

## **An Intervention to Increase Positive Attitudes and Address Misconceptions About Australian Muslims: A Call for Education and Open Mindedness**

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*The present study describes a nine-week anti-prejudice intervention targeting attitudes towards Australian Muslims at a Western Australian university in 2008 using data from 19 Psychology students. Quantitative results found a marginal increase in reported positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims, together with a significant reduction in the reporting of negative media-related beliefs. Using a thematic analysis on reported attitudes and beliefs about Muslim integration and immigration, we found differences in the themes expressed before and after the intervention. Beforehand, themes included a cultural divide in values; a need for more cultural understanding; and aspects of Islamic ideology restrict Muslims from integrating. Afterward, themes included an increased awareness of structural issues affecting Australian Muslims; a re-framing of citizenship as a shared identity; an increased awareness of negative representation of Muslims in the media; an acknowledgement of Australia's inherent diversity; and a shift from homogenising Muslims as a group to constructing Muslims as part of a diverse society. Clearly, such interventions alone are not enough given historical and contemporary contexts. However, our study indicates that – in this context at least – in-depth cross-cultural analysis and learning can be used to bring about change.*

In Australia, negativity and hostility towards marginalised groups generally is a major problem and has been well documented with respect to Indigenous Australians (Mellor, 2002) asylum seekers (Klocker, 2004) and refugees (Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). More recently, there has also been an increase in negativity against Australian Muslims, in part due to the events and repercussions of September 11, 2001 (Poynting & Nobel, 2004). However, there are few published studies regarding the success or otherwise of anti-prejudice strategies in Australia; let alone with respect to Australian Muslims.

Some research suggests that the media contributes in developing a negative

perception of Australian Muslims, often portraying Islam as a religion in direct conflict with the values and traditions of Western culture, and deeming Muslims unable to commit to the values of liberal democracy on the basis of their religious beliefs (Aly, 2006, 2009; Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). Indeed, this focus on conflict is reflected in the views of many mainstream Australians (Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007). There appears to be a widespread belief in the broader Australian community that Islam equates with terrorism and the threat thereof (Kabir, 2007); in fact, Griffiths and Pedersen (2009) found that the higher the level of prejudice in community participants, the higher the fear of terrorism ( $r = .46$ ). In

that study, participants reported their beliefs were due mainly to the personal values that they held – regardless of whether they were comparatively rejecting or accepting of Australian Muslims. Those data indicated that other relevant factors affecting beliefs about Australian Muslims were personal experience and the influences such as friends, family, and – relevantly for the purposes of the present study – the media.

Having outlined some possible social psychological factors influencing prejudice against Australian Muslims, an important question beckons: how would we go about changing such attitudes in a more positive direction? There have been a limited number of published social-psychological studies outlining evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of such strategies in Australia with respect to Indigenous Australians (see Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2001; Mooney, Bauman, Westwood, Kelaher, Tibben, & Jalaludin, 2005; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). To date, however, there have been no published studies examining the reduction of prejudice against Australian Muslims with one exception. Specifically, Issues Deliberation Australia (2007) held a community forum which included a pre-test and a post-test on a number of issues relating to Muslim/non-Muslim relations. Some relevant outcomes from this forum were that there was a decrease in the number of participants wishing to curtail the number of Muslim immigrants, a decrease in the perception that Muslims have a negative impact on Australia's national security and social harmony, and an increase in political knowledge about Islam.

There have also been a number of cultural awareness programmes regarding Muslims and Islam that – while not explicitly including pre-test and post-test – give indications of success (e.g., Roberts & Fozdar, in press). Roberts and Fozdar suggested that there were three main issues that contributed to participants' positive change in attitudes: (a)

having participants give serious thought to the influences of their own culture; (b) including the stories of practising Muslims; and (c) allowing free and open discussion. Other authors also note the importance of free and open dialogue (Pedersen, Walker & Wise, 2005). In a similar vein to Roberts and Fozdar, Pedersen and Barlow (2008) argued that the following principles are important when attempting to reduce prejudice against Aboriginal Australians<sup>1</sup>:

- (a) including representations and voices of Aboriginal Australians, (b) encouraging open dialogue within the framework of mutual respect rather than simply lecturing to participants, (c) providing factual information; in particular, to combat false beliefs ... (e) creating a safe environment for discussions and (f) attempting to invoke empathy rather than guilt (p. 157).

While some research suggests that such interventions are effective in reducing prejudice, it is important to note that they can also increase prejudice in some cases and not others (e.g., Case, 2007); they can also have a primarily positive effect but not on all variables (Boatright-Horowitz, 2005; Mooney et al., 2005). Such interventions also have the potential to simply increase prejudice, although there is no published evidence in Australia to state this (although one could ask – who is likely to publish such findings?) In this regard, one can only imagine the amount of prejudice reduction interventions that have been conducted with less than satisfactory results that have not been published due to the “bottom drawer problem”; that is, studies that do not work not being published. This is problematic as it is possible to learn from non-successful interventions as well as successful ones.

### **Overview of the Present Study**

The data presented here are part of a larger study which examined positive attitudes toward both Indigenous Australians and Australian Muslims. However, for the purposes of this paper we report the findings regarding

Australian Muslims only (the Indigenous findings have been presented elsewhere; see Pedersen, Aly, Hartley & McGarty, 2008). In the present paper, we investigated attitudes toward Australian Muslims and media related negative beliefs. As noted above, the media has been linked with anti-Muslim prejudice in a number of studies (e.g., Aly, 2006; Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007). Can positive attitudes be increased, and media related negative beliefs reduced, after nine-weeks of a cultural psychology unit? We did not attempt to break down each individual component of the intervention, but examine the data as a whole; in other words, we do not attempt to compare – say – the giving of information versus the use of empathy. We also qualitatively investigated the themes expressed before and after the intervention regarding attitudes about Muslim integration and immigration.

### Method

#### Participants

Data were collected at two times. At Time 1, participants were 32 second and third year Psychology students undertaking an elective unit “Introduction to Culture and Psychology”. They were recruited in the first seminar by their (Caucasian) unit coordinator, where they were given the opportunity to complete a short 3-page questionnaire. This was not compulsory and all responses were anonymous. With respect to data collected at Time 2, 19 participants completed the questionnaire both times. From this point onward, we analyse the results of participants who completed both questionnaires. Participants were primarily female (74%) with a wide range of ages (18 to 47;  $M = 25.9$  years;  $SD = 8.6$ ). Just over half of the sample (53%) identified as being Caucasian/European with the remainder coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Asia; India, Latin America). Approximately one-third of our sample stated their religion as Christian and one third stated no religion, and the other third were comprised of Buddhists, one Hindu, Muslim, and Pantheist. Most (84%) of our sample self reported moderate political views, with only approximately one-fifth reporting

strongly left views; nobody reported strongly right-wing views. As noted, one participant identified as being Muslim; however, the inclusion of this participant did not affect results and he was retained in the sample.

#### Procedure

*Time 1 Intervention.* In the seminars, students were given nine (non-compulsory) three-hour seminars with respect to Australian Muslims, asylum seekers, and Indigenous Australians (although, as previously noted, for the purpose of the present paper we concentrate on attitudes toward Australian Muslims). Students were encouraged to acknowledge their own cultural biases – regardless of their ethnicity. They were also encouraged to respect the viewpoint of other cultures although not to the point of complete cultural relativity. In other words, while some cultural practices may be not what they would choose to do, this does not mean “their way” was necessarily “the correct way”.

A seminar of particular importance was the eighth seminar titled “Australian Muslim responses to public opinion and the media discourse”. This seminar was given by the second author of this paper who is an Australian Muslim. There were two specific readings for the seminar: Aly (2006) and Aly and Walker (2007). The seminar explored some common myths and misperceptions about Muslims in Australia and the perpetuation of stereotypes in the Australian media. The lecture drew on an analysis of Australia’s history of cultural anxiety and the construction of Muslims as a source of fear and anxiety both pre and post the September 11 terrorists attacks in the United States in 2001. Specifically, the following topics were covered. First, the students were given a brief history of representations of Muslims in popular media as a source of fear in Australia; for example, the “Moslem Menace” around 1912 to the “Veiled Threat” of the late 1990s. Information and discussion involved: (a) media-related writings about Australian Muslims (b) information about Islamic beliefs and practices (c) post 9/11 discourses in

Australia, including discourses on terrorism and the Muslim ‘other’ (d) negative media bias on Australian Muslims, (e) Australian Muslims engaging alternative discourses – hence subverting subject positions in the popular media; (f) Australian Muslims disengaging the popular media discourse and creating new narratives of belonging, (g) re-affirming Australian Muslim identity, and finally (h) how Australian Muslims are challenging popular stereotypes at personal level. Throughout the seminar, many media-related negative beliefs were debunked by the presenter.

To guide the intervention seminars, we put together and used a set of principles based on previous research (e.g., Roberts & Fozdar, in press; Pedersen et al., 2005; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). The principles used in the intervention were; (i) including Muslim voices and representations (in particular, those of the second author); (ii) the encouragement of free, open and respectful dialogue; thus, creating an environment where students felt safe to talk about the issue; (iii) giving factual information; (iv) encouraging students to make their own mind up based on the information given rather than simply accepting the lecturers’ views; and (v) attempting to invoke other-focused emotions such as empathy, rather than concentrating on guilt.

*Time 2.* Nine weeks after distribution of the first questionnaire, we gave students the opportunity to complete a second three-page questionnaire the beginning of the three-hour seminar which was identical to the first one. As occurred at Time 1, students’ participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous.

#### *Measures*

To assess the success or not of the intervention, both qualitative and quantitative data were used. Using more than one method is preferred to gain a thorough understanding of the research question being asked (Cohen, 2007). At both Time 1 and Time 2, the following quantitative information was asked.

#### *Socio-demographic information*

Respondents stated their age in years, their sex,

their cultural background, their religious beliefs, and their political orientation.

*Positive attitudes toward Muslims.* We used an attitude thermometer to measure attitudes to Australian Muslims. The prefacing question read, “In general how positive or favourable do you feel about Australian Muslims?” Participants could respond from 1° (extremely unfavourable) to 100° (extremely favourable).

*Media Driven Negative Beliefs (MDNB scale).* Participants filled out a 7 item Likert scale relating to negative media driven beliefs about Muslim people such as “Muslims are a threat to Australia’s security”. The list of items was compiled by the second author based on her qualitative research with Australian Muslims and members of the broader Australian community on the fear of terrorism and the ‘other’ (only one item of the MDNB scale, however, specifically dealt with terrorism). This research involved 10 focus groups and 60 individual interviews with 185 participants and highlighted several constructions about Australian Muslims that participants attributed to the Australian popular media (see for example Aly, 2009; Aly & Balnaves 2008; Aly & Green 2008a; Aly & Green 2008b). The range of scores was between 1 and 9 with higher scores indicating higher reporting of such negative beliefs.

However, questions were asked a little differently from Time 1 to Time 2 with respect to the qualitative data. At Time 1, participants were asked to supply a written response to an open-ended question before the quantitative questions. Specifically, they were asked to respond to the following question:

*Both students in the past, as well as members of the Perth community, have commented on what they perceive as the incompatibility of Islam and mainstream Australian. More specifically, it has been said that Muslims reject Australian values and that Islam is incompatible with Western democracy. Do*

*you agree, or disagree, with the notion that Muslims are unable or unwilling to integrate into Australian society? Do you think there should be limits on Muslim migration?*

At Time 2, 10 weeks after the first questionnaire was distributed, the first author again approached students to complete the second questionnaire in class. Specifically, participants were asked to supply a written response to an open-ended question asking “Lecture 9 involved an analysis of the issue of Australian Muslims. Do you agree, or disagree, with the notion that Muslims are unable or unwilling to integrate into Australian society? Do you think there should be limits on Muslim migration?” Students were then given the same quantitative questions as they were given at Time 1 (that is, socio-demographics, thermometer and media-related negative beliefs). Again, all participation was voluntary and anonymous.

## Results

### Quantitative Data

*Descriptive statistics.* As can be seen in Table 1, the reliability is satisfactory for the MDNB scale at Time 1 and Time 2. The mean for the positive attitudes scale is above the midpoint, even at the beginning of the intervention (that is; scores were comparatively positive toward Australian Muslims). The mean on the MDNB scale is around the midpoint at Time 1, and below the midpoint at Time 2. Thus, there was some acceptance of these negative beliefs, although this lessened at Time 2.

*Inferential statistics.* There were two noteworthy relationships between variables that emerged from our data. First, there was a marginal increase in reported positive attitudes from Time 1 ( $M = 66.9$ ;  $SD = 18.9$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 74.6$ ;  $SD = 17.0$ ) ( $t(11) = 2.0$ ,  $p = .07$ ). Second, there was a significant reduction in the MDNB scale from Time 1 ( $M = 3.6$ ;  $SD = 1.5$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 2.7$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ) ( $t(17) = 3.37$ ,  $p < .004$ ). There was a moderate negative relationship between the thermometer and the MDNB scale at both Time 1 ( $r = -.44$ ) and Time

2 ( $r = -.36$ ). That is, participants who reported negative feelings about Australian Muslims also scored higher on the MDNB scale.

Finally, given the importance of media influence with respect to the second author’s lecture, we also took one of the MDNB items to do with the media (“the media fills our heads with fear of the Muslims in our community”) and conducted a separate t-test to examine whether this item by itself changed over the course of the unit. There was a significant increase in the belief that the media influenced community attitudes from Time 1 ( $M = 7.33$ ;  $SD = 1.72$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 8.11$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ) ( $t(17) = -2.07$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

### Qualitative Data

To analyse the qualitative dataset, we conducted a thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were used only for those participants who filled out questionnaires at both Time 1 and Time 2 ( $n = 19$ ). Two coders (Author 1 and Author 2) independently analysed the data. We were interested to see the level of agreement between them, and used the guidelines of Landis and Koch (1977) to measure reliability. After a first reading of the data, three major themes were identified at Time 1 which we now describe giving their Kappa reliability. In order of prevalence, the three themes at Time 1 were self-exclusion by Australian Muslims ( $k = .87$ ;  $p < .001$ ), a cultural divide ( $k = .86$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and dialogue and understanding ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The four themes at Time 2 were integration and structural barriers ( $k = .86$ ;  $p < .001$ ); multiculturalism and religious diversity ( $k = .76$ ;  $p = .001$ ); citizenship and shared identity ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and media discourse ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In short, according to the Landis and Koch guidelines, one theme had a substantial match, three had a near-perfect match, and three had a perfect match. This can give us some faith in the reliability of our results.

## Discussion

### Quantitative Data

The significant relationship which was

Table 1  
*Descriptive characteristics*

Variables	M/SD	Items	Reliability	Range
Positive attitudes (Time 1)	66.88(18.87)	1	-	1-100
MDNB scale (Time 1)	3.57(1.50)	7	.89	1-9
Positive attitudes (Time 2)	74.64(17.04)	1	-	1-100
MDNB scale (Time 2)	2.76(1.22)	7	.84	1-9

found between positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims and the MDNB scale replicates another large-scale community research project (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009). These findings combined suggests that that if anti-prejudice strategists wish to increase levels of positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims, an important place to start is the challenging of populist but negative media portrayals of Australian Muslims. That this can be achieved is seen in the significant increase from Time 1 to Time 2 in students acknowledging the power of the media. Also, there was a marginal increase in positive attitudes from Time 1 to Time 2 as well as a significant reduction of the MDNB scale.

But why the marginal effect rather than a significant effect on positive attitudes? When looking at percentages, this equated a 7.8% increase in positive attitudes. We suggest there are three possible reasons. First, it is possible that our results reflect the lower power of our small sample size. When comparing our 7.8% increase in positivity with the increase with Pedersen and Barlow (2008) with regard to Indigenous Australians, we had only slightly lower results. That is, in their study, there was a 9.4% difference between Time 1 and Time 2. Second, as noted previously, the cultural

psychology unit focused primarily on three marginalised groups in Australia – Indigenous Australians, Australian Muslims, and asylum seekers. There was more information given with respect to Indigenous Australians compared with Australian Muslims. It is possible that positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims did not increase as much as the previous study because there was less information given in the lectures about this group. Third, and linked to the second hypothesis, there was more discussion about Indigenous issues with students being very open about (some) negative viewpoints. This was facilitated by the fact that there were no Indigenous Australians present in the seminars. With respect to Muslim issues, because there were Australian Muslims present in the seminars, involving one Muslim student and the Muslim lecturer, students from the broader Australian community may have been more reluctant to verbalise their attitudes they may have had about issues to do with Islam and Muslims in general. As noted previously, a number of anti-prejudice strategists note the importance of frank and open discussion (Roberts & Fozdar, in press; Nagda, Kim & Truelove, 2004; Pedersen et al., 2005). We suggest that these three hypotheses together may explain the .07 effect rather than a <.05

effect (which we argue that in itself is quite arbitrary). However, given the small number of participants, it is still a positive attitudes increase that is meaningful even though it does clearly need further exploration. Other authors have also commented on the fact that changes, when they occurred, were something small in nature (e.g., Boatright-Horowitz, 2005).

As noted, there was also a significant reduction in the reporting of media-related negative beliefs. Given previous research linking the attitudes toward Muslims and the negative role of the media (see Aly, 2006; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007; Pedersen & Griffiths 2009), this is not unexpected. It is also interesting in how it links to the study by Pedersen, Watt and Hansen (2006) which examined the role of politicians' rhetoric on attitudes toward asylum seekers who are often thought to be Muslim (Haslam & Pedersen, 2007). In this 2006 study, the three most common false beliefs about asylum seekers were linked to the public statements of well-known Australian politicians. This leads us to another question: "If attitudes are linked to negative media-related beliefs, how much does the Australian public actually question what they hear in the media?" Future research should investigate this.

The results of the present study provide some evidence that interventions to increase positive attitudes toward Australian Muslims can be effective. Our results are supported by previous research that suggests that the giving of accurate information about Muslims (e.g., Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007) is helpful in dispelling "urban myths" that exist in Australia's media, and that are linked to negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims. Our study also supports other research that suggests invoking other-focused emotions such as empathy, rather than self-focused emotions such as guilt, is effective in fostering more positive attitudes towards specific outgroups. Leach, Snider and Iyer (2002), for example, argue that because guilt is an aversive emotion, people tend to engage in strategies to avoid its experience, including cognitively minimising one's responsibility for

the outgroups' negative predicament. In the case of the current study, making participants feel guilty about the prejudice and discrimination experienced by Australian Muslims may have merely made them minimise their personal responsibility rather than motivating them to do something about the prejudice towards Australian Muslims (having said that, there is a fine line between guilt and empathy). However, it seems that fostering empathy may be a more effective strategy because it does not place blame on the individual, and humanises "outgroups". Interestingly, one student stated after the unit was completed that one important issue for her was the emphasis on encouraging students to make their own mind up based on the information given rather than simply accepting the lecturers' views.

#### *Qualitative Data*

At Time 1, the first theme involved *an expressed cultural divide between perceived Western values and perceived Islamic ideology*. In this theme, integration was seen to be affected by the perceived conflict between two opposing worldviews. For example, Participant 1 stated at Time 1: "I agree to a certain extent with the notion that Muslims find it difficult to integrate into Australian society. Their traditional values and ways of life are vastly different to Australia's ...". The reference to the importance of values supports past research; for example, Griffiths and Pedersen (2009) found when looking at the Perth community's attitudes towards Australian Muslims that the most significant function of attitudes towards Australian Muslims was value-expressive. In another Perth study, results indicated that nearly three-quarters of participants reported that their views on Australian Muslims were affected by their values (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009). One major theme that emerged from that study that of conformity; Australian Muslims need to conform to Australian laws and customs.

The second theme that was identified was an expressed need for *cultural understanding between Muslim and mainstream Australians*

and that a lack of understanding is detrimental to social harmony. For example, “I think education and open mindedness would go a long way for both Australians and Muslims” (Participant 8). Certainly, many studies find a significant link between prejudice against marginalised groups and education (e.g., Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009, with respect to attitudes toward Australian Muslims). Regarding open mindedness, again this has been found with others research. That is, the most prevalent theme which was reported qualitatively in Pedersen and Hartley (2009) was that of universalism; a large component of which is broad mindedness.

The final theme involved an articulation that *aspects of Islamic ideology restricted Muslims from integrating in Australian society*. Participants expressed a belief that aspects of Islamic ideology restrict Muslims from integrating in Australian society. This belief results in a construction of Muslims as a ‘problem’ group and assumes that integration is a matter of personal choice. Thus, in this theme, Muslims are constructed as being fully responsible for their own integration and there is no recognition of structural or institutionalised barriers to integration. For example, Participant 9 said: “I think maybe Muslims are more unable than unwilling to integrate into Australian society, due to the restrictions placed on them by their religion”. The integration theme, as noted previously, as been found in other research (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009).

At Time 2, four major themes were identified. First, there was *an increased awareness of structural issues to integration and an articulation of the impact of barriers on the ability of Muslims to integrate into Australian society, as opposed to the willingness (or lack) of Muslims to integrate*. This theme represents a shift in focus from self-exclusion practices of Muslims to the institutions and structures that impact on the ability of Muslims to participate fully in Western Australian society. Participants demonstrated increased awareness that socially excluded and marginalised groups need to be self empowered to exercise participatory

citizenship. For example, Participant 4 stated: “I disagree that Muslims are unwilling to integrate into Australian society, whether it is made easy for them or not is probably up to the Australian people”. As Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) note, for example, there are barriers to integration: employers are not “blind to ethnicity” (p. 206) (also see Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006). Also, it is clear that prejudice against Australian Muslims does exist (Dunn et al., 2007; Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009) and this appears to have pierced the consciousness of students.

The second identified theme *acknowledged Australia’s inherent diversity and a shift from homogenising Muslims as a group to constructing Muslims as part of a diverse society*. In this theme, participants articulated an understanding of Australia as a multicultural society and the need to respect diverse cultures and religions. For example, Participant 1 stated: “each individual in a society is different and this should be tolerated; especially since Australia claims to be an egalitarian society with equal opportunities for all”. The need to respect the views of other cultures, although not reverting to total cultural relativity, was a major focus of the intervention.

A third theme involved *re-framing Australian citizenship as a shared identity*. This theme represents a shift in the construction of Muslims as a separate ‘problem’ group to a beginning awareness of Muslims as Australian citizens who, theoretically, share both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Participants articulated a renegotiated conceptualisation of integration within a framework of shared citizenship and identity. For example, Participant 9 said: “I think that just moving to Australia is a partial integration into Australian society”. This links to work done by Every and Augoustinos (2008) with respect to national identity; they argue that national identity can be used to include groups or exclude them. However, it needs noting as Ho (2007) does that Australian nationalism is often framed in an “us” and “them” way; Australians against



dangerous Muslims. Grewal (2007) also speaks of this; however, she further notes the role of gender in the equation. As she pointed out, the “threat” of young Muslim men is often seen as being a “threat to national identity” (p. 131). However, in reality, many Australian Muslims do see themselves as being bi-cultural; that is, they see themselves as Australian and they see themselves as Muslim (see Kabir, 2007). Yasmeen (2008) also argues that Australian Muslims believe they can be both Australian and Muslim; however, they often feel that the community-at-large is less accepting of this. This would appear to have been recognised by the students.

The final theme that was identified was *an increased awareness of negative representations of Muslims in the media*. In this theme, participants articulated awareness that Muslims had been negatively represented in the media and the impact of this representation on popular beliefs among the broader Australian community about Muslims as a group. For example, Participant 1 stated:

Firstly, I do not agree with the notion that Muslims are unwilling to integrate into Australian society. I think this idea has gained popularity from the few Muslim extremists that are given media attention. Every society, culture and religion has extremists and it's highly unfair that a whole group be judged based on the opinions of few.

Other research also confirms the negative effect of media representations about Islam but there is little published research which explores how initiatives to dispel such negativity can be effective. As touched on previously, Roberts and Fozdar (in press) assessed an educational programme for emergency service workers; a number of their participants spoke of how original pre-conceptions and stereotypes about Islam, gained by through the mass media, were dispelled. As occurred in the present study, among other things, the researchers provided information about Muslim people, challenged

false beliefs about Muslim people, encouraged empathy, and provided opportunities to talk about these issues (as per Pedersen et al., 2005). Roberts and Fozdar also identified how racism works and how it affected the targets of such racism. As an aside, although the Roberts and Fozdar study did not involve a pre-test/post-test, the feedback on their intervention was generally very positive. For example, as one participant in their study noted: “I will be less likely to pigeon hole a particular group/religion or so quick to judge the actions of a few as representing those of the majority. Thank you or should I say “Shukran – Asalam Alikum”.

The thematic categories summarise the nature of the attitudinal shift expressed by the participants. These shifts directly related to the themes explored in the lectures such as barriers to participation; media construction of Muslims and popular misconceptions.

#### **Limitations/Future Research**

There are a number of limitations to the study which warrant further investigation with future research. First, the relatively small sample size is problematic with respect to the quantitative data; further research should attempt an intervention using more participants. Second, our participants were in the process of a university education, relatively heterogeneous, and actively chose to take part in the study. It is likely that there is a self-selection bias given that the unit was an elective. Similar issues were found in the Pedersen and Barlow (2008) study. As they noted, this does not mean that studies such as these are unimportant; first, because of potential flow-on effects; second, because it is possible to build up the capacity of students to oppose prejudice. The students who were more positive in their attitudes, thus signing up for the unit, are the very ones who may appreciate learning the skills contained in anti-prejudice strategies for post-university work. Third, participants were primarily women; while this is not a problem for the purpose of the present study (most psychology units have more women than men enrolled), a more even gender balance may

be informative, especially as women have been found to report more empathy (Davis, 1994; Pedersen, Beven, Walker & Griffiths, 2004; Toussaint & Webb, 2005) and are less prejudiced (Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009). Further research could take these findings into the community to investigate whether similar results would be found. These limitations withstanding, we believe the current study is a valuable contribution to the small body of research that has attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of prejudice reduction strategies.

### Conclusions

As noted previously, Participant 8 called for education and open mindedness. Our findings indicate that educational interventions can be helpful in increasing positive attitudes to Australian Muslims as well as opening students' minds to different ways of thinking other than that espoused by the mass media. Although there is a dearth of published research in this regard; to our knowledge only Issues Deliberation Australia (2007), our findings do support an increasing amount of work of prejudice reduction with respect to other marginalised groups such as Indigenous Australians (e.g., Hill & Augoustinos, 2001). Our findings also indicate the importance of Muslim and non-Muslim people working together. As noted elsewhere, a cohesive society is not one that involves prejudice, racism, and discrimination (Pedersen et al., 2005). Having said this, we also note that prejudice reduction is the primary responsibility of the wider society rather than the responsibility of Australian Muslims themselves.

Finally, we acknowledge the great importance of structural change with respect to problems concerning marginalised groups (see Donovan & Vlasis, 2006). However, we also believe that important issues such as these need to be tackled from a community level as well. There comes a time when individuals and their respective attitudes become a critical mass which can make major change. In our view, both top-down (e.g., structural change) and bottom-up (from the community) approaches are essential to interventions such as this. We hope that, in a

small way, our bottom-up, grass roots, intervention may be useful in learning how to carry out this process.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Some anti-prejudice strategies need to be tailored to suit the context; for example, white privilege; contact. Conversely, other strategies should be used as a matter of course; e.g., the giving of accurate information; the use of respect (Pedersen & Dunn, 2009; Dunn & Pedersen, 2009). Thus, even though the present paper involves prejudice against Australian Muslims, it is useful to consider past research with other target groups, especially as there is so little Australian research examining anti-prejudice strategies.

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