

# Young, British and Muslim: Academic Research and Real Lives Event Report

Sponsored by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Research Programme

Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2011, 10.00am - 5.00pm Manchester Town Hall

## Introduction

This conference had two aims: to present the latest findings from the AHRC/AHRC Religion and Society Programme concerning young British Muslims, and to discuss the nature and quality of research in this area, its uses and abuses. The background is a context in which young Muslims are the subject of constant discussion and media coverage, often of a negative kind.

Muslim young people, youth workers, educational professionals, police officers, representatives from third sector organisations and others interested in the topic gathered to meet the researchers, discuss their work, and add their own perspectives. Researchers Daniel DeHanas (researcher on Religion and Society-funded project [Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance](#)), Philip Lewis and Jonathan Scourfield (leader of Religion and Society-funded project [Religious Nurture in Muslim Families](#)) were invited to attend and add their expertise alongside speakers. Just under a hundred delegates attended.

## Morning

**Linda Woodhead** (Director of the Religion and Society Programme) opened the event. She set the scene with presentation of data about young Muslims in Britain and how the study of Islam in Britain has developed, citing significant recent works including *Young, British and Muslim* by Philip Lewis (2007), *Muslims in Britain* by Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2010), *Youth Work and Islam: A Leap of Faith for Young People* (2011) by Brian Belton and Sadek Hamid (the event co-organiser). A special issue of [Religion, State and Society](#) was just published on 'Muslim Young People in Britain and Russia' edited by Marat Shterin and Basia Spalek and arising from a collaboration co-funded by the Religion and Society Programme. Data from Clive Field's new compilation of surveys of and about young Muslims from this special issue informed her presentation.

There are now estimated to be 2 ½ million Muslims in the UK and they are more youthful than the national average. Religion is of central importance to nine out of ten, affecting much of day to day life. Family is also stated to be very important. There is strong support for gender equality, but a third believes that there is gender inequality in their community. More 16-24 year olds than older cohorts have a preference for the hijab. Two thirds think homosexuality should be illegal. A majority find Muslim organisations and local leadership largely irrelevant to their concerns. Most would prioritise the label 'Muslim' above that of 'British', but 80 per cent state that they strongly belong to Britain. Reported discrimination against young Muslims is rising steadily. Only 3.3 per cent of young Muslims felt the media portrays Muslims fairly.

There is extensive criticism of British foreign and domestic security policies. Thirteen per cent say that they regard the 7/7 bombers as having a just cause.

Such data needs to be supplemented by other evidence. Much is commissioned by media outlets and driven by current concerns and impressions e.g. concerning 'radicalisation' and loyalty to Britain. In their approach and questions, there is a tendency to treat young Muslims as different, exceptional from other youth. Linda suggested that longer-term research with a broader theoretical and temporal horizon is having the countervailing effect of *normalizing* young British Muslims.

She gave details of main areas in which such normalization has been taking place:

1. In relation to youth studies – drawing on existing tools and approaches, youth studies helps disaggregate and differentiate 'young Muslims', and asks questions about sub-cultures, cohort and generational characteristics, relations with non-Muslim young people, and common, everyday concerns such as relationships and education.

2. In relation to wider studies of social identity and ethnicity, including majority-minority relations. These studies help to clarify, for example, the diversity of social identities in Britain, and position Muslims as normal rather than exceptional in having a complex relation to 'Britishness' and 'British values' (which are themselves policy constructs as much as lived identities). Recent work on the 'super-diversity' of identity (no longer contained in simple sets of ethnic categories) also re-positions young Muslims as non-exceptional. John Wolffe's work drawing historical parallels with anti-Catholicism in the UK was also mentioned.

3. In relation to the study of religion. Treating Islam as a 'lived religion', for example, yields very different perspectives from treating it more monolithically, or solely in terms of its legal and political dimensions. Similarly, recent approaches to Islamism as a form of religious 'revivalism' or as a 'new religious movement' illuminate by drawing parallels with other familiar religious phenomena.

4. In relation to religious violence, terrorism and 'violent extremism'. Here too comparisons with other forms of terrorism and non-state violence are proving illuminating, as is made clear in much of the research presented on the [radicalisationresearch.org](http://radicalisationresearch.org) website sponsored by the Religion and Society Programme.

### **Sadek Hamid**

Sadek is a Muslim youth worker and academic who co-organised this event. He opened by emphasising the day's focus upon the welfare of young British Muslims. They have become objectified, aggregated and the focus of magnified interest since the 2001 riots and 7/7. Sadek asked everyone in the room who had been a participant in research to raise their hand - and found that it was the majority. Not many raised their hands to agree that research had benefitted them, but not many felt it had caused harm either. This illustrated the point that British Muslims are very heavily 'researched', and why it is important to consider the impact of this research upon real lives.

In 2007 the Muslim Youth Helpline reported relationships (familial as well as romantic) as the top concern of their callers, as might be expected for any group of young people. Hence the need for scholars, including Muslim scholars, to challenge superficial and distorted representations of Muslims communities. Media discourse contributes to the climate of suspicion and fear which can leave Muslims feeling defensive and unwilling to engage with outsider researchers. There is a feeling of research-fatigue. Sadek concluded by stressing that researchers' relations with Muslim communities need to be more critically assessed.

### **Session 1 – Lifestyles**

**Kaye Haw** (University of Nottingham) went first, presenting research from her project [The Myth of British Identity and the Failure of Multiculturalism?](#) The project has led to the production of a DVD drawing upon video diaries gathered as part of it. The short film can be accessed [here](#). Kaye showed clips during her presentation.

She started by emphasising the difficulty of reducing a lifetime's work to a short talk. Kaye has been working with Muslims in Britain for the last 15-20 years. As a white non-Muslim woman she has had to think hard about her position as a researcher, and access. At the start of her career she conducted research with Muslim girls in a single-sex state school and a private Muslim girls' school in her local area. The pupils' families were from a particular region in Pakistan. She kept in touch with a lot of the participants who stayed living locally, and received the recent funding to conduct participatory action research again with this generation now they are adults. At the time of the first piece of research there were public concerns around the Gulf War, the Rushdie Affair and the establishment of Muslim private schools. In 2010 there were once again social myths about Muslims in Britain, this time revolving around notions of home-grown terrorism.

Kaye was assisted by two Muslim women who had been part of the original project. They found major changes in participants' lives over the last 15 years. Stronger Muslim identities were asserted and there was a heightened awareness of how others label them. Anger and frustration at a 'media frenzy that lacks moral responsibility' and stereotypes were emphatically expressed. Having been born and/or lived the vast majority of their lives in Britain, they are not Pakistani. Yet, being British is difficult. With racist abuse it's impossible to escape self-consciousness about being 'different.' As one woman put it about being shouted at 'to go home', 'where is home?' These complications and ambiguities about identity were reflected in the structure chosen for the DVD: 1. Being British 2. Being Muslims and 3. Becoming British Muslims.

Kaye contrasted the situation in her first phase of research when, she argued, there was perhaps less tolerance and understanding of Islam and Muslims, but more toleration of risk, with the situation which now pertains, in which there is perhaps more understanding, but much less general (or official) tolerance of risk. Ironically, the latter situation may have more negative effects for young British Muslims.

**Reina Lewis** (London College of Fashion) presented from her project with Emma Tarlo (Goldsmiths) and Jane Cameron [Modest Dressing: faith-based fashion and internet retail](#) which was designed to investigate the growing online industry of modest fashion. Christian, Jewish and Muslim women have set up companies providing younger

generations with new access to modest clothing. Previously clothes were often made at home or women managed by layering mainstream fashion items. Now there is a booming niche market which is starting to make inroads into the mainstream with religiously and non-religiously motivated customers.

The industry enables Muslim women to engage in modern individuating fashion practices with new modes of dress. The commercial websites are complemented by blogs and new social media, e.g. YouTube hijab tutorials, which also generate discussions of religion and politics. These online deterritorialized arenas also foster consumption and communication across and between faiths internationally.

Reina displayed some examples, including the American company [Eva Khurshid New York](#) which uses high fashion tools to push the boundaries of modesty and the tagline 'Sexy Rediscovered'. They aim to be sold in department stores and show that not only conservative women control religious dressing. However, Muslim women remain a political symbol with the face covering recently criminalized in France. Patriarchy and racism persist. Reina ended with a clip of the '[Niqabitch](#)' artists walking the streets of Paris in niqabs and short skirts days before the ban came in to illustrate how the law cannot discern the motivations behind wearing different forms of dress.

Reina is now editing a collection on 'Mediating Modesty' arising from a [conference](#) organised by the project to be published by I. B. Tauris and writing a book on 'New Trends in Muslim Style' for Duke University Press.

**Anshuman Mondal** (Brunel), author of *Young British Muslim Voices* (2008), ended the session with his response to Kaye and Reina's papers. He highlighted the indissoluble tension between experience and the translation of that experience into knowledge in academic research, between the particular and the general, agency and structure. There is a tension between experience in the immediate context of research being allowed access to participants' felt worlds and bringing these worlds into academic discourse. Language is always an inadequate approximation of experience, but the latter must be transformed into knowledge in order for people to become empowered. Only knowledge can provide the foundations for social justice and tackling inequalities.

Anshuman pointed out the contrast between two aspects of young British Muslim identity stressed, respectively, by the two speakers. Kaye had discovered increasingly assertive and hardening 'I am a Muslim' identities amongst young Muslims, which - as she observed, help preserve dignity and survival in an often hostile or ungenerous environment; but they can also intensify social exclusion and trap people in exclusionary discourses. By contrast, Reina pointed out more fluid, flexible, changing and adaptable aspects of young Muslim identity, and the way in which different cultural, religious and aesthetic elements can combine in far more interesting and complex ways than 'theories of identity' often allow. As Emma Tarlo notes in *Visibly Muslim* (2009), the hijab reflects Muslim women's agency and control, but can then also constrain, not least by the external perceptions it generates. Identities are simultaneously distilled and dispersed - people can feel 100 per cent Muslim and 100 per cent British. The researcher has a duty to 'fail and fail again but fail better' in working to represent these complexities as accurately as possible.

## Session 2 – Politics and Policy

**Farida Vis** (Leicester) was the research associate on the project [Fitna the video battle](#) led by Liesbet van Zoonen at Loughborough University with Sabina Mihelj.

Fitna was a 16 minute anti-Islam video produced by Dutch extreme-right MP Geert Wilders released in March 2008. Violent, shocking film and images were edited together with verses from the Qur'an and spurious statistics to argue that Islam directly causes terrorism and Dutch society is at risk of being taken over. This project set out to investigate young people's, including young Muslims', reactions to it on YouTube as their voices are routinely excluded from the mainstream media. YouTube offers a platform for their views, but – as Farida pointed out – it may be that no one is actually listening. This raises the question of what kind of 'citizenship' people are actually performing on YouTube around the Fitna controversy, and what they hope to achieve.

The team investigated links between YouTube posters as well as the content of videos related to Fitna. They developed innovative software to capture, store and review the mass of relevant material which is not simply accessible via a normal search engine. Overall 1413 videos from around the world were analysed. One finding was that anti-Fitna Muslim posters were the most keen to engage in dialogue with their opponents as 'cosmopolitan communicators', whilst anti-Muslim posters were content simply to state their views on the issue without feeling the need to justify them. Another finding, from network analysis, was that most networks of posters are small, and connect like-minded people at a somewhat superficial level.

Farida is now writing a textbook *Researching Social Media* with Mike Thelwall (who developed the YouTube capturing software), which will be published by Sage in 2012.

**Basia Spalek** and **Laura Zahra McDonald** (Birmingham) spoke about their [two projects](#) funded by Religion and Society, conducted also with Salwa El Awa (Ain Shams University, Cairo), as part of ongoing research about Muslim communities and counter-terrorism (CT). Since 2007 Basia has led five funded projects looking at community-based approaches to CT which involve building up partnership and trust based upon equality and transparency, in contrast with more common, hard-line approaches. She acknowledged that this might sound idealistic, but they engage with community 'heroes' who have not given up on partnership and are still working hard to build links. Basia acknowledged the value of funding from the Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils as this allowed freedom and independence. In the realm of CT knowledge is very controlled and think tank research can be politically influenced. This is an over-theorized area traditionally drawing upon very little data.

There is a denial of profiling in security practice, but young Muslims in Britain from across a variety of backgrounds report feeling under scrutiny, disproportionately subject to stop and search by police and labelled as a potential terrorist. The UK Preventing Violent Extremism agenda has undergone various reviews since 2006 in a process of learning which is meant to make it more community-friendly, and which is partly successful. But national strategy has also had negative consequences on the

ground e.g. with trusted community groups and workers becoming stigmatized unnecessarily. There is a lot of confusion over the causes and prevention of violent extremism. In their work Basia and Laura are challenging strong neo-conservative discourses which seemingly seek a clash of civilizations and conflict through high-level engagement with civil servants and politicians. It can be hard to see the impact the research is having, but they are broadening out the debate over time.

**Sughra Ahmed** who is a research fellow at the Policy Research Centre of the Islamic Foundation and author of their 2009 report [Seen and Not Heard: Voices of Young British Muslims](#) responded. She reflected particularly upon the benefits that good research can have for Muslims communities in Britain. Yes there are feelings of research-fatigue, resentment at negative terms employed in civic discourse, and concern about the quality of research from think tanks. However, there is still a need for research if policies are to be well-informed. CT is a significant policy priority, but general issues regarding educational under-achievement and poverty which affect Muslims in Britain also need addressing. Muslim charitable work and social action are often overlooked in research, reporting and policy, as are female voices. It is a very British tradition to be sceptical about political policy, but Muslims ought not to tar it all with the same suspicious brush. They can be open to policies, e.g. the funding of charitable organisations, from which communities can benefit. They can also be involved in redressing the balance of focus in research.

**Discussion** then ranged from questions of different national CT policies to the ethics of online research. Basia emphasized the real risks specific community groups are constantly taking trying to reduce violence. Farida pointed out that with the police and in policy there is a very flat view of YouTube as a hot bed of radicalisation, as if all young Muslims are only '10 clicks away from a jihadi website'. This does not match reality and research can challenge such misconceptions. The problem of how academics get access to policy-makers when they are selective in what they will listen to, and when there is too often a closed Westminster circle of Whitehall and think tanks, was debated.

## Afternoon

### Session 3 – Breakout Groups

This was an opportunity for participants to meet each other and the researchers and discuss in small groups what they had heard so far. On tables of up to 10 people, each volunteer chair directed people to discuss with their neighbour (who had to be someone they had not met before), and then with the whole table, the two questions below and note answers on Post-It notes:

1. What have you found most interesting/annoying so far?
2. Does research help or hinder?

Unsurprisingly, responses were varied, but common themes did emerge. In response to Question 1, people found the concept of modest fashion particularly interesting. It showed younger generations of Muslim women having confidence and expressing their own ideas about dress. The fact the London College of Fashion had deemed it a sufficiently significant area to study was welcomed. One delegate did raise a concern about the imposition of a non-Islamic definition of modesty. A couple were concerned about the continuing public focus on the hijab and repetition of debates over the course



of the morning, with the labels 'British' and 'Muslim' remaining polarized. Many, however, appreciated the heterogeneity of Muslim identities presented and the point about de-exceptionalizing Islam. There was interest in a qualitative, community-based approach to counter-terrorism, but a participant worried it could be interpreted as legitimating the view that terrorism is the Muslim community's problem to sort out.

Kaye's DVD was popular, as was looking at young Muslim YouTube responses, especially the question of the research ethics involved and the fact people are using humour to defuse far-right rhetoric. The mix of participants was appreciated, though the absence of the press or policy-makers noted. Quite a few would have liked more opportunity for interaction and more accessible language in the presentations for non-academics. Nonetheless, the research had got participants thinking about different perspectives and new subjects and stimulated lively discussion.

Again, in answer to Question 2, as is to be expected, there was no overarching agreement as to whether research helps or hinders. It depends upon the focus, design, execution and context of the research, and how it is communicated. The importance of honesty in terms of objectives, value judgments and limitations was highlighted, as was that of disseminating findings in an accessible way that reaches the wider public and policy-makers. One delegate pointed out the risk that the media cherry pick and misrepresent results, but another saw rigorous research as providing an important alternative knowledge-base to commentators and journalists.

Concerns about funding and time pressures constraining research were expressed. Effective partnerships with communities and the voluntary sector were thought to help. More connection between research and teaching in universities and schools could also make research more helpful. There is a problem with the slow pace of academic research relative to policy. Yet, research can help challenge misconceptions and was generally viewed positively.

#### **Session 4 – Does Research Help?**

The day ended with a panel of experts who were invited to present their 10 minute reflections tackling the session title which then prompted discussion.

**Sophie Gilliat-Ray** (Cardiff) has been investigating Islam in the UK since the early 1990s and is leading the Religion and Society-funded project [Muslim Chaplains Research Project](#). She approached the question in relation to British Muslims under four headings.

*1. Who does research* Twenty to thirty years ago, Islam was only really looked at by scholars in Islamic, religious and race and ethnicity studies and anthropology. The [Muslims in Britain Research Network](#) comprised mainly non-Muslims and few women. Today it is far more diverse and balanced, but research has diversified in some far less positive ways. In the last five years social policy think tanks have become 'overnight experts' but do not observe academic protocols or reference pre-existing research. Who is producing material and whether they have proper training ('not just an MA') needs to be scrutinized more closely by users of the research.

2. *Positions driving it* Research on British Muslims is generally qualitative and there can be an unhelpful over-reliance upon interviews and certain organisations and individuals who then become over-researched. The power dynamics always have to be taken into account: who is included/excluded, silenced/heard in a piece of research? Empowering research participants helps manage these issues.

3. *Topics of research* 9/11 and 7/7 have led to a limited range of topics: British Muslim identity, multiculturalism, social cohesion and public policy. There's been too much emphasis on the appearance of Muslim women rather than the issues which are most important to them: housing, education, access to equitable healthcare, childcare. New agendas and innovations need encouragement.

4. *Its outcomes* With the new impact priority in academic funding, those who might benefit from research are starting to be given a voice in decisions about who and what to fund and research, and increasing stakeholder involvement is to be welcomed. Academics are under pressure to produce certain scholarly outputs, and this can mitigate against creativity in methods of dissemination. However, although the people who benefit from a piece of research may not be the participants themselves, there can be other beneficiaries. Sophie pointed out that a lot of the best results are *long-term* and *indirect*. For example, work she undertook with Jim Beckford at the University of Warwick on religion in prisons in the early '90s did not have immediate impact upon respondents. However, it stimulated debate within Her Majesty's Prison Service and the appointment of a new Muslim advisor. Now there are 200 Muslim chaplains working in prisons supporting the disproportionately large number of Muslims in British prisons. Just because you do not yourself see the benefit of research does not mean there is none.

**Tafazal Mohammad** is the Managing Director of Muslim Youth Skills with 13 years experience in youth work. He started with an example to illustrate the kind of challenges young British Muslims across England currently face and the consequent challenges of working with them. A group of 'hard to reach' Muslim young people had undertaken a Duke of Edinburgh award hike alongside teams of other young people in Yorkshire. A group of 'Asian young people' was reported to be 'behaving suspiciously' on the moor. Though they were simply hiking, the police turned up after youth workers had refused to pass on their details. In interviews with Tafazal afterwards the young people involved reported feeling upset, scared, disgraced, criminalized and victimized for the way they looked.

Muslim young people need to feel that they have a stake in society and can trust people in authority. Religion is a central motivating factor for them whether they are practising or non-practising, and service providers need data in order to make a real impact in young Muslims' lives. Tafazal questioned whether service providers such as himself are getting the data from research which they need. Researchers need to think about who will use research: who is listening. The no 1 issue raised during the 2007 UK Youth Parliament was terrorism. Young Muslims are concerned about this issue, but will not engage with official channels over it as they do not feel safe. Research can address how to create safe spaces for young Muslims to engage in.



**Muhammad Khan** is former Chair of the Muslim Youthwork Foundation and Tutor in Youth and Community Work, Ruskin College Oxford. Muhammad started by asserting that research is needed, knowledge is important. He then played a video of the famous Native American actor and activist Floyd Westerman singing '[Here come the anthros](#)'. This track includes lyrics about anthropologists coming on a holiday to observe and bringing their friends. The aim was to communicate how it can feel to be researched.

Muhammad then drew upon a piece about engaging with researchers he wrote in 2007 entitled 'Ethical Pimping'. The researcher exploits the currency of experience, making a living out of difference. As a youth worker, Muhammad would field constant requests from universities, think tanks and government departments for contact with young Muslims. Pollsters would, for example, want to speak to '10 Somalis'. Yet, he or the young people who then participated would rarely hear anything again about the project. Whose purposes does such research serve and what benefit does it bring to the researched?

The Muslim Youthwork Foundation has produced a series of posters 'designed to capture 'Muslim youth experiences' which challenge and subvert the stereotypes and Islamophobic perceptions that Muslims and Muslim communities face today', and Muhammad displayed one featuring a young man carrying a backpack: <http://www.mywf.org.uk/?page=posters2>. Youth policy makes no reference to Muslim young people. They are only named under counter-terrorism. Research can help inform the difficult choices policy-makers need to make and balance the need for counter-terrorism strategies and the needs of young people.

### Discussion

Firstly Sean McLoughlin draw attention to a project surveying British Muslim experiences of hajj he is leading: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/hajj/index.htm> and Tim Peace a conference on 'Muslims and Political Participation in Britain' in Edinburgh, April 2012, organised by the Alwaleed Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge and the Muslims in Britain Research Network: <http://www.alwaleed.ed.ac.uk/>.

Then the alternative to public sector consultation (as described by Muhammad Khan) was queried. Let's be realistic: much research is consultation by public services which can give voice to the 'consumer', and most academics working on Islam are well-meaning liberals! It was also pointed out that the media are entitled to go and asks questions of whomever they want; should academics be far more constrained? Muhammad agreed that research and consultation would be missed and that their decline is a real possibility with the change of administration and cuts to youth services already seen. Tafazal Mohammad advocated bottom-up, community-led approaches to research.

Sophie Gilliat-Ray said that she'd found the playing of Floyd Westerman's video personally offensive as she and many others spent lifetimes building up relationships in and through their research, sometimes leading to enduring friendships. Muhammad emphasised that this was Floyd Westerman's own experience of being researched, and as such should be treated with respect. A delegate pointed out that academic research has to be consensual: prospective participants have the right to refuse to take part (but

this does lead to ‘anaemic’ findings?). The problem of funding was discussed, and the extent to which this may bias research. The distance maintained between funding and academic research in the UK was recognised as something precious which needs to be carefully safeguarded.

How Muslim young people can be ‘normalized’ as part of wider youth culture whilst simultaneously taking Islam seriously as a distinctive motivating factor for them, as advocated by Tafazal, was questioned. Tafazal responded that whilst young Muslim people do face the same everyday challenges as other young people, there are particular needs and issues, e.g. feeling labelled and hence victimized as potential terrorists, which addressing the faith factor can help create conversations around. Sophie highlighted areas related to British Muslims which are under-addressed such as the experiences of Iranian Shia’s and South Asian reformed groups and the Policy Research Centre, Markfield, as an example of a new generation pioneering culturally-nuanced policy work. Then, in response to a question about access to academic outputs outside of universities, she also pointed out that authors can sometimes pay a fee to make their journal articles open access and often academics will email on articles if asked.

Further distinctions were drawn between academic and other forms of research. The word ‘research’ is now used of widely varying activities, and distinctions between different types of research need to be more carefully drawn. On a rigorous understanding, ‘research’ is that which not only gathers information but interprets it by setting it in a much wider context (theoretical, historical etc.). Much of what passes for research today is more like fact-finding, driven by immediate (and often fleeting) interests and preoccupations. At its worst, research simply backs up and legitimates existing policy and prejudice. There is a huge amount of reinventing the wheel and ignorance of existing studies. The Muslim Youth Work Foundation’s motto is ‘responding to lives not events’, and good research should also be critical of passing concerns. Yet good research, of various kinds, does still matter and can still shift opinion – at least over time.

*Report written by Rebecca Catto with edits from Linda Woodhead and posted online 17/12/11.*