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# The Role of Gender, Religion and Friendship in the Perception of the “Other”: An Investigation of Secondary Students in Australia

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*This paper reports some results from a large scale national study of attitudes towards Islam and Muslims amongst Australian secondary students. Wide-spread negative stereotypes and the relatively new presence of the Muslim community in Australia tend to suggest non-Muslim students may not be well informed, while the longstanding multicultural posture of educational policy suggests otherwise. Variation in response between boys and girls, religion or non-religious affiliated also revealed a high level of significance. Specifically girls and students in non-religious schools were more accepting of Muslims. It was found that having a friend who is Muslim is significantly associated with reduced prejudice towards Muslims. While non-Muslim students agree that acceptance of Muslims does not come easily in Australia, school does not emerge as a site for change. The findings show Australian students are generally ignorant about Muslims and Islam, and few believe that schools are filling the gaps in their knowledge*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Theorists (Streitmatter and Pate 1989; Killen and McKown 2005; Soenens et al. 2005; Biggs 1999; Berzonsky 2004; Hunt et al. 2006) agree that pre-conceived judgment of how the individual thinks about ‘the other’ is usually formed without adequate information. Three critical approaches have been proposed to measure examples of preconceived judgment such as prejudice. One of these involves measurement of manifest stereotypic behaviour, otherwise defined as the tendency to over-generalize qualities of others. When driven by prejudice over generalized qualities are usually combined with hostility. The other two approaches measure how an individual relates (active behaviour) to a perceived ‘other’, and the way an individual feels about the other (affective component).

Meertens and Pettigrew (1997) suggest that a distinction should be made between blatant prejudice and subtle prejudice. Blatant prejudice includes the ascription of negative descriptors (stereotypes) to the perceived ‘out-group’ whereas subtle prejudice will not evidence negative descriptors but rather the omission of positive descriptors being attributed to the perceived out-group.

Alongside such stereotypes, members of the mainstream (dominant) social group share ‘symbolic beliefs’ which they value and defend against out-groups (Esses et al. 1993:139; Schwartz and Struch 1989). Esses et al. state that these symbolic beliefs consist of a wide variety of perceptions, including the way certain groups fit into the society and help to make it a better or worse place in which to live. According to Esses et al., it is the dissimilarity of such beliefs, rather than ethno-cultural characteristics, that induces prejudices, negative attitudes toward other groups. Such assumed differences of beliefs raise suspicions and thus lead to intergroup conflicts. In these conflicts, group members perceive not only themselves, but also their values to be under threat. And when the group's shared values or symbolic beliefs are (or seem to be) threatened, they tend to become even more salient.

Social walls may be erected both by the minority group to stop its members from assimilating, or by the majority group to prevent minorities from joining them (Hutnik 1991). Both expressions of prejudice to the ‘other’ are usually supported by the norms of the community, a church/mosque or temple, a school, workplace, or other institutions. The intensity of it varies with the degree that people want to feel accepted by those around them, and their resistance to the social walls becoming penetrable.

Psychological factors, although very important, constitute only one aspect of the “us–and–them” conflicts. They are interlinked with other factors, political, economic, historical, etc. Psychological theories are therefore not adequate to explain the intergroup conflict on their own; they reinforce those factors and they are reinforced by them.

The aim of this survey is to probe the attitudes of senior students in Australian schools toward Islam and Muslims. This paper will investigate the extent of Islam-phobia amongst Australian adolescents and the variation within the gender, religious and friendship divide in the perception of the Muslim community and other selected religious groups.

The findings provide empirical data which enable us to make a distinction between subtle and blatant prejudice, further contributing to the understanding of the psychosocial development of prejudice. It is understood that without constructing a theoretical model on the basis of statistical findings in this investigation makes it difficult to interpret the problems under examination. The temptation to advance theoretical premises without regard to the circumstances surrounding the study would have tended to influence the analysis of the statistical results, as well as the interpretation of the attitudinal trends and patterns between the subgroups.

## **2. METHOD**

Participants were students from 42 high schools across Australia, with the exception of Western Australia and the Northern Territory (omitted for reasons of distance and cost). About half the sample came from Catholic schools (53%), and a quarter each from other Christian schools (26%) and non-denominational schools (21%); only three government schools participated. A total of 2,300 secondary students, from years 10-12, completed the questionnaire for this study. Neither Islamic nor Jewish schools were approached to take part in the study.

The survey consisted of a structured questionnaire containing 70 items including attitudinal, behavioral, knowledge and demographic details. In addition participants were presented with attitudinal statements answered by way of a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree); knowledge of Islam will not be dealt with in this paper.

### 3. RESULTS

We set out to explore the attitudes of the sample as a whole. We also presented participants with a list of 15 attributes and asked whether or not each applied respectively to Muslims, Christians and Non-religious persons. (The latter two groups were included in order to serve as a baseline against which to compare perceptions of Muslims.)

But does this mask differences within the sample? For instance, do boys differ systematically from girls in their attitudes towards Islam and Muslims? To answer this and similar questions, we used statistical techniques to determine if there were significant differences in the mean attitudes of all the demographic groups measured in the survey.

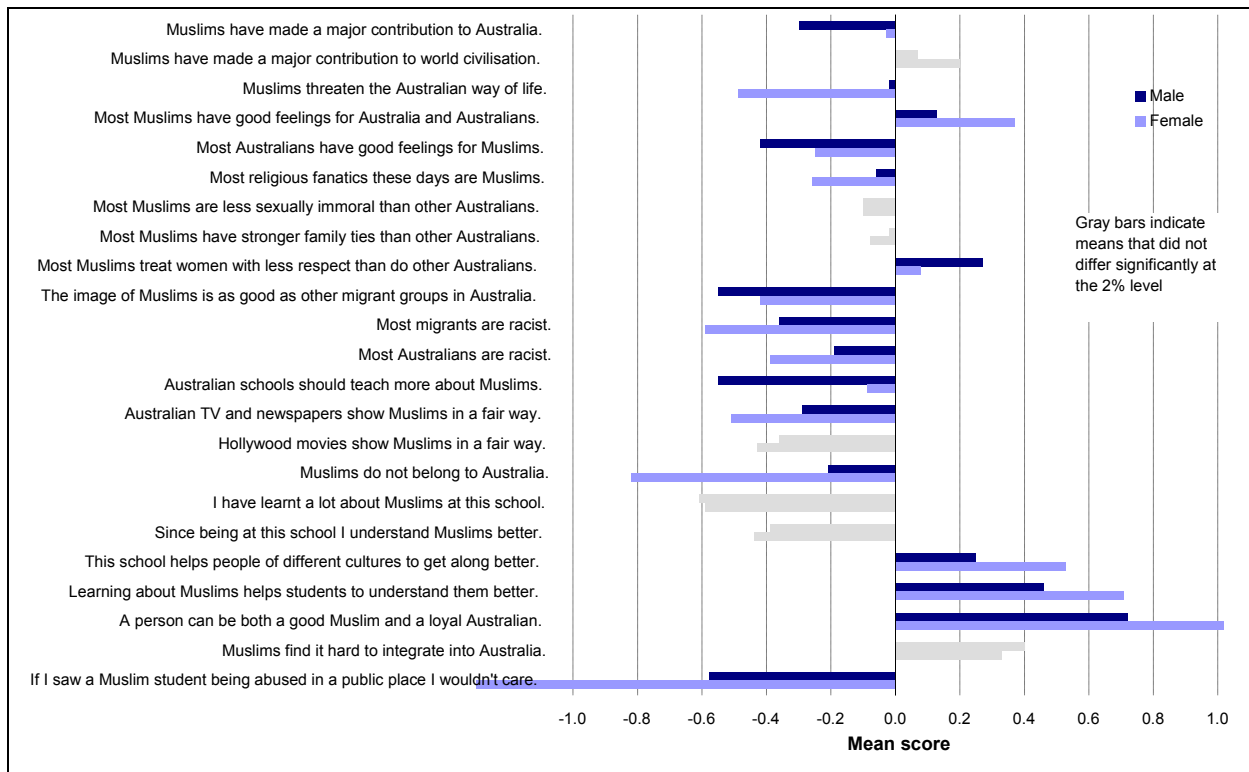
#### *Gender Differences*

Significant differences were found between the responses of boys and girls (Figure 1). Boys and girls differed significantly on the following statements.

<b>Boys agreed more, or disagreed less, than girls</b>	<b>Girls agreed more, or disagreed less than boys</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians.</i></li><li>• <i>Muslims threaten the Australian way of life.</i></li><li>• <i>Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims.</i></li><li>• <i>Most migrants are racist.</i></li><li>• <i>Most Australians are racist.</i></li><li>• <i>Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way.</i></li><li>• <i>Muslims do not belong to Australia.</i></li><li>• <i>If I saw a Muslim student being abused in a public place I wouldn't care.</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.</i></li><li>• <i>This school helps people of different cultures to get along better.</i></li><li>• <i>Learning about Muslims helps students to understand them better.</i></li><li>• <i>A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.</i></li><li>• <i>Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.</i></li><li>• <i>Most Australians have good feelings for Muslims.</i></li><li>• <i>The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups in Australia.</i></li><li>• <i>Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.</i></li></ul>

These findings show that boys were less accepting of Muslims and Islam than were girls. Interestingly, boys agreed more than girls with the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*; clearly a view not founded in direct experience.

Figure 1 Mean attitude scores, by sex



### The Role of Religion

Significant differences were found between the responses of respondents according to their religious affiliation (or lack of one, Figure 2). On many statements, there was a strong tendency for the two Christian groups—Catholics and Other Christians—to resemble each other and to differ from the Non-religious:

Non-religious agreed more, or disagreed less, than Christians	Christians agreed more, or disagreed less, than Non-religious
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilization.</li> <li>Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.</li> <li>Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.</li> <li>Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims.</li> <li>Most migrants are racist.</li> <li>Muslims do not belong to Australia.</li> </ul>

On two statements, all three religious affiliations differed significantly from each other.

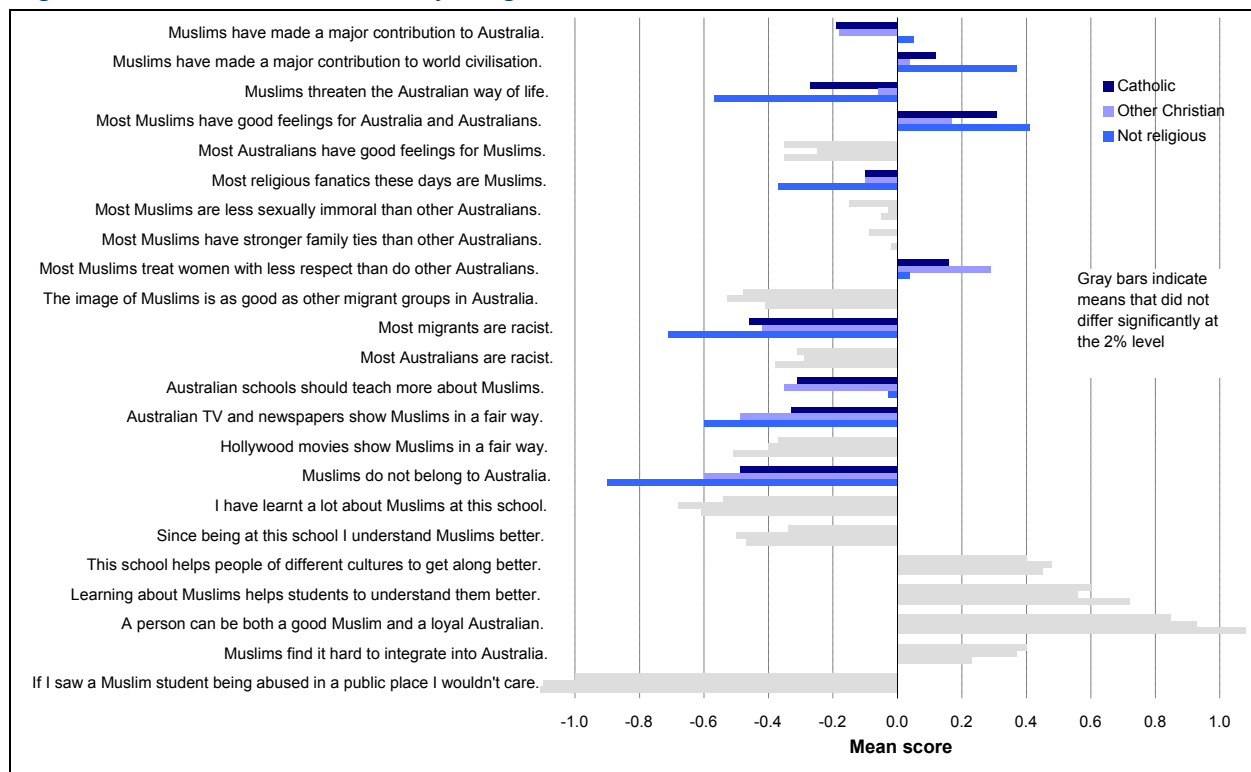
On the statement *Muslims threaten the Australian way of life*, all disagreed, but to different degrees: Non-religious most, Catholics next, Other Christians least.

On the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*, they all agreed: Other Christian most, Catholics next, Non-religious least.

On one statement, *Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way*, Other Christian and Non-religious did not differ significantly, but did differ from Catholics: all groups disagreed, Catholics least.

These findings show that the two Christian groups were significantly less well-disposed towards Muslims and Islam than were the Non-religious.

Figure 2 Mean attitude scores, by religion



### *Does Having Muslim Friends Make a Difference?*

In a word, yes. Significant differences were found between the responses of those with Muslim friends and those without (Figure 3). Those with Muslim friends differed significantly from those without on the following statements:

<b>Those with Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than those without</b>	<b>Those without Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than those with</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.</i></li> <li>• <i>Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilization.</i></li> <li>• <i>Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.</i></li> <li>• <i>Most Muslims have stronger family ties than other Australians.</i></li> <li>• <i>Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.</i></li> <li>• <i>This school helps people of different cultures to get along better.</i></li> <li>• <i>Learning about Muslims helps students to understand them better.</i></li> <li>• <i>A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Muslims find it hard to integrate into Australia.</i></li> <li>• <i>Muslims threaten the Australian way of life.</i></li> <li>• <i>Most migrants are racist.</i></li> <li>• <i>Hollywood movies show Muslims in a fair way.</i></li> <li>• <i>Muslims do not belong to Australia.</i></li> <li>• <i>If I saw a Muslim student being abused in a public place I wouldn't care.</i></li> </ul>

These findings suggest that those with Muslim friends tend to evidence positive attitudes towards Muslims. Although those who lack Muslim friends do not tend to endorse negative attitudes, they do tend to disagree less with such attitudes. In other words, positive attitudes are generally embraced by both groups, but more strongly by those with Muslim friends; and negative attitudes are generally opposed by both groups, but more strongly by those with Muslim friends.

Note that these findings say nothing about causation. Having Muslim friends might give rise to positive attitudes, or alternatively having positive attitudes might predispose one to seek or accept Muslim friends. Nevertheless the two are strongly associated in a statistical sense, meaning that if one is present, the other is likely to be also.

Respondents were presented with a list of 15 attributes and asked whether or not each applied respectively to Muslims, Christians and Non-religious persons. (The latter two groups were included in order to serve as a baseline against which to compare perceptions of Muslims). For many attributes, there was little difference in the perceptions of the religious groups, but on some the Muslims stood in sharp contrast to the others (Figure 4).

Figure 3a: Mean scores difference in gender and religion to select attitudes

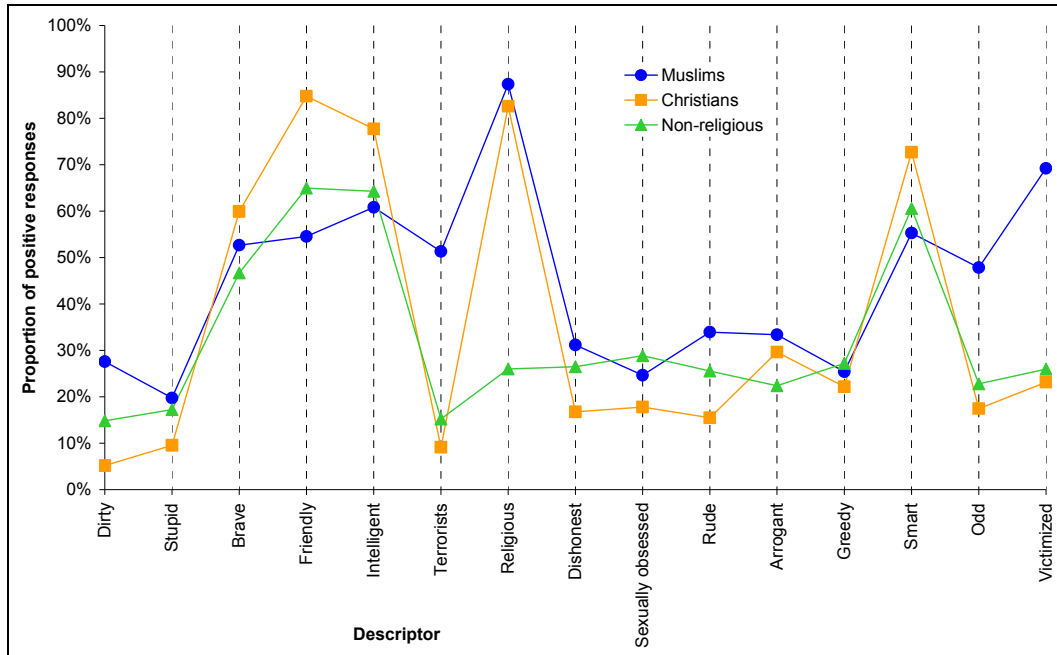
Attitude	Sex			Religion			Sig
	Male	Female	Sig	Catholic	Other Christian	Non-Religious	
Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.	2.70	2.97	<b>0.00</b>	2.81	2.82	3.05	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilisation.	3.07	3.20	<b>0.04</b>	3.12	3.04	3.37	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims threaten the Australian way of life.	2.94	2.40	<b>0.00</b>	2.63	2.79	2.23	<b>0.00</b>
Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.	3.13	3.37	<b>0.00</b>	3.31	3.17	3.41	<b>0.02</b>
Most Australians have good feelings for Muslims.	2.64	2.78	<b>0.02</b>	2.70	2.76	2.74	0.67
Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims.	2.95	2.69	<b>0.00</b>	2.84	2.87	2.57	<b>0.00</b>
Most Muslims are less sexually immoral than other Australians.	2.89	2.92	0.60	2.86	2.93	2.96	0.30
Most Muslims have stronger family ties than other Australians.	2.97	3.03	0.40	2.99	3.02	3.05	0.76
Most Muslims treat women with less respect ...	3.29	3.11	<b>0.01</b>	3.21	3.28	3.00	<b>0.01</b>
The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups ...	2.37	2.60	<b>0.00</b>	2.53	2.51	2.50	0.93
Most migrants are racist.	2.64	2.41	<b>0.00</b>	2.54	2.58	2.29	<b>0.00</b>
Most Australians are racist.	2.81	2.61	<b>0.01</b>	2.69	2.71	2.62	0.58
Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.	2.45	2.91	<b>0.00</b>	2.69	2.65	2.97	<b>0.00</b>
Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way.	2.71	2.49	<b>0.00</b>	2.67	2.51	2.40	<b>0.00</b>
Hollywood movies show Muslims in a fair way.	2.64	2.57	0.22	2.63	2.60	2.49	0.14
Muslims do not belong to Australia.	2.79	2.18	<b>0.00</b>	2.51	2.40	2.10	<b>0.00</b>
I have learnt a lot about Muslims at this school.	2.39	2.41	0.87	2.46	2.32	2.39	0.21
Since being at this school I understand Muslims better.	2.61	2.56	0.52	2.66	2.50	2.53	0.10
This school helps people of different cultures to get along better.	3.25	3.53	<b>0.00</b>	3.40	3.48	3.45	0.57
Learning about Muslims helps students to understand ....	3.46	3.71	<b>0.00</b>	3.60	3.56	3.72	0.19
A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.	3.72	4.02	<b>0.00</b>	3.85	3.93	4.08	<b>0.03</b>
Muslims find it hard to integrate into Australia.	3.40	3.33	0.21	3.40	3.37	3.23	<b>0.03</b>
If I saw a Muslim student being abused ... I wouldn't care.	2.42	1.70	<b>0.00</b>	2.00	1.90	1.89	0.34



Figure 3b. Mean scores difference in father's birthplace and Muslim friend to select attitudes

Attitude	Father's Place of Birth			Any Muslim Friends?		
	Australia	Other	Sig	Yes	No	Sig
Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.	2.82	3.03	<b>0.00</b>	3.31	2.75	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilisation.	3.12	3.28	<b>0.02</b>	3.47	3.06	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims threaten the Australian way of life.	2.62	2.44	<b>0.02</b>	2.19	2.69	<b>0.00</b>
Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.	3.31	3.26	0.43	3.53	3.22	<b>0.00</b>
Most Australians have good feelings for Muslims.	2.76	2.64	0.07	2.84	2.69	<b>0.04</b>
Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims.	2.79	2.76	0.67	2.65	2.82	<b>0.02</b>
Most Muslims are less sexually immoral than other Australians.	2.90	2.94	0.58	2.86	2.92	0.33
Most Muslims have stronger family ties than other Australians.	2.99	3.06	0.38	3.10	2.98	0.12
Most Muslims treat women with less respect ...	3.20	3.08	0.09	3.05	3.21	0.05
The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups ...	2.52	2.51	0.89	2.52	2.52	0.94
Most migrants are racist.	2.52	2.40	0.08	2.32	2.54	<b>0.00</b>
Most Australians are racist.	2.63	2.81	<b>0.02</b>	2.78	2.65	0.12
Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.	2.73	2.84	0.18	3.19	2.62	<b>0.00</b>
Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way.	2.62	2.40	<b>0.00</b>	2.44	2.60	<b>0.02</b>
Hollywood movies show Muslims in a fair way.	2.63	2.47	<b>0.01</b>	2.38	2.65	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims do not belong to Australia.	2.48	2.12	<b>0.00</b>	1.85	2.54	<b>0.00</b>
I have learnt a lot about Muslims at this school.	2.39	2.44	0.49	2.50	2.37	0.09
Since being at this school I understand Muslims better.	2.57	2.60	0.79	2.69	2.54	0.07
This school helps people of different cultures to get along better.	3.40	3.55	<b>0.04</b>	3.64	3.38	<b>0.00</b>
Learning about Muslims helps students to understand ....	3.60	3.69	0.21	3.96	3.52	<b>0.00</b>
A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.	3.89	4.03	0.08	4.36	3.80	<b>0.00</b>
Muslims find it hard to integrate into Australia.	3.38	3.29	0.11	3.22	3.39	<b>0.01</b>
If I saw a Muslim student being abused ... I wouldn't care.	1.94	1.95	0.92	1.57	2.05	<b>0.00</b>

Figure 4  
Proportion of positive responses to attributes of selected religious groups



N = 2023 to 2078

To highlight the differences between how Muslims were perceived as compared to how Christians were perceived, the difference in proportional responses were ranked<sup>1</sup> Muslims were perceived (in decreasing order of importance) as more victimized, terrorists, odd, dirty, rude, dishonest, stupid, sexually obsessed, religious, arrogant and greedy than Christians; while Christians were perceived (in decreasing order of importance) as more friendly, smart, intelligent and brave than Muslims.

### Data Reduction

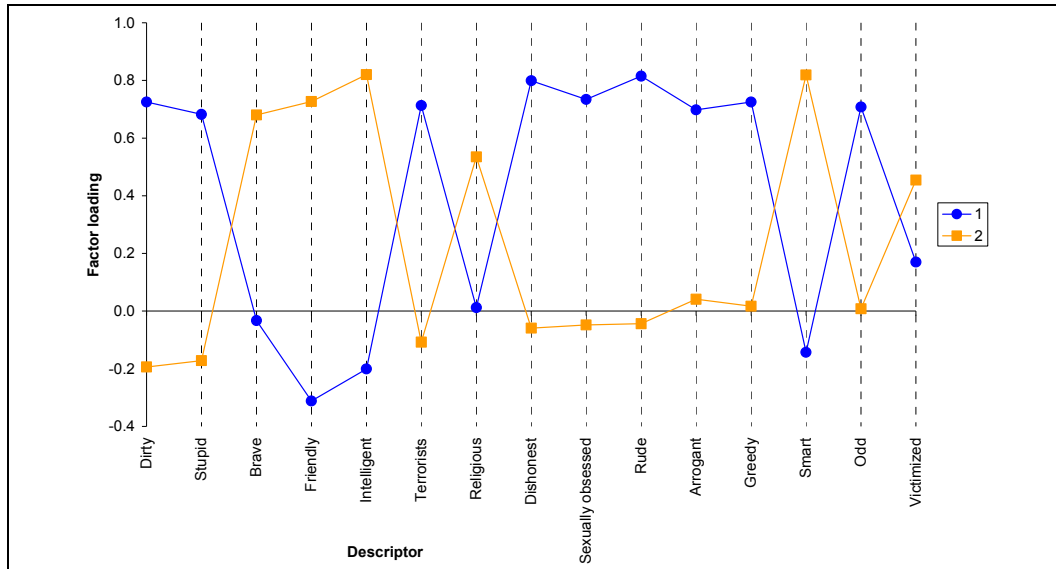
Because some of the attributes were quite similar to one another, and hence the responses to them statistically correlated, we used factor analysis<sup>2</sup> to ‘collapse’ them into a smaller set of attributes, termed factors, with little loss of explanatory power. By reducing the amount of data this simplifies the analysis considerably and can throw light on the underlying explanatory links.

Factor analysis reduced perceptions to the following factors:

- Muslims: Two significant factors jointly explained 53% of observed variance.
- Christians: Three significant factors jointly explained 53% of observed variance.
- Non-religious: Three significant factors jointly explained 59% of observed variance.

Factor loadings (that is, the relative weight accorded to each perception in the factor) are shown in figures 5, 6 and 7.

Figure 5  
Rotated component matrix showing factor loadings: Muslims



Because we are concerned principally with perceptions of Muslims, the following discussion relates to them alone.

Factor 1 loads positively on to unattractive attributes (rude, dishonest, sexually obsessed, greedy, dirty etc); and negatively or not at all on attractive ones (smart, intelligent, friendly etc) or factors that are either attractive or not depending on one’s subjective disposition (religious, victimized, Figure 6). In discussion we shall term it ‘dislikeable’.

Factor 2 loads positively on to attractive attributes and negatively or not at all on to unattractive ones (Figure 7). It also loads positively on to ‘religious’ and ‘victimized’, which contribute little to Factor 1. In discussion we shall term this trait ‘virtuous’ since it recognises virtues, downplays failings, and acknowledges religion—all in the context of being ‘victimized’.

Figure 6  
Rotated component matrix showing factor loadings:  
Factor 1:  
'Dislikeable'

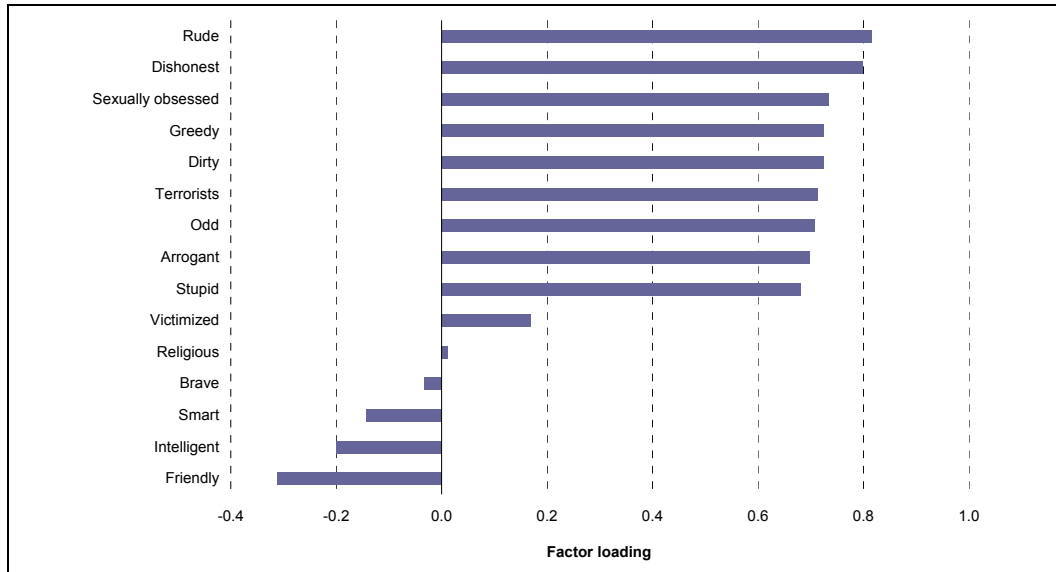
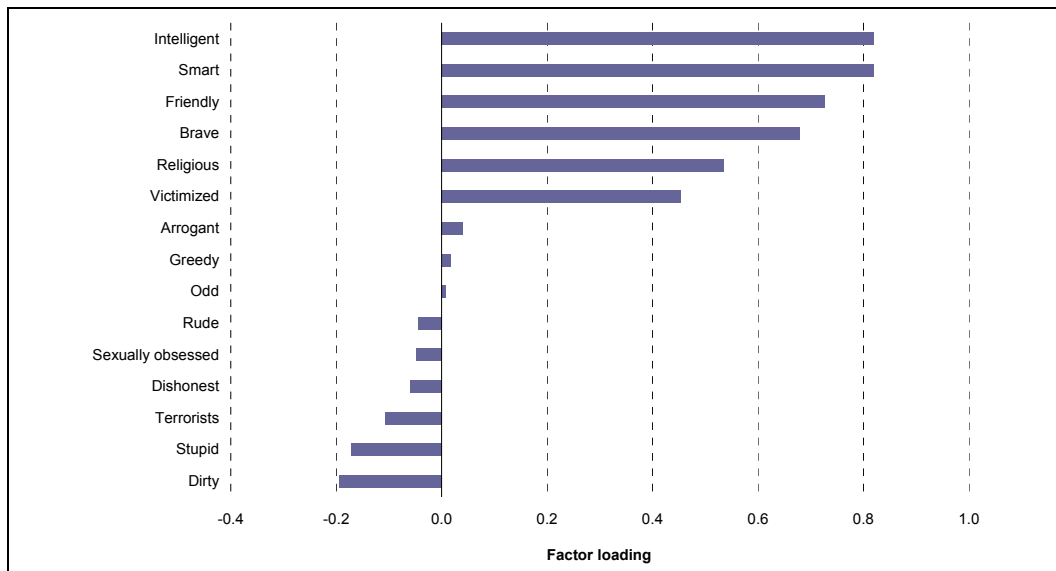


Figure 7  
Rotated component matrix showing factor loadings:  
Factor 2:  
'Virtuous'



**Note:** Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalisation.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the results that the majority of respondents are not displaying blatant prejudice. In fact, in many instances one could say that they do not seem to be displaying very much of anything given the large number of neutral responses in the 'Attitude' section of the survey. There is a statistically insignificant minority who openly display negative attitudes toward Muslims but, as has been found in previous studies, they appear to have a general disposition of negative attitude to many things, of which cultural difference is just one.

It is always a heart stopping moment when the data reveal a large number of neutral/non-committed/don't know/don't care responses. And how, as researchers, are

we to know which is which? The items that drew the most 'neutral' responses were ones that asked for judgment, rather than experience – for example, "Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims". Very few students reported either having a Muslim friend or neighbour so anything but a 'neutral' answer would have to involve something other than personal experience. Even if the students had some contact with Muslims, they avoid labeling 'Most' with that limited experience. Thus it appears that in this survey these students avoid the use of stereotypic labels most of the time.

When required to take a position, other than that of neutrality, by being presented with a forced choice, students who had been particularly 'neutral' did not ascribe or associate negative labels with Muslims. Again, without the personal experience by which to make an informed decision, students are avoiding the use of prejudicial and stereotypic labeling.

The one result which was arguably contrary to this trend was the incidence of students associating the 'terrorist' label with Muslims. Noteworthy is the fact that a few students who had associated 'positive' labels with Muslims made this association. It is possible that the association of 'Muslim' and 'Terrorist' is an indication of subtle prejudice. If the student is associating the group 'Muslim' rather than commenting on the individual terrorist happening to be Muslim then this could be interpreted as an indication of the subtle prejudice that Pettigrew and Meertins (1997) described. Experiential learning needs to be built in to the curriculum which will facilitate the learning style preferred. Blatant racism is evident in only a minority of cases and this seems to be coupled with a general 'negative' attitude rather than being 'Muslim specific'. Future studies should take note of this ambiguity in design and make the interpretation of the question less ambiguous.

The suggested trend, that these students are mostly reserving judgment until they have acquired evidence from personal experience, is interesting. It suggests that learning is most beneficial if it involves an experiential component. Thus, whilst the majority of respondents agreed that learning about Muslims would increase understanding, they rejected the idea of the school 'teaching' more. Curriculum based comparative religion classes are hence of less benefit in fulfilling the experiential component than field trips or cultural exchange type programs that facilitate the actual meeting with, and experiencing first hand, peoples of different cultures and religions.

These students also display a distrust of information obtained from the media, both press and cinematic, which contributes to the need to rely on personal experience for obtaining information. It is not clear from this study whether this would have an impact on the role of peer groups in providing information - do peer groups proscribe the 'party line' or are peer groups formed by students who share the same experience-informed opinions?

Although the suggestion that adolescents are now relying on personal experience to form opinions, rather than passively adopting opinions taught to them, may herald a generation that is indeed "marching to beat of its own drum", the corollary may be that we are seeing a generation that may acquire their sense of identity at a rate slower than previous generations. This of course will have many ramifications in terms of psycho-social development that are beyond the scope of this paper.

## 5. NOTES

1. Differences were calculated as in the following example: 69% of respondents regarded Muslims as 'victimised' as compared to 23% who regarded Christians as 'victimised', hence the difference was  $23\% - 69\% = -46\%$ . All differences were significant at the 5% level on paired t-tests. No analogous comparison was made between Muslims and Non-religious as it was considered unnecessary since perceptions of Non-religious resembled perceptions of Christians.

2. Factor analysis is one of several statistical techniques collectively termed 'data reduction' methods. As the name implies, factor analysis aims to reduce large datasets, ones with many variables, to simpler datasets that capture most of the information present in the original but with fewer variables, termed 'factors'. Each respondent is assigned a score on each factor. The numerical value of the factor score ranges between +1 (high), -1 (low) and 0 (neutral).

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