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**I know who I am, but who do they think I am? : Muslim perspectives  
on encounters with airport authorities.**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we report an analysis of individual and group interviews with 38 Scottish Muslims concerning their encounters with authority – especially those at airports. Our analysis shows that a key theme in interviewees' talk of their experience in this context concerns the denial and misrecognition of valued identities such as being British, being respectable, and being Muslim. One reason why such experiences are so problematic concerns the denial of agency associated with being positioned in terms that are not one's own. The implications of these findings for understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations are discussed.

**Keywords:** social identities, national identity, social exclusion, Muslims, border surveillance, belonging

“That's the debate, Andrew. That is absolutely the heart of the debate. And the West's gotta resolve this debate. Is the reason why they're like that because of us, or is it actually because of them? Now, my view in the end is we should stop being in a situation where we think we've caused this. We haven't caused this”.

Tony Blair (BBC interview 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2010)

Analysing tensions between Britain and the Muslim world, Britain's former Prime Minister denies much is to be gained from examining 'our' own actions: rather, the focus is squarely on 'them'. Blaming the other can be comforting. However, the costs can be significant: if one continues to act without regard for how one's actions impact on the other there is little chance for any improvement in intergroup relations. Indeed, there is every chance of a further deterioration.

Yet, reflection on one's own actions and their impact is not so easy. It requires adopting the perspective of the other and how one's own actions shape the other's experience. Asymmetries of power can make appreciation of other people's lived experiences and of one's own role in that experience particularly difficult. But, no matter how hard, such an exercise is crucial, and here we seek to take seriously the issue of British Muslims' experiences of authority. Specifically, we consider their accounts of how they feel they are treated by the police in British airports. Such interactions may seem rather uneventful. Daily, many thousands of passengers pass through British airports and some will be stopped resulting in a short delay. However, from the vantage-point of Muslim passengers

even such apparently uneventful interactions can raise painful questions about how they are seen and positioned by others, and what this means for how they may see themselves. Indeed, in some respects, the everyday routine nature of such interactions adds to their significance.

Below, we consider British Muslims' identities and how these may be shaped by their contacts with others. We then explain the context to our research and the themes we pursue.

### **British Muslim identities**

Europe's Muslim communities are routinely viewed as 'in' Europe, but not 'of' Europe. Many of Europe's majority populations view Muslims with concern (Velasco Gonzalez et al. 2008). Certainly, many non-Muslim Britons assume that British Muslims do not identify themselves as British (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2006), and such views are sustained by essentialised images of Islam that depict Muslims as an alien other.

However, many Muslims do identify as British (Maxwell, 2006). Moreover, identification as British and as Muslim is not a zero-sum game: Britishness does not come at the expense of a Muslim identification (Hopkins, 2011). Indeed religious identities cannot be considered without regard to the context in which they are located, and this is well-illustrated in ethnographic and interview research which emphasises the local quality to young Scottish males' Muslim identities (Hopkins, 2007). Moreover, attending to the contextual determinants of identity reminds us that identities are multiple and that how one identifies in any given context depends on events and the actions of others (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2004)

The research cited above cautions against the easy tendency to assume that any difficulties in adopting a British identification arise because of features inherent to either Islam or to Britain's Muslims. Indeed, this research draws us to the investigation of how Muslims' understandings of who they are may be affected by their interactions with the non-Muslim majority. Accordingly, we now turn to research concerning majority-minority relationships, especially research investigating the outcomes of intergroup contact encounters founded on relationships of unequal power.

### **Majority-minority encounters**

Intergroup contact is typically assumed to improve intergroup relations. But, contact is not always a panacea. Contact has a reliable (modest) impact upon intergroup perceptions, but this effect is strongest for majorities (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Tropp and Pettigrew, 2005). Indeed, even when contact is structured to maximise positive intergroup outcomes, minorities show less change than majorities. Such asymmetries underline the importance of taking the minority's vantage point seriously: it seems the 'same' encounter may be quite different for those with and those without power.

Yet, insight into minorities' experiences of their contacts with majorities is limited as few studies actually look at how minority group members *themselves* construe their contact with majority group members (Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005). In part this is because the focus has been on how contact reduces majority group members' prejudices; and because researchers have viewed contact encounters in terms of a pre-defined checklist of factors believed to make contact more or less 'optimal'. What research we do have on British Muslims highlights

the mix of pleasures and costs associated with acting as an ambassador for Islam (Hopkins, Greenwood and Birchall, 2007) and some of the concerns minorities may have about how contact limits minority group members' ability to act as a cohesive group to secure change (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2006). But we know little of British Muslims' lived experience of their contact encounters with majority group members, particularly with those who are seen to represent the majority community; and we know little about how this impacts on their sense of identity (Husband and Alam, 2011; Spalek and Lambert, 2008).

### **Relations with authority**

In some contexts intergroup interactions can sometimes be the cause (and not the solution) to intergroup antagonisms. Relations between minorities and the police have often been difficult and complaints about being treated as untrustworthy are common (e.g., Fine et al. 2003; Jefferson and Walker, 1993). In Britain, Muslims complain about both formal and informal surveillance (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011; Thiel, 2009) and report that the expression of their British and Muslim identities has been turned by others into topics of concern. This has widespread consequences for their everyday citizenship (Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011). It also results in more frequent contacts with the authorities: recent developments in security legislation have increased the degree to which Muslims are subjected to 'stop and search' powers. For example, Section 44 of the Terrorism Act (2000) gives the police power to stop and search individuals in certain areas without needing to have grounds of 'reasonable suspicion'. Critics have argued that such stops discriminate against Asians, and data reviewed by Thiel (2009) for The Police Foundation show that stops by the Metropolitan Police Service almost

doubled between 2004/5 and 2005/6 with the rise in Asians being stopped being particularly acute.

The psychological impact of such encounters is hard to gauge. However, there is evidence that the police are understood to be representatives of the broad majority community and that minorities believe their own treatment reveals much about the degree to which they are included (or not) in that community (Talbot and Bose, 2007). Issues of procedural justice and identity are key elements in these dynamics: people expect fair treatment from those with whom they share a common group identity (Lind and Tyler, 1988) and to experience what one believes is unfair treatment amounts to being told by 'prototypical' representatives of society that one is not actually regarded as a *bone fide* group member. (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). This can result in feelings of diminished self-worth and powerlessness (Smith, Allen, and Danley, 2007). It can also result in a degree of alienation from the authorities and reduced evaluations of police legitimacy (e.g., Bradford, Jackson and Stanko 2009). To cite just one recent study amongst American Muslims in New York (Tyler, Schulhofer and Huq, 2010) there was strong evidence that perceived lack of procedural justice led to a perception of authorities as illegitimate, which in turn reduced willingness to voluntarily cooperate with counter-terrorism measures.

### **Minority group members' understandings of their experiences**

At the outset to this paper we suggested that understanding intergroup tensions requires attending to how the actions of the one party contribute to the lived experience of the other. In the present context this implies attending to Muslims' experiences of the authorities' actions. The data relevant to such an investigation



are diverse.

Some aspects of Muslims' experience of the police's behaviour require quantitative data. Thus, if one were interested in the impact of stop and search practices on Muslims' orientation to the police one could consider the number of people stopped, on what grounds, and with what outcome. Moreover, one could compare the figures with those for other groups. Yet, such data are poorly recorded. For example, in an investigation of the impact of counter-terrorism measures on Britain's Muslims, Choudhury and Fenwick (2011) note that until 2010 there were no central records of stops at British airports under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act (2000) if the duration of the stop was less than one hour. In 2010 shorter stops were recorded for the first time and show that over the year 85,557 stops took place (of which only 2,687 lasted more than one hour). As data on the (perceived) ethnic background of the stopped passenger were only recorded for those stopped for more than an hour, it is difficult to establish a clear picture of the degree to which Muslims are disproportionately subject to police attention.

Other questions require more qualitative data concerning minority group members' understandings of their experiences with authority figures. Such qualitative data cannot address the questions described above (e.g., whether Muslims are stopped disproportionately). Nor, can interview data support strong claims about what precisely happened in any interaction (to speak with any confidence on this and how the actions of the one party impacted upon the other one would need ethnographic data complemented by interview data obtained from Muslims and the authorities). However, qualitative data obtained with Muslim participants allows us to begin to explore how people make sense of their encounter and their beliefs about what it meant for them.

In what follows we present just such a study. We report qualitative data obtained with Muslim participants concerning their experiences with authority. At the outset we made no assumptions about which encounters would be of importance to our participants. Rather, and in-keeping with our desire to appreciate the minority's vantage point, we simply sought to explore what sorts of encounters our participants raised as being significant. In turn, we addressed the following questions: How are these encounters experienced? Are issues of identity implicated? If so, what identities are implicated and how? Finally, to take the investigation one step further, we asked what is it that makes the definition (and redefinition) of identity in such encounters so significant?

## **Method**

### Sample

Our data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 23 Muslims and two focus group discussions involving an additional 15 participants. We recruited participants in three Scottish cities (Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow), through a range of organizations (e.g., an Islamic student society, a Muslim youth group, Mosques, and a women's centre). We attended various community events including Mosque open days and Police-Muslim consultations, where we approached individuals directly. Finally, we asked those we interviewed to recommend others to contact.

As we do not seek to make claims about the incidence of particular events we did not seek a representative sample of participants. Rather, we sought to gain insight into the range of experiences with authority and the diverse ways in which encounters could be experienced and interpreted. Hence we recruited across a

range of ages, occupations, and ethnic backgrounds. The sample included professionals, businesspeople, students, and home makers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia). Some were born in the UK, and all were residents who self-identified as British. Thirty-two participants were male and 6 were female. The youngest participant was 19 and the oldest was in his sixties. The sample is skewed towards older, middle-class males. This is because initial contact in each city was made through a local Mosque (however it bears repeating that our priority was to secure diversity rather than representativeness). The interviews averaged 1 hour in length and were conducted by the first author (a white Australian woman). Whilst there may be merit in the interviewer being Muslim, there are also disadvantages associated with the interviewer being seen as sharing the same identity as one's respondents. Most obviously, insiders are assumed to share common knowledge and hence to ask certain questions would seem strange and awkward. People can be less willing to elaborate upon their understandings and experiences because they assume the questioner already knows the answer.

### Interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured schedule. We started by inviting people to tell stories about memorable encounters they or others had with authorities:

We are interested in the kinds of interactions, both good and bad, that people are having with authorities. I want you to just tell stories about interactions that made some impression on you. You can tell as many stories as you like about experiences with anybody who you perceive as

having authority in society.

We asked people to be as detailed as possible and where appropriate probed for additional information: What were the circumstances? Who was there? What was said and done? In asking for stories, we were not concerned with the objective reality of encounters, but with how people made sense of these encounters. Often participants' story-telling entailed considerable reflection on their emotions and their thought processes. Where this was not the case, we probed further.

Typically participants referred to various sites of interaction as significant but a common topic was their experiences at British and local Scottish airports . Indeed in a number of cases people asked explicitly: 'is this about airports?' In such cases, we stressed it concerned encounters significant to them, and that we were happy to be guided by them. The prominence of airports in our data does not imply that other samples would necessarily focus on airports to the same degree. However, amongst our sample airport interactions seemed to exemplify the issues they wished to discuss.

Participants reported experiences before departure and on arrival associated with domestic, European, and long-haul flights. As we cannot investigate the specific dynamics to each encounter (as one would if doing ethnography) and we only have access to participants' accounts, we do not attempt to investigate if participants' experiences were different according to where they were flying to/from etc. Rather, we focus on their overall account of the experience, especially if and how issues of identity feature. Accordingly, our interviews touched on a wide range of topics: e.g., participants' identifications as

Scottish, British and Muslim, foreign policy, relationships with fellow non-Muslim Britons and non-British Muslims, etc.

### Analytic strategy

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) we subjected these data to a thematic analysis. In our first readings of the corpus we identified and coded the types of encounters mentioned (i.e., what forms of authority were involved, where the encounter took place); and whether these encounters were judged positive, negative, or ambiguous. Once we identified the specific site of interest, we defined our data set as those sections of the interviews related to these encounters. Readings of this data set focused on identifying repeated patterns of meaning around people's understanding of the encounters. While we looked for identity-related issues (i.e., encounters believed to reveal something about participants' relationship with authorities and society in general) we did not limit ourselves to these themes. Our coding and the development of themes proceeded through an iterative process of reading and re-reading the data set. As far as possible we kept to the explicit meaning our participants gave the experience (Boyatzis, 1998).

Our analysis is in three sections. First, we examine which sites are of particular significance to people – as has already been intimated, there was strong consensus here about the importance of airports. Second, we show how the experience of airport encounters turns on issues of identity - we look at *what* identities are at stake and how people see these identities as implicated in their airport experiences. Our purpose here is not to be exhaustive. Rather, we have selected material that illustrates the complexities of people's diverse identity positions and the ways in which people experience these identities being denied

and misrecognized. Third, we look at *why* the experience of being misrecognized and having one's identity denied is a problem.

In the quotes provided below, respondents are identified by gender, age, and, where known, occupation.

## **Analysis**

### What sites are problematic?

We were presented with many stories of encounters with a range of authorities including police, teachers, health professionals, politicians, and Muslim leaders. Moreover, the flavour of these encounters differed markedly. People reported both positive and negative experiences, but also a degree of ambivalence where the ambiguity of the context made it difficult to interpret authorities' actions.

Amidst this diversity, what stood out was that airports were consistently and unambiguously identified by all but two interviewees as a site of humiliation, distress and in some cases, fear. There are three things about people's accounts of their encounters that signal airports as a problematic site. First, whereas in other contexts people often expressed uncertainty about how to attribute negative encounters with authorities, in the airport context, this was not the case. All those who talked about airport encounters were explicit that the basis of their treatment was that they were Muslims and that anyone who was Muslim (or fitted a Muslim stereotype) was open to similar treatment. Indeed, for some there was a taken-for-granted quality to these experiences: as one put it "*I should play the lottery because by this probability I get pulled aside every time. But the point is, we all get stopped*" (M, 40s, Professional).

Second, there is a prototypical 'Muslim Airport Story': one that is widely shared and provides a frame for how people interpret their personal encounters with authorities. For instance, in this young man's account of being taken aside for questioning at the airport he instantly recognizes the experience: "*I knew where this was coming from, but it was my first time being singled out*" (M, 28, Youth worker). This can be contrasted with a level of ambiguity which surrounds experiences at different sites. Thus one respondent told a story about his experience of attending a car accident involving his brother, where the police threatened him with arrest if he didn't move away from the car. He commented:

Extract 1 (M, 40s, business-person): "I know why we get treated at airports like that, because we're Muslims. But whether that was to do with me being a Muslim, I don't know."

Third, to say that there is a shared or prototypical Muslim story is not to say that every Muslim we spoke to had a personal story to tell. But, even in the absence of a personal story, the shadow of the collective story was apparent. Most obviously, respondents felt accountable for their lack of negative experience: it was something that they had to remark upon. For example, one interviewee explained: "*I'll be honest with you. My experience at British border controls has been quite positive*" (M, 50s, business-person). This sense of embarrassment at one's own positive experiences violating the collective experience conveys something of the powerful hold this narrative may have within Muslim communities. It also suggests that positive individual experiences may not be sufficient to overcome anxieties about the airport.

### What is problematic about airport experiences?

So, what is it about Muslims' experiences at airports that make this site so problematic? If we separate out the elements of the prototypical 'Muslim Airport Story' we can easily locate the problem in the humiliation of being pulled aside in full view of other passengers and subjected to seemingly irrelevant and misguided questions, and petty discourtesies such as keeping loved-ones waiting. But the problem goes beyond these practices. It lies in what these practices communicate about how one is regarded. In other words, issues of identity emerge as being of central importance. However, this took a number of different forms implicating different identities: (a) national (Scottish) identity; (b) 'respectable' identities; (c) Muslim identity.

*National identity:* Our research was conducted in Scotland, and when speaking more generally about their relationships with authorities and the broader community, many of our interviewees expressed pride and affection for Scotland. Scotland was described as a place where Muslims had "*established good relations with the indigenous population*" (M, 40s, business-person) and felt a sense of belonging. This was frequently contrasted with the greater tensions perceived to exist over the border, in England. In the extract below we see an eloquent expression of frustration from a Scottish-born young man who, however much he might feel Scottish, also reports being *made to feel* as the other.

Extract 2 (M, 28, Youth worker): For me to be singled out felt where am I now? This is my home, I consider Scotland my home. Why am I



being stopped in my own house? Why am I felt, being made to feel as the other in my own house?

What is described here is hurt and confusion at being denied an important social identity; of being cast out from the group and positioned as other and alien. The extremity and illegitimacy of such an experience is further emphasised in the next extract by the use of a telling contrast:

Extract 3 (M, 31, Physiologist): To be treated like that when you're a citizen, you know you don't even get that kind of treatment if you're going abroad to a foreign country where you are foreign. You're the alien in that society. So I mean, it's not a pleasant experience.

The irony here is that national identity is something that is generally taken for granted. Airports are one of the few places where it is made explicit. It is not just that the practice of passing through border control requires one to produce documentation of one's national identity, it is also that one has a sense of returning 'home' and one might even expect to be welcomed home. It is precisely at this point that Muslims experience being made to feel even less at home than when going abroad.

*'Respectable' identities:* Although we would expect national identities to be particularly relevant and salient in the context of airport experiences - and indeed they were - other identities too were clearly implicated. For instance, people expressed shock at not being recognized as respectable, moderate, law-abiding

and contributing members of society. Older participants in particular referred to these identities. Typically such participants were reasonably sanguine in their acceptance of the need for greater security measures at airports, and some were involved with the authorities in combating extremism. But as apparent with the respondent below, rather than this lessening the affront at being repeatedly stopped and questioned at airports, it could have the opposite effect. He describes the experience as shocking precisely because his self-conception was of someone who enjoys high status and respectability in the community, and who is on the side of countering extremism:

Extract 4 (M, 40s, business-person): I find it shocking that in my forties, a businessman here, people like me are actively engaged in sort of counteracting extremism because we, people like myself are liberal thinking we try and show a different face to Islam. And people like me are being harassed at airports.

*Muslim identity:* If the problem lies in being defined as ‘other’, then it is not only a matter of what valued identities are being denied to people, it is also a matter of what identities are ascribed to them. If people are being told that they are not Scottish and that they are not respectable, how are they being defined? Or, to cite the continuation of extract 2 (in which M, 28, youth worker complained about being othered in his own ‘home’ and ‘house’): “*I know who I am, but who does he feel I am now?*”

In our interviews there is a clear answer to this question--a shared meta-representation that one is perceived as Muslim. That in itself is not problematic: it

is an identity that participants are invested in and proud of. Rather, what is problematic is the way that this category is defined. As one of the interviewees explains, this is communicated in deeds as much (if not more than) in words. For him the style to the interaction communicated much: “*Just the way they treated me, you know like, you interrogate me as though I was a criminal and terrorist, you know?*” (M, 50’s; Community leader).

What is at issue here is more than simply a matter of negative stereotyping. It is the fundamental misrecognition involved in using an identity which, for our interviewees, was a source of morality and inclusion as a basis for ascribing immorality and justifying exclusion. One aspect of this has to do with criminality. Consider, for instance, the following extract from an interviewee who had been involved in illegal activities in his youth, who had found his salvation through Islam, and who was now working to help young Muslims find strength in their faith:

Extract 5 (M, 39, Student): I was you know a shop-lifter amongst people. I broke every law there was probably because I was a drug addict. So actually following my religion made me stop all these bad things and actually I’ve become a better person.

Another aspect of the affront to participants’ Muslim identities concerned gender relations. Participants’ understood their Muslim identity as a basis for sexual morality and Muslim practices are presented as sustaining moral behaviour. Yet participants judged that what they took to be markers of purity were mis-read as markers of danger. Indeed, one observed that they would be better treated if they

discarded their purity: referring to travelling with “*a sister who’s wearing the hijab*”, one male complained:

Extract 6 (M, 40s, Professional): Had she been dressed as a slapper let’s say and she was holding onto, clinging onto my arm, we would have just boogied on through like two lovebirds and then nothing would have happened.

To add one more twist to this tale, several of our interviewees stressed the way in which the values of their faith not only sustained their morality but also connected them to the best of British values. Indeed, especially amongst our younger respondents, many felt that their religiosity outweighed their particular brand of religion, and made them more in tune with authentic Britishness than most white British youth who had succumbed to a culture of partying, drinking and promiscuity.

Extract 7 (M, 28, Youth worker): What British means to me is that Britain and many other countries are based on core values. Core values that are intrinsic to my faith and probably relevant to Britain is Christian values. I think that’s what it ultimately means to be British. I don’t have to watch *Eastenders* to be British. I don’t have to watch *Match of the Day* to be British.

In other words, for some participants the irony is that in the name of protecting Britishness and the British way of life they felt they were being asked to disavow

the very things that tied them to Britishness in the first place. In a nutshell, the source of their belonging was being mutated into the warrant for their ‘othering’.

Reviewing these data it appears that at every level, participants reported being denied the identities that matter to them. Their Scottishness and Britishness is put in question, as are their claims to respectability. Moreover, whilst their Muslim identity is acknowledged (indeed imposed to the exclusion of all else), its meanings are so inverted as to become something in which they no longer recognize themselves.

#### Why is the airport experience problematic?

In the section above we have shown that the problem of encounters with authority at airports lies in the denial of identity. From the extracts above, it is clear that this is more than an intellectual concern. There is a ubiquitous feeling of rejection, of hurt, and of humiliation. In this section we ask why the denial of identity is experienced as so problematic. Our answer is that identity is not simply important as a way of looking at oneself and looking at the world. It also has real consequences for what we can do. To be denied an identity is to be denied a position from which one can act upon the world. That is, our interviewees may *feel* that they are British or *feel* that they are Muslim, but they cannot *be* British or *be* Muslim as they would like.

*Loss of agency as British:* Thus far we have considered participants reports that the way they are treated communicates the fact that the authorities (and the society) do not see them as fully British. That is about how they are acted upon,

but what about the ways they act themselves?

Consider the response of one of our interviewees who was stopped and interviewed as she passed through the airport. She described herself as *'boiling'* because she was thinking *'why do they have to do it to me? Why don't they stop the Scottish woman?'* She asserted strongly that her treatment was unwarranted because she had done nothing wrong. But still, she did not challenge the authorities and when asked whether she felt that she could, said

Extract 8 (F, 29, Mother): I guess the way you see on the news that they lock up anybody these days. You can just say that you're against the war in Iraq and they'll lock you up. It's almost that kind of thing do you know what I mean?

As many of our interviewees saw it, the problem is that in the post 9/11 period, the national security agenda gives authorities absolute power and the ability to exercise their power in an arbitrary fashion, especially where Muslims are concerned. This is compounded by a sense that one's peers have themselves bought into the othering of Muslims and hence cannot be relied upon to challenge what the authorities do. In some accounts participants reported that the image of Muslims meant their fellow passengers were cautious, and sensing this, participants felt unable to behave in ways that they normally would. For example, one reported that when queuing in the airport he felt inhibited with regards to interacting with fellow passengers:

Extract 9 (M, 40s, Business-person): I like to see the funny things in

life, right? And you can't joke and you can't really chat with people in the queue while you're waiting for security because they just don't want to be associated with you.

However, sometimes participants reported more than feeling inhibited from interacting with fellow passengers. They also felt vulnerable to overt hostility:

Extract 10 (M, 20s, Professional): So it happened in public and it happened while other people who had been on that plane with me, they're walking past. That happened in my home city so there could have been people who knew me. And that, that then, again it comes down to self-consciousness. It's like how I felt other people are perceiving me by being pulled over and being questioned, you know? And it's not a nice feeling. Even when you're walking around after that you're thinking, who saw that? You're looking over your shoulder thinking is somebody going to shout something at me?

Faced with the power of the authorities and deprived of support from their peers, it is not surprising that our interviewees felt that they had little room for manoeuvre. To insist on their rights would only open them to further difficulties. So, on the whole, they reported staying silent. But, they also experienced a sense that in doing so they failed to act as Britons would be expected to act. One of our older respondents made the point that this was particularly galling for younger people who have always lived in the UK:

Extract 11 (M, 40s, Business-person): They've been born and brought up here in a way that they have freedom of speech and they have their rights. But that's where they get annoyed.

It is not clear from this extract, exactly where the problem lies. Is it that people are annoyed only with the authorities for denying them the ability to enact their identity or is it also in part a sense of annoyance at themselves for having accepted the position to which they had been ascribed? This becomes slightly clearer in the last section of our analysis which addresses issues of agency as they relate to Muslim identity.

*Loss of agency as Muslim:* If our interviewees felt incapable of acting as good Britons, they also felt unable to act as good Muslims insofar as any sign of Muslim identity could be taken as a sign of danger and hence lead them into trouble. The most obvious example of this was where people spoke about women removing the head-scarf before entering the airport. But there were other more subtle examples. Here we find a young woman who, on the one hand, understands her obligation as a good Muslim to be accepting of people's stares and to engage with people's (mis)understanding of her faith, but who, on the other hand, feels unable to deal with the sheer weight of scrutiny:

Extract 12 (F, 27, Student): You get stares and things but you always just smile and then sometimes it can get a bit stressful because you don't want to be so obvious all the time, and you just want to kind of push it in the background and people maybe not to ask you questions



or you know. We just say that it's you know, it's from Allah. If he wants people to ask then they're gonna ask you and you have to be prepared for the questions.

If this respondent feels, at least in part, some responsibility for succumbing to the weight of othering, the respondent below is equally troubled by feeling implicated in the process of othering fellow passengers who appear Muslim. In the extract below this participant reports how he found himself looking at other Muslims in a way that he finds painful:

Extract 13 (M, 40s, Business-person): I will be now looking at, you know, Asian people and Middle Eastern origin people who are sitting in the plane with me. You know to see if everything's okay - what they're doing - just in case, if they look dodgy in anyway or anything like that. But it's beneath your brain-washing.

What is debilitating in this is that again, people are isolated, not just from other British passengers, but from other (British) Muslim passengers. Thus this participant reports feeling cut-off from the very people with whom in the context of airports they share a common experience. Moreover, this means that they are denied the agency that comes from the recognition of this shared experience and the possibility of support and solidarity. Indeed, in-so-much as being seen as other and dangerous is a shared Muslim experience, what is most humiliating and most debilitating is that one is turning not just against others, but against oneself.

## Discussion

Our data reveal several striking findings. Among our interviewees there was a general consensus that airports were problematic and a shared understanding of what happens at airports. Whether correct or not our participants had a sense if they were stopped it was because they were Muslim, and indeed that being stopped is what happens to Muslims.

In part, this specific focus on airports may reflect the middle class skew in our sample. Other Muslims, from less affluent backgrounds and who travel less, may have stressed other encounters as well as or even rather than those in airports. However, first, it is worth pointing out that what our respondents had to say about airports as a site of concern did not always relate to their own individual experience. Rather it related to a shared understanding of what happens to Muslims in general. It was a social representation (Farr and Moscovici, 1984). Second, what concerns us, and where we wish to make claims to generality, has less to do with the site of problematic encounters than with the processes which render the encounter problematic.

With regard to the issue of what makes airport experiences problematic, then, we found references to a sense of injustice, often implicit in the very claim that one had been stopped simply as a Muslim and without any good reason. But the accounts also featured an emphasis on humiliation. This is a topic that is receiving increasing attention in sociological and historical analyses (e.g. Lindner, 2006) but which is strangely neglected in psychology. People gave eloquent accounts of the humiliating experience of being picked out, of being positioned as criminal and, above all, of this happening in public under the gaze of their fellow passengers. But they were equally eloquent about the fact that what made this

experience humiliating had to do with identity; or rather the denial of identity. To sit in shame before their peers was to be denied the identities which gave them position and pride in society. This suggests that analyses of humiliation need to pay more attention to the dynamics of identity, but equally, that the analysis of identity dynamics needs to pay greater attention to the experience of humiliation.

Another aspect of the interviews that struck us was the range of identities implicated in airport encounters. It is, perhaps, to be expected that national identity is made salient, and that to be picked out for harsh treatment is experienced as a denial of one's national status (Zine, 2002). Equally, given that airport security practices are intimately bound up with the global fears of 'Muslim extremism' it is equally to be expected that Muslim identity is made salient, and that to be picked out as a Muslim for harsh treatment is experienced as affirming the pathologisation of Islam. But our participants also reported finding a range of 'respectable' identities compromised: as a professional, a business-person, a community elder and so on. Perhaps most interesting were the dynamics surrounding gender practices. Both male and female participants saw Muslim women's dress as a source of morality and pride, and to find Muslim women subjected to looks that were hostile could be deeply upsetting.

It might seem self-evident that humiliation and the denial of status would be strongly aversive. However our interviewees indicated that the issue was not simply esteem, but action. Insofar as identity is not just about *seeing* but about *being*, what mattered was that the denial of one's valued identities denied people the basis for acting on their own terms. Being pressured to take up the positions and the associated mores imposed by others they lost their autonomy and agency. Moreover, this was not just a function of external pressures; it was also a matter of

self-policing. The problems were therefore compounded by a sense of being complicit in and responsible for one's plight.

It is important to clarify this argument in two ways. First, our analysis focuses on participants' own understandings – in this case, their own sense of complicity and responsibility. We, as analysts, are certainly not seeking to attribute blame. Indeed, it is arguable that one of the most painful aspects of the airport experience is the way in which fear and isolation make self-repression one of the few viable strategies to avoid trouble. Second, we should not overstate the loss of autonomy and agency: people did not always feel impelled to abandon their identity practices or incapable of responding. Indeed, elsewhere we have reported instances in which Muslim passengers refused to comply with stop and search requests and explored how such refusals could be seen as assertions of the right to be treated with respect and on terms that accord with one's own self-definition (Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011).

Our key claims must be calibrated against the limitations of our data. Our sample is not, and was not intended to be, representative of British or Scottish Muslims. Accordingly we make no generalised claims about this population, either in relation to the incidence of airport stops or in relation to their impact. Nor do we have ethnographic data of actual encounters, or interview data with the officers involved. Undoubtedly, analyses of such materials would allow investigations of the bases for officers' decision-making and the degree to which Muslims are targeted unfairly. However, such questions are rather different from those that motivated the research reported here where we are simply interested in identifying the sorts of encounters Muslims found problematic and the degree to which their identity featured in their accounts of why these encounters were so

painful. In answering these latter questions, we can say that, for our particular sample, airports were a key site for our interviewees, that their concerns involved issues of identity, and especially the loss of identity (with all that this means for being able to act on one's own terms). For the future, we need to ask whether the same or other sites are equally important to other groups of Muslims; whether similar processes of identity denial and humiliation are equally central to problematic encounters, wherever they occur; and whether such processes are also relevant to the encounters that non-Muslim groups have with authority (e.g. police stop and search of working class and black youth).

Putting these themes together adds to the general argument that Muslims' sense of being part of (British) society (or of being outside of that society) cannot be understood by reference to Muslim identity alone. It develops (in part at least) out of interactions with (British) authorities where people experience whether their claims to inclusion are accepted or refused. In saying this, we do not deny that there may be voices within the Muslim community arguing that (British) society is alien and that Muslims should have nothing to do with it. But the appeal of those voices will be moderated by how people are treated by those seen to represent this society (cf. Drury and Reicher, 2009). For this, if for no other reason, we should resist calls to focus entirely on the mote in the eye of the other and to ignore those in our own.

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