PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF ASIAN MUSLIM YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

The research used survey methods to examine the influences of identity and perceived discrimination on psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in 119 (75% first generation) Asian Muslim youth. The analyses revealed that a strong Muslim identity exerted a positive influence on life satisfaction, school adjustment and pro-social behaviours. It also buffered the negative influence of discrimination. Comparative data indicated that the adaptation of Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand was as good as, or better, than their Maori and Pakeha peers.

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INTRODUCTION

The population of Muslims in New Zealand has increased by more than 50% over the past decade, reaching approximately 36,000 or almost 1% of the national population. About 77% of the Muslims currently residing in this country are overseas-born, with the majority originating from the Asian subcontinent (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). The steady increase of Muslims in New Zealand is reflected in many other Western countries, and rising immigration along with heightened media attention in the post-9/11 era has precipitated a worldwide increase in research on Muslim communities across the globe.

Many new settlers face prejudice and discrimination; however, there is reason to suggest that these pressures may be greater for Muslim immigrants than their non-Muslim counterparts. The 2009 Report on Race Relations noted that there were more complaints of discrimination on the grounds of religious beliefs from Muslims than any other group (Human Rights Commission, 2010) and a recent community survey indicated that New Zealanders have less favourable perceptions of Asian immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries compared to immigrants from other countries in the region (Stuart, Ward, & Adam, in press). This is of significant concern as there is a large

body of research that has demonstrated the negative impact of discrimination on immigrant social integration and psychological wellbeing (Jasinkaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Perhoniemi, 2006; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Vedder, van de Vijver, & Liebkind, 2006).

In addition to the pressures of prejudice and discrimination, immigrants confront the challenge of maintaining their traditional culture and heritage while adapting to and participating in the wider society. Although negotiating these competing demands and blending and integrating multiple identities can be a stressful process, religious, ethnic and national identities often function as resources for acculturating youth (Ward, 2009). Consequently, this research explores the ways in which these multiple identities impact on the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Asian Muslim youth.

This paper broadly examines the predictors of psychological wellbeing and positive behavioural adjustment in a diverse group of Asian Muslim youth living in New Zealand. It addresses two questions:

1. How do perceived discrimination and cultural identity (national, ethnic and Muslim) affect psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand?
2. How well-adapted, psychologically and socio-culturally, are Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand compared to their host national peers?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and nineteen participants identifying themselves as Muslim participated in this study. All participants lived in New Zealand and had at least one parent of Asian origin. Participants were aged between 13-19 old, with a mean age of 15.79 (*SD* = 1.41). Participants were 73.9% female. Of the sample, 33.7% were born in New Zealand, and 75.9% were New Zealand citizens. The breakdown of participants' ethnicities is presented in Table 1.

Participants completed an anonymous, voluntary questionnaire. They were recruited to the research by field assistants in Auckland and Wellington, who are members of the Muslim communities.

In addition to the Muslim participants, 396 New Zealand Europeans and 114 Maori youth (aged 13-19) recruited previously to participate in the New Zealand component of the International Comparative Study of Ethno-cultural Youth (ICSEY) served as the comparative sample (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006).

Table 1
Ethnicities of Asian Muslim Participants.

	N	%
Afghani	33	28
Cambodian	1	1
Fijian Indian	23	19
Indian (unspecified)	35	29
Malay	1	1
Pakistani	22	18
Sri Lankan	4	3

Measures

All participants completed an adapted version of the survey used in the ICSEY project (Berry et al., 2006). In addition to personal background information, of interest in this research are the measures of perceived discrimination, cultural identity (Muslim, ethnic and national) and psychological (life satisfaction and psychological symptoms) and socio-cultural (behavioural problems and school adjustment) adaptation. With the exception of the measure of behavioural problems, all responses are made on 5-point agree-disagree scales, and higher scores reflect greater perceived discrimination, stronger identities, greater life satisfaction, more psychological symptoms, better school adjustment and more behavioural problems, respectively.

Perceived discrimination was assessed by five items relating to unfair or abusive treatment on the basis of ethnic, cultural or religious background (e.g., “I have been teased or insulted because of my background”).

The cultural identity scales tap aspects of belongingness (e.g., “I feel that I am part of the New Zealand community”), pride (e.g., ”I am proud to be a member of my ethnic group”), and centrality (e.g., “Being a Muslim is an important reflection of who I am”) in relation to religious, ethnic and national communities.

Psychological adaptation was assessed by positive (life satisfaction) and negative (psychological symptoms) indicators. The life satisfaction scale included 5 items (e.g.,” In most ways my life is close to my ideal”), and the psychological symptoms measure had nine items tapping depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms.

Socio-cultural adaptation was likewise assessed by positive (school adjustment) and negative (behavioural problems) indicators. Sample items for school adjustment include “At present I like school,” and “I have problems concentrating on my homework.” Behavioural problems included activities such as bullying, theft and vandalism and were measured on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from “never” to “many times during the last year.” The psychometric properties of the scales are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Psychometric Properties of the Scales

		Mean (SD)	No. Items	Cronbach's α
Asian Muslims	Life Satisfaction	3.46 (0.80)	5	0.78
	Psychosomatic Symptoms	2.38 (0.72)	9	0.89
	School Adjustment	3.99 (0.63)	7	0.79
	Behavioural Problems	1.39 (0.60)	8	0.83
	National Identity	4.01 (0.67)	5	0.79
	Ethnic Identity	3.51 (0.43)	15	0.86
	Muslim Identity	4.41 (0.56)	12	0.89
	Perceived Discrimination	2.12 (0.75)	5	0.84
NZ European				
	Life Satisfaction	3.43 (0.86)	5	0.82
	Psychosomatic Symptoms	2.73 (0.76)	8	0.84
	School Adjustment	3.60 (0.72)	7	0.72
	Behavioural Problems	2.02 (0.86)	8	0.84
Maori				
	Life Satisfaction	3.43 (0.81)	5	0.72
	Psychosomatic Symptoms	2.64 (0.76)	8	0.84
	School Adjustment	3.47 (0.59)	7	0.55
	Behavioural Problems	2.31 (1.03)	8	0.86

RESULTS

The Prediction of Psychological and Socio-cultural Adaptation

The analyses considered the influence of perceived discrimination, cultural identities and their interactions on psychological (Table 3) and socio-cultural (Table 4) adaptation. This was undertaken by hierarchical regression with the introduction of perceived discrimination on step1; Muslim, ethnic and

New Zealand (national) identities in step 2; and the interactions between identity and discrimination in step 3. Where an interaction effect was present, graphs were constructed using Modgraph (Jose, 2008).

Table 3
Perceived Discrimination and Cultural Identity as Predictors of Psychological Adaptation

	Life Satisfaction			Psychological Symptoms		
Step	1	2	3	1	2	3
Perceived Discrimination (PD)	-.22*	-.06	-.16	.26**	.21*	.27*
Muslim identity (MI)		.23*	.12		.029	.11
Ethnic identity (EI)		.21*	.24*		-.21*	-.26*
National identity (NI)		.20*	.20*		.014	0.02
PD x MI			.28**			-.18
PD x EI			-.04			.11
PD x NI			.02			.21
R^2 change		.132**	.061*		.041	.028
R^2	.046*	.179**	.239**	.070**	.110**	.139**

*p < .05, **p < .01

Life Satisfaction

Discrimination predicted lower life satisfaction (ß = -.22, p< 0.05), but lost significance once cultural identities were added to the model. On the second step, all cultural identities were associated with greater life satisfaction (national identity, ß = .20, p<0.05; Muslim identity, ß = .23, p <0.05; and ethnic identity, ß = .21, p<0.05), and an interaction effect between discrimination and Muslim identity was found (ß = .28, p< 0.01) on the third step. This model accounted for 23.9% of the total variance.

Figure 1 depicts the interaction effect. When Muslim identity is weak, increases in perceived discrimination are associated with lower life satisfaction (slope t(111)=-2.72, p< 0.01). In contrast, discrimination does not produce a significant effect for youth with moderate (slope t(111)=-1.49, *ns*) and strong Muslim identities (slope t(111)=1.39, *ns*). As such, Muslim identity can be seen to buffer the negative effects of discrimination on life satisfaction.

Psychosomatic Symptoms

Greater perceived discrimination (ß = .26, p< 0.01) and a weak ethnic identity (ß = -.21, p< 0.05) predicted more psychosomatic symptoms on entry and remained significant in the final step of the equation. There were no significant interactions. This model accounted for 13.9% of the variance.

Figure 1
Muslim identity as a Moderator of the Effect of Discrimination on Life Satisfaction

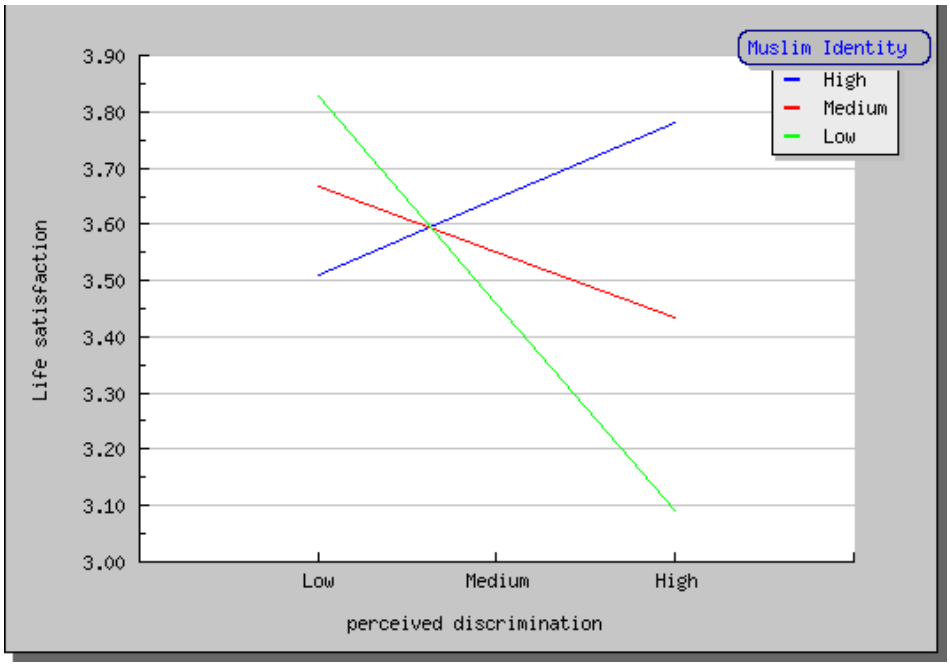


Table 4
Perceived Discrimination and Cultural Identity as Predictors of Socio-cultural Adaptation

	School Adjustment			Behavioural Problems		
Step	1	2	3	1	2	3
Perceived Discrimination (PD)	-.26**	-.13	-.16	.27**	.15	.22*
Muslim identity (MI)		.33**	.30**		-.21*	-.11
Ethnic identity (EI)		.03	.04		-.14	-.20
National identity (NI)		.05	.03		-.01	-.00
PD x MI			.07			-.23*
PD x EI			.02			-.18
PD x NI			-.13			.13
R^2 change		.094**	.022		.063	.055
R^2	.070**	.164**	.186**	.074**	.137**	.192**

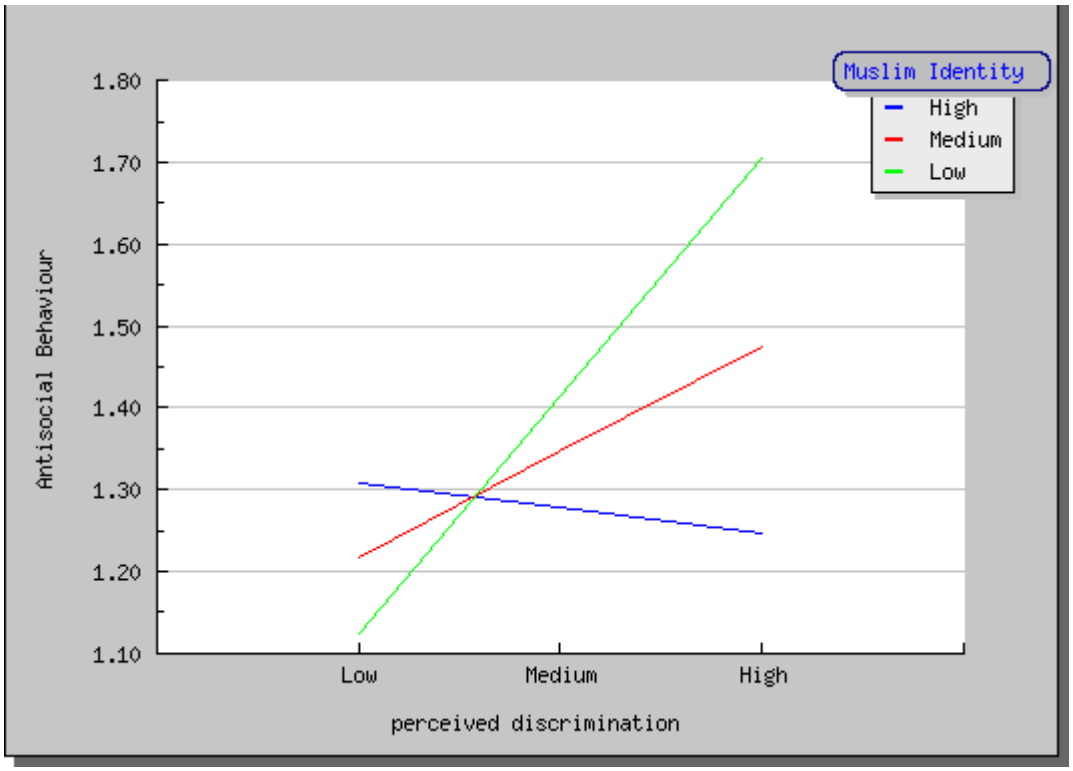
*p < .05, **p < .01

Behavioural Problems

Discrimination was associated with more behavioural problems (ß = .27, p<0.01) in step 1. Although steps 2 and 3 of the regression analysis did not further explain a significant amount of additional variance, a strong Muslim identity (ß = -.21, p<0.05) predicted fewer behavioural problems on entry, and a significant interaction was found between perceived discrimination and Muslim identity (ß = -.23, p<0.05). The model accounted for 19.2% of the variance in behavioural problems.

Figure 2 depicts the interaction effect, which shows that a strong Muslim identity buffers the negative effects of perceived discrimination (slope $t(111)=-0.38$, *ns*). The negative impact remains, however, for youth with moderate (slope $t(111)=2.07$, $p=0.04$) and weak (slope $t(111)=2.71$, $p<0.01$) Muslim identities.

Figure 2
Muslim Identity as a Moderator of the Effect of Discrimination on Behavioural Problems



School Adjustment

Finally, discrimination also predicted poor school adjustment (ß = -.26, p<0.01); however, it lost significance once cultural identities were entered into the model. Muslim identity (ß = .33, $p<0.01$) predicted better school adjustment on entry. No interaction effects were found. This model accounted for only 18.6% of the total variance of school adjustment.

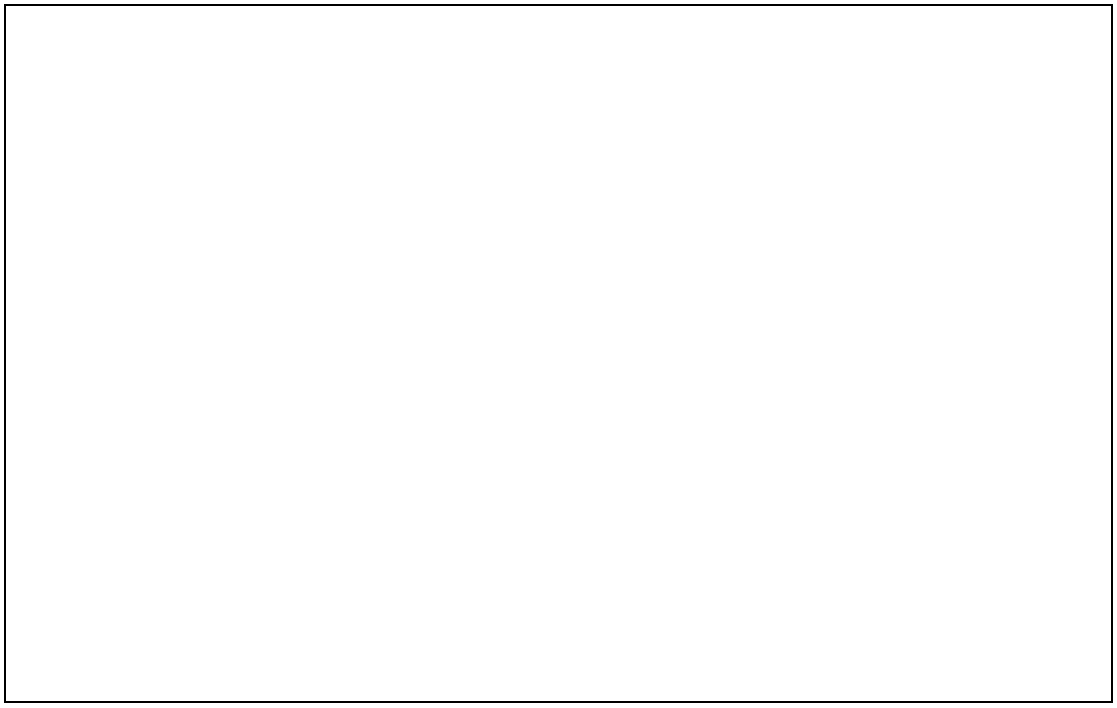
These results suggest that all three dimensions of cultural identity exhibit some influence over positive adjustment in Muslim youth. A strong national identity is associated with increased life satisfaction, a strong ethnic identity predicts positive life satisfaction and a reduction in psychosomatic symptoms, and a strong Muslim identity is related to enhanced life satisfaction and school adjustment and protects against the detrimental effects of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction and behavioural problems.

Adaptation in New Zealand Youth

Analyses of covariance were conducted to examine the effect of ethnicity on the four measures of adaptation, controlling for gender and age. Gender was significant for all analyses. Females reported more psychosomatic symptoms (F(1, 596)=9.09, p<0.005) and greater life satisfaction (F(1,596)=10.82, p<0.001), better school adjustment (F(1,596)=2.62, p< 0.02) and fewer behavioural problems (F(1,596)=15.24, p<0.001) compared to males. Age significantly impacted behavioural problems (F(1,596)=5.97, p<0.02), with a general downward trend in antisocial activities as age increased.

Figure 3 graphically depicts the difference in adaptation scores between the three ethnic groups. No significant difference emerged between the three groups on the life satisfaction scale, F(2, 596)=2.27, *ns).* Asian Muslims reported significantly fewer psychosomatic symptoms (F(2, 596)=20.51, p<0.001), fewer behavioural problems (F(2, 596)=30.42, p<0.001), and better school adjustment *(*F(2, 596)=12.05, p<0.001) than their New Zealand European and Maori peers.

Figure 3
Adaptation in New Zealand Youth



DISCUSSION

This research aimed to investigate the effects of discrimination and cultural identity on the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand. Results demonstrated that cultural identity exhibited a positive influence on adaptation, and Muslim identity in particular buffered the negative impact of discrimination. Results also indicated that Asian Muslims

are adapting as well as, or in most cases, better than, their New Zealand European and Maori peers.

The ICSEY project conducted by Berry et al. (2006) presented strong evidence that an integration approach to acculturation, maintaining both ethnic and national identities leads to better adaptation outcomes. While there is some evidence in this study to support these findings, the introduction of religious connection as a third dimension of cultural identity generated a different trend. Muslim and ethnic identities typically facilitated adaptation, and Muslim identity emerged as the only significant moderator of the detrimental consequences of discrimination. The effects of national identity on adaptation, however, were marginal.

The processes by which Muslim identity contributes to psychological and social wellbeing remain to be explored; however, parental influences on the development of identity are likely to play a key role. Immigrant parents must make choices about the core values to transmit to their children, and it has been suggested that religious parents often choose to prioritise the maintenance of religious over ethnic identities (Ross-sheriff, Tirmazi & Walsh, 2007). This has been borne out in research by Stuart, Ward and Adam (in press), which shows that Muslim identity is stronger than both ethnic and national identity in Muslim youth. Consequently, a strong Muslim identity may replace the positive influences that most immigrant youth derive from their ethnic identities.

The unique positive impact of religiosity in youth may also contribute to the outcomes. Van Dyke and Elias (2007) found that religiosity increased resilience in youth as it provided them with a higher purpose in life and encouraged forgiveness and abstinence from harm. In the case of Islam, the concept of staying on '*as-sirat al-mustaqeem'* ("the straight path") is a heavily emphasised (Zine, 2001). A devout Muslim would recite a plea for this in their prayers at least 17 times a day, acknowledging both the struggle to stay on this path, and the blessing attained if achieved. This higher purpose can help attain a sense of tranquillity with one's worldly situation, as believed to be promised by God if His laws are correctly followed.

In conclusion, despite facing the challenges of acculturation and discrimination, Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand adapt well, and a strong identity as Muslim facilitates this process. The protective functions of Muslim identity highlights the importance of immigrants being encouraged to maintain their cultural and religious practices and ensuring that New Zealand remains a tolerant and inclusive society in the face of increasing diversity.

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