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Influence of Media Stereotypes on Muslim-Americans' Perceptions of Identity

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Abstract

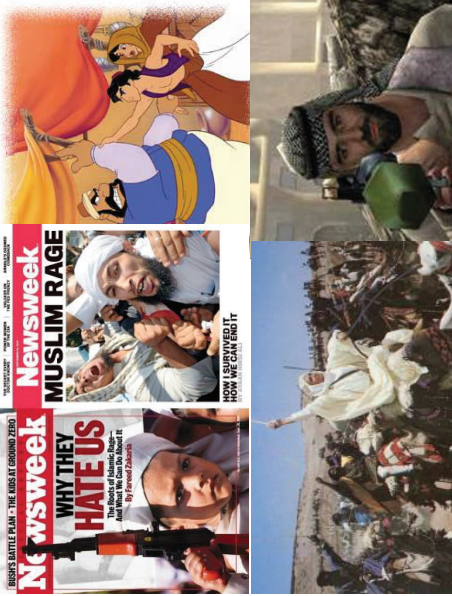
Most Americans depend on media for information regarding Muslims (Nisbet, Ostman, & Shanahan, 2009). The portrayal of Muslims within media is largely negative (Shaheen, 2001). Given the importance of media as a socializing agent, it is important to understand how media might influence the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims on several important dimensions. Media portrayals of Muslims as the "enemy" are likely to reduce the acceptance and inclusion of Muslim-Americans within the American national identity by Non-Muslims. This presentation is also likely to influence Muslim-Americans' perceptions of the compatibility or conflict between their two identities. Using the Social Identity Theory and acculturation literature we explore the theoretical reasons why negative media portrayals of Muslims may influence both, the Muslim-Americans' and Non-Muslim American's, perceptions of the extent to which Muslim and American identities are compatible or in conflict.

Introduction

Media and Portrayal of Muslims: For most Americans, media is the primary source of information about Muslims (Nisbet, Ostman, & Shanahan, 2001). The frequency of Muslim portrayal in American media is more common today than ten years ago, but negative images are much more prominent than positive ones (Racos & Reyna, 2003). Muslims are frequently linked with violence and terrorism, perpetuating the stereotype that Muslims are terrorists. These portrayals have been associated with numerous intergroup problems (e.g., thinking in terms of "us" versus "them") between Muslim and non-Muslim Westerners (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007).

Effects of Media Stereotypes on Non-Muslim Americans: Despite there being 7 million Muslims within the United States (White House: Speeches and Remarks, 2009), there is a perception of Muslim-Americans not being "quite American" (Haddad, 2004). Research on inclusion/exclusion of group members suggests the valence (positive or negative) associated with a subgroup determines the extent to which that subgroup will be included/excluded from the superordinate category (Rydell, Hamilton, & Devos, 2010). Given that Muslims are associated with a host of negative concepts (e.g., terrorism, violence, intolerance), non-Muslim Americans may be less likely to perceive, accept, and include Muslim-Americans as part of the American national identity.

The General Aggression Model (GAM: Anderson & Bushman, 2002) suggests that "a person who repeatedly 'learns' through experience or through cultural teachings that a particular type of person is a 'threat' can automatically perceive almost any action by a member of that group as dangerous" (pp. 173).



Example Media Portrayals of Arabs and Muslims

The GAM suggests that repeated exposure to media portrayals of certain groups as terrorists systematically "teach" a person that members of those groups are a threat. Consequently, automatic use of these knowledge structures may influence aggressive perceptions and attitudes (e.g., Muslims are terrorists/violent) and related emotions (e.g., anger and fear) towards members of these groups.

Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that participants who are exposed to negative media images of Muslims are more likely to display implicit bias as opposed to participants who are exposed to neutral and positive media images of Muslims (Park, Felix, & Lee, 2007). Additionally, in an experimental study participants who were exposed to video games that included elements of terrorism (with or without a direct Arab reference) were more likely to display anti-Arab bias and perceive Arabs as mean, hostile, and aggressive compared to participants who played a video game without elements of terrorism (Saleem & Anderson, 2013).

Figure 1: Participant Perceptions of "Typical" Arabs and Caucasians as assessed through a drawing task (Adapted from Saleem & Anderson, 2013).



Effects of Media Stereotypes on Muslim Americans: The inability to identify with a positive, superordinate ingroup (i.e., American) can have deleterious consequences, not only for intergroup relations (i.e., relations between Muslim-Americans and other Americans) but also for the functioning of marginalized subgroup members (i.e., Muslim-Americans; Dovidio et al., 2005). Studies reveal that many Muslim-Americans have had first-hand experience with discrimination (Pew 2007), an overall sense that life has become more difficult in the U.S. since 9/11 (Pew 2007), and the perception that the federal government does not care about their political concerns (Calfano, Djupe, & Green 2008).

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) failure to be included within the superordinate (American) identity could result in different kinds of reactions from Muslim-Americans. These strategies can be used as coping mechanisms to deal with decreased self-esteem, low group vitality or perceptions of rejection by the majority outgroup. One possible reaction is to reaffirm one's identity within the superordinate group (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). The second reaction is to distance one's identity from the subgroup (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). The third possible reaction is to increase identification with the original ingroup. Recent evidence suggests that post 9/11 young Muslim-Americans were more likely to identify with their religiosity (Sirin & Fine, 2007). A fourth reaction sparked by this perceived injustice is a desire and support for social change and/or militancy (Koomen & Frankel, 1992). Threats such as negative media portrayals, perceived discrimination, and impermeability of boundaries could increase the likelihood for Muslim-Americans to hold negative attitudes and perceive hostile actions towards the source of threat to be acceptable and justified. Indeed, evidence suggests that U.S. born Muslim-Americans who report experiencing discrimination are more likely to be dissatisfied with their American identity and hold more favorable opinions towards Al-Qaeda (Jamal, 2011). There is of course a need to experimentally test which of these reactions Muslim-Americans display when their American national identity is threatened and further explore what the potential mediating and moderating variables are behind this effect.

Conclusions

We urge scholars to empirically explore the influence of media stereotypes on Muslim-Americans identification as Muslim and American. Negative media portrayals of Muslims could influence Muslim-Americans acculturation strategies and could influence the extent to which they perceive their two identities as compatible or in conflict with each other.

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