2018

Muslim veiled women and religious discrimination: A strength perspective

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Recommended Citation

Muslim veiled women and religious discrimination:
A strengths perspective

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of **Bachelor of Social Work Honours**

School of Arts and Humanities

Edith Cowan University

2017

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my amazing husband and my three beautiful children,

for their ability to bring out the best in me.

ABSTRACT

The word 'Islamophobia' has gained and continues to gain wider currency in both the academic and public sphere. In the recent years, there has been an increase in literature focusing on Muslims and their experiences living in Western societies. It has been established that religious discrimination impacts negatively on self-esteem, mental wellbeing and one's sense of identity. However, there is little research focusing on Muslim veiled women in particular even though it has been established that people who are visibly Muslim are more vulnerable to religious discrimination. This phenomenological study explored the lived experience of Muslim veiled women from South West Western Australia who experience religious discrimination. The aim of this research was to understand the strategies utilised by these women to manage discrimination in their everyday lives.

The findings demonstrated the importance of the Mussollah (mosque) as a community, the women's agency and reflexivity, and the role of aspiration in negotiating multiple forms of discrimination. It was found that religious discrimination intersects with other aspects such as gender and ethnicity. The research demonstrates the women's ability to understand the context that they are living in and negotiate the discourses present in society towards Islam and Muslims. This enables the women to re-construct their own narratives of what it is to be a 'Muslim woman' in their present context. This study demonstrates importance of considering the strengths and resilience of individuals under conditions of adversity.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. *incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;*

II. *contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or*

III. *contain any defamatory material;*
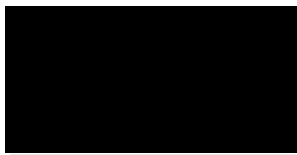
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Islam is one of the four main religions in the world and has over 1 billion followers (Fozdar, 2012). In recent times, due to various international developments, there has been a significant spurt in the migration of Muslims to Western[1] countries (Shadid, & Koningsveld, 2002). Western countries are generally characterised as pluralist societies (London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), & Ramadan, 2016). However, this means that there are dominant and subordinate groups present within these societies (Young, 1990).

Within the context of Australia, Muslim Australians make up 1.3% of the Australian population and have lived in the country for over 140 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Salleh-Hoddin, & Pedersen, 2012). Muslims have contributed greatly to its diverse culture and unlike popular belief; all Muslims do not belong to a homogenous ethnic group as they represent different sects, cultures and ethnicities (Fozdar, 2012). Nevertheless, in Australia, Muslims are identified as a group distinguished by practices that are different from the dominant, and largely secular, mainstream culture.

Having said that, instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and constitutions that are put in place by Western societies guarantee religious freedom (Akbaba, & Fox, 2011; United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). However, the notions of 'liberty' and 'tolerance' that most Western societies uphold is rapidly changing towards Muslims due to the increasing number of terrorist attacks and the 'war on terrorism' being linked with Islam. This has placed a massive spotlight on Muslims identifying them as a threat to Western way of life (Akbaba, & Fox, 2011; Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012; Salleh-Hoddin, & Pedersen, 2012). It is widely acknowledged that the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States has had a huge impact on how Muslims and Islam is viewed in Western societies (Rane, & Ewart, 2013). Muslims are no longer seen as capable of integrating in to Western societies or respecting democracies or secular law (Rane, Nathie, Isakhan, & Abdallah, 2010). This is further fueled by increased negative media representation, which portrays Muslims as extremely violent and

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[1] The term 'Western' used when describing different societies in a term that is associated with societies residing in or originating from the West i.e., Europe and United States (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

supporting martyrdom and terrorism. With all these aspects in play, it is often Muslims who are living in Western societies that bear the brunt of the negative impacts of this changing attitude towards Muslims (Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; Jamil, & Rousseau, 2012).

In the recent years, there has been an increase in literature focusing on Muslims and their experiences living in Western societies. A number of subjects are being explored in relation to religious discrimination varying from media misrepresentation, employment opportunities, to their sense of identity and belonging (Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2011; Rane, Amath, & Faris, 2015). It has been established that religious discrimination negatively impacts one's self-esteem, mental wellbeing and sense of identity (Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012). In addition, a number of studies show that media misrepresentation further contributes to social exclusion, abuse and violence towards Muslims (Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey, & Furneaux, 2011; Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; Hejin, 2015). Furthermore, it has been established that people who are visibly Muslim experience a greater level of discrimination (Foster et al., 2011; Hejin, 2015; Jasperse et al., 2012; Patil, 2015; Rane, & Ewart, 2013; Syed, & Pio, 2010). Accordingly, given that the veil is viewed as a marker of Islam, Muslim women who wear veils experience significantly more discrimination than those who are not veiled (Iner, Zayied, & Vergani, 2016). Despite this, it appears that little research has been conducted focusing primarily on the experiences of Muslim veiled women.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experience of Muslim veiled women living in the South West of Western Australia. While the research focus initially was to explore the detrimental effects of religious discrimination in this group within a regional context, it became apparent that these studies did not consider the possibility that there might be positive aspects that might help these Muslims mitigate the effects of the said religious discrimination. Hence the focus of this study has been shifted to understanding how these women go about mitigating the effects of religious discrimination. Although the study is a step away from how the above-identified phenomena has been researched in the past, it is very much guided by the current body of research on Muslims and their lived experience discussed in the background to the study. With this shift in focus, the study helps contribute to a better understanding of the strength and resilience that these women exhibit in their everyday lives.

Research question

Members of groups that are visibly different from the dominant cultural group within pluralist societies often experience many forms of violence and oppression (Young, 1990). The existing body of knowledge only extended to how society and structural inequalities can impact individuals. While the focus of the research is on exploring the strengths, it is acknowledged that this cannot be discussed without discussing the experiences of discrimination, violence and stigma as it sets the context for this research. Within this context, the study explores how Muslim veiled women go about managing religious discrimination in their everyday lives and this study addresses the question:

> How do Muslim veiled women living in regional South West Western Australia mitigate the effects of religious discrimination?

This study employs a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of Muslim veiled women who experience religious discrimination. While this study explores this phenomenon from a strengths perspective with the aim of understanding whether there are any commonalities in these experiences that might inform current practice as well as contribute to raising community awareness highlighting the resilience and strengths of these women.

Significance of the study

While there is a growing body of evidence on Muslim perception of religious discrimination and its negative impacts, there is little research that could be located focusing on the strengths of people who experience religious discrimination. A strengths perspective in exploring this phenomenon shows a different viewpoint of the lives of people who experience religious discrimination and a step away from just focusing on impacts and detrimental effects of religious discrimination.

This research seeks to highlight the importance of the insight a person with lived experience brings to an issue. This research has a very practical aim. Results from this exploration could be used to inform not only professionals working with people who are experiencing religious discrimination but also with the community to create more awareness and understanding. This research will also add to the current knowledge base on the experiences of Muslim veiled women and is a fundamental step towards creating new knowledge on how Muslims mitigate the effects of religious discrimination.

Organisation of the thesis

Chapter one of this thesis introduced the purpose and background of this study. Chapter two will outline the literature that was reviewed as part of the research process briefly covering religious discrimination, looking at Islam and lived experience of Muslims both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the review explores this phenomenon outlining different facets of religious discrimination varying from loss of opportunity, detrimental social and psychological effects, to the impact on one's sense of identity and belonging. Chapter three presents the theoretical orientation and methodology covering the research design and ethical considerations taken into account including how potential risks for participants are to be minimised. Chapter four details the findings of the study outlining the themes of both discrimination and the strengths that were identified from the data analysis process. This section includes quotes from the participants to tell their story. The fifth chapter will present the discussion on the finding linking it with relevant literature with the aim to ground the analysis. Furthermore, both the limitations and the strengths of the study will be outlined. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the recommendations on future research possibilities based on the research findings.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the literature relevant to this study. The review begins with the subject of discrimination because the concept is important to understanding how some groups are treated differently than others in contemporary Australian society. Discrimination is a prominent topic that is discussed and researched all around the world in varying contexts and a heavily debated subject in the public arena. Simply put, to discriminate is to make a distinction; be it because of race, religion, gender, socioeconomic class, age or disability (Cotter, 2011). The United Nations (n.d.), in their Rule of Law, identifies that no person should be discriminated based on race, sex, language, or religion. In following this, the Australian Human Rights Commission (n.d.) defines discrimination as

> any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms.

As this definition suggests there are a number of ways in which individuals might find themselves discriminated against. However, for the purpose of this study, the main forms of discrimination for exploration are religion, gender and ethnicity. The review will demonstrate their relevance in understanding the experiences of the target group in question.

Religion

Muslims are the second largest religious group of international migrants across the globe. As of 2010, Muslims make up 23% of the world population and the numbers keep rising (Pew Research Center, 2017). As mentioned prior, the religious composition of most Western countries has remained stable over the last few decades. However, the increase in global migration partly due to the rising conflicts in the Middle East Muslim majority countries, is contributing to an increase in Muslim populations in these countries. This in turn is contributes to more multi-religious societies. This increase in the number of people with Muslim backgrounds, however, has not been embraced positively by everyone (Kunst et al., 2012). This

has led to decades long debates of how Muslims should act to integrate into Western societies and how Muslims can be accommodated in these societies.

The term 'Islamophobia', coined in the late 1980s (Runnymede Trust, 1997), later included in the Oxford Dictionary, is defined as the "dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). This word has a similar connotation to the word xenophobia and as any word with –phobia means, is used to express the fear and hatred towards a certain group of people (Sheridan, 2006).

It is contended that the events of 9/11 was a significant point in history, changing the way Muslims are seen and portrayed in the Western societies, especially in the media (Hebbani & Wills, 2012, Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012; Salleh-Hoddin, & Pedersen, 2012). This and other terrorist events in the West has also resulted in increased research efforts exploring the attitudes towards Muslims residing in these communities including the impact of this change in attitude extending to how it impacts Muslims integrating into Western societies (Akbaba & Fox, 2011). Muslims residing in Western societies often bear the brunt of this religious discrimination against Muslim minorities as the current climate of Islamophobia (i.e., hostility towards Islam) escalates (Jamil, & Rousseau, 2012).

While religious discrimination is a subset of general discrimination, it can be a more difficult terrain to navigate both for people experiencing it, and for people who explore this subject. This is because other forms of discrimination, such as cultural or economic, are more fluid subjects that with time and effort are more likely to be negotiable. This cannot be said for religion, which when in conflict with host society values, often becomes a non-negotiable issue. (Akbaba & Fox, 2011). Like any other religion, practicing Islam involves specified religious practices and behaviours and some Muslim women wear the veil (also called hijab, headscarf, abaya, burqa and possibly several other names) to adhere to the teachings and traditions of Islam (Kabir, 2005). However, wearing a veil is often identified as a 'tangible marker of difference' (Jasperse et al., 2012) in Western societies and this heightens the odds of exposure to religious discrimination for these women. Indeed, the *Islamophobia in Australia* report published in 2016 suggests that, according to the incidents reported, females tend to be targeted more when they wear veils given that it represents their faith (Iner, Zayied, & Vergani, 2016)

Media Influence

To further understand religious discrimination, it is important to understand how members of a society get the information that help them establish their biases towards minority groups. Sheridan's (2006) study conducted with non-Muslim graduates in United States, established that, even though the participants had little knowledge about Muslims and the religion of Islam, they held very firm attitudes towards Muslims. Moreover, it was found that these attitudes were mostly gleaned from media sources and Hollywood movies. This study gives an indication of the power media holds in shaping one's view and the collective understanding of communities on different subjects. There is a robust literature around how media both subtly and blatantly advance their own interest and ideological perspectives (Aydin and Hammer, 2013; Van Dijk, n.d.). It has also been demonstrated that people who live in media-dominated societies are hugely influenced by a given media source's standpoint on a given issue and rely on media sources to define and understand these things; especially in relation to things that they have not experienced (Aydin and Hammer, 2013; Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; La Ferle, & Lee, 2005). Increasingly, Muslims and Islam has become a dominant topic with media coverage, which is often biased, especially towards Muslim women wearing veils. This practice has become associated in popular culture with 'oppression' and more recently 'terrorism' (Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; Hejin, 2015). There are a several studies focusing on how this media misrepresentation of Muslims affects their everyday lives (Foster et al., 2011; Rane, & Ewart, 2013; Patil, 2015). Research by Hejin (2015) and Hebbani and Wills (2012) suggest there is a huge disconnection between the media representation of Muslim women and their lived realities and demonstrate how this impacts their everyday lives.

Negative Experiences and Impact of Religious Discrimination

There is a growing body of research emerging in Australia with respect to experiences of Australian Muslims. These researchers focus on varying subjects in relation to religious discrimination varying from media misrepresentation, employment, and their sense of identity and belonging (Rane, Amath, & Faris, 2015). Contrary to the populist view, Rane, Nathie, Isakhan, and Abdallah (2010) established that while Muslim Australians valued their Muslim identity, they also believed in Australian values and seek to integrate into the society. In addition, the study showed that the participants had little trust in Australian media but strongly supported Australian democracy. This is consistent with Salleh-Hoddin and Pedersen's (2012) findings where the participants blamed media for its role in promoting prejudice towards Muslims. Experience of religious discrimination is a recurrent theme in almost all

literature reviewed and a strong link has been established between religious discrimination and wellbeing (Every, & Perry, 2014; Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; Jasperse et al., 2012; Kabir, 2014; Rane, & Ewart, 2013; Phillips, 2007). In addition, Fozdar (2012) and Syed and Pio (2010) indicate that Muslims are subjected to subtler forms of discrimination when seeking employment and are hence marginalised based on their religion. Syed and Pio's (2010) study was exclusively focused on Muslim women and identified that they are further jeopardised given that they are more disadvantaged in terms of having to negotiate both gender and ethnicity.

Ethnicity and Gender

How does ethnicity and gender make Muslim women are more vulnerable to discrimination? An understanding the interaction of religion, gender and ethnicity provides a more holistic approach to understanding these women's experiences. This discussion begins with understanding ethnicity in the context of this research.

'Ethnic' comes from the Greek word 'ethnos' meaning nation - the word nation being used from a sense of commonality. Milton Yinger (1981) defines an ethnic group as a group that shares not only race but a common language, religion and/or ancestral home with a related culture (Fozdar, Wilding & Hawkins, 2009). Ethnicity can be a highly unsettling field of inquiry as there is an element of othering that is present when exploring the subject of ethnicity (Brubaker, 2014). People use ethnicity to identify common traits between them and also to draw boundaries creating a sense of 'us' and them' based on the differences. This can happen through processes of self and other categorization, cultural differentiation to geographic and social clustering in relation to ethnicity. This ethnic boundary making helps define these groups and people's sense of belonging and acceptance within these groups (Brubaker, 2014; Fozdar, et al., 2009). Muslims living in western societies can come from a range of ethnic groups and may share different boundaries and elements of groupness. Groupness is a term used by Lamont et al., (2016, p. 279) that points to the symbolic, material, spatial and psychological elements that shift and change according to different contexts but which shape people's membership in groups. In the context of this research, it is of importance to understand how these women's similarities and differences contribute to their sense of groupness and whether this acts as a protective factor that contributes to their resilience.

Order in communities is reproduced through legal, conceptual and structural means. For example, it is well established within Australian society through anti-discrimination law that

people should not discriminate against others on the basis of ethnicity, gender or able-bloodedness (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). However, there is clear evidence that such discrimination still occurs (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). While at times one can identify how these social arrangements are controlled; mostly these arrangements are a culmination of collective behaviours by individuals. These behaviours and boundaries identify and mark the social territories when it comes to human relations (Epstein, 1992). Race, gender, class, and ethnicity are different yet overlapping aspects that contribute to social structures of privilege and disadvantage (Lorber, 2005).

From these four categories, gender remains one of the most visible marker for individuals when it comes to differentiation and has been one of the boundaries that is used persistently in ordering and categorising individuals within societies (Epstein, 1992; Fozdar et al., 2009). Gender inequality can take different forms and is influenced by both economic and social norms within a given society. It is further influenced by cultural practices and it is often women that are disadvantaged when compared with men in similar situations (Lober, 2005). In the Western cultural imaginary, Muslim women are often depicted as passive and oppressed by patriarchal and religious structures (Scharff, 2011) resulting in these women having to navigate both the gender and these religious discourses amongst other factors.

Intersectionality, a concept that was coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw during the Black Feminist movement in the United States, links in multiple intersecting systems such as gender, race and class in understanding one's experience (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1997). This intersection of multiple identities and categorisations is a central theme in feminist theory and shows the importance of looking at these issues from a multi-dimensional lens. These systems cannot be separated from each other and leads to complex inequality where the person can be disadvantaged at multiple levels – which in this case is being a Muslim veiled woman (Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012; Choo, & Ferree, 2010; Lorber, 2005). These categorisations and societal discourses differentiate and group people according to these categories, be it gender, ethnicity or religion. The people belonging to each of these groups are fundamentally intertwined with the identity that they have been labelled with; making them a specific kind of collectively, specific consequences depending on their understanding of themselves and others around them (Young, 1990).

These groups, be it ethnic or religious based, have a specific affinity with one another within the group based on their similarities. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) identify that just commonality or connectedness cannot alone encompass groupness but together can contribute to the sense of belonging to a distinctive and bounded group. While groupness is a

function of self-identification and the perception of out groups (Lamont et al., 2016), Young (1990) identifies this process of group formation as an expression of social relations and that it exists in relations to other groups and on differences in their way of life. Groupness is not black and white where you either belong to a group or not; it is a very complex domain and everyone negotiates their place – be it gender, religion or ethnicity. Therefore, people's perception of their level of identification with a given group or belonging to the group can affect how they perceive experiences; be it stigmatisation, exclusion or discrimination.

Categories such as ethnicity, race and gender help social workers in understanding and overcoming oppression (Sands, & Nuccio, 1992). Social work's response to discrimination has manifested through anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002), anti-discriminative practice (Thompson, 2006) and the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996). These concepts have been part of social work landscape since 1970s and are embedded within the values underpinning social work practice (Cocker, & Hafford-Letchfield, 2013).

In this section, the attempt has been to show that no social interaction is confined exclusively to the inter-individual exchange and understanding these symbolic boundaries and interactions help us understand the various aspects in play when exploring social interaction and meaning making. This is of importance to this research process because, as women who wear veils that identify them as Muslims, they are not only negotiating religion but also their gender and ethnicity in their interaction with others.

Theoretical underpinnings

This research is underpinned by the theoretical framework of strengths perspective; an ecological perspective looking at individuals and communities in the light of their talents, competencies, strengths, qualities and resilience to empower people to enhance wellbeing. The strengths based approach is a step away from looking at the deficits and focuses on identifying and supporting existing strengths (Chenoweth, & McAuliffe, 2012; Grant, & Cadell, 2009; Saleebey, 1996). While strengths perspective has been critiqued for not recognising the impact of societal and structural inequalities on individuals (Gray, 2011), the existing body of knowledge has shed light on how society and structural inequalities can impact individuals. What it has not done yet is to look at the issue from a different viewpoint. Shifting the frame from detrimental effects to resilience allows us to explore how the women utilise resources available to them in times of difficulties and learn from the mechanisms that they have put in place to grapple with the difficulties that they encounter in their everyday lives.

As mentioned prior, given that society influences one's behaviour, it is important to further situate the study by exploring the concept of social constructionism to help guide the study. One's identity and their place in society is and can be fluid depending on their experience in and of society (Andrews, 2012). Burr (1995) argues that the social realm influences one's identity and their thoughts and languages impact the way our world is experienced. Social connectedness, or the lack of it, can influence one's identity and mental health. While positive connectedness and feelings of acceptance within a community can uplift one and act as a protective factor for mental health, emotional and social isolation and feelings of segregation based on gender, ethnicity or religion can negatively influence their sense of belonging and resilience. As every person feels and makes sense of the world differently, social constructionism deals with ambiguity and multiple meanings and therefore, would help in understanding how these Muslim veiled women make sense of their lived reality, this time, underlined by the theme of resilience (Beitin, & Allen, 2005; Brooks, 2014).

Conclusion

This section presented the current body of knowledge available looking at religious discrimination with a focus on finding research that focused on Muslim women. The literature review helped in identifying the negative impacts of the said religious discrimination. More importantly, going through this process helped in identifying the lack of focus on Muslim women in understanding their experiences. This section also briefly outlined the importance of understanding the multiple layers of identities that a Muslim veiled woman has to negotiate within her experiences, showing the importance of understanding these intertwined systems that puts these women at a disadvantage to get a fuller understanding of how they experience their world. Another element that has been looked at is the concept of groupness; this element has been included as this is another factor that can influence how one experiences the world and can also influence their resilience and ability to understand and cope with stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion.

This section further outlines the theoretical underpinnings for this research; both strengths perspective and social constructionism allows the researcher to gain an understanding of their experiences from a resilience perspective giving a voice to their experiences. The next chapter outlines the research design and the methodology utilised to undertake this study.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the research design and methodology utilised in this research. The purpose of this chapter is to detail methodology, methods including the methods and the ethical underpinnings that informed this research project.

Approach

This research is situated within the interpretive genre of qualitative inquiry and aims to explore the strengths of Muslim veiled women in mitigating the effects of religious discrimination. Interpretivism is founded on the theoretical belief that reality is both socially constructed and fluid (Crotty, 1998). Ideas of social constructionism came to prominence in the 1980s as an alternative to positivism (Mathison, 2005). Interpretivism promotes plural perspectives of experiences due to the belief that reality is socially mediated. Thus, the meanings people bring into situations are always negotiated within cultures, social settings and relationships with other people (Blaikie, 2007, Bryman, 2012, Punch, 2014; Thomas, 2013). The research is underpinned by the social work strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996), a pragmatic approach, that also emerged in 1980s. Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kishardt (1989) suggest that this perspective assumes that people have strengths, which enable them to adapt and change even during times of adversity and suffering. Interpretivism and the strengths perspective align beautifully with the research aims, which are to contribute to understandings of religious discrimination by exploring the strengths of Muslim veiled women in how they manage it in their everyday lives.

Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of Muslim veiled women who experience religious discrimination. Phenomenological research design sits within the interpretive family of research. Phenomenological inquiry, pioneered by German philosopher Edmund Husserl, is interested in understanding the lived reality of people who experience a phenomenon (O'Leary, 2010; Mouskatas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Patton, 2004).

Husserl's phenomenology evolved from the Cartesian tradition of the body-mind split belief and is based on his teacher Brentano's ideas of 'intentionality' (Dowling, & Cooney, 2012). The two fundamental procedures adopted by Husserl to study lived experience, known as *epoche*, are bracketing and phenomenological reduction (Dowling, & Cooney, 2012). Bracketing involves the researcher abstaining from prior knowledge on the subject and phenomenological reduction is where the researcher works to restrain the natural tendencies of judgment and investigation of the objective existence (Dowling, & Cooney, 2012; Wertz, 2011). This is because the objective of the research is to describe a given phenomenon 'as it is' in its raw form without any preconceptions, frameworks or rules to influence it. Research conducted using phenomenological design is therefore invested in presenting the lived experiences of the people subjected to a said phenomenon, in this case religious discrimination. The attempt is made to remain true to participant's understanding of their everyday lives (Groenewald, 2004).

The interest in the research evolves from the researcher's own experience as a Muslim veiled women living in a regional community in a Western country and the curiosity to understand the meaning within this experience. Given that phenomenological research focuses on meaning-making and perceptions of individuals, this methodology offers a framework and the tools to ensure rigour and transparency in engaging with research participants and understand the 'what' of the experience that the research participants felt (Creswell, 2013; Eberle, 2014; Flood, 2010; Hiles, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Moustakas, 1990). Given the personal interest in the subject, a journal was kept throughout the research process. These notes and the data analysis process was critiqued by the supervisor as an additional check to ensure rigour and impartiality. Rajendran (2001) identifies this as an important step in insider research as a critical colleague/friend can help explore the research process and ensure that the research process is objective and unbiased.

Method

The population of interest for this research was Muslim veiled women, 18 years and above, residing in regional South West of Western Australia. Participants had to have resided in Australia for at least one year and have a good command of the English language. The reason for these inclusion criteria is that this would mean that participants would be able to meaningfully contribute to the research as they would have had experience living in a Western society. The lived experiences of three Muslim veiled women from different backgrounds were documented through unstructured in-depth interviews. The interviews averaged at about 45

minutes. This form of interview works well with the phenomenological approach as these interviews are very loosely structured, had no predetermined categories for questions and answers, and relied on social interaction between the researcher and participant for eliciting information (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008; Sarantakos, 2012). This format allowed the researcher to get a richer and fuller expression of participants' perceptions of their experience (Thomas, 2013; Walter, 2013).

A snowball sampling approach was employed to recruit participants. This was achieved by contacting identified Muslim organisations and multicultural organisations in South West Western Australia. These are well-established cultural organisations within the community that have significant numbers of members who identify as Muslim. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to access a hard-to-reach population through people who can identify prospective participants and link the researcher to them (Punch, 2006; Walter, 2013). This process also allowed participants to contact the researcher, rather than the other way around, giving the participants the opportunity to make a decision about participating without any influence from the researcher. The participants initially contacted the researcher through email to organise the interviews.

Interviewing

Participants were invited to participate in a one-hour confidential interview at a place and time convenient to them. During the interview participants were asked a range of questions about their background, their experiences of discrimination, ways in which they managed these situations, how it makes them feel and any support systems they have in place. The interviews also asked what they would like to see in the community. Participants were also asked what they can do on a personal level in achieving these aspirations. The interview schedule can be found in the appendices. Papadopoulos and Lees (2002) persuasively argues that religious matching between the researcher and the participants can contribute to a more equal relationship between them. Hence, the researcher being a Muslim veiled woman helped in eliciting the information the researcher was seeking. The interviews were conducted with extreme caution in recognition that the participants were from a highly stigmatised vulnerable group where they are frequently subjected to media misrepresentation, questioned about their identity and their loyalty and discriminated because of their religion on a daily basis (Every, & Perry, 2014; Hebbani, & Wills, 2012; Jasperse et al., 2012; Kabir, 2014; Phillips, 2007; Rane, & Ewart, 2013)

All interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants in order to gain their final consent for the interview to be included in the data analysis process. Given the subject matter, the potential impact on the participant reading their story was something that was identified as a possible risk from an early stage. This was discussed with participants and they were advused to be considerate of their wellbeing both during the interview process in addition to when and if they chose to review their transcripts. While the need did not arise, the researcher had established a relationship with a local counselling service in the South West to ensure that the participants can be linked to appropriate services if required.

Data Analysis

In phenomenology, the aim is to present the collected data in a way that shows and demonstrates the values and essence of the lived experience that has been researched (Moustakas, 1990). Hence, thematic analysis has been used to identify themes and capture the essence of the data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Thomas, 2013). This method allowed the researcher to unify and find meaning in large bodies of data that might otherwise appear isolated and different (Lichtman, 2013). In addition to this, narrative structures were utilised to express the data through words to complement participants' stories and provide a deeper understanding of their story (Garson, 2012). Narrative structure and thematic analysis compliment each other and can be used together to analyse the same set of data quite seamlessly as narrative structure provides the researcher a way of organising the data into themes (Garson, 2012).

Given that the interest here is not just the uninterrupted descriptions of the social conditions but also the whole story, this form of analysis allows the researcher to capture the event from beginning to end at the same time identifying similar themes and categorising them accordingly. To end with, both the structural and textual accounts were combined to convey the lived experiences of these Muslim veiled women (Roulston, 2010). For the purpose of analysis, the transcribed data was read and re-read to gain familiarity and was coded using both descriptive and *in vivo* coding. With the help of an excel spreadsheet, the 116 descriptive codes were organised and then grouped into 48 clusters in the second cycle of coding. These clusters were then organised into the seven themes. During the process, analytic memos were written up to enable researcher to reflect on the meanings and thinking that the codes evoked (Saldaña, 2016; 2011). Lastly, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information was excluded from the data analysis process to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Ethical considerations

Social research often involves exploring topics that are sensitive and intensely personal (Walter, 2013). The research here was approved by the Edith Cowan University Research Ethics Office. While the focus of the research is on strengths of Muslim veiled women, it was not possible to achieve this without discussing the experiences of religious discrimination and this could have been potentially distressing for the participants to recall. In order to address this aspect special care was taken to ensure the participants were aware they could withdraw at any time with no consequence (Walliman, 2011). Laverty (2003) highlights the importance of creating an environment of safety and trust where the participants are able to talk freely. Great care was exercised to ensure that these interviews were conducted respectfully and did not cause harm to the participants (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010; National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007).

Information letters were provided to the organisation along with a consent form. These letters outlined what the researcher sought to gain from the interviews with prospective participants. The option of contacting the researcher and participating in the research process was left entirely with the participants. The Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2010) also outlines the importance of consent for an ethical research process. Gaining consent can include both oral and written processes in some circumstances. Information about the study was also explained to the participants verbally prior to the start of the interview and consent was sought as part of the interviewing process. Copies of the information and consent forms are available in the appendices. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were shared with the participants to ensure that participants have the opportunity for a final consent for their stories to be included in the research.

Strengths and limitations

While there is a growing body of evidence on Muslim perception of religious discrimination and its negative impacts, there is little research that could be located focusing on the strengths of people who experience religious discrimination. Moreover, there is also little research that focuses specifically on the experience of Muslim veiled women, particularly in regional areas. A strengths perspective in exploring this phenomenon shows a different viewpoint of the lives of people who experience religious discrimination and a step away from just focusing on impacts

and detrimental effects of religious discrimination. This research also seeks to highlight the importance of the insight that a person with lived experience brings to an issue.

With phenomenological studies, the focus is on the value of the lived experience and how it could contribute to understanding and avoid reducing these experiences to a mere cause and effect relationship (O'Leary, 2010; Rane et al., 2015). The study was limited to three participants within the same catchment area and hence it could be argued that the findings cannot be applied to other individuals in different contexts; however, as the research is exploratory generalisation was not the aim. Additionally, it is acknowledged that given the small sample size, there may be many other experiences that are not representative in the data. However, the researcher wishes to acknowledge that there was a significant interest within the Muslim community towards the research even though some individuals refrained from participating due to the external events and political climate at the time.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the research design and the ethical and practical aspects of conducting this study. This research is situated within the interpretive genre of qualitative inquiry, a theory based on the belief that reality is socially constructed and fluid with multiple possible meanings. Participant recruitment, the interviews and data analysis process were also explained in this chapter. In addition, the ethical issues of working with a vulnerable group and the measures taken to address this vulnerability were described. Seven main themes emerged from the analysis process and these are presented in the next chapter as findings.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the data analysis process of the study. Seven themes were identified from the three transcripts.

- Discrimination
- Negative Impact
- Strengths
- Positive experiences
- Understanding context
- Groupness and
- Future direction

The first two themes, *discrimination* and *negative impact,* are important contextual themes for setting the scene in answering the research question of this study. The next four themes of *positive experiences*, *strengths*, *understanding context* and *groupness* are the main themes that contribute to understanding the processes by which the participants mitigate the effects of religious discrimination. The last theme relates to future directions and entails what these women would like to do and see in the community to help make it more inclusive.

Discrimination

As mentioned in the literature review, it would be impossible for us to talk about the strengths of these women without accounting for the discrimination that these women face in their everyday lives. The participants outlined several incidents where they were subjected to varying levels of discrimination based on their religion and choice of clothing. This could range from being harassed while in public spaces:

> *I was just waiting in line and this elderly lady behind me started saying things about Muslims this and Muslims that…. I moved away in the end but she continued to verbalise negative things about… you know, the way I was dressed and Muslim people in general (Aminath)*

The harassment extended to being physically assaulted:

> *…and one of the students came up and pulled my veil quite hard so that my hair became exposed (Aminath)*

The participants also talked about being treated as a stereotype and often having to defend their faith. They experienced this as stressful. For example, one participant referred to many incidents that she had faced in the community where she had to account for events of terrorism:

> *Muslims here in good jobs like teachers and all but I feel like we always have to answer… against for what the terrorist[s] do (Asiya)*

These participants also faced discrimination when seeking work and in their workplaces. One participant recounted her experience of being in that position

> *I do remember, walking in to the staff room and conversations stopping and* [that] *type of thing happening (Aminath)*

Similarly, another participant shared her experience in her place of work:

> *My superior didn't treat me the same and I felt uncomfortable as they treated me differently (Asiya)*

These excerpts display a snapshot of the different forms of discrimination that these women are subjected to based on their visibility as Muslim women, denoted by their choice of clothing and by the assumptions of others in the wider community.

Negative impacts

Participants voiced both their immediate reactions in the aftermath of an incident and also the long term impact that these incidents had on them. One participant shared their experience after being verbally abused in a public setting:

> *So I managed to hold myself together just enough to get what I needed and get out of there and promptly broke down and started crying… and I ended up needing to send my students home and* [to] *just go home (Aminath)*

In another incident, the same participant talked about how

> *one of the other colleague sort of held my arm and said* [to me] *you are shaking and I realized the impact it had on me (Aminath)*

Another participant talked about being 'shaken' and 'shocked' when these incidents occurred. This can also result in feelings of self-consciousness that can extend to hypervigilance:

> *… aware and more conscious of what is happening around me (Asiya)*

Participants described times when they had taken to boycotting events and engaging in self-imposed exclusions to avoid being subjected to feelings of rejection and discrimination:

> *…sometimes I just didn't get what way people thinking when they are looking at me like that at one point I was thinking so much about it in my head then I (started to) avoid (everyone) you know… (ignore) everything around me (Asiya)*

It is not just the immediate effects. The women described the more prolonged impact of these incidents. For one participant this translated into a fear of disappointment in seeking work:

> *I have mixed feelings, you know, as in if I should or not* [look for work] *and ultimately what if they reject me again because of my look* [veil] *and all these things (laughs sadly) so… better just not go through this (Asiya)*

Positive experiences

While the negative experiences demoralise and can have adverse effect on people, positive experiences help people feel accepted and part of the community. One participant talked about how it positively impacts her life and in turn makes her confident about herself:

> *everyone around me is very accepting and helps me with issues and that makes me feel part of them* [the community]. *That also minimizes the discrimination. Minimises making me you feel uncomfortable (Fathimath)*

Two other incidents were described where the participants and/or their partners were supported when they were subjected to discrimination

> *In the end, one of the chemist staff actually came down from behind the counter and spoke to her and said if … you continue to speak in that way you are not welcome in our shop (Asiya)*

And

> *his manager got really angry and banned that lady from coming to the bank. So that was a really good on them that they felt him* [to be] *part of the group (Fathimath)*

These quotes show incidents where people in the community take positive action, which the participants suggested, stopped perpetrators from further victimising the victim. It also sent a message of value to the participants when others intervened.

Strengths

In the interviews, participants were asked to describe how they cope with these experiences and what helps them. All participants talked about how their social networks, education and understanding of the religion have helped them in managing these experiences. One of the participants stated how her social networks helped her in being more resilient:

> … [my friend] … *is very strong in knowing where she stands as a Muslim woman and so* [she] *has been really beneficial to me and given me a different viewpoint of what a Muslim woman can be as well which has really added to my own personal understanding of how to live as a Muslim woman (Asiya)*

The conversations also revealed their understanding of how different people perceive them and their ability to integrate into the community

> *I have many Australian friends. I talk with them; I work with them. I live around them (Fathimath)*

And

> *Generally, because I have worked in the education field I have felt that that's also a safe environment because people in education are generally open to learning and more approachable and willing to be understanding (Asiya)*

Furthermore, self-confidence and positive outlook in life was mentioned by the participants. In particular, one participant expressed that:

> *I don't have any fear about my right to be in Australia either… I don't have any doubt about my right to live in Australia or to be here so the way I deal you know I can definitely know that I can stand up for myself and face anyone (Asiya)*

Another participant stated:

> *…but I am so strong that I don't care as I have always covered my hair (Fathimath)*

This demonstrates how these women make the choices, in this case to cover their hair and how they learn strategies to negotiate the consequences that these choices might yield. This can be standing up for themselves and having a conversation:

I actually did approach her and asked her was she talking to me (Asiya)

It can also be to choose strategic silence. But most of all, all participants talked about the future and keeping an eye on the "the bigger picture" as helping them put these experiences into perspective. For example, one of the participant expressed:

Well every time I got a problem, I think I have to move on; move on because of my kids you know because I have my dream I came here for them (Aminath)

Another participant said:

We left our homes to come here to have a better life (Fathimath)

Most importantly, all participants were aware of the importance of being able to have a conversation or seek appropriate help if and when they are exposed to discrimination. One participant talked about it being:

the first thing is being able to talk about it. You know off-load and diffuse it that way. If you didn't have anyone to talk about it to, then I think that would make it a lot more difficult (Asiya)

This participant also mentioned that:

as far as my own personal wellbeing goes, I mean I look after myself I am quite aware of mental and emotional wellbeing (Asiya)

Understanding context

It is not just about knowing how to act and what to do; it is more than that. It is the ability to understand what is happening around them and seeing how different aspects influence each other. All participants expressed how media, in particular news media on television and in print, influences public views on Muslims and how this can affect the way some people see Muslims:

they have the understanding that whatever the media is showing is not always true… but that [media] has an effect on some kind of audience here and they do look at you [differently] *(Fathimath)*

Another participant voiced:

It's all what is projected on the media and so forth. So I understand that side of it. I don't accept it but I understand it (Asiya)

And this presentation can be quite one sided as stated by one participant:

> *It is like a view on Muslims, Islam is not a bad thing but you know they are looking on the TV on something like that its always on Muslims but there are also good Muslims (Aminath)*

It was also mentioned how acts of terrorism impacts the community's view on Muslims:

> *But sometimes I think that, I am saying this because we are talking about this but why they are doing this… this terrorist and all doing bad things that's why people are looking down to Muslims (Aminath)*

The participants also talked about the influence of culture on religion and how that can influence the way they practice Islam and the importance of understanding this difference. One participant said:

> *Only by coming out of your culture you begin to appreciate the variety of ways that Islam is and can be expressed (Asiya)*

One participant also raised the issue of how Muslim women may isolate themselves for different reasons:

> *Muslim women tend to hide themselves away. We leave it up to the husbands or men in the family to make connections to a certain degree and as a Muslim woman that doesn't necessarily benefit us (Asiya)*

This participant also discussed how that can feed into prejudiced views and assumptions that are present in the community:

> *Exactly (it feeds into that whole idea of that Muslim women are controlled and oppressed) from an outside perspective (Asiya)*

Most of all, the participants were very aware of the fact that Muslim women wearing veils is still very uncommon in the South West when compared to cities and, hence, there is a lack of understanding within the community with regard to the meaning of this: One participant said:

> *you could probably still count the number of veiled women that you see or know… there are probably not more than two hands worth of people that you could think of that wear* [the] *veil (Asiya)*

Another participant stated:

> *I know that when I go to* [further into the] *South West ... into towns as well because people have never seen ladies with covered hair. They look at you in an odd way (Fathimath)*

Groupness

Strengths can be found in different forms. Finding support in people who have a similar background, or a shared understanding of what these participants were going through acted as a safe haven for these women. One participant shared their experience of being able to be with people who understood you:

> *I think that's really good that we have that link to our culture as well as...religion part where you can go and just be yourself and relax and do whatever... you don't think that other people might judge on you or something because they are people who accept you and they do the same thing. So that's really good. That's why I really like going to Mussollah and whenever there is an event we always try to go (Fathimath)*

However, in talking about this, it did bring out the very relevant issue of people in minority groups feeling the pressure of having to represent their entire group to avoid the risk of being labelled a certain way:

> *So if we give them good service, if we talk to them nicely and we behave nicely that's the thing that we leave a good Muslim impression. It's not we are doing it for ourselves because I represent wherever I go* [and] *whatever I do if I wear a veil I represent my religion more than anything else. That's why we always take care never to upset anyone, never to do anything wrong, that might have an effect on our religion (Fathimath)*

As presented above, the Mussollah (mosque) was presented as a place that brought this community together. Not just for religious purposes, but as a place of mutual support and benefits:

> *the Mussollah is really good...Then visiting each other, explaining, sharing and all the other.... I think it is quite a strong Muslim community here. It's not big but whatever there is, they are quite strong and they support you even if you need them for anything*

One of the participants also talked about how this Muslim community has evolved in the recent years:

> In [South West town] *before… initially it was the Malay community that were the Islamic community and over time there's been other different cultures come to* [this town] *and there has slowly been an expansion and more inclusion as initially* [when] *everyone they came together they speak Malay, otherwise there was no interaction (Asiya)*

This participant also mentioned how this group is coming together and how different circumstance can affect their interaction within these groups whether it is due to language or other factors:

> *…other people in the Muslim community have only just started to emerge in the last 12 months even and they have been in* [this town] *for years. It has taken them a while to be comfortable to be part of the Islamic community for whatever reason (Asiya)*

Future direction

Lastly, the participants were asked what their hopes for the future are and how they, as Muslim veiled women, can contribute to achieving this. There was a strong desire expressed by all participants, for acceptance, to prove the media wrong and for recognition as well:

> *So I would love to be part of the community where everyone is more accepting and more understanding of you, rather than judging it on the media and stuff (Fathimath)*

Adding on:

> *…and show them there are good sides to it. Rather than what the media is showing you. So I would really like to be part of that group where they can help other people understand Muslim community (Fathimath)*

Interestingly, the following statement expressed by one of the participant in talking about proving the media wrong did reiterate the issue of representation that was mentioned earlier:

> *So we have to set that image and stay with that and make people believe that whatever media is showing is not true. There are Muslims who are good (Aminath)*

Mussollah (mosque) has been recognised by the participants as an integral part of the Muslim community and the participants talked about how the mosque is not recognised by the government or the community:

for the Mussollah we have in [South West town] *its only recognized as a community centre at the moment. It's not recognized as a place of religion and that's the end goal the community would like to get to and then it can be recognized and finalized as a Masjid (Asiya)*

In answering the question of what can be done, it was interesting to see that the participants reflected inwards and talked about the importance of knowing one-self and self-education in terms of understanding their religion:

I think that understanding that the first level of jihad[2] is actually education. You know education of the self and then education to others… So I think, yeah that's the way me as a Muslim woman with Muslim women can affect some sort of change. Educating ourselves about what Islam really says in regards to us and our own faith and then how we connect with others outside of that faith (Asiya)

Furthermore, the participant expressed:

So if you are not comfortable in your identity as a Muslim and your own knowledge that the first thing that needs doing. Educating yourself and understanding the difference between culture and religion. Because if we don't understand it as Muslims then there is no way we can get that message out to other people (Asiya)

While another participant added to this notion:

So Muslim people should understand their religion first, and secondly try to improve their own selves first. Be strong yourself, if you are not strong enough anyone can break you (Fathimath)

The participants also talked about practical ways in which they could contribute to achieving a more inclusive and accepting community. The following excerpts demonstrate their ideas on achieving this.

One participant stated:

[We need to challenge] *that [media] is the only place they can get the information from. That's not true. So they have to have that personal experience with a Muslim in order to defend them or in order to accept them. So that's the thing I think will make a big difference if all the Muslims get more involved with everyone else (Fathimath)*

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[2] The Arabic word "jihad" is often translated as "holy war," but in a purely linguistic sense, the word "jihad" means struggling or striving (The Islamic Supreme Council of America, n.d.)

Another participant expressed the following points:

> *I've been involved in the welcome dinner project. I don't know if you heard about it. The welcome dinner project is one way of … the idea is that established Australians invite migrants to come and have dinner together… to get to know somebody. So it's a great concept and way of trying bring people together to have a conversation… I know in Perth there's been opportunities where the Imams have opened up the mosque and invited people to come and so forth and other bigger cities as well (Asiya)*

All participants reiterated the importance of the personal connection and this comment sums it up most succinctly:

> *Through making connection with others. It's that personal connection (Asiya)*

In the next chapter these themes are discussed in relation to the research question and the wider literature by way of concluding the research.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to explore how Muslim veiled women living in regional South West Western Australia mitigate the effects of religious discrimination. A general representation of strategies and the means that Muslim veiled women use in mitigating the effects of religious discrimination emerged from the data analysis of the interviews. The descriptions presented in the previous section revealed both their experiences and the means that assist the participants in coping with incidents of discrimination. The discussion begins by considering the importance of community to the well-being of these women. Next, the agency and reflexivity of the women in considering their circumstances is explored. Finally, the role of aspirations emerged as a significant aspect in helping these women to place negative experiences in a wider context. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

The Mussollah (Mosque) as community

As discussed in the findings, the Mosque and the Muslim community plays an integral part in providing a support system for the Muslims living in South West Western Australia. The results demonstrated that groupness, in this instance, is shaped through both the participants' strong sense of symbolic and social boundary making (i.e. self-identification as Muslims and the outer group perceptions towards Muslims) (Lamont et al., 2016). Being part of the Muslim community and connecting through the Mussollah acts as a source of strength for these participants. This membership provides them with a safe space where they can relax and relate to each other without the pressures of having to present in a certain way. Young (1990) describes how the view of the dominant groups towards minority groups, through processes of cultural imperialism, can result in stereotyping and thus may force individuals belonging to these groups into taking on particular dialectic subjectivities: one being that of the dominant perspective and the other derived from their lived reality. This causes people to live a life of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) whereby they are forced to view themselves from the outside perspective as well. The Mussollah and the Muslim community gatherings in this instance provides them with a much needed safe haven where they can free themselves from

the stereotypes and labels that are forced on them by the dominant culture. It becomes a place to just be.

Agency and reflexivity

The participants expressed the importance of understanding their own self, their religion and education. When asked to talk about the strategies that help these participants, it was a privilege to experience their ability to discuss and make sense of the discourses that are present within the dominant culture and their sense of agency. Individuals do not simply submit to experiences but rather they seek and interpret these experiences in order to accomplish goals and make meaning and bring satisfaction to their lives (Bandura, 2001). Reflexivity is a mediating process that allows individuals to consider both themselves within their social context and the social context in relation to themselves (Caetano, 2015). Archer (2010) discusses how the recurring social changes in contemporary societies, especially with the increasing geographic mobility and resulting cultural diversity, increases the likelihood of individuals being subjected to social contexts that are different to those that they are familiar with. Given the increasing events of global terrorism and mass media speculation where Muslims are being increasingly put under the spotlight, the participants showed their reflexive capabilities and how this reflexive 'sense of self' enables them to self-monitor and adapt accordingly (Archer 2010). This acts as a protective factor in the case of these participants as this process allows them to have ownership in the process that guides their life choices.

The role of aspirations

This study has highlighted the intersectionality of both societal and structural influences that result in the discrimination that these women are subjected to. These include the discourses around their religion, gender and ethnicity that are interconnected. Tariq and Syed (2017) have established that Muslim veiled women are more likely to be subjected to gender, ethnic and religious discrimination simultaneously. The participants are very aware of the different elements that contribute to social norms and discourses of religion, gender and ethnicity. Hence, this awareness contributes to them actively constructing 'diaspora spaces' by negotiating the discourses present in society towards Islam and Muslims enabling them to re-construct their own narratives of what it is to be a 'Muslim woman' (Mirza, 2013, p. 11). Their ability to persevere, their hope for better futures and their aspirations to be part of the solution in achieving their goals emerged as a significant aspect that helps them to work

through negative incidences and experiences of discrimination as they are able to put them into perspective against their life goals. This was repeatedly talked about by the participants even as they acknowledged the difficulty in maintaining this positive outlook at times when faced with similar incidents repeatedly. The ability to maintain this positive outlook and sense of identity along with their social support networks, especially through the Mussollah, were found to be very important sources of resilience.

Recommendations for further research

This research provides a glimpse into the lived reality of Muslim veiled women in understanding how they manage religious discrimination in their everyday lives. It is hoped that it provides a foundation for further research on the subject. It could be also helpful to explore the themes identified in this research in a larger demographic to further understand and explore ways in which the Muslim community could be linked into the wider community. Additionally, given that the Islamophobia in Australia report (Iner, & Vergani, 2016) identified online incidents and experiences of discrimination, this element could be incorporated into the study to capture a better understanding of the women's experiences and the strategies that they put in place to counter these experiences. Lastly, while the focus was on recruiting participants living in South West Western Australia, all participants that volunteered resided in the same catchment area. A larger sample, drawn from a wider geographical area, could help gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and hopefully help in contributing to tailoring interventions to help people mitigate the effects of religious discrimination.

Final reflection

Social work is committed to human rights and social justice and addressing issues which might impact personal wellbeing or contribute to inequality or discrimination (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2017). The aim of this research has always been to shift away from the normal line of focus on the detrimental effects associated with religious discrimination, which has been researched in the past and see it from a different perspective. As social workers, it is important to understand how a different way of looking at a subject may help provide a new way of understandings and directions for action. Achieving a new perspective does not, however simplify the issue or ignore the adversity associated with religious discrimination. Rather it offers a more balanced picture of the resources, strengths and resilience of those who experience it.

This thesis concludes with a quote by one participant, which captures the dilemma that individuals subjected to multifaceted issues such as religious discrimination face when looking at finding a solution:

> *It is one step forward, one step back, or sideways and I don't think I have an overall answer (Asiya)*

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Information letter

SOUTH WEST CAMPUS

585 Robertson Drive, Bunbury
Western Australia 6230
☎ 134 328

www.ecu.edu.au

ABN 54 361 485 361 CRICOS IPC 00279B

Request for your participation in research: Muslim veiled women and religious discrimination: A strengths perspective.

To whom it may concern,

I am a Social Work Honours student enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work Honours in the School of Arts and Humanities in Edith Cowan University. I am conducting a study to understand the experience and strengths of Muslim veiled women living in a regional South West Western Australian community. My supervisor is Dr Lynelle Watts from the School of Arts and Humanities. My study is a qualitative study designed to consider the following research question:

> **How do Muslim veiled women living in regional South West of Western Australia deal with the effects of religious discrimination?**

This letter is an invitation to participate in this study to find out your thoughts on the experience of being a Muslim veiled woman living in a regional community. Participation in this study is voluntary. The research will take place during the month of February and March 2017 and it will involve an interview of approximately 60 – 90 minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location and time. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising myself or my supervisor. With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. All information you

provide is considered completely confidential. Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any findings resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used. Notes and/or tapes collected during this study will be retained in a secure location for the duration of the research. Furthermore, these notes and/or tapes maybe used in future in subsequent research projects that may stem from this study.

The aim of the research is to highlight the importance of the insight that a person with lived experience brings to an issue and the results from this exploration could be used to inform not only professionals working with people who are experiencing religious discrimination but also with the community to create more awareness and understanding. This research will also add to the current knowledge base on the effects of religious discrimination and is a fundamental step towards creating new knowledge on how Muslims mitigate the effects of religious discrimination.

While the purpose of the study is to understand the experience and strengths of Muslim veiled women, I am aware that this cannot be achieved without discussing any experiences of religious discrimination, which could be distressing to recall for participants. I assure you that I will make every effort to ensure the study is conducted with utmost care and consideration and I have established a relationship with Bunbury Counselling (Address: Plaza Offices, 123 Spencer St, Bunbury) to ensure that the participants can be linked to appropriate services should the need arise.

If you have any questions about this research project you may contact me on 0423 421 102 or my supervisor Dr Lynelle Watts on 08 9780 7732. This project has been approved by the WAAPA and School of Arts AND Humanities Ethics Subcommittee (Project 16172). If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you can contact:

Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
270 Joondalup Drive
JOONDALUP WA 6027
Phone: (08) 6304 2170
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

The research data gathered in this study may be used in subsequent research studies and at a later date the findings of the project may be published in order to disseminate the findings of

the research but any identifying information relating to any individual or organisation will remain confidential. All participants will receive a copy of the findings of the research.

Yours sincerely,

Aishath Shizleen
Social Work Honours student
Bachelor of Social Work Honours
Edith Cowan University

Appendix 2: Consent form

CONSENT FORM

I have been asked to participate in a research project on Muslim veiled women and religious discrimination: A strengths perspective.

I understand that as a participant in this project I will be interviewed and will be asked questions in relation to my experience of being a Muslim veiled woman living in a regional community.

I understand that although I may not benefit directly from participating in the research I understand that my participation will be recorded and the answers I give may be used in data analysis processes. I understand that my participation will be kept confidential and that my identity will be kept anonymous.

I have read the information above and I agree to participate in this research, realising that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I agree that the research data gathered in this study may be used in subsequent research studies and may also be published provided my information and my participation are not identifiable.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 3: Letter to Muslim Organisations and Multicultural Organisations

SOUTH WEST CAMPUS

585 Robertson Drive, Bunbury
Western Australia 6230
☎ 134 328

www.ecu.edu.au

ABN 54 361 485 361 CRICOS IPC 00279B

Request for assistance in identifying potential participants for the research project: Muslim veiled women and religious discrimination: A strengths perspective.

Dear (title of appropriate person),

I am a Social Work Honours student enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work Honours in the School of Arts and Humanities in Edith Cowan University. I am conducting a study to understand the experience and strengths of Muslim veiled women living in a regional South West of Western Australian community. My supervisor is Dr Lynelle Watts from the School of Arts and Humanities. My study is a qualitative study designed to consider the following research question:

How do Muslim veiled women living in regional South West of Western Australia deal with the effects of religious discrimination?

I am seeking to document the lived experience of five Muslim veiled women aged 18 plus years who have been residing in the south west of regional WA for at least a year and have a good command of English language. It is expected that the interviews would take approximately 60 - 90 minutes and they can be conducted at a location convenient to participants. The interviews will take place during the month of March and April 2017 and the participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts before inclusion in the research. In addition, any identifying information relating to any individual or organisation will remain confidential.

The aim of the research is to highlight the importance of the insight that a person with lived experience brings to an issue and the results from this exploration could be used to inform not

only professionals working with people who are experiencing religious discrimination but also with the community to create more awareness and understanding. This research will also add to the current knowledge base on the effects of religious discrimination and is a fundamental step towards creating new knowledge on how Muslims mitigate the effects of religious discrimination.

I hope to recruit five participants to take part in the study and I am writing to you to request for your kind assistance in forwarding this information to potential participants with the intent to give them the opportunity to contact myself or my supervisor should they be interested in partaking in this project. While the purpose of the study is to understand the experience and strengths of Muslim veiled women, I am aware that this cannot be achieved without discussing the experiences of religious discrimination, which could be distressing to recall for participants. I assure you that I will make every effort to ensure the study is conducted with utmost care and consideration and I have established a relationship with Bunbury Counselling (123 Spencer St, Bunbury) to ensure that the participants can be linked to appropriate services should the need arise.

Should you have any questions about this research project please do not hesitate to contact me on 0423 421 102 or my supervisor Dr Lynelle Watts on 08 9780 7732. This project has been approved by the WAAPA and School of Arts AND Humanities Ethics Subcommittee (Project 16172).

Your assistance in helping to identify potential participants for study will be greatly appreciated and will contribute to the success of this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Aishath Shizleen
Social Work Honours student
Bachelor of Social Work Honours
Edith Cowan University

Appendix 4: Interview Structure

Unstructured interviews are normally reliant on the social interaction between the interviewer and the participant rather than a formal interview schedule. The aim is to allow the participant to discuss relevant topic areas freely.

The agenda includes, but is not limited to the following:

• Exchange greetings and general talk to create a comfortable and easy environment for the participant

• Identification questions and background – Age, ethnicity, lifestyle and family

• Can you tell me about your experience of living in this community as a Muslim woman who wears the veil? Follow-up questions to find out about their personal experiences to facilitate exploration of their experiences.

• Can you tell me about your support systems (familial and/or professional)

• Hopes for the future?

• Is there anything you would like to add before we finish?

While this schedule is designed to elicit information about the experience of the participants it is only a guideline and all relevant topics and discussions raised in the interview process shall be explored and followed up on.

Appendix 5: Data Analysis – Summary Table

DISCRIMINATION	NEGATIVE IMPACT	POSITIVE EXPERIENCES	STRENGTHS	UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT	GROUPNESS	FUTURE DIRECTION
differential treatment	affecting work	acceptance	Awareness/ education	culture vs religion	support systems	Importance of knowing yourself
verbal attack	boycott/ avoiding	support/positive interaction	self confidence and rights	Feeds into prejudiced views	desire for acceptance	importance of self education
physical assualt	breakdown		Better future	awareness and understanding	desire for recognition	way forward
harrassed	hypervigilant		good social network	minority	desire to prove media wrong	
negative experience seeking work	fear of dissapointment		Non-judgemental attitude	making sense of other's views	representation	
stereotyped	Given up		own resilience	Media influence	increased vulnerability	
question choice of clothing	shocked		positive outlook			
	Stressed		Understanding religion			
	Struggle		speak out / respond			
	self conscious		Strategic silence			
	social isolation		strategies to cope			
	scared/cautious		motivation/commit ment			