
**The Rochdale ‘Grooming’ case and the Politics of Racialisation**

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**Introduction**

Contemporary Islamophobia, certainly since 9/11, has become globalised—at least in the ‘West’ (Morgan and Poynting 2012). In a characteristic interrelationship between the global and the local, there has accumulated a global stock of clichés, stereotypes and folk myths about the Muslim ‘Other’ to be drawn upon to inform common sense about local circumstances and local events. Ideological elements involving the racialization of Muslims are electronically circulated internationally and virtually instantaneously, and this process can lend itself to a seemingly never-ending series of moral panic spirals in which the perceived deviance of Muslims is amplified. Globalised images and imagined civilizational clashes can thus swirl around the vortices of any number of quite local events and conflicts: a schoolgirl in a jilbab, halal products in a supermarket, the construction of a mosque or prayer centre, purportedly ‘extreme’ Muslim values in schools of one locality, anti-war protesters with long beards and long rhetoric, and so on.

This chapter traces the playing out of just such a relationship between the global and the local in the case of demonising of Muslim

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1 Enveloping outer garment worn by some Muslim women.
communities that took place after public outrage following a case of ‘grooming’ and sexual violence centred on one locality in north-west England. The authors were intent on researching Muslim communities’ experiences of the hegemonic exhortations to ‘integrate’ into British culture and British values, and their widespread castigation for supposedly refusing or failing to do so (Tufail and Poynting 2013). Our empirical investigation was by coincidence centred upon Rochdale, in the Greater Manchester area, at the very time when the media-driven outrage about the ‘grooming’ case hit the headlines. Consequently, every single one of our interviewees alluded, unprompted, to these events, the effects on their communities of the way that they were represented, and their personal experiences of such ‘othering’. One set of crimes by nine men became a focus point and a metaphor for the otherness—and indeed dangerousness—of Muslims, nationally and globally.

Local Background

A series of offences involving sexual exploitation and violence in the United Kingdom in 2008–9 led to a moral panic about ‘Muslim gangs’ that racialised South Asian men and held the culture of Muslim communities in particular to be the main cause. Following high-profile criminal convictions of a number of Asian-background men for these crimes against socially marginalised and vulnerable minors, the term ‘Muslim gang’ has, in media and popular discourse, become synonymous with the notion of ‘grooming’. The terms ‘Asian’, ‘gang’ and ‘Muslim’ have been used interchangeably in this context and have served as signifiers for misogyny, cultural and religious incompatibility with ‘Western values’, and an inherently dangerous masculinity.

Interviews with second-generation immigrant British Muslims in the Greater Manchester area reveal the ways in which this group has experienced such criminalisation by association. The stereotyped media hyperbole and the related political reaction over ‘grooming’ and its ideological association with Muslims is to be understood in the context of longer term demonisation of young, British Muslim men in particular. This chapter contends that this form of Islamophobic moral
panic, whereby serious sexual crimes involving children are crudely conflated with the religious and cultural values of Muslims in general, has instilled fear and hopelessness in British Muslim communities, entrenching feelings of exclusion and alienation among an already ‘othered’ population.

The Rochdale ‘Grooming’ Case

In May 2012 nine men from Rochdale and Oldham, Greater Manchester, were sentenced to up to 19 years imprisonment for a series of offences, including rape, against seven vulnerable teenage girls aged as young as thirteen (Carter and Siddique 2012; BBC 2013b). The investigation and criminal proceedings had received prominent media attention both before and during the trial and it was widely reported as a significant factor that the men involved were of Asian descent and Muslim. Indeed, media commentators suggested that ethnicity and religion were of central relevance in explaining why these crimes occurred and that the response in preventing such crimes in the future should take these factors into account (Bunyan 2012). At the same time, this case also began to be exploited by elements of the racist far right, such as the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). Both of these groups have diminished significantly in recent times—perhaps overshadowed by the rise of the somewhat more mainstream anti-immigration UK Independence Party—though they remain active. For the EDL in particular, the case served as a catalyst in continuing hostile demonstrations across areas of the UK with sizeable Asian and Muslim populations, which had been taking place on a regular basis since the inception of the far-right group in 2009. Both the BNP and the EDL have taken an openly anti-Islam stance which is at the forefront of their political campaigning.

In the Heywood area of Rochdale in February 2012, a few days after the abuse trial had begun, a takeaway food shop where the former business had been identified with the ‘grooming’ was pelted with bricks and missiles, with the police reporting approximately 200
youths involved in the disorder (BBC 2012). The youths were heard chanting ‘EDL! EDL!’ Although the EDL later took to Twitter to distance themselves from the disturbances, they praised the actions of the rioters. The period after the trial saw a surge in anti-Muslim racism, abuse and violence including a family in Nottingham moving into a new address and being met with a burning cross wrapped in ham (Burnett 2013). As Burnett notes, this and similar attacks barely made the news at the time. In June 2012, the self-proclaimed leader of the EDL, Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley Lennon), led a demonstration outside Rochdale Town Hall. Holding a Qur’an aloft, he screamed ‘Shall we burn it?’ to loud cheers and declared that the protest was against ‘Muslim paedophiles’ (Unite Against Fascism 2012).

In December 2013, Labour MP for Rochdale, Simon Danczuk, made national headlines and provoked controversy and outrage by claiming that ‘There is no doubt about it, ethnicity is a factor in this type of abuse, this on-street grooming’ (Jones 2013). Referring to the Asian community, Danczuk went on to say that

I think there has been some denial in terms of this being a problem...I’ve seen that over the last couple of years there’s been a tendency not to want to speak about it in terms of ethnicity. I think that’s been unhelpful. (Jones 2013)

These comments drew criticism from Muslim community leaders along with Asian MPs and councillors from Rochdale. Danczuk’s words received a ringing endorsement from the BNP who, on their website underneath a headline of ‘Labour MP wakes up 12 years later!’ stated that ‘Labour’s Simon Danczuk should be congratulated for having the guts for speaking the truth’ (BNP 2013). Such comments, however, were not limited to the Rochdale MP, or to the BNP. Ex-Home-Secretary and Labour MP for Blackburn Jack Straw (Prince 2012) voiced his concerns that ‘There is an issue of ethnicity here which can’t be ignored’, and unelected Conservative peer Lady Warsi, the most senior Conservative Party Muslim figure, also concluded that ‘race’ (sic) was a factor, with Pakistani men seeing white girls as ‘fair game’ (Press Association 2012). David Starkey, a historian noted for his outspoken and controversial comments on minority groups, claimed that the men were acting ‘within their cultural norms’ and called on schools to teach English history to ethnic minorities so that
they are ... first and foremost English citizens and English men' (Shepherd 2012).

Not Ethnic

Ironically, in the years 2012 and 2013 a series of high-profile public scandals emerged in which prominent English citizens and English men were revealed to have been engaging in the long-term sexual abuse of young and vulnerable boys and girls. These figures ranged from the recently deceased Jimmy Saville, a ‘celebrity’ entertainer and disc jockey found to have abused hundreds of—possibly up to a thousand—children (Boffey 2014), to disgraced former MP Cyril Smith - a long-standing Liberal Member for Rochdale, ironically. In contrasting the racialised ‘grooming’ cases to those of these well-known and powerful figures, it is an obvious but nevertheless telling point that the criminal sexual exploitation by the latter is not presented or ‘explained’ in popular discourse through the lens of either ethnicity or religion. Indeed, even several contemporaneous cases—most notably one trial in Derby in mid-2012—that involved multiple white men sexually exploiting and abusing young girls of similar age (a story in itself that achieved rather less media attention) and which mirrored the abuse taking place in Rochdale, were not subject to folk explanations relating to the offenders’ race, religion or culture (Harker 2012). There is historical precedent too for the selective deployment of racialisation in the context of cases of child abuse. An infamous 1990 child abuse scandal in Rochdale concerned white alleged perpetrators yet the reporting and reaction was entirely focused on the failure of social workers and indeed even victim blaming (Salter and Dagistanli 2015).

A notable aspect of the aftermath of the Rochdale sexual abuse trial was the number of Muslim community leaders and organisations that were moved to condemn publicly the offences on behalf of their communities and to attempt to distance their faith and their people from them. One sermon from an imam stated ’We wholeheartedly condemn the disgraceful actions of those involved in these cases and
welcome the convictions in the cases that have been through the courts’ (BBC 2013a). This evidently defensive position, of being compelled to condemn sexual offences that they had absolutely nothing at all to do with, is a feature that was not of course replicated by other religious groups or organisations (such as white people in Derby or their church) when abuse in those communities took place. As the following section will highlight, this distinction resonates when speaking to British Muslims and listening to what they regard as the constant need to justify either their Britishness or their status as 'moderate' Muslims.

**British Muslims’ Responses—The ‘Fear’ of Association**

We proceed now to explore how, in the context outlined above, their sexualised racialization as uncivilised, violent, dangerously hyperpatriarchal and inimical to British and Western values is being experienced by a generation of British-born Muslims in the Greater Manchester area of north-west England. Here we present findings from interview research with British Muslims, mostly second-generation immigrants, conducted in 2012–2013 in the Greater Manchester region and focused on the Rochdale area. The project involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty self-described British Muslims, who mostly are in their twenties or early thirties, equally divided between men and women. Volunteers for interviews were recruited through community contacts by ‘snowballing’. Interviews were digitally sound-recorded with the permission of the participants, and were professionally transcribed with anonymity protected. Pseudonyms invented or agreed to by the interviewees are used in this chapter. All interviewees identified as British Muslims. Though they practised various degrees of religious observance in their daily lives, all asserted that being Muslim was a central aspect of their identity and the way they lived.

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2 The authors wish to acknowledge the grant in 2012 by the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University, for the project, 'Muslim Immigrants' Lived Experiences of Integration Demands', which funded the transcription of these interviews.
Our respondents expressed in common the feeling that their community had been labelled negatively by the media and by public figures, especially in relation to the Rochdale case in a way that had singled them out for particular attention. For instance, Sajid, a 28-year-old British-born Pakistani dual national, spoke of the damaging effects that the reporting of the Rochdale case had on his local community. Sajid felt strongly that his community was being collectively demonised for the actions of a few:

it was taken as, these are ... Muslim paedophiles. And the tension that created within our society within Rochdale was unreal. ... It had nothing to do with their faith ... but for some reason the media had to include the word Muslim, and ... it portrays the whole community or the whole religion in this way.

This blaming of the Muslim community in particular for the sexual 'grooming' carried out by a relatively small group of men was also resented by Imran, a British-born 31-year-old teacher:

I mean, when a white person does it, is it called grooming? When a priest does it, is it called grooming? No. But when a Muslim does it, they have to give it a name. They have to label it so they could use ... put that label onto our religion and our culture ... they shouldn't have done it. But why label them? Why can't you label everyone, everyone who sexually abuses all sorts of children?

Imran made direct reference to other recent high-profile examples of sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable children that had not resulted in the labelling of a particular community and he found it to be a source of frustration that his own community had been associated with 'grooming'. Shaukat, a 27-year-old optician, expressed similar sentiments to Sajid and Imran and further believed that this was another example of the targeting and the demonisation of the Muslim community

Things like the recent incident in this Rochdale area where the paedophile ring, it was kind of, you know, all over the media. It's—the way I see it—it's a group of people who have done very, very wrong things, very, very bad things but the fact that they were of Pakistani descent or the fact they're Muslims and that was getting—you know—mentioned in every single sentence of it that was reported on ... I don't know what them being Muslims has anything to ... do with this. It's absolutely irrelevant the fact that they're Muslims ... that seems to be the biggest thing now—Muslim does this or Islamist does this.
Sharaz, a youth worker in his early thirties, spoke of criminals from all backgrounds needing to be dealt with regardless of ethnicity and religion. He found that recent events had added pressure on the community because now, it ... there almost seems to be a new concept of Asian grooming gangs like, you know, we've got a network of grooming gangs that set up for white girls and it's somehow accepted and we're okay with it. We're absolutely not okay with it ... but it seems as if it's being portrayed as very much an Asian problem.

Sharaz, in his day-to-day role as a youth worker, has regular contact with a range of agencies and local young people and he spoke of how the recent publicity surrounding the sexual abuse trial and the subsequent demonisation of his community had emerged in the attitudes and views of some of his colleagues. As he explains:

Well, in my particular job, we have meetings quite often with other practitioners and often you'll hear phrases so you'll talk about certain things and, you know, they'll talk about, 'Oh, this particular girl is with an Asian.' So there might be two individuals and it might be age-appropriate. There's nothing wrong with the relationship. But the practitioners will refer to this girl dating an Asian like there's something wrong with an Asian. And that really annoys me. And it's happened more than once.

Sharaz explained that he was reluctant to raise this with his colleagues as he didn't want to be accused of victimising them; instead he spoke of the issue being grounded in ignorance and concluded that he would address it by speaking individually to each colleague concerned in order to encourage them, over a period of time, to re-consider their views.

**Muslim 'Fear' of the Media**

In many of the interviews, the role of the media in demonising Muslim (and by association, Asian) communities was a recurrent theme. For example Nazia, an IT professional in her early forties, focussed on the responsibility of the media to represent issues and communities fairly, and stated that in relation to the sexual abuse trial the Muslim community was unfairly targeted by the press:

I think they've got an agenda. ... For instance, the Rochdale cases—the paedophiles. It was a big thing that they were Muslim or that they were Asian, and yet, that was one of the few cases where they were Asian or they were Muslim. When you look ... around the same time, there were a load of cases like that where they picked up
gangs down south, in very nice, little rural places and all the rest of it. But the fact that these people were white or Christian wasn’t the issue. It was the fact that they were paedophiles. Yet, when it came to the Rochdale case, it was all about the fact that, you know, they were Asian, and they were Muslim, and they were grooming these women.

Amber, a 31-year-old lecturer and barrister of Arab origin, felt personally affected by the media vilification of the Muslim community and she has seriously considered leaving the country because of it. As Amber explains,

[On considering moving abroad] at least you don’t face the constant sort of Islamophobia you sort of feel nowadays in the UK, which is constantly seen in Muslims being vilified in the press and in the media and in the news. And actually things, little tiny things like when there’s injustice going on in the Middle East, it’s not even covered by the news because like Muslims don’t really count, or Arabs don’t count, which makes me feel like we are sort of an inconvenience here and we don’t really count.

Like other respondents, Amber cites other examples of how and when Muslims are targeted and demonised by the media and suggests that the recent sexual abuse trial is but one example of this othering process taking place. Sajid is clear in his responses that this process goes beyond othering and argues that ‘when it’s shown on television or even in the newspapers as, it’s just … this is a Muslim man who’s done this crime, when the faith has got nothing, absolutely nothing to do with is, then I think it is a form of discrimination, a form of oppression, and a form of persecution’. Sharaz links the vilification from the news media to the attitudes then expressed as a result by some members of the public

Well, I mean, the thing is any time anything happens on the news then they’re always wary because you know somewhere down the line that it will come down to maybe Islamic extremism and something to do with moderate Islam or extremist Islam or a different faction of Islam, Islam that’s not compatible with the UK … and then if you go online and, because people can express their view point anonymously now in this day in age by Twitter and Facebook, and anonymous comments on newspaper websites, you realise the depth of the hatred that people have against Muslims. And then obviously that combination of, you know, reading all the literature and the media and stuff. It makes you feel like—you know what?—you’re not really wanted.

As with Amber, who has considered leaving the country, Sharaz is made uncomfortable by these processes and he points painfully to the role the media have played in marginalising his community: ‘The
mainstream media has absolutely slaughtered us'. Imran recounts his feelings of helplessness when encountering stories regarding Muslims:

The media do not give a shit. They have been told what to say so people hate on us even more, and there's nothing we can do with it. It's probably one of the strongest things to influence anyone in this world in this day in age, is the media. If it's not on the TV, it's in the newspaper. If it's not in the newspaper, it's in your mobile phone. And you can't get away from it.

Imran further spoke of the press having a 'field day' with his religion and went on to say 'we were labelled as terrorists since 9/11. I don't know who quoted it, but someone said ... "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims". I don't know what to say to that. I was gobsmacked'. Sajid takes a somewhat historical perspective in analysing the state of recent and current media representations of Muslims and argues that 'As soon as the media find another scapegoat, someone ... another race, another people to blame, we'll be left behind and we won't be bothered any more'.

'Fear' of the Authorities

Another common theme raised by the interview respondents’ related to the authorities; in particular the state, the police and the criminal justice system. It was felt by many respondents that Muslims were unfairly targeted by state authorities and from Shaukat's perspective, this appeared to be driven by an anti-Muslim sentiment stemming from within the authorities that considered certain Muslim communities to be a threat and so worthy of suspicion:

Before 9/11 happened, I can't say I'd ever heard of anybody kind of being treated badly just because they are Muslim whereas now there appears to be a lot of things in place that kind of impact Muslims in a negative way, things like, you know, the anti-terrorism laws and you know, just general, the way you're treated by the police and you know, well, you seem to be the victim of a stop and search, random stop and search, you know, quite often when really there's nothing random about it.

For Shaukat, such policing practices appeared to be discriminatory on the grounds of ethnicity and religion; 'I mean, how often do you see or hear about a couple of Muslim or Asian-looking people being stopped and searched. It's very, very common now whereas it's very rare that they do a random spot check or random search on a white person'. Imran also experienced what he believed to be discriminatory
practices from officials, and he made particular reference to being repeatedly stopped and searched both at the airport and by police officers;

one main point, after the 9/11, I’d travelled quite a lot, and every time I’m coming back and forth into the country, every time I visit another country, I don’t have a problem. Every time I come back into England, I get stopped. Now, I’ve asked them this, every time I get stopped by Customs, I don’t pull the race card out. I say to them, ‘Could you just tell me why you pulled me? And I don’t worry if you want to mention my skin colour. Just ... could you just ... on a serious level, because it’s happened to me every time I visit a country.’ And they just keep saying the same thing, ‘Random checks. Random checks.’ Now, on the streets where I live, again, I would get stopped by a police and they will say the same thing, ‘Oh, it’s just a random check, random check.’ In the car, I get pulled over, just another random check. And I can’t get away from it. It’s everywhere. I’m not a criminal, but I feel like I’m being treated like one. I’m always looking over my shoulder, because at the end of the day, I don’t want to waste ... get my time wasted as well as waste a police officer’s time. So I just try to get to the bottom of it, but they all said the same thing, ‘It’s just a random check.’ And I don’t believe that one bit at all.

Imran also makes reference to knowing why he gets repeatedly stopped, but being powerless to do anything about it: ‘They keep saying the reason why they’re stopping me at the airport is because I’m a Muslim and the Muslim ... they’re saying Muslims were behind 9/11. And I know that’s the reason I get pulled at the airports. But there’s no control over it. And the only thing that I could do is just to shrug it off and carry on with my life’. Imran was able to recount several examples of when he had been stopped and searched, sometimes when he was walking on the street of his home in traditional Asian clothing; he believes that it would be much worse if he had a beard. His fear of the authorities extends to being extremely careful about how he uses the Internet, re-stating his powerlessness in being able to challenge dominant policing narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims.

And I’m afraid of typing in anything along ... anything related to terrorism or anything related to Muslims on the internet. I’m afraid of doing that because I believe that they are tracking ... I mean, they will track down if you use certain keywords, like the name of ... saying Allah or saying terrorists or saying bomb on the internet ... I mean, it’s like the new ... the policy they have. If we suspect you’re being a terrorist, we’re locking you up for three months. ... It’s like, what can we say? You can’t say anything.

Like Imran, Amber could recount several examples of discriminatory and racist treatment by police officers. Also like Imran, Amber spoke
of her vulnerability, and her inability at being able to challenge the situations that she found herself in. Amber relates that

As an ethnic minority, I just feel very vulnerable. And I actually felt like even though I’m part of the society and I work hard and pay my taxes and I pay my bills, I don’t get the same protection other people get. Instead, you know, I feel that the very people that are there to enforce the law can sometimes use an ethnic minority’s vulnerability and expose them and take advantage of that.

Amber articulates that despite being British, she feels like an outsider:

victimised, vulnerable, marginalised … a reminder that actually you are not British. Stop thinking you’re British because you’re not. ... From 9/11 … I always felt this, like I’m different. Like I’m British but I feel like I’m constantly being told that I’m not. And that people are not integrated then it’s because when they do try to integrate or they are trying to integrate or trying to live their life alongside their British counterparts, they’re constantly being pushed out or told, ‘Actually you don’t belong here’.

Fear of Others

Another theme that emerged from the interviews with British Muslim was their fear of discriminatory treatment, vilification and indeed violence by non-Muslims in British society. There was repeated reference to the influences of both the media and state authorities in some of their encounters with non-Muslims. Nazia, for instance, spoke of how some of her friends were reluctant to go out at night, for fear of being subject to an anti-Muslim attack:

I think there’s a lot more people that are, who feel intimidated, who feel scared to go out. I mean I’ve had people that say to me, well … and particularly women that say, ‘Oh, I don’t like going out in the dark or once it gets dark and …’ which is ridiculous in Britain, but, you know, it’s that level of fear.

Nazia also spoke of how, after a recent anti-Muslim attack, some of her friends then actively avoided the location, despite it being on the high street of Manchester city centre:

And also people will talk about, you know, hanging out in different places. So for instance, I was saying to somebody the other day, a friend of mine, I was saying, ‘Oh, you know, this couple got attacked in Nero’s coffee shop in Piccadilly Gardens after an EDL demo.’ And all of a sudden all the girls said, ‘Oh, yeah, but we don’t hang around there anymore.’ And it was like, What you are saying to me, you are not hanging around there anymore because you feel you would … it’s not safe?
Without making reference to a specific event, Shaukat is able to explain how he feels he is treated and perceived now and contrast it with a different time:

I was only quite young when 9/11 happened but before that I wasn’t aware of any problems with being a Muslim or why it was any different to any of my other, kind of, friends or people I went to school with who were non-Muslim but as soon as 9/11 happened, it’s almost overnight, you kind of, the way people see you has changed and then 7/7 ... kind of brought it close to home and people, your own neighbours or your own friends then kind of look at you in a different way. It’s as though you’re now, you know, you’re now a suspect of some kind of a crime or I don’t know. It’s hard to describe but I think 9/11 and 7/7 had a massive, massive impact on my life and the way people kind of look at me and people from my kind of faith group.

This sense of alienation and description of an othering and indeed criminalising process was referred to by other interview respondents too, including Sajid, who explained that

people are questioning themselves nowadays, do they even belong here? Should we move back to Pakistan or whichever country they come from? Because life over there would be so much easier. You’re not looked at differently; you’re not treated any different. You’re not part of the oppressed, and that’s what the Muslim community is going through at the moment: a sense of oppression just as blacks were in the 1970s, 60s. We’re going through that phase that now.

Imran clearly differentiates the discrimination he faces from the police to what he describes as discrimination and indeed risk of violence that he experiences from ‘normal people’

It’s like I can’t walk down the street now without being looked out, being harassed, even not by police but even just normal people. I mean, was it in the news a couple of ... was it a couple of months ago? A Muslim girl was walking to work and she got punched in the back of the head by some guy. I mean, unprovoked. I don’t know what to say.

Imran’s fear is all too apparent when he considers the future; ‘I think we’re going to be labelled terrorists for life. That’s what I think. That’s what I mean when I ... when I told you ... when I think about my future. I’m scared. God knows what’s going to happen.’
‘Fear’ of Belonging: Collective Punishment and Continual Justification

Our interviewees made regular reference to having to justify their ‘Britishness’ and particularly so after events such as the Rochdale sexual abuse trial. Nazia found that some British Muslims that she knew would go out of their way to evidence their ‘Britishness’ and she found this to be perplexing, and a requirement not faced by other communities: ‘I think some of them spend a lot of their time trying to prove that they belong, you know, to the extent where you see whenever there’s an event they’ll have a British flag out, you know? And it’s just like, “Well, nobody else has to do that.” You know, it’s not expected from anybody’. However, Nazia also noted that British Muslims were wary of this additional expectation and that this affected their sense of belonging in the country.

I think they feel less like they belong because they are constantly having to justify the way they live or their opinions or anything like that. So I think actually when they question the community’s integration and all the rest of it, what they’re actually doing is just increasing the divisions, because actually now people are having to justify being here or belonging or feeling British. And you know, you shouldn’t have to justify it. The fact that you live here should be enough.

In a similar vein, Sharaz makes reference to how he and his friends feel that they have to make an additional effort to associate themselves with ‘Britishness’ not only because they are Asian, but because they are Muslim. When ‘something happens’, as with the Rochdale crimes, Muslim communities experience pressure to distance themselves from it and to demonstrate all the more that they are ‘good’ Britons.

You have to work very hard to integrate in inverted commas ... but to try to integrate, to be British, again in inverted commas. So I think there’s a lot of effort that me and my mates put in to try and be British, try and live up to a certain expectation or what the people, the wider community have in mind of how we should act and I think there’s more of ... an added pressure to be extra British because ... we’re from a different ethnicity and particularly ... of a particular religion. So there’s that added pressure that we, something happens, we have to go and condemn it. We have to come out and say, ‘No’, and then we’d have to make an extra effort, you know, to be nice or to go and do something unconventionally good that may oppose their view of our religion, if you know what I mean.

In the aftermath of the sexual abuse trial, our participants also referred to how the media and political backlash had effectively served as a collective punishment for the Muslim community. As
Shaukat explains, this association led to feelings of alienation, marginalisation and disenfranchisement:

It was, you know, like I said it was a group of guys who did some very bad things but the way it was covered by the media, the way they meant every single Muslim have to be a paedophile or you know, a sex offender or you know, a potential sex offender was really kind of, again, it really upsets you. Things like, just in the workplace where you're having a general conversation with one of your patients and they'll ask where you're from and as soon as you say 'Rochdale' to anybody, and that's it, that, you know, they'll say 'Oh, Rochdale.' And then go on and talk about this whole grooming case. There's a lot more to Rochdale than one, you know ... more reason for people to know about it but it seems to be the only reason why people are aware Rochdale is even on the map.

Shaukat also spoke of how he felt his community had been singled out and of how this had deleterious consequences for him personally, in that his achievements in life mattered little in the context of being a British Asian Muslim male from Rochdale. For him, the labelling as dangerous because of deviant masculinity and sexual violence was experienced as ideologically bundled up with the labelling as dangerous through association with terrorism:

It’s the fact that we’re now branded as paedophiles or rapists or whatever or terrorists, potential terrorists even and I think that that’s kind of the most difficult thing to accept the fact that you know, I’m a young, British Muslim who’s never done anything illegal in my life, has actually served this country for, you know, X amount of years and you’re still seen as a potential terrorist or potential paedophile or potential rapist so you know. It’s ... quite wrong really.

Taking the above points together, Sajid does not understand why additional expectations are made of Muslim communities when the divisions have been instigated and exacerbated by non-Muslims and his following response also reflects a powerlessness that is felt in being unable to challenge the dominant narratives that exist about Muslims and which ultimately serve as a form of continuous collective punishment:

Well, what can we do? There’s not much the community can do. I mean I stay at home; I’ve watched the news with my father and my father only says to me, ‘Why are they saying these things? Why are they lying about the faith?’ And really, what can we do? What can we do to change the media? What can Muslims do to try and change the mentality of society, the way they portray us? There’s not much we can do. We can try to build bridges; we can try. But are there ... if we were to try and build bridges, we are building bridges which we did not break in the first place. Other people broke these bridges but we are trying to build them. And I don’t see why.
Conclusion

This chapter has explored how media-amplified moral panic and some political manipulation over a series of serious crimes committed by perpetrators who happened to be Muslim men have been experienced by Muslim communities in the surrounding area. The crimes were represented as symptomatic of the deviance of Muslim masculinities and the problematic patriarchy allegedly induced and indulged by Islam. As Razack notes, this is but one of the many ways in which the Muslim male is negatively constructed; ‘Considered irredeemably fanatical, irrational and thus dangerous, Muslim men are also marked as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot’ (2008: 16). Sexual exploitation and violence were racialised as characteristic of whole cultures and entire ethnic and religious populations, at the same time as the sexual exploitation and violence of the ‘mainstream’ were rendered invisible. In the experiences of our interviewees reported here, the local Muslim communities were assumed to share the deviance of the offenders and were expected to share the blame. Their leaders were required to be apologetic for this communal culpability, and to take firm steps to eradicate the root problems within ‘their’ communities. Muslims within Rochdale especially felt pressure to keep a low profile about their faith, and felt collectively under heightened scrutiny and suspicion. They were made fearful of vigilante forms of collective punishment, as some put it, and of heightened and forceful intervention by state authorities, experienced as a form of retribution and continual reminder of non-belonging. As Kumar (2014) has noted however, the conditions for anti-Muslim sentiment are not simply created by the rhetoric and actions of familiar racist and far-right figures and organisations. Rather, as we have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, liberals and liberal institutions, from politicians to mass media organisations, have been instrumental in stoking a fear of Muslims resulting in their ‘othering’ and marginalisation.

In this local but globalised context, ‘fear of Muslims’, for our participants, became their fears, as Muslims, of these forms of targeting, harassment and victimisation.
References


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