

Karim Mitha

Culture, identity and mental health

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

What happens when we lose our sense of belonging?

Interdisciplinary researcher Karim Mitha thinks joining a club or getting involved in a community can be a great way to support our mental health and also help us feel part of something.

Science communications student Tremaine Billham talks to Karim Mitha about his research into acculturation, Islamophobia and depression.

Tremaine:

I'm Tremaine Billham and I am here today with Karim Mitha who is going to talk to us about mental health.

So, your current research centres on the relationship between islamophobia and the development of mental health disorders like depression, is that right?

Karim:

That's very close actually. So, what I'm looking at is the relationship between acculturation [and mental health].

So there's literature that suggests often times first generation, second generation migrants, when they come to a new setting, they often encounter what's termed 'culture clash' or 'culture shock'. The whole process of getting used to a new environment, the way things work, so a lot of literature suggests that that process of acculturation can lead to depressive symptoms or mental health conditions.

Where the literature fails is that it often considers the first generation migrant.

Now if we consider the aspect of in the UK and Scotland, we're about second or third generation migrant populations.

Tremaine:

Mhmm

Karim:

And so what I'm looking at is the aspect of whether or not that acculturation still occurs in further generations. And so specifically, I'm looking at the relationship between identity and where that falls in, that pathway between acculturation and depression.

Islamophobia is particularly salient for the Muslim population, obviously. Particularly for second generations. You know, they've grown up in this setting. If you ask them where they were born, they say 'well, I was born here; I am from here' and then often the external image that's being portrayed on them is that they don't actually belong here. [1m22sec]

So when we consider that aspect of acculturation or acculturative stress and how that can impact on their sense of wellbeing and mental health, often times, particularly in BME [black

and minority ethnic] communities, people find a sense of belonging within their own localised networks, so whether it's their faith community or whether it's that local congregation or maybe it's their whole ethnic identity.

There is loads of literature which looks at ethnic identity as a predictive factor, in terms of clothing choice, in terms of the language use.

So, essentially I am looking at the relationship of identity that's on that pathway between acculturation, islamophobia and depression.

Tremaine:

So could you clarify the term acculturation for us?

Karim:

Okay, so in terms of acculturation, people often use Berry's Model of Acculturation.

And with that said, it's when a new community comes into a new context. They generally fit into four patterns and these patterns are being integrated, assimilated, separated or marginalised and they basically mean different things.

So, that model has been criticised as to why is it a one-way process? Should it not be a two-way acculturation? And essentially when we talk about acculturative stress that basically means in generalised terms whether or not if you move to a new context you are often faced with differences of languages, differences of the ways things work, different values, the way people interact with each other. So you come within a certain framework to a new setting and when that doesn't necessarily match with your own background or when people see you as an 'other', how does that impact on yourself and the community that you grew up in?

So people talk about being like are we acculturated in terms of the music we listen to, in terms of what we eat, in terms of the TV programmes that we watch, the languages that we speak in. So that's an aspect of acculturation.

Tremaine:

This is all about a sense of belonging then? [3.04]

Karim:

Mhm.

Tremaine:

Okay, so how does this sense of belonging, this idea of belonging, impact on our mental health?

Karim:

So there's quite [a lot of] research that talks about the way that people feel as part of a community. If you look at the basic aspects of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs you see there's an aspect of belong and self-actualisation. So it's a part of being as humans; we are a social species, we like to feel that we are part of something, that we belong somewhere, that we

can ascribe identity to ourselves. So for example, I'm Karim, I'm... you know this and that, and whatever labels you put and also labels that people place on themselves.

When we talk about belonging, particularly for a migrant community, they come into a setting where it's very unfamiliar to them so they look at what's comforting to them, so often times that's in terms of food choices. You can see oftentimes there's many different types of restaurants that cater to particular ethnic diets.

People like to feel that there is a sense of self in their behaviour, there's a sense of self in what they choose, in sense of who they interact with.

So, there's quite a lot of work that relates to belonging in terms of... people say that I... for example, especially for the Muslim community, I'll say that "I am Muslim, this is who I am" and for them, being part of a Muslim community is sort of ascribing to something that's greater than themselves, so they're not just an individual. Oftentimes we talk about, like the black community or the Chinese community or the Asian community, so it's basically something that is larger and is ascribing in, interacting with people that you feel that you have shares values and shared history and shared communalities with.

Tremaine:

So is this likely to have a positive effect on you mental health?

Karim:

Mhm. There's literature which suggests that being part of something, this aspect of belongingness and having value and having meaning. So the aspect of being part of something that's greater [than] yourself. So particularly amongst faith communities, if you feel you belong somewhere, you feel that you have people who you have things in common with, which makes you feel that you are not alone.

So oftentimes people who have depression they feel very isolated, they feel that they can't interact with someone, nobody understands them. By feeling that you are part of something, that often gives you meaning, and gives you purpose and so that's an aspect of belonging.

Tremaine:

So what happens when we lose this sense of belonging?

Karim:

This is what my area is, this aspect of identity. So if you feel that you don't belong somewhere, then the question becomes "well, who are you?" So I could ask you, well, who you are, and where you come from and so you try to construct your own personal narrative and your own personal autobiography; this is my background, this is where I grew up, this is my family, I live in this neighbourhood, so you are ascribing different aspects to yourself.

Now, when something is removed from that and someone says "wait, actually, no you don't belong here, actually, no we don't consider you to be British", for example, then that causes what is an aspect of identity threat. So, Glynis Breakwell has done quite a lot of work in this aspect of identity threat. So when you have someone saying, that actually, no they don't validate the assumptions you have about yourself, that can cause you to sort of re-evaluate

and say well this is what I thought about myself now if they're saying no, does this change my whole self-concept? Does this change how I think about myself, and who I am as a person?

So oftentimes people of who they think and who they feel they are, are very inextricably linked. When someone says "no, you're actually not" of course you're going to re-evaluate your entire self.

"Wait... I've been living like 20 years thinking this way and now all of a sudden someone is telling me I don't belong here. Then where do I belong?"

That can cause aspects of self-doubt and isolation.

Tremaine:

Ah, okay so you kind of have an internal identity crisis as a result?

Karim:

Yeah, especially for people who don't necessarily fit any mainstream [setting].

So, I think, the way I like to see my research is that's its very applicable to sort of any group really. So for example, you could be Jewish, you could be Chinese, you could be African-Caribbean, you could be like any different ethnicity or nationality and this aspect of sort of fitting into a certain particular group, [so something] like social identity, and the idea of group membership and how that's very salient and how that's very... very important to people.

Tremaine:

So would you say there's a more pronounced effect in people who have experienced Islamophobia compared to people who have been rejected [in] other groups?

Karim:

I think what's interesting about, particularly for the population I look at amongst the Muslim community is that obviously we are aware in the last 10-15 years, there has been such an increase in heightened suspicion amongst people in their group.

So oftentimes, maybe they grew up, particularly first generation migrants, they felt that yeah they were 'other-ised' but they felt yeah just integrate, just you know lose your cultural markers, just speak English, just try to belong.

Now you have a second generation, a third generation that've grown up here and to them this is their home. When people say that "no, actually, you don't belong here. Where are you really from?" that can cause people to question who they are. If you compound this with an aspect of labelling other people, so for example Muslims will often feel that they are labelled as terrorists. They've got the whole prevent strategy. They feel that they are dressed differently, look differently, have a very different aspect of belonging.

That causes them to question well then if we don't fit [in the] outside [world] then maybe we need to turn insular and to find community amongst ourselves. So often, there is a sense

that “are Muslim communities very insular?” Could that be an internal process or could it be as a response to something that’s external?

Tremaine:

Wow, that’s actually a really interesting point.

So is this something that you have experienced yourself?

Karim:

I think because... [laughs] This is a very interesting question Tremaine!

I think I would say personally, and I think this echoes a lot of my respondents as well, when you come from a place that’s very ethnically diverse to Scotland, which is not very ethnically diverse. And I say that because the statistics show that it’s about 96% white in Scotland and the BME population is very little.

So, happenstance you feel that you don’t necessarily look like everyone around you.

I think that in terms of comments, where do we consider Islamophobia and what do we consider as discrimination? So for some people they mean different things. So is it something blatant, like has someone called me a terrorist? Or did someone say, “you speak very good English, where did you learnt it from?” So I think that’s, that could be an example of subtle discrimination. Or if someone says like... or if they question your ability to speak or to write. And I think, yeah there’s an aspect also in Scotland that we want to perceive it as being very diverse and inclusive. And oftentimes the respondents I have spoken to have said things like “well, we’re probably a decade behind to where London is. One day I wasn’t wearing Asian dress and I was wearing something else and I was told “you’re dressed normally today.” Now, what does that mean being dressed ‘normally’ today?

I think it’s interesting also that when we look at sort of the research that’s being produced, oftentimes there’s an aspect of Orientalism, and oftentimes we like to exoticise another group that’s different from ourselves.

If you look at groups who have written about the Muslim community, they are predominantly by non-Muslims, so are the findings they have, are they an accurate depiction because I think when someone comes into your group you want to present your best face.

Tremaine:

Mhm.

Karim:

So like for example, I would use the analogy of when you have visitors over to your house, you make sure the flat is clean! [laughs] And then you make sure somebody is actually... you know they don’t see the mess, hide it in the closet! So oftentimes, I would use that analogy for social research so if you have someone coming in and saying that “oh everything’s fine, everything’s integrated and you know that become the narrative whereas actually, you know, there are issues, just like in any other group. But maybe take someone from within

that community to actually tease it out a bit. I've got for example Imams who I have spoken to, so faith leaders, and they told me things like they feel very fearful.

So they are often mindful of you know, they have narrated when they have had reporters coming into the mosque, and then say that they are a congregant or a worshiper and then next thing they know it's on Channel 4 and then the Mosque is seen by Prevent strategy

Tremaine:

Oh my gosh.

Karim:

So there is this fear that's taking place, if you're asking like about Islamophobia in that sense. So I would say there's aspects of subtle [and] blatant discrimination and also micro aggressions.

Micro aggressions is a new literature which comes probably from America, but it has to do with the African-Caribbean population, and a lot of them would say things like oh well again it's about fitting to stereotypes, so the fact that oh, you know, "you can speak English" or the fact that you know, "you integrate really well", or "oh, are you forced to wear a hijab?" for example. A lot of respondents told me that have they have been asked have they been forced to do something that has actually been their choice. So a lot of assumptions are being made. And if you probe deeper, I think I've got a lot of respondents say that they do feel that their views are not valued, they're often spoken down to... yeah. I think it's also a power dynamic that takes place.

Tremaine:

So in terms of mental health, how can people who have experienced these things develop resilience to these kinds of common mental health disorders?

Karim:

I'm really glad you brought up that point, because resilience is something that's being seen as very important these days. There's a lot of research that goes in[to] this area.

Finding personal aspects that people can individually feel that they can respond to situations themselves.

So one of the published works I've done, talks about how the faith community can actually be useful as a resilience strategy. So oftentimes people do things, like we were speaking just beforehand about maybe doing some exercise, or maybe getting involved in the community, volunteering. And I think this ties to the aspect of self-efficacy. Basically, if you are involved in a community, in any community, you feel that there is a role for you to play. And what does that do for your sense of self? You feel valued, you feel that your life has meaning, you feel that you have a sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy and all these things basically build upon your sense of self-worth as a person. So if you imagine someone as depressed, very lonely and isolated.

Now if you bring them into somewhere and say “hey, would you like to contribute to something?” all of a sudden that makes someone feel that “oh, my opinion is being appreciated, I actually have some value as a person that they are asking me to contribute.”

So I think this is an aspect where faith communities, they do things really well because they are engaged with getting people doing sports, youth events, getting people to do charity drives. I think this is something that people within closed... not closed communities as such but people who have grown up within a close-knit community they are very used to getting everyone involved and then you sort of notice, “hey, I haven’t seen so and so in church in three weeks, what’s going on?”

So I think that is something that close-knit communities do really well.

Tremain:

Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today. This has been Forward Thinking, thank you very much for listening.

If you want to know more about the topics discussed in this podcast, follow the links on the Forward Thinking blog at forwardthinking.ppls.ed.ac.uk

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes for more research, news and views from Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences here at the University of Edinburgh.