

Media's negative role in the construction of stereotypes toward Muslims

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Abstract

This research was conducted to improve the relationships between Muslim students and students from diverse backgrounds at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez", Cuba in 2013. In order to achieve this objective, the fundamental characteristics of Islam as well as the primary reasons for the misinterpretation of Muslims. The role of the media as for stereotyping was emphasized based on the analysis of concepts regarding its social representation, dimension and structure. Three research techniques were used: Drawing, Semantic Differential and Free Words. These methods were associated with the objective to characterize the social representation of the Muslims in a Cuban university environment. The results obtained revealed prejudice and stereotyping of Muslims due to the misinterpretation of the customs and traditions of Islam. Hence, recommendations are made to develop an understanding, acceptance and respect for the Islamic culture and its followers by encouraging efforts directed at socio-cultural transformation on the university campus.

Key words: Media, negative role, stereotypes, drawings, Muslims.

Introduction

Nowadays, the media, be it television news, newspaper reports, electronic reports or blogs is present at almost each 'event' whether it be at warzones, natural disasters, riots, political campaigns or funerals. The daily reports enable the people throughout the global village from different socio-cultural backgrounds to keep in touch with global events. In addition, the public is well-informed and can improve their knowledge on various topics. However, the media is also used to spread propaganda, distort information and publish false information, images or ideas according to interests of press agencies or private organizations. This is what takes place with regard to the representation of Muslims throughout the media.

The common misconceptions of Islam are 'imprinted' in the minds of the majority of non-Muslims because they are constantly being bombarded with misinformation of its customs, traditions, faith and people. The western world primarily controls international media including international satellite channels, radio stations, newspapers, magazines or books.

The internet has also become a powerful medium of information. Although the internet is not controlled by anyone, one finds a significant amount of virulent propaganda about Islam on the internet. On the other hand, Muslims are also utilizing this media tool to portray the correct image of Islam and Muslims, but their attempts are lagging compared to the propaganda against Islam.

The propaganda against Islam by the media directly influences and confirms stereotyping toward Muslims. It also provokes non-Muslims to adopt an unfavorable social representation of the Islamic religion and its followers.

Methods and techniques of Social Psychology and the Theory of Social Representations can be used to respond to the media's negative role in stereotyping Muslims. The study of social representation is symbolic with regard to the universe as being the first link for future action of social transformation.

Background and Literature Review

Origin of wrong conceptions about the Islamic Religion

Even though the dominant Arab culture, its philosophy and natural sciences as well as the economic force and politics of the Islam, were highly admired in the Middle Ages, the devaluation and rejection towards Arabic-Islamic culture began during the Renaissance.

Many ethnic-religious prejudices against Islam had existed because persons from other backgrounds had created them. Nowadays there is ever-increasing propaganda against the Muslims, who are labeled dreadful for the world, as part of a new clash of civilizations between Islamic and Western cultures.

The wrong perception and low representation of the Islamic culture has been facilitated by the news, the film industry and the media in general. There is a communicative monopoly that publishes only bias aspects according to priorities and interests of certain media sources although many of these aspects are entirely false.

After the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, the negative image of the Arab culture and the Muslims was reinforced by the Western media. The media has propagated that if one is an Arab or Muslim, it is equivalent to being a terrorist, who is similar to Satan committing

horrendous crimes. The media was used to create a negative image of the Muslims to generate intolerance, leading to discrimination, exclusion, xenophobia and even undesirable military action.

Media's influence in the construction of stereotypes

The confirmation of public opinion and the construction of social representations of different acts in contemporary societies depend on the media.

As explained by Martin Serrano (1986: 143), "The participation of the media in the elaboration of a representation of what it happens in the world begins when the mediator institution, or other social agents (Agency of News, Writing Council, Censors, etc.), select determined events to make them public and no select others".

The production of mediated representations is a process in which the reporter participates such as mediator inside an informative company. This process implies the selection of current social events; collecting information and construction of narratives of these actions, which are edited, recorded, published, nested and finally, 'served' to the public.

The media (journalists, reporters, photographers, bosses of information, writing, and directives) develop their role as mediator by constructing the reality, through their interpretation of facts. These analyses are determined by their cultural baggage, ideology, professional formation, individual interests for the ideal conception of their professional duty.

Thus, the production of the media is determined in a first instance for the cognitive mediation that the reporter carries out as an individual and in the second instance, for informative companies on behalf of certain politicians. This contributes to the popularization of mediatized information and often stereotyping propagandist information. Although it is important to point out that the popularization of stereotyped information not only brings impositions by certain media for the sake of commercialization, it also needs repetition by way of popular narrating (Martin-Barber, 2001).

The consumption of certain contents can be an important factor in the internalization of stereotypes. The stereotypes are "beliefs more or less structured in the mind of a person about a social group" (Páez, 2004: 760). These generalizations swiftly formulated about a group; moreover, they usually have incomplete or erroneous information (Schiappa, Gregg &

Hewes, 2005). For this reason, these representations can result in ignorance of the variability of the group members. When a person is categorized within a group, for example, "group of Muslims", the latter is usually perceived as being of a negative character. Since he/she is part of the group, it will be difficult to change these negative perceptions (Tan, Fujioka & Lucht, 1997).

The media's role can be significant for the pre-activation of stereotypes toward Muslims through the presentation of repetitive patrons in informative contents or contents of fiction (Dixon, 2000; Dixon and Linz, 2000). When the images appear frequently, these are transformed into crucial information by people as common knowledge (Brown-Givens and Monahan, 2005). So, the image of Muslims will be considered valid and true by those who frequently follow the media (Fujioka, 1999).

When the images of Muslims are shown in a prejudiced way, the audience will develop an erroneous perception of Muslims. This wrong perception may legitimize social differences that can contribute to the discrimination of certain groups in front of others (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad & Huang, 2000). Busselle & Crandall (2002) reported that the media does not transmit and generalize only stereotype certain groups, but rather also justify the consequences it will have in the formulation of public policies, discrimination and other actions in the social sphere.

Stereotyping generated against Muslims by the media is developed in two stages according to Brown-Givens & Monahan (2005). During the first stage, it will activate a system of personal beliefs that associates the Muslims with certain stereotypes. The media's impact during this phase is stronger when it excludes knowledge of the Islamic faith and its followers (Fujioka, 1999). During the second stage, the activated stereotypes are recovered to interpret the information they receive and to improve the perception of the Muslims.

Thus, having a different religion, as in the case of the Muslims, can be the reason for discrimination induced or reinforced by the media. In this regard, non-Muslims may have an unfavorable perception of Islam.

Theory of Social Representations

From the psychological point of view, Serge Moscovici is recognized as the principal exponent of the theory of Social Representations, proposing that “... Social Representation is a group of concepts, enunciated and explanations originated in the daily life, in the course of the communications among individuals. Social representations are in correspondence with myths and systems of beliefs in traditional societies. They are a system of values, ideas and practical relative to objects, aspects or dimensions of the social life and constitute an instrument of orientation in the perception of situations and the elaboration of answers...” (Moscovici, 1981 as cited in Perera, 2005: 44).

Denise Jodelet incorporates new elements to the aforementioned definition and posits that social representations are: “...condensed images of a group of meanings; systems that permit to people interpret what happens to them, and even, to give a sense to the unexpected thing; categories used for classify persons and situations” (Jodelet, 1986, as cited in Perera, 1999: 9).

There are many other definitions, conceptions and notions of social representation. Therefore, the social representations are complex and versatile concepts that contain forms of social thought that facilitate the interpretation of the reality. They are forms of knowledge socially elaborated and participate in the construction of the reality.

Representations are structured around three fundamental components: attitude toward the object, information about the object and a field of representation where they are organized in a series of contents of a hierarchy.

Attitude shows positive or negative dispositions that people have toward an object of representation. In the attitude, there are dynamic elements that affect the person emotionally. Information is knowledge about the object of representation. Last and not least of significance in the field of representation is the order and hierarchy of elements that configure the content in the representation.

This field of representation is organized in a diagram or figurative nucleus, constituting the most solid and stable aspect in the representation. It also organizes the group of elements of the imagination giving meaning to all the elements that are in the field of representation. The

rest of the elements are round the central ideas and they could, in the future be at the figurative nucleus (Alfonso, 2012).

The Theory of Social Representations provides an opportunity to explain scientifically the necessity of a change in the social subjectivity if we understand that one of the main barriers in the relationship with Muslims and practitioners of this religion in general, arises simply from the representations people have about Islam. It is critical to interpret this reality beginning with the interpretation of beliefs and opinions of social origin shared by the groups.

Social Representation of Muslims: Role of the Media

Muslim students from many countries study at Fructuoso Rodríguez University, Cuba. In this university, conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims occurred in the past. In many instances the own barriers that generate stereotyped conceptions limit the educational policies of the institution. Therefore, research was initiated to explore the social representation by students and professors at Fructuoso Rodríguez University with regard to Muslims as well as establish future actions of social transformation according to the characteristics of the social representation studied.

The results of the research revealed that the majority of the persons have a wrong perception of Islam and Muslims due to the media. The respondents reported that their knowledge and ideas about Muslims were as a result of movies, news, Internet, TV programs and reports in newspapers or magazines.

Purpose and scope

The main objectives of this practical study was to: 1) examine the Media's negative role in the perception of stereotyping Muslims; 2) analyze how social psychology and the theory of social representations can help to change the media's negative influence, in a Cuban university environment.

Limitations

The sampled population for the study comprised full-time undergraduate students and professors at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez", Cuba in 2013.

Hypothesis

According to the reviewed literature in addition to the problems at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez" against Muslim students, the proposed hypothesis is: non-Muslim students have an unfavorable representation toward Muslims. Prior to this study, there were reported instances at the university, where certain Muslim students were excluded by their non-Muslim classmates. Muslim students also became victims of bad jokes.

Sampling

The target population consisted of full-time undergraduate students and professors at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez", 2013. The university had a total of 2500 students enrolled at the time of the study.

Sampling was conducted in the year when there were more Muslim students than the previous years. Students were sampled in various groups according to their academic year from freshman to senior. However, no attempt was made to categorize them in an academic year due to the limited number of students and professors sampled in each career. The sample size was also limited because certain non-Muslim students were unwilling to share their opinion about Muslim students.

The overall sample comprised of a total of 45 fulltime undergraduate students and 15 professors at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez". The students and professors were stratifiedly selected based on their careers. A total of 5 students and 3 professors were sampled from each of the Agronomy, Veterinary and Agricultural Engineering careers.

Methodology and Design

The study adopted the qualitative research approach, that is, a Technique of Drawing and Free Association of Words methodology.

Technique: Drawing

The drawings were titled "*I see the Muslims like this form...*". The respondents were asked to represent the beliefs of Islam symbolically through illustrations.

In general, most of the samples categorized Muslims in three fundamental categories: “physical features and typical dress”, “ingrained religious beliefs” and “war and terrorism”. All these categories focus primarily on physical and external aspects. However, a few respondents focused on feelings and spiritual qualities.

The most frequent category was: “physical features and typical dress”. In this category, the following drawings were displayed: men with beards, long dresses, turban and handkerchiefs, head covered with hats and women with veils. The sketches emphasized beards for the men and veils for the women (Annex 1).

The category: “ingrained religious beliefs” is part of the previous category. In this category, certain symbols are reflected, for example, symbols of meditation and prayers associated with religious centers. Among those symbols that appear often are referred to The Mecca (Annex 2). Many of the respondents associated the religious beliefs with strong dogmas that contribute to motivation and patterns of behavior. According to the respondents, these beliefs can motivate and realize acts of terrorism; the watchwords being “killing in the name of Allah”; the recurrent sentence in the drawings. The respondents affirmed that this assumption was drawn from the media.

The category “war and terrorism” revealed illustrations of bombs, firearms, battle tanks, collapsed structures, wounded people, blood and symbols in general of fights and conflict (Annex 3). Several phrases accompanied these drawings such as: “They are always in war”, “they are terrorist and suicidal”, “Fanatic”, “The Muslims are dangerous persons”, “it is necessary to be careful with them because they are very violent”. These sentences reaffirmed the ideas, which associate Muslims with military events and acts of terrorism, violence and aggression. It study also revealed that the respondents stereotyped and were prejudice against Muslim students.

Technique: Free Association of Words.

A fundamental analysis was drawn of all the responses that originated from the word: “Muslim”. The researcher informed the respondents to *say the first words that crossed their minds when the “Muslim” was pronounced*. Certain categories were analyzed according to the results which consisted of a dynamic group of terms which maintained relationship and proximity of their meaning.

The category: “characteristic of the personality” appears in first hierarchical order. This was elaborated upon with the words: strange, different, people of another world, crazy, evil, disciplines, respect, antiquated, intelligent, strict, brave, perseverance, educated, cults and friendship.

“Religious beliefs” comprised of the following terms: religion, religious, believers and credulous. The third category was “terrorism and war”. The following words such as terrorists, suicides, wars, battle tanks, firearm, blood, death, attacks, murderers, conflicts, fanatic, aggressive, resolved and espionage were included. These terms denote the existence of emotions and negative feelings by the respondents towards the Muslims. The sampled population perceive the Muslims as such each day on both television and the Media in general.

“Physical features and typical dress” revealed the following words but not limited to, long dresses, many clothes, big suits, strange clothes, bearded men and covered bodies.

The category “marital customs” appeared less represented. In this category, there are words and expressions such as many women, harem and a man with several wives. In this sense, the category of “bad habits” occurs in less frequency and contained descriptions such as alcoholic and drug addicts.

In the drawing technique, the terms used in the frequency of evocation and hierarchical order represented the sample of the study base their opinions on incorrect and distorted information of the reality that drives not only to poor criteria, but also to behavior, expressions and attitudes sustained in stereotyping and prejudice.

Findings and Discussion

From the cognitive dimension, there is ignorance of the real and specific characteristics of the Muslims as well as their practices and moral principles. There are erroneous conceptions of the Muslim people. Likewise, there is limited knowledge of the Muslim conception. There is a presence of prejudice and stereotyping because people in general have a poor knowledge base of the realities of Islam. This was confirmed in the results from movies, novels, the internet, articles and the media in general. Thus, it can be concluded that the consumption of media contributes to the formation of stereotypes, and at the same time, the media provides

unfavourable social representation of the Muslims at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez, 2013".

The information provided by the students and professors about Muslims does not come from the daily experience or direct contact with Muslims in general. There is a significant change in the representation of people who have a close relationship with the Muslims and those who do not. It implies people who have befriended Muslims, and have a different representation of other members of the sample. In fact, they have a more favorable and real representation of the Muslim in reality. This situation is directly related to a principle of the Social Representation. It affirms that the representation varies depending on the proximity of persons with the object of representation.

Other opinions are also distant from the reality. For example, these views included the association of Muslims with wars and terrorism as well as with bad habits. In fact, Islam rejects those criminal acts. Unfortunately, most people do not know this. The Holy Koran clearly states that if anyone kills a person, it would be as if he/she killed all the people; and if anyone saved a life, it would be as he saved the life of all the people (Al-Ma'idah: 32). Clearly, Islam advocates peace.

In general, so much in the verbal speech, in the symbolic representation. In the extra-verbal manifestations, there are attitudes with a tendency to exclusion, the idea being that it is better to keep one's distance from the Muslims because they are different and dangerous. There are many pejorative words; for example, certain respondents refer to the Muslims as "people of another world", "different", "strange", "terrorists" and "fanatic". The sample perceives the Muslims as individuals far of the "normal parameters".

As previously referred to in this article, there is a trend to exclude the Muslims. Moreover, there is much prejudice about Islam and ideas in direct contradiction to the real principles and doctrines of this religion. In summary, ignorance of the Muslims is evident.

Concerning the attitudes of students and professors about Muslims, there is a prevalence of attitudes of rejection, avoidance, and evasion. These different behaviors could be appreciated owing to the scientific observations, but in certain instances there were direct manifestations through expression, for example: "I try to stay distant of the Muslims" or "I don't want to have a relationship with them". And there were other pejorative expressions as: "Muslims are

satanic and crazy”, “they are people of another planet”, “they should disappear”, “they are always in war”, “they are dangerous, aggressive and suicidal” and “Muslims are strange things”.

In summary, the categories “ingrained religious beliefs” and “terrorism and war” are the central nucleus of the social representation (Figure 1). These elements are in direct contrast to the rest of the elements in the field of representation, which has the following categories in its system of periphery: “physical features and typical dress” and “characteristics of the personality”, and in a minor measure (isolated elements) “bad habits” and “marital customs”. Finally, it can be concluded that the nature of the central nucleus determines attitudes of rejection towards the Muslims as revealed by certain respondents comprising students and professors.

The results revealed how the students and professors at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez" contribute to an extent social stereotyping of Muslims as well as the untruths being compounded upon by many media. It represents a critical dimension of the possibility of harmonious and functional relationships between Muslim students and the university community.

Figure 1 Description of the field of representation.

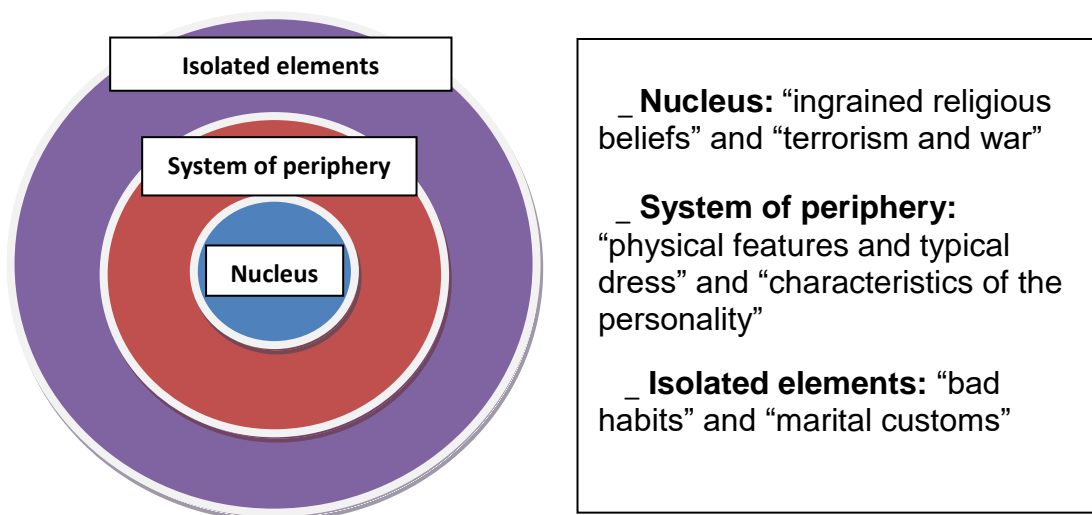


Figure 1. The field of representation.

For those reasons, there is a necessity to elaborate socio-cultural action that can contribute towards a substantial and significant change in the social representation of the Muslims at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez", keeping in mind the results obtained in the field of representation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The propaganda against Islam by the Media directly influences the confirmation of stereotypes toward Muslims and it provokes non-Muslims to develop an unfavourable social attitude towards the Islamic religion and its followers.

There is limited knowledge of the Muslim and a distinct presence of prejudice and stereotyping which resulted in misconceptions and understanding of the realities of Islam. This is directly due to the negative, bias and propagandic perception held by the media almost throughout the world.

The Theory of Social Representations allows entering the symbolic universe of people as the first link for future social transformation, and in this way, it can change the media's negative role. The author strongly recommends:

1. To continue studying the negative role of the Media in inculcating and stereotyping Muslims.
2. To undertake in-depth research of the Islam and Social Representation about Muslims in both Cuba and globally.
3. To develop projects of socio-cultural transformation at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez" and elsewhere in order to facilitate the acceptance and respect towards both the Islamic culture and its people.

The following actions provide an overview of a wide range of activities that can be developed according to the characteristics in the context of the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez".

The first activities were directed at the *isolated elements*: "bad habits" and "marital customs." Secondly, activities were related to the elements of the *System of periphery*: "physical features and typical dress" and "characteristics of the personality". Lastly, activities were carried out with the elements of the *nucleus*: "ingrained religious beliefs" and "terrorism and

war”, keeping in mind that these include the most stable aspect to representation. Hence, modifications should not be made directly at this level before achieving partial results in the transformation of the isolated elements and the system of periphery.

Possible activities are:

1 – Discussions of a woman's paper, the meaning of marriage and marital customs according to Islam.

2 - Exhibition of pictures, objects, dress and Muslim attire with comments and clear explanation as well as dialogue the human qualities that the Koran advises.

3 - Discuss and exchange bases and fundamental precepts of the Islam.

4 - Conference: “Necessity to know the truth about the Islam nowadays”.

5 - Magisterial Conference: “Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim campaign propagated by the media”.

6 - Projection of many documentaries which evidence that Islam is against terrorism.

7 – Dialogues about wars in the Middle East and use of Islam as a pretext.

8 - Rain of ideas (ask a group of persons): “How to improve relationships with Muslim students at the university?”

9 - Game of roles (through small dramatizations to show): favorable and unfavorable behavior towards the Muslim students.

10 - Great cultural activity: “Approach to the reality of the Islamic culture”.

Following this study, several recommended activities are being practiced at the Agrarian University of Havana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez". However, we must continue undertaking other activities to cultivate and promote respect for the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim students through interfaith dialogue.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Drawings belonging to the category: "physical features and typical dress"



Annex 2: Drawings of the category: "ingrained religious beliefs"



Annex 3: Drawings belonging to the category: "terrorism and war"



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