Airports as Sites of Fear

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Airports are a site of particularly high levels of frustration, anxiety, and in some cases even fear for many Muslims in Scotland. This is tied to people's personal experiences with airport authorities throughout the UK and abroad, and also to the stories that circulate within the Muslim community and through the media. In the last year we have interviewed more than 50 Muslims in Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow about their experiences with airport authorities. In our interviews people describe an experience of humiliation: of having their sense of self-worth as members of the community and their expectations of being treated fairly and with dignity violated. Although all those we interviewed expressed a deep commitment to Britain and to its security, even those who reported relatively benign experiences at airports held doubts about the safety of interacting with authorities—particularly in high security contexts.

There are several dimensions to people's accounts of experiencing humiliation which we think are important, and which are the focus of our current analysis and future research. The very public way in which people are often pulled aside and questioned in front of other passengers is often referred to as a particular source of distress. Also, the sense of powerlessness in the face of petty discourtesies such as not being given information about the process, being kept waiting for prolonged periods of time; and thoughtlessness about waiting family. Finally, the questions themselves are perceived as ill-conceived for identifying security threats, as well as being ill-informed and disrespectful of Islam.

The everyday effects of these experiences are insidious, yet powerful. What people describe is a state of hyper-vigilance and an acute awareness of their own behaviours when travelling. Some spoke of their efforts to appear less threatening by changing their appearance and their behaviours—sometimes to reduce their own anxiety, but at other times as an empathic response to the fear they saw in fellow passengers. For instance, people spoke of changing what they wear, how they walk, and perhaps most significantly, their social interactions (e.g., averting their gaze and not speaking to fellow passengers). From the outside these changes in behaviour may appear to be mundane and inconsequential. But, when viewed from the perspective of wanting to build relationships of trust within and between communities, practices that break down everyday sociality are of considerable consequence.

Finally, it was clear from our interviews that people who identified as Scottish or British and who saw themselves as law-abiding and contributing members of society, often found the local airport experience particularly humiliating and hurtful. This is not to say that those who are not British were unconcerned, but it does speak to the importance of looking at how people's sense of identity and of what is being violated in these encounters plays a role. It also speaks to the importance of considering the long-term consequences of these experiences for people's confidence in their place in society, and in relation to this, their confidence in societal authorities.

These are just some of the themes which our research will continue to explore over the next year. We are also interested in working with airport authorities to look at possible measures to improve community relations around airport security practice.