research highlights

SOCIOLOGY

Misrecognizing minorities

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Ongoing public debate about multiculturalism and citizenship highlights a need to better understand how ethnic and religious groups encounter one another. But what happens when that encounter includes being misidentified?

New research by Peter Hopkins and colleagues, drawing on a large qualitative study of ethnic and religious minority youth in Scotland, found that Sikhs, Hindus, South Asians more generally, and black and Caribbean young people were regularly mistaken for being Muslim. Their encounters with misrecognition were characterized by racial stereotyping based on physical features and occurred in schools, taxis, airports, and other public spaces. As an explanation for those encounters, study participants identified recent political events, media coverage, and a general conflation of the 'Asian' community with the 'Muslim' community — exemplified by the widespread use of the term 'Paki' as a racial insult. Although responses included using humour, clarifying their religious affiliation, social withdrawal, and ignoring the situation, these racialized encounters have potentially severe consequences.

The study points towards a need to better understand the impact of exclusionary readings of identity and misrecognition on a sense of citizenship, belonging and personal well-being; the problems arising from the homogenization of ethnic identities in social discourse; and the impacts of Islamophobia on the broader community.

Adam Yeeles