REVIEW ARTICLE

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Strategies for combating prejudice against Muslims in Australia

Nayeefa Chowdhury [1]✉ & Ahsan H. Khandoker[2]

The post-9/11 era has witnessed an upsurge in prejudice against Muslims in Western societies. Prejudice runs the risk of leading to discrimination if left uncurbed. This review attempts to explore the strategies used to combat prejudice against Muslim communities in Australia. A Boolean search for the key terms found seven studies ($N = 3{,}177$) that were conducted between 2012 and 2022. The study findings suggest that lower levels of education, lack of knowledge of Islam and Muslims, age, and a perception that prejudiced beliefs against Muslim communities are shared by the mainstream population are significant predictors of prejudice against the said group. Intergroup-contact strategy is the primary strategy which has been employed to combat prejudice. However, most of the studies that have been conducted lack ecological validity. In addition, the issues related to multilayered causal mechanisms leading to intergroup contact have been critiqued in this review. Recently, a few studies have used the psychoeducational approach in combating prejudice against Muslims in Australia. This approach has gained external validity. However, the studies related to psychoeducational intervention in combating prejudice against the said group are in their infancy. Recommendations have been made for future research directions that are efficient, practical and may inform government education policies.

Introduction

Known as an 'immigrant nation', Australia is home to diverse communities. Approximately 30% of Australia's population is born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2022a, b, c). For the first time in history, non-Western communities have become the primary source of permanent migrants in Australia (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012).

Although Australia promotes diversity and multiculturalism (Commonwealth 2010) to achieve social cohesion, research findings suggest that multiculturalism may ironically increase racial essentialism, in which an outgroup is perceived as unequal and less worthy (Wilton et al. 2019; Mandalaywala et al. 2018). In other words, multiculturalism may pose a threat to establishing a multi-tier national identity among Australians. Recent data on hate incidents (Benier 2019) and prejudice in Australia (Shin and Dovidio 2018) lend support to the discourse of the multiculturalism critique.

[1] School of Psychological Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. [2] Healthcare Engineering Innovation Center (HEIC), Department of Biomedical Engineering, Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE. ✉email: NayeefaChowdhury@gmail.com

Prejudice against Muslim communities in Australia (MCA)

Prejudice is characterised as negatively judging others based on the groups or communities they belong to (Dovidio et al. 2019). Prejudice against Muslim communities has been an ongoing problem in Australia since 9/11 (Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Fozdar 2012; Pedersen and Hartley 2012; Syed and Pio 2010). The Muslim communities in Australia represent one of the fastest-growing migrant groups (ABS 2011). Negative portrayals of Muslims in the media have fuelled prejudice against this minority group in Australia (Poynting and Perry 2007). They continue to experience the most discrimination after the indigenous communities (Every and Perry 2020). The visibility of the hijab puts Muslim women at risk of being victims of discrimination (Iner et al. 2022).

This article outlines the predictors of prejudice and reviews recent literature on strategies for combating prejudice against Muslims in Australia.

Determinants of prejudice against MCA

A study by Pedersen and Hartley (2012) indicates that the level of education, a lack of concern about racial equality, concern about gender equality and age are significantly correlated with prejudice against MCA. Lower levels of education are associated with more prejudice, and the youth bracket is associated with reduced prejudice. Moreover, unconditional belief in the political rhetoric against MCA reported in the media is highly associated with higher prejudice (Pedersen and Hartley 2012).

Logically, there seems to be a causal link between simple-minded belief in the media and low levels of education, as the skill of critical thinking is generally focused on in higher studies (Wright 2002). The study by Ewart et al. (2022), which analysed data from the national social survey of the random stratified sample of 1265 non-Muslim Australian residents, supports the findings that levels of education and age are significant predictors of prejudice against MCA. Ewart et al. (2022) additionally indicate that adherence to Christianity is a predictor of prejudice against MCA.

Another strong determinant of prejudice is a lack of factual knowledge about Islam and Muslims (Moritz et al. 2017). MCA is often interchangeably termed Arabs (Dunn et al. 2007), whereas Muslims in Australia are among the most ethnically and linguistically diverse groups in Australia (Hassan 2018). Approximately 16% of MCA are of Western origin, and the majority of Arab Australians are adherents of Christianity (Hassan 2015).

MCA is often conflated with asylum seekers (Pedersen and Hartley 2015; Haslam and Holland 2012), whereas only a third of the asylum seekers in Australia are Muslims (Refugee Council of Australia 2018). Asylum seekers are often "dehumanised" in the political rhetoric through the media (Pedersen and Hartley 2015, p. 7). The monolithic categorisation and the perception of the MCA as "dehumanised" asylum seekers fuel the view that Islamic and Australian values are mutually exclusive.

The perception that Islamic and Australian values are incompatible is a consistent determinant of prejudice against MCA (Paolini et al. 2022; Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Moritz et al. 2017). A sizeable 4.5% of respondents (n = 60) of a survey among 1347 university-educated, non-Muslim Anglo-Australian Women believe that Islamic and Australian values are incompatible (Paolini et al. 2022, Table 5). The number might be higher among the cohorts with lower levels of education. Figure 1 illustrates the significant determinants of prejudices against MCA.

Literature selection

This article has attempted to review existing literature on strategies applied for combating prejudice against Muslim
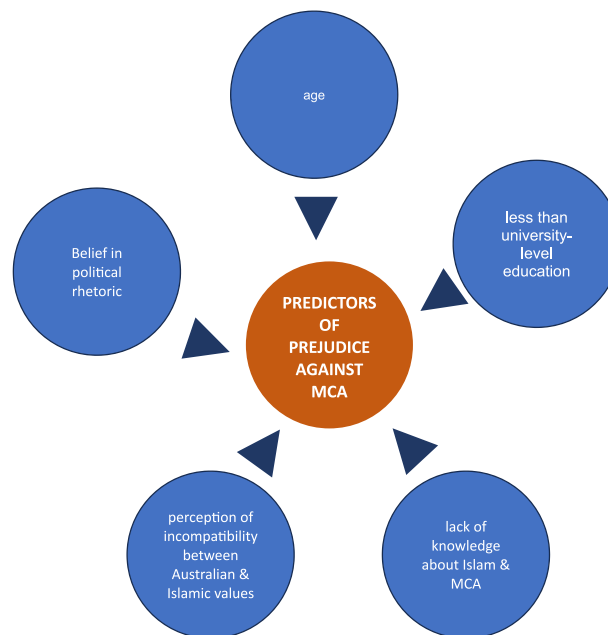
**Fig. 1** Predictors of prejudice against Muslim communities in Australia.

communities in Australia and pinpoint research gaps on the said topic. A total of eight peer-reviewed journal papers (N = 3,177) were selected for the review (Table 1). These research studies are relevant to our topic and were published between 2012 and 2022. The key terms 'Muslims', 'Australia' and 'prejudice' were searched using Boolean operators through the APA PsycInfo database. The details of the literature selection process are illustrated in Fig. 2.

Intergroup contact strategy

In combatting prejudice, the contact hypothesis is the most prominent theory psychologists advocate (Allport 1954; Paluck et al. 2019). The majority of the studies related to prejudice against Muslim communities in Australia focused on the 'intergroup contact' strategy (Table 1). The contact hypothesis posits that interactions with a member of an outgroup would reduce prejudice against the group (Jackson and Hogg 2010). An 'outgroup' is defined as a group one does not psychologically identify with (Jackson and Hogg 2010). The stigmatised outgroup may represent a different race or religion, for example.

A meta-analysis (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) of 515 intergroup contact studies indicates that prejudice towards an outgroup typically has a highly significant (moderate Cohen's d) inverse association with intergroup contact. However, the finding contradicts several studies that are discussed below, suggesting that the intergroup contact strategy does not have carte blanche sovereignty in combating prejudice. Intergroup contact has important multilayered dimensions, all of which should be analysed systematically.

Firstly, an intergroup contact experience may be positive or negative. Studies reveal that negative intergroup contact experience has a stronger individual-to-group generalisation effect than positive outgroup contact experience with a stigmatised minority (Paolini and McIntyre 2019; Barlow et al. 2012). So, the valence of outgroup contact plays a key role in minimising prejudice and enhancing social cohesion. Large-scale initiatives carrying out intergroup contact programmes run the risk of further marginalising the stigmatised minority without a well-planned strategy to ensure positive intergroup contact. An intergroup contact experience is largely shaped by contextual factors, such as socio-
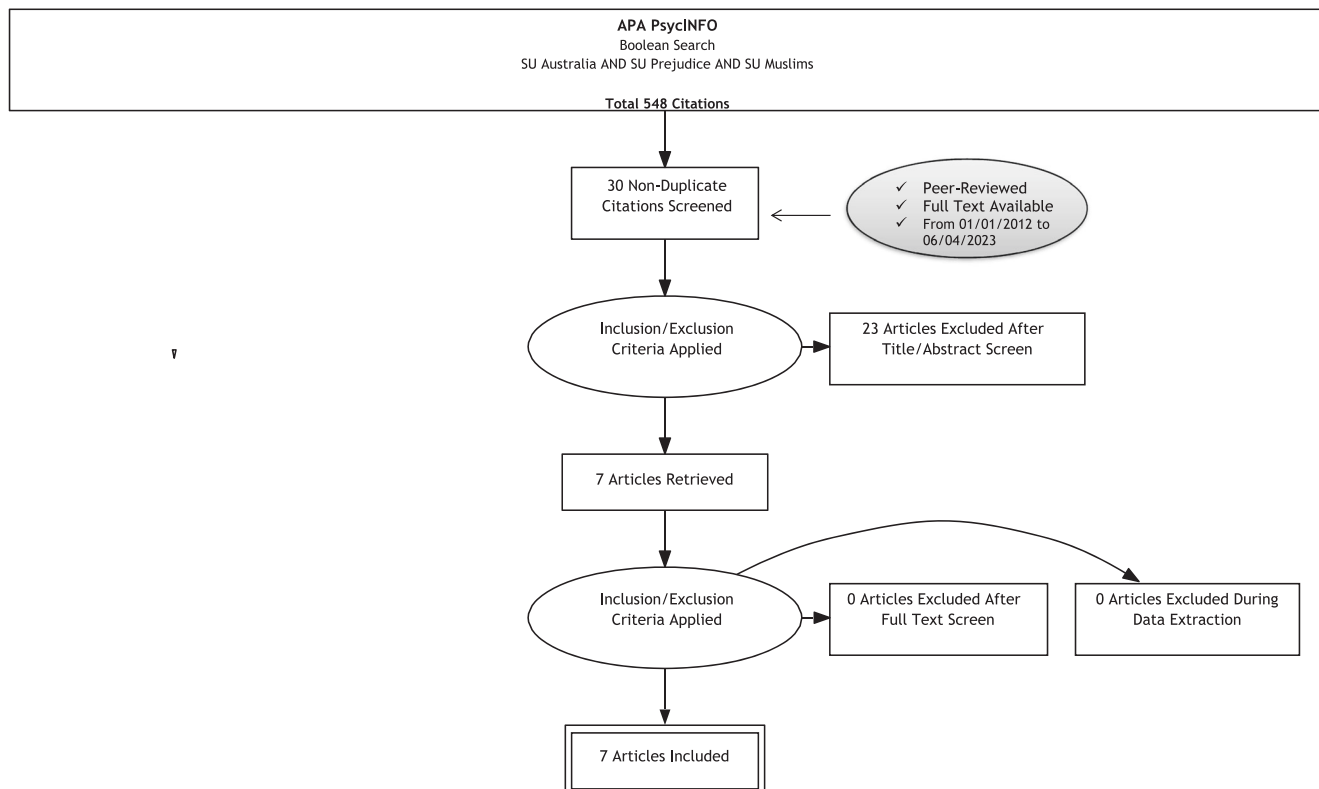
Fig. 2 Literature selection criteria. PRISMA Flow Diagram (SU = Subject(s), AND = Boolean Operator).

political dynamics and the level of stakeholder opposition (Hsieh et al. 2022).

Secondly, 'outgroup contact' is an umbrella term that does not explicate the causal link to the contact between the members (Paolini et al. 2022). An outgroup contact may be interpersonal, where two teenagers happen to take the same extra-curricular activity, for example, or it may be interactive, where two individuals build a personal relationship with each other. Outgroup contact may occur due to environmental factors such as proximity to outgroup neighbourhoods or intra-group factors such as alienation from ingroup members, or intra-personal reasons such as a thrill-seeking personality trait. All these factors differentially affect the outcome related to prejudice (Paolini et al. 2022). Most studies on outgroup contact and prejudice have not focused on the essence of the 'contact', which is problematic.

Some studies attempted to narrow down the contact hypothesis to explicate the nature of intergroup contact that is related to prejudice reduction. Bastian et al. (2012) infer 'social distance' as a measure of prejudice towards an outgroup, where 'social distance' is defined as the degree of 'contact-seeking attitude' as an outcome of intergroup contact experience. In other words, a 'contact-seeking attitude' as an outcome of intergroup contact indicates a reduced level of prejudice against an outgroup.

The internal validity of the study by Bastian et al. (2012) seems questionable as the inference contradicts other studies on the relationship between 'contact-seeking attitude' and 'prejudice'. Paolini et al. (2022) conducted a community-led initiative of intergroup contact programmes that revealed that a *lack* of 'contact-seeking attitude' might be exhibited despite having past positive contact experiences and good impressions of the outgroup, due to other factors, such as one's work schedule and proximity of the targeted neighbourhood. In summary, 'contact seeking' is not always a valid construct in measuring prejudice against Muslim communities in Australia.

As a peripheral topic of interest, Bastion et al. (2012) infer that intergroup contact with the mainstream group may not result in a 'contact-seeking attitude' on the part of MCA. In other words, the study by Bastian et al. (2012) reveals that when a member of MCA (i.e., a minority group) makes intergroup contact with a member belonging to the mainstream Australian population, the interaction does not reduce social distance. To critique the study, the sample participants in the study (Bastian et al. 2012) are not representative of mainstream MCA, as all sample participants were students studying in eight faith-based Islamic schools. A negligible fraction of the MCA population attends faith-based Islamic schools in Australia. Hence, choosing all participants from students attending only faith-based Islamic schools might not reflect the diversity of the mindset of the target group which is the MCA.

In terms of ecological validity, most studies lack ecological validity in that they are conducted in artificially imposed settings. Only one study (Paolini et al. 2022) listed in Table 1 provides field data within a strong salient intergroup context. There is a gap in the literature on longitudinal studies concerning the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice towards Muslim communities in Australia. The study by White and Abu-Rayya (2012) is the only longitudinal study which investigated the trajectory of prejudice towards Muslim communities in Australia in an imposed interactive contact experience setting.

Knowledge-based intervention strategy: perceived versus factual knowledge
A knowledge-based intervention which incorporates psychoeducational programmes to raise factual knowledge of Islam and MCA seems to have gained preliminary external validity in combating prejudice. The research initiative in this regard is still in its infancy and demands replication and rigorous modelling. Only three studies ($N = 804$) were found that investigated

Table 1 Studies (2012–2022) on strategies for combating prejudice against MCA.

ID of the study	Focus of the study	Demographic profile of participants	Average age of participants	Sample size	Cumulative sample size	Relevant study findings
Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015)	Knowledge-based intervention	Non-Muslim Anglo-Australians	19.28	89	N = 3,177	Perceived knowledge of Islam and Muslims reduces anxiety related to making an outgroup contact.[a]
Barlow et al. (2012)	Intergroup contact	Non-Muslim Australians	40	173		• The valence of IC is a vital factor in reducing prejudice against MCA. • A negative IC experience is a **stronger** predictor of increased prejudice compared to a positive IC experience in the reduction of prejudice against MCA.
Bastian et al. (2012)	Intergroup contact	Non-Muslim Australians	16[b]	750		IC reduces contact-avoiding attitude towards MCA.
Mansouri and Vergani (2018)	• Intergroup Contact (IC) • Perceived Versus factual knowledge of Islam and MCA	Non-Muslim Australians	55.34	621		• Perceived knowledge of Islam and Muslims is a strong predictor of prejudice against MCA. • Factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims is a negative predictor of prejudice against MCA. • Intergroup contact with MCA reduces prejudice.
Paolini et al. (2022)	Intergroup contact	Non-Muslim Australians	28.12[c]	1347		IC-seeking attitude might not be a predictor of prejudice against MCA.
Thomas et al. (2012)	Knowledge-based intervention	Non-Muslim Australians	24.01	94		Factual knowledge of Islam and Muslim is a negative predictor of prejudice against MCA.
White and Abu-Rayya (2012)	Intergroup contact	Australian Christians	12.79	103		IC reduces bias towards MCA.

[a] The study did not explicitly measure prejudice towards MCA. However, the study measured the role of social interaction anxiety as a barrier to intergroup contact, assuming intergroup contact is an effective strategy for combating prejudice towards MCA.
[b] The study did not provide the mean age of the participants but provided a range of 14–18 years. Hence, the median age of 16 years has been used in the table as the average age of the participants.
[c] The mean age of a section (follow-up; N = 559) of the original participants has been provided by the study.

correlations between prejudice and factual or perceived knowledge of Islam and MCA (Aydogan and Gonsalkorale 2015; Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Thomas et al. 2020).

Impact of perceived knowledge. The study by Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015) suggests that 'perceived knowledge' about Islam and Muslims lessens anxiety towards making an outgroup contact and helps build a 'contact-seeking attitude', which in turn may help reduce prejudice. To critique the study, the 'contact-seeking attitude' may not explicitly reflect reduced prejudice, as is evident from a study that indicated that the 'contact-seeking attitude' might stem from an intent to confront the stigmatised minority (Paolini et al. 2022).

Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015) employed the "feedback manipulation" (p. 403) technique in their experiment, where the experimental group received positive feedback on the results of a knowledge test on Islam and Muslims regardless of the actual scores the participants obtained. Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015) suggest that the anticipated stress from communicating with an outgroup member lessens when one perceives that they have sufficient knowledge (i.e., cognitive resources) of the outgroup member's background to be able to communicate with them. Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015) infer that the 'feedback manipulation' technique may help reduce prejudice against MCA.

To critique the study by Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015), the 'feedback manipulation' technique may ironically fuel prejudice against the MCA, as there is a positive correlation between 'perceived knowledge of Islam' and the overestimation of consensus regarding prejudiced beliefs against MCA (Thomas et al. 2020; Pedersen and Hartley 2012). In other words, the more confident a person is about their perceived knowledge of Islam, the more confident they are that their perception of Muslims is shared by the Australian majority. This overestimation of consensus regarding stereotyped beliefs against MCA might further aggravate prejudice (Thomas et al. 2019).

Resource appraisal hypothesis and factual knowledge. The "resource appraisal" hypothesis by Aydogan and Gonsalkorale (2015, p. 401) directly contradicts the findings of a study by Mansouri and Vergani (2018) that reveals a strong association between self-reported knowledge of Islam and higher prejudice against MCA. Mansouri and Vergani (2018) suggest that factual knowledge of Islam, in contrast to self-reported knowledge of Islam and MCA, is associated with reduced prejudice. Thomas et al. (2020) conducted a 12-week psychoeducational programme among university students in Western Australia and concluded that factual knowledge of Islam is an effective tool (moderate Cohen's *d*) in combating prejudice against Muslims.

Future research direction
The majority of studies related to combating prejudices against MCA focused on the 'intergroup contact' strategies and yielded contradictory research outcomes. An 'intergroup contact' experience is complex and multilayered. Each of the contexts and factors associated with an 'intergroup contact' experience should be systematically analysed in order to delineate meaningful results. The majority of the 'intergroup contact' studies in the past decade were set up in imposed settings, lacking ecological validity.

'Psychoeducational intervention' strategy in combating prejudices against MCA has gained preliminary external validity. However, the strategy needs rigorous modelling and replication. Only a very limited number of studies (Table 1) have delved into researching psychoeducational intervention in reducing prejudice against MCA.

Implementing psychoeducational interventions in school settings entails navigating potential challenges and ethical considerations. Obtaining informed consent from both students and parents is a primary hurdle, necessitating transparent communication about the intervention's purpose and potential outcomes, ensuring comprehension. To address this, schools can employ clear, accessible language and engage in community outreach to explain the benefits of the intervention. Cultural sensitivity is crucial, as psychoeducational interventions would involve discussions on sensitive topics. Schools can mitigate this challenge by incorporating diverse perspectives into the intervention design, providing training on cultural competence for facilitators, and creating a safe space for open dialogue.

Schools can establish comprehensive assessment frameworks involving stakeholders in the evaluation process of psychoeducational intervention programmes to ensure the intervention's effectiveness and minimise any potential adverse effects on students' mental health.

Notably, over the past decade, all knowledge-based interventions in Australia have predominantly centred on tertiary students (Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Thomas et al. 2020). Interestingly, higher academic education levels (i.e., university-level) are not associated with prejudice. Conversely, lower academic education levels (i.e., less than university-level) are significant predictors of prejudice (Ewart et al. 2022). Consequently, the population without a university-level educational qualification emerge as ideal research participants for knowledge-based interventions in combating prejudice against MCA in the future.

Furthermore, the statistics reveal that only 10% of students aged 15 or over undertake tertiary education in Australia (ABS 2022b). To that end, the impact of the psychoeducational intervention might be more worthwhile if it is done for secondary school students.

To date, no studies on the said topic have been conducted among secondary school students in Australia. Given that the retention rate of secondary students until higher secondary graduation is more than 80% in Australia (ABS 2022c), longitudinal studies on psychoeducational intervention among secondary students in combating prejudice against MCA might reach a wider circle of the Australian population. In this way, the intervention would be more widespread, and the study findings may yield an important implication for preventing prejudice that might lead to discrimination against Muslim communities in Australia.

On a final note, a cost-effective way of reducing prejudice against MCA would be building consensus in the classroom on the said topic, as studies show that building consensus significantly helps reduce prejudice against a Minority group (Randjelovic 2008). Building consensus refers to promoting a shared understanding within the classroom to foster agreement and address prejudice against MCA. Practically, this can be achieved through open discussions, activities, and educational initiatives that encourage students to engage with diverse perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and collectively develop a more inclusive and empathetic environment. This approach could be pivotal in fostering a more inclusive environment, addressing the root causes of bias against MCA, and promoting understanding of MCA among students.

Concluding remarks
In summary, this article promotes inclusivity by addressing the intricate challenges faced by Muslim communities in Australia. It serves as a resource for developing evidence-based strategies to combat prejudice against these communities. The article delves

into the determinants of bias against the MCA, highlighting key factors such as education, age, political rhetoric belief, and perceptions of incompatible values.

The suggestion of directing interventions towards a younger demographic is made, as it holds the promise of long-term impact and broader influence. This article attempts to provide a clear roadmap for educators, community leaders, and policymakers to craft more effective initiatives aimed at mitigating prejudice against Muslim communities.

Furthermore, the article emphasises the need for a multifaceted approach to implementing psychoeducational interventions in school settings. This approach incorporates effective communication, cultural competence, confidentiality safeguards, inclusivity measures, ongoing professional development, and rigorous evaluation strategies. By underlining these aspects, the article underscores the importance of upholding ethical standards in the execution of psychoeducational interventions.

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Acknowledgements

Author contributions

NC conceived the idea, designed the review protocol, conducted the literature search, drafted and revised the article. AHK revised the article and organised the funding. All authors approved the submitted version.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required because this is a review article.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Nayeefa Chowdhury.

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