Defining and Describing Islamophobia

— some notes and links

Insted Consultancy, London, 2018

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Defining, describing

In relation to the term Islamophobia, as also to other such terms (there are very many!) it is often useful, and sometimes invaluable or even necessary, to observe a key distinction between a **definition** on the one hand and a **description** on the other.

Definitions and descriptions are similar to each other, and either can act as an introduction to the other. Also it can happen that exactly the same set of words is seen and used by one person as a definition but by another person as a description.

Nevertheless there's a real distinction to observe between (as the words are being used here) a definition and a description.

- **A definition** is what one finds in a dictionary.

- **A description** is what one finds in an encyclopaedia.

Or, a definition is what you find in an Act of Parliament, whilst descriptions are what you find in parliamentary speeches and debates. You also, of course, find descriptions rather than definitions in essays, lectures, articles and books.

A definition, in the current context, is formulated and referred to in order to establish criteria according to which an action may be judged, commended, rewarded, criticised or punished.

A description in the current context is formulated and referred to in order that the causes and features of certain behaviours may be clarified, and that recurrences of them may therefore be encouraged or prevented.

Both definitions and descriptions are necessary, but are needed in different contexts and with different purposes.

Definitions are needed in legal and quasi-legal contexts. But in other contexts and for other purposes they are neither necessary nor even always desirable. Frequently what is needed is description, not definition.

Defining and describing Islamophobia

It is often said, though wrongly, that the Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia in 1997 as 'fear or dread of Islam... ' What Runnymede actually did was introduce a lengthy and nuanced **description,** not definition, of the term Islamophobia by saying that it's shorthand for referring to a complex cluster of different, though inter-related and inter-relating, behaviours.

Runnymede's verbal description was illustrated with a visual diagram expressing the idea that Islamophobia's various facets have a chicken-and-egg relationship with each other, not a linear cause-and-effect relationship. The visual diagram can be seen at https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf

Runnymede suggested through its long description and visual illustration that Islamophobia has four main sets of facets. It named these as prejudice, discrimination, violence and exclusion, and made further distinctions within each of these four.

Over the years different words have been suggested for the four facets, but the fundamental notion that there are four facets has not changed. A more recent description of the four facets may be found at http://www.equaliteach.co.uk/faith-in-us/

The current legal definitions in the UK pertaining to Islamophobia are by and large satisfactory and are not in urgent need of modification. They include the definitions in equalities legislation; in hate crime legislation; and in legislation relating to incitement to religious hatred. What we do need is more **description**, based on and leading to deeper understanding.

Other words requiring clarification

The words *Islam* and *phobia* are problematic, and so are words such as *religion* and *belief*.

It is sometimes said that the term *anti-Muslim racism* is preferable to the term *Islamophobia*. But of course this is not helpful unless the terms *racism* and *race* are clarified as well.

Further discussion and explanation

A re-statement of the key concepts in the 1997 report https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/islamophobia-20-years-on-still-a-challenge-for-us-all

'Faith in Us – educational materials for teaching about Islamophobia', 2018
http://www.equaliteach.co.uk/faith-in-us/

Notes for a lecture at an international conference, 2013
Cartoons, causes and counter narratives

An essay about competing terms and core concepts, 2013
Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, or what?

Sixty recent discussions, 2016/17
Issues – a selection of online articles

Follow-up report from Runnymede, 2017
Islamophobia – still a challenge for us all

Critical review of the two Runnymede reports, 2017
Reports on Islamophobia, 1997 and 2017

A lecture in November 2017
What U Lookin @?

Narratives and counter-narratives
Toolkit published in September 2018
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Robin Richardson, October 2018