On the Discursive and Methodological Categorisation of Islam and Muslims in the West: Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

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Abstract: This article reflects on the ethical and epistemological challenges facing researchers engaged in contemporary studies of Islam and Muslims in the West. Particularly, it focuses on the impact of the constructions and categorisations of Muslims and Islam in research. To do this, it considers the entwinement of public discourses and the development of research agendas and projects. To examine this complex and enmeshed process, this article explores ideological, discursive and epistemological approaches that it argues researchers need to consider. In invoking these three approaches alongside an analysis of a collection of recent research, this article contends that questions of race, religion and politics have been deployed to reinforce, rather than challenge, certain essentialist/orientalist representations of Islam and Muslims in the West in research. As this article shows, this practice is increasingly threatening to compromise, in a Habermasian communicative sense (i.e., the opportunity to speak and be heard for all concerned), the ethical and epistemological underpinnings of social science research with its emphasis on inclusion and respect.

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1. Introduction

I want to contextualize this article by recounting a series of events and personal exchanges I have had over the years in relation to conducting research that is focused on Muslim migrants in the West. Back in 2014, I was conducting fieldwork in the southern French town of Grenoble where large numbers of North African migrants have settled since the mid-twentieth century. The research project I was conducting at the time was funded by the Australian Research Council and aimed to examine, and indeed debunk, the circulating assumption that Islamic religiosity is often associated with lack of local civic engagement and social integration among Muslim migrants. I had arranged an interview with a local religious leader, an Imam, that did not go to plan from the word go. The Imam, an Algerian-born migrant himself, was very aggressive and deeply cynical about researchers, academic institutions and their publicly funded research. My own identity as a Muslim researcher did not preclude me from the tirade of allegations about researchers colluding with 'infidel' governments in order to whitewash imperialist, neo-colonial agendas that aim to subjugate Muslims and delegitimize Islam as a faith. Whilst in the end I managed to have a somewhat useful conversation with the Imam, though no formal interview was conducted, this incident highlighted a significant chasm between research agendas and methodological framings and the reality on the ground of everyday Muslim life in the context of migration, settlement and the negotiation of difference. The Imam's scepticism towards me and his rejection and de-legitimization of research funded and approved by public institutions, seems to be reflective of a growing concern about the motives, the utility, the assumptions and the impacts of research on the lives of ordinary individuals.

More recently, I have also been involved in interesting discussions with members of the Australian Muslim community in Melbourne regarding their growing concerns about prevalent Muslims-focused research framings. As an Australian Muslim scholar, I was approached by individual members and leaders of a prominent Muslim community organization who wanted to discuss their apprehensions about the framing of research questions in a project on Islamic religious leadership in Australia. This project was being undertaken by one of our Institutes' early career researchers, which is why these questions were directed to me in my capacity as the Institute's director.

The meetings—which were initiated and organized to consider and address community apprehensions vis-à-vis institutional research framings—progressed beyond the initial agenda that was focused on the project's research questions around religious leadership. Indeed, the discussions engaged with the broader questions of the relationships between research agendas, researchers' positionality, government policies, media narratives and community concerns. The conversations were respectful, honest and conducted in good faith, and left no doubt of the impact of institutionalized practices—be they in research, government policy processes or media reporting on community attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. The key message was that the repercussions of these practices on community members are immediate and profound, even when the intention of such practices is to ameliorate or offer support in difficult circumstances.

These exchanges were challenging on personal and professional levels and prompted deeper thinking about these community-specific concerns, as well as about the deeper epistemological and ethical questions they raised. This is especially the case at a time when, around the world, government rhetoric and policies are at their zenith in regard to agendas focused on security, counter-terrorism and a neoliberal muscular take on social cohesion (Kymlicka 2007, 2015). Thus, my starting point is questioning whether, and to what extent, we still have a substantial problem around research framing that amounts to reinforcing prejudices (Allport 1954; Said 1978) and, in some cases, engaging in epistemic bias (Elmessiri 2013; Said 1997). My exchanges with Australian Muslim community representatives prompted deeper reflections on questions around research design and the specific interview questions that had caused such alarm. These reflections led me to consider whether there is a need to critically appraise dominant research methodologies, as well as broader related ontological questions, in relation to research on minority groups that already suffer entrenched prejudice, institutional discrimination and socio-cultural oppression (Allport 1954; Aslan 2009; Hassan and Martin 2015). More deeply, I wanted to question the assumption that well intentioned research is inherently 'innocent' and that, consequently, as researchers, we are not implicated, nor are we responsible for, the production and reproduction of negative framings and reification of categorisations (Brubaker 2012) that in principle at least we ought to deconstruct and disrupt.

Therefore, this article asks a series of inter-related questions. Are current methodological approaches and conceptual framings in need of renewed critique? Are categorisations inherently problematic and unavoidably reductionist? Should we do away with 'othered' categories of analysis altogether? What are the implications of this for the insider/outsider researcher debate? Furthermore, are the contestations these questions imply more acute when it is white researchers studying minoritized 'people of colour', as is argued forcefully in the burgeoning literature on decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2012; Wilson 2016)? Or are these challenges inherent to the epistemological process itself, which reflects, in addition to contemporary politicized agendas, deep ethno-centric assumptions about knowledge-production processes that often reproduce the scholarly traditions of colonial legacies and imperialist tendencies in the context of oppressed groups (S. Schmidt 2014; Said 1978)?

2. Setting the Scene: Research on Islam and Muslims in the West

Over the past 20 years, a surge in the study of religious minorities has mirrored and coincided with a political focus and media emphasis on all things related to Islam and Muslims (Buskens and van Sandwijk 2016; Klausen 2005). The genesis of this swell was earlier, perhaps, with the political events of the late 1970s, when the war in Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution started to

intensify the international public gaze on Islam and Muslim countries (Said 1997; G. Schmidt 2011). This intensification reached exponential levels following the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent global war on terror and the more recent conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa region in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings (Mansouri 2020). No doubt these political events with their almost exclusive emphasis on violence, terrorism and anti-democracy tendencies have contributed to growing research and media agendas where framing and reporting have become almost inherently problematic and negative. Indeed, many studies have examined the sharp increase in newspaper articles and editorials centring on Islam and Muslims, and the mostly negative framing given to conflicts, risks, instabilities and terrorism (Bowen 2014; Ogan et al. 2014). This portrayal of global Islamic politics, Islam and Muslims, was also accompanied by an enormous rise in sociological research on Islam practices and Muslim migrants in Western cities (Baker et al. 2012; Silvestri 2005; Roy 2004; Werbner 2002).

In reflecting on the problems inherent in understanding and researching 'othered' groups that are 'different' from 'us', Stuart Hall asked 'How do we represent people and places which are significantly different from us? Why is "difference" so compelling a theme, so contested an area of representation? What is the secret fascination of "otherness," and why is popular representation so frequently drawn to it?' (Hall 1997, p. 25). His explanation for this fascination with 'difference' linked constructed notions of 'identity' with notions of the 'Other'; that is, with those deemed outsiders, who are not understood to share cultural traits and historical narratives with a dominant society.

In relation to Muslims in Western cities, there is no doubt that much of the contemporary public discourse, and to a large degree, scholarly attention, are driven by an underlying assumption, mostly generated through negatively constructed and differentiated identities. Socially constructed collective identities understand Muslim peoples' values, religious doctrines, political attachments and cultural practices to be incompatible with Western ways (Akbarzadeh 2016; Mansouri et al. 2015; Raihanah et al. 2013; Mansouri and Marotta 2012; Mandaville 2001). This increasingly problematized framing of Islam and Muslim citizens in the West, including in Australia, is largely responsible for rising levels of Islamophobia (Allen 2010; Aslan 2009) and negative attitudes towards Muslim citizens in comparison to other ethnic and religious migrant groups (Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Markus 2017). In discussing Muslims living in the West, one has to keep in mind that these are not homogenous communities marked by complex diversity around language, ethnicity, religious traditions, or jurisprudence schools among other variables. Indeed, other than the obvious groups of Sunnis and Shiites, Muslims exhibit all the ingredients of a super-diverse global community that is united by the core pillars of their monotheistic faith. Whilst of critical importance, these complexities associated with internal heterogeneity are beyond the scope of this article.

Furthermore, and although the negative media and political emphasis on Islam and Muslims that is shaping public opinions and sustaining anti-Muslim attitudes is problematic, the focus of this article is solely on the scholarly attention on Islam and Muslims in the West. Such academic attention, this article argues, has been growing in recent decades in ways that go beyond the usual interest in migrants and other minoritized communities. Illustrative of this trend is the significant increase in articles on Islam and Muslims in the West in leading international academic journals. As Brubaker (2012) reported in his analysis of religion-focused publications in leading journals, just 5% of the articles published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies (ERS)* between 1978 and 1996 related to religion in general. This proportion more than doubled in the following decade and by 2010–2012, 14% of the journal's articles centred on religion, with a majority of these (almost three quarters) being focused on Islam.

This growth in research and publication on religion continues unabated with a disproportional emphasis on Islam and Muslims, mostly within problematized framings. In a recent survey exploring the past seven years of the *ERS* journal's articles (2013—present), 180 of 909 articles (20%) focused on various aspects of religion and religiosity (Mansouri 2019). Of those 180 articles, 60% focused on Islam and Muslims, and of those, 75% centred more specifically on Muslims in Europe. To put this into some perspective, this journal is not focused on the study of religion and indeed states on its website that it 'aims to be the leading journal for the analysis of the role of race, racism, ethnicity, migration

and forms of ethno-nationalism'. Religion is certainly an important dimension of these issues, but not the main factor given the number of intersecting variables at play ranging from age and gender to socio-economic status and cultural heritage. It should be added here that the analysis of the *ERS* journal could well apply to any number of other similar journals within humanities and social sciences and that its inclusion is only motivated by the fact that it was the focus of Brubaker's seminal work on categorisation and analytical framings.

There are, of course, times when scholarly attention to Islam and Muslim communities in the West is not only intellectually justified, but also important to consider the ways in which Muslim migrants coalesce around their religious or cultural identities. This often happens as part of the gradual integration and adaptation process or in the face of external threats, most notably exclusion and discrimination. That is why, when Muslims living in the West perceive these identities to be under attack from media and government policies, they often turn to intra-community bonding and networking practices that prioritize their collective 'Muslim' identity. Such practices often take place whilst overlooking intra-community differences in favour of, or drawing attention to, 'common knowledge, values, practice, and/or shared life experiences relating to denigrated or discordant social identities' (Tinker and Smart 2012, p. 643). This way of mobilizing a collective Muslim identity in the face of social exclusion and political marginalization, although understandable from an intra-community solidarity perspective, nevertheless raises important questions about the wider oppressive discourses and practices that produce these framings, including within research agendas where Islam and Muslims are often engaged with as the 'problematic other'. However, and as this article argues, there ought to remain a distinct differentiation between collective group identity claims in the face of oppression on the one hand, and reductionist external constructions that are attached to hegemonic agendas on the other. Such negative framings are often articulated within media-related, policy-specific or epistemological contexts.

The escalating focus on Islam and Muslim communities in the West and the resulting research agendas, which are often state-funded, has led to non-Muslim researchers having 'great sway over the "Muslim narratives" in public policy and the broader media coverage' (Islamic Council of Victoria 2017, p. 3). In Australia, the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) argues that this increase in Muslim- and Islam-centric research has been 'driven by methodologies used extensively with security, counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism, violent extremism and social cohesion' (2017, p. 1). Subsequently, this has had a significant effect on 'the self-perception and health and well-being of Muslim communities' and led to an 'unfair burden' of 'over-consultation' on Muslim communities (2017, pp. 3–5).

As the above areas of research focus identified by the ICV demonstrate, this upsurge in research is not divorced from, but rather is enmeshed in, deeper socio-political and historical contexts. Research does not take place in isolation and, indeed, often reflects historical, political and social processes (S. Schmidt 2014). Undoubtedly, the contemporary study of Muslims in the West remains interwoven with the legacy of Orientalism (Said 1978). A legacy that Secularization Theory, for example, has further sharpened through its framing of an oppositional relationship between Islam and by extension, Muslim migrants on one hand and 'secular' Western societies on the other (Casanova 1994, 2006; Taylor 2007; Asad 1993, 2004).

It is Edward Said's (1978) seminal book *Orientalism* that stressed how long standing prejudices intertwine with colonialist agendas to entrench oppression, subjugation and dispossession. Said asserted that, ' . . . the discourse of the West established an image of the Orient as backward, barbaric, and inherently inferior. Middle Easterners thus became caught in the process of othering without the agency of defining their own identity' (cited in S. Schmidt 2014, p. 21). Colonialist projects were enabled, among other things, by research agendas. Said argued, the Western scientific project of 'knowing' the 'other' (be that Indigenous, colonized or Eastern peoples) is perpetuated through 'institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial

styles' ([Said 1978](), p. 2). It is this systematic instrumentalization of knowledge that has created and entrenched unequal power relations. As Linda Tuhiwai [Smith]() ([2012](), p. 1) writes:

> . . . the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity.

Much critical theorizing of colonization seeks to resist, disrupt and re-construct 'knowledge' creation under its reflexive, decolonizing auspices. In doing so, both Said and Smith's work draws upon Foucault's power–knowledge nexus, where the latter is instrumentalized to enact, sustain and indeed justify the former. As Smith writes, ' . . . research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions' ([Smith 2012]()). Such epistemological understandings and methodological practices determine overall research design and objectives, and ultimately, govern the scope of scientific knowledge claims. Thus, there needs to be more explicit and critical examinations by researchers as to how knowledge construction is understood and approached and how such construction is invariably context-specific and socially situated ([Darlaston-Jones 2007]()).

3. The Epistemological and Methodological Challenge for Islam-Related Research Agendas

When conducting research where the subject participants are members of minoritized groups, especially those belonging to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, researchers need to be cognizant of their positionality vis-à-vis the 'researched', in particular, how such positionality impacts and shapes the conceptual framings and overall research orientation ([Bourke 2014]()). Scholars working within contemporary Islam- and Muslim-related research are faced with these ethical, epistemological and methodological challenges, which they must contend with in order to overcome potential racial and epistemological bias.

Firstly, there is a need to come to grips with the homogeneity/heterogeneity dualism that shapes much scholarly discussion about Muslims in the West. As [Tinker and Smart]() ([2012](), p. 644) argue:

> . . . there is unarguable diversity within the group 'Muslims': not only national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political and sectarian variation, but also cross-cutting differences relating to class, gender, age/generation, migration, sexuality, disability, etc. The dualism of homogeneity and heterogeneity is not, of course, solely a problem when conceptualizing collective Muslim identity, but nevertheless, it is prominent in scholarship on 'Muslims in the West'.

The necessity to communicate and narrate the internal diversities of those of Muslim faith reflects a wider methodological and theoretical orientation to resist essentialist, racialized framings that have emerged from anti-racism agendas. Understood in this manner, identities are inherently enmeshed, fluid, and shaped by relations of power. Thus, research epistemologies and methodologies must enable the communication of intra-community heterogeneity, in order to engage meaningfully with the multi-faceted complexity of individual lived experiences, and not seek to impose singular, linear knowledge claims upon people.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is also the need to connect researcher positionalities to pre-existing relations of power that permeate the processes of research itself ([Bourke 2014]()). Many researchers try to address these issues in their work by engaging in deep theoretical explorations of the nature of power, authenticity, social relations and the nature of knowledge itself ([Spivak 1987](); [Squires 2008]()).

An example is the recent intercultural turn in diversity and migration studies that rejects methodological nationalism, ethnocentricity and cultural prejudice (Mansouri 2017; Menski and Shah 2006) and insists on the primacy of the inter-personal, inter-cultural and transformational social engagements across difference (Zapata-Barrero 2019).

The uncritical reproduction of constructed concepts, theoretical or discursive, can reify a particular interpretive lens. In this case, the use of Muslims in the West, or Islam, as a category of analysis in research agendas, can harden homogenous and politicized understandings of those of Islamic faith who reside in Western nation-states. This, in turn, denies their heterogeneities, as well as reflecting and projecting certain power configurations inside and outside the concerned communities. In Australia, pertinent examples include Australia Day celebrations and 9/11 anniversary commemorations, both of which often reduce understandings of complex events to reductionist binaries that are communicated as 'us' versus 'them' (T. Abbas 2004; Gaita 2011). The use of such binaries in framing and interpretive lenses has been instrumental in maintaining and justifying colonial discourses and sustaining 'othering' processes (Smith 2012; Imtoual 2009). In the case of research on Islam and Muslims in the West, this polarizing often occurs along ethno-religious lines, what Huntington infamously coined a 'clash of civilizations', through which Islam, and its adherents and teachings, are rendered incompatible with convivial co-existence and mutual acceptance (Mansouri et al. 2015; Vertigans 2010; Werbner 2005; Said 1997).

Given the politicalization of these categorises, it is therefore crucial that we reflect on the related ethical and epistemological challenges for research agendas focused on Islam and Muslims in Western contexts (Brubaker 2012; Funk and Said 2004; Said 1994). The extensive research being conducted on Muslims in the West 'has extended scientific knowledge on the topic, but at the same time it has created such a diversity of interpretations that this could itself be a new subject of research' (Bectovic 2011, p. 1120). Furthermore, this rapidly growing field of research also includes new agendas and in some cases, conceptual framings, that are inherently antagonistic to Islam and Muslims. For example, government-funded research has largely centred on official approaches to countering violent extremism, muscular social cohesion measures, and harsh migration and asylum seeker deterrence practises. Furthermore, the increased saliency of law enforcement at borders, aimed almost exclusively at Muslim people, has created a broader social and policy agenda, which has led to a body of research that amplifies and reifies the problems of binary categorisations outlined above (Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Jakku 2018; Kymlicka 2015). Consequently, research agendas are particularly problematic because they generate broader understandings and interpretations of Islam that are then used, or appropriated, to drive further discourse, policies and practices that single out, essentialize and problematize Islam and Muslim communities. This often takes place when researchers use Islam and/or Muslims in the West as units of analysis in research frameworks in ways that can reinforce particular fixed, circulating discursive narratives. The challenge for researchers, if they want to avoid such conflation, is to steer away from cultural relativism and ethnocentrism in conceptualizing, analysing and writing about Muslim subjectivities, 'The first tends to evaluate other cultures and religions from its own, while the second assumes that cultures and religions can be understood only from within' (Bectovic 2011, p. 1122). As a result, how 'othered' cultures, religions and individuals are framed requires overcoming the excessive tendencies of both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism in current research.

For this reason, this paper argues for a more critical use of analytical categories such as 'Muslims' and 'Islam', particularly in the context of social integration in the West, to avoid methodological and theoretical reductionism. Such critical use requires an assessment of ideological, discursive and epistemological elements of research. To do this, I now consider how these three interconnected elements are understood and employed in recent research that engages with questions of race, religion and security in reproducing and reinforcing, rather than re-framing and challenging certain ideological positions, historical and contemporary epistemological approaches and discursive orientations.

Thus far, much of the research conducted on Islam and Muslims in the West has been framed in ways that risk compromising, in a Habermasian communicative sense, the opportunity for all concerned

to speak and be heard (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1990). Such a disempowering communicative process can undermine the ethical and epistemological underpinnings of social science research. Exclusionary and reductionist practices are often framed as necessary for loosely defined, and ultimately ill-conceived, notions of public good and national interest. Indeed, many research agendas and priorities, including those run through national research councils, such as the Australian Research Council, often direct research funding to areas perceived to be in the national interest, as in the above list of examples, even if this ends up targeting, scrutinizing and vilifying certain groups. Thus, we need to disentangle, critically and reflexively, intersecting factors in the knowledge construction process. This includes considering the epistemologies that researchers employ, and their related research methodologies and methods. These research frameworks must contextually construct knowledge, both spatially and temporally, in ways that centre relational dimensions and manifestations in what it is we claim to know.

In addition to political and security concerns, research on Muslims in the West has also covered diverse social issues. As Jeldtoft and Nielsen (2011) emphasize, this includes research on how Muslims in the West respond to globalisation, participate in transnational practices and are involved in civil society activities at the local level. Much recent research has focused on socio-legal questions that explore how 'Islamic law is implemented in Europe and employed by Muslims' (Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2011, p. 1114). The assumption here is two-fold: firstly, that Muslims living in the West have an underlying commitment and attachment to a set of religiously inspired laws; and secondly, that these 'foreign' laws are inherently risky and incompatible with the civilizational outlook of Western societies (Mansouri et al. 2015; Rohe 2006).

Much of this academic attention has problematically operationalized 'what it means to be Muslim', as a category of analysis. As Brubaker argues, we must ask 'Who—and what—are we talking about when we talk about "Muslims"?' (Brubaker 2012, p. 2), insisting that answering these questions must involve a careful consideration of the enmeshments of the academic category of analysis researchers use with an 'an increasingly salient—and contested—category of social, political and religious practice' (2012, p. 1). The latter category 'of self- and other-identification' is:

> ... profoundly shaped by the prevailing ways in which people are identified by others; and other-identifications may be shaped—though usually less profoundly, especially where major asymmetries of power are involved—by prevailing idioms of self-identification, especially by publicly proclaimed collective self-identifications. (Brubaker 2012, p. 2)

The escalation of Islamophobia is a pertinent example of the impact of entwined processes of categorisation, oscillating between the analytical and the socio-cultural. In discussing the post-9/11 rise in levels of Islamophobia, Vertigans identifies the ways in which 'stereotypes are utilized [...] to denigrate the outsiders based on characteristics of "group disgrace"'; to the point where these 'outsiders' are 'categorized' as the 'minority of the worst'; that is, characterized by the 'behavior of the least desirable' (2010, p. 29). In addition to this socio-political context, such categorisation is understood to have a long history—'a long-lasting trend in Western societies, increasingly manifested in recent decades' (Allievi 2005, p. 29), which has 'transformed one category into the other ... The other, the different, the foreigner, the immigrant ... [a]nd today the Muslim' (Allievi 2005, p. 3). Thus, Allievi goes on to argue, in public debates, the related 'polarization, at present, is on the Islamic one' (2005, p. 29), which further reify, racialize and (mis)represent the whole community in ways that render them not worthy of empathy, care or respect.

4. Ideological, Epistemological and Discursive Conundrums on Researching Muslims in the West

There are several important points to consider when reflecting critically on the current conceptual framings and discursive categorisations of Muslims and Islam in the West. First, there is the banal idea that the (visible) Islamic practices of Muslims in the West are at odds with contemporary socio-political understandings of civic nationalism, social cohesion, political attachments and national belonging in the West (Mansouri et al. 2015). This, in turn, fuels a public (mis)perception of a deficit in Muslim civic

engagement, where they are characterized as being unable and/or unwilling to engage in the social life of their Western local communities and broader nation-states. Furthermore, this (mis)perception helps perpetuate the view that religious affiliation and observance are somehow linked, directly or indirectly, to violent extremism. There is a view in many Western public discourses that excessive Muslim religiosity might produce adverse social and security situations (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). Implicit in this assumption is the central question of whether Muslims living in the West have the individual capacity and the collective religious leadership to be able to fully engage as active citizens without betraying their faith. This framing is underpinned by difficult ideological, epistemological and discursive questions, which those engaged in research on the lived experiences of Muslim people often fail to engage with in nuanced, contextual and in-depth approaches.

Ideologically, practices of racialized categorising by researchers reify the disempowerment of people who identify as Muslim, as it aids majoritarian ascriptions of an identity that denies agency, heterogeneity or authenticity. 'Muslim', as a category of practice in Western discourses, assigns a prescriptive identity that fails to resonate with those to whom it is applied. This reflects a major shift in how migrants of Muslim faith are identified and referred to in public. They are no longer recognised by their national or regional origin, for example, as Arabic or Moroccan, but rather they have come to be exclusively identified in very particular religious terms (Allievi 2005, p. 3). This reflects a particular homogenous imagining and construction of Islam in the West, which, as a result, paints certain beliefs and practices as being passively held by all, but which Muslims themselves may not hold or exercise.

This discursive shift in the process of recognizing migrants has had profound institutional effects, which, in turn, have enormously impacted individual Muslims and their communities. New suites of programs and intervention strategies, as well as research projects, squarely focus on Muslim peoples' civic nationalism, social cohesion and political attachments and their senses of national belonging. Much of this research is driven by a deficit hypothesis that problematizes everyday Muslim lives in ways that the lives of other religious individuals and groups are not (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). The related research agendas risk reifying, even fetishizing, and reinforcing a particular type of religious visibility, namely that of being excessively religious and not necessarily understood in positive terms.

This process is not without response from those on whom this research focuses; that is, Muslims have reacted to this relentless public discursive stigmatization. Brubaker writes that 'the experience of being stigmatized as Muslims in everyday interaction or public discourse leads some to reactively assert a Muslim identification, to revalorize what has been devalorized' (2012, p. 3). Indeed, research has shown that, within such a hostile political milieu, even those migrants who were not previously religiously oriented often start to identify more strongly as Muslims, in some cases invoking such labels as 'secular' or 'cultural' Muslims (Spielhaus 2010) to justify these self-ascribed religious identities.

The contested interplay within religious identification processes is not only taking place between self-ascribed identity notions (Muslims) and other-identification (non-Muslims), but also within Muslim communities. This has led to the emergence of intra-community tensions over leadership, representativeness, authenticity, ostracization, self-disciplining and self-repudiation (M.-S. Abbas 2019). Indeed, as part of the political rhetoric constructed within securitized agendas, 'divisions may be created within the suspect community where members correspond more closely to "problematic" Muslim identities . . . the "internal suspect body" addresses diverse ways that suspectification operates depending on how the body is read by other Muslims' (M.-S. Abbas 2019, p. 266). In other words, and reflecting the stereotypical characterization of 'suspect Muslims', in terms of visible and supposedly excessive religiosity (Mansouri et al. 2015), certain members of the Muslim community face intra-community discrimination based on specific ethnic, religious and gendered grounds.

Alongside the ideological and discursive problems within which Muslims in the West find themselves trapped, there are also ontological and epistemological conundrums for researchers to consider. Such consideration requires questioning the philosophical assumptions researchers hold, explicitly or implicitly, about what constitutes social reality; that is, the ontological foundations of their research, which, perhaps, has never been more problematic than in the present situation for Islam and

Muslims in the West. Consequently, in terms of epistemological framing, the key challenge is deciding what we accept as valid evidence of that social reality. A critical engagement of both our ontological assumptions and epistemological considerations shapes how research agendas and projects can be framed, designed, implemented and communicated.

Together, the ideological, ontological and epistemological conundrums reflect the foundational ambiguities between the discursive framing of research focused on Islam and Muslims in the West and the lived experiences of Muslim people. Researchers must engage with the resulting complexities and unpack how their own research's ontology, epistemologies, methodologies and methods reflect or challenge binaries, such as organized versus non-organized Islam/Muslims; individuals versus collectives; ethnicized versus de-ethnicized Muslim subjectivities; or religious versus non-religious identity signifiers. How one critically understands and engages with categories of analysis in research is a challenge that needs to be grappled with, especially for those engaged with Islam or Muslims in the West, given the conflict between discursive constructions and heterogeneous lived experiences. For non-Muslim researchers, Helen Wilson's (2016) notion of an 'ethics of attunement'—where one is less self-focused, and instead is engaged in challenging normatively enduring asymmetrical power relations—is an essential critical lens through which to consider a possible critical re-framing of categories of analysis and entrenched methodologies.

5. Recent Research on Muslims in the West: Some Illustrative Examples

Although a comprehensive and detailed examination of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of research on Muslims in the West is lacking, this section seeks to offer some illustrative examples of the framing problems discussed above. As there has been little systematic analysis of published research on Muslims, this section will consider some useful data presented in Ismail and Shah's (2014) study, which analysed 100 abstracts of published research articles across five journals dedicated to the study of Islam and Muslims in the West. By using Swales' (1990) introduction–method–results–discussion (IMRD) model and the Create a Research Space approach[1], Ismail and Shah's aim was to examine the rhetorical features of these articles and the genre orientations adopted across the publications. The journals selected for the analysis were the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, Islam and Science, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, Journal of Islamic Studies and the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. These journals were selected because 'they are well established in the academic community and are dedicated to the scholarly study of all aspects of Islam and the Islamic world' (Ismail and Shah 2014, p. 76).

The study found, in respect of the IMRD model, that the abstracts almost exclusively included what Swales would understand as introductory information. That is, the abstracts paid significant attention to providing 'the background, situation of prior studies, introduction of current research and description of main features of the research' (Ismail and Shah 2014, p. 76). They included less information on methods employed, and gave very little attention to the research findings, the results or the broader conceptual discussion of the articles, as illustrated in Figure 1.

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[1]　The IMRD model was designed to assist with the construction of the 'rhetorical structure of a research article' and the Create a Research Space model 'accounts for the rhetorical structure of the Introduction' of a research article (Ismail and Shah 2014, p. 76).
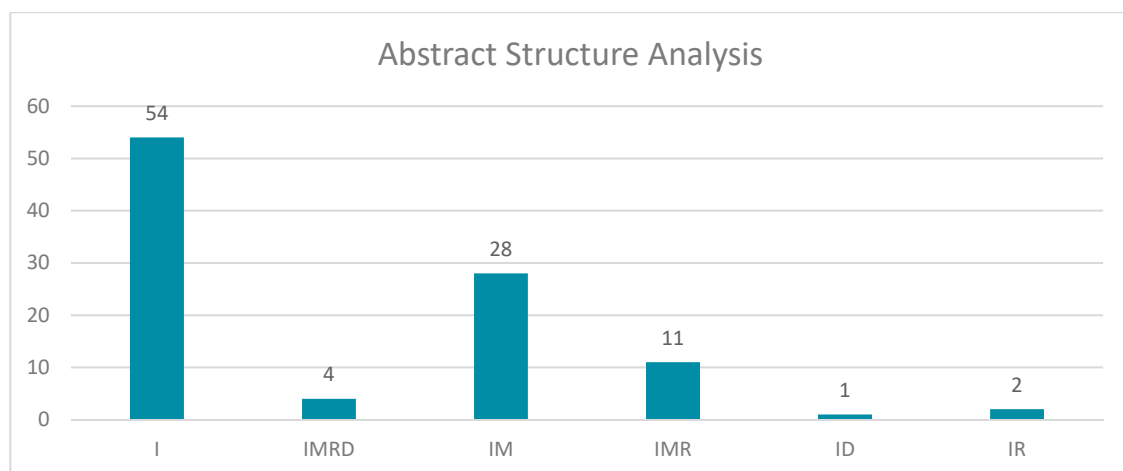
Figure 1. Structural analysis of the article abstracts. I, introduction; IMRD, introduction–method–results–discussion; IM, introduction–methods; IMR, introduction–method–results; ID, introduction–discussion; IR, introduction–results.

What does this kind of rhetorical analysis reveal about research approaches and methodological choices in the context of Muslims in the West? Ismail and Shah's analysis seems to suggest that for the purposes of appealing to reviewers and readers, researchers of Muslims/Islam tend to emphasize discursive framings when communicating their studies and constructing their papers' abstracts. This, in turn, infers a tendency not to prioritise the empirical results of the reported research or the relevant theoretical discussions. The above findings highlight a lacuna in methodological and dissemination approaches that are more explicitly presented in order to engender deeper, more nuanced understandings and reporting of both the rhetorical constructions of the reported research and the epistemological approaches underpinning this body of literature.

Research agendas on Muslims in the West have been predominantly deficit-oriented and in many cases blatantly instrumentalized to fit within certain pre-existing paradigms demanded by political expediency and public agendas. That is, research has often been constructed around ideas of Muslims in the West being problematic. In the context of Muslims in the West being routinely linked to public discourse around terrorism and national security, Lipschutz (1995, p. 9) argues that '[s]ecurity … is meaningless without an "other" to help specify the conditions of insecurity'. As Breen-Smith suggests, the 'othering' referred to by Lipschutz 'is the state-level division of society into two ideological camps, with the West characterized by the values of liberty, democracy and freedom, and the "other" camp seen as embodying antithetical values and goals and posing a threat to international security' (2014, p. 226).

This tendency to 'other' and racialize is clearly illustrated by the mobilization of 'Muslims' and 'Islam' as categories of analysis to examine a vast plethora of research questions that often fail to disentangle heterogeneous Muslim identities from Islam as a theology and as a religious basis for group culture. By scanning recently published research on Muslims, it is evident that the thematic focus reflects these problematized agendas, which range from challenges of migrant integration and acculturation to race relations and global religious movements. There is also a growing interest in transnational connections and group solidarity among Muslims, political violence and human security (with a specific focus on Muslim youth) and the enduring debates on the status of Muslim women within Islamic laws and in Muslim majority societies. Even when researchers seem to have positive orientations, they still manage to frame overall methodological choices around discursively driven problems or challenges of Muslims in the West. The following abstract by Inglehart and Norris (2009, p. 1) gives an instructive example. They write:

> To what extent do migrants carry their culture with them, and to what extent do they acquire the culture of their new home? The answer not only has important political implications; it also helps us understand the extent to which basic cultural values are enduring or malleable;

and whether cultural values are traits of individuals or are attributes of a given society. Part I considers theories about the impact of growing social diversity in Western nations. We classify two categories of society: ORIGINS (defined as Islamic Countries of Origin for Muslim migrants, including twenty nations with plurality Muslim populations) and DESTINATIONS (defined as Western Countries of Destination for Muslim migrants, including twenty-two OECD member states with Protestant or Roman Catholic majority populations). Using this framework, we demonstrate that on average, the basic social values of Muslim migrants fall roughly mid-way between those prevailing in their country of origin and their country of destination. We conclude that Muslim migrants do not move to Western countries with rigidly fixed attitudes; instead, they gradually absorb much of the host culture, as assimilation theories suggest.

Specifically, Inglehart and Norris' introductory sentence seems to be underscored by an all too common deficit-oriented premise in migration studies, particularly in relation to some groups. In this example, there appears to be a working assumption that Muslim migrants' culture will be at odds with the hosts' and, as a result, might prove problematic in the desired objective of integration and adaptation. The abstract goes on to question the much invoked assumption that Muslim migrants have 'rigidly fixed attitudes'. However, and somewhat paradoxically, whilst the project's findings dispel such problematizing, the research design itself mimics, and thus, amplifies, a binary construction of the relationship between homogenous 'Muslim' and homogenous 'Western' cultures. This study, as is the case with much social science research on Muslim migrants in the West, seems to be underpinned by an assumption that twenty 'Islamic Countries of Origin' share the same, fixed 'Muslim' culture. This premise is, of course, at odds with the heterogeneity of the cultural practices, Muslim or otherwise, of those diverse countries of origins. Thus, the research method in such studies end up reifying a homogenous understanding of who a 'Muslim' migrant is in ways that obfuscate the internal heterogeneity of these migrants' religious practices and cultures, and as a result, reinforces circulating, essentialist socio-political discourses. Thus, while the reported findings do challenge some discursive framings in relation to cultural adaptation and social integration, they nonetheless leave intact, and indeed might even reify, others that are premised on a predominantly homogenous, fixed and uncritical Islamic culture.

Another more recent study published in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (Asfari and Askar 2020) examines Muslim migrant integration in American society in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing global war on terrorism. Whilst the reported research seems to be focused on the socio-cultural integration and adaptation of Muslim migrants within a political context, this nevertheless problematizes the religious dimensions of their identities. The full abstract states that:

Immediately following the attacks of 9/11 in New York, mainstream media outlets echoed the notion of Muslims as strangers who are unable to assimilate into American culture. The purported difficulty in the assimilation of Muslims in America was linked with their religious affiliation, an indelible marker of their ideology, and one that supersedes any national identity. Given the paucity of research on the assimilation of Muslims in America, this paper sought to explore if-and-how this group is assimilating into American culture. Utilizing a mixed-method design, we conducted focus groups, followed by a multi-state survey. Using segmented assimilation theory, we found evidence that Muslims with higher educational attainment and household incomes are well-assimilated. We also found that respondents who identify themselves strongly as Muslim are less likely to assimilate, preferring instead to maintain close in-group ties. We discuss the implications of these findings in greater detail.

In addition to similar framing tendencies identified in the previous Inglehart and Norris's example, this study seems premised on two fundamental assumptions. Firstly, that assimilation is a desired outcome in the migrant settlement process, even though such framing is inherently problematic as

it reflects a majoritarian view of migrant integration. Such a view sees this process very much as a one-way, unidirectional process with migrants gradually shedding their heritage culture and in the process adopting the majority's mainstream cultural norms. Secondly, the findings reflect an even more problematic assumption that Islamic religiosity is associated with social fragmentation and in-group bonding, rather than externally oriented bridging social capital. However, much in-depth, sociological research has challenged such assumptions and shown that such oppositional, binary assumptions do not reflect the everyday reality of individual Muslim lives which are internally diverse, unique and less prone to simplistic generalization (Mansouri et al. 2017).

More generally, these examples and other similar research reflect much recent scholarship dealing with 'the Muslim question' that are becoming synonymous with Muslims in the West. Even when the overall aim is to understand settlement processes in cultural terms, the actual assumptions around the nature of heritage culture, religious beliefs and related value systems that non-Muslim researchers carry with them tend to be predominately deficit-oriented. As a result, consequent analyses of cultural, social, religious and even political forms of engagement, are often undertaken in ways that at least in some cases seem to project fixity, rigidity and closeness onto their 'Muslim' interlocutors. It is this kind of framing that is causing the members of various Muslim communities in the West to display a high level of cynicism towards researchers and research institutions. This might help explain the growing resistance to participate in research agendas that Muslims in the West perceive to reinforce and project certain racialized views about their culture and religion and that, as a result, fail to challenge, let alone change, their oppressed, subjugated positions in society. However, there are numerous examples of research that not only strives to avoid essentialist, homogenizing framings but is explicitly oriented towards disrupting such methodological and discursive approaches. A good case in point is the growing body of work around the everyday lived experience of individual migrants, including Muslims, where the emphasis is on the vibrant heterogeneity of Muslim's lives and their normalcy. The following abstract provides such an example:

> In current debates, Muslims are often perceived as a homogeneous group of devout persons who one and all have close relations with mosque associations and regularly, for purely religious reasons, turn to such associations. However, such notions clash with the reality. This paper contrasts such generalizing ascriptions with a differentiated image close to actual life. On the basis of a comprehensive mixed-methods study, the spectrum and differentiation of the ties of Muslims to constituted Islam, over and beyond ethnic boundaries, are described. The analysis focuses on everyday experiences, views and activities; it also examines the process-driven character and virtualization through the Internet of religious life. The findings of the present study point up the changes religious authorities are experiencing, and just how ambivalent and diverse the relations of Muslims to religious organizational structures are or can be. (Kolb 2020, p. 1)

Nonetheless, in general terms, and whilst it is almost unavoidable that the categories of analysis employed in research will overlap with discursive categories of practice, there is an urgent need to adopt more critical, reflexive framings that prioritize nuanced analyses rather than reproduce reified representations. Research on Islam and Muslims in the West will not disappear any time soon; rather, it will continue to increase in volume and scope. However, it is crucial that researchers outline and adhere to the strictest epistemological and ethical standards in order to generate a worthwhile scholarship that does not become part of the hegemonic structures within which it is often produced. The analysis above of these two abstracts could be applied to hundreds, indeed thousands, other abstracts, but it should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of research that aims to test particular public perceptions of or attitudes towards the Muslim community or any other minoritized group. This remains a plausible, accepted and indeed desired methodological choice that is driven by discursive, theoretical and other epistemological considerations. What is being discussed here is that such design, in most cases unwittingly, does play a role in reifying negative perceptions of the 'target'

community. This is clearly the case at least from the perspective of those affected most directly by this research, Muslim individuals and their communities.

6. Conclusions: Challenges and Opportunities in Making Steps Forward

A de-ethnicized approach to individual religious identity that privileges reified, reductionist framings of minorities is both pervasive and pernicious, particularly in the context of hyper-securitised socio-political agendas (Mansouri et al. 2015; Gaita 2011). This article does not argue for less emphasis on studying minorities nor on a blind avoidance of testing attitudinal hypotheses, including Muslims in the West. It certainly does not suggest doing away altogether with categories of analysis in the context of minorities in general and Muslims in the West in particular. Rather, it seeks to clarify the requisite epistemological conditions needed for studying complex phenomena in ethical, nuanced, and respectful ways that do not end up reinforcing existing modes of oppression and exclusion (Jensen 2011). Indeed, much of the current research continues to be framed through a deficit-oriented lens that fails to 'empower socially oppressed groups, foster "oppositional consciousness" and above all, challenge the existing forms of research that, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate oppression' (Imtoual 2009, p. 169).

In order to address some of the challenges raised in this article, humanities and social science research needs to rethink the assumptions, foundations and implications of much of its conventional approaches to studying ethnic and religious identities in post-migration contexts. Historically,

> . . . social sciences research on Muslims and Islam has tended to be focused on Muslims as ethnic minority groups linked into the broader fields of race relations and migration research. Since the 1980s researchers in the fields of race relations and migration have increasingly mobilized 'Muslims' and 'Islam' as a common denominator. (Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2011, p. 1113)

It is this interchangeable deployment of categories across race, ethnicity, culture, religion and other identity markers that has led to the current confused state of affairs in the emerging scholarship on Muslims and Islam in the West. However, there is hope from within humanities and social sciences, as demonstrated by relational sociology and new perspectives that pay more attention to intersectionality, everyday lived experiences, and researcher positionality in the study of Islam and Muslims in the West. Since the causes of racialized, essentialist depictions have largely been linked to global, political events as well as deeper historical engagements, any attempt to account for, let alone disrupt and replace some of the current framings need to be attentive to these external ideological currents, as they often overshadow funding priorities and by extension research agendas. It is this macro-level awareness of this wider politico-historical process that can guard against instrumentalized approaches to research on Islam and Muslims in the West. Perhaps the inadequacy of many critical approaches to the study of Islam and Muslims in the West can be linked to a lack of appreciation of these historical and political processes with all the power, hegemony and oppression that they can invoke vis-à-vis the 'other'.

Furthermore, we need to focus on understanding agency and religious individualization amongst Muslims in ways that account for the non-linearity of the ongoing contestations and negotiations of what it means to be Muslim in supposedly secular polities and where negotiations of the sacred are an everyday meaning-making exercise that can span the tradition/modernity continuum. This understanding of the individualized, agentic dimension of Muslim identity is of critical importance because it challenges the accepted premise of the need to either 'rescue the victim' or to govern the 'suspect'. This approach to framing has underscored much of the research on Muslims in the West, as has been the case in recent years in relation to efforts to profile, subdue, even de-radicalize the 'Muslim terrorist' (M.-S. Abbas 2019; Breen-Smyth 2014).

Finally, mere compliance with procedural research ethics standards and processes within research institutions does not absolve researchers of their obligation to pursue methodologies and agendas that

do not harm the 'researched' individuals and groups. Researchers must grasp the significant tropes associated with studying Muslims in the West and reflect critically on the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of research agendas that often reflect societal agenda-setting and entrenched stigmatizations. With a view to adopting more explicitly de-colonial and de-orientalising lenses, research with Muslims, not on Muslims, needs to be thought of in terms of genuine co-design and co-ownership in agendas and practices. Research needs to ensure broad and inclusive community input into dissemination and communication strategies, with reciprocal research capacity-building being at the ethical epicentre of all such research endeavours. Such approaches will avoid exacerbating the widening ethnic knowledge gap and the prevailing ethnocentric epistemic bias (Elmessiri 2013). Research production must become diversified to include the people whose lived experiences are being studied to bring multiple perspectives to questions of race, class, gender, sexuality and able-ism (Bilge 2010). Knowledge production in general must not only be led by those that researchers seek to research, but must also involve and be led by researchers from those very groups that are supposed to be the subject of examination, be they indigenous, colonized people or minoritized migrant groups. This broadening of research agendas, both in terms of ownership and framing, can represent more authentically the perspectives of those who live and have lived on the margins of social and racial marginalisation (Bourke 2014; Smith 2012). Nonetheless, we must be careful that while we pursue these important critical, inclusive, and empowering epistemological and methodological re-framings, we do not fall into the very exclusionary trap that we want to overcome—that is, to pursue separate research agendas based on in-group membership along religious and ethnic lines.

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