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Identification and disidentification in reported schooling experiences of adolescent Muslims in England

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Abstract

Acts of terrorism, moral panics, and negative stereotypes contribute to racialised and islamophobic ascriptions of Muslimness in Western contexts. In educational institutions such representations occur in the curriculum, in conflict between peers, and in prejudiced and discriminatory behaviour of teachers. For adolescents identified, or self-identifying as Muslims in schools, these challenges have been interpreted as cues that prompt identification processes, such as identity declaration, internal seeking, and religification. This paper contributes to this theoretical framework by suggesting that the concept of disidentification may provide further insights into the multi-faceted aspects of Muslimness as a minoritised identity and individuals' negotiation of them. Disidentification includes disassociation with Islam, and shifts in self-positioning in regard to representations of Islam

and minoritised conferrals related to it. Using rich interview data generated with adolescents in England, we argue that different ways of self-understanding and self-representing minority identity contribute to the contestation of Muslimness in the form of both identifying and disidentifying behaviours and discourses.

Key words: Muslim; Islam; adolescents; schooling; identity; religification; disidentification

It [school] stunts your awareness of your own religion. When you're at home it's quite a religious place but when you get to school it just goes out of the window – that's [religion's] not part of your life anymore... you become confused.

Jamal, male, 16, Westville Community Centre B, group interview

Jamal's perspective resonates with the conclusions of several studies about the experiences of Muslim students in North American and European schools undertaken in the last twenty years (e.g. Archer, 2003; Hassan, 2010; Zine 2000, 2001). As Jamal's example suggests, Muslim adolescents report challenges during schooling, including a clash between secular and religious norms at school and at home respectively. Negative identity conferrals and other cues in schools have been conceptualised as factors that can push adolescent Muslims towards increased religious self-understanding (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011; Anon, 2015; Peek, 2005). The present article develops and challenges these explanatory frameworks by using the concept of disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) to explore the ways adolescents may 'labour within' conferred minority identities, using, reworking and partially rejecting established forms of representation.

In the interviews undertaken for this small-scale exploratory study, Jamal and other participants' minority identities were self-understood and communicated ironically as well as sincerely – and in racial, ethnic, national, and political terms, as well as religious.

Through further examples drawn from interviews with adolescent Muslims in England undertaken in 2011, we argue that no one minority identity, such as ‘religious’ is solely appropriate to account for the subtle agency of Muslim adolescents’ self-understanding and self-representation. We unpack the complexities, described by Jamal as ‘confused’, which lie in the fluidity and multiplicity of identifications, especially those that are ambiguous and undecided. We locate religiosity as one axis of intersecting discriminations and by so doing expose phenomena that previous conceptual frameworks have not rendered fully or appropriately.

Religification and the schooling experiences of Muslims in Western contexts

Religification can be understood as a phenomenon acting upon the identities conferred on young Muslims, the processes of identification taking place among them, and changes in the way researchers identify, approach, or focus upon, religion among those they identify as ‘Muslim’. In the years after 9/11, the ascription of more religious identities to Muslim youth have exacerbated prejudice because religiosity is increasingly perceived to relate to violent extremism (Brubaker, 2013; Weller et al., 2001; Zine, 2001). During the same period, and for the same geo-political reasons, Muslims in Western diasporas have come under the renewed attention of researchers and educators (Anon, 2012), who have developed conceptual frameworks to understand changes in self-understanding. These have largely focused on religion as a distinct and essentialised identity (e.g. Armet, 2009; Visser-Vogel et. al., 2012). Researchers have used religious categorisation to define participant samples. For example, Maykel Verkuyten and Aslan Yildiz’s (2010) ‘Religious identity consolidation and mobilization among Turkish Dutch Muslims’ shows how measures of religious identity in the psychological-developmental paradigm have been constructed in

order to measure political activity in relation to religion. The conflictual and military connotations of the use of 'mobilization' perhaps also reflect the tacit political assumptions of some researchers. Yet on the other hand, studies conducted by researchers consciously sympathetic to the experiences of Muslim minorities, apply concepts of 'Islamophobia', which also arguably invoke an immutable identity binary of 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' (e.g. Hassan, 2010).

Studies conducted internationally 'post- 9/11' have highlighted the stigmatisation of Muslim youth, and the role of stigmatisation and negative conferrals on identification processes (e.g. Mirza et al., 2007; Peek, 2005). Small-scale studies of secondary school teachers' attitudes corroborate the existence of discrimination, suggesting teachers may be prejudiced against Muslims, or report feeling challenged when teaching Muslims (Miller and McKenna, 2011; Niyozov, 2010). In addition to teacher prejudice, scholars have suggested the curriculum and very structure of schools in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom present considerable challenges for Muslim students (Hassan 2010; Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008; Ipgrave, 2010; Miller & McKenna, 2011; Zine 2000, 2001). The lack of provision of prayer spaces, limited leave of absence for Islamic festivals and fasting are of concern to Muslim students, parents and communities (Coles, 2008; McIntyre et al., 1993; Muslim Council of Great Britain, 2007; Weller et al., 2001; Østberg, 2001).

Scholars concur secular diaspora prompt religifying choices among adolescent Muslims. Jacobson (1997), following Barth's (1969) notion of ethnic boundary maintenance, considers second-generation English Muslim adolescents' identification with Islam as a way of perpetuating an ethnic boundary between immigrant groups and wider society. She suggests that adolescents use religious identities rather than national or ethnic criteria to differentiate between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' because of Islam's clearer but

more universal boundaries – a relatively new ‘binary’ of difference also observed by Archer (2003, p. 34). Zine (2000) applies a similar concept to suggest that Muslim high school students in Canada use Muslim identity as a boundary to form resistance to school authorities and teachers in order to compensate for their marginalization and stigmatisation. (Similar arguments have been used about the use of the hijab, e.g. Bartkowski & Ghazal Read (2000)).

Chaudhury and Miller (2008) and Peek (2005) examine and identify comparable religious identification processes. When confronted with mainstream American culture in schools and elsewhere, some Muslims become ‘internal’ seekers and search for answers about life within the tradition of Islam (Chaudhury and Miller 2008). Peek (2005) argues that religiosity increases through stages of identity development, the third stage, ‘declared identity’ being a particularly strong identity necessitated by the aftermath of 9/11 when adolescent Muslims reported the need to pre-empt or address harmful stereotyping and discrimination by stating what their religion was, and what they believed (Peek, 2005, p. 233). Anon (2015) developed and applied aspects of these theories and argues that when students are ascribed with religious identities in secondary schools, they have a range of ‘choices’ in self-representation and self-definition available (Chen, 2010). Christians, Jews and Muslims can declare their religious affiliations in the manner Peek suggests, seek further information and understanding to reconcile critiques and challenges (Chaudhury and Miller, 2008), or ‘mask’ their religion publicly (Faircloth, 2012).

Muslims’ negotiations between secular schools and religious homes have been interpreted as a dual discourse competence (e.g. Baumann, 1996; Østberg 2000). However, we consider this to be a simplification. For example, Baumann describes how Southall youths identify with solid markers of discourse (family, community, background, language

and culture) and classifies them at group level, ignoring the complexity of their identity negotiations and positionalities that we want to call to attention to in this article.

The present article suggests that in addition to masking, declaration and internal seeking, adolescent Muslims position, articulate and represent themselves in more nuanced ways, including disassociation and disidentification. By addressing clusters of intersecting identifications both in self-presentation and in external classifications (i.e. by teachers) we demonstrate how Muslim identities can be used discriminatorily but also as strategies of resistance to completely aligning, static, identifications. This conceptual framework accounts for the complexity of Muslimness as a contested and minoritised category with ethnic, racial, national and political features as well as religious ones. For example, when compared with Christianity, conferral of Muslim identities differ dramatically because while practising Christian adolescents are a minority, because of their religiosity and practice (and may also suffer some prejudice), they have historic ties with established authority structures in English society and are usually ascribed majority racial identities (Anon, 2016a).

The concept of disidentification

The lack of sufficiently complex conceptual paradigms to appropriate Muslim identity in diasporas has been considered problematic in the study of religion (Brubaker, 2013). This article shows how the concept of disidentification can give a richer vocabulary to explain Muslim adolescents' self-understanding and representation. Disidentification offers a flexible positioning theory with which to chart creative strategies such as the use of irony and disassociation, and also to consider the impact of the researcher's conferrals on participants' interview performances (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). We draw on the

work of queer and performance theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz (1999), who argues disidentification is at the contact point between constructivist and essentialist identity theories and practices. Disidentification occurs when essentialised and closed identity configurations are conferred (in this case, ‘Muslim’) and met and changed by creative performances of the self. In the public sphere of Western Europe today, religious identities in general and Muslim identities in particular are often conferred with negative or generalising assumptions (e.g. of scientific ignorance or monotheistic exclusionism). We argue this prompts some of those identified as Muslim to both align and distance their religious identity, ‘standing under a sign to which one does not belong’ (Butler, 1993, p.219) assuming the identity but simultaneously working against it. Disidentification entails reinhabiting received identity positions with a difference, working *within* the identity matrices of the majoritarian public (secular, Christian) sphere, creating spaces to act, ‘composing and recomposing, weighing and ordering, deleting, supplementing and deforming’ the grid (Muñoz 1999, p. 196).

Disidentification does not discard more conventional concepts of identification, such as those theorised as religification, but takes into account the flexibility of social actors’ performances of self-understanding and self-representation in response to constructed categories. Rather than tracing performances of multiple and distinct religious and other identities, disidentification interprets actors as in-between solid identity poles, unable to wholly reject or endorse the identity of a dominant ideology. Compared to discourse centred approaches (i.e. dual discourse competence), disidentification emphasises the temporality and fluidity of self-presentation as an everyday social drama and struggle. In our application of disidentification we draw on Harré’s (1993) metaphor of a musical key change. That is while for the researcher, social actors are performing positioned roles

(e.g. Key C), for the actors themselves, such roles are reality (Key B b). The structure and relationship between values is the same, but the mode of experience is different. In this way we argue disidentification is both a performative strategy apparent in interviews and daily life, and a hermeneutic for interpretation.

Disidentifications are dramatic performances and sites of creative production but they also offer the opportunity for critical interpretation. Louis Althusser gives an example of how everyday performances ‘interpellate’ into an identity. When a policeman calls after someone on the street ‘Hey citizen’, and they turn around, they accept the identity ascribed to them and confirm the authority of the caller (Althusser 1971, p. 118). However, minority subjects in particular are continuously hailed by several and intersecting identities – of racism, sexism, classism or religification (Crenshaw, 1989). But in order to fight back, to gain agency and representation, they still must subscribe to one ideologically conferred identity. Though they cannot fully consummate ideological identification, they echo its material restrictions, show its lack of fixity in reality, misuse or rework it and smuggle in contradictory aspects (for instance showing or hiding tattooed Quran verses, blending religious, hip-hop and sports culture). In the case of adolescent Muslims, religification puts greater weight upon the intersection of religious identity conferral than on other minoritising categories.

Our approach explores the performative strategies of adolescents and considers how they manoeuvre to survive discrimination and other antagonisms. We do this in three principal ways showing that: 1) adolescents may endorse and/or reject religious identifications in their self-representations and performances and these positions may shift depending on context; 2) that Muslimness as a contested category has several intersecting aspects, including nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and academic ability that cannot be

easily separated; and, 3) power relations between the researcher and researched need to be understood reflexively, including the identity ascriptions conferred during data generation and analysis.

Engaging with adolescent Muslims

Fieldwork was conducted in two cities in central England, 'Westville' and 'Southville' in 2011. These cities, organisations and participants have been given pseudonyms because of the potential ease of identifying minority community centres in each city. A series of group, pair and individual interviews were conducted at two Muslim community centres in Westville with Sunni Muslim participants (n=11), and one in Southville with Ahmadiyya participants (n=4). Research design followed the same methods used in studies undertaken with other religious/community groups (Anon 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Interviews were around an hour long and were repeated with the same participants on different occasions. The Westville sites were selected because they were community centres that catered for the majority Muslim population of their respective areas (and advertised themselves as such). One was attached to a Mosque (A), the other to a local-authority funded initiative (B). The Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House was purposively selected as an example of a minority group in the Islamic tradition, although the analysis given in this article does not focus upon relationships between Ahmadiyya adolescents and other Muslim groupings (for this, see Anon (2015)). Participants were between the ages of 12 and 18 and attended state-maintained schools in urban areas with large proportions of ethnic minority students. They were interviewed in groups according to gender at request of the community centres. One individual interview and two group interviews were conducted with four boys at Westville community centre A; three group interviews with four boys, and two group and one pair

interviews with three girls at Community centre B; and, one group, one pair and one individual interview at Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House. A mix of individual, pair and group interviews were employed because this method has been shown to be a highly effective means of accessing perceptions of religious minorities in politically sensitive contexts (Peek & Fothergill, 2009), and to generate responses with participants' reasons for consent or dissent on group consensuses (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Lewis, 1992). Participants were interviewed at least twice (with one exception) and some individually in order to mitigate for the influence of group biases (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007) .

Physical access to community centres was difficult and the interviewer (Anon) was denied access to nine community centres after visits, discussions and meetings with gate-keepers. Limited access constitutes a significant finding itself about the social climate experienced by Muslim adolescents (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). Among gate-keepers there was concern that the research could reinforce inequality by investigating participants' perspectives of an unequal education system, and suspicion the research was part of a wider counter-terrorism and surveillance initiative in collaboration with other government agencies (DCSF, 2008; Anon, 2012).

At all the research sites, from a wider pool of attendees, volunteers were recruited who expressed interest and commitment to taking part in interviews about their schooling experiences as young Muslims. Data generation began with one or more group interviews that followed the discussion of the perspectives of participants about their experiences of secondary schools. These discussions followed prompts such as, 'What is it like to be a Muslim at school?' or 'What is your experience of Religious Education, as a Muslim?' Interviews were audio recorded, except on three occasions when audio-recording was not considered appropriate. Key themes in group discussions and ambiguities informed further

questions for follow-up interviews as part of a ‘continuous’ or ‘emergent design’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Morgan, et al., 2008). It should be noted that the interview questions comprised identity conferrals that prompted identity negotiations. This may have been exacerbated by the ascription by some participants of a white, Christian or surveillance/authority identity given to the researcher. Like Althusser’s famous example, the interviewer ‘hailed’ participants as Muslim subjects. The resulting data, therefore, can be interpreted as participants’ disidentification performances in the interviews, and also reported performances of similar strategies employed in schools. There was noticeable unease among participants in discussing religion and religious identity in interviews. (This was attributed to suspicion of collusion with security organisations by one gate keeper.) In discussion, these participants could be silent when other participants articulated their concerns – raising difficulties in data generation and analyses as more vocal participants contributed more to group discussion. The analyses given in this paper focus on interviews where participants talked freely and did not seem concerned about sharing their points of view. Data were interpreted at first by identifying salient reported schooling experiences, and then by both authors applying concepts of identification and disidentification to how participants articulated them. These findings are represented in this article by selected episodes from the interviews concerning participants’ identification and disidentification with aspects of Muslimness.

Identification and disidentification in the reported schooling experiences of adolescent Muslims

The conferral of Muslim identity by the interviewer during interviews cued responses centred on issues of self-understanding and self-representation, and issues of equity in

schools. These were often told as narratives of significant events or controversies. These included reported conflict between students, reported prejudice and discrimination of teachers, and controversies surrounding perceptions of Islam outside of school that had an impact inside school. In one of the examples given we consider the impact of the 'Muslims against Crusades' poppy burning in 2010, when a political group burnt the symbol of war remembrance, the poppy, in order to protest against UK military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq (Bloxham, 2010)). While this pertains to the perspective of a participant interviewed in 2011, comparable mediated controversies and representations of Muslims and Islam are ongoing, such as those surrounding Islamic State for example. These kinds of reported narratives are similar to those in other studies of Muslims' reported experiences of secondary schools, including negative relationships with teachers, bias and prejudice (e.g. Archer, 2003; Hassan, 2010; Mirza, et al. 2007; Weller et al., 2001; Zine, 2001).

However, while some participants were vocal and critical of schools, others played down grievances and perceptions of prejudice and discrimination and wished to disidentify themselves from religion, arguing that religious practice was not important for them, and as not being particularly religious, prejudice and discrimination did not affect them. This is the most obvious sense that we use 'disidentification'. For example, in one group interview with three female participants, Khadija self-identified as a religious Muslim, but Fatima and Yasmeen did not consider themselves to be religious. While Fatima and Khadija both reported incidents of abuse motivated by religious or racial prejudice, Yasmeen, on the other hand, did not believe these were an issue for her personally. This was because she and her friends were not 'really religious people' (Yasmeen), i.e. not essentially classifiable by religion, and therefore her girls' school could be an accepting place for them.

The perceived link between irreligiosity and the decreased susceptibility to prejudice was explored in further interviews. In a subsequent pair interview, when asked what they thought of religious Muslims, Fatima and Yasmeen hesitantly described how they and their friends would call bearded religious Muslim men (and each other), 'Taliban'. In these identity conferrals, Yasmeen, Fatima and their friends disidentify with extremism and mainstream Islam by ambiguously mixing the two. However, in so doing they do not simply identify with mainstream prejudice against Islam that considers religiosity as associated with terrorism, but also identify with Muslims by using an insult with their peers as a joke that signifies group membership. The excerpt below demonstrates this double-edged aspect of disidentification. 'Taliban' can be used as hate speech (Butler, 1997), but taken at a literal level 'talib' means 'student' or 'seeker'. Playing with semantic identity values, this example shows that in order to disidentify by using hate speech ironically, first, religious knowledge and a sense of the boundaries of irony are necessary.

Interviewer: *Thinking about religion, how do you think young people perceive Islam?*

...

Fatima: *The[non-Muslim] girls I know think we are all equal, we are not different... If they have a party with drink there, they won't say 'don't come'... They will invite you still.*

Yasmeen: *But then again, outside school if you are walking down the road outside of school and you see a man with a beard, apparently he is a Taliban, everyone would think that.*

Fatima: *Yeah, it's that thing that all Muslims are terrorists*

Yasmeen: *Like if they look like a terrorist, then they are to be a terrorist, like with a beard.*

Fatima: *And those things on their head.*

Yasmeen: *But then again, I would kind of say that myself.*

Fatima: *I wouldn't say that, actually.*

Yasmeen: *Yeah, I wouldn't say it to someone, but you would think it.*

Fatima: *Yeah, you think it but you probably know it isn't true though, obviously.*

Interviewer: *And would people say that in school?*

Fatima: *Yes, but they use it as a joke kind of thing. 'Oh, alright Taliban!' But we don't think anything of it.*

Interviewer: *So this is a joke?*

Yasmeen: *Yeah.*

Fatima: *No, it's not a joke, like a bad joke, everyone gets along.*

Yasmeen: *They have other kinds of jokes, not just for Asians. They do it for everyone. If you don't know the person, you wouldn't say it.*

Interviewer: *Give me an example of when the word 'Taliban' is used.*

Yasmeen: *Like if someone has got one of them scarves on, then we would say 'Taliban.' But because you know them they wouldn't think anything of it, but if you were walking down the street and it was someone you didn't know, then you wouldn't say it.*

Interviewer: *... But do girls say it to girls in school?*

Fatima: *Yeah, the girls do say it to each other. They are like, 'Oh alright Taliban!' But they will just laugh about it, they won't think anything of it.*

Fatima, female, 14; Yasmeen, female, 15, Westville Community Centre B, pair interview

This example shows how disidentification can work as mimicry, borrowing and putting on discriminatory masks, but playing them incorrectly. The girls find pleasure in using dangerous and derogatory terms and at the same time show their power and the fear they can induce. They 'inhabit phobic images with a difference' (Muñoz, 1999, 167). Here this includes humorous-non-humorous simultaneity: the person on the street or the other girl is a Taliban and is not a Taliban in a joke that is also not a joke. This performance recreates a temporary group with an interstitial identity. Who knows this is framed as a joke is 'in'.

Disidentification also allows for the analysis of changes in positioning. In the same interview, Yasmeen parodied the interview scenario as an episode of the BBC TV show 'Weakest Link' (a quiz show where the weakest contestants are removed from the game at each successive round), joking that she wanted a script. This joke perhaps indicated her opposition to the claim that Muslimness should be associated with religiosity and negative schooling experiences when in her case it was not reported to be important. However, while in previous interviews she disassociated herself with Islam, she also described one episode that had had an impact on her sense of identity:

My mate was praying near the sports hall and this other girl a year younger, a white girl, recorded her praying because she thought that was funny – something like that is offensive.

Yasmeen, female, 15, Westville Community Centre B, pair interview,

This example shows that Yasmeen's identification with religious practices, though asserted as weaker than others, could be triggered by significant episodes. She chooses to infer and apply religious norms to a school context in order to gain agency, constructing an 'us' and an 'other'. Through partly identifying with and defending religious practice as worthy of tolerance, Yasmeen recreates a dramatic encounter. She positions spectators who side with her mate while defending the right to religious ritual practice without ridicule. Without identifying as Muslim, she defines a counter space for religious activity, which is public but also shielded from audio-visual monitoring and mediatisation.

The complexities of disidentification are also illustrated by Yasmeen and Fatima's own performances of their minoritised identities in interviews. Having disassociated themselves with religion to differing extents, Yasmeen and Fatima used 'Asian' or 'brown people' to designate minoritised identity, rather than 'Muslim'. For example, Fatima described an exchange with a local Catholic school:

We went to this Catholic school and it felt like we were the only brown people there ... And they were all white and they were all staring at us because we were all brown and then one of them shouted out, 'Oh go back you paki things!'

Fatima, female, 14, Westville Community Centre B, pair interview

The use of 'brown' here establishes a collective position that is elided by the mainstream – and in the re-telling of a scene, this grouping is answered by concurrent reification by using a slur. A similar example can be given in relation to Fatima's description of the repercussions of the Muslims against Crusades poppy burning in 2010. Fatima explained

how during the media controversy that occurred after this event, a white peer made comments on a social media website after school, clearly visible to her classmates.

OK, basically this past year there was them Muslims who burned the poppy or whatever and there was this one [white] girl who put on her status on Facebook 'Oh why are all of the pakis doing this?' and I was thinking it is not all of the pakis, it's only them. [...] And then the next day she said it again, and so I went up to her and I said 'it's not all of us, why have you been saying this stuff?' and she said, 'I didn't say all', but she clearly did say all, and every single Pakistani in the school noticed it and everybody went up to her [...]

Fatima, female, 14, Westville Community Centre B, pair interview

In this account, Fatima uses the slur 'paki' to identify the prejudice of her school peer, and to disidentify with religious extremists by using ethnic and national ties instead of religious ones to describe her and her peers. She juxtaposes 'us' and 'them' while re-appropriating hate speech, and temporally positions herself using essentialised identity categories (Spivak, 1999). Her strategy was to challenge the charge of 'all' Pakistanis – counting herself amongst 'all of us' – empathising with the protest against the war memorial by asserting that not all Pakistanis agree with the actions of the 'Muslims'. This shows a kind of disidentification related to declared identity, that religious and political views should not be attributed to ethnic identities and that in the case of this conferral, correcting this attribution vocally was an appropriate strategy.

These examples show identification and disidentification are complex and context dependent. They play with intersecting discriminatory identities and – temporally and fluidly – align themselves with them. The complexities of negotiating Muslimness are further illustrated by other participants' use of terms to describe themselves, others and their attachments. In the second city interviews were conducted, Southville, participants would also use 'Christian' interchangeably with 'white', and 'Muslim' and 'Pakistani' respectively. Likewise, reported slurs could be based on racial or colonial power relations,

such as 'paki', or on religious and political tropes, 'terrorist'/ 'Taliban'. For example, Aadil perceived racial identity to be the cause of prejudice, but then assumed racial identity to be synonymous with religious identity – the Muslim majority of his school mitigating for occasional racism.

Race is a problem rather than religion, but most of the school is Muslim anyway.

Aadil, male, 13, Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House, pair interview

A similar explanation was given by Muhab, who argued that fights occurred on racial lines, with religion as a secondary factor.

I think it's generally a racial thing, I think religion is just a subtitle of that. But umm like when these fights do happen, obviously they don't openly say it's because, oh yeah he's this race or he's that race. It's just more like they look for another reason maybe. It's like... everyone knows it's because of this [race].

Muhab, male, 17, Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House, individual interview

However, race was conferred with extremist attributes by peers. Muhab described how his peers labelled him as a terrorist. In order to disidentify himself with terrorism, however, he resorted to violence.

Muhab: *Umm, well, people didn't really say anything to me, but, like they'd make little jokes [about terrorism], and it got to a certain point where, you'd have a fight about it, and nobody would say anything. But, umm, I mean, people do say it, so... people don't say it anymore to me, but obviously you know that's what their views are. So, just 'coz they don't say... just 'coz someone doesn't say anything to you, it doesn't mean that's not what they think.*

Interviewer: *And these were white kids, were they?*

Muhab: *Yeah, yeah. Like, I was the only Asian kid there, so...*

Interviewer: *What kind of jokes would they say?*

Muhab: *Umm, just like, bomb-related jokes, suicide bomber-related jokes, and stuff like that. [...]*

I'm a very hard person to, like, piss off, so, it was like, I let it go for quite some time. And near the end of my first year there, I'm thinking, well they're saying stuff about me, I should do something about it. So that was when I had my first

fight there, and then I had, like, two or three fights after that, and it completely stopped.

Muhab, male, Year 17, Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House, individual interview

Muhab's strategy is consciously aimed to disidentify with conferred violent tropes but in so doing, paradoxically invokes a violent identity performance that confirms him as an essentialised-minoritised subject, thus perpetuating the conferred identity of an aggressive male Muslim youth (Archer, 2003). However, he also unpacks the disguised and intersecting discriminatory identifications that are typical for conflict (Midden, 2014). This example illustrates the difficulties of adolescent Muslims to move beyond stigmatised and minoritised self-representations in order to survive and gain agency. His survival strategy paid off, but his identity remained as 'other'.

Another attribute of Muslim minority status was inferior academic ability. Some participants in Westville believed some teachers and students perceived them to be lower achievers, which could also demotivate teachers from making an effort. Khadija believed being a competent Muslim in Maths made her the target of a hate attack by a 'Christian' girl. This was perceived as racially motivated, rather than a religious matter, but the perpetrator was described as Christian, and Khadija described herself as Muslim.

Khadija: *I think it was in Maths and somebody poked me with a compass and scratched my hand. [...]*

Interviewer: *So who did the jabbing?*

Khadija: *It was this girl in my class, I don't know why she did it, it was a while ago. She had the jacket and the pin and she actually scraped it across my hand and it hurt [...]*

Interviewer: *Do you believe that was racially motivated?*

Khadija: *Yeah, I think so. It was a Christian.*

Interviewer: *Do you think that was motivated by religion or race?*

Khadija: *I think it was by race coz I'm...In the class, in Maths I used to know what I was doing and I always used to help everyone else and just because I was Muslim and I knew what I was doing and that's why she did it.*

Khadija, female, 16, Westville Community Centre B, group interview

Khadija counter-intersects the categories ‘white’ and ‘Christian’. Her temporal self-identification is based on ‘othering’ (Spivak, 1985), i.e. safeguarding group identity by constructing a generalised opposite. Speaking in terms of identity, disentangling herself from race and religion is as difficult as unravelling her ‘other’s’ identity cluster.

Participants also disidentified with the religious identities conferred by teachers. Amir and Jamal believed that mistaken identity conferrals in schools ascribed religious ties that were unjustified and confusing. Jamal used the example of a discussion about the Iraq war held as part of the formal curriculum which appeared to focus on Islam.

That’s bringing race and religion into it, whereas if you are discussing like invading Iraq, you’re discussing political issues which religions and faith don’t necessarily come into it. They’re [teachers] just pinpointing our religion and faith rather than doing it as a general view.

Jamal, male, 16, Westville Community Centre B, group interview

Amir described an introductory class to Islam with the same concerns. The Religious Education teacher had used a picture of the September 11 attacks alongside that of the Qur’an. In this example, Amir is appalled that non-Westernness and religion are conflated and depicted as relevant categories of conflict, even though the stated aim of those classes was to promote peace and tolerance. On the next occasion Amir was interviewed, he reported with a wry smile that since the last interview, the image used in connection with Islam in his Religious Education lesson was not the September 11 attacks, but the London bombings of July 7 2005.

While discussions in group interviews showed that participants disidentified with religious ascriptions to their political perspectives, ability and race, self-essentialising identification along religious boundaries were also reported. For example, religious ties

could be emphasised across national and ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, fights could take place along religious boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. Amir described how a 'black' non-Muslim student had referred to a textbook picture of a Muslim woman in hijab as a 'monster' which then precipitated a brawl between a number of students divided between 'black' students and 'Asian' Muslims. Religious identifications uniting different ethnicities were also apparent when some participants reported national and ethnic conflicts. For example, when participants in Westville Community Centre B reported occasional fights between different ethnic and national groups in their schools (Somalians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Afghans), Akram believed that these kinds of conflicts should not really take place because 'they're all Muslims at the end of the day' (Akram). In so doing, he invokes the general identity marker 'religion', and, eradicating difference in ethnicity, creates a claim for unity (as observed by Jacobson (1997)). According to Akram, friendship ties were segregated into groups of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians.

Muslims stick together, Hindus stick together; they're separate, they don't interact with each other. They don't speak to each other. They just stick to whatever: Muslims, Hindus, Christians.

Akram, male, 17, Westville Community Centre A, group interview

Other participants also reported peer groupings according to religion, or perceived lack of it. Although Jamal and Amir were critical of religious ascriptions to their political beliefs, they identified religious differences between themselves and their 'white' or 'Christian' peers. They explained how becoming aware that white people were generally not Christian was an important realisation, adapting their range of counter-essentialisations as a coping strategy. Jamal explained that most white people were atheists and had no interest in religion, and this was 'shocking': 'one of the biggest misconceptions is thinking a white person is a Christian' (Jamal). In that group interview, friction over the ongoing

war in Afghanistan was reported between ‘white atheists’ and ‘Muslim’ pupils. Amir also reported arguments with secular peers over the existence of God in a Religious Education (RE) lesson which began ‘theoretically’ but ended ‘racially’.

Amir: *With us in RE, it’s us Muslims versus the atheists all the time, because it was like half and half split atheists/Muslims. And at one point we annoyed the atheists so bad because we threw all these facts at him [an atheist] and he said ‘Go waste your time in the Mosque’*

....

Interviewer: *So, this is one example of an argument with somebody that starts off theoretical?*

Amir: *It started off well, but once we started asking the questions, the pressure got to him and like and he was still answering them, but he wasn’t as confident as he thought he would be and it just started getting personal and he started saying ‘Go waste your time in the Mosque, Go waste your time there!’*

Jamal: *Where as we would see that as a racist comment the teacher would not, you see.*

Amir, male, 15; Jamal, male, 16, Westville Community Centre B, group interview

This example shows how power of interpretation and framing determine identification processes (Goffman, 1972). The complex interrelation of race and religion in self-understanding and self-representation – othering and counter-othering, ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ – is a strategic play with universal categories dependent on context. While at other times in the interviews, Amir and Jamal had criticised religious identity conferrals, here they stress boundary strengthening between them and other self-identifying Muslims in opposition to atheism which then becomes to be understood racially. They use both othering and strategic essentialisations to counter othering and essentialism ascribed to them. This reported narrative indicates that different strategies can be employed to shift identifications from racially to religiously determined loci, depending on context, intention and strategic goals.

Contestations about Muslimness were reported occurring in school among Muslim peers, indicating a range of shifting positions taken up by adolescents and reflecting those

articulated in interviews. These could be based on gendered representations of being a religious Muslim. For example, Fatima explained that Muslim girls more religious than herself could be too assertive about religion. During Ramadan she started to wear a headscarf, and as a result a group of 'Arabic girls' approached her a number of times and told her that she should wear a headscarf every day and not just during Ramadan. She found this intrusive and unwanted. In response, she adopted a middle range position, using the headscarf as a temporary spiritual technique rather than a permanent self-identification marker. After a teacher failed to take the incident seriously, she informed a school Prefect who was able to stop them.

On the other hand, self-identified religious participants reported contestation and debate with less religiously-adhering peers, or peers who behaved religiously outside of school, but less so in school. Some male participants aired concern that only a very small proportion of their peers attended Friday prayers when available at school, and most did not fast properly during Ramadan. These concerns were often connected with gender. Boys could have 'different personalities' (Yasser) in their Masjid than in school. Some were 'gangsters' (Ahmed) who engaged in drugs, smoking, chasing girls and violence. Despite this, participants reported that religious adherence was generally respected and less observant, nominal Muslims were 'proud to be Muslim' (Ahmed), suggesting the shifting boundaries of their identification. While these examples may seem to describe a dual discourse competence or the performance of multiple identities, as we have shown in previous analyses, these are better interpreted as a mapping of interstitial identities more complex than the binary Muslim (male) vs. non-Muslim (male).

Discussion and conclusion

This is a small-scale study that has explored in some detail the identity negotiations of a small number of adolescent Muslims. Exploring disidentification as self-essentialising, mimicry, appropriation and play with intersectionalities offers a promising conceptual repertoire for further research. It shows how the identity category 'religion' is used and resisted exactly like 'race', 'gender' or 'ethnicity'. While limited, these examples have shown the shifting complexities of the self-understanding and self-representation of Muslimness among adolescents. They show how in secular schools, a strong sense of religious identity can be constructed among Muslim adolescents through processes of identification and religification as argued by other researchers (e.g. Jacobson, 1997; Peek, 2005; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011). However, the same data show that the relationship between religious practice and identification, and between racial and ethnic identifications are complex (Archer, 2003; Brubaker, 2011). Muslimness' intersecting aspects, such as political positioning and beliefs about academic ability cannot be easily separated. Interviewees produce mappings of interstitial positions using their repertoires of religious knowledge. Muslims may simultaneously endorse and reject 'Muslim' or religious identifications in their self-representations – both in interviews and in their roles and positions in reported episodes at school – and these may shift according to context and over time.

Disidentificatory performances, commonly reported in the context of conflicts and controversies, could take the form of irony, self-referential jokes, fights with fluid alliances, contestations, protests, or silence. Disidentificatory practices provide a critical hermeneutic for researchers and their participants: when minority subjects partially accept stigmatising idioms, such as 'Taliban', 'brown' or 'terrorist', they re-use them with new meaning. This

turns hate-speech against the mainstream. Disidentification exposes the power play of the dominant identity code, but at the same time decodes and rewrites it. This may involve self, or strategic, essentialising: consciously agreeing to self-identify with an unchanging position in order to gain agency and manoeuvre conflict. Alternatively, adolescents may mock affiliations with religious identities, re-use racist or otherwise discriminatory symbols or language, turn them against their originators, revealing that their semantic value is not naturally given to describe reality, but relies on power and context.

These complexities raise considerable difficulties for researchers. In research about Muslims in England and other comparable contexts, power relations between the researcher and researched need to be adequately examined and reflexively accounted for, including the identities conferred during fieldwork and data analyses. How much are researchers interpellating or othering, and with what sort of intentions? Adolescent Muslims are potentially exposed and subject to different competing ideologies and discourses – some of which could be related to forms of Islam – but they are also identified and minoritised by intersecting racial, gendered, national, political and ethnic conferrals. Static or essentialised models of religious identification risk classifying all adolescent Muslims as religiously conformist, for accepting the conferral of ‘Muslim’, of which, arguably they have no choice. These conferrals, including those of researchers may be misleading and reinforce neo-colonial power relations, overlooking the unstable positionality and playfulness of adolescents’ self-understanding that are ‘not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity’ (Muñoz, 1999, p.32).

The ascription of ‘Muslim’ to research participants in this study was problematic, prompting silence in addition to the other disidentification strategies considered in this article. Working through the complexities of this conferral was not straightforward for any

of the participants. One priority for future research is to account for, and explore how distancing or disassociation of religion, as well as increased identification with religion – and what remains undecided and in between – may take place among adolescent Muslims. This may not be just considering processes occurring among non-religious ‘outliers’. Religification, although a compelling theory, may not in reality comprise a mass religious phenomenon, but be a complex of flexible processes linked to racialised representations in highly-strained contexts. This article has given some nuanced analyses of the identity negotiations of adolescent Muslims relevant to these problems. By comparison, traditional identity theories may rely on naïve assumptions about the categories ‘Muslim’ or ‘religious’. More fluid concepts of identity, such as disidentification, therefore, while challenging, offer rich explanatory potential for the study of religion in adolescence.

Acknowledgements

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