

Methodological Eclecticism: Feminist-Pragmatist Reflections on Re/centering Muslims in Research about Islam

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Abstract

For over a decade, researchers have consistently asserted that Muslims in the West are ‘research weary’ (Sangera and Thapar-Björkert 2008: 544), ‘tired of too much research about them’ (Alvi et al. 2003: p. xv) and are concerned about ‘not being given the opportunity to shape research that is about them’ (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). Research on Muslim in Britain and in the West are further complicated by social hierarchies and popular discourses that often position Muslims as the ‘different other’. Working within a feminist-pragmatist epistemological framework this chapter will bring together methodological reflections from a decade of research of Islam and Muslims in the West. It asserts the need for research paradigms that are grounded in partnership and positionality, and which maintain intellectual rigour while also being accountable to the people who are the subjects of research.

Keywords: Muslims; feminism; gender; Islam in Britain; methodology

Introduction: Research as a place for Agency?

“I’m here because as a Muslim, I just want to make sure the right values and views come across, to be part and you don’t misunderstand what we believe in.”

Black British, Muslim Female

“I’m not religious at all, but I’ve got great respect for all religions and especially with recent events I’m really appalled at the way Islam is portrayed. I don’t know much about it but I’m really interested in learning more and finding out why it’s portrayed in such a bad light.”

White British, Non-religious, Female

This article begins by foregrounding the voices of two participants in a recent research project. These two quotes above are from two young women – one Muslim and one non-religious - who participated in a student focus group discussion as part of a collaborative research project on narratives of Islam on higher education campuses in Britain (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). In the two quotes above, both participants reflect on their motivations to participate in this research. Despite their different religio-cultural backgrounds, these young women both state that they are aware that Islam is misrepresented within popular public discourses in Britain. Both students assert that their participation in the research was motivated by their individual desires to challenge stereotypes of Islam, in ways that were informed by their own positionality.

The young Muslim woman spoke about clarifying and *representing* Islam. She echoed other Muslim participants, who stated that she shouldered a strong (and often a burdensome) sense of responsibility

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to represent Islam and clarify misunderstandings about their faith. As articulated by another young Muslim student his participation in the research was partly motivated by a desire, “to assure people that we [Muslims] are good people.” In this research, a majority of participants who were non-religious or non-Muslim participants said that they were cognizant of misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims. How they dealt with this awareness varied. Some participants were satisfied with simply being aware – Islam was at the periphery of their existence and so they did not feel the need to make amends or to improve their knowledge of Islam. Others, including the non-religious female participant quoted at the top of this article, were deeply the reasons for its negative portrayal.

Through their participation in this research, both participants signalled their desire to claim *their* agency in these intellectual debates about Islam and Muslims and to challenge hegemonic representations and scrutiny of Islam (Ahmed and Hashem, 2016). Through their participation in the research and by sharing their views and experiences of Islam, both participants hoped to contribute to a much larger goal around facilitating more equitable understandings of Islam and Muslims in Britain. Their commitment to the research extended beyond participation in an interview or focus group discussion and instead within the research they became activists facilitating societal change. Thus for both participants, their participation in the research, becomes an act of witness (Fine, 2006), agency (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020) and consciousness-raising (Stanley, 1990; Morgan, 1970). While there is a burgeoning intellectual lean towards research that is co-produced or collaborative, there is only limited reflection about this in relation to research about Islam and Muslims. In this article, I reflect on how my feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance has enabled a space within research for participants to take voice, to take agency including in shaping the structure of the research and in giving them a sense of the ownership of the research.

Key to participants’ narratives of seeking agency in research is their perception of the politicized and securitised nature of contemporary public discourses around Islam and Muslims, which necessitates their activist approach to Islamic Studies. Research on Muslims in Britain and in the West are complicated by social hierarchies and popular discourses – both historical and contemporary - that position Muslims as the ‘different other’. Scott-Baumann writes about “certain government ideologies that ‘weaponise’ ideas about Islam as if they are malevolent” (Scott-Baumann, 2018). Orientalist hangovers when combined with a growing prevalence of research on Islam in relation to terrorism or its prevention means that Muslims are marginalised in knowledge production about themselves, their faith, their roles and contributions to pluralist British society. Against this backdrop of overtly politicised ‘Islam versus the West’ debates, Hopkins and Gale encourage researchers to provide reflections about their approaches, lens and motivations, as they navigate the complexities of Islam in Britain (2009).

In this paper, I take up Hopkins and Gale on the challenge they set. My methodological insights and reflections from a decade of research in the sociology of religion and the sociology of Islam in Britain to inform this paper. This article is divided into four main parts. First, I provide a brief contextualisation about Islam in Britain, within which I situate the largely methodological discussion that entails the second part of this paper. The third part brings in a discussion around ethics in research. Finally, I consider the epistemic and structural politics of knowledge in relation to the study of Islam and Muslims. Thus to use Punch’s metaphor, I clarify the ‘methods horse’ that pulls my research cart(s) (1998) and provide a trail for other researchers to reflect upon, develop and follow.



Diverse yet Essentialised: Islam in Britain

According to the census 2011, Muslims in Britain are the largest religious minority in Britain. Due to patterns of migration, Muslims in Britain are a veritable melting pot that reflects the diversity of Muslim communities from across the world. Within British Muslim communities, different ethnicities, cultures, denominational affiliations and ways of believing coexist – in their own silos and also in conversation with each other within what might loosely be called British Islam. While the term ‘British Islam’ is contested, it remains a useful ‘shorthand’ marker for the transformations in Islamic praxis that have occurred in Britain brought about by a diversity of social, cultural and religious stimuli.

Due to migration from the Indian subcontinent (during the 1950s onwards) two thirds of the Muslim population in Britain is of South Asian heritage, with familial and cultural ties in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This may be described as the dominant ‘flavour’ of Islam in Britain which can on occasion overpower other ethnic strands of Islam in Britain – African, Middle Eastern, Far Eastern and white British convert populations. Denominational affiliations usually follow ethnic backgrounds. While this data is not collected in the census, research suggests that as with global Muslim populations, only around 10% of Muslims in Britain are of Shi’i heritage. They are therefore a minority within a minority and can struggle to be represented in policy discourses or indeed in academic research on British Muslim communities, although this gap is now gradually being filled (Esposti and Scott-Baumann, 2019; Shanneik, 2017, 2013). Two Sunni traditions from the Indian subcontinent – *Deobandi* and *Barelvi* – are widely visible in British Muslim communities in establishing mosques and madrassas (Geaves, 1994). This is all further complicated by flavours of Islam ‘imported’ from other parts of the world, for example literal or *Wahabbi* forms of Islam from Saudi Arabia or more *Sufi* forms from North Africa and Turkey.

The paragraph above uses a number of labels and generalisations, which are needed in the context-setting description of British Muslim communities that is entailed here; however, it is important to interrogate these categories. All ‘forms’ and ‘flavours’ of Islam are open to communal and personal interpretation, as individuals establish their own culturally and individually-determined habits and practices of faith. Personal ‘modes’ of believing - understood here as individuals’ nearness or closeness to religious values and practices – can shape how significant or not religion is in an individual’s life. Muslims in Britain range from those who devotedly and rigorously hold on to religious practice, fore-grounding religion in their lives to those who may have much looser ties to religious belief, who may be non-religious and who simply retain a cultural affinity to Islam.

The Muslim population in Britain is young. And especially for young third and fourth-generation British Muslims, who are born and educated here, Islam in Britain has become rooted in British values and cultures. Young Muslims have evolved their own hybrid sense of British Muslim identity, which while retaining familial and cultural ties with the countries of their parents’ origin, presents itself as inherently British. Whereas Muslims who lived in Britain in the 60s and 70s yearned to go home (although they never did) (Anwar, 1979), for their children and grandchildren, Britain is emphatically home (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

The Politics of Researching Muslim communities in Britain

So Islam in Britain is diverse and is increasingly more British. Yet within public discourse, policy-formulation and indeed in academic research ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ are still categories that

homogenise (Stevenson *et al.*, 2017; Scott-Baumann *et al.*, 2020). According to the Change Institute (2009:5),

research on Islam in Britain often focus the on the largest Muslim ethnic communities originating from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the findings of these studies have often been extrapolated and assumed to hold true for other Muslim communities. Recent journalism and literature has reinforced this tendency to homogenise or ‘essentialise’ Muslims and ignore the diversity of these communities in the UK.

Public and media discourse represent Islam and Muslims as a monolithic whole and the diversity and vibrancy of different flavours, modes and cultural forms of Islam is often lost. Such broad brush approaches to Islam in the West, and in Britain, often also then exceptionalise Muslims as existentially and practically different, as alien to British values, as migrants rather than citizens, as ghettoised, as angry anti-West activists and as being prone to radicalisation. Muslims become the nominated other in an unevidenced yet ubiquitous ‘us and them’ dichotomy. This is a hierarchical characterisation – so in this ‘us and them’ (non)relationship, the ‘us’ is vested with all that is good and which must be emulated in all of society. Whereas the values and the ways of the Muslim ‘them’ may be unknown but are nevertheless somehow much less desirable and may be viewed with suspicion, ridicule or even contempt (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

The characterisation of Muslim as the different other has seeped into research into Muslim societies. In researching Islam in the West and / or Britain, it also important to consider how paradigms of Islamic Studies are grounded in historic factors including but not limited to colonisation and its impact on the study of Muslims as the different, colonised Other. This is linked to Said’s critique of the positioning of Muslims as external to the West, and as somehow less human (1978). In a similar vein, this characterisation of the different other renders invisible the intellectual contributions of Muslim (and indeed Eastern) scholars and philosophers to the development of ‘Western’ philosophy and civilisation (Gutas, 1998). More recently, an academic turn towards securitisation and the study Islam and Muslims in the context of terrorism or preventing it have further problematized research on Islam and Muslims (Jackson, 2007). Modood and Thompson describe such othering as a process through which ‘a dominant group imposes a negatively valued identity onto a subordinate group, where the latter finds it difficult to resist that imposition’ (2020: 13).

Muslims in the West have become ‘weary’ of research that is about them (Sangera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008: 544, Alvi *et al.*, 2003) and which often reinforces the homogenisation in narratives about Muslims and the exceptionalisation of Islam. They are concerned about not having opportunities to shape political, social and historical narratives about their lives, communities and their faith (Scott-Baumann *et al.*, 2020). This weariness is beginning to show. In their longitudinal study of inter-religious relations and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, Weller *et al.* note how Muslim responses to their survey were much more forthcoming in the first iteration of their survey, which was conducted in 2000. In the 2010 iteration of the same survey, Muslim organisations were much slower to respond – leading them to consider the reasons for this (Weller *et al.*, 2013). When I was undertaking my doctoral research on Muslim women, participants usually vigorously interrogated me on my motivations for researching Muslim women (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020). In environs characterised by the over-scrutiny of Islam that intensified by the UK government’s *Preventing Violent Extremism* strategy, many Muslims report being suspicious of the intentions of research. In the next sections, I reflect on my methodological strategies to navigate Muslim weariness and suspicion of research.



Feminist-Pragmatist Approaches to studying the ‘Everyday’

When I first set out to undertake research on Muslim women over a decade ago (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012), my own positionality within the research meant that I was inherently aware of the diversity and complexity among British Muslim communities. In order to hear less-heard voices, in the case of that research – Muslim women, I situated myself within a feminist epistemological framework. This framework drew upon feminist approaches that aimed to uncover and showcase women’s contributions to knowledge and civilisation (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; McDowell, 1997; Afshar & Maynard, 1994; Stanley, 1990). Feminists argued that due to prevalent patriarchal social hierarchies, women’s voices and contributions to knowledge were overwhelmingly unheard and unacknowledged. However, through their manoeuvres to challenge the marginalisation of women, feminist scholars developed philosophical worldviews and methodologies that were inherently suited to challenging the marginalisation of *any* disenfranchised groups. In the case of my research, feminism (as an epistemology) allowed me to recognise the need to interrogate the social and political contexts within which I was producing knowledge about Muslim women. This stance was inspired by Flax’s assertion that feminist philosophy represents “the return of the oppressed” and the “particular social roots of all apparently abstract and universal knowledge” (1983: 249).

Feminist research practice as I see it, at least in theory aims to encourage social equality. Whereas earlier forms of feminism are critiqued for representing exclusively white middle class voices and interests, it has become more reflective within itself and inclusive of ways of being and thinking of women from African Caribbean, Asian, South American and working class backgrounds (Cohen et al., 2000; Webb, 2000). As feminism evolved, its propensity to enable research with and for those who were at the margins of society increased. Feminist methods are characterised by the interrogation of traditional commitments to truth, objectivity and neutrality – it insists that research is not neutral and is shaped by the personal worldviews and biases of the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, research is a collaborative approach between researcher and researched, who together approach the field to produce new knowledge. The experiences of individuals, women and men, become inseparable from conceptions of knowledge hence making them ‘knowers.’

In my endeavours to challenge the essentialisation of Muslims, I am also inspired by the pragmatist thinkers of late 19th century America – Dewey, Sanders and Pierce. Pragmatism challenges traditional formulations of problems and knowledge through its emphasis on practical action, lived experience and purposive thought (Rao, 1968: 2). Within a pragmatic epistemological stance, ideas, philosophies, doctrines, actions and indeed religion become meaningful only through the consequences they have for individuals. Pragmatic research is thus contextual, in the case of research on religious groups (here Islam), pragmatism situates both religious texts and religious experience in the social, cultural and geographical contexts that the individual inhabits (Schutz, 1954; Somekh et al., 2005). Rather than studying Islam in Britain, textually (and arguably as an abstract construct), my pragmatist approach insists that I study it through the ‘consequences’ it has for people and the real-life impacts it has on their lives and the decisions that they make. By foregrounding the diverse experiences of individuals and communities, pragmatist approaches address concerns around the homogenisation of Muslims.

Guided by this feminist-pragmatist stance, my research answer questions that are meaningful to the communities I am working with, about the influence of their faith on various aspects of their social, communal and political lives. I thus position Islam as a living tradition that shapes the everyday lives of those who adhere to it. I argue that it is difficult if not impossible to maintain disciplinary boundaries. Instead, in order to reflect the diversity of lived religious experience, disciplinary boundaries must become permeable allowing ideas and methods to intermingle in order for research

questions to be answered. For example, in my research on the experiences of Muslim children in care, I worked across theology and sociology as well as children's law and social work. This tactical bringing together of lived and textual religion facilitated an exploration that was incisive in providing practical guidance for frontline social workers and well as new theological understandings of caring for vulnerable children (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2018). By transcending disciplinary boundaries, it was possible to enact research-informed interventions to enhance life outcomes for these vulnerable children.

'Lived religion' as a conceptual framing is gaining credence. In my work, I draw on Certeau's seminal work in which he describes everyday life as the 'tactics' or negotiations through which people individualise societal structures: rules, norms and histories, making them their own as they negotiate their lives through these structures (1982). Muslims in Britain adhere to rules set by the religious and secular 'institutions' that are prevalent in their lives – religious texts, religious authorities, British legal frameworks and government policy. The individual Muslim experiences his or her religion in a way that is contextual - their needs, employment, social and profession networks, worldviews and beliefs—including beliefs that are not religious. So for example a Muslim's commitment to protecting the environment would draw upon both 'secular' organisations working in this area and religious teachings. Both are informed by this 'environmental Muslim's' personal leanings. They are also inspired by each other – this Muslim may read the Quran in ways that pick out interpretations that facilitate his or her beliefs. My mental image of the everyday is therefore messy and intertwined, with 'secular' and 'religious' considerations coming together as determined by social contexts.

There are critiques of using the everyday as a theoretical framework, for example Fadil and Fernando's, who are concerned that it has become the norm in academic practice for the 'everyday' to be used to singularly denote liberal forms of Islam or suggestions that emphasis on the everyday might devalue theology and religious texts. Yet through a pragmatist emphasis on the individual, both critiques may be overcome – by allowing an intellectual space for the varied experiences of the participants and by recognising the influence that religious texts have on lives and. This use of everyday religion underpinned by pragmatism, allows for methodological eclecticism and gives the researcher the conceptual framing needed to do 'what it takes' to answer the research questions at hand. In the next section we explore how these epistemological framings inform method (as opposed to methodological) choices to work with Muslims in Britain.

Methods that work *with* rather than *on*

The methods that can be used to access Muslim voices are no different from those that are used for other parts of society. The researcher's toolkit is rather standard: interviews, surveys, participant observation and so on. Additionally, the evolution of visual, participatory and digital methods provides innovative ways to engage research participants in ways that are non-hierarchical. Each of these methods can be used on their own and in tandem with each other to answer whatever question is at hand. In this section on methods, I will not discuss individual methods. However, I will reflect on how the methods I have used are underpinned by my feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance.

Firstly, my research paradigm is predicated on the uncovering of the contributions and experiences of individuals who experience and live faith, and by assigning sociological value to their experiences. It is the individual who, on the basis of his or her life circumstances, personal preferences and social contexts (both freedoms and restrictions) determines his or her beliefs and how to enact them in everyday life. In addition to its foundational texts, Islam, then, is also defined by the lived experiences of Muslims who believe in diverse ways and who also 'belong' in diverse ways (Day, 2011; Davie,



1994, 2015). Rather than a monolith, Islam becomes an assemblage of diverse lived experiences or an ‘ecumene’ which Salvatore describes as ‘an extremely mobile set of patterns and civility providing both cohesion and orientation to translocal networks and to a variety of locales (2016:10). This positioning allows the inclusion of both religious and non-religious lived experiences of Islam. Islam becomes both a religious and cultural marker of identity.

Then, my work responds to Siddiqui’s pioneering call to study Islam and Muslims as inherent to British Society (2007, pp. 20-21) and it is important to consider carefully the transformations within the politics of research that this statement demands. My feminist-pragmatist stance challenges framings of Muslims as the different other. It does so by emphasising individual experience and voice, and demonstrating how values for example around respect, love, family or kindness can transcend cultural and religious affiliations. In my research on inter-religious relations in Britain, Muslims more than other religious or belief groups spoke about having experienced discrimination. All religion or belief groups spoke about a commitment to British values around toleration and shared values, which they stated would contribute to better and more peaceful lives for *all* (Weller et al., 2013). Admittedly my research uses the categories Islam and Muslim, but it does so with a view to replace reified constructions with more nuanced reflections that humanises and build bridges.

Intersectionality is a key consideration in research. Muslims are not just Muslims, there are other aspects to their identities – ethnicity, gender, class, age. In explorations of Islam and Muslims, by taking a collative view of all these identity positions the researcher can mitigate the risk of exceptionalism posed by the use of the categories Islam and Muslim. By taking a complicated and intersectional view of identity, it becomes possible for the researcher to uncover aspects of identity that are shared by groups that disagree. So, for example, while there may be religious differences between two hypothetical antagonistic groups, there may also be lingual or cultural traditions that these groups share. In my research around interreligious relations in Britain, I ran focus group discussions with participants who self-identified as non-religious. By sharing my own journey of religious experimentation and change, I was able to find a common ground that I share with my non-religious participants. Finding this space allowed for a more congenial research experience for both researcher and researched.

Positionality is of paramount significance in contemporary politicised contexts. Borrowing from feminist geographers, positionality can be used to denote reflections on researchers’ identity, their nearness and or distance from the field of study and how they impact the field. As noted above, feminist epistemological stances insist that research is never neutral. Researchers’ deeply-held biases – both positive and negative - shape how they approach the field. The field also responds to the researcher. Sultana describes the conduct of fieldwork as contextual, relational, embodied, and politicized. She writes about her fieldwork in Bangladesh and being perceived as a ‘*deshi*’ girl, which in her context meant as somebody who was from Bangladesh, ‘one of us’. Being of Bangladeshi heritage, in undertaking the fieldwork her own notions of home and field were obfuscated. Yet as an academic working in a university she had power (Sultana, 2007). I have always attempted to be transparent about who I am in the research, both in how I undertake the research and then how I write about it.

Finally, the process of doing research can create an intellectual space for dialogue with others and with oneself. In our research on Islam on campus, there were occasions when focus group discussions brought views that disagreed into dialogue with each other. The discussions were unquestionably a method to uncover research findings, but occasionally they also became avenues for disagreeing views to bear witness to each other and to find a way to coexist (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). The methods

therefore also had meaning for those who participated in them. In my research on Muslim women (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012), a young woman spoke about how people's questions about Islam and her role in the research allowed her to reflect on her own knowledge of her faith:

“I think that people who come from outside are more inquisitive about Islam. They ask questions, and their questions ask about things that we never question ourselves. I met somebody a while ago and she was asking me questions and I thought I don't know the answer to that question because I've never asked myself that question.”

Khalilah, Birmingham, February 2008

Research thus has the potential to facilitate processes of what feminists describe as consciousness-raising (Morgan, 1970). Participants in research have opportunities to uncover their own agency, social roles and contributions. They may also reflect on blind spots in their own knowledge. This was exemplified in my research on Muslim children in care. I worked with social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents to explore the journeys of children of Muslim heritage through the care system in Britain. I approached the field with humility and a clear mind-set that the expert/s in relation to care practices were not the researchers (me and my team) but those frontline carers and professionals who were working with children on a daily basis. However, through analysing diverse care-providing experiences and situating them in wider discussions around the sociology of Islam in Britain and Islamic theology, the researchers created new understandings of how to best meet children's needs. Good practice from a range of perspectives were collated and shared. Both researchers and participants recognised gaps in their knowledge. The research process and findings enabled enhanced reflective professional practice (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2018).

My feminist-pragmatist approach predicates reflection and transparency from the research. Research becomes a negotiation - a collaborative space for exchange of ideas, expertise and experiences between the researcher and researched. To ensure that the interests of both researcher and researched are protected, such conscientious approaches to research need careful ethical underpinnings, which are discussed in the next section.

Ethically-Literate Research?

In 2015, Scott-Baumann and I proposed a set of eleven research guidelines for the “ethically literate” study of Islam and Muslims. We suggested that these could form the basis of a methodology for engagement in cross-cultural/ interreligious contexts and could also serve as self-reflective practice to guide all our imaginations in our daily contact with others who are different and / or similar to us.

1. The researcher must interrogate their own value system and their own ethical literacy in research ethics in order to be able to undertake research; this should form part of initial preparation for any research: we continue to retain bias even when our bias is challenged.
2. Relationships of trust must be established for ethical reasons and pragmatic reasons also, to make good relationships more likely and to facilitate future research.
3. It is necessary to enter with care and to work carefully in such a highly politicised research field; it is a place where people live and work and they must be protected.
4. Feedback to communities will be more likely to be successful with genuine co-operation and honesty: the researcher should learn to write only that about which they are prepared to discuss with respondents, which requires honesty, courage and tact.



5. Self-reflective practice will require clarity about one's personal position, and this will then affect the ongoing self-evaluation of the research as well as future proposals and affiliations with future funders.
6. Any highly politicised research field is likely to suffer from adverse and destructive media coverage and a high degree of care and pragmatism is necessary to ensure that the reputations of others are not damaged.
7. Researchers have a responsibility to engage with the groups being researched in a democratic and non-hierarchical manner so these groups can critically engage with the research process, inform the research processes and finally become empowered to implement research findings to bring about social change for the better in their own lives and for their communities.
8. In research environments that are diverse, our work insists on the need for research to be inclusive. Research must not focus only on dominant 'representative' voices.
9. Language is a conscious component of the researcher's investigative process: if we can accept how impossible the perfect translatability of meaning from one person to another really is, this helps us to understand the other, because we see how we must make compromises in trying and failing to understand one another fully.
10. Constant self-reflection enables researchers to move beyond the rhetoric about preventing violent extremism and radicalisation narratives.
11. The use of collaborative research methodologies (including feminist methodologies) that allow for researcher/s and researched to work together and which give voice to all the diverse stakeholders.

(Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 167-9)

These ethical considerations move the researcher away from solely bureaucratic and document-dominated processes at universities that are aimed at protecting university and researcher interests. The documentation is important and ensures that processes of consent, confidentiality and reporting are transparently documented. However, in the context of British Muslim studies more theorisation and reflection around the lived experience of ethics in research urgently needed. The latest iteration of the UK government's Preventing violent extremism strategy (2015) has included a new category of non-violent extremism. Reading between the lines, it seems very much like thoughts and ideas are being policed and freedoms are being dissipated. In all my research projects, Muslims have spoken in different ways about feeling unable to articulate aspects of their beliefs (even when these beliefs had nothing to do with Islam). They were self-censoring to protect their own and their communities' interests. More than ever before we need ethically-literate research that can accurately represent communities, without any judgement, so that all are protected from harm and research can facilitate greater good.

There are ethical considerations that are specific to collaborative research approaches. In collaborative approaches participants' voices are emphasised as is a need to share ownership of the research narrative with them and an aim to accord agency to the research subject. Yet as researchers we publish from our research and own it. Unlike Frigga Haug, we do not share authorship with all our research participants (Haug et al., 1999) – this is not practically or intellectually feasible given

professional and indeed personal requirements to publish. In this sense academics are ‘powerful’, – the privileged who decide how the evidence is used and which words are used to frame it and give it meaning. So, in this respect, how exactly are we according agency to those who spoke to us in the field? Whose voices do we privilege and whose gets left out? While we are guided by established processes of analysis that provide us with checks and balances, we acknowledge that the power dynamic between researcher and researched remains unequal. I end this section with a question: How might the ethically conscious researcher account for the power imbalance in research? There is no one way to answer this, however what is certain is that this question and its many answers need careful consideration.

Owning knowledge?

An overarching question that research about Islam and Muslims must answer pertains to how they are known. This question can be disaggregated: Who knows Islam? And how? What is known about Islam and Muslims? What is not known? Who produces knowledge about Islam? And why? What are the sources of knowledge on Islam? My feminist-pragmatist standpoint encouraged the vesting of authority in the individual who experiences and enacts knowledge (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). According to Guest, knowledge is sociological and emerges from socially situated acts of knowing (2012).

The ways in which we produce and disseminate knowledge are influenced by society and social hierarchies, therefore knowledge is never neutral. French feminist philosopher Michelle Le Doueff writes authoritatively about the historical process of marginalisation of women within from institutions of knowledge that became hegemonies of male scholarship and authority (1998). Other marginalised voices are excluded too, for example, black men or working-class contributions. Intersectionality is key to understanding the hierarchies of knowledge as is more questioning of what is authentic and authoritative (hooks 1989).

I postulate that ‘knowledge’ of Islam is produced through our conversations with those who live Islam in different ways and who therefore ‘know’ it in different ways. Such a stance allows researchers to access and include those who are not Muslim or religious, but who experience Islam through friends, family, the news and fiction. They may encounter Islam in passing or in-depth, yet they experience it, perceive it, interact with it and form an opinion about it, even if they ultimately dismiss it as irrelevant to their lives.

What about authority and knowledge production in Muslim contexts? The sociological / historical thesis about the reduction in the authority of Muslim institutions of learning and religious scholars and the concomitant individualisation or democratisation of Islamic knowledge production has been widely accepted for at least fifty years, if not more. Two decades ago the historian Francis Robinson, in considering the impact of print on the Muslim world, asserted that:

“By breaking the stranglehold of 1200 years of oral transmission, by breaking the stranglehold of the madrasa-trained *ulama* (or religious scholars) on the interpretation of Islamic knowledge, print helped to make possible an era of vigorous religious experiment” (Robinson 1993:246).

The age of ‘vigorous religious experiment’ has been amplified manifold times by developments in digital technologies and increased internet access across the Muslim world. Technological and sociological developments have led to a democratisation of Islamic knowledge and a transformation of historical hierarchies of authority, giving individual, ‘everyday’ Muslims more access to the



knowledge and tools they need to decide what they want to believe in, why and how. This democratisation has led to the emergence of religious actors and narratives that inhabit a continuum of religious positionalities, ranging from literal to liberal; fundamentalist to bricolage; and extremist to pluralist. Ironically, the internet and the public square both become spaces in which these different positionalities must coexist. There is scope within Islamic theological and sociological discourse for different voices to coexist based on the individual's determination of his or her circumstances and in their rendition of their experiences and interpretations (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

In researching Islam and Muslims in politicised contexts the researcher must reflect constantly and consistently on ideas of knowledge, and hierarchies of knowledge. Knowledge is political. It is not neutral. In producing a new narrative, researchers and the participants together delve into the politics of knowledge. The findings of research will be scrutinised and critiqued. These findings will be heard and will hopefully have an impact. Knowledge can therefore also be agentic.

Conclusion: Re/centering Muslims

In environments, characterised by debates around politicisation, securitisation and marketisation of research, it becomes all the more significant to reflect on the power dynamics, known and unknown, in society that determine how we *know* each other. As researchers we need to consider our responsibilities to challenge hegemonic power dynamics to allow different voices to be heard in research and to facilitate agentic spaces within which they can claim their voices. The production of knowledge (which is the ultimate aim of research) is neither impartial nor fair, and it can be argued that knowledge is riddled with biases, injustices and subjectivities bought about by social hierarchies within which it is produced. Being cognizant of the politics of knowledge and challenging them is key to producing a new paradigm of research on Islam and Muslims that is built on ethics of partnership, relationship and social justice.

Working within a feminist-pragmatist epistemological framework this article utilises methodological reflections from a decade of research of Islam and Muslims to consider collaborative approaches to studying Islam and Muslims in Britain. It theoretically and conceptually frames a research approach that works *with* and *for* British Muslim communities rather than *on* them. I assert the need for research paradigms that are grounded in partnership and positionality, and which maintain intellectual rigour while also being accountable to the people who are the subjects of research. Methodological eclecticism rather than loyalty to any one paradigm of research allows for a more nuanced representation of the complexity and messiness of everyday life. By recognising the diversity of voices and way of those who describe themselves as Muslim, such an approach re-positions research as a dialogue or exchange between research and researched. The act of doing research thus becomes vested with agency for *both* researcher and researched.

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