

Rethinking Western Muslim Identity with Social Representations

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The research subject of social identity among Western Muslims raises concern, as it is questionable if one can dissociate its political implications from academic analysis. This article uses the concept of social representations as a viable alternative in providing a more nuanced depiction of Western Muslim identity dynamics. We first illustrate the need to go beyond the identity construct in social psychology, as it may potentially reproduce the moral panic surrounding Muslims in public consciousness. We then propose an alternative conceptualisation Western Muslim identity - using social representations - which emphasizes the importance of common-sensical knowledge structures. We discuss the necessity of understanding Western Muslim group dynamics without politically reifying the implicit incongruity of national/religious affiliations via the construct of ‘identity’.

Keywords: Western Muslims; social representations; social identity; identity integration; moral panic

The quandary of multiple identities traces back academically to the early 20th century. How are we to understand the psychological configuration of individuals whose backgrounds are comprised of several cultures? Today's most prominent social psychological approaches – such as the bicultural and acculturation models – are rudiments of acculturation theory; artifacts of an era which presumed, in time, migrants would eventually emulate majority culture. For contemporary Western Muslims, identity is not merely a question of acculturation; indeed, their non-integration is seen as a national concern (Norton, 2013). Western media often associates Islam with violence and portrays Muslims as potential security threats (Alsultany, 2012; Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). The risk of radicalisation among Western Muslims is often discussed along lines of civic integration; those perceived to oppose 'national values' are thought of as potentially liable to extremism (Kundnani, 2014). It is thus imperative that we think critically at our understanding of 'identity' with Muslims born and raised in North America and Europe (which we name 'Western Muslims' for brevity's sake). Are conventional social identity models appropriate for Western Muslims in this socio-political climate?

Ethnic identity is conceptually significant in this regard. In psychology, religious identities such as 'Muslim' are seen as artifacts of ethnic heritage. As migrant descendants learn more of their ethnic heritage, their relationship to the ethnic group increases in value and legitimacy as a social identity (Phinney, 1990; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), was conceived as a means of depicting the process by which ethnic identities are negotiated vis-à-vis the mainstream (national) identity. The social identity approach is one of the foremost identity models in social psychology. Initially, Henri Tajfel was concerned with the attention accorded to individuals in social psychology, and thus developed a social-centric model based on intergroup relationships to explain incidence of prejudice and conflict (Jenkins, 2014). Tajfel and Turner (1979) then proposed that our group affiliations formulate social identities within our self-concept; this creates a sense of belonging that favors the in-group and belittles the out-group. A social identity relates to group membership based on the sense of commonality characterized by language, religion, ancestry, ethnicity and citizenship – its role serves as a reference group within our self-concept (Baker, 2000; Hendry, Mayer, & Kloep, 2007; Jenkins, 2014). It comes as no surprise that acculturation and bicultural identity models, derivatives of social identity theory, are popular

frameworks in research with descendants of Muslim migrants (e.g. Britto & Amer, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Stubbs & Sallee, 2013; Zaal, Salah, & Fine, 2007).

The employment of such models presumes the Muslim identity to be akin to an ethnic identity, with the same politically contingent objective of identity integration. The premise of social identity research in psychology specifically is to determine well-being as contingent on identity integration. Berry's acculturation models (Berry, 1974, 1997), for example, were designed to evaluate an ethnic minority's perceived value of maintaining both ethnic and mainstream cultural affiliations. Meanwhile, the bicultural identity model was designed to evaluate the degree in which mainstream and ethnic identities integrate according to their perceived compatibility (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Like the acculturation model, the bicultural identity model suggests that perceived conflict between the cultural and mainstream identities best predicts psychological well-being – better identity integration presumes lower internal conflict (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

We found these models to be deficient in their employment with our self-identifying Muslim participants from Berlin, Copenhagen and Montreal for several reasons. First, these identity models were initially developed for migrants (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Second, these models are unable to distinguish between group membership and political categorization, and potentially reify the political discourse that depicts the Muslim and national identities as distinct (Younis & Hassan, in press). Third, the very nature of Muslim or national identities are subject to debate (Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013; Said, 1994). As such, public discourse regularly confounds ethnicity with religion, which in turn accounts for the wide variation of the recruitment criteria used for Western Muslims in research (Amer & Bagasra, 2013; Meer, Dwyer, & Modood, 2010). The usage of ethnic identity confounds a sense of belonging based on shared commonality as well as *a priori* group categorisation reproduced externally through political discourse (Jenkins, 2014). Finally, while scholars generally acknowledge the multiplicity of social identities within individuals outside the context of migration, we still have a limited understanding regarding the nature of the relationship between social identities (Ramarajan, 2014; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Beyond these methodological

limitations however, we would like to introduce an additional criticism at the heart of Western Muslim identity research: the moral panic surrounding Western Muslims.

IDENTITY AND THE MUSLIM QUESTION

Identity is an elusive construct. There were over 170 definitions of identity in academic circulation in the 1970s alone (Gleason, 1983). The debate over the utility of social identity has recently been reinvigorated (see Brubaker and Cooper (2000) for a critique and Jenkins (2014) for a rebuttal). The tension arises, among other reasons, from identity's slippery slope towards essentialism; through processes of distinguishing similarities and differences between group affiliations, there is the potential for groups to be perceived as monolithic (Jenkins, 2014; Sartawi and Sammut, 2012). Despite this, the identity concept remains ubiquitous in research which, according to Jenkins (2014), is precisely the impetus it study: the popularity of identity (in politics, media, academic journals, etc.) makes it an experiential reality and therefore an object worthy of study. With Western Muslims especially, considering the questions of integration that have pervaded public discourse in the past two decades, one can understand how researchers would find their identity development significant.

We nonetheless raise a concern with the employment of social identity, not as an analytical concept in general (as per Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) critique), *but in specific relation to Western Muslims*. As we hope to make apparent, the object of identity with Western Muslims is unlike other populations, for 'identity' among Western Muslims is deeply embedded within the foundation of what Norton (2013) calls 'the Muslim question'. The Muslim question relates to the moral panic surrounding Islam and Muslims in Western countries, whereby the Muslim identity has been the recipient of considerable political attention in matters ranging from civic integration to the war on terror. The Muslim question thus recounts the comprehensive political 'othering' of Western Muslims. In this political dynamic, identity catches the public's eye; the integration of Muslims is not only viewed as a matter of civic concern, but a question of national security. Thus, the concept of identity vis-à-vis Western Muslims is one endowed with conflict. The national and religious identities are not only seen as contradictory, but incompatible (Holtz, Dahinden, & Wagner, 2013). Unlike Holtz et al. (2013) however, we argue that the

supposed conflict between national and religious identities comes part and parcel with the object ‘identity’, when made specifically in reference to Western Muslims.

Reicher (2004) contends that “models that serve to reify social categories in theory may also help reify categories in practice”. There is the potential for identity models in research to politically reify the moral panic surrounding Muslims. In turn, research with Western Muslims may inadvertently reproduce the boundaries of meaning in which Western Muslims experience and express their identity. To this process of reification, Howarth (2009b) conducted a study investigating how psychologists both examine and reproduce ‘race’ in their research. She argues that by qualifying ‘race’ as a category of analysis, researchers impose a “racial classification onto the design of the study, in the sampling strategy or questions asked, therefore treating ‘race’ as an a priori object of study [...]” (Howarth, 2009b, p. 3). Howarth (2009b) instead employed social representation theory to examine how the researcher and participant co-construct the meaning of race. Howarth’s (2009) observations questions the extent to which *our very own research* served to reify the Muslim identity as an *a priori* object of study, as established upon implicit socio-political knowledge structures whereby religion and nationality are perceived diametrically opposed.

This all begs then the question, how do we explore a Western Muslim’s relationship between their religious and national identities *qua* group affiliations, without reifying the ‘Muslim question’ underlying identity discourse? We believe the approach of social representations to be a viable alternative in providing a more nuanced depiction of Western Muslim group affiliations.

Our reflections in this article originated from our research with Western Muslim young adults in Montreal, Berlin and Copenhagen, between 2012 and 2013. A total of 20 participants within an age range of 18 to 25 were recruited to discuss their national and religious identities. The interviews were then analysed qualitatively using discourse analysis. Participants were recruited by word of mouth from youth groups as well as student associations, high schools, colleges, universities and Sunni mosques. Most of the participants were undergraduates (or recent graduates), with a small number having just completed high school, from predominantly South Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds. Our research discussions featured a variety of

themes including: the relationship between religious and national identities (Younis & Hassan, in press, b); the anteriority of national identity dynamics in the conversion narratives of Muslims (Younis & Hassan, 2017); and how the perceived need to experience an ‘objective’ Muslim identity is an artifact of the political context (Younis & Hassan, in press, a).

Our research provoked a need for alternative frameworks to predominant acculturation and bicultural identity models. We found the concept of social representation suitable in this regard, and this article outlines how it can be used to broaden our understanding of Western Muslims. We begin our argument by clarifying how social representations distinguishes itself from social identity in its relation to culture. We then review how social identities are conceptualised within a framework of social representations, and the significance of hegemonic representations and communication in this regard. We continue with a brief overview of the literature on Western Muslims within the field of social representations, discuss the utility of hegemonic representations as an alternative foundation for Western Muslim identity understanding, and culminate with a discussion on the pitfalls of employing ‘identity’ with Western Muslims.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Moscovici (1963) introduced social representations as a means of explaining social psychological phenomena as embedded within social, political and cultural conditions. For the sake of this paper, we relate Tateo & Iannaccone’s (2012) definition of social representations:

a network of meanings, that the members of group or culture use to build the meaning of being individuals within the society. In their twofold role as both product and tool, Social Representations take part to the process of symbolic mediation” (page 7).

From such a definition, the social representation approach advocates both an internal and an external understanding of culture. It assumes an underlying network of meanings (representations), shared by individuals in relation to others, upon which an individual perceives

themselves as part of a group. Moscovici and Kalamalikis (2012) argue that social representations is thus an anthropology of culture on the one hand, and a psychology of culture as it relates to common sense, ideas and language.

Both Moscovici's social representation approach and social identity theory were both conceived in an era dominated by individual-focused research that was dismissive of the social context (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011). Elcheroth et al. (2011) contend that 'The context of Social Psychology' (Isreal and Tajfel, 1972), which included chapters by both Moscovici and Tajfel, was a manifesto of a movement that sought to differentiate itself from methodical individualism. While social representations and social identity approaches have historically branched into separate paths of social psychological research, Elcheroth et al. (2011, p. 7) argue for their reciprocity "*the way we orient to representations depends on how we categorize ourselves in relations to the groups with which those representations are associated.*" The distinction between groups is not just a social artifact; it reflects the organizing principles underlying the meaning structures of each group.

Moscovici (1988) outlines three categories illustrating the relationship between social groups: hegemonic, polemical and emancipated representations. Hegemonic representations purport deeply embedded beliefs that are resistant to change, unconscious, and generally shared among everyone in a cultural group. When contested, these unconscious ideas become conscious and polemical and subject to debate. Polemical representations thus refer to salient ideas upon which two or more groups disagree. As such, a cultural group sharing the same hegemonic representations may be further divided into subgroups based on rivalries regarding a polemical representation. Emancipated representations reflect elements of knowledge which are not yet compatible with the hegemonic representations of the group. New information produced by exposure to different cultures or novel scientific discoveries, such as cloning, are examples of this. Duveen (2007) argues that emancipated and polemical representations inherently suggest a degree of reflexivity - and are thus available in social discourse. Hegemonic representations on the other hand allude to facets of taken-for-granted knowledge upon which the emancipated and polemical social representations are deliberated; the *common-sensical* network of meanings, outside the realm of consciousness which binds individuals together. According to the social

representation approach, cultures are established upon collective hegemonic representations which lay the common-sensical foundations of meanings upon which individuals reflexively negotiate contested and novel experiences. New objects become anchored by means of hegemonic social representations, thereby rendering the unfamiliar familiar.

Social representations and social identities are thus conceptually interrelated (Wagner et al., 1999). Explaining this relationship, Duveen (2007) suggests that social identity is determined at the point where a representation is no longer communicable. Individuals with the capacity to communicate – debate a polemical representation, negotiate an emancipated representation – must necessarily share a platform of commonsensical knowledge upon which their communication is made possible. The capacity to communicate indicates a shared set of hegemonic representations – a cultural background. Conversely the inability to communicate an idea constitutes a barrier from those who do not share the same set of hegemonic representations. In other words, a cultural boundary comes to fruition when the commonsensical foundations of knowledge differ to the extent that overt ideas are not transferable.

Communication thus reinforces the boundary to which a social identity can be made. This differs from the conventional social psychological approach to identity founded upon an internal sense of belongingness or an external political categorisation – often ethnicity, race, gender and religion (Jenkins, 2014). It also suggests that communication is not entirely determined by language; individuals from France and Germany may effectively communicate a great number of ideas to one another, despite linguistic barriers, due to shared hegemonic representations. Conversely, a French farmer may find it more challenging however to communicate an idea with a Mongolian shaman, whose knowledge structures (e.g. of ontological realities) differ more profoundly. Shared hegemonic representations are thus the glue that hold traditional societies together in solidarity despite perceived differences in opinions (Sammut, 2011).

While communication can take many forms externally, implicit forms of communication remain significant (Elcheroth et al., 2011). This notion of implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge, underlined by Moscovici (1988), is central to our argument. Negotiated ideas necessitate implied forms of understanding. This notion, which scholars such as Latour (see e.g. Latour, 1996; Sammut, Daanen, & Moghaddam, 2013) relate to as interobjectivity, has garnered traction in

recent years. The concept relates to all forms of knowledge necessary to create space for intersubjective interaction. Consider for example an individual whose hegemonic representation of a dog is ontologically that of a pest. Should the individual encounter the dog representation as that of a family member, its ontology is brought to consciousness for cognitive negotiation. When the implicit meanings underlying the object of a dog become explicit, the individual, bestowed with a reflexive capacity, is then tasked to negotiate the two or more antagonizing views contained within the representation. The hegemonic thus becomes polemical within a network of meanings. Moscovici (1984) previously likened culture to social representations, in that they have an agentic capacity to entice and empower us to act upon them.

The subject of conflicting hegemonic representations between groups has also been discussed in relation to intentionality, where intentionality is understood as the mind's representation of an object or idea – such as a dog. Bauer and Gaskell (2008) argue the “*subject is always a collective of conscious selves and others, who come together for a project of common intentionality.*” In an intergroup context, representations are formed vis-à-vis other communities, in which various groups relate to an idea with various internationalities that differ based on divergent and established representations. In other words, the representation of a dog is formed and negotiated as a function of discrepant intentionalities. Both hegemonic representations and intentionality relate to invisible webs of meaning that formulate the basis upon which communication takes place, and sets the foundation in which new ideas are negotiated. In other words, an individual's agency to interpret and negotiate a novel idea is contingent on the implicit knowledge structures which they share with others.

There are some advantages in viewing social identities through the lens of hegemonic representations. First, by emphasizing communication and based on shared, implicit foundations of meaning, it reformulates the concept of cultural groups in a manner that bypasses political categorization. This accounts for an understanding of identity that looks beyond politically charged notions of belonging, which we will discuss later on. Furthermore, hegemonic representations beg to question the conflict between religion and national identities as found in public discourse. This last point relates directly to the question of Western-born Muslims. Are their national and religious identities deserving of categorical differentiation? Our observations

with Western Muslims lead us to believe that their identities are not ‘hyphenated,’ as social identity models suggest, but ‘different’ – a third space, unique and indivisible. This raises the concern if civic solidarity is truly “what makes collectives hold together in the present era” (Sammut, 2011, p. 16), or if there is already something underlying this collective consciousness.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES: DISCUSSING WESTERN MUSLIMS

Research into this ‘third space’ of social identity is not novel. In England, Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998) explored how the Chinese community’s representation of health involved a contradictory combination of Chinese traditions and western biomedical knowledge – two disparate knowledge systems. The authors argue that the contradictions arising from disparate health representations are deeply embedded in the defense and negotiation of the Chinese identity in a Western setting, rendering the Chinese social identity a particularly Western artifact. Communal narratives loaded with social representations develop idiosyncratic understandings of the world, which in turn foster group identification (Jovchelovitch, 2008; Marková, 2007). But these groups are far from homogenous, and social representation theory does not stipulate the need for homogeneity. Through cognitive polyphasia, both groups and individuals sustain and navigate complex and even conflicting representations. The conflict we are interested in, when discussing multiple social identities, is that of inter-group differences. In migrant diasporas, the ethnic identity emanates in the ‘space’ between the immigrant culture and the host culture identities (Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson, & Sammut, 2014). The crux of the following discussion is this ‘space’ in between identities, often related to as the locus of identity hybridity (Amena, Caroline, & Ragini, 2015; Aveling & Gillespie, 2008; Hopkins, 2011; Sirin & Fine, 2007). What constitutes this third space among Western Muslims? To this we must first question what constitutes a Muslim in public discourse.

The ‘Muslim’ category is elusive, confounding intra-religious differences, ethnicity and race (Brubaker, 2013; Grillo, 2004). Moreover, Muslim communities in Western countries are unique from those in Muslim-majority countries; modernising and deterritorializing forces have

moulded their religious experience (Roy, 2004). The transformation of Islam from a political hegemony (in Muslim-majority countries) to religious minority (in the West) is significant since it has removed the political coercion of perceiving the religion in a distinctive fashion. There is a wide diversity of Western migrant communities from Muslim-majority countries, all categorised politically under the all-embracing category of 'Muslim'. Due to this unlinking of the political from the religio-cultural, a secondary product of the migratory transformation is the change in perceptions of the Muslim *ummah* (community) from local to global, national to boundless (Roy, 2004). The Western Muslim identity is thus global in scale, disassociated from its historic origins and at times unrelated to actual religiosity (Roy, 2004). As a social identity, the Western Muslim category subsumes elements of theology, race, gender and culture which Muslims must navigate in their religious identity development. The challenge then for researchers is to develop the appropriate analytical tools which accounts for these divergent elements of the Western Muslim identity.

There are several studies employing social representations we believe are exemplary in their dynamic depiction of Western Muslim identity dynamics. Amena, Caroline, and Ragini (2015) for example discuss how practicing and non-practicing British Arab Muslim women relate to the representation of virginity. The sanctity of virginity was not merely a religious proscription, but existed within a larger religio-cultural framework that took its form vis-à-vis British society. The authors discuss how religious representations have spatial and temporal elements that are, above all, subject to social and political contingencies. Other scholars employ social representations with regards to questions of national identification, citizenship and hybridity (Hopkins, 2011; Sartawi & Sammut, 2012). Much of their findings dispute the common belief that a Muslim's religious identification impedes national identification. In line with our own findings, national and religious identities are not only concordant, but the perceptions of one necessarily informs the other (Younis & Hassan, in press). Similarly, Breakwell (1993) argued that social identities are unlike ice cubes in a tray. Instead, they interact in ways that has implications for their representational processes.

For Western Muslims, the interaction between their national and religious identities is one based on tension (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012, p. 573):

The non-conscious flow of everyday life is disrupted due to a clash between two meaning systems that produce contradictory objectifications of a particular social object. The participants, aware of this contradiction, need to renegotiate meaning for the object implicated, and, in doing so, are positioning themselves towards it and renegotiating their own identities.

We see how hegemonic representations within Islamic as well as British thought become polemical as the meaning systems clash and available for cognitive negotiation, as discussed earlier. This occurs in the everyday whereby British Muslims are constantly negotiating new ways of being ‘Muslim’ in a British context (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012). Social representations thus provide a means of understanding the subjective hybridity, in which Western Muslims can belong to a ‘third space’ within their religious and national identities that is more than the sum of its parts (Bhabha, 1994).

Looking Back at our Research

Our participants offered a variety of vivid images illustrating the ‘third space’ between their identities. Sherif¹, for example, described his identity as a ‘bridge between two worlds’. This analogy is poignant, indicating a wholeness within diversity. To Sherif, his identity is personified by a bridge which, as per its function and purpose, would not exist had it not been situated between two divergent landmasses. Although the worlds are separate, he is to be found in the space between the two; the bridge’s very existence is contingent on difference, and its essence implies it not belonging exclusively to one side or the other. Similarly, Leila draws the analogy of a steak to exemplify her identity, stating that the meat of her identity is Muslim, but her Iraqi and Danish affiliations are the marinade. Here we see that although the meat has a basic flavor, the mixture of different ingredients in the coating (and, of course, the flavor seeping into the fibers of the meat) alter its taste. Thus, the initial piece of meat is no longer the same once cooked, and although one may be able to discern individual ingredients apart from others, the dish is truly more than the sum of its parts. Not only are the boundaries blurred in both images, but they also underline the significance of social representations as an appropriate means of understanding these images.

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms.

If hegemonic representations are the building blocks upon which ideas are understood and negotiated, the majority of Western Muslims understandably develop the same implicit knowledge structures of the society in which they are raised. In our article in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (Younis & Hassan, in press), we argue that Western Muslim young adults perceived a need to experience their faith as ‘objective’: a global entity, free from cultural contamination, to be practiced in a definitively singular manner. Our analysis affirms Roy’s (2004) observations that perceived need for objectivity is a product of a vast array of socio-political conditions, of which we highlight two: the deterritorialization of Islam through migration and perceived Islamophobic public and political discourse. But there’s more: the perceived need of distilling ‘pure knowledge’ from distorted beliefs was the scientific project of the enlightenment. It follows the Western philosophical orientation of self-actualization, whereby personal experience precedes one’s experience of ‘truth’. For Western Muslims, the objectification of religion is a product of individualisation that gives primacy to experience in religious development.

In another example, Amal, born to a Pakistani family in Copenhagen, relates the following when discussing the development of her religious identity:

Amal: I started to question the stuff, and part of my life was becoming more religious. I decided to wear the headscarf; that was the point in my life where I decided who I am and what I want to do. It’s me who decides it - nobody’s telling me.

Growing up in a Pakistani household, Amal was raised as a Muslim though she only began practicing her faith in late adolescence. She describes how her Muslim identity only became salient when she finally chose it for herself. Here Amal’s insistence on choice as a determining element of her faith is not arbitrary. Indeed, the importance she accords autonomy and the ‘true self’ reflects an inherent individualism that is socially produced via the philosophical-religious orientation and political organization of Danish society (Cushman, 1996; Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004). Her religious identity development hinges upon the implicit knowledge structures found in Denmark – the religious identity engaged in relation to the Danish ‘alter’. This is not a question of Muslim-Danish integration as acculturation and bicultural identity models might suggest. On the contrary, the hegemonic representations of autonomy preceded her affiliation to

her Muslim identity; it formulated the web of meaning upon which her experience of faith developed. Her religious identity developed not in contrast to, but *in accordance with* society's meaning structures (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012).

There are two observations we extrapolate through the lens of social representations. The first is how religious and national identities can be discursively independent yet founded on the same underlying network of meanings. Indeed most of our Western Muslim participants affirmed a sharp divide between their religious and national social identities – psychologically, socially, politically. Yet, like Sherif's bridge analogy, their narratives portrayed a perpetual state of integration and disintegration as they attempt to consolidate the discursive abstraction of their religious and national identities in a 'third space' that is not merely the sum of its parts. As these young Muslims develop, the taken-for-granted hegemonic representations become polemical and available for conscious deliberation. A unique palate of implicit knowledge structures is cultivated during their development; religious meanings are derived within a secular environment, and national values are embedded with religious significance. The Western Muslim, in other words, develops according to a unique set of implicit knowledges that has not yet become polemical or emancipated, but that is nonetheless different from other groups.

To say thus that Western Muslims position themselves between two cultures would be to borrow the same vernacular used in social identity theories. The utility of hegemonic representations allows us to envision how two cultures converge into an entirely novel experience. Doing so, they develop and engage with representations that are not apparent to either cultures alone, nor are they in conflict. Amena et al. (2015, p. 15) summarize this thought succinctly: *"In this way, participants are not passively engaging in retaining their 'Arabness' nor immersing themselves completely in their 'Britishness' but demonstrate the agency to challenge the cultural moral order expected of them as both British and Arab women."* This observation shares thematic commonalities with Jovchelovitch's (2008, p. 19) discussion of cognitive polyphasia, *"where differing, and at times conflicting, styles of thinking, meanings and practices co-exist in the same individual, institution, group or community."* Cognitive polyphasia encourages our observation that communities can overlap in intentionalities and hegemonic

representations, despite being politically categorised as discrepant. The underlying fabric of meaning is one; the ensuing social identities are political artifacts.

This begs then the question to what extent, as a function of this fabric of meaning, the ‘Western Muslim’ identity is inherently and inevitably an oxymoron. To what extent is the incessant conflict between civic and Muslims identities part and parcel of an exotic perception of Islam as something all-together different than Western society (Said, 1994), and exacerbated by ‘the clash of civilisations’ narrative in conjunction with the contemporary war on terror (Mamdani, 2005)? Do Muslims inevitably perceive themselves as ‘the other’ because of the lack of effort (from the state, from Muslims themselves) to integrate ‘national values’? This does not appear to be the case. Western Muslims may contest the political call for ‘integration’ or insist on it, but they cannot escape it; it is established upon the basic knowledge structures of how the Muslim identity is understood. This is not a matter of the controversies surrounding Muslims in Western public and political discourse (see e.g. discussions on niqab, Tissot (2011)). Rather, our point relates to the religious/national incompatibilities which persist within implicit meaning structures. For example, countries such as Denmark have an understanding that a woman wearing a headscarf could never represent the state in any high-ranking governmental position, such as a judge (Holtug, 2011). This is not a sensationalised political issue subject to debate; as one female Muslim participant puts it, it is simply *obvious*. A female lawyer wearing a headscarf could never become ‘Danish’, for there is a door at the end of her career which bars her from becoming a judge. There is no one single reason for this obstruction; it is simply a product of a whole host of various hegemonic representations (involving her religion, gender, etc.). The obstruction of her ‘Danish identity’ is thus experienced early on in life as she learns to communicate with wider society; a doxa within her early development moving onwards, though she only comes to *realise* it in her education.

Western Muslims thus develop within the meaning-structures that invariably espouses conflict with the political ‘alter’ of Western society; a conflict that is captured and reproduced discursively through the language of ‘identity’ in academia (for a discussion on the military-industrial-academic complex, see Miller & Mills, 2010). In this, a few questions must be raised about the role of power in communication (raised earlier, as a basis for shared hegemonic

representations). Though everyone has a voice, not all voices are equal. How can Western Muslims contest dominant and oppressive representations when language itself (such as identity) may be the vehicle of this oppression? Who is allowed to contest and redefine hegemonic-come-polemical representations in society (in relation to class, race, gender, etc.)? Can a Western Muslim publicly deny their 'integration' without their denial be understood as a representation of potential extremism? Such questions, and more, are significant in any discussion, should the doors of rethinking Western Muslim 'identity' be opened.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: BEYOND IDENTITY

In this article, we argue that the social representation of identity among Western Muslims is politically charged with years of moral panic; deliberations over integration and the war on terror have dominated identity discourse. As a result, the representation of identity among Western Muslims is inescapably one of conflict; to raise identity as an object of research is to reify this conflict. One cannot discuss identity outside the trajectory of the moral panic surrounding Western Muslims. Our main argument was thus to describe how one could possibly conceive of group affiliations through social representations, leaving 'identity' behind entirely. Returning to the study of Sartawi and Sammut (2012), the authors demonstrated the tension and inevitable clash of disparate meaning systems among British Muslims. We agree, and even though it corroborates our own research, it begs to question however the necessity of calling upon the politically-charged construct of identity (even should participants relate to it as such). Rather, the clash between meaning systems and the polemical and emancipated representations that arise may be sufficient in relating to these tensions.

More research is required on the social representation of identity among Western Muslims, along the same lines as Howarth (2009a) has done within race studies. Identity can no longer be seen as simply a concept to denote similarities and differences without delineating the political ramifications of its usage among groups (i.e. Western Muslims). We must be mindful of how social identities are themselves social representations, lest their study with Western

Muslims reify the *a priori* political categorisations. This observation applies just as well to other constructs. The term ‘integration’ - also popular in social identity research - has particular political connotations with Muslims, and it is questionable if one can dissociate its political implications from academic analysis (Olwig & Paerregaard, 2011). Perhaps, as researchers, we should take the first stand to look critically at the concepts we employ in this regard.

William James (2013) famously suggested that individuals develop ‘multiple voices’ in accordance to their social identities. This ‘multi voiced-ness’ is a great metaphor for the American heritage of identity acculturation research, in which, religious, ethnic and national identities are perceived as discreet, separate and conflicting entities in need of integration. Jenkins (2014) argued that the popularity of social identities in all forms of social discourse (politics, everyday discourse, academic journals, etc.) inevitably make them ‘real’ – and worth of research. We agree with their social reality but disagree with the ubiquitous academic utility of identity as an apolitical construct equally applicable across all groups.

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