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Negotiating British Muslim belonging: a qualitative longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

British Muslims are often viewed as holding values incompatible with Britishness, regarded with suspicion and sometimes subjected to gendered forms of racism. Research projects have found that identifiably Muslim women face everyday microaggressions, yet little is known about how they negotiate both this and their identities over time. This article addresses this gap by reporting the results of qualitative longitudinal research that explores the narratives of two young British Muslim women over a seven-year period. The women were first interviewed when they were single undergraduates in 2010 and followed up as married young professionals in 2017. On both occasions they were negotiating their identities and sense of belonging in a climate of heightened scrutiny of Muslims. The paper examines their reflections on: “fitting in” with Britishness, their religious identities and the complexity of belonging. Methodologically, it contributes to qualitative longitudinal narrative research.

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Since 2001, attacks in the US, England, and other European countries, together with reports of young Muslims joining Daesh (also known as Islamic State or ISIS), have intensified scrutiny of Muslims and led to their construction as a “suspect community” (Shain 2013; Kundnani 2015). Ahmed and Matthes (2017) suggest that since “9/11” there have been mainly negative media portrayals of Muslims as extremists and Islam as clashing with “western” values. These perspectives, commonly found in current media coverage of British Muslims, are underlined by the UK government’s counter-terror strategy, which stresses the importance of assimilating to “British values”¹. Indeed, the UK government’s counter-extremism strategies have centred on tackling a perceived Muslim threat, which has alienated Muslims, particularly through

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the Prevent duty (part of the Counter-terrorism and Security Act 2015), which requires certain bodies, including universities and local authorities to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”, (HM Government 2015, 3).

Muslim identities

The framing of Muslims in media, government and popular discourses has affected the way in which Muslim identities have developed. Muslim identities, like those of many other minoritized ethnic groups in the UK, have long been expressed “in relation to, and in resistance against, dominant racialised discourses of national community. Thus identifications *as Muslim* are forged in relation to specific discourses of exclusion” that operate at the local and national level (Dwyer 1999, 57). Birt (2009, 215) argues that in Britain there has been a return to Islam “as a primary public identity and a form of political mobilisation”, particularly among second- and third-generation Muslims. Muslim identities can, therefore, be superordinate to ethnic and national origins. McKenna and Francis (2018, 2) argue that in a climate of increasing hostility, Muslims have sought to strengthen their religious identities. This fits with Yuval-Davis’s (2011, 15) argument that “the emotional components of people’s constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they become”.

In a study of young Somali Muslims, Valentine and Sporton (2009) found that Muslim subject positions allowed their Somali interviewees to overcome “the denial of their Britishness, their disidentification as black, and the complex ambiguities of their claims to be Somali”. Similarly, Hoque (2018, 185) described Bangladeshi Muslims in the UK as marginalized in mainstream British society while also being outsiders in the Bangladeshi cultural community because they are seen as western. He argued that out of an “identity vacuum”, emerges “a global ‘transcultural’ and ‘transnational’ British-Islamic identity”.

Muslim women who wear headscarves can face hostility from those who consider it to be: a sign of their oppression; a symbol of a refusal to “integrate”; “an expression of fundamentalism or an act of religious propaganda”, (Shadid and Van Koningsveld 2005, 60) or a sign that they are “harboring terrorist sympathies”, (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2017, 131). The headscarf itself can become a site of struggle around the question of belonging and is often seen as an indication of women’s lack of agency. Yet, as Zempi (2016) argues, women’s reasons for wearing the hijab or niqab are not usually discussed.

Belonging and hierarchies of belonging

Belonging describes an “emotional (or even ontological) attachment” and is “about feeling ‘at home’”, (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018, 230). It is

dynamic and expressed, formalized and politicized when it is under threat. The boundaries of belonging are constantly being altered and challenged and the politics of belonging is at the centre of the political agenda amid “growing ethnic, cultural and religious tensions within as well as between societies and states” and around the world (Yuval-Davis 2011, 2). Yuval-Davis (2011, 113) argues that the “revitalization of religion” is one surprising aspect of present-day politics of belonging. Constructing the boundaries of belonging to a nation state necessitates the construction of both those who belong and those who do not (Phoenix 2011; Christensen 2008). Within and across boundaries there are hierarchies of belonging that are shaped by intersections of ‘race’, ethnicity, class, religion, age and sexuality (Phoenix 2011) and change over time. Back and Sinha (2012, 140) argue that a “new hierarchy of belonging” is emerging in which minority communities are subjected to “a racial reordering, a differential inclusion that is selective and conflict-ridden”.

The analyses that underpin this paper are timely given that visibly Muslim European women’s bodies are at the centre of struggles around the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). Muslim women’s perspectives on this are, however, under-researched and little is known about how those perspectives change or perpetuate. This paper contributes to the understanding of Muslim young women’s perspectives. It explores the ways in which two headscarf-wearing women negotiated their identities as Muslim undergraduates and then young professionals in Britain in a period where Muslims are frequently subject to exclusionary mainstream discourses. The paper also contributes to the sparse literature on qualitative longitudinal research methods.

The paper is divided into three substantive sections. The first discusses the methodological approach. The second explores the participants’ 2010 and 2017 narratives about “fitting in” with “Britishness” and their accounts of exclusion and alienation in Britain. The final section considers how the women claimed their British identities. The paper argues that exclusionary discourses push Muslim young women to prioritize their religious identities above their ethno-cultural, class and other identifications, but that young Muslims can nonetheless do “belonging work” to assert their Britishness and the right to claim the country in which they grew up.

Methodological approach

The interviews that inform this paper were conducted in contexts where Muslims were the focus of fears about terrorism. I conducted the first set of interviews as part of a small-scale study on how Muslims in Britain negotiate belonging in 2010, against the backdrop of the then Labour government’s “Preventing Violent Extremism” programme (formulated after the “9/11” attacks and the London bombings in July 2005), which has been criticized

for focusing on Muslims in a “stigmatising” and “potentially alienating” way (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010, 3). The second set of interviews was also conducted against a backdrop of media and political pronouncements about “Islamist terrorism”. The second interview of the participant pseudonymized as “Yasmin” took place just after the bombing in Manchester in May 2017, and four days after the deadly attacks in London on 3rd June 2017, which were carried out by men who allegedly shouted, “This is for Allah” (Wilford 2017). The second interview of the participant pseudonymized as “Aaminah” took place in September 2017, a few days after the London, Parson’s Green underground bombing, which Daesh claimed, although their involvement was not established.

Yasmin and Aaminah, whose accounts are analyzed in this paper, were two of six Muslim undergraduates from two universities who participated in semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed in 2010 (three women and three men). I explored questions on: belonging and identities in relation to being Muslim in the UK, Europe and the Global North more generally; perceptions of British domestic and foreign policies; understandings of Islam and views of Muslim countries internationally. Yasmin and Aaminah explained that they tried to observe the five pillars of Islam and regularly attended the ISoc (Islamic Society) at their university. One of the young men said he attended the ISoc from time to time. None of the other participants were involved in ISocs, although two were active in university Palestinian societies.

I decided to focus on the narratives of Yasmin and Aaminah, as they considered Islam central to their identities. Both women were from working class backgrounds and were first interviewed as 20-year-old undergraduates. Yasmin (Eritrean) and Aaminah (Bangladeshi) were recruited at a Sisters’ ISoc event at their university. Over a period of six months in 2010 I spent a couple of hours each week doing informal observations at the ISoc, positioning myself as an interested observer. I then interviewed them again in 2017 when Yasmin (27) was married and Aaminah (28) was married with two children. I decided to take a small case study approach because it allows “topics to be pursued in more depth” (Miles and Benn 2016, 727) and I analyzed the women’s narratives over the seven years between interviews as this “allows rare insight into the reconceptualization of ... experiences over time”, (Orlana and Phoenix 2017, 185).

Qualitative longitudinal research has been recognized to be invaluable for analyzing temporal dimensions of experience and the ways in which personal biographies are interlinked with social structures and processes in historical and generational context (Holland 2011). Given that “[p]ostmodern religious identities ... are complex and ... dynamic, fluid, multiple, hybrid, syncretic, often contradictory, open to change”, (Hoque 2018, 185), it is important to explore how women narrate stories about their Muslim identities at different life stages.

In 2017 I first asked the women similar questions to those asked in 2010 and audio recorded their responses. I then showed Yasmin, and read to Aminah, what each had said in 2010, and audio recorded their comments and reactions, which were then transcribed.

I began the analysis by annotating the transcripts for narratives about religion, belonging and feelings of alienation. Repeated themes, phrases or concepts across interviews were also noted. The interpretations were arrived at through a combination of initial thematic analysis and then analysis of narratives. Once themes were identified the narratives were compared across interviews and within each account. I explored the impressions the participants sought to give of negotiating Muslim identities in Britain and interrogated what led them to shape their narratives as they did. I was conscious that interview accounts are co-constructed, so that “the actual findings from the data cannot (and should not) be easily separated out from the form of their production”, (Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood 2008, 3). A narrative approach is central to my analysis since, as Portelli (1991, 50) argues, oral accounts do not simply reveal “what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did”. Stories also facilitate understanding of the intersection between self and society (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2013).

The value of the accounts lies in the exploration it affords of what Yasmin and Aminah made of their past and current experiences of living as Muslims under scrutiny in the UK and how they sought to convey these ideas to a non-Muslim researcher. The paper also explores how hierarchies of belonging within and across boundaries shaped by intersections of “race”, ethnicity, class, religion, age and sexuality (Wemyss 2006) feature in their narratives. In the rest of the paper I explore the young women’s narratives about negotiating being visibly Muslim women in Britain at a time of heightened anti-Muslim racism and scrutiny of Muslims.

“Fitting In” with “Britishness”

2010

Yasmin and Aminah’s negotiations of their British identities and intersectional positioning in a context of increasing exclusions of, and hostility towards, Muslims developed over time in complex ways. In 2010, both were active members of their university’s student-run ISoc, which was central to both their religious practice and socializing on campus. Drawing on her research with British Muslims, Song (2012, 157) argues that “ISOCs provide an avenue through which Muslim students can assert public ethnicity as Muslims”, allowing them to network with each other, organize charitable

works and enhance their faith. At the time I conducted the first interviews with Aminah and Yasmin, British Muslim students were frequently portrayed in the media as “potentially vulnerable and malleable” and those involved with ISocs were constructed as being “motivated by an explicitly anti-western agenda”, (Song 2012, 147).

Aminah said that she prayed five times a day, fasted and wore the hijab (which she described as a headscarf and abaya). She cited the Prophet to explain the principles by which she lived both when I interviewed her and when I spent time with her and the other “sisters” from the ISoc. Yasmin described herself as most comfortable in the prayer room at university, where the ISoc sisters met, because “[b]asically we pray all the time ... It’s our social hangout sometimes”. During the time I spent in informal observations in 2010 in the ISoc, it was clear that it brought Muslims together and helped foster important friendships. It was also evident that some second and third-year women students sought to shape the religious practices of younger Muslim women by encouraging them to wear the headscarf and study the Qur’an.

Yasmin and Aminah shared their 2010 narratives against a backdrop of Islamophobia that they explained affected both them and their families. For example, Aminah described her mother being spat at and harassed in the post-7/7 climate of anti-Muslim racism. It was also a period of debates on “integration” predicated on the assumption that Muslims have to “fit in” with a “Britishness” of which they are not part. As Kundhani (2007, 26–27), argues, the media-driven “integration debate” suggests that it is Muslims’ “cultural difference which needs limits placed on it; it is they who must subsume their cultural heritage within ‘Britishness’; it is they who must declare their allegiance to (ill-defined) British values”.

In 2010, Yasmin explained that she woke up on the morning of the interview to a text message from a friend telling her to vote against banning the burka on public transport in a poll posted on a popular right-wing newspaper’s website. She said she was “literally depressed” because “[t]his is our home and for someone to say, ‘don’t come out wearing a burka on public transport’, it’s like saying, ‘don’t come out of your house’”. Yasmin’s concerns need to be read in the context of what Shain (2013, 74) describes as “the securitisation of everyday life” that has accompanied the “war on terror” and provided a permissive environment for prejudice under the guise of “integration” or “security” in Britain and across Europe.

Asked in 2010 what the poll on banning the burka made her feel about how she fitted into UK society, Yasmin replied:

Yeah, well it reminds me that I don’t, maybe. When you live here and you’ve lived here all your life, you erm ... you don’t think there’s another place ... Oh

God [Cries] ... You don't think that you belong anywhere else [Cries – pauses]
Yeah. Cos you see it as your home, don't you, and if someone says, "No, you
don't belong here," you're like, "where do I belong?"

Yasmin's emotional narratives suggested that she was negotiating an increased sense of alienation. From his research on young British-born Bangladeshis, Hoque (2018, 185) argues that "[t]hey are part of a ping-pong generation, neither here nor there, rejected by others around them and never fully grasping a sense of belonging". The undermining of Yasmin's sense of national belonging was produced by the very body of discourses that demand Muslims privilege their Britishness, and by extension their sense of belonging in Britain, above other identities, including religious ones (Mythen, Walklate, and Khan 2009). In stipulating that Muslims must conform to a nebulous ideal of Britishness that downplays "Muslim" difference, these discourses can serve to alienate Muslims rather than incline them towards a shared sense of belonging to the nation.

In 2010 I asked Yasmin where she felt she fitted in and she said she had thought she fitted into the UK, but that the way in which Muslims were held collectively responsible for the actions of a minority called that into question, coupled with the fact that "[p]eople are really angry about ... Muslims".

[T]here are people out there who really really really hate us, really hate us with a passion. Do I really want to be in a place where someone really hates me 'cos, without even knowing me because of something that I believe in? In that sense then I wouldn't fit in, would I? ... Perhaps I don't. I haven't thought about it too much [Long pause].

During the course of the interview, in which she cried a few times, it seemed that the realization that as a practising Muslim woman she might be precariously positioned in Britain became particularly evident to her, causing her to reassess not only her positioning, but also her identities. It is one of the ways, identified in the literature, that narratives are powerful in concretising understandings of society and everyday life in new and vivid ways (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2013). The upset this generated for Yasmin raises ethical issues about the impact of research about belonging and identities on marginalized participants (Phoenix 2016).

When asked how she felt about "fitting in" to British society in 2010, Aminah expressed a sense of confusion as she attempted to position herself within her intersectional identities in a context where "everyone's drawing lines" and you are either in their group or you are not.

Culturally, am I in the culture group, am I in the religion group? Or am I in the religion and culture group, or am I in the British group? Or am I in the Bangladeshi group or am I in the working class group? It's a bit confusing. I don't want to be in any group other than being a Muslim cos everything else is not fixed,

everything else it changes. Being a Muslim is kinda something fixed and it's something secure and it feels right.

Aaminah said that she does not agree with everything Britain does, which was a barrier to feeling a strong sense of Britishness, while she has little in common with Bangladeshis beyond the language and food. Furthermore, she suggests that her university education distances her from her working class roots. In contrast to the uncertainty she described feeling around other possible identities, Aaminah described deriving a sense of security from being a Muslim. In prioritising her Muslim identity and the sense of security she derives from it, over identities in which she is positioned more marginally, such as cultural, ethnic and class identifications, Aaminah is responding to the current exclusion and alienation of Muslims in a similar way to the young Muslims in studies by scholars such as Hoque (2018) and Valentine and Sporton (2009).

2017

Yasmin and Aaminah's second interviews were in 2017, one year after the UK's vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) that led to a rise in hate crime' and increased abuse of people who look "foreign" (Sloan 2017). Their 2017 narratives were produced against a backdrop of anti-Muslim racism exacerbated by global tensions (Kassaye, Ashur, and van Heelsum 2016) and fears, including about the international presence of Daesh, which sought to create a caliphate in Iraq, Syria and beyond (CNN Library 2017). Daesh recruited Muslims from numerous countries, including 850 from the UK who went to warzones in Syria and Iraq (Dearden 2017). Daesh were linked to more than 140 attacks in 29 countries, not including Iraq and Syria where there were much higher levels of violence (Lister et al. 2018). Groups such as Daesh have had a significant impact on discourses on Muslims and Islam as tangible threats to the "western" way of life, and on Muslims being "commonly associated with oppression, religious fanaticism and terrorism", (Kassaye, Ashur, and van Heelsum 2016, 774).

While in 2010, Yasmin's focus was on the implications of a possible burka ban and how it made her feel, as a professional in 2017 she took a step back and gave a more analytical overview of the processes that lead to the demonization of Islam. Her explanation was a political narrative that religion has historically been exploited by politicians and governments as a means of controlling the people or turning them against each other. She suggested that it was "easy" to hold up a religion as "the enemy", rather than adopting a deeper, more analytical approach that recognizes people's complexity and the fact that the perpetrators of different attacks "have their own motives and ideologies". She critiqued the "lazy shorthand" that the media and politicians use when they simply blame Islam. In so doing, she appeared to be speaking

to a broader audience than me to question how Islam and Muslims are being treated.

In response to being asked where she felt she fitted in, Yasmin said she has “become more aware” of her own racial identity and what it means to be a black Muslim woman. Reading over the 2010 narrative about people who “really hate” Muslims, she cried again.

It kind of reminds me that it's not so different now, really ... there's still a sense of not belonging, but I think for me it's based in more substance, it's based in more thought and reflection, rather than, “This is scary, where do I go?” Now I'm thinking, I belong somewhere, I belong in the universe, I belong with God, but where is my physical space, my practical space? ... It's so sad (2017).

Yasmin's narrative suggests she feels an even stronger sense of religious belonging than seven years previously, but that her sense of “not belonging” in society has solidified as her understanding of her positioning as Muslim has increased. Her question about physical space, constructs religion and her mind as each productive of versions of belonging, but everyday life as alienating. Yasmin's comments resonate with Mythen, Walklate, and Khan's (2009, 747) findings that their participants' Muslim identities were solidified “in defiance of hostility and victimization”.

For Yasmin, migration also played a part in her feelings of dislocation. Reading over her 2010 narratives, she said

This isn't about Islamophobia, this is really going back to my essence, my childhood because when you are from a country and don't ever go there, don't ever live there, you are always displaced, you don't ever belong anywhere because the people you look like, that you're similar to, don't accept you because you don't speak the language, you don't do what they do.

Yasmin described negotiating a liminal positioning due to growing up in the UK, but being Eritrean, born in Saudi Arabia. The lack of acceptance she described as confronting her in 2010 mirrored the rejection she described facing her in Eritrea due to a language barrier and cultural differences.

In 2017, Aminah, who had shifted from describing herself as working class to referring to herself as “touching on the middle class, but I feel I'm working class at heart”, described feeling a sense of dislocation and not belonging as a British Muslim in ways that echo Yasmin's narrative.

I feel sorry for us British Muslims and American Muslims because we don't belong anywhere. We don't belong in Arab countries, they don't see us as part of them, we don't belong in our cultural countries because they think we've sold our culture for the English culture and English people don't like us because they think we're not part of them. We're kind of like homeless in terms of that.

Aminah's description of British and American Muslims as “homeless” emphasizes the sense of not belonging that is palpable in both women's narratives.

She added that “people in England think I’m a traitor or I’m going to backstab them. We ain’t got nowhere really”, which suggests that she felt she was seen as an “enemy within” and consequently alienated. When I asked her how that made her feel, she said, “Really scared. Not for myself, but for my kids. I don’t know what their future holds”. The shift from being a single woman to being a mother meant that the main focus of her concerns was no longer herself, but the next generation.

Aminah, who said she has been working in schools since she graduated, explained that she has seen a change in safeguarding policies and she described developments in UK counter-terror strategies that target Muslims and stifle religious expression as concerning.

It’s all about Prevent now. I think it’s not done in the best way, but you’ve got to do it. Does a child talk about a religion a lot? How can you say that because a child talks about religion there might be safeguarding issues? Prevent tries to show that it’s about everyone, but it’s just about Islam.

What is striking about both sets of Yasmin and Aminah’s narratives is the way in which their sense of not belonging geographically has persisted. Both point to their sense of alienation from Britishness and from the countries their families come from. This suggests they occupy a complex, liminal position. The next section explores the tensions and contradictions around claiming a British identity and examines how the women worked to feel a sense of belonging in spite of dominant discourses that threatened to undermine it.

Claiming a British identity: contradictions and defiance

This section explores the shift from 2010 when both Aminah and Yasmin felt a sense of dislocation from Britishness and a general sense of global alienation as Muslims brought up in the UK, to a position in 2017 when, in spite of their marginality, they claimed their right to Britishness. What is striking is that in both cases the most defiantly British narratives were elicited in 2017 after the women had reflected on what they had said in 2010. This was in contrast to the views they shared earlier in the 2017 interviews when they were just asked the 2010 questions again and reiterated narratives about feeling alienated. It seemed that seeing their younger selves grappling with painful questions about identity and belonging spurred them to articulate stronger claims to Britishness.

2010

Yasmin replied, “Not really”, when I asked whether she saw herself as British. Instead, she said she saw herself as, “Just a Muslim”, not as British, English or any other nationality. In a similar way, Aminah said that she doesn’t “fit in with the world”. When asked how she felt about this, she said, “I honestly

don't care [Laughs]. Cos like ... I don't know ... Cos at the end of the day I see it like this, the only important thing is my relationship with Allah".

If I'm compromising my religion to be accepted by society, then I wouldn't be accepted by Him ... Even if I wasn't religious there'd still be questions about me being from a working class background. There'd still be questions about me being Bengali, so the odds are against me. I'm a female, I'm working class, I'm from an ethnic minority and I'm a Muslim, that's like four things against me so I can't really let it get to me.

Some of the prejudices Aminah alludes to in her narrative are highlighted by Hoque (2018, 184), who argued that Bangladeshi Muslims born in the UK "continue to experience multiple levels of discrimination and racism at a wider societal level". Although later on in this 2010 narrative Aminah described herself as "British", the focus was on her relationship with God being paramount and making up for a more general sense of alienation and dislocation. When I asked her in 2010 how she felt about "fitting in" in England in light of her concerns about racist attacks on Muslim women, Aminah said

I feel like if you want to accept me, accept me. If you don't, that's okay. It's like, what do I have to do to be accepted? It's my religion that's a problem right? It's not my colour. It's not that I eat rice and curry, it's my religion. So if you can't accept my religion then it's fine. I don't wanna be in your society if you can't accept my religion.

Aminah's frustration was underlined by the rhetorical question in her narrative, "What do I have to do to be accepted?" Her assertion that "it's fine" because she would not want to be part of a society that refused to accept her as a Muslim, seemed like an attempt to assert her agency in an exasperating situation.

2017

When I asked Yasmin whether she saw herself as British in 2017, she said that she saw herself as less British than she did last time, but that she sees herself as British "to some extent". When I asked her in what way she does and does not see herself as British, she said:

I do in that I live here and have a British passport (laughs) and this has been my home for over twenty years. And when I go back to my actual home, if I go back to Eritrea, for example, I don't feel at home and if I go back to Saudi Arabia where I was born, I don't feel at home there either. So this must be my home. And I don't in that, I'm just questioning people's inhibited thoughts, inhibited thinking, prejudice.

Yasmin suggested that her legal claims to Britishness (her passport) and the fact that she has spent the majority of her life in the UK contribute to her

seeing herself as British. Similarly, a number of the Muslim participants in Shazhadi et al.'s (2018) study conceptualized Britishness as being "legally British". However, Yasmin said sometimes people are "nicey nicey" and she wondered if that's what they "really feel". Implicit in her narrative is the idea that while people might be seemingly friendly and accepting of difference, their views about Muslims, for example, may be more prejudiced. Similarly, Shazhadi et al. (2018, 614) suggested that racial discrimination, and some white people challenging Muslims' British identity, made some of their participants anxious about "the nature of their British identity".

After reading the 2010 narratives in 2017, Yasmin said that now she has more money and travels more, being abroad underlines her sense of "Britishness", a concept that is hard to define, but which relates to "certain cultural values and mannerisms". She said others recognized her Britishness in practices, such as queuing. This has helped Yasmin to see herself as British, despite her feelings of alienation in the UK (cf. Shazhadi et al. 2018; Jacobson 1997). Yasmin's narrative constructed belonging as "an active process", which Mecheril (2003) theorizes as "belonging work". Yasmin also described herself as "fine" about recognizing the way in which identities shift and change over time. "[F]inding yourself and feeling a sense of belonging is a life-long journey".

In her 2017 narratives she made it clear that her positioning is affected by much more than how her Muslim identity is perceived in the UK. However, anti-Muslim racism and exclusions as a result of migration complicated her "belonging work".

What is striking about Yasmin's narratives is that in 2017, before re-reading her earlier narratives, Yasmin said she felt less British than in 2010. However, in 2010 she had said she did not really feel British, whereas in 2017 she said she did feel a sense of Britishness despite exclusionary narratives in the media and government rhetoric. When asked in 2017 for her views on how the government frames Muslims who question or criticize UK foreign policy, Yasmin expressed her determination not to be excluded from a sense of British belonging. She described the government as "shifting responsibility onto the Muslim community" to avoid having to

bring in policies and engage with people in a more meaningful way. It's easy to say, "This is your problem, you sort it out. You're affecting us, you're poisoning us." I'm part of us! If you exclude me, then you're making that happen.

She said she is determined not to accept the government rhetoric, "no matter what". In contrast to her 2010 narratives, Yasmin defiantly asserted her right to be accepted as British. Her refusal to accept exclusion from an implied British "us" can be seen as part of the belonging work she does that enables her to feel a sense of Britishness, however nuanced, contingent and contested.

In a similar way to Yasmin, in reflecting on her 2010 narrative, Aaminah said that international travel has helped her to see herself as English.

I do feel that's part of me that's very English. Like I remember we went to Mauritius, and ... everything was like so chilled, even when we went to the supermarket it was really chilled and I go to my husband, I like the London lifestyle of everyone's busy, going, hurrying up. This woman is trying to talk to me rather than do my shopping. Or queues, I love queues.

Like Yasmin, Aaminah highlighted the cultural practice of queuing as one way in which her Englishness manifested itself when she was abroad. In 2010, Aaminah asked rhetorical questions about the country in which she wanted to raise her future children and mentioned the possibility of moving abroad to "give them an easier life". In 2017, now a mother of two, she reflected on her 2010 narrative and said that she had discussed moving abroad with her husband and they had considered Dubai, but that dream got "broken" because they "realized that actually we don't fit in there, we fit more here in this country ... our lifestyle our views. We feel better here so we're going to stay here". Furthermore, she said that "I'm not gonna wait for someone to say I am British, I've made myself British".

[B]efore I felt like I wanted someone to say "Yes you're British, you're part of the club now, you've made the cut." But now I don't feel like anyone has the right to say to you, anybody ... whether they've made the cut or not.

In contrast to her narratives seven years earlier, Aaminah constructed herself as the person who has the right to determine whether she is British and contrasted her current, confident position with how she was at 20 when she felt it was for others to accept her into the British club. Implicit in Aaminah's narrative about making herself British, was the "belonging work", that Yasmin alluded to. A British identity was something she has worked to claim and sustain.

In 2017, when Yasmin and Aaminah reflected on what they had said in their early twenties, they both staked claims to Britishness and belonging that did not depend on the acceptance of the population at large. However, both women had a more ambiguous relationship with Britishness than the Muslim participants in Shazhadi et al.'s (2018, 616) study who "did not just recognise their British identity but embraced it".

Reflecting on the process of looking back

I explored Yasmin and Aaminah's longitudinal narratives in terms of biographical time (considering aspects of the life of each) and historical time (i.e. "how individuals locate themselves in relation to different external events, and wider social and structural conditions", [Holland 2011]). This approach allowed me to explore how Yasmin and Aaminah's perspectives and

understanding of how their positioning as Muslims in Britain changed as they grew older, got married and, in Aaminah's case, had children. It also enabled me to analyze how their perceptions were shaped by the socio-political contexts in which I conducted the interviews.

What was striking was that neither participant remembered what they had said previously, but nonetheless they reiterated some ideas. Being confronted with what she had said seven years earlier upset Yasmin, which raises concerns about the ethics of confronting participants with their earlier narratives (although she had cried extensively at the first interview). However, the tripartite qualitative longitudinal method, (1) initial interview questions, (2) the same questions again years later, (3) reflecting on narratives from the first interview, was productive in terms of eliciting contrasting narratives in the same interview. In this case, both participants adopted a more defiantly British stance after reflecting on their initial narratives about feeling alienated from Britishness.

Commenting on re-reading the 2010 narratives in 2017, Yasmin said, "It makes me think, I haven't really changed that much in seven years. It's quite scary". She suggested that as she has grown up she has become less self-assured than she was seven years earlier. "I think I know less now than I did then. When I was younger there was conviction about everything. I thought I knew it all, whereas now everything comes into question". However, she said that "that process has actually made me a better person".

Yasmin characterized her 2010 self as thinking, "Oh, this is so wrong!" whereas now she is thinking more critically about society. While she said she has more space to think now, she also described herself as "more vulnerable" because her convictions are less strong and "[i]t's easier for people to knock you over ... on this path of discovery". She gave an example of her vulnerability from the day before the 2017 interview when she was in a taxi in which the LBC talk and phone-in radio station was playing and she was feeling "upset" because of the "horrible" things people were saying about Muslims, like herself. However, she said, "I'm still okay with that because that's part of where we're at at the moment. It's the awareness of being aware of where you are". Yasmin constructed herself as agentic in 2017 in her "awareness" of the current socio-political moment and she presented that awareness and recognition of the pain and violence of anti-Muslim racism as a way for her to "get by" (cf. Allen 2008) and endure it.

It is important to acknowledge that the process of retrospection involves reconstruction of memories rather than an accurate and filmic re-presentation of events (Brockmeier 2015). Nonetheless, the ways in which the women think about their younger selves and narratives illuminates their present identities and concerns (Josselson 2009).

When I asked Aaminah how she found going back over the questions she had been asked seven years earlier, her response pointed towards recognizing

that she would continue to face racism, but not let this impede her. She explained that the situation is “much more difficult” than her parents realize.

[T]hey're always telling us, “You're so lucky to be in this country. You've got all the opportunities.” ... they used to feel like, ignore racism it will go away. Whereas I have the opinion you know racism is there but you can't let it affect you. It's always been there. Your grandparents had to face it, we have to face it, but you can still be successful.

Conclusion: negotiating Identities

This paper seeks to contribute to understandings of how Muslim young women in the UK negotiate their identities over time, reinterpreting past experiences as they narrate the present. It explored how young Muslims can learn to negotiate and resist anti-Muslim racism and alienating discourses, such as those around Prevent, through belonging work.

The narratives of Yasmin and Aaminah, two visibly Muslim women who were undergraduates in 2010, married professionals (and, for Aaminah, a mother) in 2017, show the ways in which, at different life stages, they have negotiated their identities as practising Muslim women in a context of anti-Muslim discourses, increasing Islamophobia and violent attacks by men claiming to be acting in the name of Islam. Their narratives highlight the importance of strong Muslim identities for practising British Muslims in a context of marginalization from mainstream society, while drawing attention to the pain and frustration caused by alienating discourses and anti-Muslim racism. Both women prioritized their Muslim identities above other possible identifications (cf. Hoque 2018). Valentine and Sporton (2009, 748) argue that in contrast to “unstable racial and ethno-national identities”, Muslim identities have “powerful emotional salience”. In prioritising their religious identities, Yasmin and Aaminah are behaving in a similar way to other second-generation British Muslims (Song 2012).

Despite the feelings of alienation that run through both sets of their narratives, Yasmin and Aaminah concluded, having reflected on what they said aged 20, that they “fitted in” in Britain more than anywhere else and agentically highlighted their resistance to efforts to exclude them from belonging to Britishness. This belonging work included simply insisting on being part of the nebulous “us” that media and government rhetoric constructs. The women, however, appeared more tentative about claiming their Britishness than participants in Shazhadi et al.'s (2018) study.

Methodologically, their narratives are important because they demonstrate identities in process, showing not only how positions shift over time, but also how qualitative longitudinal research can elicit contrasting narratives about the present when participants are first asked questions about how they see themselves and then invited to comment on narratives they shared in

response to the same questions in the past. It indicates that memory may have powerful effects on identities.

The women's narratives highlight the complexity of negotiating belonging as Muslim young women in the UK. They point to the importance of intersectional analyses that recognize how the interplay of a number of factors, including: religion, gender, age, class, ethnicity and migration affect positioning in hierarchies of belonging. They also highlight the value of longitudinal research that underlines how identities are not fixed, but fluid and how growing older and shifts in positioning can lead to a stronger sense of self and greater confidence in claiming belonging, even as individuals recognize their vulnerability.

Note

1. Outlined in the government's 2011 Prevent strategy as including "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs", (DfE 2014).

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