

ARTICLE

‘That still goes on, doesn't it, in their religion?’ British values, Islam and vernacular discourse

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Abstract

This article explores ‘everyday’ or ‘vernacular’ conceptions of Muslims, Islam and their relationship to ‘British values’. Drawing on original data from focus groups in the East of England, it argues that the relationship is typically constructed around a series of binary pairings. Where Islam is held to be traditional, conservative, pious and outmoded, British values are seen as progressive, liberal, secular and modern. This opposition matters for three reasons. First, it is a contingent construction rather than reflection of realities; one that draws upon Orientalist tropes and militates against alternative ways of imagining this relationship. Second, it does important work at the vernacular level in explaining political dynamics, especially successful integration (because of British liberalism) and the failure thereof (because of Islam's traditionalism). Third, its predication on an essentialised claim of difference inflects even competing efforts to story the British values/Islam relationship which tend, we suggest, to reinforce the positioning of Muslims and their values as somehow beyond or external to Britishness.

KEYWORDS

British values, Britishness, identity, Islam, Muslims, vernacular discourse

Focus group participant.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Singh Investigation into Alleged Discrimination in the Conservative and Unionist Party reported on its independent enquiry into Islamophobia in the Conservative Party (Singh, 2021). Home Secretary Sajid Javid had secured a commitment to the enquiry in the 2019 Conservative Party leadership debate, 1 year after a similar request from the Muslim Council for Britain and former Conservative Party chairman Baroness Sayeeda Warsi had been rejected. Such accusations of Islamophobia (which the Singh Report did little to assuage) are indicative of profound and enduring concerns around the perception, experience and treatment of Muslims in Britain. Their pertinence, moreover, has increased through the promotion by successive UK governments of a particular version of 'British values' as a litmus test for Britishness: a dynamic that encourages conformity to such values and risks othering those unable, or unwilling, to ascribe to them (Habib, 2018). British Muslims, as a consequence, often find themselves in the unenviable position of subjection to Islamophobic abuse *and* having to affirm their Britishness, including through condemning acts of Islamist terror, and disassociating with criminal acts carried out in the name of Islam (Warsi, 2017).

Concerns around the construction and policing of the relationship between Britishness and Islam have generated important scholarly work (e.g., Hamid, 2017; Lander, 2016; Lewis & Hamid, 2018; Maffouz, 2017). In this article, we contribute to this literature by focusing on 'vernacular' constructions of 'British values' and their relationship to Islam, drawing on original findings from focus group research in four locations in the East of England: Bedford, Ipswich, Luton and Norwich. These findings are important because they nuance understanding of public attitudes while enabling reflection on the dominance of established discourses and potentially even present opportunities for the disruption thereof.

Our argument is that vernacular constructions of the relationship between British values and Islam tend towards a binary opposition. Islam and Muslims, we demonstrate, are frequently characterised as traditional, conservative, outmoded and excessively religious. Britishness, in contrast, is associated with modern, liberal, progressive and secular values. This opposition matters for three reasons. First, it is a contingent construction, rather than reflection of realities; one that draws upon longstanding Orientalist tropes and militates against alternative ways of imagining this relationship. Second, it does important discursive work at the vernacular level in explaining political dynamics, especially successful integration (because of British liberalism) and the failure thereof (because of Islam's traditionalism). Third, its predication on a construction of difference inflects even competing efforts to story the British values/Islam relationship that, notwithstanding their disruptive potential, tend to reinforce the positioning of Muslims and their values as beyond or external to Britishness. To make these arguments, the article begins by exploring literature on British Muslims and British values. A second section offers a rationale and exposition of our research design and methodology. Our analysis of the vernacular construction of these phenomena is then followed by a concluding section detailing avenues for future research.

2 | 'IN ALL ITS MURKY GLORY': ISLAM, MUSLIMS AND BRITISH VALUES

Recent attempts by UK governments to develop or mandate a common understanding of 'British values' have attracted considerable academic, political and media controversy (Kundnani, 2015; Poole, 2018; Revell & Bryan, 2018; Warsi, 2017; Wolton, 2017). Much of this controversy has centred on the reification of 'British values' to include 'democracy, personal liberty, rule of law, and tolerance and mutual respect' (Home Office, 2015, p. 2), a reification that excludes alternative understandings of the British social and historical experience including its colonial pasts and enduring inequalities. Despite their contestability, fundamental British values (FBVs) are now incorporated in school curricula and form the basis for the *Life in the UK* citizenship test on British customs and traditions (Stronach & Frankham, 2020). Yet, as Warsi (2017: 44) summarised:

The British Values debate has two major flaws. Firstly, there is a suggestion that ‘the list’ of values is exceptionally and exclusively British, and secondly, our history does not always support an adherence to these values (Warsi, 2017: 44).

As Warsi continues, with reference to the Conservative Party’s belated support for same-sex marriage, ‘Each generation asserts its own “British values”, based on the society that makes up Britain at that time’ (Warsi, 2017: 38). Because of this, there is no ‘agreed single definition of Britishness and British values ... [and, importantly] The deeply worrying part of the debate about British values—in all its murky glory—is that it is often only directed at British Muslims’ (Warsi, 2017: 47).

This understanding of ‘British values’ as (i) contingent, thus contestable, and (ii) predicated on Muslim values as its constitutive outside is picked up by Revell and Bryan for whom: ‘There is no such thing as a set of values that is British; there are only the values that particular governments or policy documents at specific times insist are British’ (Revell & Bryan, 2018: 7). The emergence of British values, here, is ‘rooted in a positioning of radical Islam as a threat to liberal democracy’ (Revell & Bryan, 2018: 8); one that is apparent in the outworking of policy agendas that are presented as universal and contrasted to the illiberalism of Islamist and (increasingly) the far right. Dame Louise Casey’s (2016) review for the Department for Communities and Local Government on opportunity and integration, for instance, concluded that it was ‘cultural and religious practices in communities that are not only holding some of our citizens back but run contrary to British values and sometimes our laws’ (Casey, 2016: 5). Casey, moreover, explicitly mentions Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin whose religious leaders she identifies as, ‘keen to take religion backwards and away from 21st Century British values and laws on issues such as gender equality and sexual orientation; creating segregation and pulling communities apart’ (Casey, 2016: 128). The review’s recommendations, consequently, included suggestions that all migrants to the United Kingdom should take an ‘Oath of Integration with British Values and Society on arrival’ (Casey, 2016: 168), and that:

The promotion of British laws, history and values within the core curriculum in all schools would help build integration, tolerance, citizenship and resilience in our children. More weight should be attached to a British Values focus and syllabus in developing teaching skills and assessing schools’ performance (Casey, 2016: 168).

This aspiration to inculcate ‘British values’ has continued apace within schools including through pedagogical publications (Blaylock et al., 2015; Carroll et al., 2018; Habib, 2018; Maddock, 2017). Franklin Watts, for instance, produced a series of British Values books for 6- to 8-year-olds including: Roshan learns about democracy (Chandler, 2019a); Emily learns about tolerance (Chandler, 2019b); Kara learns about respect (Chandler, 2019c) and Josh learns how rules keep us safe (Chandler, 2019d).

Publications such as these accord with the United Kingdom’s anti-radicalisation strategy—Prevent (Department of Education, 2015)—castigated by educators such as Lander (2019): 1) as ‘the insidious imposition of a political securitisation agenda onto an unsuspecting profession and pupil population’. Suke Wolton’s (2017: 131) study of Prevent spotlights the increasing predication of claims around ‘British values’ and national identity on assumptions about Muslims:

Wider society has placed an emphasis upon the apparent unassimilability of Muslims, a policy focusing on ‘community cohesion’ as opposed to eliminating deep-seated structural inequalities, while there is a general widening of economic and social divisions in society as a whole. These attempts have placed the attention onto Muslims and not the workings of society. Policies seek to modify, improve or develop the behaviours of Muslims and the ways of Islam but not always the attitudes of majority society.

Such concerns have generated considerable quantitative analysis. Ipsos Mori's (2018: 5) review of eight surveys conducted between 2015 and 2016, for instance, argued that British Muslims typically reject any sense of conflict between their religious and national identities:

Religion is a far more important part of their life for most Muslims than it is for other people in Britain, and is central to their sense of identity. But Muslims do not feel that this is in conflict with their 'Britishness', and they are in fact more likely than members of other groups to feel that their national identity is also important to their sense of who they are. Most Muslims have a strong sense of belonging to Britain, and believe that their religion is fully compatible with the British way of life.

Indeed, the ICM Survey of Muslims for Channel 4 (2015) and the ICM Survey for Policy exchange (2016) revealed over 90% of Muslims felt able to practice their religion freely in Britain, with 72% of British Muslims rejecting the idea that Western liberal society is incompatible with Islam (Ipsos Mori, 2018: 57). Such views, however, contrast markedly with population-level findings such as the 56% of respondents in a 2016 survey believing Islam incompatible with British values (Ipsos Mori, 2018: 58) and the 52% of respondents to a YouGov poll (2015) for whom, 'there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society' (Ipsos Mori, 2018: 77).

Since Ipsos Mori's review, two further opinion polls have been conducted by ComRes on behalf of Ahmadiyya Muslims (2019) and the conservative Henry Jackson Society (2020). The Ahmadiyya survey showed 30% support for the idea that Islam is compatible with British values, with 48% disagreeing. Amongst British Muslims; however, 89% agreed (ComRes, 2019). The 67% taking a negative view of Islam in this later survey was lower than in antecedents, although 83% of British Muslims still agreed that most people in the United Kingdom have a negative view of Islam (ComRes, 2019). The 2020 survey for the Henry Jackson Society has questions likely to elicit a negative response towards Islam, yet found 76% of Muslims holding a favourable view of the United Kingdom. It also reaffirmed previous findings on the significance of religion to British Muslims, with 87% considering their faith important (ComRes/Henry Jackson Society, 2020).

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

Findings such as the above indicate that Muslims in Britain remain widely viewed as a suspect community needing instruction in British values. This apparent sense of Muslim difference amongst majorities (who consistently hold negative views about Islam), on the one hand, and British Muslim insistence of the compatibility between Islam and liberal values, on the other, lies at the heart of our research. Our focus, described further below, was on how non-elite individuals within the United Kingdom understand and discuss 'Muslim values' and their relationship to Britishness and 'British values' in informal, everyday contexts. Such 'vernacular' expressions of cultural identity and difference (Jarvis, 2019) are important for three reasons.

First, engaging seriously with vernacular perspectives on significant political questions adds a qualitative richness to quantitative findings such as those explored above. Vernacular research offers space for individuals to speak about politically charged topics such as security and identity in language and categories that are meaningful to them (Luckham, 2017: 112). This 'bottom-up' engagement with the concerns, anxieties and priorities of citizens not only opens space for unexpected and surprising findings that may be missed by more rigidly structured quantitative approaches. It also, importantly, enables reflection on nuances, contradictions and ambivalences within public understanding that may be less accessible to survey- or related methods (Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017: 23). In so doing, it expands the range of perspectives and voices heard on (international) political dynamics by moving beyond the discourse of privileged subjects and recognising the existence of a 'broader tapestry of (in)security stories for researchers to hear (or co-construct)' (Jarvis, 2019: 118).

This broadening move becomes particularly important where the focus is upon collective or shared values which are vital for articulating, 'who we are as a people, and what it is that binds us together, while distinguishing us from others' (Henderson & McEwen, 2005: 173). Taking such claims seriously, therefore, encourages attendance to 'the ways in which ordinary social actors construct themselves as nationalised subjects' (Condor & Abell, cited in Skey, 2009: 337) and make sense of the relationships between communities. As Jarvis and Lister (2013: 158) summarise, the 'bottom-up' emphasis of such work helps to address a widespread propensity within academic research, 'to speak for, rather than to (or, perhaps better, with) 'ordinary' people and the conditions of (in)security they experience, encounter or construct in everyday life'.

Second, vernacular perspectives allow insight into the dominance or hegemony of socio-political imaginaries and whether (and how) specific discourses resonate amongst diverse publics (Jarvis et al., 2020a). Participants in research such as ours often draw upon heterogeneous discursive resources to explain and justify their worldviews. In so doing, notwithstanding caveats about generalisation discussed below, their contributions enable reflection on the reach, fixedness and persuasiveness of wider (political, media and other) conversations around (in this instance) cultural identity.

Third, vernacular conceptions also have potential to *disrupt* dominant ways of thinking about identity, community and difference including through problematising and politicising that which appears neutral, natural or inevitable (see Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). As demonstrated further below, participants in our focus groups refused as well as reproduced established ways of conceptualising the British values/Islam relationship, including through reference to personal and vicarious experience. Such contributions shed potential new light on ways of living and understanding cultural identity in this context that are grounded not in abstract theorisation but, rather, in the everyday life experiences of 'ordinary' people (Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016).

As this suggests, our research employs a broadly constructivist orientation, in which values, like collective identities, are 'made, not given' (Henderson & McEwen, 2005: 173), including, importantly, in the spaces of everyday life. If, as Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue, bottom-up productions of national identity emerge through (i) discursive claims, (ii) choices made within institutional contexts, (iii) ritual performances and (iv) consumption habits, our emphasis in this article is on the first of these: 'The practical accomplishments of ordinary people giving concrete expression to their understandings of the nation' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008: 539). Focusing on such expressions enables investigation into how claims around Muslim values, Islam and their relationship to Britain are formulated and defended in vernacular discourse. It also, as demonstrated below, allows interrogation of the limitations of such constructions through reflection on disagreement and contradiction therein.

The data for this article were generated via a mixed methods project that ran between October 2016 and January 2018 within the United Kingdom's East of England region. The project's immediate motivations were, on the one hand, an empirical curiosity about the increasing prominence of 'British values' within the United Kingdom. And, on the other, a political curiosity around the implications of this discourse for the lived experiences of individuals who may feel excluded by, or self-exclude from, this construction. This curiosity-driven approach reflects what Lobo-Guerrero (2013: 25) terms 'wondering as a research attitude', which involves approaching:

Research material on the grounds of its very existence. Its starting point is to encourage the researcher to pose questions on why something has been presented or analyzed in a particular way; what needs to be in place for a particular idea, which appears obvious or simple, to be possible, and indeed, thinkable; and what role do those ideas and thought play on the way the world is portrayed.

As Lobo-Guerrero (2013: 25) continues, wondering facilitates critique by allowing 'for the singularities of a practice or a discourse to stand out and for the researcher to make them explicit'.

To explore public constructions of the relationship between British values and Islam, the project employed three methods (Jarvis et al., 2020a, 2020b). First is digital storytelling, in which Muslims living in East Anglia were recruited as participant researchers to conceive, film and edit short autoethnographic films (8–10 min) on the theme: 'British [Muslim] values'. This was accompanied by semi-structured interviews with the participant researchers and other

relevant individuals, and by eight focus groups with Muslim, non-Muslim and mixed participants. Supplementary data were also generated in a Q&A discussion that followed a public screening of the autoethnographic films, and two group discussions with hard-to-reach communities led by a participant researcher.

Although informed by all of the above, this article concentrates on material generated within the focus groups. The groups followed a common topic guide of four initial open-ended questions: (i) What does the term 'British values' mean to you?; (ii) How do you feel when you hear people talk about 'British values'?; (iii) What does the term Muslim values mean to you?; and (iv) How do you think 'British values' relate to Muslim values? Attendees were then shown short clips from films produced by three participant researchers (totalling approximately 8 min) and asked whether this impacted their understanding. The groups concluded by asking—'If you could say one thing to the government about British values and Islam, what would that be?'—and, time permitting, opportunity for wider discussion. Given our emphasis on public understandings, experiences and discourses, these questions served as a guide, with the conversations led by participants' interests.

Our purposive recruitment strategy employed public advertisements, targeted invitations, snowballing and negotiation with community organisations. The focus groups took place in a range of settings, including small rooms on a university campus, participants' homes and community organisation premises. Forty-five individuals contributed to the groups, generating a corpus of 56,716 words. The groups were recorded on audio equipment, and participants were compensated with a supermarket voucher. On completion of the research, our audio files were transcribed, checked for accuracy and analysed through the 'framework method' (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002): a common qualitative approach (e.g., Gale et al., 2013; Jarvis & Lister, 2015; Law et al., 2011) for systematically sifting, charting and sorting research material to understand, order and summarise data in its own terms (Jones, 2000: 560). This meant an immersive reading through four stages (Gale et al., 2013: 4–5): familiarisation through an initial reading of the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings; coding via a paraphrasing of short sections of text within each transcript; production of an analytical framework from the coded material; and application of this framework to the corpus.

Our analytical framework was structured around an a priori template of four basic codes generated deductively from the project's research questions and our topic guide (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006): (i) British values; (ii) Muslim values; (iii) relationship between British values and Muslim values; and (iv) miscellaneous (to capture material tangentially rather than directly relevant to our research questions). This template provided a broad structure for our analysis, which then proceeded inductively through identification of subcategories capturing diversity (of perspective, of emphasis, of focus and so forth) within each of the four headings. The use of a hybrid inductive/deductive approach is common within qualitative analysis using the framework method (e.g., Gaile & Adams, 2018; Grunberg et al., 2021; Lester et al., 2021), enabling fidelity to the research data while maintaining a focus on the underpinning research questions and literature. Table 1 summarises the analytical framework this produced.

As with related research, we do not claim that our findings are replicable (e.g., Jackson & Hall, 2016; Jarvis & Lister, 2015). The purposive sampling approach and sample size of our research means we are able to offer, at most, 'moderatum' rather than statistical generalisations about vernacular understandings of Islam and British values (Williams, 2000: 221). Such generalisations are moderate in scope and moderately held (Payne & Williams, 2005: 297) and recognise that our findings are contingent to our research design and analysis (Payne & Williams, 2005: 306; Jarvis et al., 2020a). Here, it is important to recognise that the vernacular perspectives discussed below are intimately linked to the contexts of their construction and therefore exist as the co-creative work of focus group participants and moderators (Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). Thus, although focus groups offer a useful method for exploring 'everyday' discourse on contentious issues (see Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Morgan, 1996), they do not provide unfettered access to participants' inner thoughts.

4 | MUSLIM VALUES, BRITISH VALUES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP

Our focus groups generated wide-ranging discussion on the relationship between British Values and Islam. To explore this, we begin by showing the prominence of constructions of difference across our groups which coalesce

TABLE 1 British values and Islam: Analytical framework

Index category	Subcategories	Example
1. British values	1.1 Contestability, questionability 1.2 Specific framings, e.g. freedom, honesty, generosity 1.3 Anecdotes/illustrative examples 1.4 Changes over time 1.5 Similarities/differences with other places 1.6 Problems with the use of 'British values' 1.7 Origins of British values—cultural, historical and intrinsic	1.1 <u>Elusiveness</u> : 'It's hard to say exactly what they are'
2. Muslim values	2.1 Contestability 2.2 Specific examples, e.g., Sharia law, arranged marriages, dress codes. 2.3 Characterisations of Islam 2.4 History of Islam 2.5 Perceptions/constructions of Islam, e.g., in the media 2.6 Similarities/differences with other faiths 2.7 Characterisations of Muslims 2.8 Specific framings of 'Muslim values' 2.9 Importance of Muslim values (human, social) 2.10 Personal anecdotes/illustrations	2.2 <u>Arranged marriage</u> : 'Arranged marriages. That still goes on, does not it, in their religion?'
3. Relationship between British values and Muslim values	1.1 Similarities and overlaps 1.2 Differences	1.3 <u>Religious festivals</u> : 'Muslims do not celebrate Christmas, do they? Well, they may do in a different way but Christmas to us.'
4. Miscellaneous	4.1 Relationships between politics, culture and religion 4.2 Value or importance of religion/faith (in general) 4.3 Problems of religion (in general) 4.4 Multi-culturalism, integration, cohesion 4.5 Identity	4.4 <u>Immigration, tensions</u> : 'We have all the people that have been where we live generation, generation, and then we have new families coming in, so it's a bit of a divide.'

into an overarching Muslim/British binary. This binary, we argue, elides heterogeneities within these complex identities, draws on established Orientalist tropes, and performs important discursive work for explaining political issues. From this, we turn to three dissenting understandings of this relationship. Notwithstanding their potential to disrupt dominant discourses of difference, we argue that these alternatives (while likely well-intentioned) frequently reproduce a construction of difference between the two identities.

4.1 | Constructing Muslim values

One of the most common themes encountered across our focus groups was a depiction of Islam as a faith of uncommon importance to its believers. Its centrality to Muslims was regularly mentioned, whether through reference to individual identity: 'when the Bismillah is whispered in their ear at birth, that is their identity, that is the culture. To depart from that is a massive thing, which may lead in some cases to death' (Group 3; Respondent [R] 1; non-Muslim; female); or to the values of believers: 'Any moral values ... as a believer, I believe this came from the Holy Book because we believe this Holy Book came from Allah' (G5; R2; Muslim; female). Views such as these also supported juxtapositions between majority Muslim and Christian societies: 'The countries that you are describing with Islam ... there's no separation of state and belief.' (G3; R2; non-Muslim; male), and 'the religion of Islam is much more central to the countries in which it is the main religion' (G2; R6; non-Muslim; male).

The above examples are indicative of a widespread understanding we encountered of Islam as a distinctive faith with profound differences to other religions. During a discussion about family and marriage, for instance, one participant argued:

Muslim culture is different. It does not mean to say it cannot interact with, and obviously it does interact with other, with British values, but it is different, and fascinatingly different. ... looking from the inside you can see all these complexities. Looking from the outside it just looks, to many British people, different and somewhat threatening. (G2; R6; non-Muslim; male)

Islam, here, is deeply embedded in individual lives and social structures, and Muslims are characterised as unusually pious. One non-Muslim participant, for instance, when asked about his understanding of 'Muslim values' argued that 'typical' Muslims were particularly, even excessively, sensitive about their faith:

You can be a Christian and have this idea of British values of being tolerant and okay yeah, you are knocking Jesus again in the public sphere on *Have I Got News For You*. You know, it's easy to mock Christianity and Christians do not take the same offence as, I was going to say the average Muslim. But a typical Muslim, or the Muslim community are much more easily offended much more quickly. They're reactionary, as soon as you say anything, you cannot even speak about the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, which is what I had to say in Saudi [Arabia]. Because if you do not say 'peace be upon him', it's like you are not showing enough reverence to the Prophet. Yes, I'm not, I go along when people say that it's very easy to offend Muslims, it is very, very easy to offend Muslims, they are easily offendable, offended as a group. (G3; R2; non-Muslim; male)

Other participants also spoke to the religiosity of Muslims when asked to reflect on representations of Muslims in the media: 'I guess if [you] are of the Muslim faith you are probably far more committed than if you are of the Christian faith, in this day and age' (G7, R6; non-Muslim; female). For one non-Muslim female, similarly, 'if you are a practicing Muslim you'll pray five times a day, there are so many rites and rituals around it, which the secular and the religious are kind of intertwined' (G6; R5; non-Muslim; female).

This construction of Muslims as especially pious and unusually beholden to their faith connects to a distinctively conservative framing of 'Muslim values'. One non-Muslim participant, for instance, after watching a film produced by a British Muslim convert, compared Islam unfavourably with the liberalisation of other Abrahamic faiths: 'In Christianity and Judaism there are very liberal arms of those religions which welcome gay marriage and homosexuality generally. ... I may be wrong—but I think it's more of a problem for Islamic culture to deal with' (G2; R6; non-Muslim; male). Others highlighted the importance of respect and modesty within Islam: 'Muslim values [include], for example modesty, or, you know, worshipping ... respecting your family, these kind of things' (G2; R7; non-Muslim; male); and 'I've worked with a lot of the young people for a long time, and a lot of them have been Muslim, and it has always

struck me that they are very respectful towards other people and especially towards older people and to women' (G8; R3; non-Muslim; male). In the words of one Muslim participant, similarly: 'respect is very important for a Muslim because we have to always respect adults and we cannot speak to adults rudely' (G8; R2; Muslim; male). Although anecdotes of nonconformity were shared in our groups—'girls I went to sixth form with, some of them would leave the house in a hijab, and then as soon as they got to school, they would put on make-up and change their clothes in the toilet and then go out' (G2; R4; non-Muslim; female)—the overwhelming portrayal we encountered (from non-Muslims in exclusively non-Muslim focus groups in particular) was of a traditional and conservative Islam dictating the behaviour of Muslims, even to the detriment of others:

I was with a friend who's a retired psychiatric nurse and ... I told her about this [focus group]. And, she said, well in her work she encountered several Muslims, and some of them were very easy to get on with, and others not so. And, professionally she found it very difficult when they might be, for instance, in the middle of restraining a difficult patient, and she's a little woman. And, she'd be working with a Muslim and it was prayer time and they'd just go. (G6; R4; non-Muslim; female)

4.2 | Constructing difference

Given the above characterisation of Islam, it is perhaps unsurprising that a number of participants explicitly differentiated Muslim values from their British equivalents. As three participants in a mixed focus group responded to a question about similarities between the two:

- G8; R1; Muslim; male: No, different.
 G8; R2; Muslim; male: No, I think they are different.
 G8; R4; non-Muslim; male: Very different, yeah.

Three constructions of difference, even tension, were particularly common in our groups. First was a sense that a conformist, even repressive, Islam sat uneasily alongside a more licentious 'pretty much, do as you like, freedom, British secular culture' (G6; R2 non-Muslim; male). One participant when asked about the distinctiveness of Muslim values was critical of the excesses of British liberalism yet argued of Islam that—'we think it's weird ... I certainly would not want to have to do that myself, and everything that goes with it' (G6; R5; non-Muslim; female). A Muslim female, similarly, unfavourably contrasted the conformism demanded by majority Muslim countries with the individualism of states such as Britain: 'In countries which the Muslims are [the] majority, there's no acceptance to others, there is no individual rights ... they found these things here in the UK, in Europe, in their new lives, new communities, they are not from their cultures' (G5; R1; Muslim; female). Another participant, in a non-Muslim focus group, went further still, translating perceived geographical and cultural differences into a temporal one that relegated 'the Muslim outlook' to an inferior, closed past (see Helliwell & Hindess, 2013):

I was wondering if a Muslim outlook today is not so dissimilar from a British Christian outlook ... well I was going to say 80 or 90 years ago ... you know, will Islam ... the Islamic outlook on the world, will it move on, or is the trendy modern Islamic outlook actually ... more repressive? ... It's the repressive sort of fundamentalism, radicalism, that gets the headlines is not it? And, there are some ways that I find it incredibly difficult, the burka and ... I do not think anything should be banned. But why do you want to hide yourself away? I can see that this is our view, our view is that they are hiding themselves away ... But I'd like to know whether it's the woman's view or the male dominated. (G6; R3; non-Muslim; female)

The emphasis on the Burka speaks to a second prominent construction of difference we encountered focused upon gendered inequalities, with reference to ostensibly misogynistic dress codes, gendered violences and matrimonial expectations especially common in our groups. In the words of one participant, considering cultural difference, for instance: 'arranged marriages. That still goes on, does not it, in their religion?' (G4; R5; non-Muslim female). For another, in a non-Muslim focus group, more broadly, 'I think perhaps Muslims' ideology has a slightly different idea of what relationships between the sexes should be than our society which is basically secular' (G6; R2; non-Muslim; male). One participant from the same group situated gendered opportunities within wider social structures:

People I've spoken to who are Muslim probably do feel those same values [as Christians]. But the Muslim communities do not ... Not necessarily the religion, but Muslims do seem to segregate men and women, which I do not actually find compatible with my views. I've never wanted to feel a second-class citizen, and I think growing up as a girl in this society, I had to think why cannot I play football, why cannot I do woodwork, why cannot I be a pilot? I had all those thoughts as a child, and I think children today, a woman today, a girl today, does not have to think that. But actually, in other societies that are still thinking that, but they should not be. (G6; R4; non-Muslim; female)

In the following conversation on cultural difference and values, concerns around arranged marriage, forced marriage, respect for women, and women's rights coalesce towards a relatively homogeneous construction of Islam:

G4; R7; non-Muslim; male: I mean like everybody says now, obviously, we are all the same ... but we do hold sometimes different values to other people and a lot of Muslims, they do have the same bad values that we would not agree with, they just do not talk about it.

G4; R8; non-Muslim; male: Yeah, forced marriage, yeah, so that's a normal thing for them where here we do not agree with it, it's not legal. It's a British value, it's against the law and there it's something that you would do traditionally when you are 16 or 15 and life goes on. It's just one of the things that I do not understand about, you know, Muslim people and the fact that from the people I know that are Muslims, they have no tolerance for women and I hold really big values for you know democracy and values for women and treating the women's right and a lot of cases I've seen where Muslim people have no actual respect to their women, like you know, British people have for other women like their daughters or wives or you know, friends, relatives.

A third construction of difference contrasted the above construction of pious Muslims with the secularity of 'English people [who are] not very religious now' (G8; R5; Muslim; male). This distinction juxtaposed, on the one hand, a British tendency to compartmentalise religion: 'We regard religion as a personal thing. It's something that's inside us, inside our heads, that what we believe, no matter that we share beliefs with other people, we still treat it—I think quite rightly—as a personal thing' (G3, R3; non-Muslim male). With, on the other, a sense of Islam's omnipresence in the lives and Muslims: 'I think there's a lot of religious things that we English people would not do and Muslim people do, like the Ramadan. That's a kind of thing that, you know, in here you would not do and, you know, any Islamic person, it's on their head, they have to do it. Even if they do not want to they have no choice' (G4; R9; non-Muslim female). As one participant summarised:

We do not really get that religion is so important, we just do not get that ... Even the small minority of the British population that would claim to be religious and attend church on a Sunday, they do not take their religion as seriously, and it's not as big a part of their lives. And, it's very hard to understand a culture where religion is such a big part of your life. We just do not get that ... It's just two completely opposed views. (G6; R2; non-Muslim; male)

As the above suggests, Muslim and non-Muslim participants in our focus groups tended towards a binary construction of Islam's relationship to Britishness. Islam, as we have seen, is characterised as traditional, conservative and all-encompassing for its followers. Despite positive references to respect and hospitality, this vernacular construction situates Muslim values (such as modesty), social relations (generational or gendered) and practices (shariah law, arranged marriage) as outdated, even ill-adapted to contemporary Britain. Muslims, positioned thus, lack critical distance from their faith; their religiosity requires adherence to Islam's rules, risking conflict with expectations of British social and professional life. This construction of excessive piety, moreover, is invoked to explain both the seriousness with which Muslims interpret their religious obligations, and the opprobrium faced by those deviating from cultural expectations.

This construction also, importantly, both relies upon and reproduces a contrasting account of British values. Where Islam is traditional and conservative, Britain—for our non-Muslim focus groups, in particular—is modern and liberal: a space of equalities, rights, protections and freedoms: 'probably one of the only countries in the world where the defining characteristics of freedom are upheld as strongly as they are here' (G3; R3; non-Muslim; male). Islam's religiosity, here, finds opposition in Britain's secular, progressive, and fluid cultural mores: 'British values are constantly changing. There's a move now towards secular liberalism in a big way' (G3; R1; non-Muslim; female). And the conformity expected of Muslims finds its opposition in British tolerance: 'Tolerance of difference, tolerance of different faiths, religions amongst others ... not everybody lives in a democracy, we do.' (G6; R1; non-Muslim; female). Islamic solemnity contrasts with the stereotypical British sense of humour: 'A lot of British people across all classes tend to react to stressful and dangerous situations with humour—as a mechanism for coping. ... we have a sort of ironic distance from a lot of things that exorcise many people' (G6; R2; non-Muslim; male). And the anachronisms of Islam, finally, contrast with a construction of Britain as progressive and modern, uncontested within our non-Muslim focus groups, as in this account of women's rights in the United Kingdom:

Most countries that do not share what we have now labelled our Britishness, the values we have just discussed, the most obvious thing that strikes us when we go to see them, to visit their country, is that women do not have the rights that they have here. Now this is, does not just apply to countries which are substantially Islamic, it applies to most countries. ... I mean to be fair, we are not different or better, we have just managed to be a bit ahead of the curve, where these things are concerned. (G3; R2; non-Muslim; male)

4.3 | Implications and alternatives

This widespread binary between a progressive/modern/liberal/secular Britain and a dated/conservative/traditional/pious Islam positions the two, as we have seen, in a relationship of difference. Heterogeneities within the two poles, here, are elided or resolved through this construction, with Muslim otherness marking the boundaries, and therefore establishing the meaning, of modern, liberal Britain (Salter, 2002: 10–11). Constructions of difference, such as these, are vital to the production of collective identities that are contingent and historically situated rather than reflective of any underpinning essence (Torfing, 2005: 14). More specifically, vernacular constructions of Muslims and their values reinforce the myth of an internally coherent and identifiable British identity associated with its own distinctive set of political ideals. As David Campbell (1998: 2) summarises, 'the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an 'inside' from an 'outside', a 'self' from an 'other', a 'domestic' from a 'foreign'.

These everyday reflections on Muslim values and practices draw, at times, on established Orientalist tropes in their (re)imagining of self and other by depicting Islam as systematically distinct from the West and relatively resistant to change (Said, 2003: 300–301). In this sense, they resonate with and arguably reproduce the wider political and public discourses considered at the article's outset. Interestingly, despite the widespread securitization of

Muslims as a *danger* to British lives, security and values (Croft, 2012; Kundnani, 2014), we encountered very few explicit constructions of threat. Examples of banal, quotidian forms of antagonism were far more common in our groups, with references to Islam's traditionalism and conservatism seen to generate social unease rather than threat. The following anecdote, for instance recounts a family member's conversion to Islam, which was described at other times in the group as 'complicated' and creating 'ripples in the family' (G6; R1; non-Muslim; female):

There's so many areas where it feels like we cannot be ourselves around them, because of the way they live their lives. The banter, the drink, the little superfluous things, they are on a very different path, which is fine, but back to your point about religion, it's so, so, so important [to Muslims], that is so, so, so true. (G6; R1; non-Muslim; female)

For a non-Muslim male in a different focus group, similarly:

a lot do not want to change, they bring their cultural expectations, and if it's their faith, they bring their faith, and that does not change, they want to carry on being who they are, what they do, what they practice, who they pray to, when they come here. And there can be a clash there, especially when you get—I cannot think of a better word—kind of ghettoised communities where in certain city centres or cities where women for example just stay within their social group and never speak to anybody outside of that group because there's a cultural expectation or a cultural norm. (G2; R2; non-Muslim; male)

If this binary does important discursive work in explaining social tension at the vernacular level, it also, importantly, has utility for explaining seemingly opposite dynamics of successful integration and community cohesion. Here, a conception of Britain as an instinctively liberal space of tolerance, even hospitality, towards outsiders explains the United Kingdom's functioning as a multicultural society. In the words of one participant in a non-Muslim focus group, 'you have all of these new different religions and stuff coming into the UK and you look in our, sort of, age group and you think everyone is mixing along quite well' (G4; R3; non-Muslim; female). For another, similarly, British success in this area contrasts markedly with the illiberalism of other societies: 'You talk to people abroad, they say Britain is in many ways an easier place to live in terms of personal interaction than a lot of other countries where there's more tension' (G2; R6; non-Muslim; male).

As argued above, vernacular perspectives such as those explored in this article also have important potential to problematise or disrupt dominant discourses by drawing attention to hidden or subjugated understandings and experiences. As Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2017: 45), drawing on Rancière, neatly put it, they can make 'heard what is otherwise discounted by those who govern as "mere noise"'. In our groups, we encountered several alternative, even dissenting, constructions of the Britishness/Islam relationship. Some participants, for instance, problematised the very idea of 'Muslim values', most noticeably in the Muslim or mixed focus groups—therefore highlighting the contingency of the dominant binary relationship through unmooring values from any geographical or cultural particularity: 'There's no such thing as English values or Muslim values or this, this, that. It's just human values, is not it' (G1; R4; Muslim male). Others de-essentialised the idea of Muslim values by recognising important differences between Muslim communities—'not all us Muslims from around the world have got the same values or the same culture' (G1, R2; Muslim; female). Others still reflected on the changing nature of Muslim values—'Muslim values are changing as times change and as cultures change, and as Muslims are influenced by other things' (G2; R7; non-Muslim; male); and, indeed, on intersections between religious and other ideas and identities: 'For me, it's quite personal. It's like if I'm homophobic then my Islam would be homophobic. If I'm violent, my Islam would be violent. If I'm a feminist my Islam would be feminist. It's really that simple' (G1; R1; Muslim; female).

Many Muslim and non-Muslim participants highlighted the problematic framing of Muslims within contemporary Britain and the dangers of caricaturing Islam—'This is the kind of complexity that from the outside most British people

do not see or understand when they think of the word Muslim values' (G2; R6; non-Muslim; male). Many also spoke directly, and critically, on the widespread securitization of Muslims noted above: 'I'm Muslim as well but my religion, a lot of people say Muslims are Taliban, terrorists and all that, it's a normal thing' (G7; R1; Muslim; female), and:

for us in Britain if a couple of people are bad out of that group, we are not all seen as bad people, whereas I feel like Muslims, if there are a couple of people that have, like, done something because of their religion, I feel like the whole group are then seen as bad people and they are not all bad people. (G4; R9; non-Muslim; female)

As one participant in a non-Muslim group argued, a sense of national belonging is still frequently withheld from Muslims within the United Kingdom who remain widely seen as outsiders or 'foreign' (see Johns et al., 2015); a construction with potentially profound implications for political participation and beyond (see Kyriakides et al., 2009):

I mean there's nothing technically at least to stop any of us taking our banana box and standing in Green Park and saying: this is what we believe, and this is wrong, and this is how It should be done. Not in theory anyway. But if somebody, if a Muslim stands up and says that we are wrong, or something is not... Whatever they say that contradicts the mainstream liberal elite, if you like, that effectively rules this country, people say, 'Ahh you are a Muslim: it should not be like that'. We take offence more strongly than we would if one of our ... if somebody was from some other religious background. So, Muslims are singled out. (G3; R3; non-Muslim male)

The constructed difference between British and Muslim values was also, finally, problematised through reflection on potential complementarities. One non-Muslim participant, for instance, identified similarities between the values of each: 'I think they [Muslims] do respect our values. Their values are nearly the same' (G4; R11; non-Muslim female). This was evident, too, in the words of a Muslim participant from a Muslim group: 'we are more similar than we have differences, and most of the religions are based on moral values' (G5; R2; Muslim female). The religious—and therefore shared—roots of such values offered a common explanation for these complementarities, as evident in this conversation amongst non-Muslim participants:

G6; R4; non-Muslim; female: My understanding is that they are fairly similar

G6; R5; non-Muslim; female: Yeah, me too. When I said that our British values are mostly based on Christian values, then, and they are fairly similar to Muslim values aren't they?

One convert to Islam, indeed, went further still, suggesting that their new faith had generated a better understanding of their identity and values as a British citizen:

becoming Muslim I understood more about British values, more about my culture. Decency, honesty, integrity, decorum. ... There's very little differentiation between Islamic values and British values. The practice can be different, but the core ideal, the value structure, is something that, you know, is entirely compatible, there's no separation, and that has to be made clear. (G1; R3; Muslim; male)

These dissenting conceptions of the British/Muslim values relationship are important because they help render visible the contestability of dominant framings thereof. In so doing, they open opportunity for destabilising the binary construction with which we began, highlighting other ways of understanding Islam, Muslims and their 'fit' or positioning within contemporary Britain. The vernacular sharing of these alternatives appears often to be driven by an impulse towards communality: a desire to identify, and to celebrate, overlooked commonalities and connections between cultural groups. For some, moreover, recognising the shared roots of British and Muslim values in the

Abrahamic faiths and appreciating the heterogeneity, rather than homogenisation, of communities itself presents opportunities for greater social cohesion rooted in commonalities rather than perceptions of difference.

These alternative constructions merit further reflection for two reasons. In the first instance, they allow for very different articulations of the meaning of Britishness and Islam. Rather than static pairs on an antagonistic binary, the two identities, here, become more complex, more plural and more entangled with other ideas, values and ways of being. This not only serves as a critique of the widespread othering of Muslims in contemporary Britain—although, as we have seen, it certainly does this. It also pulls attention to the precarity of efforts to speak authoritatively or exhaustively about what it means to be British, or Muslim, or both. This, then, potentially repoliticizes these entities through demonstration of their fundamentally contingent existence (Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). Second, the sharing of these alternative articulations in our focus groups may even be read as an expression of political agency: as an effort directly to contest dominant discourses and their assumptions. Understood thus, the very voicing of these alternatives becomes an act of dissent (O'Loughlin & Gillespie, 2012) or resistance (Lister & Jarvis, 2013) and therefore an act of everyday political participation, however small or banal. In this sense, they constitute not only representations, but negotiations or enactments of being that involve a (re)claiming of what it means to be British or Muslim.

Notwithstanding the importance of these alternatives, we need also recognise their limitations in fully escaping the dominant Britishness/Muslim binary and its socio-political work. In the first instance, many ostensibly positive framings of this relationship still situated Muslims and Islam as somehow outside or external to Britishness, not least through the use of banal deixes such as 'us' and 'them' (see Billig, 1995): 'But I think *they* do respect *our* values. *Their* values are nearly the same.' (G4; R11; non-Muslim female, our emphasis). Such language continues the rhetorical positioning of Muslims as foreign, as different to an imaginary British 'us', even while it purports to recognise contingencies between the two. Second, assertions of similarity in our groups also tended to reproduce the dominant construction of Britain as a liberal, democratic space of tolerance and hospitality in which media stereotypes are critiqued and different communities are able peacefully to cohabitate. In so doing, of course, they risk overlooking the multiple and ongoing examples and experiences of intolerance, discrimination and Islamophobia faced by Muslims today. Descriptions of Muslim willingness to integrate, moreover, also risk reproducing a restrictively liberal construction of multiculturalism in which unchallenging forms of otherness are integrated into a pre-existing, and subsequently undisturbed, self. As Kyle Grayson (2013: 382) argues, drawing on Troyna (1985: 217), 'these manifestations are the "saris, samosas, and steel-bands" that constitute the liberal (or boutique) vision of multiculturalism. They are easily absorbed, perceived as unthreatening to the dominant liberal *mise-en-scène*, and understood as non-political'. Or, as one of our non-Muslim participants put it in discussing this liberal paradox: 'It's when it goes against toleration that we do not tolerate it, if that's not too paradoxical. You know, we will not tolerate intolerance' (G6; R2; non-Muslim; male).

5 | CONCLUSION

This article presented original findings from a series of focus groups on 'vernacular' conceptions of Muslims, Islam and their relationship to 'British values'. As we have seen, we encountered a dominant construction of this relationship framed around a series of binary pairings in which Islam's traditional, conservative, and outmoded piety is juxtaposed to the progressive, liberal, secular modernity of Britain. This framing, we argued, is constitutive, rather than reflective of these two identities which tend to be simplified and find their heterogeneities flattened. The binary draws, moreover, on longstanding tropes around Muslim difference, and does potentially important discursive work in the explanation of contemporary political dynamics.

Engaging with these expressions, we argue, adds a textual richness to findings from related quantitative studies. Participants in research such as this are able to speak on identity and difference through categories and experiences that are meaningful to *them*, notwithstanding the limitations of a focus group setting. As we have seen, this adds

richness and nuance to our understanding of public views and their anchoring in autobiographical experiences, anecdotes, thought experiments and the like. It also enables reflection on the dominance of established discourses in this area, and—in the final part of our analysis—on opportunities for, and efforts at, disrupting such discourses. Although we are circumspect about the ability of alternative articulations to fully escape the dominant British/Muslim binary we encountered, the willingness to discuss alternatives may itself be read as an important effort to (re)politicise the binary and its typically antagonistic structuration.

Future research in this area could therefore build on our analysis through greater exploration of the sources of vernacular constructions: What role, for instance, do popular culture or the news media play in public understandings? Comparative analysis with other regions or countries would also add to our understanding of the particularity or otherwise of these findings. Longitudinal studies would shed light on continuities and change over time, and the importance of specific events within this. Larger studies, finally, would enable analysis of the importance of other identity claims and their intersection with those explored here: Do gender, social class or sexuality, for instance, impact upon public constructions of this relationship?

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