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Reluctant pluralists: European Muslims and essentialist identities

Justin Gest

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An emerging consensus among scholars of Muslim political and social identity suggests that Western Muslims live out an anti-essentialist critique of identity construction. Considering this view, this paper examines a cross-national comparison of British Bangladeshis in London and Spanish Moroccans in Madrid that solicits the perceptions of working-class Muslim men. While the results indeed reaffirm respondents' concomitant relationships to a variety of identity paradigms, interview content demonstrates that subjects' multiplicity is complicated by their desire to meet – not reject – the essentialist standards of belonging to the identity paradigms discursively available to them. Rather than defiantly cherry-picking preferred characteristics of religion, ethnicity and nationality, individuals' responses suggest that they are trying to fulfil perceived standards of authenticity. Such a contention helps explain the prevalence of Western Muslims' expressed and well-documented 'identity crisis', suggests the enduring relevance of identity essentialisms, and more broadly, complicates post-modern conceptions of identity formation.

Keywords: Muslims; identity; nationality; Islam; UK; Spain; Europe

Introduction

Identity construction among young European Muslims of migrant origin has drawn significant attention for many reasons. They represent a fascinating case study of the intermingling of distinct ethnocultural, religious and national senses of belonging – each complicated and strengthened by ever-intimate and immediate tools of globalized communication. European Muslims also represent the fastest-growing population in many of their respective countries – numbering more than 58 million people in Europe by 2030 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011) – which has galvanized debates about welfare consumption, employment and citizenship. Moreover, the private construction of European Muslim identity has been publicized significantly by corresponding political identities and their scrutiny by policymakers and the press. Threaded through each of these considerations is interest (or concern) about the purported conflict between Muslims' allegiance to their faith and their consensual obligation to their state (Gest 2010; Laurence 2012). The question is: how can we explain European Muslim identities?

Examining the whirlwind of analysis, there appears to be an emerging consensus among scholars of social and political identity that European Muslims live out an

anti-essentialist critique of identity construction every day (see e.g. Strasser 2008; Salih 2004; Liebkind 1989; Grillo 2003, 2004). Indeed, in their quotidian choices, European Muslims selectively negotiate a variety of obligations and lifestyles to formulate a constellation of unique identities that – from the outside – appear to select from different spheres of belonging simultaneously. Subsequently, various scholars have heralded a generation of young Muslims ‘striving to resist hegemonic attempts to reduce their identities to essentialised ideological entities, and seeking to destabilise these hegemonic representations’ (Salih 2004, 996). Scholars think that European Muslims do this by – for example – adhering to certain aspects of Islam, specific ideals of national belonging and unique traditions of homeland culture to assemble an amalgamated identity that defies the discourses of complete religious, national or ethnic ‘authenticity’.

This argument connects with a variety of work by scholars arguing for a postmodernist approach to identity construction. Informed by societies defined by greater individual choice and less normative guidance, this approach emphasizes the incoherence and decentralization of identification processes that limit individual agency in the process of self-definition (see Rattansi and Phoenix 1997; Bauman 2001). With new capacity for action and self-definition, Hall (1991, 39) writes that suppressed minorities are obligated and able to confront their pasts, recover exiled cultures, rediscover social roles and subjectively recast their identities. The self is thereby viewed as ‘constructed’ – in the modernist sense that it is not organic, but also in the postmodernist sense that it is interminably renovated (Hall 1990, 222). Baumann (1996) understands this interplay by creating conceptual space for ‘dominant’ and ‘demotic’ (local) identities.

In examining the purported anti-essentialism of European Muslim identity construction, I have focused on the perspectives of young, working-class, British Bangladeshi and Spanish Moroccan adult men, situated in their local context. While collected data indeed reaffirm respondents’ concomitant relationships to a variety of identity paradigms, interview content demonstrates that their multiplicity is complicated by their desire to *meet* – not reject – the discursively available essentialist standards of belonging to identity paradigms. Rather than defiantly cherry-picking characteristics of religion, ethnicity and nationality – as it appears to the outsider – individual responses suggest that the young Muslim men interviewed are trying to fulfil perceived standards of authenticity. In short, the British and Spanish Muslims interviewed often expressed an implicit desire to be ‘everything to everyone’.

Such a contention helps explain the prevalence of what young Muslims have called an ‘identity crisis’. Indeed, individuals that are disinterested in accommodating the essentialist identity components of religion, ethnicity or nationality would not feel a sense of crisis if they were deemed inauthentic by their peers. Instead, it is precisely an internal desire to fulfil the perceived standards of authenticity that underpins individuals’ senses of self and collective belonging. From interview content, this appears true despite the constructed nature of essentialist ideals and participants’ successful daily negotiation of these competing allegiances. In what psychologists term *polyphasia*, young British and Spanish Muslims thereby wish to shift from one competing identity to the next depending on context, without losing the strength of

their connection to one identity vis-à-vis the other. They are the most reluctant of pluralists.

While this argument reconsiders our approach to and understanding of Muslim political identity formation, it also raises questions about the postmodern conception of identification as it pertains to the young Muslim men interviewed. Indeed, the evidence suggests that multiplicity is not necessarily a rebuff of the essentialist cultural structures that postmodernists dismiss, but may be a separate simultaneous embrace of different (and perhaps awkwardly conflicting) essentialisms. In this way, an example like ‘British Muslims’ should be thought of as striving to be quintessentially British *and* quintessentially Muslim – meeting the perceived standards of one community without mitigating the authenticity of their belonging to the other.

In this article, I will substantiate this contention by beginning with a brief overview of the methods and background of the two case studies. I will then consider how different theories of identity formation understand the role and impact of essentialisms. This review raises three principal questions: (1) Do individuals actually disappear from the process of identity formation in post-modernity? (2) Amid the multiplicity, are identities fragmented or coherent? (3) What is the role of social contexts in European Muslims’ identity formation? I will address these queries with reference to prominent literature and interview data, before concluding with the implications of my ideas about subjects’ perceptions of essentialist identity paradigms.

Background to the cases

Methods

The study of essentialisms and contemporary identity formation requires sensitivity to surrounding social contexts and the variability of their subjective interpretation. Qualitative interviews and immersion in communities of interest enable the researcher to consider both situated experiences and objectively observable behaviour (see Côté 2006). Equally importantly, they illuminate the continuous interactional processes that intermingle context with idiosyncrasy in natural settings. Under circumstances when certain personal choices were neither behaviourally observable nor measurable, probing follow-up questions and passive observation allowed me to investigate the rationalization of respondents’ senses of affinity.

Furthermore, identity formation is a process (Hermans 2001; Grotevant 1987; Kroger 1993). It is therefore important to use investigative methods that examine individuals’ deliberative considerations as they make everyday choices in real time. As Schachter writes:

In listening to individuals’ descriptions of their deliberations and choices regarding identity, it is possible to fathom how they understood the relationships among their different identifications and how they consciously and unconsciously attempted to transform or redefine these relationships in order to create a more coherent identity. (Schachter 2004, 171)

Labs are simply less sensitive to social contexts and the power inequities therein. So at the expense of generalizability, I anticipated that qualitative interviews would render a more meticulous comprehension of sociopolitical behaviour and ideation that would inform my hypotheses. Data were therefore collected on street corners and football fields, in youth clubs, living rooms, mosques and fast-food shops – in order to solicit the subjectivities of respondents' social and political self-image.

Migrant-origin, second-generation European Muslims evoke many key themes in identity theory and, for the purposes of this study, are subject to a variety of powerful essentialisms. Despite Muslims' remarkable ethnic, national and sectarian heterogeneity, they have been classified monolithically by their supranational religious affiliation. However, the subject position 'Muslim' has also allowed many European Muslims to simplify troubling aspects of their nationality or ethnicity (Valentine and Sporton 2009, 744). Despite lamenting the problems with essentialisms, Grillo (2004) writes that:

for some people (outsiders, insiders, Muslims, non-Muslims) a person's essence is captured by their religion. Though it is important not to essentialise "Muslim", we must understand that essentialising is a social fact which analysis must take into account and explain.' (Grillo 2004, 864)

And in practice, the classification 'Muslim' and its suggested essentialisms have not only been wielded by governments and non-adherents, but also by Muslims themselves in equally instrumentalist fashion. Recently, this has been as true for those seeking to vilify Islam as it has been for those attempting to defend and reclaim it.

This study was based on two case studies of European Muslims – Bangladeshis in London's East End and Moroccans in Southern Madrid. All participants are aged between eighteen and thirty and are citizens or will shortly be eligible for citizenship in their countries of residence. All have resided nearly the entirety of their lives in Britain or Spain. Subjects were encountered in their neighbourhoods, granted full confidentiality, and examined using in-depth interviews. Part of a larger study on European Muslim political behaviour and identity construction, these communities were selected for their contrasting sociopolitical identities, despite similar social positioning and similar systems of national government. Cognizant of differences in citizenship policy and migration histories, I interviewed 100 subjects in total – sixty in the target group plus forty community leaders and elders to provide context (for details, see Gest 2010, 233–243).

London's East End

Since their arrival in the East End in the 1970s, Bangladeshis have slowly emerged to define the contemporary East End's civic and cultural life – supplanting antecedent communities of Eastern European Jews, Irish Catholics and Francophone Huguenots as the newest migrant community of London's historically working-class borough (see Dench, Gavron, and Young 2006). Like their predecessors, earlier generations of Bangladeshis encountered the intolerance of white East Enders wary of an inscrutable Other (Eade 1994; Eade and Garbin 2002).

However, thanks to their effervescent civic activism (see Glynn 2006), the UK's rather open citizenship laws and historically thin definitions of Britishness, the newest generation of Bangladeshi adults is characterized by its fluency with British life, culture and politics. Today's young adults subsequently possess a fervent sense of entitlement about the rights, liberties and opportunities that they expect from the British social system. Such expectations have frequently been disappointed by a competitive economy, but also by the realities of casual discrimination and the recent scrutiny of security policies that have fingered British Muslims as suspected extremists, impugning the Islamic faith for the actions of a handful of adherents. This turn has coincided with a public reaction to the multiculturalist discourse of the 1980s and 1990s and a preference for policies promoting greater 'cohesion' around identified 'core values'.

Lavapiés and Southern Madrid

The southern barrios of Madrid begin once the city's dramatic plazas, grand promenades and calculated urban planning deteriorate into the narrow, sloping passageways and crooked corridors of Lavapiés – the central city's low-rent immigrant barrio. In the immediate aftermath of the train bombings on 11 March 2004, several young Moroccan, Algerian and Syrian suspects were arrested in the corridors of Tribulete Street in Lavapiés, where the mobile phones that detonated the bombs were purchased. Ultimately, eighteen of the twenty-six men identified by police as participants in the attacks were Moroccan nationals, most from Tangiers and the neighbouring former colonial outpost of Tetuán. Since then, a bolstered presence of police officers who patrol the plazas and alleys by car, motorbike and horseback interrogate people regularly, demanding documentation. 'The 11 March bombs really changed things a lot,' says one interviewee, Majid. 'And it was by Moroccans. We really just [screwed] ourselves. The behaviour of Spaniards changed. When you're in the streets, they treat you differently, they look at you differently.' Increasingly securitized, the Moroccan community is steadily moving to the peripheries of Madrileña society. Neighbourhoods of Moroccans are gradually growing in the southern, working-class barrios of Madrid Sur (García 2004).

Even without much institutional or symbolic acknowledgement of their growing presence in Spain, Moroccans have adapted. Unlike British Bangladeshis, this has been a largely passive process of consuming available cultural goods and following certain local customs. Most Moroccans interviewed – even some of those born in Spain – maintain a lingering desire to return to Morocco, and many do not believe that Spanishness occupies *any* part of their identity, that they have any future stake in Spain, and that the norms of Catholic Spain and Islamic Morocco are reconcilable. Given these disparate constructions of European Muslim identities, the following sections will examine subjects' concurrent relationships with national, ethnocultural and religious spheres of belonging.

Identity theory and essentialisms

Much of social and psychological identity theory has centred on the roles that individuals play and make. The self is generally thought to be a dynamic construct

that negotiates individual behaviour given ambient social structures and circumstances. This behaviour is informed by the internalization and interpretation of contextual norms, discursive stereotypes and paragons of identity that the individual may then emulate, rebuff or somehow integrate. In any case, identity theory, even while revealing the constructed nature and incoherence of essentialisms, acknowledges that individual choices are ultimately impacted by them (see Hogg, Terry, and White 1995, 256–262). This section will first review European Muslims' relationship with such identity essentialisms, and then consider modernist and postmodernist explanations.

Social discourse about Muslims and Islam has been dominated by the promulgation of images portraying an irreconcilably foreign and illiberal group of young men and suppressed women to characterize a religion that is arguably more ethnoculturally heterogeneous than any other. Such imagery has been, to a large extent, the product of reactionary efforts to construct and root simplistic essentialisms amid – and also *because of* – the perception that Islam is competing with national identities. Migrant-origin Muslims' reconstruction of homeland norms has spurred native communities to reflect on the character of indigenous identity in order to define it against the difference confronting them. In this way, not only have these national identities been dis-embedded, but like Muslim identities, they have been reinvented, some involving nostalgic efforts at recovery – exemplified in 'heritage' projects – which attempt to shore up the unstable, shifting grounds of identity formation (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997, 99–100).

In characterizing their national identity, European states have been most adept at defining that which they are not. Consequently, the past decade has witnessed the recreation of 'Britishness', '*Hispanidad*' and '*fraternité*' – enshrining essentialist conceptions of the national into public policy. Recent rules that ban burkas, establish British 'values' or prohibit the construction of minarets have played on the need to adhere to a particularist liberalism that is often every bit as constructed, exclusive and fundamentalist as the Islamic extremism from which it seeks to differentiate itself. Howarth (2002) has persuasively exhibited how individuals develop an understanding of their social context and of their relationship to it through the eyes of others. For this reason, it is worth considering the impact of and response to such ubiquitous essentialisms, as they pervade identity formation in Europe and abroad.

Modernist and Postmodernist approaches

Modernist conceptions of personal identity reflect the underpinning logic of essentialism. Erikson (1963, 1968) and Marcia (1980) argue that the solidification of a secure sense of self represents the achievement of adult maturity. This sense of self features an integrity and continuity that align the individual identity with social context so that the individual is generally unaffected by the surrounding world. Accordingly, Eriksonian modernism is characterized by: (1) individual agency; (2) sameness and continuity over time and context; (3) coherency as the resolution of adolescent conflict and introspective exploration; and (4) the assigned virtue of identity security as the achievement of psychological development. Schachter (2005, 169) notes that while Erikson was deeply aware of the social aspect of personal

identity formation, he stressed that a relatively coherent and integrated identity was the individual's psychological need as well as society's need. Indeed, modernist perspectives lend themselves to existing social propensities to construct 'typical' identities, whether for ease of reference or social mapping. However, the continuity and coherence of the modernist interpretation also contributes to the belief that certain identity 'types' possess a single set of essential characteristics, which supports simplistic reference, understanding and social treatment.

Postmodernist approaches highlight the fluidity and fragmented nature of personal identities. Scholars like Rattansi and Phoenix (1997, 101) argue that modernist theories produce a strong individual/society dichotomy that obscures understanding:

the complex ways in which identities are formed and operate dynamically in different social contexts. ...This glosses over the obvious contradiction between the naïve assumption of control and choice in "identity options" and the fact that, as is the case with women and ethnic minorities, some identities are more "assigned" than others and thus not open to choice. (Grotevant 1992)

In this way, the postmodernist approach contends that personal identities are largely imposed by social circumstances, and are not simply the unfolding of an essential essence inherent in certain human beings regardless of specific institutions and cultures (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997, 104). For postmodernists, the content of identity constructions cannot be essential because they are: (1) 'decentred' from the individual who is not conscious of certain inclinations; (2) 'relational' to ambient circumstances; (3) multiple and 'hybridized' internally and in their perception by others; and (4) constantly in the process of being reconstructed (see Rattansi and Phoenix 1997; Bauman 2001; Hall 1990, 1991; Giddens 1991).

Which of these theories best explains European Muslim identity construction? From this conceptual overview, a paradox emerges. Even as the process of identity construction is increasingly individualized by the contemporary shifting of hierarchies and boundaries, individuals continue to depend (perhaps increasingly) on essentialist organizations of personal identification to relate to one another. This means that essentialist divides are simultaneously transcended and reproduced, often by the same individuals. Indeed, while individuals may objectively discard essentialisms in new aggregations of personal identity, essentialisms appear prominently in the subjective way that individuals understand third-party perceptions of them. In order to explain British and Spanish Muslims' negotiation of these circumstances and relate it to understandings of identity construction, we must first address three pending questions given the case data:

- (1) Does European Muslim individual agency actually *disappear* from the process of identity formation in postmodernity?
- (2) Amid the multiplicity, are European Muslim identities *fragmented* or *coherent*?
- (3) What is the role of social contexts in European Muslims' identity formation?

Individual agency

Individual agency in identity formation is complicated by the question of whether the individual has control over a process of personal identity construction that is powerfully affected by social contexts. This is especially salient because the experience of European Muslims suggests that agents are susceptible to the logic and convenience of coherent constructions. My subjects accept and appeal to essentialisms, even while simultaneously defying their simplicity or irreconcilability.

Among British Bangladeshi interviewees in London's East End, their reinvigorated embrace of Islam appears to be a response to a securitized European social environment that undermines their claims to national belonging (see Archer 2001; Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera 2008). Islam is a way to respond that also satisfies the desire of young adults' parents and other local community members to follow certain ethno-religious traditions (Ballard 1996; Hussain 2004). So even while many British Bangladeshis are separating themselves from the restrictions and anachronism of Bangladeshi culture, Islam serves a sufficient replacement for all involved (Gardner and Shukur 1994).

New universalist forms of Islamic identification are unique products of the Muslim experience in the diaspora. Only once separated from acculturated forms of Islam may adherents achieve the critical distance necessary to reimagine their faith in the context of their new situated existence. In the diaspora, Muslims encounter a multiplicity of linguistic, ecclesiastical and cultural norms because there is no status quo to reference and settle matters of disputed propriety, authenticity or truth – due to an absence of, or competition for, 'social authority' (Roy 2004). Therefore, many adherents to this reinterpreted Western Islam approach their religion in the way of a convert, filled with references to 'authenticity' and a regard for the sacred text as the only dependable source (Jacobson 1997). In doing so, they subject themselves to a new essentialism that – despite its religious base – is just as constructed as national identity.

Given that some British Bangladeshis' feel rejected by white peers, the idea of an identity that ignores borders and unifies like-minded people holds great relevance. 'Islam simplifies,' Mahir says. 'It's all about unification, and that's what we're getting away from. I am a Muslim. Not a Barelwi, Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi, Hanafi or whatever. I'm a Muslim. I'm not British or Bengali. I'm Muslim.' Mahir's rejection reflects a common desire to move beyond differences to a universalist Islam that enables Muslims to transcend exclusive ties. Similarly, Ismail, a high school student, says:

I don't feel an identity crisis, because I feel like I have a relationship with God and so I don't have any problem saying that I am a Muslim. I've put myself in a box, and eliminated my British and Bengali ties. Do I need to claim to be British? No, I don't need to. I have a British passport. And I've only been to Bangladesh once, when I was a child, and I was too young to remember any of it.

Such statements suggest that subjects are ultimately in control of their identity formation – that their selections were made consciously.

Like converts, British Bangladeshis' relationship with Islam therefore becomes chosen (and thus more closely defended) and rhetorical (and thus more unstable).

Because it supplants a national or ethnic identity that requires no exercises beyond discursive identification, Islam as an identity does not necessarily suggest practice or even accurate knowledge. ‘Without Islam, I have no identity,’ Ebrahim, a university student, says. ‘My practice is weak, yeah. I have little time in life for Islam. But it’s still my base. When I have nothing else, it’ll always be there.’ All participants who discussed their dabbling in the *haram* (prohibited by Islamic law) say that they will return to the ‘right path’ later in life. Islam is therefore an entity that – unlike Britishness and Bangladeshi culture – is perceived to be flexible and enduring. It cannot be withheld because of third-party disapproval, nor is it evanescent with increasing time and distance. Indeed, Islam is perceived to be more subject to personal interpretation and agency than either British nationality or Bangladeshi heritage.

Responses here suggest the relevance of what modernist sociologists and psychologists term ‘identity structure’. Structural approaches address the manner by which individuals come to organize and construct their identity – defining how individuals receive, retain, manipulate and evaluate their life experiences and social contexts (Kroger 2005, 202). For the more outwardly religious British Bangladeshis interviewed, even though they appeal to externally imposed expectations of their Islamic piety, they also believe that they consciously *choose* whether and how to integrate their faith into their identity. This is less true for less religious respondents. Among Moroccan interviewees in southern Madrid, there was a sense that they were discursively misrepresented, and subsequently expected to maintain certain roles not of their making. As a result, those participants who were quite assimilated into Spanish culture and looked upon Moroccan norms as relics, identified with the very image that they rebuff. Zahir, a twenty-year-old from Fuenlabrada, was born and raised in Madrid:

I don’t feel Moroccan or Spanish. I’m somewhere in the middle. But I’m mostly Moroccan. Moroccans are more closed. They are in another century. They’re very traditional. You can’t go out at night, you can’t have sex before marriage, you can’t wear short clothes. I don’t feel obligated. I was taught things, but you take the path you want. That’s what my parents taught me, but Islam is more strict. In the future, I will also be a strict practitioner of Islam. And I’m certain that my wife will be Islamic. My ideal is to find a Spanish woman and convert her.

Reading his statements in other parts of the interview contextualize this reluctance to embrace the Islamic aspect of his Moroccan identity:

The image of Islam in Spain is that it is closed. That women are dominated. They have reason. It is closed. Women are undervalued. They’re supposed to have kids and no more. I’ve lived in Spain a long time and I’ve been influenced by the society here. I think we need to integrate. If we were in an Arab country, it would be fine. Our values are not incorrect objectively. They’re just incorrect for living in Spain...

I go out in Madrid. But there are a lot of places there that won’t let me in because I’m Moroccan. It’s because the real Moroccans, the ones who recently immigrated, get into a lot of trouble. They fight, they cause problems.

Zahir's statements exhibit that he is familiar with conventional portrayals and understandings of religion. In this context, his responses suggest that the labels most germane to his identity have been imposed in a way that does not reflect his interpretation. He refers to 'real Moroccans' as if he is not, and demonstrates some confusion about the contextual contingencies of Islam. He wishes to find a 'Spanish wife' but convert her (almost metaphorically) to his way of life. Clearly, Zahir's attempts to have it both ways have proven futile. He is Islamic simply because he is Moroccan, but not necessarily because he wants to be. He feels the pairing is socially forced upon him.

Objectively observed, subjects' various dabblings in Islamic religiosity and local norms suggest that they select germane attributes of multiple identity constructions to which they are exposed in the informational flow of daily life. In the process, they may individually construct self-styled identities composed of incomplete paragon – disparate fragments welded together. But subjectively interpreted, subjects explain lifestyle choices as deliberate attempts to adhere to selected essentialisms of personal importance, or as authentic reflections of innate and therefore immutable identity forms. In this way, each assumes control over the integration of diverse attributes. They think of their identity as multiple, but also complete.

Fragmentation and coherency

Questions of fragmentation and coherency seem to be in the eye of the beholder. Modernists claim that individuals choose among disparate identity elements or integrate them into a structure characterized by sameness and continuity. Postmodernists contend that such elements are never universally integrated and that fragmentation should be accepted as part of a more adaptive personality (Schachter 2005, 381). To reconcile these positions, Schachter (2004) proposes the concept of 'identity configurations' in which individuals adopt different identifications that exist separately side by side as 'confederated' attributes of the self. However, the problem of perspective persists: who determines whether an identity construction is fragmented? The observer, removed from individual decision-making, or the individual, blind to the potentially 'mixed and borrowed' nature of his or her identity? According to a majority of respondents, their identities are positively coherent.

British Bangladeshis appealed to their embattled Islamic faith as a source of coherence. Irrelevant to individuals' depth of practice or knowledge, Islamic identity simplifies the divisive networks of Muslim sects and ethnicities that compete for power, and enables some degree of felt unity against their collective vilification in the West. Some respondents described their embrace of Islam as a reaction against their rejected Britishness, which reactionaries characterize by moral temptation and vice (see Gest 2010, 104–108).

By providing a trans-ethnic source of community to supplant the problematic local, the *ummah* (global Muslim fellowship) facilitates claims to collective injury as much as it facilitates claims to collective pride. And like a culture, followers of an Islamic identity tend to treat Islamic teachings as a complete way of life – as opposed to the way that some of their parents have treated Islam, as a set of rituals to perform and repeat. However, this becomes problematic for many young people in the East End

because religious teachings and norms often conflict with demanding career ambitions and other aspects of their British identity. ‘Religion clashes with the style of the subculture,’ Ridwan says. ‘I feel bad if I go to mosque when I style up my hair, so I wear a hat. I feel weird, self-conscious when I wear my ripped jeans.’ Islam is thus employed by those who feel rejected by the essentialist British nationality as an essentialist replacement, and by those who hope to be recognized as British as an equally authentic identity that must coexist. In both cases, very few adherents view their faith as something that could be followed incoherently.

For Spanish Moroccans, just as Spanishness entails Catholicism, pork and premarital sex, their Moroccanness entails Islamic faith, a halal diet and lifestyle, and one side of the antiquated conflict between Spanish Catholics and Muslims. According to respondents, these elements are simply inseparable. Consequently, while many British Muslims feel the need to embrace their Islamic faith more closely in light of their integration into a post-Christian secular British society, such an ‘embrace’ would be redundant for Moroccans in Spain. While many British participants in London’s East End only felt as Islamic as the last time they prayed – those British Bangladeshis who had lapsed spoke of Islam with regret – this was rarely the case with Moroccan participants. Twenty-year-old Mahmud has not returned to Morocco since his parents moved to Madrid 10 years ago:

My mother says, “Pray, pray.” But I say that I will when I’m ready. Right now, I don’t have the time. You aren’t a Muslim because your parents tell you to be, or because you’re scared of God. You’re a Muslim because you feel it in your heart. It has to be there [gesturing inward].

As a Moroccan, he is quite naturally Muslim, and feels little need to reassert this or ‘prove’ it.

From this examination, we see that essentialisms (and their subjective fulfilment) frequently provide the framework of individuals’ sense of coherency – confederate or otherwise. However, individuals differ in their subjective perception of the tension between mainstream and ethnic cultures (Benet-Martínez et al. 2002, 493). For Schachter, such inconsistencies suggest an objectively observable ‘loose identity structure’ that features an inner logic and possibly a different developmental trajectory (Schachter 2005, 390).

The source of this inner logic is explicated to an extent by Hermans’ (2001) concept of the ‘dialogical self’, which combines continuity and discontinuity. He explains that there is continuity within the individual’s relationship to diverse identity elements and essentialisms. However, there is a discontinuity between the same characters as far as they represent different, incomplete and perhaps opposed voices in the spatial realm of the self (Hermans 2001, 248). Hermans argues that the dialogical self is ‘social’ in the sense that other people occupy different positions in a multi-voiced self, which therefore considers the perspectives of others outside the self while expressing the individual’s identity. Because these opposing entities are subject to situated power differences, the voices of some groups are more prominent than others (Hermans 2001, 263). In the case of European Muslims, their capacity to speak as Britons and Spaniards is mitigated by social forces. Thus they may more powerfully

assume their Islamic identity, even while quietly maintaining the voice of their British and Spanish countrymen. This suggests that the negotiation of identity is subject to context.

Social context

Given the inner logic of the dialogical self, individuals appear to access multiple systems of ideas, values and knowledge, and can shift from one network to the next. The research of Veronica Benet-Martínez et al. suggests that such shifts depend on social context. They argue that ‘individuals can possess dual cultural identities and engage in active cultural frame switching, in which they move between different cultural meaning systems [or contexts] in response to situational cues’ (Benet-Martínez et al. 2002, 493). These exogenous cues may be matters of generational status, linguistic assimilation, sociopolitical climate (Benet-Martínez et al. 2002) or per Howarth (2002), third-person understandings of one’s identity attributes. The latter appears to be particularly poignant to the identity construction of British Bangladeshis and Spanish Moroccans who feel estranged from their state of residency and citizenship.

On paper, British Bangladeshis conduct quintessentially British existences. Nearly all the subjects in the East End were born in the UK, attended British schools, and have absorbed years of British television, music and cultural media content. English is their best and usually only language. They survive on a diet of curry when at home and halal fried chicken on the streets. ‘I do want to feel British,’ says Ridwan, ‘because then I’m not isolated. I don’t want people to say that just because I’m Asian or Muslim, I’m not British.’

However, a majority of respondents say that they feel definitively rejected by British society. Qadim says:

When I have kids, they may not even speak Bengali. But in the UK, I’ve been forced to think I’m different because of my skin colour and the shade of beard I keep. Everything I have is for this country. But I’m not allowed to feel a part of it.

From news reports that cast South Asians and Muslims as dangerous, laws designed to profile them, personal and collective experiences with discrimination and racism, and negative informal social interactions, young Bangladeshis have become intensely insecure about their role in British society.

British disqualification is all the more poignant because British Bangladeshi subjects generally dismissed any significant connection to their Bangladeshi nationality. Bangladeshi customs like arranged marriage, restrictions on female behaviour, clothing preferences and certain ceremonies have been identified as part of an antiquated culture that has no place in modern British lives – even while such traditions remain practised by their parents and extended families.

Ultimately, a somewhat repressed desire to be recognized as British is what makes the rejection of Bangladeshi participants’ Britishness affect them so strongly. Their sense of entitlement has been violated. Respondents clearly appealed to the liberal notion of *de jure* Britishness, but were consistently frustrated by the *de facto* ethnocultural image of Britishness employed by countrymen who hold Bangladeshi’s

brown skin and Islamic faith against them. Interestingly, claims of British authenticity were frequently substantiated with references to local acquaintance, the English language and passports – the same attributes possessed by Spanish Moroccans who nevertheless perceive little belonging to Spain.

As opposed to their Bangladeshi counterparts' interest in fulfilling the requirements of British nationality, the majority of Moroccan subjects believed that qualification as an authentic Spaniard was impossible – short of conversion to Catholicism. They perceived themselves to be essentially Moroccan, and therefore essentially not Spanish. Asked to identify certain lifestyle choices as typically 'Spanish', a significant number of participants selected only those that are distinctly prohibited by Islam. Spanish choices of music, sport and or media content were never mentioned. Usman says:

For me, coexistence is about doing what you have to do to live peacefully with other people. It's not a matter of integrating. I can't eat pork or drink alcohol. I can't go out to clubs and find girls. Those are rules. But going out to clubs, getting drunk and getting with women are *like* rules for young people here.

Walid says: 'I can't change my religion. And I won't change in order to integrate.' Many participants plainly believe that Christianity is a presupposed characteristic of being *civically* Spanish. According to interviews, a significant portion of second-generation Moroccans already believes that gaining Spanish nationality would entail changing who they are, particularly religiously.

The inextricability of Islam from the Moroccan identity has only been reinforced by the discursive tendencies of Spaniards, who regularly refer to Moroccans as 'Muslims' and, more crudely, as *Moros* – a derogatory term that literally means *Moor*, the anachronistic classification of the Maghrebi existential foe and Other on the Iberian peninsula. Such discourse positions Islam within the individualist and privatizing framework of Spanish secularism, which converts Islam into a matter of personal belief or an integral product of family heritage – something more festive and cultural than it is spiritual or sacred. With such externally imposed and internally affirmed essentialisms, Islam is acquiring a greater public relevance among a group of people for whom religion was almost never the exclusive point of identity reference. Moroccans thus respond to the essentialism of Spanish identity constructs by adhering to a sense of Moroccan essentialism – nevertheless revealing a concern to *meet* the qualifications for their chosen identity, rather than defy them. This is hardly different from their Bangladeshi counterparts, who by and large desired to be recognized as authentically British rather than authentically Bangladeshi.

As the cases evince, different contexts constrain, enhance, interact with and constitute developmental processes. Complementarily, individuals sometimes create, choose, maintain, change and constitute their contexts of development (Schachter 2005, 376). This calls for considering not how the individual deals with culture, but how each constitutes the other (Schachter 2005, 377). With due respect to modernist and postmodernist viewpoints, when neither the context nor the individual exclusively predetermines identity, it can only be thought as co-constructed.

The reluctant pluralists

In both case studies, we see communities of young British and Spanish Muslim men who are inclined towards the fulfilment of essentialist identity forms even as they pursue ostensibly pluralist lifestyles. In the East End, the Bangladeshi interviewed exhibited a potent concern with following the most authentic brand of Islam, but also (and perhaps because of) a clear desire for full recognition as Britons. In Madrid, Moroccans typically expressed a fatalistic perception that they would always remain essentially Moroccan, both in their self-reflection and their public image, no matter how much they adapted to Spanish society. Although both demonstrate the enduring relevance of essentialist identity structures to social and self-validation, the difference in manifestation can be attributed to the opposing worldviews of British Bangladeshi and Spanish Moroccans.

These different worldviews point to the salience of national integration and citizenship regimes that construct certain conditions of national belonging. Such policies appear to be perceived by respondents as the most official of essentialisms – those that are enforced by the requirements of naturalization. Indeed, in restricting entry to the national society, citizenship tests, admission rules and national identity discourse comprise the social context that pivotally impacts individuals' self-conceptions. This is neither to argue that native nationals endorse or even reflect such constructions, nor that minorities necessarily aim to satisfy their stipulations. If anything, citizenship tests galvanize little more than superficial memorization of political and cultural trivia (and most of this study's subjects were citizens anyway). Instead, the findings of this study suggest that the nature of such policies appears to regulate the openness or restrictiveness of individuals' understandings of their belonging. In the East End, *de jure* acceptance as a British national perplexed individuals who felt rejected in actual social interactions and by the recent government establishment of 'shared values'. This led to the desire to assert their officially recognized belonging while also celebrating their (sometimes shakier) Islamic faith. In Lavapiés, conceptions of a more rigid Spanish identity led many Moroccan respondents to grasp their Moorish heritage more tightly – often ignoring their affinities for Spanish culture and life. In this way, respondents expressed a desire to meet the requirements of foreign belonging in response to their perceived disqualification from local belonging. In both cases, the concern to somehow 'qualify' was clear.

Postmodernist critiques would emphasize the observable incoherence of such British and Spanish Muslim identity constructions as an objective social reality. However, it seems apparent that within the subjective minds of many of the individuals interviewed, they are adhering to paragons in self-perceived fulfilment of selected essentialisms – often multiple at once. Coherence is evidently a virtue, held by individuals engaged in the most profound of so-called identity 'crises'. Essentialist identity structures thereby demonstrate their power as simplifiers. They render subjects easy answers to complicated lifestyles and circumstances. They are often intertwined with political claims to represent or defend an embattled community. They render individuals a sort of externally validated positionality in lieu of the uncertainty of an un-legitimated hybridized existence. And they seem to resonate with a human social need for the

collective reinforcement of their individual social choices, particularly in circumstances characterized by instability and dispute.

Postmodernist critiques might also refer to the individual's obsolescence in navigating these circumstances. And yet, it is the individual who chooses and somehow integrates these disparate identity components into the continuous whole described (erroneously or not) by respondents. It is the individual who negotiates with which of these components to emphasize depending on social context. It is the individual who navigates social contexts in their quotidian interactions. As it pertains to Spanish and British Muslims' identity construction, the postmodernist approach quite usefully depicts the nature of social circumstances, but appears to underestimate the enduring agency of individuals who remain considerably concerned with crafting identities that fulfil established ideals of coherency. 'Like it or not,' Brumann writes, 'it appears that people – and not only those with power – want bounded culture, and they often want it in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized and timeless fashion that most of us now reject' (1999, S11 in Grillo 2003).

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