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► To cite this version:

Claire Tinker, Andrew David Smart. Constructions of collective Muslim identity by advocates of Muslim schools in Britain.. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2011, PP (PP), 10.1080/01419870.2011.577899 . hal-00716626

HAL Id: hal-00716626

<https://hal.science/hal-00716626>

Submitted on 11 Jul 2012

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Constructions of collective Muslim identity by advocates of Muslim schools in Britain.

Journal:	<i>Ethnic and Racial Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	RERS-2009-0090.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	Muslim schools, Collective Identity, Education, Muslims, Claims-making, Multiculturalism

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3 This paper considers how and why collective Muslim identity is expressed and
4 mobilized by advocates of Muslim schools in Britain. This relates to broader
5 questions about the conceptualization, construction and meanings of Muslim
6 identities, and the problem of essentialism that can arise when reporting identity
7 claims that emphasize intra-group unity. Analysis of data from interviews with
8 stakeholders in the debate about Muslim schools in Britain revealed advocates
9 commonly regarded separate schooling as a protective measure against threats
10 and/or attacks to Muslim identity. It is argued that interviewees invoked
11 collective Muslim identity in ways that drew attention to common knowledge,
12 values and practice, and/or shared life experiences relating to denigrated or
13 discordant social identities. The commonalities expressed by respondents are
14 interpreted as evidence of a convergence of identities and interests in particular
15 social conditions, and are not claimed to be essential characteristics of collective
16 Muslim identity.

37 38 **Keywords**

39 Muslim Schools, Collective Identity, Muslim, Claims-making, Multiculturalism,
40 Education.
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51 Collective Muslim identity is expressed and mobilized in group claims-making.
52 This raises questions about the conceptualization and construction of collective
53 Muslim identity (e.g. Modood 1998; Sayyid 2000), and the social conditions in
54 which identities and interests converge (Hempel 2004). In this paper, these
55 questions are considered in the context of debates about Muslim schools in
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3 Britain, using an analysis of qualitative interviews with stakeholders. It is
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5 revealed that advocates for Muslim schools commonly perceived Muslim
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7 identity to be under threat and/or attack, and considered separate schools as an
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9 appropriate means of defence. In expressing these arguments, two constructions
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11 of collective Muslim identity were apparent: 1) knowledge, values and practice,
12
13 and/or 2) life experiences relating to denigrated or discordant social identities.
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15 These findings are discussed to reflect upon the formations and meanings of
16
17 collective Muslim identity in the context of claims for Muslim schools. It will be
18
19 argued that the expression or mobilization of identifications that emphasize intra-
20
21 group unity is not evidence of essential group characteristics, but rather the
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23 convergence of identities and interests in particular social conditions.
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32 **Background**

33 *Muslim identity*

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36 Expositions of Muslim identity grapple with a tension between commonalities
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38 and diversities. On the one hand, it appears self-evident that all Muslims share
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40 some thing(s); the thing(s) that enable them to identify as Muslims (or allow
41
42 other people to label them as such). On the other hand, there is unarguable
43
44 diversity within the group 'Muslims'; not only national, ethnic, cultural,
45
46 linguistic, political and sectarian variation, but also cross-cutting differences
47
48 relating to class, gender, age/generation, migration, sexuality, disability, etc. The
49
50 dualism of homogeneity and heterogeneity is not, of course, solely a problem
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52 when conceptualizing collective Muslim identity, but nevertheless it is prominent
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3 in scholarship on 'Muslims in the West'. Indeed, many authors adopt a position
4 in which they reveal or defend the existence of heterogeneity (e.g. Modood
5 2007), and communicate a clear message: all Muslims are not the same. The
6 prominence and tenor of this message can, at least in part, be explained by the
7 intellectual impact of the 'anti-essentialist critique' (Modood 1998) and an anti-
8 racist undertone that accompanies concerns about prejudice and discrimination
9 against Muslims.

10
11 Muslim identity can be analysed as a form of religious identity (Peek
12 2005). In his discussion of British Muslims, however, Meer (2008, p. 66) claims
13 that 'rather than being scripturally informed, we can view Muslim identity as a
14 quasi-ethnic sociological formation'. He justifies this conceptualization due to
15 the blurred boundary between religion and ethnicity in relation to minority group
16 experiences and political mobilizations. Moreover, it also emphasizes the
17 intersection between Muslim identity as self-assigned and externally ascribed.
18 Modood (2007, p. 134) identifies that the salient dimensions of identity for
19 Muslims in Britain include: 'a sense of family', 'community membership and
20 heritage', 'simple precepts about self, compassion, justice and the afterlife' and
21 'collective political advancement'. He notes, nevertheless, that in the current
22 British context Muslims may often be positioned (or position themselves) as
23 having an identity marked by 'difference' (p. 109).

24
25 A sociological lens focuses attention onto the political, social and
26 economic processes and contexts involved in the creation and construction of
27 identities (e.g. Schwedler 2001). In contemporary Britain, the politics of Muslim
28 identity appear to be in flux. Modood argues that there is ongoing debate about
29 'what it is to be a Muslim' and a 'proliferation of Muslim organizations' each
30

1
2
3 displaying and promoting 'a particular Muslim identity' (2007, p.140). For
4
5 example, Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins (2002, p. 294) describe the different
6
7 ways that two Muslim political organizations invoke the concept of *da'wah* - 'the
8
9 injunction to invite people to Islam' (p. 288).
10
11

12
13 If more individualized identity constructions are considered, however,
14
15 this fluidity appears to be the norm. Dwyer (1999, 2000), following Hall (1992),
16
17 conceptualizes identity as 'contextual and relational positionings' (1999: 6), and
18
19 views identity 'as a process that is always in progress' (2000: 475). Her analysis
20
21 of young British South-Asian Muslim women attends to their multiple and
22
23 intersecting identities, the contingent nature of 'difference', and how individuals
24
25 subvert, resist and rework dominant meanings in their identity constructions.
26
27 Hopkins (2007, p. 61) reveals considerable variation in the 'strength, nature and
28
29 meaning' of individuals' affiliations to Muslim identity. This may be contingent
30
31 on circumstance; for example, Ahmad and Venetia (2010) report that the sense of
32
33 'otherness' felt by some Muslims was heightened by political tensions.
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41 *Muslim claims-making*

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46 Muslims (individually and as a group) have become increasingly socially visible.
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48 The protests associated with *The Satanic Verses* in the 1980s marked the rise in a
49
50 politicized Muslim identity (Modood 1992). By the end of the 1990s the
51
52 Runnymede Trust (1997) was reporting discrimination against Muslims, and it
53
54 was being argued that: 'the Muslim community has become increasingly a
55
56 symbol of identification and collective action, particularly around issues of
57
58 separate schools, religious education and religious discrimination.' (Alexander
59
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1
2
3 1998, p. 441) The terrorist atrocities which followed the millennium cast a very
4
5 different light on these nascent socio-political engagements; Muslims became
6
7 perceived less as 'victims of social inequality' and more as 'potential
8
9 aggressors'. Indeed, studies of British press coverage show that Muslims have
10
11 been increasingly visible and often portrayed negatively (Poole 2002; Meer,
12
13 2006).
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17 During this same time period, analysis of survey data suggested that
18
19 many Muslims were prioritizing religious identity over other identifications
20
21 (Modood et al. 1997). In addition, qualitative research provided evidence of
22
23 situations in which Muslim identities were given primacy over other aspects of
24
25 identity (see Modood 2007, p108-9). Of course, evidence of prioritization does
26
27 not preclude the salience of other identities. As noted above, other social
28
29 differentiations and contextual factors influence the expression of Muslim
30
31 identities, including 'the dominant narratives of national identity' (Dwyer 2000,
32
33 p.476). Indeed, in the context of debates about primacy and allegiance, it is the
34
35 construction and potential salience of the compound identity 'British Muslim'
36
37 that has come to the fore (Modood 2007).
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44 Muslim identities have been mobilized for collective action (Statham
45
46 1999). As Statham et al. (2005, p. 439) note, however, various overlapping (and
47
48 potentially competing) categories of collective identity are evident in group
49
50 demands: 'The same migrant group may mobilize as 'Pakistanis', 'Asians' ...,
51
52 'Muslims', 'British Muslims' or as 'ethnic minorities''. Statham et al.'s (2005)
53
54 analysis of British newspaper coverage nevertheless showed that two thirds of
55
56 demands were based on religious forms of identification, and of these the
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58 majority (61.4%) were from groups identifying themselves as Muslim or Islamic.
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3 This evidence of a pattern of group claims-making is somewhat tempered by the
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This evidence of a pattern of group claims-making is somewhat tempered by the
aforementioned studies of press coverage. It does, however, demonstrate that
collective Muslim identity is not only a focus for mobilization, but also it is part
of a media narrative in which Muslims are sometimes presented as a group with
common needs.

Muslim schools

Meer (2007, p. 55) argues that mobilizations for Muslim schools can be
understood as ‘an addition to – or continuation of – a historical settlement
between earlier religious minorities, the established church and the state’. The
contemporary existence of faith schools reflects the significant historical role of
religious organizations in the development of the British education system. This
predominantly involved the Protestant and Catholic churches (Chadwick 2001),
although Jewish schools also have a heritage spanning four centuries (Miller
2001). Faith schools exist either ‘independently’ or within the state sector (where
public funding has attendant policy and practice requirements). In Britain there
are over 7000 faith schools in the state sector, although very few of these are
non-Christian (in England this includes eleven Muslim schools) (Bolton and
Gillie 2009). In addition, there are 140 independent Muslim schools in England
and two in Wales.¹ The Muslim Council of Britain (2007) estimates that there are
over 400,000 school-aged Muslim children in Britain, and that only
approximately 4% of these attend an independent school.

There is a broad spectrum of Muslim schools. Pupil numbers range from
5 to over 1800, and while some larger schools are purpose-built, many smaller

1
2
3 schools operate in homes, offices or above mosques (Parker-Jenkins et al. 2005).
4
5 The eleven state-funded Muslim schools are required to employ fully qualified
6
7 teachers and follow the National Curriculum for England. Those in the
8
9 independent sector (like all independent schools) need not follow these
10
11 requirements, but nevertheless some choose to (Tinker 2009) while others claim
12
13 they have insufficient resources to do so (Walford 2001).
14
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16
17 Muslims schools are a relatively recent addition to the educational
18
19 landscape; the first independent Muslim school opened in 1979 (Dooley 1991),
20
21 and the first to enter the state sector was in 1998. This extension of state support
22
23 to Muslim schools was mired by dispute and controversy. The first Muslim
24
25 school admitted into the state sector had endured multiple rejections during a
26
27 fifteen year campaign (Parker-Jenkins 2002), and it was not alone in
28
29 experiencing opposition from central government (McLoughlin 1998).
30
31 Consecutive Labour governments from 1997 promoted policies to increase the
32
33 number of Christian and minority faith schools (Jackson 2003). Nevertheless, the
34
35 idea of state-funded Muslim schools has continued to generate unease and
36
37 debate.
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44 Objections to initial applications for state support centred on resources
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46 and local necessity, and arguments about segregation in the context of
47
48 multicultural education policies. It has been argued, however, that resistance ran
49
50 much deeper. McLoughlin (1998, p. 451) claims that underlying perceptions of
51
52 ‘Islam and Muslim schools as necessarily ‘separatist’ and ‘fundamentalist’
53
54 meant that Christian schools did not face similar objections. Dwyer (1993, p.
55
56 149) similarly argued that the Muslim schools were subject to public and
57
58 political distrust in ways that their Jewish and Catholic counterparts were not,
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3 because they were 'seen to offer a particular threat to the hegemonic culture'.
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6 Substantial differences in socio-historical context complicate direct comparisons
7
8 between faith schools. Nevertheless, even since the shift to an ostensibly
9
10 supportive policy environment, particular concerns about Muslim schools have
11
12 persisted in relation to social cohesion, extremism and gender roles (Meer 2007).
13
14 There is a continuing perception that Muslim schools are culturally 'out of place'
15
16 or hazardous.
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20 A key justification for Muslim schools (including in the state-sector) is
21
22 the need for equality in an educational system which includes other faith schools.
23
24 In addition, arguments have been made about the rights, choices or needs of
25
26 parents, children and/or 'the Muslim community' (Hewer 2001; Parker-Jenkins
27
28 2002; Jackson 2003; Tinker 2006, 2009; Meer 2007; McCreery et al. 2007).
29
30 These include: having educational institutions that are organized and run in ways
31
32 that reflect religious (and/or cultural) values and practices (including gendered
33
34 practices); communicating or inculcating particular religious and cultural
35
36 knowledge, practices or values (which are viewed as marginalized if not wholly
37
38 absent in the curricula of mainstream schools); enabling children to avoid the
39
40 prejudice and discrimination that is perceived to occur in mainstream schooling
41
42 and which is argued to undermine their self-confidence and self-identity; and,
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44 improving children's attainment. The rationale of protecting or supporting
45
46 Muslim identity is highly prominent in these accounts. The promotion of Muslim
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48 identity (as an end in itself, rather than as an outcome of a principle of justice or
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50 an instrumental desire to enhance educational outcomes) is, however,
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52 controversial. Secular interest groups, and some politicians, journalists and
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3 academics, vehemently argue that religious identities should not be promoted by
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5 state-sanctioned education.
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8 Heterogeneity in the construction and expression of Muslim identities
9
10 must be recognized. Arguably, however, this marginalizes questions about the
11
12 coherence and stability of collective Muslim identity. This paper explores how
13
14 collective Muslim identity is constructed and expressed in the contentious arena
15
16 of claims for Muslims schools. It seeks to examine what it is about collective
17
18 Muslim identity that is most stable or most commonly attested to; and what
19
20 might be the dominant formations and meanings in collective Muslim identity in
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22 this context.
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29 **Methodology**

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34 The findings reported in this paper originate from research (undertaken by CT)
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36 examining the debate about the state-funding of Muslim schools (Tinker 2006,
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38 2009). A qualitative research design was favoured to enable an in-depth
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40 consideration of the outlooks of research participants on this potentially
41
42 controversial topic (Mason 1996).
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46 A purposive sampling technique ensured that participants with relevant
47
48 views and experiences were recruited (Ritchie et al. 2003). Thirty-six interviews
49
50 were organized with representatives from four stakeholder groups: political
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52 parties; interest groups; head teachers; and parents of Muslim school-children.
53
54 Individuals within the four groups were selected in different ways. Documentary
55
56 and on-line searches were used to identify representatives from four political
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58 parties and eleven interest groups (eight of which were 'Muslim interest groups',
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3 ranging from those focussed on education, through those with a general remit to
4 serve the needs of Muslims, to those with overtly political aims). Head teachers
5 of four independent Muslim schools were identified through contact with the
6 Association of Muslim Schools, while eleven head teachers of state-maintained
7 schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils were identified through Local
8 Education Authorities. Twelve parents were identified using a 'snowball'
9 sample, following recommendations from head teachers or other parents.

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20 Semi-structured interviews focused the data collection on key issues, but
21 allowed respondents' some freedom to direct the discussion (Kvale 1996).
22 Interview 'guides' varied between stakeholder groups, but common topics
23 included the state-funding of faith schools in general and Muslim schools in
24 particular. Interviews were conducted between July 2003 and March 2004 (by
25 CT), each lasting approximately one hour. Interviews usually took place in the
26 respondents' home or workplace, and were conducted in English.

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37 Interviews were transcribed in full and imported into *NVivo* data analysis
38 software package. CT constructed a list of codes from preliminary interviews,
39 and applied these to subsequent data, expanding and compressing the coding
40 frame as necessary. A 'thematic analysis' (Gomm 2004, p. 189) was developed,
41 and the findings reported here comprise four themes relating to the justifications
42 for Muslim schools that involved ideas about Muslim identity.

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51 The research was conducted in accordance with the British Sociological
52 Association (2002) statement on ethical practice. With so few state-funded
53 Muslim schools in Britain, and a limited number of stakeholder organizations,
54 there was a risk that some respondents may be identifiable. This limit on
55 confidentiality was discussed with relevant interviewees, and it was agreed that
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3 quotations would be anonymized and related descriptors would aim to limit
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identifiability.

Certain restrictions in the study can be noted. The issue of ‘interviewer effect’ in this research is discussed in detail elsewhere (Tinker and Armstrong 2008). Many respondents (25/36) were Muslim and the interviewer is not, and in this respect, it is open to question whether the commonly recounted narratives of threat and/ or attack against Muslim identity would have been similarly generated in an interview with ‘matched’ religious affiliations. Conducting the interviews in English may have affected the potential pool of interviewees, and the possibilities of exploring deeper thoughts and feelings with respondents who spoke English as an additional language. Qualitative research rarely aims to have statistical generalizability (Mason 1996). Thus, while the findings reported here chart the range of concerns expressed by this sample of respondents, questions about the representativeness of these opinions (among others who comprise the stakeholder group but were not in this sample) would require further research of a different design.

Findings

The overarching theme that emerged from the data analysis was a perception that Muslim identity was under threat and/or attack, and that separate Muslim schools were an appropriate means of protection or defence. Four sub-themes are presented below; these represent the range of ways in which ideas about identity were used by respondents to support the case for Muslim schools.

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3 *The curriculum*
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8 A concern most commonly aired by representatives of ‘Muslim interest groups’
9 was that Muslim identity may be confused, lost or denigrated because of the
10 content of the curriculum in mainstream schools, both what was included and
11 what was omitted. There were three perceived shortfalls in the curriculum: that it
12 might contravene religious teaching, lack information about Islam or lack
13 information about the achievements of Muslims.
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22 A representative of an interest group that promotes Islam and serves the
23 needs of Muslims argued that aspects of the curriculum, such as sex education
24 and evolutionary theory, might contravene Islam:
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31 Children spend about 7 or 8 hours at school, and they’re taught all the
32 wrong things. By wrong things I mean they are against the religion. They
33 are teaching about Darwinist theory, about this family planning, sex and
34 other things. [...] So when they come back after school it’s a very hard
35 job to clear those cobwebs in their minds.
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46 This view reveals a fear that children’s religious identity or affiliation may be
47 confused if they are ‘taught all the wrong things’; and it implies such
48 contradictions would be avoided if children attended Muslim schools.
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53 A lack of religious knowledge was also a concern for the above-quoted
54 respondent. Here, he invoked the views of parents to support his opinion that
55 Muslim schools best serve the interests of Muslims:
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3 [...] for the parents, it is important that their children is getting religious
4 education for longer. Which is necessary, because if you look at those
5
6 other boys who go to those [non-Muslim] schools, ask them about their
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8 religion, 'I don't know, I don't know'. So, what they will be in their
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10 practical lives? Will they be Muslim, will they be Christian, will they be
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12 Jews, or nothing? Most of them will be nothing.
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20 This viewpoint, that religious instruction is a necessary part of education, appears
21
22 to be rooted in a fear that a lack of knowledge of Islam may result in a child
23
24 losing their Muslim identity and becoming 'nothing'.
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27 It was the systematic under-representation of the experiences,
28
29 contributions and perspectives of non-European individuals and groups that most
30
31 concerned a respondent at an interest group that campaigns and lobbies on behalf
32
33 of 'the Muslim community':
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39 [...] the national curriculum [...] is very Eurocentric. I think this has to
40
41 change, to take into account the contribution other cultures and
42
43 civilizations made to our civilization. [...] In these faith schools this
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45 young person will be told of the contribution their faith, their culture,
46
47 their civilization has made to the wider civilization. They are not simply
48
49 useless people.
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55 This view, which connects self-confidence and collective identity, reveals a fear
56
57 of a denigrated identity if Muslim pupils view themselves as part of a group of
58
59 'useless people'. The respondent contrasts this with opportunities afforded by
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3 faith schools which would purportedly reflect more positively ‘their faith, their
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5 culture, their civilization’.
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10 *Secular or Western values*
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15 A second theme that emerged from the data analysis, most commonly expressed
16
17 by head teachers of independent Muslim schools, related to the values, morals
18
19 and behaviours inculcated by schools. Typically, the concern was that collective
20
21 Muslim identity may be lost or undermined because aspects of secular or
22
23 Western values are different and threaten ‘good’ ‘Islamic’ morals and behaviour.
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26
27 One head teacher of an independent Muslim school invoked the views of
28
29 parents (and then Muslims generally) when he argued that aspects of identity
30
31 differ between Muslims and ‘secularized people’.
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36 When they see most secularized people, for example they see the dress
37
38 code of the average British child, it sends a warning signal, it’s not
39
40 dressed according to the Sharia. When they see the drinking, it’s not
41
42 according to Sharia. All these factors build a particular picture, a
43
44 particular identity in the minds of Muslims. And they see the Muslim
45
46 identity as distinctly different from the one that they see upon the street or
47
48 on the television.
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55 Other interviewees, such as this head teacher of a different independent Muslim
56
57 school, viewed these allegedly secular values as threatening:
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3 We see nothing to stop this tide of secular values becoming more into the
4 fore. It scares us to be quite frank with you. And these are the ways that
5
6 we try to safeguard ourselves, having Islamic schools, etcetera.
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12 The views of these respondents suggest a perceived contrast between Islamic and
13 secular values, and position Muslim schools as a means safeguarding collective
14
15 identity.
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20 It was also repeatedly claimed that pupils in mainstream state schools
21 exhibit anti-social behaviour (with specific references to underage drinking,
22 drug-taking, swearing and vandalism), and this was contrasted with the
23
24 behaviour instilled by Muslim schools. For example, the head teacher of a third
25
26 independent Muslim school argued that the school aimed to:
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34 [...] bring the children up in an Islamic environment, and equip the
35 children with Islamic manner and behaviour. Islamic manner and
36
37 behaviour tells the children to be kind to the neighbours, to encourage
38
39 them not to mess around, not to throw your banana skin in the street, or
40
41 smoke cigarettes.
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48 Similarly, a representative of an interest group that politically promotes the
49 establishment of an Islamic state argued the role of Muslim schools was to:
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55 [...] nurture the Islamic personality first and foremost. What that means
56 essentially is a person's thoughts, his inclinations, that these are in line
57
58 with Islam. [...] To give it a practical slant [...], this would mean that a
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3 Muslim would not put his parents in an old people's home because he
4
5 would understand that his obligation is to look after his parents [...]
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10 It is notable that the examples of 'Islamic manner and behaviours' or 'the Islamic
11 personality' claimed by these respondents are actions or attitudes that many non-
12 Muslims would also consider 'good'. These viewpoints suggest that Muslim
13 schools were viewed as a way of instilling collective identity rooted in 'good'
14
15 morals and behaviour, but they also imply a perception on the part of these
16
17 respondents that Islam has a monopoly on these or that non-Muslims are immoral
18
19 and/or badly-behaved.
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27 A particular expression of the concern about values and the loss of
28 identity related to gender. The head teacher quoted at the start of this sub-section
29 reported that he struggles to convince some parents to allow their daughters to go
30 to co-educational institutions after leaving his school:
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39 [...] in a sense they are afraid that if they allow their girls to go on into
40 mixed education schools or colleges that they'll lose their own identity,
41 become embroiled in things which are not Islamic. [...] They feel that the
42 girls should not really be educated in [non-Muslim] schools because
43
44 they'll be lost to Western society and so forth.
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53 While this viewpoint is evidence of a perceived gender-specific identity threat
54 from being 'embroiled in things which are not Islamic', the notion of loss is also
55 striking; not only a loss of 'their own identity', but also that they will be 'lost to
56
57 Western society'.
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6 *Prejudice and discrimination*
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10 Concern over prejudice and discrimination were widespread among the sample,
11 but most commonly expressed by parents and head teachers. Characteristically,
12 the fear was that Muslims were under attack and afforded little protection, and
13 that this created risks to children's self-esteem or self-confidence.
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19 The fear that Muslim children experience prejudice was commonly
20 rooted in experience. For example, the parent of child who attended a
21 mainstream state school claimed that her son's religious views had been unfairly
22 criticized by both fellow pupils and teachers:
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31 [...] the teacher would be putting him down, you know, 'you're not
32 supposed to believe that and you're not supposed to say this'. [...] Not
33 that he believed in any of the terrorists or anything like that, it's just the
34 religion itself, that's what people were picking on. [...] They said it's
35 wrong, and he will say 'you can't tell me that my religion is wrong'. He
36 says 'anyway we don't believe in killing', because they said 'your
37 religion is all about killing'.
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51 Such perceptions, of attacks on belief, underpinned some parents' desire for
52 defensive or protective measures.
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55 This parent therefore sent her child to an independent Muslim school
56 after having negative experiences in a mainstream state school:
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3 I mean my youngest child when he was little he went to the state school
4 he used to wear little hats. [...] Every day the boys in the playground
5 would take his hat and put it on the roof, and the annoying thing was that
6 I would get a complaint from the school that the caretaker had to keep on
7 getting up. I said 'look you've got to respect the fact that he is wearing
8 that, [...] you have got to educate other children not to keep throwing it
9 on the top, not to keep telling me not to make him wear it, that's not fair'.

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22 In this respondent's opinion, not only was her child subjected to discrimination
23 because he expressed a Muslim identity in his clothing, but also the school
24 offered no protection and subsequently blamed the problem on her.

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29 It is in the context of such experiences that one head teacher argued that
30 state-funded Muslim schools, such as his, were necessary to create: 'a sense of
31 self-esteem and self-confidence in the children'. Indeed, he argued that restoring
32 self-confidence to young Muslims was essential not only to ensure 'they will be
33 able to participate fully and positively in the world outside', but also because
34 those who lacked it were at risk of radicalization:

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46 Without that self-confidence, our experience and observations and
47 analysis is that they are very prey to a sort of identity crisis, [...] and then
48 they possibly seek out some sort of strong, perhaps fundamentalist or
49 extremist position which gives them a strong sense of identity.

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58 For this respondent, having Muslim schools offered denigrated Muslim children
59 a route out of an 'identity crisis' that alternatively risked losing them to the
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3 'strong sense of identity' offered by fundamentalism or extremism. Indeed, he
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5 argued in particular that active support of Muslim school in the state sector was
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7 the best way to encourage the development of a secure British Muslim identity.
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13 *Discordant identities*
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17 A fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis, most commonly expressed
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19 by parents and head teachers, related to the potential for discord between sources
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21 of identity. In summary, some respondents viewed plural identities as a cause of
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23 unhappiness, confusion or conflict, and Muslim schools as source of a stable and
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25 coherent identity.
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29 One fear was that Muslim pupils attending schools where there are few
30
31 other Muslim children would result in them not 'fitting in'. For example, a parent
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33 of children at an independent Muslim school recalled his childhood 'identity
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35 crisis', the attendant feelings of isolation and how this influenced his decision
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37 about his children's education:
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43 I didn't really know who I was [...]. At one time I thought well I'm
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45 English, I'm not Muslim I'm English, and I wanted to be as much English
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47 as I could, more English than the English, and I wanted to kind of pretend
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49 I had nothing else. And then I [...] swung the other way, I am Muslim and
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51 my dad is from Egypt although I've only been to Egypt a couple of times
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53 but I tried to, you know... But then I realized eventually that I am
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55 actually a bit of both. [...] It took me a long time to sort that out, and I
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60 feel that part of the reason was because I didn't have [...] anyone that I

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3 could identify with, I didn't have any guidance on the matter, I was kind
4 of alone [...]. I just didn't want that for my children, I wanted my
5 children to feel a strong sense of identity, that they belonged, that they
6 were Muslim and they could be proud to be Muslim and there were other
7 Muslims in this country and they felt happy about that. But at the same
8 time, you know, I wanted them to have a good education and feel that this
9 is their country and feel proud of their country as well.
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22 This respondent believed that he could help to protect his children from isolation
23 by sending them to a school that offered 'a strong sense of identity', which
24 appeared to mean an identity that emphasized the collective: belonging,
25 affiliation, pride in being part of a group and knowledge of the existence of
26 'other Muslims'. A potential conflict over a dual identity, nevertheless, remains
27 evident in his juxtaposition of a Muslim identity to pride and belonging to 'their
28 country'.
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38 Another source of identity conflict was potential differences in
39 expectations and behaviours at home and school. One head teacher of a state-
40 funded Muslim school argued:
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48 There is the possibility that children will grow up being very mixed up.
49 They have one way of being at home and another way of being at school
50 and that can cause problems.
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57 The differences in the 'way of being' remained vague in this respondent's
58 account (it is surmised that the source of differences were aspects of belief and
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3 behaviour reported above, which are further evident in the extract which follows
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6 below). Nevertheless there is concern that these variations impact on identity,
7
8 with a risk of children being ‘mixed up’ if the differences are great.
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10 A representative of an interest group that politically promotes the
11
12 establishment of an Islamic state argued that ‘the role of an Islamic school is to
13
14 complement the role of a parent in educating children’. This view was echoed by
15
16 a parent whose child attended an independent Muslim school, who suggested that
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18 conflict was avoided as the school reinforced parental messages:
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24 Things like when we teach them eating manners and things like that. [...]
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26 I would say eat with your right hand, say ‘bismillah’ which means in the
27
28 name of Allah. I, as a parent, would do that and that would be reinforced
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30 if they went to an Islamic school from a young age [because] the teacher
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32 would say ‘can we all say our prayers together’, ‘can you make sure that
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34 you go and wash your hands and that you’re all eating with the right
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36 hand’.
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43 This solution to a perceived home-school conflict portrays an idealized harmony
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45 between parental and institutional viewpoints, but nevertheless it demonstrates an
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47 underlying concern with difference in religious (and cultural) beliefs and practice
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49 and posits ‘an Islamic school’ as a means to a coherent Muslim identity.
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54 55 **Discussion** 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Earlier in the paper questions were raised about collective Muslim identity (its
4 common formations and attendant meanings) and the construction of claims for
5 Muslim schools. Advocates of Muslim schools interviewed in this study
6 commonly expressed a perception that Muslims were under threat and/or attack.
7
8 This was sometimes infused by meanings that revealed fears about loss of
9 identity, or even the loss of individuals from the group. Muslim identity was
10 often seen as being challenged, denigrated and undermined by Western or secular
11 ideas, values and behaviours. Threats came from perceived (overt and
12 institutionalized) anti-Muslim prejudice, and from everyday 'non-Islamic' values
13 and behaviours. As such, fears particularly focused on 'external' threats, relating
14 to assimilation into Western, secular society, or from the identity-crises that
15 might arise from majority/minority relations of power. Less frequently, fears
16 extended to 'internal' threats - the loss of 'moderate' Muslims to 'radical' or
17 'extreme' Islam. In this threatening social context, Muslim schools offered
18 various means of defence (that were differently emphasized by stakeholder
19 groups). In sum, schools could instil or reinforce knowledge about Islam and
20 related practices or modes of behaviour, and/or they could protect Muslim pupils
21 from anti-Muslim prejudice (or extremism) and offer them a sense of worth. It is
22 thus suggested that two constructions of collective Muslim identity were invoked
23 in the context of advocacy for Muslim schools. The first related to knowledge,
24 values and practices expressed in relation to religion but which sometimes
25 blurred into ethnicity. The second centred on life experiences relating to
26 denigrated or discordant social identities.

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Essentializing collective identity

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6 The respondents' arguments for Muslim schools draw on and reproduce ideas
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8 about collective Muslim identity. This evidence can be explained using the
9
10 concept of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1987), whereby those identifying with
11
12 a particular group promote an idea of intra-group unity in order to further what
13
14 they consider to be their, or the groups', interests. Employing this concept as an
15
16 analytical tool, however, can leave the analyst open to an accusation that they are
17
18 unfairly representing organizations or individuals by implying that an idea of
19
20 group unity is being used instrumentally. Such an accusation is a particular
21
22 concern for this study, as slyness and inscrutability are common Orientalist
23
24 stereotypes (Said 1978) and the Runnymede Trust (1997) argues that portrayals
25
26 of Islam as an instrumentalist political ideology (and subsequent representations
27
28 of Muslims as manipulative and insincere) can be manifestations of
29
30 Islamophobia. To clarify, it is not suggested that that respondents' in this study
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32 were disingenuous when they invoked ideas about collective Muslim identity,
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34 and it is worth re-iterating that such ideas were largely mobilized defensively, in
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36 social circumstances that respondents perceived as threatening.
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44 The data reported above, however, also revealed an example of
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46 essentializing perpetrated by those who perceive themselves as resisting
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48 discrimination, which raises difficult questions (Thompson 2008). Negatively
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50 judgmental group stereotypes of immoral Western or secular 'others' were
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52 expressed by a few respondents as they marked out their identity in relative or
53
54 oppositional terms. Bauman (1989, p. 64) discusses the 'antagonism generated
55
56 by the human practices of identity-seeking and boundary-drawing', and for
57
58 Jenkins (2008, p. 48) this boundary work is a 'ubiquitous feature of human
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3 sociability'. Modood (2008) argues that essentializing that excludes groups, or
4 casts them as inferior, is different from that which is used to resist such activities.
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6 Such a division, however, is difficult to sustain. A claim for Muslims schools
7
8 underpinned by negative stereotypes of non-Muslims is a claim based on
9
10 stereotypes, regardless of whether the aim is to protect Muslim pupils against
11
12 prejudice and discrimination. To the extent that strategic essentialism is an
13
14 ideological activity, the distorted or misleading portrayals of 'other' groups or
15
16 individuals that occur under its rubric could be considered ethnocentric, or even
17
18 racist.² Whether such outlooks are commonly generated, encouraged or
19
20 legitimated by strategic essentialism is a question for further research.
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29 *Avoiding essentialism*

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34 Reporting these expressions of collective identity raises critical questions about
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36 the extent to which such findings essentialize, homogenize and/or reify the group
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38 under discussion. Recent sociological debates about multiculturalism have
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40 addressed such questions, and while the protagonists commonly reject
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42 conceptualizations of groups as static or homogenous, they offer different ideas
43
44 about the relationship between individuals and groups. Meer and Modood (2009,
45
46 p. 4) distinguish between formulations of multiculturalism that 'invalidate
47
48 'group' identities' and those that are 'inclusive of 'groupings''. Three theoretical
49
50 positions - that range from weak to strong in their conceptions of groups - are
51
52 outlined below. They are used to explain different aspects of the expression and
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54 mobilization of collective Muslim identity in the data, while avoiding the risk of
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56 portraying these as essential group characteristics.
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Meer and Modood (2009, p. 15) claim that Paul Gilroy's *After Empire* advocates 'multiculturalism without groups'. Gilroy (2004) champions the potential of convivial, cosmopolitan 'multiculture' against continuing racism and 'the endless narrative of immigration as invasion' (p. 166). With respect to group identity, Gilroy argues that '[t]he radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification' (2004, p. xi). This stance draws the analytical focus toward the processes and contexts of identifications (and away from the 'content' of collective identities). Hempel (2004) contends that explanations of 'ethnic identifications' need to examine the conditions under which identities and interests converge. In this study, the convergence of identities and interests was evident in respondents support for Muslim schools based on defensive narratives about threats to, and protection of, Muslim identity. The conditions for such expressions include³: the minority status of the religion and its adherents (in terms of religious affiliation and often in terms of ethnicity); Britain's dominant secular (post-Christian) culture; prominent global and national political contexts; and, perceptions and experiences of prejudice and discrimination. They also, however, include a dominant socio-political context that promotes discourses of rights, equality and choice (including in relation to education), and where demands for equitable and 'culturally-sensitive' service provisions are commonplace. Other conditions relate to the responsibilities and concerns of parents and head teachers, and the organizational agendas of interest groups (and of schools). Gilroy's injunction to attend to the mechanisms of identification is thus analytically useful for the present study as it emphasizes the

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3 socio-political processes and contexts framing respondents' expressions of
4 collective Muslim identity.
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8 An analytical position in which groups are more prominent is offered by
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10 Anne Phillips in *Multiculturalism without Culture*. Phillips aims to 'address
11 inequalities between cultural groups' (2007, p. 8), but opposes 'forms of
12 multiculturalism that cede power and authority to cultural groups' as intra-group
13 disagreement is masked when representatives become the 'definitive voice of
14
15 'their' group' (2008, p. 558). While promoting an agency-centred version of
16 multiculturalism, she recognizes nonetheless that 'reified notions of culture are
17 widely deployed by groups' (Squires 2008, p. 536). Phillips' approach to the
18 intersection of individuals and groups is summarized thus by Squires (2008, p.
19 536): 'her primary normative concern [...] is with individuals, and the rights of
20 individuals vis-à-vis groups; but individuals who nonetheless experience
21 structural inequalities on the basis of group membership'. This approach draws
22 attention to the construction of collective identities through experiences of
23 structural inequality. In the findings reported above, some respondents attributed
24 experiences of marginalization (i.e. threat and denigration) to their affiliation to
25 the group 'Muslim', and used these to explain the need for the protection
26 believed to be on offer in Muslim schools. In this respect, collective Muslim
27 identity was thus in part defined by marginalized social status (which, as argued
28 above, should be understood within broader contexts of minority/majority
29 relations of power). Phillips's approach thus highlights that constructions of
30 collective identity can be rooted in subjective experiences of inequality (which
31 those affiliated with the group may deploy in their interests).
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3 The third and 'strongest' conception of groups appears in communitarian
4 versions of multiculturalism (Parekh 2000; Modood 2007). It emphasizes 'strong
5 ethnic, religious or cultural identities' in order to address the circumstances
6 facing particular groups, 'not least subjectively conceived ethno-religious
7 minority groupings' (Meer and Modood 2009, p. 14 and 4). One danger of strong
8 conceptualizations is that groups start to appear inflexible and homogenous.
9 Modood (2007; 2008) answers this problem by applying Wittgenstein's idea
10 about 'family resemblance' to groupings, and thereby suggests that groups can be
11 coherent without the presence of definitive (essential) characteristics. The
12 groupings are phenomenological - people are perceived (by themselves or others)
13 as belonging to or being excluded from groups categorized by labels such as
14 Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, etc. Underlying these labels are ideas about knowledge,
15 practice and values, which when enacted, mark attachment and affiliation to (or
16 exclusion from) the group. This analytical position accurately reflects certain
17 ideas about collective identity expressed by respondents in the present study.
18 Specifically, when respondents explained about belonging to the group Muslim,
19 they often invoked ideas about shared knowledge, values or practice. There was,
20 nevertheless, sometimes a blurred boundary between religion and culture, which
21 coheres with Meer's (2008) claim that Muslim identity is a 'quasi-ethnic
22 sociological formation'. These 'strong' conceptualizations of collective identities
23 are thus helpful as they prioritize respondents' conceptualization of their
24 identities, even if - analytically speaking - their outlooks may be considered
25 essentialist.
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Conclusion

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6 In this study, advocates of Muslim schools in Britain invoked and mobilized
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8 ideas about collective Muslim identity that were based on their perception that
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10 they shared with other Muslims either knowledge values and practice and/or life
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12 experiences relating to denigrated or discordant social identities. It is not
13
14 claimed, however, that these are essential characteristics of collective Muslim
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16 identity. Throughout the paper, the importance of heterogeneity and context has
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18 been reiterated. The collective Muslim identity expressed by the interviewees
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20 converged with their shared interest for a separate school provision in social
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22 conditions in which they perceived themselves to be under threat and/or attack.
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24 Theories with varying approaches to ‘groups’ (but all with anti-essentialist
25
26 undertones) were used to understand different elements of the data: that identity
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28 constructions are context-bound processes; that subjective experience of
29
30 structural inequality can inform affiliation to groups; and, that group members
31
32 may experience and express their affiliations in essentialist terms. The forms of
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34 collective Muslim identity reported in this study may be thus regarded as
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36 context-dependent constructions that reflected an intersection between perceived
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38 social conditions and interests, and which drew upon, shaped and promoted ideas
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40 about commonality and collective needs.
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50 **Acknowledgements**

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55 CT was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (PTA-026-27-
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57 1361) and the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship, University of Bristol.
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12 ¹ Personal communication: Association of Muslim Schools (10/05/2010).

13 ² Miles (1989, p. 42) defines racism as an ideology which portrays 'human beings, and the social
14 relations between human beings, in a distorted or misleading manner'.

15 ³ This is not to suggest that all Muslims, or even all the respondents, share a common stance
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