Contemplating official categories: Is the devil in the detail?

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Census 2021 will provide the third set of comprehensive statistics on religion in England and Wales, providing a means to explore how faith communities have changed over a twenty year period. The 2001 National Census of Population included, for the first time since 1851, a category on religious affiliation, which asked the public, 'What is your religion?' A Muslim category was amongst the tick box options, repeated again in 2011 and 2021. Muslim lobby groups were at the forefront of the campaign to include a question on religion in government data collection exercises, among which the National Census acts as a bench mark for all other official surveys including local authority data gathering (Aspinal, 2009). Therefore gaining recognition through becoming a category in the Census afforded a form of official recognition for 'Muslim' as a collective identification marker by officialdom, which would oblige other agencies to follow suit. Yet the campaign for the inclusion of a religion question, and indeed a Muslim category, took place before the sharp increase in both anti-Muslim discrimination and suspicion of the population, as a result of 9/11, 7/7 and government policies such as *PREVENT* (Hafez, 2018; Law et al., 2019; Abbas, 2020). Thus, what had been seen as a historically defining moment for British Muslims, in gaining official recognition as a community, came to be perceived as a potential means for surveillance and scrutiny (Hussain et al. 2021; Hussain 2022). Through exploring perceptions of the census among a sample of British Muslims, this article considers how the meaning attached with becoming an official category has shifted over time. It asks whether - just as collective identity markers are argued to increase and decrease in the salience groups afford them (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Serpe and Stryker, 2011) – does

the meaning attached to official categories change for those who they are meant to represent?

Two key themes were noted within the study discussed here, firstly there was apprehension regarding how data derived from the Muslim category would be both used (in terms of state control) and perceived (in terms of facilitating negative narratives about Muslims). Secondly, there was concern that intra-community dynamics – namely the intricacies of daily life within grassroots communities who are heterogeneous, and in some cases competing for resources and recognition, can be masked and even disempowered by being analysed within broader categories, such as the Muslim one. According to writings by those such as Brubaker (2000:62) the first theme can be understood as discussion on a category of analysis – that is Muslim as a category "used by social analysts" namely governments and policy makers to codify and stratify populations; and the latter about the non-official lived experience of groups or collectives as categories of practice "native or folk or lay categories…of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors". In the second type, a group can self-identify with an identity label which may well have been known and well established, even before their arrival on British shores, yet due to lacking official recognition it remains 'lay'. Despite this, in the British context, such identity-labels remain apparent and even those who would tick the same box for a broader category are able to distinguish themselves for important matters of marriage or local politics (see Ballard's writings on *biraderi* ,2004) from their next door neighbours group, whether its officially categorised or not. This is the reality of the categories of practice – they exist very much within the day to day exchanges that occur within our neighbourhoods.

In Brubaker's 2012 paper, *Categories of analysis and categories of practice: a note on the study of Muslims in European countries of immigration*, he writes, "[A]s scholars we can and should adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards our categories. This means, most obviously, emphasizing that 'Muslims' designates not a homogeneous and solidary group but a heterogeneous category. Beyond this, and more substantively, it means focusing on the changing ways in which the category 'Muslim' works, both as a

category of analysis and as a category of self- and other-identification in practice" (p.6)

Although Brubaker does not consider ethnic group differential in his essay – discussing Muslims as 'immigrants/immigrant origin' and thus attributing socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Muslims in Europe to - in the most part - an inevitable aspect of the immigrant experience in their journey to becoming more established. This does not meaningfully acknowledge the very real impact of a religious penalty beyond that, e.g. white British Muslims of non-immigrant stock experience a religious penalty when it comes to employment outcomes (see Khattab and Johnston, 2013). He does however describe potential intra-Muslim dynamics in terms of differences in theological interpretations, positions and identifications. Nevertheless, his work provides a useful analytical framework to consider how the meanings attached to the Muslim category differ for those who are identified by it *or* it is meant to represent; and whether an awareness of other group identities (as categories of practice) is justification enough to demand official recognition (become a category of analysis)? And If not, how can we acknowledge and respect the 'unofficial', so that they do not become marginalised among their neighbours belonging to official groups - who by their very inclusion within categories of analysis – are legitimate stakeholders for government attention and access to resources?

Becoming a category

Faith organisations were at the forefront of the campaign to collect official statistics on religious affiliation. Hussain (2017) discusses how previous data on ethnicity had pointed to higher levels of disadvantage among British Muslim communities, who could still only be identified through their ethnic groups (e.g. Pakistani and Bangladeshi). Minority faith group organisations – such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) – lobbied the government to include a question on religious affiliation in the census with the expectation that it would provide evidence to improve the conditions of grassroots communities.

The 2001 data confirmed that the Muslim population was indeed more disadvantaged across a number of measures compared with all other faith groups, including leaving compulsory education with no qualifications, despite also showing a greater propensity to go onto Further and Higher Education, compared with the national average (Hussain, 2008). A related concern arising from the Census data was that Muslims are the least economically active among the faith categories (Peach 2006). Findings also revealed that Muslims had the highest proportion of households living in overcrowded conditions (42% compared with 12% nationally) and the lowest proportion of households with central heating (Hussain and Sherif, 2014; Hussain, 2017).

A second set of data was collected by the 2011 Census, which demonstrated the continued prevalence of deprivation found within the British Muslim population (MCB 2015). Approximately half of Muslims were living in poverty according to key indicators, such as the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, overcrowded housing and higher rates of unemployment. Both censuses, therefore confirmed the perceived benefit of collecting official statistics on faith groups and Muslims in particular, in terms of highlighting areas of concern for targeted policy interventions. However, many saw the inclusion of religious categories as not merely a matter of evidence gathering for policy makers, but also an acknowledgment of how communities were choosing to self-identify and wished to be seen in the nation states they are citizens of. Hussain and Sherif (2014: 417) write,

The issue raised about distinguishing the 'religious' element from 'cultural' or 'ethnic' identification became increasingly contested by Muslims who challenged the notion that religious beliefs ought to be situated within domestic and personal domains (Weller 1998). Rather than, with time, coming to de-emphasise cultural and indeed religious markers, the opposite occurred. Greater recognition as what was, in the British context, increasingly identified as a 'faith community' correlated with the intensified demand for the right to practise the tenets of their religious duties outside of the home, in response to which more mosques, Islamic schools and cemeteries were established (Peach and Gale 2003). In addition to growing pressure to accommodate religious practices in public arenas, there was a

documented increase in the number of Muslims using their religious identity in addition to, or in place of, other social markers.

Furthermore, writers like Ballard (1996) suggested that combining Muslim communities – hitherto disparate ethnic groups – provided greater power in numbers both for domestic lobby but also as part of a global diaspora community. Others such as Saint-Blancat (2002) and Peak (2005) add that discrimination is easier to tackle as a collective, especially in the face of growing hostility towards Muslims in public and policy realms. Thus a unified Muslim category turned a number of smaller ethnic minority communities into the second largest faith group in the country over night.

Yet there were those from within the Muslim population who opposed the use of religion as an official category for a number of reasons. For example the well-known British Egyptian scholar Zaki Badawi articulated concerns over a religion question, fearing "it might pave the way to surveillance and state control" (Sherif 2011:11). His apprehension was expressed at a time where Muslims still remained 'under the radar' so to speak. The fact that this concern is now shared by many within the faith population under discussion here, is a direct consequence in the way that Muslims are now perceived by non-group members, rather than how Muslims view themselves.

However, the representation of Muslims as a single community was also flagged as problematic (Ballard 1996; Hellyer, 2005). Organisations attempting to speak for all Muslims and encouraging policy development in this direction have been challenged (Ali 2007; Pędzwiatr, 2007). Hussain and Sherif (2014: 426) write, "Although practitioners, census officials and other contributors carefully deliberated on what the census question should measure, such discussions largely occurred at mainstream Muslim organisational levels. It was agreed that no denomination or sub-groups would be listed. However Muslim minority groups may interpret this as a way of promoting mainstream interpretations of Islam at the expense of representing religious diversity".

Furthermore, others such as Hellyer (2005: 83) have discussed difficulties surrounding the use of religious affiliation as an identity for Muslims stating, "Muslims [are not] an ethno-cultural group by

virtue of being Muslim', thus pointing to the risk of a single Muslim category resulting in the 'ethnicisation' of Muslims." Therefore, there were some who had already commenced a debate on the risk of statistics on Muslims presenting an oversimplified narrative which would undermine intra-Muslim prejudice and disparities both along ethnic and religious lines (Ali 2007).

Khattab and Johnston's (2013) analysis confirmed that all Muslims experienced a 'penalty', that is when variables are the same, including for example, educational attainment, Muslims – including white British origin Muslims – are more likely to be unemployed. However, despite this, there was important differentiation in terms of intra-Muslim outcomes pointing to evidence of an ethnic hierarchy in which non-White Muslims experience an additional colour racism, and Black female Muslims the highest penalty, among all sub-groups. This therefore reminds us why there is merit in not only presenting statistics on Muslims as a 'bloc' or single faith community.

Against this backdrop there remain communities who lobby for official recognition through categories which are believed to better represent their needs (Ali 2007; Kalra et al 2019). Some activists argue that by presenting their communities as 'Muslim' has cast a shadow over important nuances and led to a neglect in catering for specific community needs. Two such groups are Kashmiris and Somalis – both of whom within a British context are almost entirely Muslim in terms of faith affiliation, yet despite forming substantial shares of the British Muslim population, and indeed the United Kingdom's ethnic minority populations, neither have an ethnic category within official data collection exercises. We now know that British Somalis have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and in recent correspondence between Allen Brett, the Leader of the Rochdale Borough Council and the Census Engagement team, he confirmed that, "the majority of the wards with a large Kashmiri community were the first ones to suffer from COVID-19"[i].

On ticking the Muslim box

Hussain et al. (2021) reported findings from a study which undertook an online survey among British Muslims on their perceptions of the census. Over half of respondents reported that they "always or

mostly complete the form". Approximately 30% stated that they either did not understand the purpose of the census, or understood its purpose a little. Furthermore, over one third agreed with the statement that "the census has a negative impact on British Muslims". The authors write,

> *The reporting of findings from the previous two Censuses generated negative press, with some commentators using figures to predict inflated rates of Muslim population growth or to pin point towns and cities with higher than average Muslim communities as problematic. This together with the intense securitization of British Muslims has led to many within the community to be particularly reluctant to provide detailed information about their household members; fearing surveys are a tool for security monitoring.* (Hussain et al. 2021: 3)

Similar apprehension was reported by a study conducted in April 2021 – as the National Census was taking place. A sample of British Muslims were interviewed during online and in person focus groups. The majority of participants were able to describe what the census is used for in theory, and this was generally discussed in terms of understanding population trends and/or for planning and service provision, and representation. However, as with previous research, the focus group discussions highlighted, perceived lack of transparency on how Census data is used, resulting in apathy towards the exercise ii) distrust of government surveys, impacting willingness to take part and iii) ability to complete forms accurately (Hussain 2022). Therefore, although having data on the Muslim population has no doubt provided vital information about the social and demographic trends – which point to the need for deliberate action by policy makers - the Muslim category hailed for recognition and its function in facilitating group rights is simultaneously fraught with apprehension.

...and thoughts on missing boxes

Findings from earlier research (Hussain et al. 2021) suggested that some communities were conscious of the fact that they did not have their own ethnic category on the census form, despite forming large sub-sections of the British Muslim population; and that this could

potentially lead to disengagement with such official exercises. As a result of such concerns, research participants were also asked what they thought about large Muslim communities, such as Kashmiris and Somalis, not having their own ethnic categories. A significant amount of discussion was generated. Some felt that emphasising ethnic differences created divisions among British Muslims, as one quote sums up:

> *I don't understand, we're all Muslim, we don't need to differentiate ourselves*

However this was challenged, as one respondent recounts a conversation she had on this very topic with a neighbour:

> *it's all about recognition and just recognising your own culture and your identity, whereas all different races, all different cultures, you all have your different languages and you have your different cultures, but you're all one body, you are Muslims.*

Of course one can tick Muslim as well as an ethnic category, however, as stated, communities who form sizable proportions of the Muslim population do not feel as though they have an appropriate ethnic category; and that demands for such can be met with opposition for creating divisions when there had been concerted efforts to unify. This, it could be argued, is a step backwards in the face of what matters – combating discrimination and disadvantage among all Muslims, given the tangible outcomes Islamophobia has for all Muslim groups. Yet what we also know is there is stark variation in terms of experiences of poverty and discrimination within the Muslim population based on ethnicity (Khattab and Johnston 2013) as well as intra-community dynamics (Kalra et al 2019).

Opposition in the face of such demands was stated to be particularly apparent when attempting to differentiate Kashmiris from the existing official category they are classified within – Pakistani - in the census. The *British Kashmiri Identity Campaign* was established to lobby the state and relevant agencies to include a 'Kashmiri' category in the census, however, given it was not included on the 2021 form, a community wide campaign using social media platforms, encouraged the diaspora to refrain from ticking 'Pakistani' and

instead to write in 'Kashmiri' under 'Other'. Several respondents were aware of the campaign and had commented on the need for a separate category. One described her experience in encouraging members of her community to do the same:

> *We did get a bit of funny looks, when there was certain people that were in the supermarket that weren't from Kashmir and weren't speaking that [Pahari] language and they were Urdu or Punjabi speaking. It was almost like, I think some people find it quite offensive that we are doing this [asking for Kashmiri recognition] and we are trying to segregate. But whereas it's just what we were trying to say is that it's just us getting recognised, that's all it is.*

Interestingly, some respondents felt that it was more of a legitimate demand for Somalis to have their own official ethnic category than Kashmiris, and the former were seen as a distinct group who were currently being inserted into African – which is too broad a category as it represents an entire continent.

There were other groups who were discussed as not having their own official ethnic category, in addition to the two aforementioned communities. One of the focus groups with youth generated substantial discussion on how ethnic Pashtuns, although forming a quarter of Pakistan's population and a sizable section of the British Pakistani community, felt they remain a distinct community in the UK:

> *So you are getting branched under the Pakistani umbrella however you feel that the Pakistani community might not see you as Pakistani.*
>
> *…however you have to tick a box.*

And so we return to categories of practice, in Small Heath, Birmingham where the quote from this discussion group took place. On Ladypool Road, the Azad Kashmiris, who speak to each other in Pahari form the majority. However, the tailor in one of the fabric shops quickly switches to Punjabi for customers who are visiting the area. The in joke is that wherever you have two Pashtuns they will always speak Pashto, and so the lived reality of differentiation plays out on the streets of the UK, yet all of the three mentioned groups fall

under the Pakistani category of analysis. It was stated earlier how a group can self-identify with an identity label – e.g. Pashtun or Kashmiri, which may well have been known and well established, even before their arrival on British shores, yet due to lacking official recognition it remains 'lay'. Despite this, in the British context, such identity-labels remain apparent and even those who would tick the same box for a broader category – e.g. Muslim and Pakistani, distinguish between themselves for what are perceived as important matters. Is this problematic? After all Brubaker himself suggests not all groups who self-identify with a ethnic identity need have a corresponding category of analysis.

Members of the British Kashmiri community who actively lobbied for official recognition as a category in their own right would argue that it *is* deeply problematic based on findings that suggest they suffer from some of the highest levels of disadvantage and discrimination from both outside the Muslim community and within it (see Ali, 2007; Kalra et al., 2019). If the mere existence of a collective identity (as a category of practice) is not enough to demand official recognition, how can we ensure equal representation, as a non-official stakeholder group, for government attention and access to resources? As Muslims are the most ethnically diverse minority faith group in Britain it is important to undertake additional research on the impact of a lack of ethnic categories, given some sub-communities within the Muslim umbrella demonstrate higher levels of socio-economic deprivation. Therefore, gaining accurate information on such communities for targeted service provision and support is crucial.

As Brubaker (2012:5) points out, "[t]he making of European Muslims has involved not only a re-labelling of populations previously identified and categorized in other terms as Muslims, but also the production of public representations of Muslims and the generation of knowledge about Muslims. And wittingly or unwittingly, scholars have been party to this ongoing process. Identifying one's object of analysis as 'Muslims', for example, highlights religious affiliation and, at least implicitly, religiosity; it also marks the population of interest as different from the surrounding population in both religion and religiosity." However, what some communities claim is even more problematic than "identifying one's object of analysis as 'Muslim'", is

that it can act to de-emphasise other identity markers, or worse still, render claims for recognition of unofficially recognised identity markers as unnecessary.

As one such scholar who analyses data generated from the Muslim category, I am among those Brubaker described in the quote above a decade earlier. Despite the increasing apprehension surrounding statistics derived from the category and what they do (and do not) represent, they afford us - both academics and members of the Muslim faith population – a level of information that prior to becoming an official category was sorely needed to understand socio-economic and demographic trends, against a backdrop of growing evidence, and indeed, concern that the Muslim experience could not simply be understood as the immigrant experience. It is our challenge, however, to ensure that intra-Muslim dynamics are also given due consideration, and that lived experiences are not mistakenly deemed less relevant because they do not neatly map against the categories that "count".

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