Geographical contributions to understanding contemporary Islam: current trends and future directions

Abstract
In recent years, geographers have been giving increasing attention to religion – and Islam in particular – yet such work is rarely referred to within the broader social science literature about Islam and Muslims. This paper seeks to promote interdisciplinary dialogue, discussion and debate by highlighting the contributions that human geographers are making to understandings of contemporary Islam. In particular, I draw upon research within urban social, cultural and feminist geographies to review current trends within geographical scholarship about Muslim individuals and communities. I then use this paper to suggest ways in which interdisciplinary research – in collaboration with human geographers - might seek to advance contemporary understandings of the social and spatial experiences of Muslim families and communities. I propose that a focus upon households, nations and intersections offer potential avenues for future research, whilst also highlighting the importance of thinking critically about the methodological issues involved in understanding contemporary Islam

Keywords: Human geography; homespaces; nations; intersections; qualitative methods

Introduction
Until relatively recently, the study of religion tended to occupy a marginalised position within human geography. For example, almost twenty years ago, Lily Kong (1990: 355) observed that the study of religion as ‘a valuable focus of inquiry has not always been immediately apparent’ within human geography. Yet, a decade after making this observation, Kong (2001: 211) noted that religion had ‘attracted significant attention…within geography’, and more recently still, Gale (2007, 1016) has stated that it is clear that ‘something like a mature disciplinary subfield has emerged’. There are overviews of both general and specific aspects of the geographies of religion (see for example Brace, Bailey and Harvey, 2006, Holloway and Valins, 2002, Kong, 1990, 2001, Proctor, 2006, Sopher, 1981, Stump, 2008) which provide useful guidance and ideas for future research. However, it is arguably research about Islam and Muslims that forms the largest body of scholarship within the geographies of religion evidenced by the recent publication of a number of edited collections on this topic (see e.g. Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan, 2007, Falah and Nagel, 2005, Hopkins and Gale, 2009) and so it is timely to synthesise this work and suggest future avenues for interdisciplinary research about contemporary Islam. Furthermore, global events such as those in New York on 11th September 2001 as well as the bombings in Bali on October 12th 2002, the Madrid train bombings of 11th March 2004 and the bombings on the London underground on July 7th 2005 have drawn much attention to, and are directly connected, with issues of security, surveillance and what Pain (forthcoming) has termed ‘globalised fear’. This has resulted in Muslim individuals and communities becoming the regular subjects of suspicious media coverage, government reports and vicious racist attacks (e.g. Hopkins and Smith, 2008, Noble, 2005, Peek, 2003, Sirin and Zaal, 2007). Research could usefully therefore seek to advance understanding of contemporary Islam whilst also working to improve the situation and circumstances of Muslim individuals and communities through promoting their well-being and protecting their livelihoods and everyday security.
In this article, I aim to synthesise the main trends within geographical research about contemporary Islam before suggesting avenues for future scholarship in this field, drawing upon existing trends within geographies of religion as well as broader themes from across human geography and neighbouring disciplines. In doing so, I hope to bring geographical research about contemporary Islam into conversation with other areas of the discipline and vice versa. To do so, this article is structured around five main themes. First, I explore current trends with geographical research about Islam highlighting that work within this field tends to reflect upon four main issues: residential segregation; cultural geographies of the city; gender relations; and everyday responses to geopolitical issues. Following this, I aim to set out an agenda for future research about geographical research about contemporary Islam reflecting upon four main areas of scholarship. First, I draw upon geographical interest in the significance of housing and the meanings of home to suggest that future research could usefully focus upon Muslim household, families and relationships in order to advance understandings of the economic and cultural geographies of Muslim families and communities. Second, I suggest that issues connected with nations, regions and territories could extend the scope and criticality of geographical research about Islam by highlighting the often significant influence of nations, governments and politics on the everyday lives of minority religious communities, whilst also assisting to appreciate the diversity of Muslim identities in terms of countries and regions of origin. Third, considering the intersections, interactions and inequalities between and within Muslim communities opens up possibilities for exploring the experiences of Muslims possessing and experiencing a range of different social identities and structural inequalities as well as the interactions between Muslims and peoples of other religions. Finally, I suggest that there are important questions to consider about how human geographers research Islam and Muslims in the future, and so I seek to explore some of the methodological questions involved in doing research with Muslims.

Current trends

Within geographic scholarship about Islam, there are – broadly speaking – four main bodies of scholarship each drawing upon different philosophical and sub-disciplinary trends within human geography. The first body of work draws upon traditional concerns within urban social geography about the mapping, measuring, and monitoring of residential segregation (Peach, Robinson and Smith, 1981) and the locations of social groups within cities (Ley, 1983, Peach, 2002). Much of this work seeks to explore the complexities of ethnic and racial segregation (Phillips, 1998, 2007) drawing upon census data (Howard and Hopkins, 2005) and has recently drawn attention to the urban spatial patterning of Muslim populations (e.g. Peach, 2006, Phillips, 2006). Alongside observations that new patterns of settlement are seeing Muslim populations locating in suburban locations (Peach, 2000), this important work has also sought to interpret and explain the complex relationships between areas of Muslim settlement, society and space (Hopkins, 2007b, Peach, 1990, 1996, 2006a, Phillips, 1998, 2006). For example, Peach (2006) has recently used the UK 2001 census to analyse the distribution of Muslims and other South Asian groups in London, highlighting that there is ‘considerable residential separation between Muslims of different ethnic origins’ (Peach, 2006: 367). Challenging homogenous perspectives on Islam, this work shows that ‘family, ethnicity, and region of origin are the dominant determinants of location’ (Peach, 2006: 368). Furthermore, Phillips has recently challenged the discourse of Muslim self-segregation through research in Bradford, arguing that:

Although it emerged that British Muslim families value residential clustering, for reasons of culture and tradition, familiarity, identity and security, the desire for separation from
others is not self-evident. Their spatial segregation in poorer neighbourhoods largely reflects bounded choices, constrained by structural disadvantage, inequalities in the housing market (past and present), worries about racism, and . . . racial harassment. (Phillips, 2006: 34).

As such, although this work seeks to measure, map and monitor changing patterns of Muslim residential segregation, scholars are also seeking to offer explanations for variations in settlement, changes in location over time and internal and external factors influencing these processes.

Closely related to research about Muslims and residential segregation, a second body of literature focuses on Muslims and the cultural geographies of the city (e.g. Gale and Naylor, 2002, Dunn, 2005, Naylor and Ryan, 2002) informed by work within cultural geography. Important work by Kevin Dunn (2001, 2005) has explored the politics of mosque development in Sydney. For Dunn (2002: 292) ‘mosque opposition has been a primary expression of the racism suffered by Muslims in Australia’, and these process are largely motivated by troubling discourses of nationalism connected with white supremacy and right-wing politics (Dunn, 2005). Similarly, research by Naylor and Ryan (2002) has drawn attention to the ways in which mosque developments in the UK often involve the ‘politicisation of planning decisions’ (Naylor and Ryan, 2002: 55) as a result of the (racist) assumptions of local objectors. Furthermore, concerns about mosque development have also heightened due to suburbanisation as middle-class locals see such buildings as ‘exotic sites amidst the ‘normality’ of the city (Naylor and Ryan, 2002: 55, see also Naylor and Ryan, 2003). A key focus of work here has been to question the role of the urban planning process (Gale, 2004), considering factors such as the aesthetic qualities of mosque buildings and the complex ways in which planning decisions are bound up with wider social and political relations.

The third – and arguably largest – body of scholarship within Muslim geographies draws upon perspectives informed by feminist and social and cultural geographies, focusing in particular upon gender relations within Muslim communities. An important concern of this work has been to problematise stereotypical understandings about the role of men and women in Islam highlighting the complex spatial behaviours of Muslim men and women in different localities (e.g. Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan, 2007, Falah and Nagel, 2005). Much attention here has been drawn to the experiences of Muslim women, focusing upon a broad range of concerns including: veiling practices in different places (e.g. Dwyer, 1999, Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005, Lewis, 2005, Secor, 2002, 2005), constructions of home (e.g. Mohammad, 2005, Phillips, 2009), and access to and experiences of education and employment (e.g. Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans, 2009, Dale et al, 2002, Mohammad, 1999). More recently too, geographers have also been doing research with Muslim men (e.g. Hopkins, 2004, 2006, Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera, 2008, Ehrkamp, 2008) highlighting the complexities of Muslim masculinities in different settings and at different times.

These three trends are arguably the most prevalent within geographic scholarship about contemporary Islam, however, in recent years - and in light of significant international events and politics - a fourth area of scholarship has started to emerge which is characterised by its focus upon critical geopolitics (e.g. Halliday, 2003, Hopkins, 2007a, Hopkins and Smith, 2008, Horschelmann, 2008). Drawing upon work within feminist political geographies, Horschelmann (2008) has explored the perceptions of risk after 11th September 2001 of 16-18 year-old students in the UK, most of whom are of South Asian heritage, highlighting fears connected with racism and discrimination. Similarly, Hopkins (2007c) found that the everyday experiences of
negotiating neighbourhood streets changed after 11th September 2001 for young Muslim men due to concerns about experiencing racism as they socialised with their peer group, journeyed to school or college, or attended mosque. Research with Muslim teenagers and university students in the USA (Peek, 2003, Sirin and Fine, 2007) has also sought to explore issues of identities, surveillance and belonging after the events of 11th September 2001 highlighting issues relating to the management of racism and social incivility and the (re)assessment of hyphenated identities. An important focus of all of this work is the observation that “…geopolitics are local; everyday life is geopolitical” (Pain and Smith, 2008: 249).

Much of the research about Islam with human geography has drawn upon trends within social, cultural and feminist geographies and has recently been making important connections with trends within political geography as well. There is also important work which is reflective of other sub-fields within the discipline and draws upon research from a wide range of places. Overall, there is work within human geography that reflects upon existing trends within the majority of the sub-fields of geography. This includes research within social, cultural and political geographies (as highlighted above), as well as work within development studies (e.g. Halvorson, 2005) and to a lesser extent, economic geographies (e.g. Pollard and Samers, 2007). Moreover, this scholarship has drawn upon empirical research conducted in a range of locations including various aspects of urban life in Australia (Dunn, 2005) Germany (Ehrkamp, 2008), Turkey (Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005, Secor, 2002), France (Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005) and Singapore (Kong, 2006) as well as in other localities such as post-Soviet central Asia (Rowe, 2007), Bosnia (Bringa, 1995), Morocco (Freeman, 2005) and Pakistan (Halvorson, 2005) to name a few. Furthermore, the scalar focus of this work includes research focusing upon a variety of scales including the global, national, local, urban, neighbourhood, street, school and the mosque. That being said, there appears to be a dearth of research within human geography about Muslims in rural settings reflecting the tendency of research to focus upon residential segregation or cultural geographies of the city. Furthermore, the focus of work upon the contemporary period has also led work about Islam within human geography to neglect the possibilities for explore the historical geographies of Islam, a point already made by Brace, Bailey and Harvey (2006) with regards to the geographies of religion. In synthesising these various contributions to geographic scholarship about Islam, I now offer reflections for potential new research directions which scholarship within this field could usefully draw upon.

**Households, families and relationships**

A focus upon homespaces has been an important feature within research about the geographies of Muslim identities, drawing in particular upon the ways in which homespaces act as locations for the management, expression and re-working of gendered identities (see for example, Phillips, 2009). This work connects closely with the recent ‘explosion of scholarship around the concept of home’ (Jacobs and Smith, 2008: 515, see also Blunt, 2005, Blunt and Varley, 2004). Staeheli and Nagel (2006: 1600) draw upon what they refer to as ‘topographies of home’ to explore the complex ways that Arab-American immigrants experience and negotiate their connections between homes in the USA and in the Middle East. As they note: ‘home’ is a bundle of contradictions. It conjures feelings of safety, belonging, and connection. It can be a site of violence, oppression, and alienation’ (Staeheli and Nagel, 2006: 1599). Furthermore, drawing upon research with young, mostly working class, Muslim women in the UK, Phillips (2009: 25) highlights that the ‘driving forces underlying the creation of home-spaces, are rooted in personal and family circumstances, lived experiences of community and neighbourhood, and
understandings of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Recent work by Hopkins and Smith (2008) has also shown how – following the events of 11th September 2001 – young Muslim men displayed a tendency to withdraw to the private spaces of home in order to avoid the increased possibility of experiencing racism or harassment in their negotiations of public places. A focus upon Muslim homespaces and the construction and contestation of gendered identities remains an important topic for future research, not least for the ways in which such work contributes to challenging, diluting and overcoming problematic stereotypes about Islam, gender and place. However, future research could usefully seek to consider broader issues about Muslim households, families and relationships and I now suggest three ways in which human geographers in particular, and social scientists more generally, might seek to advance scholarship in this area.

Connected with research about homespaces and gendered identities, work about Islam within human geography has drawn heavily upon the recent development of children’s and young people’s geographies in wide variety of contexts (see for example, Dwyer, 2000, Halvorson, 2005, Hopkins, 2004, Phillips, 2008). Although the focus upon childhood and youth has offered important insights into the diversities and complexities of being Muslim, this has resulted in the practices, identities and geographies of Muslims of other ages being marginalised from scholarly investigation. This has previously been observed by Kong (2001: 2007) who notes about the geographies of religion that there may be ‘different geographies for different population constitutions’. As such, future work could usefully take up recent calls for thinking relationally about geographies of age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007) by focusing upon the experiences of Muslim families and households. Work here could draw upon scholarship about the multiple formations of Muslim families and households (Duncan and Smith, 2002s, 2002b, Husain and O’Brien, 1999, 2000) interrogating the ‘traditional Muslim family model’ (Husain and O’Brien, 2000: 6), the obligations upon particular family members and the negotiations, tensions and outcomes related to these. Key considerations for future research about Muslim households and homespaces could include the contemporary nature of intergenerational relations (Vanderbeck, 2007) within Muslim families and households, Muslim lifecourses, Muslim parenting and the relationships between, within and across Muslim families. In doing such work, researchers could draw upon existing work about Islam within human geography by giving consideration to issues of spatial segregation, cultural geographies of urban life and gender relations. Furthermore, it is also crucial to understand the ways in geopolitical changes connected with global events and international politics have (re)shaped Muslim family life and so consideration of the influence of events such as 11th September 2001, the bombings in Bali on October 12th 2002, the Madrid train bombings of 11th Mach 2004 or the London underground bombings on 7th July 2005 may contribute to understanding the relationships between geopolitical events, international politics and local lives.

Related to the global framing of such events and thinking about global financial issues, Pollard and Samers (2007: 313, see also Samers and Pollard, forthcoming) have observed the ‘rapid growth of Islamic banking and finance’, the heterogeneous practices associated with its adoption, and the ways in which this is becoming increasingly ‘Western’ in character. Such scholarship could usefully be applied to advancing understandings of the economic geographies and financial management of Muslim households. As Smith and Munro (2008: 159) note ‘housing dynamics have moved to centre stage in the management of whole economies, the project of regional development, and the regeneration of neighbourhoods’. This raises questions about the internal economic and cultural management of Muslim households. How do Muslim families manage their housing situations and deal with ‘property prices, housing wealth, and
mortgage debt’ (Smith and Munro, 2008: 159) in the context of a range of financial products and their perceptions about the requirements of their religious faith?

Nations, regions and territories

Although geographical contributions to understanding contemporary Islam has focused upon a range of geographical scales and localities, the dominant tendency within this work is to focus upon relatively local circumstances. Whether it be about patterns of religious residential segregation (Peach, 2006), access to education and employment (Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans, 2008), mosque location (Naylor and Ryan, 2002) or veiling practices (Lewis, 2007), the inclination of existing scholarship is to focus upon the local and so attention is drawn to homes, streets, neighbourhoods and cities. In one sense, this is a strength of this sub-field, highlighting that much work is based around theoretically-informed empirical investigations into the experiences of local neighbourhoods and communities with Muslim residents. Although this scholarship does not ignore the significance of other scales – such as the national or global – and instead sees these as interconnected and interrelated with local experiences (Dunn, 2005), there has been a tendency with this work to overlook the potential influence of discourses around nations, nationhood and nationalism and the possible significance of other regions or territories. So as Mansfield (2005: 471) proposes, ‘while we need to avoid thinking of the national simply as a unitary container that has clear insides and outsides, we need to move beyond rescaling by reintegrating the national as a dimension of scalar process.’ I propose then that there is a need to consider the role of nationhood, regions and territories in the everyday lives of Muslims and how connections and disconnections between different nations, regions and territories influence senses of religious identities, experiences of migration and accounts of resettlement. Such work could explore both the ways in which the national contexts in which Muslim communities reside influence their experiences, and the ways in which the national or regional origins of Muslims shape their identities, inspire them to practice their religion in particular ways and encourage them to adopt distinct social and cultural behaviours, attitudes or values. I now consider these two suggestions in turn.

Recognising the ways in which the national context influences the experiences of Muslim communities, important research by Kevin Dunn (2001, 2004, 2005) has explored the politics of mosque development in Sydney in the context of debates connected with nationalism, citizenship and belonging. Dunn (2005: 46) acknowledges that ‘the local level, or everyday context, is clearly a most instructive site at which to examine issues of nationalism and belonging’ (Dunn, 2005: 46). This work explores various national discourses – such as those associated with discourses of Australian multiculturalism, racist right wing political attitudes and gendered behaviours, and protection of white dominance – and how these manifest themselves in opposing the development of mosque buildings in Sydney. Similarly, research by Ehrkamp (2005: 1688) has interrogated the ways in which German national discourses about assimilation are managed and contested through the spatial practices and identities of Turkish immigrants and their persistent construction as ‘oriental and ‘other’. Clearly, this work demonstrates the complex ways in which discourses at the national level – through debates about multiculturalism, assimilation, governance and/or politics – often has direct influences on everyday experiences whether this is through an application for mosque development, disconnections or exclusions from within the nation of residence, or general contestations over senses of belonging. Future research could usefully continue to explore understandings of local practices, attitudes and behaviours, whilst also seeking to understand the often significant influence that the nation of residence has on Muslim communities.
As well as exploring the role of the national contexts which Muslims experience on a everyday basis, research about contemporary Islam could also usefully seek to advance understanding and appreciation of the ways in which specific practices, attitudes and values held by Muslims connects with or relates back to their countries or regions of origin, or relates to their parent’s or grandparent’s heritage. Recent census analysis by Peach (2006: 368) provides an excellent example of how variables of religion and ethnicity can be simultaneously analysed in order to demonstrate the distribution, diversity and relationships between ‘political Islam and everyday Islam’ within the Muslim community in London. Peach (2006: 355) argues that ‘regarding British Muslims as a set of communities rather than as a single community may be more instructive for our understanding’ (Peach, 2006: 355) given the diversity and distribution of the Muslim population. Contrary to the high levels of Muslim segregation that might be expected (although see Phillips, 2006), this research demonstrates that ‘there is considerable residential separation between Muslims of different ethnic origins. The Bangladeshis are the most encapsulated, while the Indian-Pakistani divide is the most permeable of the South Asian ethnic boundaries’ (Peach, 2006: 367). The dominant influences over residential location appear to be family, ethnicity and region of origin rather than religion, and explanations proposed for this include the origins of specific ethnic groups ‘in the north-western part of the subcontinent’ (Peach, 2006: 367) as well as the presence of particular language communities.

By exploring the ways in which Muslims can be recognised as a diverse and heterogeneous population – varying according to ethnic background, nation or region of upbringing, family norms, language and cultural practices and so on – will undoubtedly help to advance understandings of contemporary Islam. In doing so, it is crucial that we seek to be critical and reflexive of the identity labels and group affiliations that we use, as it may not be religion or nationality that is of most significance, and instead, a particular region of origin or cultural practice may be crucial in shaping how Islam is practised. The analysis by Peach (2006) outlined above shows that a variety of factors influence the residential location of London’s Muslim communities, and so future research could seek to explore the multiple influences on the everyday geographies and spatial practices of Muslims living a range of places and at different times. All in all, such work will help to challenge the misrepresentation of Islam in the media, improve public understanding of Islam and help to promote public recognition of the heterogeneity of Islam (Hopkins, 2004, Dunn, Klocker and Salaby, 2007).

Intersections, interactions and inequalities

Recognising the diversity within the sets of Muslim communities which form the focus of geographical research about contemporary Islam opens up space for considering the personal social identities of the Muslims that tend be the subject of research. The vast majority of research focuses upon Muslims who are marginalised in ways related to their recent migration or the migration of their parents or grandparents, and their membership of particular non-white ethnic groups or other marginalised and stigmatised communities. So, for example, work has focused on Iranians in Sydney, London and Vancouver (McAuliffe, 2007a, 2007b), Turkish immigrants in Germany (Ehrkamp, 2006, 2007, 2008), Arab migrants to the USA (Nagel, 2002) and young Pakistani men and women in the UK (Hopkins, 2006, Phillips, 2009) to name a few examples. Much of this work also draws to attention to the complex ways in which the experiences of Muslims are racialised and gendered in different ways at different times, often seeking to explore some of the stereotypical qualities associated with Muslims. Although some research has sought to explore the interaction of Muslimness with other social identities – such as sexuality
(Rouhani, 2003, 2007, Yip, 2004, 2009) – future research could also seek to understand the ways in which other social identities such as disability, class and caste influence the personal biographies and everyday experiences of Muslims, and the ways in which particular intersections and interactions of identities shape experiences of social relations. Also, although there has been a tendency to focus upon marginalised identities such as those associated with the articulation of particular forms of femininity or racialisation, recent geographical work about Islam has drawn attention to previously overlooked social identities such as those associated with masculinities (Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera, 2008, Hopkins, 2006, Ehrkamp, 2008). Such a focus opens up possibilities for seeking to understand the experiences of Muslims belonging to social groups who are regarded as mainstream or less marginalised that those researched in other work. This could lead to important research about the experiences of Muslims who occupy positions of power, white Muslims or Muslims belong to upper class or caste groups.

In considering the potentials for exploring how Islamic identities intersect and interact with other social identities, consideration of the ways in which the geographies of Muslims shape and are shaped by the spatialities of other religious groups and practices offers fertile ground for future study. Such work could seek to explore the various connections that exist in different places between Islam and other religions and spiritualities, the connections with other sacred or secular sites and the ways in which any conflict between Muslims and other religious, spiritual, agnostic or atheist groups might be managed or contested. Kong (2001: 228) has highlighted the importance of exploring ‘different religions in different historical and place-specific contexts’. Investigating this issue in the context of geographical scholarship about contemporary Islam raises crucial questions about what geographies of interfaith studies might look like? What are the interactions between Muslim and other religious and non-religious geographies like in different places at different times and why?

**Researching Contemporary Islam**

A key consideration relating to the advancement of inquiries into the multiple spatialities of Islam and Muslims relates to the processes, methods and politics involved in researching contemporary Islam. This topic provides a fruitful avenue for future scholarship, discussion and debate, particularly since existing work has only paid scant attention to such matters. Reflecting existing trends within geographic work about Islam, research focusing on the mapping, monitoring and measuring of residential segregation tends to employ a range of quantitative tools associated with the analysis of census data and the manipulation of large scale surveys (e.g. Peach, 2006). Much of the other work within human geography tends to rely largely upon the collection of original empirical data through the use of qualitative methods. Some of these qualitative methods are often used alongside other qualitative techniques, including: archival research; ethnographic work; focus groups; oral histories; and interviews. As has been suggested elsewhere (Hopkins, 2007b), future research could usefully seek to combine quantitative and qualitative research in order to advance scholarly understanding of Muslim geographies.

A fruitful suite of opportunities for advancing critical understandings of the methodological issues involved in researching contemporary Islam is present within the recent flurry of interest in participatory action research approaches and methods (e.g. Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2008). Participatory action research ‘involves researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2008: 1). Furthermore, such work has
sought to replace an ‘extractive’, imperial model of social research with one in which the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved. Put another way, advocates have attempted to remove hierarchical role specifications and empower ‘ordinary people’ in and through research. Their intention is to transform an alienating ‘Fordist’ mode of academic production into a more flexible and socially owned process (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2008: 1).

It is important to emphasise that participatory action research can be seen as an approach to research – or an epistemology – as well as a set of methods and techniques (Kesby, 2007). So, researchers could usefully adopt either or both of these by seeking to work collaboratively with Muslim families, communities and neighbourhoods in order to promote social change, as well as adopting participatory techniques in order promote knowledge and advance understanding of the complexities and diversities of contemporary Islam.

Although research about Islam within human geography clearly develops from either detailed quantitative analysis and/or the sophisticated employment of a mixture of qualitative methods, consideration of the range of methodological issues involved in researching Islam is surprisingly rare. Most studies make passing reference in the methodology section of journal articles to issues about gaining access, sampling strategies, obtaining access, analysis process and such like, yet there is a lack of sustained engagement with methodological issues within geographic scholarship about contemporary Islam. This raises a series of important questions about the various ethical and methodological issues that work within contemporary Islam engages with. What strategies do researchers use to gain access to Muslim communities? How do researchers negotiate their relationships with gatekeepers, research participants and others involved in the research? Are there particular strategies they adopt when analysing the data collected? How do they seek to disseminate the research they have conducted? Critical engagement and discussion about these and other questions could be useful for advancing the sophistication of research about contemporary Islam.

A significant issue that is rarely discussed within the geographies of religion - let alone within geographical scholarship about Islam – relates to the positionalities of the researcher and the researched and the ways in which this determines, shapes or transforms the research process. Although some work within critical geographies and sociologies of religion (Hopkins, 2009, Mohammad, 2001, Olson, 2008, Yip, 2008) is starting to take this issue seriously, it is surprising that little consideration has been given to these issues, particularly given the connections of much work about Islam within human geography with research within feminist, social and cultural geographies. Clearly, the gendered, classed, racialised and religious background, identities and practices of the researcher and the particular Islamic and other social identities of the research participants may determine the nature of the research encounter, the detail of the data collected and the overall outcomes of the research. This is therefore a key issue for future research to consider (Hopkins and Gale, 2009). Drawing upon their experience of conducting research in Bradford, UK, Sanghera and Thapar-Bjokert (2008: 544) note ‘that mapping the dynamics of the research relationship between the researcher and the gatekeeper becomes even more important where the research site has a controversial and contested political history’, thereby demonstrating the importance of considering not only the positionalities of the researcher and the researched, but also the positionalities of others involved in making research happen, as well as the particular social, cultural and political circumstances in which research is taking place (e.g. Hopkins, 2007a). This issue also raises the question of who is involved in researching contemporary Islam. Connected with the whiteness of geography as an academic discipline
(Kobayashi and Peake, 2000, Pulido, 2002), it is clear that the vast majority of researchers researching Islam and Muslims within human geography are white middle-class academics, although clearly there are important ways in which Muslim geographers have shaped the history and development of the discipline (Pourahmad and Tavallai, 2004, Kong, 2008).

III Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that there is a need for conversations to take place between those researching contemporary Islam within human geography and other social scientists interested in such matters, and vice versa. The initial part of this paper charted existing trends within geographic scholarship about contemporary Islam. In doing so, this paper has demonstrated that the main foci of such scholarship – residential segregation, cultural geographies of the city, gender relations and everyday geopolitics – has tended to draw upon trends with the social, cultural and feminist domains of the discipline, with some recent research connecting with themes in political geographies. This work draws upon research based in a range of localities and across all geographical scales, although work drawing upon rural and/or historical insights into geographies of Islam appears somewhat scarce. I then used this summary of existing trends within geographic scholarship about contemporary Islam as a platform to suggest possible avenues for future scholarship by drawing upon trends and themes within the discipline as a whole, as well as from neighbouring disciplines.

I have suggested that, by building upon existing trends and themes within the discipline, geographers could usefully advance understandings of contemporary Islam. One way of doing this is to capitalise upon the interest in home to explore homespaces, families and relationships by continuing to focus upon gender relations and the home in the changing geopolitical climate as well as exploring the experiences of Muslims of different ages across the lifecourse and the complex ways in which they manage and negotiate their housing, financial and related circumstances. Second, by scaling up from the tendency to focus on local case-studies, attention could focus on different national, regional and territorial contexts and the ways in which these influence the experiences of Muslims, speak to connections between and within these contexts and demonstrate diversity with Muslim communities. Third, I have drawn attention to the possibilities of thinking about intersections, interactions and inequalities within contemporary Islam, encouraging scholars to think critically about the particular social identities being studied within such work. Here, I suggest that a focus upon a broad range of social identities may provide an interesting focus for future work as would the possibilities of considering the interactions between different religious groups and communities. Finally, it is also important to consider the complex methodological issues involved in researching contemporary Islam in order to consider how ethical issues are managed, how researchers’ identities are negotiated and to think creatively about how to involve participants in research. These issues are even more pressing given the current geopolitical climate.

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