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The racialization of Muslim family life

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ABSTRACT
This article situates Muslim family life within the study of race and racism to show how colonial ways of thinking inform dominant perspectives of Muslim families. It is concerned with family life in Western societies where people identifying as Muslim are a minoritized group. It identifies conceptual and theoretical limitations arising from persisting, uncritical acceptance of dominant normative understandings of family and highlights the significance of the extended family as an overlooked category in dominant perspectives of Muslim family life. It contributes to understanding by setting out how Muslim families are simultaneously racialized and routinely overlooked in scholarship, law and policy. It argues for a need to pay attention to family arrangements shaped by ideals of familism and collectivist principles while also challenging racialized ideas of Muslim families as problematically different, incompatible, and unchanging. The article provides examples to illustrate how doing so facilitates a better understanding of Muslim family life.

Introduction

Attention has been drawn to the neglect of family practices that stretch beyond the boundaries of the nation-state with transnational families often overlooked in family and relationship studies (Reynolds and Zontini 2014). While a transnational focus includes many Muslim families, the overall aim of this article is to show how it is important to go beyond a migration lens to situate Muslim family life within the study of race and racism. This article positions the study of Muslim family life within race and racism studies to draw attention to the enduring influence of colonial ways of thinking in shaping dominant perspectives of Muslim families. It identifies a gap in knowledge arising from the associated exclusionary conceptual and theoretical orientation of family and relationship studies. Through highlighting racialized hierarchies of legitimacy and worth linked to family, it sets out how Muslim family life is problematized in ways that contribute to control, regulation and surveillance. It explores the impact of colonial thinking in influencing dominant ideas of what and who counts as a family and considers important consequences, namely deciding legal rights and responsibilities and developing family policies. The article

therefore considers how the state influences the arrangement and conduct of Muslim family life through embedding a dominant understanding of family in family law and policy.

A connected key aim is to emphasize the significance of the extended family as a central, overlooked category in dominant representations of Muslim family life. The article argues that the persisting, underlying dominance of the nuclear family in research, policy and law discourages critical engagement with family types that are seen to have a collectivist orientation and commitment to ideals of familism. In doing so, it identifies an opportunity to challenge racializing tropes of backward, problematic Muslim families through engaging with important questions about if and how principles of collectivism and familism shape Muslim family life. Taking account of family as a structure and arrangement of collective lives, it provides examples to illustrate how engaging with these can facilitate a better understanding of Muslim families. Together, the aims are intended to advance conceptual, theoretical and empirical understanding of Muslim family life.

The article is specifically concerned with family life in societies where people identifying as Muslim are both a numerical minority and a minoritized group. While it includes examples from the UK to provide context and illustrate key points, the arguments advanced are, in principle, relevant to understanding Muslim family life in other Western societies. Advancing an understanding of Muslim family life in these non-Muslim majority societies is significant in assessing the continuing influence of ideas at the heart of colonialism and imperialism. It supports the argument that colonial histories are deeply implicated in contemporary forms of racism (Meghji 2021, 23). Despite commonalities arising from this influence, Western societies differ according to the type of legal system and welfare regime and approach to incorporation of minorities, all of which influence family life. UK-specific examples are, therefore, useful in signposting factors influencing Muslim family life in other Western contexts.

The concept of racialization is used here because it captures how the multi-faceted category of race includes cultural, ethnic and religious differences between people, in addition to biological ones (Lentin and Titley 2011; Murji and Solomos 2005). It highlights how race thinking is present in circumstances where the unambiguous language of race and biological inferiority and superiority is not (Goldberg 2009). Debate over the contentious concept of Islamophobia includes recognition that religion is raced and Muslims are racialized, contributing to the argument that Islamophobia can be summed up as anti-Muslim racism (Allen 2010; Elahi and Khan 2017; Murji and Solomos 2005; Sayyid and Vakil 2010). This article engages with and furthers this debate, presenting an account of how Muslim family life is racialized through dynamic intersections of culture, ethnicity and religion.

In addition to racialization, the complex, multi-dimensional category of Muslims requires attention as a prerequisite for exploring Muslim family life. The category is commonly defined as trans-ethnic, operating across multiple ethnic boundaries (Grillo 2018). In European societies, it is common for certain ethnic categories, such as Arab and Pakistani, to be used interchangeably with Muslims in categorizing people according to religion, despite religious diversity. Methodological Islamism is foremost among unavoidable risks associated with using the category and involves both exaggerating commonalities among Muslims and overstating the significance of religion (Brubaker 2013). It also involves understating how religion intersects with various other dimensions of difference, including migration history, class, gender and generation, all of which contribute to the arrangement of family life. The article seeks to accommodate this risk by

using the category Muslim in a specific way to delineate a minoritized group. This entails foregrounding that, regardless of ethnicity and other intersectional differences, Muslims experience contested belonging through a racialized positioning as problematic outsiders who are a threat to cohesion and security in non-Muslim majority societies (Phillips 2006; Phillips, Davis, and Ratcliffe 2007). The article also includes examples which demonstrate the significance of key intersections, such as gender and generation.

Addressing concerns about methodological Islamism is critical in exploring the racialization of Muslim family life because it keeps in sight the significant, inevitable heterogeneity of Muslim families. Whether a family is viewed as a structural unit, set of relationships or normative domain, diversity and change are key features. For example, in the UK context, there is evidence that marital instability, separation and divorce are becoming an increasingly common part of Muslim family life, with a growing number of lone parent Muslim households and divorced women choosing not to remarry (Baz 2020; Muslim Council of Britain 2015; Qureshi 2016, 2020, 2021). There is also evidence of an increasing number of single person Muslim households and a disproportionate number of Muslim households experiencing overcrowding and poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2023; Muslim Council of Britain 2015; Pickett, Taylor-Robinson, and Erlam 2021). This article promotes the importance of exploring continuity and change without presupposing the centrality of familism and connected preference for collectivist arrangements.

What is distinctive about Muslim family life?

Problematizing the commonsense notion of a Muslim family is a precondition for exploring the racialization of Muslim family life. This involves considering what is distinctive about Muslim families in societies where Muslims are a minoritized group while also acknowledging the inevitable rich diversity, complexity and changing nature of Muslim family formations. There are, at least, three key features contributing to broad commonalities among Muslim families: the role of religion in family life, experience of forms of racism and positionality as Muslim. These are inter-connected and, together, contribute to the racialization of Muslim family life.

First, Islamic beliefs, rituals and practices provide an overarching structure for and background to family life, although how these are enacted is culturally situated and dependent on many intersecting factors, including degree of religiosity. Islam as a total meaning system provides a moral order to family life influencing relationships and practices (Grillo 2018). Fulfilling familial roles and responsibilities is viewed as both a religious obligation and expression of faith, with maintaining strong family ties prioritized. Muslim families are usually socially conservative, adhering to patriarchal and heterosexual conventions. Heterosexual marriage is regarded as both a religious duty and a core component of family life (Yip 2004). Having children is seen as a blessing and central purpose of marriage, and large families are encouraged in Islamic teaching (Bowen 2003; Elias 2005, 71). Parents are responsible for the welfare and care of their children and, in return, children have responsibilities in respecting and caring for their parents. However, the arrangement and dominant practices of Muslim family life stretch beyond the married couple and their offspring to include multiple, often hierarchical, intergenerational family relationships. For instance, older Muslims have clearly defined generational roles with connected, enhanced authority and status. These include

responsibilities for inter-generational transmission of both culture and religion and material resources (Becher 2008). The common practice of patrilineality extends, in a hierarchical fashion, beyond the father to the eldest brother (Shaw 2000, 93).

Second, everyday family life is influenced by anti-Muslim forms of racism as Muslim families are situated in a social and political context in which Muslims routinely experience intolerance, surveillance, and associated practices of social control (Abbas 2005; Fekete 2009; Hussain and Bagguley 2012). There is an important, frequently overlooked, question about the extent to which anti-Muslim racism bleeds into the private domain of family life. For instance, the impact of racism on patterns of family life can include reinforcing dominant masculine positions. Indeed, familial relationships have been shown as central to the reproduction of femininities and masculinities (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Some routine, gendered family practices that men adopt emerge as a response to anxieties about the safety and welfare of women, as well as younger and older family members (Britton 2018). Similarly, Muslim men assume responsibility for teaching their children strategies for dealing with racism as part of preparing them for life in a racialized society (Chowbey, Salway, and Clarke 2013, 400–401). These practices support the dominant, racializing portrayal of Muslim families as rigidly patriarchal and characterized by conflict-ridden, unequal gender relationships (Alexander 2004; Alexander, Redclift, and Hussain 2013). The Muslim family is also similarly positioned as a site of generational conflict and, as a result, perceived differences between generations are emphasized at the expense of exploring commonalities, such as experiences of discrimination (Anwar 2002; Grillo 2018). The effect of shared experiences of racism on generational relationships and connected, routine family practices is an under-explored aspect of Muslim family life.

Third, regardless of form and arrangement, Muslim families are influenced by the increased prominence of "Muslim" as a principal marker of difference. Religion in general, and Islam in particular, has frequently come to supersede both nation and region of origin, and ethnic and racial background in categorizing minoritized groups (Brubaker 2013). One consequence is that Muslim populations have been "trans-ethnicized" within a single problematic category (Grillo 2018, 174–178). Increased use of the category "Muslim" has, at times, proven advantageous in securing accommodation of specific needs and interests. In the UK context, multicultural gains in the education system are a well-known example, evidencing progress in Muslims' continuing struggle for recognition as members of an ostensibly secular society. Responsible for the religious socialization of their children, Muslim parents have successfully sought to safeguard religious observance requirements, principally with respect to diet, dress and acts of worship (Grillo 2018, 441). This involves extending religious observance from the private to the public domain, incorporating schools as a key site of secondary socialization.

In contrast, in recent years, the anti-radicalization Prevent duty has led to an emphasis on Britishness and promoting British values in schools. This has had a disproportionate, exclusionary impact on Muslim children who are collectively positioned as a security risk and whose faith is devalued (Jerome, Elwick, and Kazim 2019). Muslim parents are similarly problematized as child referrals to Prevent are seen to signal deviant child-rearing practices, parents' radicalizing influence or failure to control their offspring (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 87). The category "Muslim" is therefore not uniformly advantageous because it also operates to complement dominant racialized ideas of Muslims as a

uniform, unassimilable grouping. As well as contributing to hostility towards Islam and anti-Muslim forms of racism, it supports positioning of Muslim families as problematically distinctive and a site for the reproduction of troublesome citizens (Casey 2016; Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). The rest of this article critically engages with the category "Muslim" in examining how the distinctiveness of Muslim family life is connected to racialization.

The absence/presence of Muslim families in dominant debates about family

Informed by colonial ways of thinking and connected politics of racial capitalism, prominent classical and contemporary conceptual, empirical, and theoretical debates about family demonstrate a sustained lack of interest in Muslim family life, while indirectly contributing to problematizing accounts of it. Whether viewed as a complex web of relationships, institution or structural arrangement of social life, Muslim families are regularly positioned as either unchanging or regressive, and stubbornly pre-modern as a result. Exclusion from key academic debates about family therefore has important consequences in facilitating a racialized lack of understanding about Muslim family life.

Classical theories of family provided an initial basis for problematizing Muslim family life by overlooking family formations outside of Eurocentric, racially unmarked, white universal norms. Highly selective interpretations of colonial and postcolonial encounters portrayed a decline in extended family formations as an inevitable consequence of the shift from traditional to modern societies. For instance, Tonnies' well-known distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft-type societies and Simmel's depiction of urban societies reflected the perceived diminishing influence of both the extended family and religion, specifically Christianity (Simmel 1950; Tonnies 1957). These supported colonial notions of Western progress and superiority, providing further ideological justification for European domination (Bhambra 2007; Meghji 2021). They also legitimized Orientalist conceptions of Eastern inferiority which included depicting Islam as a hostile, subordinate religion (Runnymede Trust 1997; Said 2003). Muslim societies were subject to the paternalistic belief that colonial conquest brought civilization to peoples seen as inferior (Bandyopadhyay 2019).

Classical theories' association of extended family formations with traditional societies has an enduring legacy, influencing present-day understanding of Muslim family life. One way to demonstrate this is through comparing principal notions of extended family with those of community as these are similarly over-determined in depicting the lives of those less powerful and privileged. Racialization occurs because, like community, extended family acts as a privileged marker of difference for groups from disadvantaged ethnic, religious and class backgrounds (see Alleyne 2002, for a discussion of community). To take two, familiar examples, it is well-documented that community often features as a dominant trope in depicting working-class life whereas, in contrast, the role of extended family arrangements in transmitting wealth and privilege among the affluent is usually overlooked (Hoggart 1957; Khan 2011; Young and Willmott 1957). In the case of Muslims, adherence to extended family arrangements supports racialized notions of cultural incompatibility, positioning Muslim families as problematically wedded to practices and values that conflict with those of non-Muslims. Tied to colonial histories of migration,

the transnational family origins and arrangements of many Muslims serve to reinforce this positioning.

More recent theories of family life have focused on individualization and the apparent decline of the family and, in doing so, provide an example of how knowledge production excludes ethnically and racially minoritized groups (e.g. Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004; Giddens 1992). Collectivist-oriented cultural practices and traditions associated with Muslim family life are notably overlooked in theories prioritizing increased agency and choice and decreased adherence to traditional religious and cultural norms. Similarly, the conditions of sexual modernity are seen to include nuclear families, companionate marriage, and binary gender (Balani 2023). The resulting enduring dominance of the normative nuclear family also renders extended family formations problematic. Persisting colonialist ways of thinking about modern family life therefore obscure understanding of Muslim families. Muslim family life is seen as troublesome because it does not fit with perceived irreversible trends towards individualization. While limitations of theories of individualization are acknowledged in family and relationship studies, there remains a lack of critical engagement with families that, at least in principle, favour extended arrangements (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Duncan and Smith 2006; Smart and Shipman 2004).

Conceptual and theoretical tools advanced from the cultural turn in family and relationship studies raise important questions about the usefulness of tools designed in a dominant Western context for exploring the family lives of ethnically and racially minoritized groups. For example, I have engaged elsewhere with the question of how to apply the conceptual toolbox of personal life to explore Muslim family life (Britton 2019, 2024; Smart 2007). Advantages include capacity to challenge common, stereotypical accounts of Muslim families through encouraging a focus on changing dynamics of family life, including gender and generational relationships (Britton 2019, 2024). However, the overall individualizing imperative of these tools complements leading ideas about the declining significance of religion and associated secularization of Western societies. The extent to which they aid understanding of family lives influenced by principles of collectivism and familism is therefore debatable, with racialized understanding of Muslim family life being left unchallenged.

The individualizing orientation of dominant theories of the family has facilitated a move away from prioritizing biological and married relationships in family and relationship studies, feeding into debates about whether to continue using the concept of the family at all (Edwards, McCarthy, and Gillies 2012; McCarthy 2012). This too can be unhelpful in understanding Muslim family life given that marriage and biological relationships are usually seen as core to family arrangements and practices. The conceptual lens of the family cannot therefore easily be dispensed with when exploring Muslim family life. These debates are another example of how families from ethnically and racially minoritized backgrounds are routinely neglected due to the unacknowledged influence of dominant racially unmarked white universal norms. Similarly, evidence of the enduring institutional embeddedness of family relationships and practices supports the idea of conceptualizing the family as an institutional regime (Gilding 2010). With respect to Muslims, this is, in principle, helpful because it encourages consideration of both the significance of Islam in shaping family life and how wider institutionalized rules influence family practices and relationships. In societies where Muslims are a minoritized group, it includes

considering how decision-making in law, politics and policy can lead to discriminatory or unequal outcomes for Muslim families, explored further below.

Prevailing scholarly ways of thinking about family structure and arrangement therefore fail to acknowledge and accommodate family life informed by collectivist ideals. Muslim families are routinely overlooked while simultaneously being marked as problematic. As the next section shows, this concurrent absence/presence reproduces and is reproduced by wider racialized understanding.

Changing family norms and the "problem" of Muslim families

Colonial ways of thinking continue to influence the dominant perspectives of Muslim families. For instance, Britain, as a post-colonial state, enacts hierarchies of legitimacy and human worth that favour specific familial norms (Bhambra 2007). In Muslim minority societies, it is common for these hierarchies to operate in conjunction with changing dominant normative standards to influence how Muslim families are positioned. Reflecting key elements of sexual modernity, the impact is to exclude and problematize Muslim families in ways that contribute to control, regulation, and surveillance. As has already been touched upon, this can be clearly illustrated by considering the enduring dominance of both the nuclear family and associated companionate marriage (Balani 2023). Conceptualization of sexual modernity can, however, be extended to sexual relationships outside of marriage and the connected increased acceptance of a diversity of family forms. The democratization of relationship practices must therefore also be considered to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how Muslim families are racialized.

First, with respect to the dominance of the nuclear family, attention has been drawn to how racialized concerns about Muslim migration, fertility and birth rates have contributed to the problematization of Muslims across Europe. Prevalent concerns are articulated through a population replacement discourse which encapsulates post-colonial fears by representing Muslims as a significant demographic threat requiring careful management (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020). It is important to highlight this discourse because it contributes to the problematizing of Muslim family life through supporting racializing ideas about Muslim families as backward, different, and excessive.

The overall number of Muslims in Europe is unknown and any projected increase in the Muslim population is dependent on future levels of migration. However, Muslims are expected to make up 8 per cent of Europe's population by 2030, almost double the percentage in 1990, indicating that fears about non-Muslim population replacement are much exaggerated (Pew Research Center 2011). A preoccupation with high birth and fertility rates signals a problematic commitment to familism and collectivist ideals, with Muslim families positioned in opposition to the nuclear family normative standard. Hence, the extended family is a central, overlooked frame in dominant representations of Muslim family life. It can therefore be argued that the widely ignored, uncritical foregrounding of extended family has racializing consequences for Muslims. Not least, normalizing nuclear family formations, and problematizing those based on extended or collectivist principles, is a technology of power used to control, limit, and govern the integration of Muslims as an alien population (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020).

There are, on the face of it, tensions in dominant representations of Muslim families. On one hand, the socially conservative orientation of Muslim family life is commonly seen as

non-threatening with key features commended, including heteronormativity and taking responsibility for the care of older family members. On the other, uncritical, often implicit ideas of the extended family contribute to Muslim families being seen as too much, mirroring wider racialized concerns about Muslim encroachment in the physical and symbolic spaces of the nation (Britton 2018; Noble and Poynting 2010). Paradoxically, these co-exist with other longstanding concerns focused on an apparent lack of integration, and associated segregation, of Muslim minorities (Neal et al. 2019). Together, they contribute to an assimilationist expectation that Muslim families will adopt nuclear standards and are consequential because they influence tools of state control, such as immigration and multicultural accommodations, which impact the conduct and fabric of family life.

One useful way to illustrate these tensions is by considering the contradictory perspectives of Muslims, and Muslim families, that emerged in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic provided an unusual, much-needed opportunity to draw attention to positive emotional, intimate and relational dimensions of Muslim family life which are frequently overlooked (Britton 2019, 2024, 121–124). Recognition of the disproportionate impact of the virus on Muslim minorities occurred due to the large number of Muslims employed as frontline key workers and connected high death rate (Lawrence 2020). Sympathetic accounts of the grief and trauma experienced by Muslims foregrounded family relationships, such as highlighting the impact on family members of being prevented from carrying out the Islamic ablution ritual in preparing the body for burial (Hill 2020; Parveen 2020). In contrast, racialized accounts of Muslims as super-spreaders of the virus, selfishly ignoring social distancing rules, drew attention to risks associated with multigenerational households and communal, familial norms around socializing (Poole, Giraud, and de Quincey 2021). These functioned to problematize principles of collectivism and familism which shape Muslim family life, positioning Muslim families as deviant and excessive and, consequently, a threat to dominant normative standards.

Second, the privileging of companionate marriage, as another key element of sexual modernity, is also a means through which Muslim family life is racialized (Balani 2023). Companionate marriage, or love marriage as it is sometimes known, is portrayed as desirable in contrast with the arranged marriage system often preferred by Muslims. Arranged marriage is problematized, with a lack of intimacy, entrenched patriarchal authority and relationship conflict seen as key features (Chambers et al. 2019). Importantly, the collectivist orientation of Muslim family life is highlighted as instrumental with the agency of individual family members, particularly women, viewed as secondary to the interests of the whole family. Drawing a contrast between companionate marriage and arranged marriage therefore sustains a focus on cultural, ethnic and religious differences between Muslims and the non-Muslim majority.

Progress towards marriage equality includes recognition of same sex marriage, which has similar implications for racializing Muslim family life. As an example of companionate marriage practices, same sex marriage conforms with sexual modernity and is therefore positioned within normative standards (Balani 2023). Another tension arises from the dominant heteronormative ideals that underpin Muslim family life because, while these suggest non-threatening compliance with persisting, prevailing societal norms, they also signal intolerance towards growing sexual diversity. Islam and Muslim cultures are flagged as at odds with and a threat to the changing individualistic cultures of Western multicultural societies (Rahman 2010). Embracing same sex marriage within the standards

of normative companionate marriage therefore contributes to the racialization of Muslim family life because highlighting apparent, resulting cultural and religious incompatibility once again serves to reinforce ideas of Muslim families as a problem.

Beyond companionate marriage, wider changing relationship practices also have implications for racializing Muslim family life. Trends towards more diversity and choice in family and relationship practices are measured against the normative standard of the heteronormative couple. For instance, in the UK and across Europe, there has been a long-term, significant trend towards cohabitation as a standard living arrangement and typical way of committing to a union. This has been accompanied by an increase in the mean age at marriage and a rise in both non-marital births and children living with never married parents (Sánchez Gassen and Perelli-Harris 2015). In contrast, some evidence shows higher rates of marriage for Muslims and that Muslims marry and have children at a younger age than the population as a whole (Dubuc and Haskey 2010). These trends suggest that democratization of relationship practices has not extended to Muslim family arrangements and types, at least not to the same extent, and can be seen as indicating continued, rigid adherence to familial norms increasingly at odds with those of wider society.

However, there is some evidence that changes in relationship practices extend to Muslims, increasing the diversity and complexity of family life. One useful example from the UK is evidence of the increasing number of Muslim lone parent families, with evidence indicating that the percentage of lone parent Muslim households is higher than for the whole population (Muslim Council of Britain 2015). While divorce rates among Muslims remain comparatively low, there is also evidence of increasing marital instability and changing attitudes towards divorce (Qureshi 2016, 2020, 2021). Together, this evidence suggests that emphasizing strong adherence to heteronormative marriage can obscure changing dynamics of Muslim family life. Research and policy engagement with lone parent families has included a sustained critique of the enduring influence of nuclear family normative standards in law, policy and research (Brecher 2012; Brown 2019). This critique has not, however, been applied to families adhering to collectivist ideals, principally from minoritized ethnic and racial backgrounds, including Muslims.

Another example highlighting growing diversity of Muslim family life is how heteronormativity is being challenged in ways that reshape culturally and religiously situated family relationships. Research has revealed strategies adopted by non-heterosexual Muslims in negotiating family relationships and associated practices (e.g. Marwaha 2023; Yip 2004). The resulting risk of dishonour and selective disclosure of sexuality suggest that accommodation of non-heterosexuality in Muslim family life risks reinforcing racializing perspectives of Muslims as a threat to core liberal, secular norms (Rahman 2010). Shifting complexities of Muslim family life therefore interact with and contribute to processes of racialization.

All these examples highlight gender as a crucial intersection influencing shifting dynamics of Muslim family life. Colonial ways of thinking extend to dominant feminist positioning of marriage and motherhood as tools of patriarchal control. Muslim families are seen as an enduring site of significant gender inequality with women lacking in self-determination (Guru 2009). These perspectives overlook evidence that Muslim women draw inspiration from key women in Islamic history who challenged normative privileging of marriage and are acclaimed for a range of roles beyond wife and mother

(Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016). Conversely, they dismiss Muslim women's agency in valuing motherhood and marriage as important expressions of faith and identity (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016). Another example is the imperialist symbolic unveiling enacted through problematizing, and in some cases criminalizing, women's religious dress, such as hijab and niqab. Dress is reduced to a tool of patriarchal control, reinforcing prevailing ideas of Islam as an oppressive religion, Muslim men as oppressors and gender-based domestic abuse as an outcome of Muslim cultures (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 142–148). Colonial ways of thinking therefore operate to conceal or misrepresent shifting gender dynamics of Muslim family life.

There are related unanswered questions concerning if, how and the extent to which Muslim family life reflects broader trends in relationship practices. For example, with non-marriage becoming more common, it is useful to consider the family arrangements of Muslim women and men who never marry, live alone, or remain childless. Doing so encourages foregrounding a wider, important question about how changes arising from an increasing diversity of family forms influence an enduring commitment to familism and associated collectivist ideals (Britton 2024). Addressing these questions is essential in disputing racialized ideas of Muslim families as problematically different, incompatible, and unchanging. There is therefore potential for the democratization of relationship practices to challenge, as well as reinforce, the racialization of Muslim family life.

Muslim families in law and policy

Who or what counts as a family in the eyes of the state is consequential in shaping legal rights and responsibilities and the development of family policies (e.g. Balani 2023; Edwards, McCarthy, and Gillies 2012). The state therefore shapes the ways in which family life is organized and conducted, facilitating or constraining different arrangements. It is therefore important to pay attention to the implications of neglecting or problematizing family arrangements shaped by ideals of familism and collectivist principles. Through influencing law and policy, the dominant understanding of family contributes to the racialization of Muslim family life, with far-reaching, practical implications for the lives of Muslims. Racialization occurs through a combination of action and inaction because family arrangements are either unseen, and therefore overlooked, or based on an ill-informed, partial seeing that problematizes family life without taking account of its changing dynamics. When seen, Muslims are positioned as having either a problematic excess of family or enough family to be self-sufficient. The latter resonates with a long-standing racialized understanding of Muslims, who are viewed as wilfully self-segregating (Phillips 2006; Phillips, Davis, and Ratcliffe 2007). I will now consider some examples to illustrate how this understanding contributes to control, regulation and surveillance.

An example of the failure of the state to accommodate family lives shaped by collectivist principles is provided by Brown (2019) who presents a convincing account of how the nuclear family remains the dominant prism through which family life is imagined and understood in UK law. Legal understanding of the family is still supported by a nuclear family ideal involving conjugal and parent–child relationships only. In response to changing social attitudes, significant reforms in family law have added categories of relationships, such as cohabitants, without seriously troubling the normative nuclear family

model (Brown 2019). In law and policy, there remains a lack of recognition of shared famil-ial responsibilities beyond conjugal relationships, such as those involving siblings or grandparents. This suggests that more can be done to accommodate other models of family, taking into account how extended family arrangements influence familial relation-ships and connected roles and responsibilities. For instance, research exploring marital breakdown among British Pakistani families found an emerging matrilateral asymmetry as natal families step in to provide support after couples separate (Qureshi 2016, 127–151). Furthermore, it revealed the formation of divorce-extended families, indicating that maintenance of a collectivist orientation to family life aids fulfilment of familial obli-gations in challenging circumstances (Qureshi 2016, 271–298). Viewing family life through the dominant prism of the nuclear family means that these specific features of Muslim family life after marital breakdown are either ignored or unnoticed. Emotional, material and practical support provided by extended family members is unacknowledged because resulting relations of care are unseen. These are connected to demands arising from a moral economy of family life through which extended family members are con-sidered responsible for providing various kinds of support.

There is a related, uncontested assumption that the extended arrangement of Muslim family life is well suited to meeting the religious and cultural requirements of family members with caring needs, such as children and older people. The associated prevailing belief that Muslim families look after their own members obstructs any serious consider-ation of commitment and capacity to do so. Although dominant culturally situated norms around caring are influenced by ideals of familism, it does not follow that collectivist family practices are unquestioningly adopted, nor that adoption is straightforwardly ben-eficial to family members with caring needs. The apparent problem of an excess of family is conveniently turned on its head to position Muslim families as self-sufficient, without the need for external support. By ignoring the impact of structural inequalities accumu-lated over time, taking responsibility for meeting caring needs is seen as purely a matter of personal choice or cultural prerogative. This is reinforced through a close associ-ation between meeting caring needs and maintaining family honour, or izzat as it is known among South Asian Muslims (Shaw 2000).

Relations of care remain hidden and there is a lack of interest in how a moral economy of family life shapes familial roles, responsibilities and relationships in practice.

This is evident with respect to meeting the caring needs of older Muslims who are becoming an increasingly important health and social policy concern as Muslim popu-lations in Western societies gradually age. The cumulative impact of structural inequalities is arguably most starkly apparent with respect to older Muslims, who are usually from a migrant background and have experienced sustained, multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination. For example, in the UK, evidence points towards low pension pro-vision and a high incidence of chronic ill health in later life (Qureshi 2012; Vlachantoni et al. 2017). It suggests that older Muslims have complex health needs to meet and lack material resources to support these. Dominant normative standards connected to children's religious duty to care for parents in later life encourage a largely unchallenged set of assumptions about older Muslims receiving adequate, appropriate care within the family. With potential resource implications for effective health and social care policies, there is a lack of interest in assessing the impact of changing dynamics of inter-genera-tional relationships and connected willingness and capacity of younger family

members to provide the type or level of care required. In addition, an absence of or inadequate care is easily dismissed through dominant racialized perspectives of Muslim family life as a site of gender and generational conflict (Alexander 2004; Alexander, Redclift, and Hussain 2013; Anwar 2002). Individualizing and culturalist assumptions about apparently dysfunctional family relationships contribute to placing the blame on family members who are seen as responsible for the disadvantaged circumstances of older relatives.

Responsibility for care provision within families brings into focus significant gendered dynamics of caring and the related position of Muslim women. Women's gendered roles and responsibilities are, on the face of it, integral to sustaining a collectivist orientation to family life. As such, Muslim women's lives are seen as comprehensively shaped by deep-seated patriarchal authority and connected familial relationships (Alexander 2004; Alexander, Redclift, and Hussain 2013). For instance, culturalist understanding of low rates of employment among Muslim women includes racialized assumptions about women's willingness and capacity to work and overlooks significant structural conditions impacting women's lives (Garratt 2016). While the circumstances of women in the domestic domain are undoubtedly influenced by culturally situated understanding of women's gendered roles and responsibilities, structural constraints, including inadequate childcare provision and inequitable access to training and employment opportunities, contribute to low employment rates (Bagguley and Hussain 2016; Garratt 2016). These are likely compounded by limited options arising from fulfilling familial responsibilities on a low income.

Avoiding similar culturalist arguments about rates of poverty among Muslim families is essential in addressing a set of unanswered questions about the impact of poverty on Muslims as a minoritized group. In the UK, Muslims are disproportionately likely to live in types of family units with an increased risk of experiencing poverty (households with a disabled adult, three or more children and/or one parent) (Muslim Council of Britain 2015). Overall, families from Black and minoritized ethnic backgrounds are, at least, twice as likely than white families to live in poverty, with Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black households most affected (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2023; Social Metrics Commission 2020). To help prevent the development of ideas about a growing culture of poverty among Muslim families, I have argued elsewhere for the usefulness of exploring poverty as a family trouble for Muslims (Britton 2024, 129–135). Drawing on the important argument that poverty must be theorized from a family perspective, this involves a more detailed consideration of the distinctive character of Muslim family life and related intersections of race, ethnicity and religion (Britton 2024, 129–135; Daly 2018). Incorporating a key distinction between family and household, it promotes a focus on if and how a collectivist orientation to family life shapes the flow of resources and support in conditions of poverty. Adopting a family lens avoids convenient, dismissive assumptions about the self-sufficiency of extended Muslim families and, instead, encourages critical examination of the extent to which a commitment to familism facilitates or obstructs responses to poverty. In contrast with racialized accounts of unchanging Muslim families, it includes assessing how the dynamics of Muslim family life are changing in response to limitations of state support informed by the nuclear family normative ideal.

One other timely example connected to poverty is how state sanctions are applied to larger families that are deemed too much and, therefore, undeserving of state support,

further contributing to ideas of Muslim families as problematically extended and excessive. In the UK, Muslims are more likely to live in households that are multigenerational, overcrowded and include three or more children (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022; Qureshi et al. 2020, 6). Each of these household features is associated with an increased risk of experiencing poverty (Daly 2018). For many years since 2010, rising levels of child poverty have mainly affected larger families, driven by a two-child benefit cap preventing families from receiving further mean-tested financial support for any additional children (Patrick et al. 2023). The cap is an important example of how larger families are sanctioned for not conforming to nuclear family norms of no more than two children. Dominant normative understanding of family therefore legitimizes reducing state benefits with a disproportionate impact on Muslim families.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the significance of the extended family as a routinely overlooked category informing dominant understanding of Muslim families, and Muslims in general. It has presented a case as to why the category is inherently problematic and requires more critical engagement from scholars and policy-makers. It has shown how a racialized understanding of a collectivist orientation to family life has consistently problematized Muslim families, ignoring the changing dynamics of family relationships, roles and responsibilities. The challenge is to interrogate the relevance of familism and a collectivist orientation to family life without reproducing reductionist, racializing accounts that position Muslim families as problematically different. Success in doing so is connected to the wider issue of how to decolonize family and relationship studies when core conceptual and theoretical tools have an individualizing orientation and are designed with specific family and relationship types in mind. Wider implications of the arguments presented here include considering how these tools can be adapted to fit routinely overlooked ways of doing family life, or if new tools are required.

Shifting the research agenda to pay more attention to Muslim family life can shed further light on limitations arising from the longstanding dominance of nuclear family ideals. Importantly, racialized perspectives of Muslim families as excessive can be challenged through an increasing understanding of the advantages associated with a communal orientation to family living. Highlighting collectivist ways of doing family dovetails with radical arguments about the limitations of nuclear or privatized family formations and associated potential benefits of family life underpinned by communal principles (Balani 2023; O'Brien 2023). Efforts to reimagine family life towards a more collectivist orientation are timely given the changing family politics of racial capitalism. Global financial and political crises, the success of populist political movements and the resulting further stripping back of state welfare support expose limitations of the privatized nuclear family model and attractiveness of alternatives. Enhanced understanding of Muslim families therefore has the potential in creating positive family futures.

Proponents of critical race theory emphasize the structural operation of racism through core institutions, such as the legal system (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). This article is complementary in highlighting a need for more pluralistic understandings of family in law and policy to tackle institutional forms of inequality and injustice. Increased legal

and political recognition of relationships outside of marriage encourages consideration of a wider range of family relationships and forms. For instance, non-conjugal relationships and connected, shared responsibilities, such as between siblings, can have added importance in families with extended arrangements. It also encourages a more sustained focus on the complex, multi-faceted gendered and generational transmission of various resources within families and connected emotional, material and practical support. With respect to Muslims, it includes considering the role of religion in influencing the distinctiveness of family life and the relative significance of religious and secular law. In the UK, Sharia councils have become a feature of Muslim family life in relation to marital conflict and divorce specifically (Balchin 2012; Parveen 2017). The contribution of religious law in this limited aspect of family life must not detract from the need to consider how conventions governing secular law can be adapted to accommodate a diversity of family arrangements. This necessitates taking account of the continuing influence of Islam in family life without drawing problematizing judgements about its centrality.

It is imperative to take into account of complexities arising from considerable diversity and how these interact with processes of racialization. For instance, it involves considering how laws, regulations and policies influencing family life vary between countries. Comparisons across countries can shed light on specific features of these changes in different contexts in which Muslims are a minority. It also involves more exploration of how various intersections inform family life. The article has drawn attention to how a more robust analysis of Muslim family life involves considering how family, as an arrangement of collective life in the twenty-first century, matters in ways that differ from the past. In Western societies, this involves exploring how prevailing norms of a predominately individualistic society shape the changing dynamics of Muslim family life. Doing so includes assessing how shifting, intersectional gender and generational relationships impact on provision of different kinds of familial support, particularly as the Muslim population ages and the number of Muslim women obtaining higher level educational qualifications increases. Reassuringly, this analysis can build on existing research which has presented more nuanced, multi-dimensional perspectives on changes, capturing complexities and acting as a counterweight to racialised understandings (e.g. Charsley 2018; Charsley et al. 2020; Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016: Qureshi 2016, 2020, 2021). Any exploration must foreground the position of Muslims as both a minoritized group and a numerical minority to address ongoing racialization arising from concerns about apparent Muslim exceptionalism and the resulting lack of integration.

The article has provided fresh insights to challenge racialized perspectives of Muslim family life and move conceptual and theoretical debates forward. However, it is essential to acknowledge that doing so risks extending colonial ways of thinking by reinforcing racialized differences and inviting further surveillance. There is an ethical imperative to be mindful of inadvertently contributing to the racialization of Muslim families and Muslims more generally. This article has aimed to influence the research agenda so that, in future, there is greater intellectual curiosity in recognizing, surfacing and challenging connected problematizing accounts.

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