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Hopkins, Nick; Ryan, Caoimhe; Portice, Jennie; Straßburger, Vera Maren; Ahluwalia-McMeddes, Amrita; Dobai, Anna

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## ARTICLE

# Social identity enactment in a pandemic: Scottish Muslims' experiences of restricted access to communal spaces

Nick Hopkins<sup>1</sup> | Caoimhe Ryan<sup>2</sup> | Jennie Portice<sup>3</sup> |  
Vera Maren Straßburger<sup>4</sup> | Amrita Ahluwalia-McMeddes<sup>1</sup> |  
Anna Dobai<sup>5</sup> | Sam Pehrson<sup>3</sup> | Steve Reicher<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

<sup>2</sup>Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, UK

<sup>3</sup>University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

<sup>4</sup>Medical School Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

<sup>5</sup>Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

## Correspondence

Nick Hopkins, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK.

Email: [n.p.hopkins@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:n.p.hopkins@dundee.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

The comprehensive analysis of social identity cannot simply focus on individuals' cognitive self-definition. Rather it should also theorize the social conditions that affect individuals' opportunities to act in terms of those self-definitions. We argue that the social distancing interventions associated with Covid-19 provide an opportunity to explore the significance of otherwise taken-for-granted social factors which routinely support and sustain individuals' identity enactments. Using qualitative data gathered with 20 members of the Scottish Muslim community (19 diary entries and 20 post-diary interviews), we explore their experiences of restricted access to community-relevant social spaces (e.g., mosques and prayer rooms). Our analysis shows that while these regulations could result in new opportunities for Muslims' religious identity enactments, they also impeded their abilities to act in terms of their religious identification. Addressing such impediments, we develop our understanding of the contextual factors that shape individuals' abilities to enact identity-defining norms and values.

## KEYWORDS

communal space, Covid-19, identity enactment, mosques, Muslims, shared identity, social distancing

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## BACKGROUND

Much research explores the context-dependence of behaviour. In particular, self-categorization theory argues behaviour depends upon which of our various identifications is psychologically salient (Turner et al., 1987). In some situations, this identification may be defined in terms of what makes us individually distinctive. In others, it may be in terms of the beliefs and values differentiating our group from others. Research also shows that which of our social identities is salient (and how it is defined) is context dependent (Oakes et al., 1994). However, although such work addresses the ways in which our self-definitions are contextually determined, it has less to say concerning the contextual factors that facilitate or impede individuals' abilities to translate those cognitive self-definitions into behaviour. To some degree this reflects social psychology's shift away from studying actual behaviour (Baumeister et al., 2007; Doliński, 2018), especially the place of social interaction in shaping behaviour (Haslam & McGarty, 2001). Indeed, much social identity research involves designs in which we manipulate or measure identification and observe effects on behavioural intentions. That is, it is relatively rare for research to highlight how others and their behaviour impact our abilities to translate identity-relevant intentions into action (for a counter-example, see Levine & Crowther, 2008).

In this paper, we explore the role of others in shaping our abilities to enact the norms and values associated with a valued social identity (what we term 'identity enactment'). Specifically, we explore how the social distancing regulations designed to limit the spread of Covid-19 shaped Scottish Muslims' abilities to enact their religious identity. Our analysis is based on qualitative (diary and interview) material gathered during a period of significant restrictions. We argue their reported difficulties in identity enactment reveal much about the degree to which behaving in accordance with one's social identity is a complex social accomplishment in which others play a significant role. Below, we elaborate on the role of others in constraining or facilitating identity-relevant behaviour. We then consider the particular challenges experienced by the Scottish Muslim community when collective access to Islamic social spaces (e.g., mosques, prayer rooms) was restricted.

### Constraints upon identity enactment

The ability to translate the norms and values associated with a valued social identity into behaviour should not be taken for granted. This is particularly clear if we consider the experiences of minority group members. For example, Muslim women may face hostility to their wearing of the hijab in public settings (Velthuis et al., 2022) and if they do wear hijab may modify their behaviour to manage others' perceptions (and treatment) of them (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Similarly, the literature on 'passing' shows that anticipating others' prejudices (e.g., in relation to one's LGBTQ+ identity: Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Croteau et al., 2008; Ragins et al., 2007) can constrain one's confidence to express oneself (e.g., kissing one's same-sex partner in public). Such experiences can in turn impact individuals' 'felt authenticity' (Crabtree & Pillow, 2020) and contribute to a fragmented sense of self (Morton & Sonnenberg, 2011).

Even in the absence of others' prejudice, acting in terms of a particular social identification can be difficult: although one may self-define in terms of a particular identification, others' behaviour may compromise one's abilities to act on the basis of that identification (Reicher et al., 2021). For example, women working in professional occupations can find their opportunities to act in terms of their professional identities constrained by male colleagues orienting to them in terms of other identities (e.g., in terms of their being a mother: Rafaeli et al., 1997). In turn, this means individuals experience less opportunities to receive the identity-validating feedback that we so value and routinely seek (Chen et al., 2004; Swann, 1987).

### The social bases for identity enactment

Yet, if there are social dynamics constraining individuals' opportunities to behave in terms of their social identifications so there are social contexts which facilitate such behaviour. For example, place and identity

can be linked in complex ways (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006) such that certain places become social spaces where group members gather. Obvious examples include religious events (Werbner, 1996), sporting events (McCabe, 2006), national celebrations (Pehrson et al., 2014) and subcultural festivals (Austin & Fitzgerald, 2018; Goulding & Saren, 2009).

Of particular interest is the observation that such social spaces are contexts where group members can gather to celebrate their shared identity in a manner that is not always possible. For example, speaking of religious ceremonies, Durkheim argued that although in everyday life “the mind is chiefly preoccupied with utilitarian and individualistic affairs” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 352, cited in Olaveson, 2001, p. 110), religious gatherings were occasions in which people could rise above such everyday concerns to enact their shared ideas. Often this involves the performance of identity-related rituals which serve a variety of individual and social functions (Durkheim, 1912, 995; Hobson et al., 2017; Olaveson, 2001; Stein et al., 2021). Indeed, research shows that the strongly positive emotion which often characterizes such gatherings (what Durkheim referred to as ‘effervescence’) is bound up with the experience of being able to enact group-related beliefs, values and norms (Hopkins et al., 2016).

Insight into the social processes operating in such social gatherings can be found in studies of crowd behaviour. When people gather, their social relations depend upon how they define themselves (Reicher, 2017). In the absence of a common social identification, there may be little to bind people together such that they simply constitute a physical crowd (i.e., an aggregate of individuals). However, if they define themselves in terms of a shared social identity (and so become a psychological crowd) there are a number of social psychological outcomes relevant to identity enactment (Neville & Reicher, 2011; Reicher, 2017). For example, a shared social identification implies that all are now motivated to pursue the same values and beliefs (Reicher et al., 2021). In turn, participants likely recognize each other as fellow group members with the corollary that their social relationships become closer (Hopkins et al., 2019; Neville et al., 2022) and more supportive than would be the case in the absence of such a shared identity (Levine et al., 2005; Wakefield et al., 2011). Moreover, group members anticipate such social support being available should they need it (Haslam et al., 2012).

These features of a shared identity have several consequences. They contribute to group members' sense of self-efficacy and well-being (Jetten et al., 2012). They also facilitate group members' action in terms of their shared social identity. This is most starkly revealed in research on collective protest. Although the authorities (e.g., the police) routinely attempt to constrain protest, crowd members can sometimes overcome such opposition and translate their identity-related norms and values into action (Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2009). Specifically, research shows that a common crowd identification entails the mutual recognition of group members' shared identity-defining goals such that group members can co-ordinate their behaviour to overcome police resistance and realize their values (Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2009; Reicher, 1996; Stott et al., 2017, 2018). Related observations may be made in relation to non-conflictual crowd events. For example, research at a physically and psychologically challenging religious pilgrimage shows a shared social identity can result in the mutual recognition of group members' identity-related concerns and the provision of support necessary for participants to complete the identity-defining rituals (Pandey et al., 2014). Put another way, such studies imply that identity enactment can be conceptualized as a social accomplishment in which other group members can play a key role (Reicher et al., 2021).

## The experience of social distancing: Muslims in Scotland

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic involved interventions designed to limit infection transmission through reducing social contact and interaction. In the United Kingdom, these included restrictions on mixing in domestic settings, shops, hospitality venues and places of worship. While critical in limiting infection, such measures came with considerable economic and social costs. Here we investigate how the loss of access to community-relevant social spaces limited group members' opportunities to gather together in terms of their shared social identity and how this was reported to carry implications for their identity enactment.

As communities differ with regards to their identity-defining values and beliefs (and thus the nature of their identity enactments), it follows that such an investigation should be community-specific. Here, our interest is in the meaning of social distancing for members of the Scottish Muslim community. For many in this community, the mosque is a prominent feature of daily routine (Ahmed, 2020). It is a venue for prayer (especially for men) with some attending daily, others weekly (e.g., for Friday prayers), as well as other identity-related activities (e.g., *iftar*—the meal at which the community breaks the Ramadan fast), and events for children. In all such activities, the mosque provides a social space in which Muslims gather in terms of their shared religious identity. Accordingly, the decision to limit access to this and similar social spaces (e.g., University prayer rooms, community centres) presents a unique opportunity to investigate the significance of such (normally available) everyday social interactions for community members' identity enactments. We explore such issues through an analysis of qualitative (diary and interview) data obtained with Muslims in Scotland. As will become apparent, it is when contact with one's fellow Muslims is limited that the social bases to identity enactment are thrown into particularly sharp relief.

## METHODS

### Participants

Twenty Muslims (six male, 14 female) were recruited via social media sites with an advert concerning the pandemic's impact on UK Muslims. Participants were reimbursed for their involvement (£75 in online shopping vouchers). In what follows, participants are identified by a number (01–20) followed by a letter indicating their gender (M or F; see Table 1 for participants' demographic details).

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

	Age	Gender	National identity (self-ascribed)	Ethnic identity (self-ascribed)	Occupation	Education (highest)
01	36	F	British	Muslim	Early years	College
02	49	F	Nigerian	Black African	Care worker	School
03	26	F	British	Asian	Student	UG
04	31	F	Pakistani	Asian	Student	PG
05	43	F	Scottish	Scottish	Nurse	UG
06	40	F	British	Asian	Professional	UG
07		M	Scottish	Asian		
08	52	F	British-Iranian	Persian	Not employed	PG
09	19	F	British	Pakistani	Student	UG
10	35	F	Scottish	Pakistani	Solicitor	PG
11		F	British	Pakistani	Professional	UG
12	48	F	British	Scottish-Pakistani	Customer services	School
13	51	M	Scottish	Pakistani-Asian	Taxi driver	School
14	52	F	Scottish Pakistani	Pakistani	Not employed	College
15	37	F	British	East African Asian	Pharmacist	PG
16	21	M	British	Asian	Student	UG
17	24	M	German	Pakistani	Engineer	UG
18	49	M	British	Pakistani	Sales	PG
19	42	F	Scottish	Pakistani	Health worker	UG
20	23	M	British	Pakistani	Student	UG

Note. Education level: School, College, UG (undergraduate), PG (postgraduate).

## Diaries and interviews

At the heart of this research was an online diary. The nature of the to-be-completed diary was explained in an initial one-to-one online training session. The written documentation for this session explained:

Over a 2-week period, you will record how your life has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes things that happen now which did not used to happen, and the things that used to happen but no longer do. We simply want to you to write in your diary about any events and thoughts that are relevant to these changes.

In the training session, participants were given examples of things they could report. These included reflections on: How their interactions with other people (e.g, friends, family, acquaintances or strangers) were changed; their conversations about Covid-19 and its effect on their lives; information they heard concerning Covid-19; and changes to their everyday routines. Throughout, participants were encouraged to refer to specific incidents and to consider if and how the reported events related to their Muslim identity.

The diary was administered online using Qualtrics. Structured questions asked the entry date, when the described event took place, where it happened, and who was present. In addition to describing the event, participants were asked to describe any thoughts or conversations they had about the event, and any impact it had on them. Participants were encouraged to make entries every day for 2 weeks (with the option of making multiple daily entries), to spend approximately 30 min/day on the diary and to record things as soon as possible after they happened. This pre-diary interview was also an opportunity to establish participant trust in the research team.

Given the need for one-to-one inductions, the launch of the diaries was staggered. The first diary commenced on 06.01.2021, the last on 28.01.2021. Throughout this period Scotland was in a major lockdown announced by the First Minister at a recalled Scottish Parliament (Sturgeon, 2021). The rules specified a maximum of two people from up to two households could meet outdoors and that places of worship were closed for worship (with weddings limited to five people, and funerals limited to 20).

Following completion of the diary, participants took part in a follow-up interview (conducted by CR) structured around their diary entries. This provided opportunities to probe the meaning and significance of the documented events. The interviews were transcribed at a level of detail that did not include pauses or hesitations. One participant's diary usage diverged from the guidance and is not considered here. Of the remaining 19 diaries, participants provided entries for an average of 12 days (minimum = 9, maximum = 16). All 20 participants took part in the final interview. This research received approval from the University of Dundee's Research Ethics Committee. As the data may allow identification of the interviewee, they are not publicly available. However, interested parties may contact the authors to discuss data-sharing.

## Analytic procedure

Each participant's diary and interview were read alongside each other with the interview helping in exploring the meaning of the diary entries. Sometimes, the interview focus concerned particular entries. Sometimes, the focus was on a series of more obviously related entries. Working on the basis that our social identities provide the lens through which we appraise the meaning of events (Reicher & Hopkins, 2016) and social spaces (Morton et al., 2017; Ysseldyk et al., 2016), we focused on how participants' Muslim identity shaped their interpretation of the pandemic—especially the restrictions on their everyday social interaction.

Reviewing our data it became clear that a common issue concerned the implications of the social distancing regulations on participants' experiences of being able to enact their religious identity. Although some positive experiences were reported, negative experiences were prominent—especially when

participants referred to the limitations on their participation in mosque activities, for example: Congregational prayer—especially the *Ṣalāt al-Jumu'ah* prayers (the Friday noon prayers); communal religious celebrations (e.g., iftar); community events such as weddings and funerals; and more general cultural events (e.g., children's parties).

As our engagement with these data progressed, we became particularly interested in the challenges in religious identity enactment and our analytic reading of these data was informed by our theoretical commitments as social identity researchers (and previous research on the significance of a shared social identity for group members social relations). Accordingly, our analytic approach drew on the logic of a form of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) in which “researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 334–335).

Both positive and negative experiences of identity enactment were compared against each other in an iterative manner. Throughout, we assumed our participants' accounts of their experiences revealed something about the challenges they faced in their religious practice. Having identified diverse examples in which participants reported challenges in being able to enact (Muslim) identity-related beliefs into practice we sought to (inductively) develop higher order categorizations that captured the main ways in which participants reported experiencing challenges in identity enactment.

The initial analysis was conducted by all the authors who independently read and re-read the data. Through group discussion we came to organize the material concerning these challenges under four headings. The first concerned the implications of social distancing on participants' opportunities to enact (normatively prescribed) congregational prayer. The second concerned the challenges arising from the loss of access to Muslim community spaces characterized by mutual understanding. The third concerned the loss of fellow Muslims' encouragement to adhere to identity-relevant routines (e.g., fasting). The fourth concerned reduced opportunities to engage in valued community building activities.

Throughout, we paid attention to deviant cases (McPherson & Thorne, 2006). In this context, such cases comprised two types of response. The one involved examples of how social distancing facilitated identity enactment. The other involved reports of how participants were able to mitigate the negative effects of the social distancing regulations on identity enactment. The latter is especially important in that it has the potential to corroborate our analysis of the role of social processes in identity enactment. We report examples of both types of response.

It should be noted that none of the authors are Muslim. Undoubtedly this is problematic. Deeply negative and essentialising visions of Muslims' religious identifications have a long history (Runnymede Trust, 1997), permeating much academic thought (Abdel-Malek, 1963, translated 1981; Said, 1978). Our approach was informed by critical social scientific analyses that emphasize the historical and geographical variation between Muslim communities in terms of values, beliefs and practice (Al-Azmeh, 1993) and the contested nature of Muslims' identifications (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002). In turn, our approach was premised on the observation that Muslim identities in the West must be seen “as local, as indigenous not as the other, the exotic or the Oriental” (Ahmed & Donnan, 1994, p. 5).

Another problem with being non-Muslims is that we may have misunderstood some of our participants' diary entries. Yet, while we were able to use the interviews to disambiguate (and elaborate on) such material, interviews present their own problems. Faced with non-Muslim researchers, it is possible participants were motivated to present themselves and their faith commitments positively (such that they could be reluctant to report experiences in which they failed to enact their religious identity). However, similar issues can arise if the researcher is a Muslim: participants may assume an ‘insider’ researcher to be invested in particular practices and that they would be judgemental about participants' failures to adhere to group norms (Siraj, 2011). Also, participants may assume commonalities, which if disconfirmed may complicate the participant-researcher relationship (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Jaspal, 2009). More generally, being an outsider can mean that one can ask questions that would be harder for an ‘insider’ to ask because the interviewee would assume the interviewer to have ‘insider’ knowledge.

In the quoted extracts, excluded text is marked by square brackets []. Where we report diary entries, the text is as originally entered (i.e., uncorrected for grammar and punctuation).

## ANALYSIS

Our main analytic focus is on participants' reports of how the social distancing regulations limited Muslims' religious identity enactment. However, as explained previously, we noted two types of deviant cases. These are reported in two sections (at the beginning and end of the analysis). The first deviant cases concern participants' reports of increased opportunities for identity enactment. The second concern the ways in which some participants managed the challenges in identity enactment identified in our main analysis.

### Deviant case analysis 1: increased opportunities for identity enactment

Several participants reported social distancing resulted in increased time for prayer. For example, participant 09F (diary) explained "I have more time due to the lockdown, I can read more Quran for my grandmother. The same way that I could pray more and devote more time to God during Ramadan." Another (06F, diary) explained: "As a Muslim, I feel this is an opportunity to spend more time practicing religion as we spend more time at home." Participant 04F (diary) went further, linking such opportunities with a reduction in everyday temptation: "lockdown [] has worked wonders for spirituality, I mean, when you can't go out, can't meet anyone (unless online), can't actually do a lot of fun things, its easy to give time to God because the satan cannot really make you want to do anything else at the time because nothing else is happening." Moreover, one female (15F) reported (diary) that although she did not wear hijab, she welcomed protective mask-wearing: "I feel a sense of greater modesty with it on and that feels good. [] I find that with a mask I am a little more covered and so protecting my beauty for my husband a little more as my faith encourages me to do."

### Constraints on identity enactment

Set against such opportunities, participants reported a variety of constraints on their abilities to enact their Muslim identities. For example, some referred to how the social distancing regulations constrained their opportunities to fulfil their religious duty to help others. Thus one (19F, diary) observed that her faith required her to help others in the wider community but that social distancing limited such opportunities: "I felt quite sad thinking of how people are so alone and isolated just now and thought of my true purpose in life. To help people, to worship one God and to [be] kind to those around." Others referred to how the regulations limited their opportunity to interact with other Muslims and the relevance of this for their identity enactments. Our analysis focuses on the nature of these limitations and their implications for identity enactment. As explained above, the analysis is structured in terms of four themes.

### Enacting normatively prescribed congregational behaviour

One direct implication of social distancing was the loss of a particular form of religious practice: Congregational prayer—especially the Jumu'ah (Friday) prayer. Although prayer at home was possible, one observed that replacing congregational prayer with private prayer was no substitute because the benefits of prayer were contingent upon it being communal: Private prayer would result in one "not necessarily getting the same blessings as reading prayers in congregation" (17M, diary). Another (07M, interview), explained:

#### Extract 1

The fact that you have to limit the numbers of how many people can go to the prayers, that was really problematic, even in the Islamic sense, because it's an obligation for us to go to the Friday prayers, you know, it's in the scriptures.



Moreover, this participant (07M) explained that even when Mosque access was possible, the regulation requiring two-metre social distancing diminished the experience of collective prayer because congregational prayer required Muslims to stand together “shoulder to shoulder”:

#### Extract 2

And the fact is, with the two metre apart, people were complaining, and Muslims were saying, well, even with going to the mosque, there was a pain, they were willing to go a mosque, two metre distance and wear masks. But, I mean, people were, like, this doesn't feel like the prayer that we do, you know. People were saying, scholars, other scholars from around the world were saying this is an innovation in religion, that the fact is that they've now added a new ruling to the prayers. Some of them says it's best that we don't go the mosque until we can actually apply the same rules for prayer in the mosque, you know, so that was another issue. Even though we were allowed in the mosque, but the fact that you've got a two-metre distance, it's really, you're not praying in the mosque, you might as well stay at your home and pray separately.

Two features of this extract stand out. The first is the participant's evaluation of the experiential quality of socially distanced prayer in the mosque (it “doesn't feel like the prayer that we do”). The second is the characterization of such prayer as deviating from religiously sanctioned practice. Indeed as the interview progressed, the participant asserted such socially distanced prayer should not be categorized as congregational prayer and that non-Muslims should not regulate such issues “because they don't know the ins and outs of prayer, and the conditions for it” (07M, interview). Together these observations highlight the role of others in identity enactment. Without the proximal co-presence of one's co-religionists, one's ability to enact this normatively prescribed prayer ritual is compromised. Moreover, and at a higher order level, the inability to properly enact one's identity is attributed to non-Muslims' failure to appreciate the full religious significance of congregational prayer.

Concerns about the lack of congregational prayer were also voiced in relation to funerals. Again, the significance of this restriction for identity enactment relates to the importance of collective prayer which is believed to be important in gaining forgiveness for the deceased. Thus participant 12F (interview) explained: “from a faith point of view it's said however many people attend the funeral prayer, the more chances of the forgiveness because of the prayers that they give”. In similar vein, 11F (interview) explained “it's all about the more that people that are present at the time of the burial prayer, the more angels will come and it's a big blessing, it's seen as a big blessing, really”. Indeed, they continued “families are missing out on this in a big way, and they must be struggling. I'm sure they're struggling inside to deal with these emotions.” Once again, the point is that communal activity is integral to the enactment of religious identity (here, burial rites) such that limiting the number of mourners shaped the degree to which identity-related ritual could be properly enacted (and comfort taken).

## Mutual understanding and the validation of behaviour

In addition to providing a place for normatively required collective prayer, mosques and prayer rooms provided environments for community members' easy interaction. In the words of one participant (19F, interview):

#### Extract 3

Yes, I mean obviously as a Muslim the mosque is the hub for the community so obviously that's been shut, and we have found as a family that's had quite a profound effect on us not being able to meet with other community members. It becomes like a family to you and also just going to the local mosque for children's classes and learning ourselves. Just meeting another person who you can just you know you are on the same wavelength, and they understand you. But that in a sense has been quite hard to deal with.

A striking feature of this account is the characterization of the mosque as a place of shared identity and mutual understandings: the mosque community is explicitly defined as “a family” where one can be with others who “you know you are on the same wavelength” and who “understand you” (such that the loss of the mosque community had “quite a profound effect on us” and was “quite hard to deal with”).

The significance of reduced access to places characterized by such mutual understanding and easy interaction was particularly clear when participants reported finding themselves lost for a place to pray when away from home. For example, a university student (05F diary) explained how the closure of the University's Islamic prayer room meant she faced the prospect of performing her day-time prayers alongside her non-Muslim classmates:

Extract 4

I thought that it would be fine with my classmates if I prayed in the corner however I felt too shy to. I knew my class would have been fine about it however I felt that it was an intimate moment that I did not want to share with them. I thought that if I said to the facilitator that she would probably have found a solution for me but I did not want to draw attention to myself.

Extract 4 conveys something of the contrast between the ease of public prayer in a social space shared with fellow Muslims, and the difficulty of such prayer in an environment shared with non-Muslims. Without the mutual understanding associated with a shared identity, the participant explained she did not wish to be put in a position where she felt obliged to share her experience with others for whom it would be alien. Indeed, she explained that in such company her prayer could—because of its unfamiliarity—attract attention, with the corollary that what should be (and normally is) a significant “intimate moment”, would be spoilt. Asked in the follow-up interview to elaborate on this diary entry, the participant explained non-Muslims did not understand Muslims' religious obligations (a point she illustrated through reference to the fact she was repeatedly invited to drink alcohol), and that she was concerned about being judged for being religious. For example, she explained a concern that her “staunch atheist” lecturer would not only not appreciate the nature of her religious experience but worse, could judge her negatively:

Extract 5

05F: She would think it was maybe just a bit stupid.

Interviewer: Really?

05F: Yes, I think she would think that I was married to a Muslim, so I've clearly been brainwashed and was just, I think that's what I think, if I'm being honest.

Again, this underscores the significance of a shared identity for her religious identity enactment: in losing access to the prayer room, the participant had lost access to a social environment in which her identity-related concerns and practices were socially recognized, normalized, and validated. Indeed, with reduced access to a social milieu characterized by the mutual understanding associated with a shared identity she was fearful that her prayer would be misrecognized as evidence of her being ‘brainwashed’ (and so did not even broach her identity-related needs).

## The social co-ordination and scaffolding of normative behaviours

One corollary of the reduced opportunity to meet with others who shared one's religious concerns was a reduced opportunity to access everyday forms of support for one's own religious activity. For example, participant (14F diary) noted “we're struggling being Muslim in lockdown as we can't do what we normally did for mosque?”. When asked in her interview to elaborate, she explained.

Extract 6

I think that's the biggest thing, that you can't go over to the mosque, you can't do anything, you're in the house, and everything seems very lonely, like, if you're doing it by yourself, and

you've not got somebody to go and, not necessarily tell, but somebody to participate maybe, and see, it's like having a gym buddy, and you're like, "Let's go to the mosque," you know. [Laughter].

Extract 6 highlights the significance of one's fellow Muslims in the routine scaffolding of one's own devotional activity. Drawing a parallel between the routine of mosque-based prayer and the routine of exercise, the participant argued that just as exercise was easier if one had a "gym buddy" with whom one could share the activity, so was prayer because their socially shared routine meant each was able to encourage the other to realize their common identity-defining norms. Similar observations arose when this same participant reflected on their difficulties in observing the Ramadan fast. Typically, the fast is socially structured in that it culminates in a (sunset) scheduled communal meal (whether in the mosque or at home). Reflecting on this collective activity, the participant explained in their interview that "you have that bond where everyone at night goes to the mosque [] and you've got everybody there and they're all going to eat this dinner, everyone's going to open their fast at the same time". She continued that without this scheduled communal activity, her motivation to complete the fast was reduced:

#### Extract 7

14F: I live on my own, so everything I'm doing now is on my own, so Ramadan's going to be basically by myself, and it's really difficult when it's by yourself, because you're trying to spend that time, and you can't - like, I'm not a TV watcher, I'll read books, and you know yourself, you can only read so much, you can read maybe 3 hours straight and you think, yes, you've got into a really good book, but then what do you do then? So you're stuck, and you can't pass that time. When you're with family, you can pass that time, or you've been to the mosque, and you think, okay, that's an hour passed, and it's nearer the time of opening the fast.

Interviewer: How was it last time round for you?

14F: Difficult. I didn't keep them.

Interviewer: You didn't?

14F: No, I didn't. It was the being on my own, and can't have anybody over, and can't go over, it was too difficult, I didn't keep them last year.

Although fasting is at one level an individual activity, the Ramadan fasts are socially shared rituals in which there is a degree of collective support to adhere to the ritual. Here, two features of such support stand out. First, the choreography to the fast (in which everyone goes to the mosque "to open their fast at the same time") provides a socially shared temporal structure for one's own practice such that one only breaks the fast when others do. Second, the joint activity throughout the fast provides distraction from one's hunger. These social dimensions to the ritual contribute to the scaffolding of one's behaviour in which the identity-enactment of each contributes to the identity enactment of others. Indeed, in the absence of similarly engaged others, the participant reports their motivation to adhere to the fasting schedules faltered ("I didn't keep them").

In addition to referring to the motivational benefits associated with such joint and co-ordinated identity enactment, participants also referred to the role of context-specific norms in facilitating identity-appropriate behaviour. For example, participant 01F noted in her diary that although online activity could allow some access to religiously knowledgeable others, the experience was degraded:

#### Extract 8

At first kids were excited doing mosque now its like drag and boring they miss reality than just on camera and the cultureness off it all is going away via doing it through zoom call i have to sit next to my oldest child as she does not sit still and it gets embarrassing as the teacher has to shout at her to concentrate and therefore i have to sit next to her and make sure she concentrates and gives her full attention it wastes my 1 hour a day sitting next to her

to make sure she does not mess about I'm finding it hard at times when that 1 hour could be used doing something productive for myself instead.

Of particular note in this extract is the observation that online activity could not capture the cultural experience of participation such that her child disengaged from the learning process. In turn, as the participant's diary progressed it became apparent that her child's disengagement was compounded by the difficulties of demarcating time and space for religious instruction. For example, in a subsequent entry, the participant reported that when it was “mosque time on zoom” her eldest daughter was “playing up and I don't want to do this or that and having a tantrum as she wanted to play on the ipad I explained theres times where you have to stick to routine”. In other words, although online activity offered opportunities for religious instruction, the fact that everything (e.g., religious instruction, children's play) took place in the same domestic space meant that the norms regulating behaviour in the home diverged from what would be found in the mosque such that the relationship with the religious instructor was compromised. This underscores an important point about the nature of the collective experience that could normally be found in the mosque. It is not simply that the mosque brings Muslims together. Rather, it is that they are brought together under socially-shared expectations about behaviour which facilitate identity enactment. In the absence of such shared norms, the experience of online activity was diminished with (01F, diary) explaining “I feel like god is punishing us [] and i have lost all will to do anything now all I want to do is sleep”.

### Consolidating community membership

One wider implication of participants being unable to gather was a reduction in participants' opportunities to affirm their social relationships with others and build community identifications. Sometimes this loss was articulated with regard to building the Muslim community. For example, 17M explained (diary):

#### Extract 9

Being a Muslim is such a massive part of my life that not being able to actively participate in prayers at the mosque and internal/external events has actually been tough. Not being able to interact with some of your closest friends on a regular basis through meeting in the mosque due to similar interests means keeping these relationship has been difficult because similar interactions cannot be recreated over the phone. [] This seems like it is affecting our brotherhood”.

In similar vein, another (09F) elaborated (in her interview) on how the lost opportunity for collective prayer resulted in people becoming disconnected from each other and thus from their faith:

#### Extract 10

“there's lots of verses in the Quran about coming together and discussing faith and just gatherings and how it makes your faith stronger, and it's always a thing if you pray in a group it's better than praying yourself, especially for congregational prayers, you're always supposed to pray in a group, stand shoulder to shoulder, and it's just that thing about unity with your religion, so I think that's actually been missing as well, and it's like for some people just being a bit disconnected. I think it's especially tough for people that are away from home or people who don't have a Muslim family, they're just converts, that could be especially difficult for them because they don't really have that in their household at the moment.

A rather different sense of loss with regard to being able to affirm one's membership of the community referred to the absence of opportunities to showcase Islam to the wider non-Muslim community. For example, in their interview, participant 17M explained that before Covid the community routinely

invited journalists, Members of the UK Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) to mosque events, but that as this was no longer possible, meaningful inter-group contact was diminished:

Extract 11

we were trying to keep a contact with a lot of the journalists, and MPs and MSPs, but because we are not having these events, it's quite difficult. [] Before, we'd invite them for a New Year's dinner, or an Eid dinner, or a get together, or something. But just slowly losing that connection [] I feel like we are just spamming them a lot of the time, because we don't want to lose that connection. We think it's a very important connection to have, with your local MPs and stuff. That did affect it, I think.

In other words, precisely because the mosque provided the social context in which identity enactment was facilitated and accomplished, its closure limited the community's ability to showcase the lived reality of Muslims' religious identity. As is apparent in the quote, this showcasing of Muslim practice is itself judged to be a community value (“We think it's a very important connection to have”), such that the limitations on mosque-based identity enactment compromised yet another aspect of identity enactment—effective communication about the nature of Muslim identity to the wider community (and thus the opportunity to affirm the Muslim community's place in the wider local community).

## Deviant case analysis 2: managing the challenges of identity enactment

As explained earlier, a second type of ‘deviant case’ concerned examples in which participants acknowledged the challenges of religious identity enactment but reported being able to manage such challenges. One such example is provided by participant 20M who explained in their diary:

Extract 12

I had to lead our daily prayer at home as we are not able to go to the mosque. I have been doing so since last March. Initially I thought not being able to go to mosque would dampen my faith, but being able to read in the house has been very convenient and has bolstered both my faith and the rest of my family.

In some regards Extract 12 constitutes a deviant case in that it implies social distancing did not compromise identity enactment. However, in other respects it actually confirms the wider picture: elsewhere in his diary this participant explained he had both an in-depth knowledge of religious practice and that he lived with a large family such that while others would have found not being able to pray in the mosque “very disheartening”, he was “very fortunate to be able to perform the prayer and to share this experience with my rather large family (9 of us in total) whilst the mosques were closed due to COVID.” In other words, his knowledge and family environment allowed him to recreate in his domestic environment something of the congregational prayer arrangements that others could only find in the mosque (especially if they lived alone: Extract 7). It should also be noted that the opportunity to develop such alternative arrangements are likely gendered: as noted above several female respondents reported difficulties in identity enactment that were bound up with their domestic responsibilities, for example, childcare (see Extract 8). It is also appropriate to note that although participant 20M (Extract 12) explained how his high level of Islamic knowledge and his domestic arrangements allowed something of the personal experience of congregational prayer, it could not (because of its non-public, domestic quality) function to communicate the meaning of Islam to a non-Muslim audience (see Extract 11). Again, the point is that such an apparently ‘deviant’ case extract actually illustrates the limited scope for participants to negotiate the challenges of limited mosque accessibility.

## DISCUSSION

As noted in our introduction, the social distancing measures associated with Covid-19 provide an opportunity to investigate the role of our social relationships in our everyday lives. Previous research addressing the significance of these social distancing regulations has focused on mental health outcomes (e.g., Philpot et al., 2021; Sommerlad et al., 2022). Our own research highlights another domain in which limiting everyday interaction was consequential: reporting on their daily experiences, participants referred to the significance of the restrictions on their abilities to enact their religious identities.

As explained in the introduction, although we know much about the ways in which our self-definitions are contextually determined, we know less about the contextual factors that facilitate or impede individuals' abilities to translate their self-definitions into behaviour. Our data, gathered during a period of significant restrictions on social interaction shed some light on the ways in which the loss of everyday social interactions was consequential. Sometimes others were missed because a particular practice required others' participation (e.g., congregational prayer). In other contexts the sense of loss points to the role of others in understanding and supporting their desire to enact their religious identity. Similarly it was clear that others were important because joint activity with similarly motivated others allowed the co-ordination and scaffolding of their identity-related practice. Finally, we saw how the company of others was relevant for the building and affirmation of valued identities (including shared identities with the wider community).

As noted earlier, the form to group members' identity enactments will vary according to the beliefs, values and norms associated with their group membership. However, although our data relate to a particular religious community, some more general comments on identity enactment may be made (and in this regard it is noteworthy that Durkheim was interested in the experience of religious gatherings precisely because he believed they encapsulated processes common to all group memberships; Olaveson, 2001). Our first point is that the analysis of identity requires more than the investigation of individuals' subjective identifications. If an identity is to mean anything (and a self-categorization be sustained) it is important to be able to act in terms of that identity (and be treated in terms of that identification: Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Our analysis of the challenges associated with social distancing throws into sharp relief otherwise easily overlooked features of the social context that shape identity enactment. Specifically, it implies that identity enactment is a social accomplishment and that ingroup others can be important in this regard.

A related observation concerns the significance of particular places for identity enactment. Place and identity can be intimately connected (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006) and being in an identity-relevant place (e.g., a place of worship) can have distinctive meanings for ingroup members which impact their psychological state (Ysseldyk et al., 2016). We would add that such places are also social spaces in which group members gather in terms of their common social identity and that being able to gather in this way is important. As noted in the introduction, Durkheim (1912/1995) observed that all manner of everyday demands can limit the opportunities for identity enactment and that people needed contexts in which they could gather and collectively enact their beliefs and values. Our research builds on such insights through emphasizing the point that when group members gather in particular identity-relevant places (e.g., in a mosque) there is the potential for people to regard each other in terms of a shared social identity. This is a prominent feature of religious gatherings (Alnabulsi et al., 2018; Hopkins et al., 2016) and our analysis suggests that it is directly relevant for participants' abilities to enact their identities (see too, Khan et al., 2015; Reicher et al., 2021).

With regard to policy, our analysis implies that policy makers should be alert to the ways in the Covid-19 social distancing regulations are evaluated as a function of the beliefs, values and norms associated with different group memberships. These identity 'contents' provide the lenses through which these group memberships interpret events (Reicher & Hopkins, 2016). In turn, this implies that the experience of interventions (such as those relating to social distancing) likely varies across different communities. Our own research sheds light on (some) of the distinctive pandemic experiences of British Muslims (for other analyses of this community's distinctive experiences of the pandemic, see: Hassan et al., 2021, and Shahid & Dogra, 2022). More generally, awareness of various groups' distinctive identity-related

needs and concerns may suggest how best to tailor official communications with such communities (e.g., through acknowledging how an intervention impacts group members' identity-related concerns).

In evaluating this research, it is important to note the merits of combining diary and interview methods. The diary method allowed us to gather reports of everyday experiences and interactions participants judged as significant. In turn, the post-diary interviews allowed us to revisit those experiences and probe their wider meaning. This meant that our interviews were guided by (and responsive to) the concerns of our participants. It also gave us an opportunity to check our readings of the diary data were reasonable. As none of the research team were Muslims this was especially important. It is also noteworthy that the level of disclosure in the interviews (as when participants revealed their sense of loss associated with the limits on their ability to interact with fellow Muslims) suggests that the interviewer was able to establish a trusting relationship with participants.

However, there are limits to our analysis. Our data suggest that the experiences of the social distancing regulations were gendered and this requires further investigation. Most obviously we need richer evidence concerning the role of the Muslim community spaces in men's and women's lives (Nyhagen, 2019) and further evidence as to how the pandemic differentially impacted Muslim men's and women's domestic responsibilities (and hence the time available for—and the form of—their religious activities). So too, we need data as to how this was affected by participants' domestic arrangements (e.g., the size of the family unit, the degree to which it was multi-generational) and their material resources (e.g., house size); we do not have data relevant to these considerations. It should also be noted that we cannot address the question of whether there is anything about our sample that may have shaped the data we obtained (we simply know that many were professionals and had degrees).

Future research could also explore the creativity with which community members seek to negotiate constraints on identity enactment. For example, we know that across communities, people responded to the challenges of social distancing through developing mutual aid groups. Typically, these have been analysed in terms of their role in building psychological resilience and supporting mental well-being (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2021). However, such community organization could also be relevant to identity enactment. More generally, research on identity enactment could usefully focus on how communities routinely seek to create social spaces where a shared social identity is possible (and identity enactment facilitated). Such research should not only address group members' own place-making practices (Mohammad, 2013) but also others' attempts to thwart such activities (e.g., others' opposition to mosque building; Dunn, 2001) and how such opposition is negotiated (Sunier, 2021).

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Nick Hopkins (Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Project administration; Supervision; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing) Caoimhe Ryan (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Project administration) Jennie Portice (Data curation; Formal analysis) Vera Straßburger (Data curation; Formal analysis) Amrita Ahluwalia-McMeddes (Data curation; Formal analysis; Project administration) Anna Dobai (Formal analysis) Samuel Pehrson (Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Methodology; Project administration) Steve Reicher (Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Project administration).

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

As the data may allow identification of the interviewee, they are not publicly available. However, interested parties may contact the authors to discuss data-sharing.

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