

From Granting the Right (!) Answers to Posing Odd Questions: Perspectives on Studying and Presenting Muslim Minorities in a Politicized, Western Context

By Garbi Schmidt

Some Introductory Thoughts

On an early morning in 2007, after arriving at work and turning on my PC, I skimmed through the incoming e-mail as usual. One message stood out as particularly interesting:

Hi Garbi

[..] I write you because I am afraid that many Muslims, who unfortunately have fallen victims to an immense stigmatization and demonization within recent years, will not participate [in your study]. That is why I think that neither your research project nor those of many others are in fact trustworthy. The reason is that your results and conclusions will be used by the government. In other words, research projects like your own and those of many others are commissioned work. That is what I sense among the Muslims communities. People do not see projects like yours as independent, and accordingly you lose your credibility, especially when financing comes from the state.... Objectivity, impartiality and true science unfortunately lacks in many research projects. First and foremost, it is the politics of the government that is determining... How certain can one be that your project is not exploited? Is there any political agenda behind it?

Sincerely...[name] (email received February 2007. My translation)

The e-mail is a good starting point for the points I want to reflect on in this article. First, the e-mail gives some indications of the role that Islamic studies research and research among Muslim minorities plays in the Danish context. The examples that I draw on are all taken from Denmark; a country where the debate over Islam as a part of (or rather, not a part of) society has been heated for more than a decade, to such an extent that the heat has been “exported” to other parts of the world. The Danish case illustrates several factors central to the problematic analyzed in this volume of *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*: the politicization of the research field has extraordinary consequences for research environments and knowledge production, and how we as researchers are perceived by those we portray and those we present to. This issue inevitably leads me to the second point that I believe the e-mail illustrates: that the endeavour of research is attached to the person who carries out the research. Beyond its implications for how we carry out our profession, this issue also – and importantly – shows that the line between person and product is porous. The question I want to focus on is that if we cannot claim detachment from

the objects we produce, are we then political agents, do we lack neutrality, and what kind of knowledge and not least *reality* production do we thus participate in? One answer to the question, I suggest, can potentially be found in, 1) a broadening of epistemological starting points for research questions and 2) an enhanced and more publicized stress on reflexivity among researchers, as a means to cross-check the research subject's impact on his/her data, and further, as a means to scrutinize the impact of powerful ideological and political expectations on research.

What Agent is the Researcher?

A wider scrutiny over the agency of social researchers – broadly, because I think we should see the current challenges of Islamic research as both something specific and something embedded in wider societal discussions that points to expectations about social / humanistic research as such – is carried on outside the corridors of universities and research institutions. One example is the first New Year's Speech by our current liberal Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in 2002. Much of the speech was dedicated to contemplating the terror attacks against the cities of New York and Washington D.C. less than half a year earlier. Without any direct linkage, the Prime Minister mentioned his administration's initiatives for the coming year, including a drastic cutback on a number of state-funded councils and boards. The announcement fell under the speech's theme of securing human values and independence. The Prime Minister said:

We want to put man before the system. Every individual must have larger freedom to determine his or her own life... we believe that humans are capable of choosing for themselves. We do not need experts and arbiters of taste to choose on our behalf... We see tendencies of expert tyranny, which possibly suppresses the public debate. The people should not accept raised fingers from so-called experts, who believe they know best. Experts can be good at communicating factual knowledge. But whenever we make personal choices, we are all experts. (Fogh Rasmussen, 2002)

There is a fine line to be drawn from the Prime Minister's evaluation of the events of September 11 to his criticism of experts. The fight against Islamist terrorism includes a breaking down of illusions, of false and wrong ideas, of false and wrong authorities, to secure and enforce the independency and rational thinking of human beings. The war against terror in that sense is portrayed as a liberation war. Those who – potentially – are to be liberated are not only nations, i.e. the civilized world, but equally civilized, thinking

persons. And thinking people are portrayed as capable of making decisions for themselves, without the help (or rather the opposite) of “expert tyranny.”

One question that immediately comes to mind is who the expert tyrants are. The speech is quite clear in that respect: the expert tyrant falls within the field where public debate is possible – or in the context of the speech, a right. This field does not share the premises of exact (natural) sciences where an experiment gives a clear and re-testable answer, independent of the person carrying out the experiment: rather, results within the social field can always be discussed. The Prime Minister’s wording is striking here: “whenever we make personal choices, we are all experts.” All personal perspectives are of equal value, are valid, across the spectrum of class and expertise. The role that the Prime Minister attributes to those who are determined “experts” within a field is that of communicating knowledge of a certain kind: the knowledge that is factual – based on *facts*. This is where and when the expert can speak. Outside that realm the person is not an expert and cannot speak without any particular authority. The question is where the definition of knowledge leaves disciplines of social /humanistic research where research results are always submitted to personal analysis and reflexive contemplation and cannot be attributed to the laws of nature?

The Prime Minister’s speech contains parallels to the e-mail that I quoted in the beginning. Both the e-mail and the speech include perspectives on (1) what social /humanistic research is (implicitly including that of research in Islam) and (2) what the researcher is expected to be as a professional and as a person. Moreover, both texts see social reality as including a normative, indisputable truth that can be revealed and described in its essence. The purpose of research is thus not to think in varieties of possible understandings, but to produce a cohesive, monolithic description of ‘reality’.

Interestingly, both texts describe research results as something absolutely separated from the researcher who monitors them, writes them down, and communicates them to a broader public. Fact is fact, reality is reality. Importantly, such an understanding exposes a contrast between what society demands and expects and what academics believe feasi-

ble and even good and decent work. I will argue that we as researchers insufficiently communicate this contrast in research paradigms to society around us, and that strengthening our pedagogical effort in this area could be an important device for furthering an understanding of the limits and scope of social and humanistic research within the wider public. One particular reason why the research community remains remarkably silent about these contrasting paradigms, I argue, is in many ways connected to our research's thriving on the societal paradigm that understand research as objective (in the sense of being a total account of reality rather than a partial) – another, that positivist epistemologies within our craft (still) hold a central position as particularly valuable (i.e. Spiro 1996). The stress on what some may see as the imperfection of social research and others as a premise of all social interaction potentially leaves both research and researchers vulnerable. The actual line between person and product is difficult to make here, either to those who write or to those who read.

The present article is based on data collected in Denmark, mainly after September 11, 2001. The Danish case is a good starting point for an analysis of the politicization of Islamic studies research, since Islam and Muslim immigrants are heavily debated on all levels of society, often using research as arguments for or against certain perspectives, and just as often referring to researchers as “trustworthy”, “politically correct”, or “lacking touch with reality”. The Danish case illustrates well how the politicization of Islamic studies research intersects with a more general politicised use of Islam in definitions of a national self and political belonging. Interestingly, such societal processes focus less on the defending of the Danish welfare state and more on the defending of what participants claim to be (in an absolute sense) Danish values and norms. A recent statistical study of the Danish majority population's perception of immigrants shows that the debate over immigration has a remarkable influence on the Danish political landscape. For example, bluecollar workers would *statistically* vote for the Social Democrats and left-wing parties rather than for the right-wing Danish People's Party, were it not for their resentment of immigrants (Frølund Thomsen 2006). The same study underlines that the resentment against immigrants is not based on a fear that they may steal jobs and be an economic burden but rather a fear of the cultural and religious values they bring with them. The fear

of Islam is mirrored in newspapers and speeches before the parliament – and was so mirrored before the cartoon controversy of 2005-2006. Researchers are, willingly as well as unwillingly, participating in this game. Whether the game is perceived as entertaining to those on the board undoubtedly depends on their access to control of the situation, of having space to manoeuvre. Researchers of Islam, I must stress, are not necessarily victims of this historical situation: researchers also receive and enjoy the status of experts, and their research is prioritized by research councils and research institutions, even finding its way into the state budget. Here, the viewpoint of the sender of the email that research on Muslim communities is driven by political agendas and the state is understandable and thought-provoking. Although the money researchers apply for and the programs and projects they initiate claim neutrality, there is a fair chance that there would be less money and fewer incentives to formulate research projects and programs, if there were no political interest in the field.

The Research Community: The Diversity of Expert Judgement

So far I have referred to researchers of Islam as a collective entity. The situation is, of course, much more complex. Although researchers of Islam share a common interest in Islam as a religion that historically and/or currently affects the lives of a significant proportion of humanity, they do so in very different ways. Difference can be the consequence of variation in methodological, epistemological and theoretical orientation, a consequence of our training in diverse disciplines as history, anthropology, sociology, theology or law. But difference can also be a consequence of researchers' ideas about doing research as a pedagogical or even socially enlightening endeavour, and what factors they should stress when carrying out this task. Even within a country as small as Denmark, the difference in research standpoints is significant, highly publicized and highly politicized.

One illustrative example from the Danish context was played out in the fall of 2006, just after the announcement of the state budget. The budget ear-marked 20 million Danish Kronor for studying terrorism and radicalization. Half of this money went to an ongoing program at the Danish Institute for International Studies; the remaining money, placed under the Ministry of Defence, was dedicated to research projects on radicalization, not

least “al-Qaida inspired terrorism, rooted in Islamic fundamentalism.” (Ministry of Finance 2007:22) The focus on radicalization and Islamic fundamentalism quickly found its way to the media’s headlines. Public attention, though, was highly intensified, when MP Jesper Langballe from the Danish People’s Party (DPP) publicly announced that researchers from, e.g. the Carsten Niebuhr Department at the University of Copenhagen should not expect to get a share of the money. To the daily *Politiken* Langballe announced that researchers at that particular department had been unable to deliver critical research on Islam. Their research could therefore “not be used for anything at all.” (Olesen, 2006) Langballe’s accusations were (intentionally?) provocative, but equally powerful, given that the Danish People’s Party (known for its anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant rhetoric) is the current Liberal-Conservative government’s ally. DPP was heavily involved in the preparation of the state budget.

The politically initiated discussion over the role and value of Islamic research spilled over into the research community. Again, the press proved to be a powerful and motivating agent. An article published in late November by the weekly newspaper *Weekendavisen* underpinned the varying and even competing stands existing among Danish researchers working on Islam (Dørge & Kjøg Pedersen 2006). One researcher, at one research institution, portrayed the perspective of another research institution, as “trying to de-demonize a picture [of Islam] that probably exists in public spaces, but [by doing so the effort] overshadows that there is also a violent dimension of Islam”. Another researcher was quoted as saying that:

There are two tales [approaches (that researchers take to)...] [among researchers] about the other [Muslims/Muslim minorities]. One of them declares that we, the majority, are responsible for everything, that we suppress the other... .And we just have to recognize them, then the problem will disappear... The other tale says that if there is a problem, then we have to find out what is wrong about them [the other], and when we do, the problem will be solved. But it is the first tale that is the most popular in minority research [and Islamic research].

The article both underlines varying positions on how Islam should be described, but also ties into the debate over who are truly experts and who are not: who can speak with authority and knowledge, and who cannot. Interestingly, the researchers quoted in the article do not (willingly or unwillingly) question the fairness of such positions, neither do

they appear to defend the plural dimensions and voices within Islamic research as a premise – if not even a strength – of the field. Rather, the article, and the researchers quoted in it, reproduces a (popular) understanding of diverse research perspective as something suspicious. In the article, diversity is not described as a consequence of variation in methodology and epistemological starting points, and thereby a (productive) premise of doing and furthering research. Rather, diversity is portrayed as embedded in the normative struggle between defenders of “political correctness” – a concept that has become equivalent to leaving out or diminishing inconvenient details of, for example, Islamic history – and more realistic “hands on” approaches to Islam.

Whereas the issue of political correctness is a recurring theme in the press, the flipside of the discussion is the focus on political “incorrectness” or insensitivity that other agents in the debate see as the main stumbling block to social cohesion and coexistence. One example from the Danish media is an essay in the daily *Information* from December 2006, written by Sherin Khankan. Khankan, founder and chair of the organization *Kritiske Muslimer* (Critical Muslims) and an educated sociologist of religion, writes about what she calls the pseudo-experts of Islam (Khankan 2006). She names both people whom she sees as genuine experts and those whom she claims are not. Khankan’s argument is that “it is time that we define the borders for when we can talk about experts and when we can talk about politicians and people who are interested in Islam.” Although Khankan is quite vague about what a genuine expert is, her positioning of one set of book titles (“What is Islam?” and “The Society of the Just.”) against another (“In the House of War, Islamists and Naivist”) gives a clear indication that she considers the premises of genuine expertise.

The point here is that there is not necessarily an overlap between being an Islamic studies researcher and being seen as an expert on Islam by the press, or (perhaps?) in the wider public. Although the link frequently exists, it is just as frequently porous and insignificantly defined. Who is an Islamic expert – both in the Danish and in other national contexts – is something depending on support from stake-holders in public and media based debates over Islam and multi-culturalism. In that sense a scrutiny of meanings of exper-

tise on Islam stress the arbitrariness of these meanings, and how the core-value of the term is closely attached to questions of power and the legitimization of political action than necessarily to knowledge.

From a research position the expert/not-expert debate is fundamental for three reasons: first, Islamic studies researchers (as well as research results) do not gain authority and recognition per se as a consequence of profession or professional approach. Second, in the instances where researchers and research gain recognition, such recognition is frequently based on support or rejection of prominent positions in political debate. In other words, research gains (and loses) societal influence based on their usefulness as political arguments. Third, the use of research within the politicized debate has turned Islamic research into a dualistic, normative project, trapped between forces of “political correctness” and “radical critics”. That the research community itself is trapped in this dualism is illustrated not only by the statements in the *Weekendavisen* article¹ but even more so in a chronicle by Tina Magaard, published in *Information* in late November 2006. Entitled “Reform the Research of Islam”, it describes the malaise of Islamic research as rooted in an Edward Saidian depiction of the Islamic/Middle-Eastern world as a victim of European expansion. In Magaard’s view, Said’s ideas have created an unfortunate and indiscriminate understanding of Islamism as the voice of the oppressed. As a result, (too) many researchers of Islam blindly defend Islamism and deny the atrocities that this ideology has created. “Islamic research” Magaard concludes, “has a historical responsibility for promoting integration by giving Islamism a qualified response” (Magaard 2006) but is doing so inadequately. In other words, (part of) Islamic research – in Magaard’s view – has turned into an apologetic project due to a skewed, dualistic and theoretical (here, with ‘theory’ being equated with ‘non-realistic’) take on reality. And apologetics in this case is not only false and naïve; it is also dangerous.

My description so far underlines that a central component of the debate is the many contrasting, if not contested, understandings of what research is, should be, and what its goals are. By some, good social research is seen as a still photo of reality: all nuances are intact as long as the picture does not include any interference or black spots. The viewer

can see reality in its totality. By others (and here we find most researchers), reality is way too fuzzy, blurred and differentiated for one picture to contain it. Research is at best a snapshot taken in motion: we see contexts, contours, colours, movements. The role of research, then, is to analyse such snapshots, for example by taking a series of snapshots (a handy euphemism for doing fieldwork). These two understandings of what good research is intersect with a more general (but just as powerful) term in the media and political life, that of expertise. What is interesting is that the determination of expertise in public debates shows a remarkably low interest in how expert knowledge is produced and whether such knowledge actually fulfils research criteria of “good quality.” Expertise is a title shared by a broad array of agents, including politicians, journalists, authors – and researchers; the right of such agents to take on that title is determined by their audience’s understanding of their message as correct in the sense that it confirms (or opposes) existing viewpoints. Or, to relate the current state of things to the ambition of this article: the politicization of research lies less in a qualitative evaluation of its methods or theories, but rather in its situatedness in the ideological field of expertise.

The Asymmetry of Danger and Loss

My short and rough overview of the role that Islamic research plays in a Danish context has revealed a number of themes worth taking into account. One set of themes can be categorized as dealing with issues of danger and loss; another deals with issues of describing reality. Although the two categories of themes are heavily interrelated, I will try to analyse them separately.

The sensation of risk, danger and loss is apparent throughout the examples that I have given here. The Prime Minister describes researchers and experts as arbiters of taste, who occupy and limit the rights of citizens to judge for themselves. Researchers experience and react against political agendas that they see as hampering their work and their right to speak freely as both experts and citizens. And both within and outside the research community there is the heated discussion of researchers as naively turning a blind eye to Islamism, thus potentially jeopardizing the values upon which democracy rests. Finally,

Muslims express worry that their identity is misrepresented and misunderstood by both politicians and researchers, and that their civil rights are accordingly threatened.

That the phenomenon of risk is an underlying premise of modern society is a recurring theme in current sociological literature. In his work, *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck deals mainly with environmental risks – risks that can be attributed to modern society’s exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment and human bodies. Nonetheless, his analysis can also enlighten our present discussion. The examples that I have given so far show the risk of another sort of pollution, dealing with the transgression of individual and professional boundaries. Risk arises when “others” occupy or allow themselves – authoritatively – to represent what the subjects understand as their “territory of self”, whether this territory implies national, religious, or professional borders. The element of risk and pollution in this case is not so much a question of destruction and death, but rather – in a Mary Douglasian sense – one of invading ambiguity and loss. Ambiguity inherently counters and challenges essence and thus the domain from which one can speak on behalf of essence. Ambiguity is therefore traumatically powerful. Referring to another prominent sociologist, Anthony Giddens, we may say that ambiguity challenges self-identity as a reflexive project, as a self-narrative (Giddens 1991). The identity we want to claim, and that we believe to claim, is invaded by others and transformed by their presence.

Ulrich Beck writes that: “The destructive forces that scientists today have to deal with within all areas forces upon them the inhuman law of *infallibility*.” (Beck 1999:79)² The risk that we moderns face in daily life, whether we are dealing with toxic waste or terrorism, raises the demands for facts. We want to know what is in our food, what is in the air, and what the nature of Islamism is all about. Science – whether understood as the natural sciences or social research – is expected to be *exact, accurate*. The “problem” is that social sciences and humanities have not developed and cannot develop the tools necessary for fulfilling this demand. In particular, those of us who base our work on ethnographic studies are careful not to portray our research as applying to a general whole. Rather, we claim to offer perspectives on the whole by offering insight into aspects of it. Our focus is

directed on complexity rather than on standards, on variations rather than on norms, on description rather than on prediction.

Things do not become less complicated (or more fitted to current expectations of science) when we as researchers continuously and openly claim that the results we present are heavily attached to the medium producing them: the researcher. As one consequence we can, as already mentioned, hardly claim to present any all-encompassing perspective on a larger social phenomenon or group – such as Muslims in Denmark. What is far more complicated, and far more risky, is that by using ourselves as a tool, we can hardly claim neutrality. Again, we are back at the starting point, facing the deep bond between person and product. Although the highlighting of this bond is reflected in the research literature as a sign of doing good and serious research, the actual implications are revealed as a great deal more complicated when we deal with a subject as politicized as Islamic research. Here, the blunt highlighting of the role that the researcher plays producing his or her material does not necessarily strengthen the product's credibility – quite the contrary. It is bad politics. Being a good researcher according to research standards and doing good research according to the expectations of surrounding society pulls in two quite contrasting directions.

Ways ahead? Epistemologies, Ideologies and (Self-) Reflexivity

Where does this discussion leave us? Is there any possible way out of the risk zone? Although my examples only slightly touch upon this dimension, one aspect that is both a part of the challenge and a possible part of the solution is the large pedagogical work in which we as professionals have engaged in within recent years. As people in the West have become increasingly interested in Islam and Muslims, and with their interest frequently driven by events disrupting social and security political status quos (migration, terrorism), researchers within the field of Islamic research have taken on the role of teachers of the public. Although we are occupied with refining our understanding of a particular socio-religious group, we are equally occupied with refining our roles as experts: as people with an innate *experience* with (but not affiliation with) Islam and Muslim communities, and as people capable of communicating this experience (or knowl-

edge?) to journalists, high-school students and politicians (and, in reality, everybody else) in ways that either minimize or validate the sensation of being at risk: is Islam detrimental to women's rights, human rights, democratic values? Is Islam a violent religion? Can Muslims integrate and behave as decent and contributing citizens within Western democracies?

As illustrated in this paper, answering these questions – whatever the answer – will always leave some people unhappy. One question that we may ask ourselves here is whether the answers we produce actually change anything or whether they are simply used to fuel already existing positions within the public arena. In other words, we must ask ourselves whether we truly convince people of the relevance of research, or whether we simply confirm already existing convictions (no matter what their content). The appraisal or harsh critique that we receive, not to mention our options for funding, depends on our usefulness within powerful public – not least political – discourses. In that sense, the authority of research is not necessarily located only in methodological and theoretical sophistication but as also – and equally – in the political structures and positions of current society.

One lesson to be learned from this discussion is that the Islamic researcher *is* a political agent, as both the ways in which we carry out research and the context in which we communicate our results make our endeavour political. Islamic research is not merely a politicized field but also a *political* field. I argue that proceed is to be aware of both aspects, both when we collect data for our research and when we present our research to the larger public. To the individuals we interview and the communities we carry out research in, we are political agents as we receive governmental funding and frequently frame our research according to the questions that are raised in the public debate. We try to modify, qualify and spread light on issues that gain attention in the field where Islam is an aspect of political discourse, and we thus stand forth as political agents, whether we like it or not. Using ourselves as research tools in ethnographic research, we cannot, claim neutrality. Neutrality is not, however, exclusively a product of personal normativity. It is also an

aspect of our meeting with (and our contribution to) the demands and the interests prominent within society.

Trying to escape the role of political agent in a politicized field is perhaps both naïve and unproductive. Rather, acknowledging and laying open this methodological premise of our profession may be what we need to do. The realization may spill over in both the presentation of our work to the general public and the ways that we design our research. To illustrate the first point: in our work – either in writing or in talks – we tend to describe developments and agendas created in the field of minority-majority relations as containing the agency of politicians, the media, religious institutions and religious authorities. The group that we tend to continuously exclude from our description – one that actually has an impact on the scenario – is the research community. In an interesting article on various epistemologies within the sociological study of race and racism in the United States, American sociologist Margaret Hunter grants insights that I find useful in this regard. Outlining how sociology on race and racism in the United States in the United States is driven by at least five different epistemologies she shows how these different epistemologies have a decisive effect on what questions the researcher asks – which again has an effect on the perspectives of research (Hunter 2002). Research questions are therefore, Hunter emphasizes, not neutral, and they are further “hard to see beyond” – even when they claim to be positivist (ibid. 132-133). One way of the blind (or potentially antagonistic) spots is, she states, to encourage the advent and interplay of as many different epistemologies as possible. Adapting this advice from the field of racial studies, and stressing the plurality of research starting points as something real and even attractive, for one thing, contribute to our understanding of how researchers do politics and how we affect other agents’ ways of doing politics. Understanding ourselves as political agents will affect our sensitivity to the topics we choose to research and the way in which we carry out that research. Second, by emphasising the focus on epistemological variation and how our epistemological starting points affect our way of doing research, stresses the reflexive and self-reflexive aspects of our craft.

Self-reflexivity is both a way to realize the epistemological starting points that we all have (but not always share) and how and if they relate to normative and ideological ideas of how social reality is created: why we ask the questions we ask and what effect public discourse have on our research questions. Last but not least, reflexivity over epistemology can help us asking the fundamental question over whether we (basically) ask the right questions?

One illustrative example is that we as Islamic studies researchers come with the assumption that religion matters. This is the perspective that we throw into the field and according to which we design our research. One may rightly ask whether our specific perspective overemphasizes one aspect of people's lives without testing or questioning whether other aspects are of equal or even more significance. What is particular crucial here is that our perspective is not only potentially self-validating but equally validating of social assumptions that religion is a key to understanding the communities that we present, and that religion – not least – is a stumbling block for integration (or assimilation). In that sense, by asking particular questions, we add to the politicization of our field rather than diminishing it.

I will argue that a deeper scrutiny of why we ask the questions we ask – not least to be able to deliver certain kinds of answers – may be appropriate. How are our research questions affected by expectations and trends within wider society? Rather than seeking to answer these questions (and thus often appearing naïve and defensive), we could make one basic task of our project designs to ask ourselves whether such questions are at all relevant? Is the society around us actually asking the right questions in order to understand the processes and contrasts it encompasses? Could it be that our next move, instead of focusing on getting the right answers, should be to focus on asking the right questions? And is this perhaps the area where the competence of social and humanistic research is the strongest? Given the amount and variety of non-academic and academic experts that we find in the field, all of whom seem able to produce answers, this new approach may be a very productive path.

One final change in perspective is to learn from the experiences of other fields of social and humanistic research. As exemplified by the New Year's speech of the Danish Prime Minister, "arbiters of taste" is a general term for a group of professionals with expertise in a field where every citizen can have an opinion and be an expert according to personal experience. Although the politicization of research in the field of Islamic studies is explicit in comparison to other fields of social/humanistic research, they too share the experience of being under public and political scrutiny and even suspicion. While ethnic minority and racial studies is an example that comes easily to mind, other professional fields that have much less in common with our field (e.g. social work) show similar trends of self-scrutiny, most frequently based on external critique. As noted by theorist Anthony Giddens, the attention on risk within modern society also enlarges the wish to place blame (directed towards a subject rather than an object) – and does so across professional fields, however unevenly (Giddens 1994). Whether we can get beyond this apparent premise of modernity is too large a topic for this paper. But one way ahead may be for us to remind society of its own self-narrative and, rather than reaffirming the paradigms of reality that this narrative includes, offer the potential of alternative conceptualizations and framing.

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Garbi Schmidt is a senior researcher at the Danish National Centre for Social Research in Copenhagen. She is a program director of the ethnic minorities’ research program. Key publications include *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Temple University Press, 2004) and *Muslim i Danmark, muslim i verden: en analyse af muslimske ungdomsforeninger og muslimsk identitet i årene op til Muhammad-krisen* (Swedish Science Press, 2007).

¹ Whether the researchers included in the article were all quoted correctly is not possible for me to access at this point. I have translated the quotes as they appeared in the article.

² Danish edition of Ulrich Beck: *Risk Society*. My translation from Danish to English.