

**Special Issue:  
Muslim Youth Work**

**Youth  
&  
Policy**

Number 92  
Summer 2006



**The National Youth Agency**



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**Published by:**

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**Proofread by:**

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**The National Youth Agency**

supports those involved in young people's personal and social development and works to enable all young people to fulfil their potential as individuals and citizens within a socially just society.

We achieve this by:

- informing, advising and helping those who work with young people in a variety of settings;
- influencing and shaping youth policy and improving youth services nationally and locally; and
- promoting young people's participation, influence and place in society.

ISSN 0262 9798

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**Subscriptions:** 0116 242 7427

**Advertising:** 0116 242 7480

**Information for contributors:** Inside Back Cover.

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## Introduction

### Responding to Lives, not Events

Lave and Wenger's<sup>1</sup> notion of communities of practice of learning as a form of social participation is interesting in what it sees as the key components of this form of learning and engagement. These are:

- **Meaning:** how we consider the world as meaningful and how we then articulate it.
- **Practice:** the resources, frameworks and roles necessary for collaboration and action.
- **Community:** the way participation is defined and recognised as competent.
- **Identity:** how learning informs and affects who we are and become in our communities.

But what happens when the resources are not available? Or the conversations taking place continue to remain unrecognised or not acknowledged by the professional enterprise that you are committed to and believe in?

What happens when what you experience or see is rarely represented in the professional domain? For example, what has been the coverage in *Young People Now* of the effect of the Kashmir earthquake or from the current events between Lebanon and Israel on the social mobilisation of young Muslims? What are the effects of the constant vilification of who you are on the self esteem of Muslim young people in Britain? This absence of representation may be argued as legitimate due to capacity, but ultimately the narrative and perspective presented is a matter of choice. This is not a 'go' at *Young People Now*; the absence of alternative narratives in the youth work public spaces is not just the remit of YPN. Today's multi-ethnic and religious Britain has in its midst a number of narratives that could enable a resonance of informal education and youth work with its diverse communities. Their absence is our loss. Which narrative is chosen to support these values, principles, foundations appears to be a matter of ideological preference.

For most young people religiosity is a choice activated by whatever circumstances are presented by life, or not as the case may be. This is no longer necessarily so for Muslim young people; here it is activated by an Islamophobic discourse that does not allow this to be either latent or private.

Youth work is particularly prone to internalising a discourse such as Islamophobia, presented on the back of securing and protecting values/principles and cultural rights against an aggressor absent of all these. This weakness exists because these are its foundations, what attracted and hopefully will continually to attract those who want to 'make a difference' or

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'be of service'. But such idealistic intentions can make missionaries of all of us.

The articles presented here are from individuals involved in 'communities of practice' whose insight can be overlooked, either through their position in institutional hierarchies or within the politics of representation that exist in the relationship between the State and the Muslim communities. They present experience, reflection and analysis intended to inform policy and the practice of all who work with young people. These papers emerged from the presentations given at the two conferences on Muslim youth work that took place in December 2005 in Birmingham and March 2006 in Bradford, supported by The National Youth Agency and *Youth and Policy*. The conferences sought to present an alternative to agendas and policies that are determined by events rather than by lives. As one of a number of outcomes from the conferences a Muslim Youth Work Foundation has been established and will be launched later this year.

My thanks and appreciation to all the contributors to this journal for their articles and support. Particularly so to Jean Spence for her trust and support throughout the process of organising the conferences and this journal.

**MG Khan**  
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**Guest Editor**

1 Wenger, E (2005) 'Social Theory of Learning' in eds. R.Harrison and C. Wise. *Working with Young People*, London, SAGE Publications.

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# Towards a National Strategy for Muslim Youth Work

**Muhammad G. Khan**

*This paper discusses the reasons for the development of a Muslim youth work response in the youth work domain. As a follow on from the conferences it delves into the learning and outcomes that emerged from the two national conferences organised on Muslim youth work in Dec 2005 and March 2006. It presents the necessary actions for the way forward and argues that without the 'naming' of this response much of what is possible and what can be offered by Muslim youth workers, Muslim youth work organisations and those working in the statutory services who wish to trial alternate approaches will go unrecognised. It goes onto the beginnings of a differentiation of whether Muslim youth work is a religious or spiritual exercise, the implications of where this is located is left to the reader.*

**Keywords:** *young people, Muslim, strategy, definitions, youth work*

## Youth work in British Muslim Communities.

It can be argued that every trauma leaves a lasting legacy that shapes policy. Using the example of the effect of mass unemployment in the 1980s on individuals and communities, one cannot help but think that the emphasis on lifelong learning and getting young people on the learning or training ladder has this as a determinant. Where other community responses (particularly Black and Minority Ethnic) have arisen, these have often been on the back of events. Developing strategies and responses to communities on the basis of 7/7 or some civil unrest can have its disadvantages, including the danger of processes of representation isolating more people than they involve.

For Muslim young people, faith identity has increasingly become a positive and yet a very painful terrain to negotiate. In the secular youth work context where identity might traditionally be explored and questioned, there is sometimes a suspicion of faith based interventions, particularly of confessional approaches that create little space for a critical relationship between the young person, their religion and society. In the case of young Muslims and Muslim youth workers this becomes a difficult area of practice. Often, whilst they are under a sustained level of hostility, the identities of these young people need to be secured, comforted or understood. This is necessary before they can be critiqued and challenged again by young people or youth workers. From the perspective of outsiders this comforting / consolidation or support process can be viewed as indoctrination, manipulation of funding, or worse.

The subtle dichotomies involved in work with young people in general are discerned and revealed through its actual practice. The insights that emerge in practice can inform organisational aims, forms and locations and have done so in the history of youth work. However the Muslim organisational infrastructure for work with young people is still developing and taking shape. Considering the number and different types of organisational entities that sustain young people's and children's services, the Muslim organisational response is but embryonic, and what is there is stretched and criticised simply because so little in this terrain exists. What does exist cannot hope to deliver on all the agendas that are faced by Muslim communities. It is important to welcome as well as to question new organisational forms that arise within the Muslim setting in order to achieve a critical mass of provision relevant to the needs of Muslim young people.

A representational dialogue with Muslim communities is a cost effective approach on the part of local authorities and other agencies. However the level of investment in the development of and further investment in specialist support services needs to emerge alongside this exercise for the myriad of needs that are to be met. The opportunity to develop the capacity and variety of the organisational field to connect individuals to communities and communities with each other is missed as new and emerging organisations are sidelined from funding and development opportunities and their relationship with the mainstream radicalised. The role of youth work as an exercise that highlights relational tensions is unique and the Muslim Youth Work Conference has contributed to this dimension by identifying, bringing together, valuing and giving legitimacy to a wide variety of contributors who may not have a religion in common but who have expertise, experience and a desire to contribute on issues related to youth work with young Muslims.

## **The National Conferences**

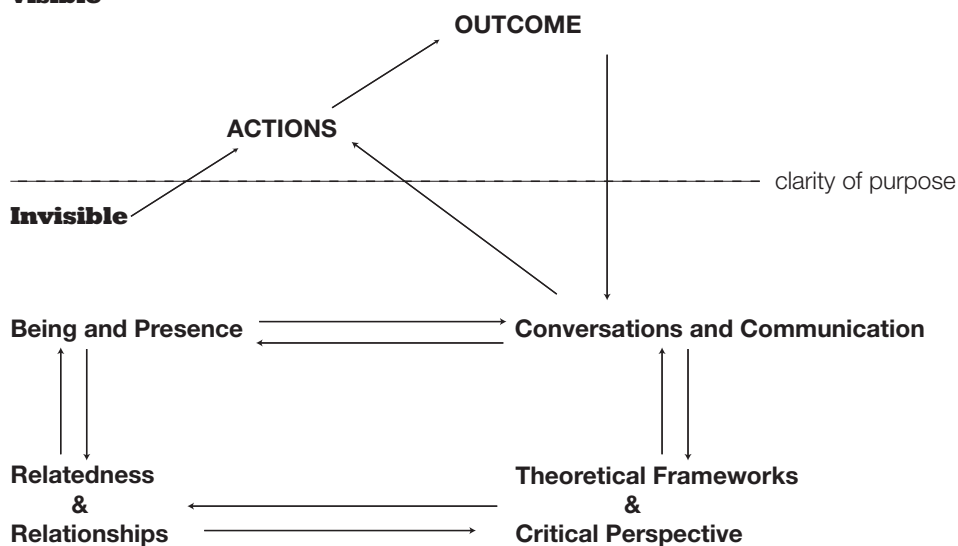
The conferences on Muslim Youth Work<sup>1</sup> initiated a unique discussion with striking perspectives that challenged all who attended. Two thirds of the audience of over five hundred people were Muslims. Those present included young people and adults across the age spectrum. The conferences attracted participants from nearly every major urban conurbation in Britain representing a wide variety of organisations – religious, voluntary, statutory, academic, governmental, security, faith based as well as individuals without organisational affiliations. A national focus was retained despite considerable interest from overseas – enquiries were received from North Africa, Middle East, Europe, Australia and North America, suggesting that there is an international demand for applied thinking. The feedback demonstrated that it provided an alternative to the events-related agenda that has characterised much of the interaction between government agencies and the BME communities historically and the Muslim community currently. The conferences sought to connect the contribution of youth work as a means of engagement/involvement with Muslim young people with critical thinking and reflective practice.

A positive and challenging dialogue was built in to the conference programmes to test existing boundaries of what can and cannot be discussed when critiquing Muslim youth work; whilst national responses to it were explored and challenged. This was aided by a

non-threatening, supportive and open atmosphere that allowed difficult and alternative perspectives to be presented and tackled. The following diagram aims to place the purpose, process and outcomes of the conferences within a contextual frame that demonstrates what influences approach, action and outcome. The conferences were an investment in what is felt but not often seen, the invisible dimension that is so crucial in authenticating participation. They demonstrate the importance of national agencies which are willing to invest and trust in the development of this critical dialogue. The NYA did both and this investment has given momentum to the possibility of distinctive responses emerging. Trust is an important ingredient in the support of new and innovative thinking. The boundaries of what is innovative are partly set by what is funded and what is not, the irony being that the more innovative you are the less chance there is of finding support for ideas. There is a further dimension in developing new approaches, of periods of lack of clarity or uncertainty as you resist following tracks already laid. These can be perceived as a lack of professionalism or organisation. But often this is new terrain and the questions and obstacles revealed are key insights that can have a subtle but distinctive effect on the project.

This diagram is intended to reveal the hidden infrastructure that supports and enables youth work and youth work organisations in Britain and provides the necessary foundations that can support policy and practice. Otherwise the Biblical parable of the seeds on the barren ground becomes appropriate to describe the relationship between agenda, actions and outcomes where this infrastructure does not exist.

## Visible



*Conversations and Communication:* There is a need to make space for conversations that engage the variety of perspectives and disciplines that can inform work with Muslim young people. It is equally important that these conversations have the means to be shared with a wider audience which can give them shape, practical form and provide

feedback. Conference participants valued and related to the assertions being made but needed empirical evidence to convince skeptical managers and organisations.

*Relationships and Relatedness:* Dialogue and relationships need to be based on a sense of relatedness between different parties. Youth work and the values that underpin it provide a relatedness that can provide a foundation for a practical agenda that initiates and strengthens relationships.

*Theoretical Frameworks and Critical Perspectives:* The feedback from the conferences demonstrated a desire from practitioners for critical perspectives that can inform their approach and practice. Theoretical frameworks and the theorising of experience influence youth work approaches and principles and give youth work authenticity and credibility. There need to be similar exercises that can do the same in giving youth work authenticity and credibility as a learning form across different faith and belief systems.

*Being and Presence:* There is a need for a Muslim presence (individual and organisational) to be felt and welcomed and located appropriately. Alongside this there need to be Muslim organisational entities that contribute to public policy and give it resonance in service forms.

The focus on actions and outcomes though necessary, can take the focus away from the 'invisible' processes that make action meaningful and ultimately provide the capacity and capability for action.

For practitioners, researchers or writers on young people, the initiation of any organisational enterprise currently finds itself in what appears to be a tension between instinctive political imperatives and practical or process necessities. The practical necessities require conversations and relationships as well as theoretical underpinnings, to bring clarity, purpose and ownership to action. This is particularly important in the context of the Muslim community as this creates the capacity for understanding, ownership, integrity and authenticity in the relationships between:

- government agencies and organisations;
- youth workers/organisations and young people; and
- youth workers/organisations and the families/guardians of young people.

The focus on Muslim young people is leading to organisational proliferation which is uncoordinated and can be confusing, offering different responses to similar issues. For example, young people ring both the Muslim Shari'ah Council and the Muslim Youth Helpline on a similar concern such as relationships, but two distinctly different approaches appear to be taken to the enquiry, both legitimate from their own perspective. The more organisations there are the greater will be the need to define with clarity their aims and objectives, the distinctive nature of their work, the choices they offer to young people and participative role which young people can play in their direction.

It is increasingly evident that Muslim youth work is involved in a catch-up exercise which requires pump-priming. There is a pressing need to communicate the conversations taking place and to provide information about the opportunities available. This necessary

communication requires a mechanism and the absence of such a mechanism is an issue for existing publication/information media both from the youth work and Muslim community. The lack of communication and dialogue could be attributed to a number of reasons:

- competing demands on the publication space available and difficulties of accessing mainstream media;
- difficulties in understanding the conversation. Conventional youth work does not comprehend the language that can give the work meaning for the Muslim community and the Muslim community/professionals do not understand the language that gives youth work meaning to the youth work community;
- the existing tension between faith based youth work and secular youth work in which Muslim youth work is situated;
- Islamophobia which possibly has victimised or aggravated Muslim experiences and approaches whilst creating fear of mistakes or a lack of clarity on how to meet the expectations that communities and emerging organisations bring;
- the speed of change and development which gives little space for 'other' stories.

One of the above, or any other reason might explain why two respectable magazines (one Muslim and the other non Muslim) both of which had reporters present did not have a report after the first conference in their publications despite the presence of key thinkers, policy makers and religious leaders. This does leave a question mark as to how Muslim youth work is informed and where critical perspectives and contemporary issues can be debated in the context of their impact on young people and the youth workers who work with young people. I was approached six months afterwards by the same youth work magazine for a contribution as part of a piece on the anniversary of 7/7. This only seemed to confirm the view that it is events that allow issues related to Muslim young people to enter into the public domain.

The development of any new national Muslim youth work organisational entity has a number of potential existing options on where and how to place itself:

*Secular:* this involves abstracting Islam out of the approach and dealing with the socio-economic consequences of young people's 'Muslimness', without seeing the relevance of their 'Muslimness'. This to a certain extent is happening at this moment through mainstream youth work. This is where there is a focus on 'roles' – for example employment and training and issues to do with Muslim identity can be pushed onto the street for the attention of whoever is there. The self representation by Muslim young people as Muslims remains largely unrecognized by a profession that claims that its starting point is where the young person is at.

*Christian:* this would involve situating Muslim youth organizations within the denominational youth work infrastructure, alongside, for example the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs, the Anglican Diocesan youth work infrastructure, the Catholic Youth Service, the Fellowship of United Reformed Youth. There are also historically large national voluntary organisations with strong Christian roots with continued commitment from churches such as YMCA, YWCA, Boys Brigade, Girls Brigade, Scouts and Guides. There is pressure to replicate these models in Muslim terms, as they are recognized by the public domain both

in terms of organisational structures and in the relationship between theology and youth work.

*Jewish:* this would follow the established Jewish model exemplified for example by the Association of Jewish Youth Makor. Because it exists outside of the different denominational terrains of the faith: orthodox, liberal, reform community, the AJY is therefore often able to recruit and work with young people from throughout the Jewish community whilst retaining its specific Jewish identity.

There are also other successful youth work models in place such as Youth Bank which pursue a specific focus. Youth Bank is an innovative national project with a grant-making role, run for young people by young people, providing training, guidance, networking opportunities and resources such as toolkits to establish local branches. Another examples of such an approach is Keyfund,

It is clear that youth work is sustained by a myriad of organisations in a variety of theoretical, policy and methodological guises. In the Muslim organisational context, anxiety in the appearance of new organisations in its realm expresses a high level of vulnerability. This can be due to uncertainties surrounding funding, or the perceived capacity at the officer/ministerial level to deal with more than 'one' voice. This inability may then be interpreted as disorganisation or lack of political maturity.

Official bodies intimate/demand the need for a single Muslim voice whilst being able to facilitate a wide variety of voices from the Christian and secular communities. This can have the following consequences:

- damaging the intra denominational relationships that exist in the Muslim community;
- narrowing the 'institutional dialogue' excluding voices that then seek other means of expression, especially young people;
- using existing faith based organisational models to visualise a Muslim model. Muslim youth work does not necessarily mean a mosque or an Imam or denominational location or blessing. Viewing Muslim youth work through Christian youth work can be distorting;
- can be understood as hypocritical in a society that values diversity as a survival mechanism, whilst restricting the possibility of this diversity through an emphasis on single voices; and
- it is Islamophobic to think of the Muslim community as one homogenous entity. This then makes extremist opinion appear typical of the wider Muslim community.

The Muslim youth work conferences created an opportunity that enabled a distinctive conversation that ranged from Muslim approaches to challenging homophobia to the difference between working Islamically and Islamic work that could visualize the complexity and variety of discourses that need to happen to support organisations and youth workers. Youth work's distinctive contribution to this is to be found in the process that creates deep relationships through meaningful conversations that enable cognitive shifts in young people's thinking and lifestyles. Instinctively Muslim young people recognise that their faith is a determining factor in their sense of wellbeing and their socio-economic standing in society. This needs recognition in policy and practice.

## Why a National 'Muslim Youth Work' Response is Necessary

There is a need for the development of a youth work response that names 'Muslim' young people. It is not enough to leave to the discretion of policy makers and service heads to challenge existing commitments or to look beyond them. The following provide some reasons for this 'naming'.

- About half the British Muslim population is under 18.
- The British Muslim population is disproportionately represented in the most deprived areas in major urban conurbations.
- A significant number of the current generation of British Muslim adults can not be seen to have achieved the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes during their growth to 18. The services addressing the needs of young Muslims are often weak (see, for example, Middlesbrough Ofsted, 2004).
- The development of community organisations and facilities by the Muslim communities is still at an early stage, and progress is hampered by economic and social exclusion and existing funding commitments.
- Youth work learning programmes in the voluntary and statutory sector typical of British youth work rarely engage with the development of youth workers based in the Muslim community and working with Muslim young people.
- Muslim youth workers and Muslim youth work has been a reactive and receiving exercise that has had little chance to present its own voice and distinctive shape. Rather it has been framed by a succession of policy responses which it has hosted. These often have made it and the policy look 'inauthentic' and in the process having both its integrity and the values Muslim organisations and youth workers bring to the work questioned.
- Youth work has become a 'condom' that can provide 'safe' entry into the lives of young people using temporary relationships that satisfy an immediate policy demand. The experiences and the voices of the youth worker and the young person are left behind. The move from consultation to collaboration needs to be made more often.
- Directly engaging with youth worker experiences moves policy and strategy closer to understanding the initiatives and innovation required.
- Developing a distinctive response in a committed funding field for new thinking and emerging organisations at a local level is extremely difficult. For example, Birmingham Youth Service, with the largest proportion of its funding nationally given to the voluntary sector, has not reviewed its voluntary grant programme for two decades. By devolving so much of this responsibility locally via Children's Trusts, innovation has been made more difficult as it would challenge existing practice and existing 'sensitive' funding relationships.
- Muslim young people receive disproportionate attention in connection with the criminal justice system and have come to see themselves as being viewed as the enemy within rather than just as young people. Muslim youth work needs to emerge as a learning, experiential and challenging exercise framed by them being young people and not only in terms of community safety and security.
- A young person centred approach is critical in a climate of 'fear' where organisations are refusing to support programmes that have the label 'Muslim' attached to it. This is narrowing the development of a distinctive, creative and positive Muslim voice



and curricula. This also inadvertently feeds a narrower version of Islam to ensure the appeasement of the mythical mainstream.

## The Muslim Youth Work 'Offer'

The development of a Muslim youth work response is needed in order that the 'offer' Muslim youth workers and organisations make can be recognized and enabled. This recognition is only beginning but has some way to go. The following are aspects of this 'offer':

- Muslim youth work can enable young people to have a sense of self worth that takes on board the faith dimension of their identity.
- The youth work process can help young men and women to be taken seriously in the Muslim community. This is particularly possible in the terms of the current policy agenda where young people need to be seen to be taking an active part in the projects and initiatives put forward for funding. Muslim organisations can be seen as being put in a situation of disadvantage by policy due to the state of youth work in this community. There is a mismatch between what is required and what exists.
- Youth participation can contribute to addressing the gendered nature of the representational sphere in the Muslim context.
- It can provide interventions in a crucial influencing space outside home, mosque and school.
- It can bring into play existing curricula in culturally appropriate ways but also develop new positive curricula that can inform identity and belonging.
- It can introduce new models of understanding work with young people and the purposes that influence it.
- Muslim youth work can form relationships with young people that are accepting and well informed about the faith dimension of their lives.
- It can assist young Muslims constantly faced with negative images of their faith to challenge this in a constructive way. For example, the arts, creating spaces for their voices to be heard.
- It can develop new relationships with the Muslim world and influence agendas on issues of justice and minorities as members of the European community.
- Youth workers from a Muslim faith perspective in senior positions with local authorities are few and far between and are often stretched and ghettoised. The conferences and any emerging organisational entity provides an opportunity to be heard outside the constraints of organisational hierarchies and community representational discourses.
- A Muslim youth work response can critique investment in the 'relationships' being invested in and cultivated with, for example, family, training, environment.
- It can produce the theoretical frameworks that are needed to authenticate a Muslim perspective/approach in work with young people.
- A national response can be more effective in pump priming local action. This is especially so in investing in new voices, ways of working where existing funding is already committed.

## The Role of the Conferences

The Conferences were important in visualizing the level of interest, commitment and need of those working with these groups to be recognized and supported. They provided a platform for the valuable insights that practitioners bring to issues of Muslim youth identity and belonging. They also provided a space where:

- The experience of the British Muslim communities took priority in what can often be a 'charged' international discussion.
- The dramatic and horrific events which capture the public imagination, but which do not reflect the mainstream experience, took second place to thinking about the strategic issues for British Muslim young people.
- The successes and difficulties in working with young Muslims in the UK over the last 20 years were reviewed and analysed.
- The youth work focus attracted participants from nearly every major urban conurbation in Britain, representing a wide variety of organisations – religious, voluntary, statutory, academic, governmental, security and faith based.
- They set an example of a positive and challenging dialogue so that existing boundaries of what can and cannot be said in critiquing Muslim youth work can be expanded.
- They modeled the complexity of ingredients that would be needed to contribute to the development and informing of youth work interventions, drawing on theology, education, social care, sociology and psychology. Youth work joins in these debates to respond to the needs of young people. The complexity includes the way Muslim, Jewish, Christian, secular and other organisations can work together sharing good practice and finding common themes.
- Participants showed real engagement, moving beyond the politics of representation. They came with particular experiences, expertise or interest in furthering good practice rather than representing an organisation or a community. There was a genuine interest and desire in wanting to know and contribute more to developing appropriate responses to the lives of Muslim young people.

## Outcomes to Date

As a consequence of the Conferences in Birmingham and Bradford, the following outcomes have been achieved:

- A dedicated issue of *Youth and Policy* on Muslim youth work – publishing papers presented at the conference.
- Bringing together key thinkers from a variety of perspectives to inform youth work.
- Commitment to two books from The NYA on Muslim youth work and issues pertinent to it
- A commitment from The NYA to the development of a web resource that can inform and support youth work with young Muslims.
- An invitation from the British Council to begin to explore how youth work can be understood in majority Muslim countries.
- A bringing together of a variety of youth work practitioners from other faith perspectives

- such as Jewish and Christian youth organisations to share youth work practice.
- Development of the use of Islamic scripture in non formal educational contexts.
- Meeting with the Minister for Families, Children and Young People (Beverley Hughes) to present these recommendations and actions.
- A commitment from the DfES to continue to invest in this conversation/initiative.

The need to define what we mean by Muslim youth work is closely connected to why do we do youth work. The conferences in their 'doing' were a process of revelation that enabled key questions and clarification to emerge. For example it became obvious that there was a pre-existing assumption that all religious approaches would follow comparative Christian definitions or systems. In the case of a Muslim approach the definition presented and agreed upon through a national workshop organized after the two conferences was that this was a spiritual rather than a confessional religious exercise. The following definition, purposes and principals were agreed for the establishment of a national Muslim youth work organisation – Muslim Youth Work Foundation.

## Definition of Muslim youth work

Create safe spaces for Muslim young people to explore personal, social, spiritual and political choices

### Purpose

- Support and promote Muslim Youth Work to initiate and develop sustainable opportunities for young Muslim people to reach their full potential.
- Provide a platform that connects the voices of youth workers and young people to policy and government.
- Generate and connect critical thinking to policy and practice.
- Provide support and expertise to organisations and bodies seeking to develop youth work with Muslim young people or wishing to develop Muslim approaches to this work.

### Principles

- The Foundation is for all young people who self define themselves as Muslim and people who do youth work with them.
- The Foundation is non-sectarian and committed to fairness and inclusion.
- The Foundation seeks to respond to 'lives and not to events'.
- The Foundation values transparency of the organisation's activities and the data it generates is shared for alternative perspectives to be generated.
- Young people are integral to the leadership and development of the Foundation.
- The Foundation's work is led by realities and issues, not dogma.
- The Foundation holds that knowledge is inseparable from practice.
- Empowerment--or the ability to contribute to a community--creates the momentum for learning and belonging.

## Recommendations

The conferences generated a serious of recommendation for policy makers in particular. These were:

1. Youth work as a professional approach can provide a meaningful point of engagement between different faith and belief communities. Opportunities identified need to be supported in order for a practical exchange that moves inter faith beyond dialogue to inter faith action.
2. An investment in the development of Muslim youth work training approaches is necessary. A qualifying course and training modules on Muslim youth work should be established.
3. A means needs to be found to continue the conversation so valued at the conferences that feeds the interdisciplinary nature of the response required to develop Muslim youth work approaches. This could be assisted by a dedicated publication that connects critical perspectives to practical realities.
4. A mechanism should be developed that can communicate best practice, opportunity and expertise across the country such as the development of a website, Standing Conference, continuation of individual enquiry groups.
5. Creating a platform that enables a relationship between Muslim youth workers or youth workers who work with Muslims and the DfES. This space needs to have representatives of other government agencies to ensure a holistic response that makes best use of time and resources. This is a serious issue in an embryonic organisational landscape that is stretched very thinly just by the number of different agencies it has to negotiate with.
6. A Standards Fund, or its equivalent should be established to initiate and critique the innovative and challenging development of new youth work approaches to work with Muslim young people. This needs to identify clearly the relationships in which the youth work is investing.
7. A frequent demand has been the establishment of an organisation. This will require financial support to conceptualise and then to activate.
8. Mechanisms should be created that access existing curricula and work opportunities for Muslim youth workers that workers can nationally apply for. International youth work is particularly important in relation to the local/global context Muslim young people in Britain operate in.
9. There is a need to develop our understanding of non formal education in majority Muslim countries for sharing of experience and intervention styles in the non formal education/organisational sphere.
10. In the arts field Muslims are still at a point at which they are justifying their right to use this medium eg Islam and the arts road show. The connection between the arts and youth work in expressing relationships is powerful and one that can be developed. Emerging organisations need to be provided with the capacity to develop this approach.
11. Investment must be made in theoretical paradigms that can inform curricula and identify interventions being made and the learning being derived. Training should be offered in Muslim approaches to youth work using theoretical frameworks that can inform youth work delivered nationally.
12. Existing youth work practice should be developed and new resources for youth workers working with young people should be introduced.

The data that was generated from both conferences was immediately available to delegates as it was felt that they had equal rights to information that they had created. It was a necessary act in enabling the field with information that could be used to inform their practice or as empirical support for new directions. It is necessary to state here that without state investment in an infrastructure that I define in terms of organisations, information and critical and theoretical perspectives, the ability of those working with Muslim young people especially from 'Muslim' organisations is going to be limited. In this matter there needs to be greater distinction between the types of Muslim organisations. There is a history of conferences that have sought to create momentum to meet particular challenges how these have translated into action has not always been evident.

Within the space of eight months two national conferences, a national workshop and a mandate for a national organization to be established were achieved. Both of the conferences were significantly over subscribed providing an opportunity to demonstrate the necessity of an interdisciplinary response that did not exclude existing expertise in the field. I felt that to develop an adversarial attitude or approach was counter productive as this may stereotype me as another angry Muslim preoccupied with Islam. The idea of challenge which is so closely connected to the concept of Jihad was a powerful dynamic in the process to date. Challenge in this instance to what I term the 'committed mainstream' (committed financially, ideologically, theologically and relationally – including the established voluntary sector) is not an act of blame but a desire for established youth work to have greater resonance with a diverse Britain that brings new perspectives to common ideals. This means the threading in of new narratives, relationships, theoretical perspectives and financial commitments. I fear that there is equally the possibility that this venture can be placed as a reactionary response that needs to sit in orbit around the committed mainstream; angry, frustrated and radicalized.

## Note

- 1 The term Muslim youth work will mean both work with Muslim young people and/or developing Muslim approaches in youth work.

# Making a place for Muslim Youth Work in British Youth Work

**Jonathan Roberts**

*This article reflects on the experience of a white British youth work lecturer and practitioner attending the Muslim Youth Work conference held in Birmingham in December 2005. Where does this debate honestly fit into the reality of where youth work stands? What connections are there between the critical tools used in university courses and those being explored in Muslim youth work? The author uses a historical perspective of the Albemarle report to challenge the lack of developmental thinking in this area of youth work. .*

**Keywords:** *Muslim youth work, Albemarle, critical, developmental thinking.*

This is a reflective account of the National Conference on Muslim Youth Work held in Birmingham. Textual scholars may enjoy comparing my understanding with what was actually said. I see the conference as a quest pursuing many trails. What is Muslim Youth Work? Is it Youth Work done by Muslim youth workers? Is Youth Work rooted in Islam? Is Youth Work to spread Islam? Can Youth Work help to develop what Islam might be? Is Youth Work to address the needs of young people who might be described as Muslims? How can youth work with young people who have grown up in conversation with Islam in the UK reflect the contradictions and benefits of that relationship? All these questions overlap and influence each other and all were addressed in part. The conference was stimulating and I was left with questions and more to follow up. I hope that this article contributes to engagement with this highly practical debate.

## Participation

The National Conference on Muslim Youth Work (December 5th 2005) attracted 211 participants of whom, maybe, 137 were Muslims. The participants were in positions of influence and responsibility in a wide variety of agencies including 43 working in public sector youth work. Nationally there were strong representations from Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and some from London. There was a good group of lively, intelligent, experienced, qualified, people working in the public sector. Among the public bodies represented were those who had recruited Muslim workers to address engagement with a Muslim population. From work which I do for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, I am aware of the difficulties that exist for the development of local voluntary Muslim groups. As well as the highly articulate, thoughtful, professional conference goers, we need to keep in

mind the wider range of people currently and potentially involved in work with the young who may contribute to this agenda.

I work in the North East and so was particularly interested in the participants from my region. The North East was represented by Abdul Amin from Sunderland, Rizwan Shah from Newcastle, Abdul Khan from Connexion Tees Valley, Tony Jeffs and Jean Spence (*Youth and Policy* and University of Durham), Catherine Duce and Susannah Moon (University of Durham, and Churches Regional Commission: research project into faith based youth work), and Yahaya Nurthidayati from the University of Durham.

Potential participants from the North East who were not there include representatives from Azaad Youth project in Middlesbrough; Mosque representatives from Middlesbrough, Stockton, Sunderland, and Tyneside; Apna Ghar South Shields; Bangladeshi Centre Sunderland; International Family Centre Stockton; BECON, the Angelou Centre in Newcastle. No doubt there were others who might have had an interest but who for some reason did not attend. As usual for the North East region we tend to have undersupported projects with British Muslims (c.f. OfSTED report November 2004 for Middlesbrough Youth Service) and are cautious about taking part when the networks and practice in London, or Birmingham may reflect large groups of BME young people (PAT 12 (2000): 88); or the sheer cost of travel and participation are too great. However the region's representatives also demonstrate the commitment of the Regional Development Agency, statutory bodies and Universities in showing leadership to create a better way forward.

## **Impressions and themes**

The abiding impression was of a discussion that was finally being had in public. There was real *gravitas* to the contributions: there was a desire to use the best forms of research, and words to underpin what was said, and an awareness of an international critical scholarly perspective. There was respect paid to the influential shapers of identity (the Muslim faith, of course, but also the British context). Contributors and participants could be sensed as describing a new pathway which had not been walked before, but where there was a mass of people already wandering in many interesting directions. We should look forward to seeing some of the descriptions applied and developed in the days ahead.

I thought that I was reasonably well informed, but I was acutely aware that I was in the presence of people speaking with authority, and making reference to texts and contexts that are not regarded as sufficiently important to be part of the mainstream. Much of the current literature is based on the themes of race, gender and tackling inequality; this conference was trying to look to different resources to address subtleties of identity, culture and the consequences for young Muslims in the UK. But even writing that sentence does not express adequately the 'axiological' 'paradigmatic' sense of difference of some conference contributions from the limits of the social sciences constructs I am used to. The Policy Action Team 12 in 2000 expressed a similar caution about their levels of understanding (PAT 12: 88). There is a need to listen, read and think about a different literature, hermeneutic tradition, and frame of reference.

## Islam

It is reassuring for me, having spent a long time with Christian Youth Workers, to hear similar utterances from the mouths of Muslim theologians: youth work isn't explicit in the Koran, human beings are there to look after God's world, and there is shrewd wisdom about different stages of growing up (c.f. Ashton 1986). Sheika Halima Krausen encouraged us to look at a new synthesis of the religious potential of Islam that might create something other than the polarised positions of idealizing the eastern tradition or being absorbed utterly in the western lifestyle. She recommended going back to the sources and rethinking. Perhaps it would be good to revive plurality in competing for the common good. There needs to be space for the Muslim religion to engage prophetically for each generation and this space might allow reflection, discovery and self education, including the scope to make mistakes.

Listening to Krausen I am struck by the plea for freedom to begin to think about and interpret the tradition in less constrained ways. Elsewhere in the conference there were comments and questions about the well meaning Imans who are brought from abroad to teach the faith. I was reminded of the cultural clashes faced by the English clergy in Africa: the shared faith is real but there comes a point where the capacity of the faithful is sufficient to begin to grow their own intellectuals, theologians and leaders. The limits of the organisational capacity to make the space for freedom seemed very evident. There is no comparison in British Christianity (except perhaps in the Black majority churches) with the struggle to have places to worship, organise, teach, learn and create the key professionals. The influence and financial support even in the earliest days gave Methodism, Roman Catholicism, and the Salvation Army, the resources to train and build social welfare centres even if they were excluded from the Anglican preserves of learning. The conference offered a space to discuss and reflect beyond what is usually available; what needs to be done to maintain and develop such a Muslim space?

Tariq Ramadan spoke well on the related theme of engaging in the dialectic between the western culture and Islam. I shall look forward to finishing his book (Ramadan, 2005), and he clearly is worth reading (at the time of the conference none of his books were in our university library). In the conference his comments were well made to open up closed definitions. On Umma: does it mean supporting Muslims right or wrong? No, there are conditions; 'Islam is great, not all Muslims are'. On Shari' a: is it just a penal code, where the harsher it is the more Islamic? Or is it social justice? Or, is it a straight path to ideals of justice and integrity? Sharia objectives may be achieved in many ways, 'if it gives an Islamic result then it is my law'. On Culture: Islam is a religion with universal principles but there have always been Islamic cultures, and now this includes French Islamic and English Islamic cultures. Ramadan encouraged his hearers to have confidence as British Muslims, with a commitment to the common good, to have a critical mind and to contribute creatively to society. On being questioned he expressed the need we have to see Muslim role models between the Mosques and the streets with the organisations for them to work in. What sort of development opportunities will be required for these role models to be encouraged?

Listening to Ramadan and Krausen there are certainly different starting points and presuppositions, and there is a different rhetorical tone about the discussion. I have



sometimes been struck by almost medieval speeches from Middle East leaders translated using archaisms that can seem harsh. At this conference the tone lacked the stridency both of those speeches, and of youth workers in the UK demonstrated when questioning Beverley Hughes at the Third annual YPN national Youth Conference, 2005. On the heels of a conference, where 'our minister Beverley Hughes was treated so shabbily' (Wylie, 2005:23), this was a conference marked by listening and careful dialogue that covered a wide range of central issues.

So what did this listening and dialogue seem like to someone brought up in the British Christian tradition? The core themes they drew on are not simply the common inheritance of the Abrahamic faiths: the call to respond to God. Nor are the themes of community, law, culture and social ethics; heretical mistakes to be sorted out. There is a strangeness to my tradition with a resonance that challenges my own integrity and believing. I have experienced this in other ways in crossing faith boundaries: when Methodism sang differently, when Friends used the silence of a group differently, when Catholics built community; I have lived through all of these and been changed. Harder are the experiences of Methodism lacking a focus on Holy Communion, the Friends lacking a professional caste of religious leaders, and the Catholics lacking women celebrating the Mass. Dialogue that is real has both creative realities that I warm to, the empty spaces of what I am attached to, and new things which are as Other as an experience of God. What will this dialogue between British Muslims and other British youth workers be like? The only way I will know will be to see the dialogue continue and grow, and this will depend on the good will and hospitality of the other.

Listening to Ramadan I was also struck by the rich variety of organisation I have access to. The Christian church has never been shy about setting up new structures and forms of organisation: new churches, parishes and dioceses to respond to the changes in population; organisations with a Christian basis but separate from a church (YMCA, Boys' Brigade, Oasis) and organisations working across a whole range of church structures (YWAM, YFC, Greenbelt). The range of approach of Christian organisations has grown over the years. Some organisations are interested in deepening young people's faith; others, on the sustaining base of their faith, offer an open agenda to the young people they work with; and still others draw a theme from their faith (e.g.: healing, hospitality, learning) which they offer as a specialism to those who need it. In part these organisations represent a desire to get things done, but they also represent the response to not being able to act within the present institutional framework - a recent example might be the Metropolitan Church response to the exclusion of the gay and lesbian Christians from much of visible church life.

The most significant national organisations for young Muslims at the moment may be the help lines, and web based advice. These sit alongside local examples of individual youth projects. In contrast to the presence of Christian projects in rich and poor areas, and at local and national levels, there appears to be a lack of provision and a limited range of approaches. How shall we see a development of a more diverse Muslim Youth Work practice?

## Young British Muslims

I was strongly put in mind of the spirit of the Albemarle Report (1960) in the declaration of a sea change needed in the nature of youth work which emerged from the conference. That Report had faced the baby boom, the end of National Service (1960:13), increased prosperity and a desire to provide something good for young people. It recommended a rethink of resources, training (1960:55) and curriculum (1960:135). So now, as pointed out by Tom Wylie in his contribution, we are faced with the demographic reality of 46% of the Muslim population aged under 25, with higher levels of overcrowding in housing, and lower levels of educational achievement. The conference was trying to hold together themes about the condition of the (Muslim) young and the potential contribution of youth work, while not wanting to suggest that youth work alone can answer some very large social issues. Albemarle coincided with other policy developments and so too does this discussion connect with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's efforts to improve life chances for the BME communities through the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy (SEU, 2001:14). This has been reinforced by the recent study of the life chances of Britain's minority ethnic communities which emphasises the comparative lack of social mobility among the British Muslim population (Platt, 2005:28-30). There are clearly other government themes too: the need to develop Community Cohesion and the events of July 2005 both carry a sense of threat. But it is worth remembering that we were frightened of young people at the end of the 1950s too (Albemarle, 1960:16f), and indeed have been, fairly persistently, ever since (Cohen, 1973; Davies, 1986; MacDonald, 1997). Maybe what we understand about the changed needs of young people will lead, among other things, to a renewal of appropriate youth work. How will we address the specific needs and aspirations of the British Muslim young people?

The difference with the current context and that of the Albemarle Report was that there existed then a strong voluntary sector and local authorities to build on (Albemarle, 1960:108,134). Felicity Winters, speaking for the DfES at the December conference, emphasised that the green paper *Youth Matters* offered an invitation to all to provide for all young people; this means providing for all Muslim Young people and not just faith based youth work. I asked her if there was yet any equivalent to the historic 'headquarters grants' for the voluntary sector faith youth work (such as the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs, or the Church of England's Youth Work). Her reply was that there was currently no equivalent body to talk to for Muslim Youth Work. How can the same specific entitlement, that has been made available to British Christians for over 60 years, be delivered at a national level to British Muslims?

A further difference was the nature of the imaginations at work on the young Muslim population. Dr Salman Sayyid described the 'immigrant imaginary': a situation where Muslims never cease to be immigrants: there is still an assumption that that is what Muslims are, no matter their place of birth and it will be what they will be because the only ways out don't seem to function. In his contribution, Sayyid outlined the failure to overcome the chasm by avoiding histories of migration and union. He pointed out the fantasy of the host consuming the immigrant over time, as they lose their nature and character to the terms of the host. He noted the extraordinary measurement of the process of absorption over time units called generations, which gives no sense of causality in historical, psychological

or social terms. The combination of these elements was creating a fantasy where the new generation of young Muslims must inevitably be the one where the new world is forged. In contrast to these public discourse fantasies there are the lives of young people: young people live in networks of social relations, with their families, their school friends, in a national and global context of life for young people. These inform and create the actual identities, and as well as positive creative aspects there are the impacts of racism – even if people won't own up to it, it doesn't mean that it doesn't happen.

## Youth Work

The DfES concern for *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005), the engagement with the green paper by youth workers and The National Youth Agency in particular mean that we did indeed talk about youth work. It is the business of youth work to seek good outcomes to the five themes of *Every Child Matters* (to be safe, healthy, enjoy and achieve, contribute, and find economic well being). Tom Wylie got his tongue round the Dublin declaration of 1916 to claim the task of 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally' (Pearse, 1916). He emphasised The NYA commitment to the intervention 'youth work' as being about:

1. The personal, social and political development of young people.
2. Characteristic methods: learning from experience, that a relationship with an adult is deployed to enable learning, and that there will be work in small groups.
3. Proceeding on the basis of values: the needs of young people are the primary concern, that diversity will be recognised and responded to, and that young people will be empowered.

Wylie placed the debate firmly at the heart of evidence based policy making: moving from the ambitions of policy to matching up the Muslim young people of Britain with the target group, and the need to see good youth work done in that context.

When giving his sketch of the life-chances of young Muslims he referred to the 10-15% 'who find life a struggle.' I wondered what this might mean and pursued my enquiries using the Muslim Helpline website. There is an analysis of data of what is currently happening to young Muslims:

- Drug abuse and smoking are shown to have a significantly higher prevalence amongst Muslim youth between the ages of 16-25 years, despite the fact that an estimated 45% of Muslim youth have never used illicit drugs, smoked tobacco or drunk alcohol.
- Mental Illness occurs more frequently amongst Muslim youth, particularly those that enter Britain as refugees. Almost one-half of the Muslim Youth Helpline's clients complain of mental anxiety, depression or suicidal feelings.
- Muslims make up 7% of the country's prison population, a figure that is five times that of the total Muslim percentage of population in Britain today. Numerous clients of the Muslim Youth Helpline have been to prison and one client recently accessed our service from prison. (MYH , 2005 [www.mya.net](http://www.mya.net) )

Like Bernard Davies (Davies, 2005:11), I prefer young people to choose to become involved, and to start where young people are starting. But, like Robert Beckford working in prison

with young black offenders (Beckford, 2004), I understand that some of this youth work will need to take place where young people have ended up and where they have fewer choices than we would like. It is precisely in the black tradition that, like Malcolm X (a.k.a. El Hajj Malik Shabazz) prison is an institution in society where educational change can come. I am struck again by my preconceptions of where safe spaces are in society, and what might constitute freedom of choice. Is it likely that Muslim youth work might include effective informal learning in prison, or a therapeutic community?

Tony Jeffs in his paper invited us to look at faith based youth work as a paradoxical phenomenon. Certainly it produced great moral and social wonders in the portrait he painted of Hannah Moore, the Eve of youth work, challenging slavery on the basis of her Christian faith. But like other biographies of that faith he reminded us of the harsh attacks and betrayals she endured from other Christians: accused of weakness to Methodism, banned from using church premises, and bankrupted. He pointed out that Christian youth work has often been strongest in the areas that needed it least, and if youth work is about children's rights, what right do parents have to impose their faith. The theme of placing the power in youth work with the young person, and the subversive nature of dialogue making the familiar unfamiliar, (replacing certainty with doubt) was picked up in questions during the conference by Bernard Davies. It was certainly striking to have two grand old men of youth work testing the robustness of doubt based youth work, but, for once, they did not seem to be setting the agenda for the conference. Jeffs' approach might encourage us to find youth workers inspired by their faith while warning us to find allies in youth work, and not just to rely on the priorities of faith communities.

MG Khan was perhaps closer to the interests and aspirations of the conference participants with his investigation of what seems to be going on in Muslim youth work. He described 'missing conversations' and 'breaks in conversation' and the lack of a genuine youth work. This description certainly captured with authority the experiences of the group of thoughtful and excellent workers at the conference who seemed to be either quietly competent, or critically creative with stories of being excluded from their starting point. Is it the case that those of us white British youth workers who have been trying to manage youth work over the last couple of decades have recruited Muslim youth workers as part of a commitment to tackling racism, or offering a multi- cultural youth service? Perhaps we were challenged (Chauhan, 1989) to hear the community development needs identified by the young people (and workers) from within the Muslim community, but we have been ineffective in listening, learning and changing.

Khan emphasised the courage that can be found to engage with British society, from Muslim faith. He also spelt out the way in which youth work has within it the values and processes that can achieve the change needed. His discussion was a powerful affirmation of youth work as a place where what is needed more widely for the British Muslims might find the opportunity to be developed: not everything will need to come from elsewhere. Khan argued that youth work has the dynamics of change built into it. People have a need (and I heard this as being particularly addressed to Muslims) to make sense of what they do. Youth work allows people to place intention (I note the power of this word in Islam). There needs to be ownership and participation for genuineness. These are all common youth work themes (Thompson, 1982) but the conclusion must be that we have still not

got genuineness as a result of current policies (Thompson, 1982 6.41)). Khan wants to see space given to thinkers and reflective practitioners, not just representatives. There needs to be a choice about the framework of thought and time to develop an understanding. Just as British youth work responded to the 1980s challenge of the Rastas that we were living in Babylon, so we should be able to respond to the challenge of young Muslims now. Khan's plea, that we should respect the diverse traditions and richness of intellectual history, seemed like a reasonable request in a city where religious range and intellectual exploration have been a hallmark for over two centuries (Uglow, 2002).

Khan went on to suggest a struggle to come to terms with self (and not just the Umma), with God and the deep beliefs that are held, with society and with creation. His model of reflection has the potential of making impacts for individuals, faith groups and organisation. Looking at it I am reminded of the reflective cycles that are developed by faith organisations trying to achieve real holistic development of young people, and those who work with them. The YMCA (1985) has taken a model of reflection to encourage groups to explore spiritual development. Margaret Kane (1986:86) developed a model of reflection in the North East to connect the rigors of sociological criticism and use of the sacred text in dissecting current lived experience. The Church of England (1996) undertook a national process of enquiry leading to a report with a theological model for youth work (1996: 23-38). The National Occupational Standards for Youth Work include units to 'Enable young people to explore and develop their values and self respect' (NOS, 2002: B1), and to 'Enable young people to explore and develop their values and self respect' (NOS, 2002:B2). This is not an alien concept, but a statement of the failure of much of the youth work decision makers to go beyond the tackling of racism and presenting a multi racial image to the world. I have worked with people who described 'coconuts' as being black on the outside and full of white culture on the inside. This conference expressed a cry from the heart to let Muslim youth workers be themselves and not a projection of white decision makers.

Activities based in religious communities have received an interesting endorsement in the research undertaken by Feinstein (2005). This longitudinal study based on 11,261 people over the period 1970- 2000 focuses on the result for those involved in church based activities and these might give some clues about what might be the case for those involved in Mosques. The description of the participants is not unlike that of the young Muslims:

*Church-going attracted girls more than boys. Young people from low income middle class families, with parents showing interest in their children's progress at school were also more likely than others to be engaged in Church-based activities. Parents tended to approve of these children's activities and the children tended to be high primary school achievers in classes with a high proportion of middle class children living in good neighbourhoods. The young people themselves were characterised by a high internal locus of control, doing homework and helping at home; though their self-efficacy tended to be low. They tended not to go to pubs. (Feinstein, 2005:3.5)*

The results of church going activity was that 'it appeared to enhance the prospect of high achievement' (2005:4.2.3) and high social capital (2005:4.2.4). Overall, they are less likely to undergo social exclusion (2005:ii.10). There are significant issues of difference between the social position of Muslims in Britain and established (and, indeed, Established) church

resources, but the research challenges long held assumptions that there are fewer benefits in the social development of young people in faith based social groups.

## What then should we do?

The National Conference on Muslim Youth Work, 2005 has contributed significantly to building the capacity of the UK to address the needs of Muslim Youth Work. The speakers and workshops (and I have not covered any workshops in my comments) have started, and continued important debates. But if that is how it is left we will have missed an important opportunity. There is a series of issues which require a policy response and commitment by a range of interested parties: here is my list, based on the structure of the Albemarle report.

**The Department for Education and Skills** can show some leadership. A ten year programme (Albemarle, 1960:108) that addresses the coming groups of young Muslims might be timely. It would be worth seeing a document that does better than the Thompson report (Thompson, 1982 6.35- 6.49) in describing what the situation is and how it might best be addressed. My reading of *Youth Matters* is of a document that (understandably) addresses all and invites all. The problem is that the Muslim team is still (in cricketering jargon) 'following on' lacking the equipment, training nets, coaches to improve their chance of success. Other government departments and initiatives have identified explicit issues to address and there is a need for joined up action in an area of life where the rest of the British population gains support from public money and accountable qualifications as it receives its entitlement.

The Department for Education and Skills can also support the development of resources. This may best be done with the National Youth Agency but like 1960 (Albemarle, 1960:108-109) 2006 needs to see encouragement for voluntary organisation.

**Muslim Youth Workers** need to form an independent charitable company to take forward the agenda of Muslim Youth Work across the country. This would form a regular place for development and help the DfES engage in productive and constructive engagement. It could be a place where it is possible to undertake learning and thinking as well as practice.

**Trainers of volunteer youth workers** need to set up entry level learning for Muslim youth workers. Training volunteers has been a mainstay of Christian youth work, and a current resource that has been developed and renewed over the years with government funding is Spectrum (2005). This allows groups of interested adults to develop skills and understanding in a fairly short space of time. Clearly any such project now would include the Youth Work National Occupational Standards, especially Unit B2. It has been in the public interest and the interests of the churches to have adults trained and accountable in their work with young people. It is timely for a similar partnership of faith, personal commitment of time, and public qualifications and money to develop Muslim Youth Work.

**Higher education institutions** need to consider how they address the particular issues of understanding, learning and qualification. We have Youth Work courses, so may not need an emergency training college (Albemarle 1960:110); maybe the development of

modules where the intellectual, reflective and practice issues raised by the conference can be investigated and assessed. Not all HEIs will want to do this but there will be some where there are regular links with British Muslims where it will be a timely development. It may be that a small development grant is all that would be needed to encourage HEIs to take the step. There are existing research programmes being undertaken with British Muslims (Green, 2005; Duce and Moon 2005), the challenge is to build these links into the mainstream programmes in better ways.

**The National Youth Agency** to continue to combine the analysis, leadership as a critical friend with the space to discuss and publish. The NYA and *Youth and Policy* have done a good job in helping this conference to happen.

**Youth workers** need to continue to grow their understanding and practice of Muslim youth work. There are good youth workers, good Connexions personal advisors, who engage with real understanding and help young Muslims make the most of their lives. But we need to recruit more role models who can help negotiate the dialogues between young people, their families, and the wider society. These role models need to reflect the diversity of regional experience and to speak and act in a way that challenges peer pressure. Youth work has a particular skill in addressing peer pressure.

## Why should we do it?

The public data is readily available (NS, 2006) that shows the current age profile of the Muslim population in the UK as 'the youngest age profile of all religious groups in Great Britain' (NS, 2006: Age and Sex). The 2001 census reported 535,853 Muslims between 0 and 16, in a Muslim population of 1,588,890; this is about 33.72% of the Muslim population, of whom 71% are under 34. This compares with a national population of 11,460,801 between 0 and 16, in a total population of 57,103,927; this is about 20.07% of the whole population, of whom 45% are under 34. Certainly, the Muslim population as a whole makes up 'only' 2.78% of the population, but when we look at the younger cohort of 0-16 year olds it makes up 4.6%: almost twice as significant to the development of the *Every Child Matters* policy. The National Statistics summary of the UK population is that 1 in 5 are under 16 and 1 in 6 are over 65 and many of our public policies reflect this aging population. For the British Muslim population the profile is more like the UK in the 19th Century: 1 in 3 is under 16 and 1 in 25 over 65. The priorities are more like those of the founders of youth work over a hundred years ago: how to provide the best life chances for the exciting, vibrant young people who fill so much of the community?

The public data also reveals the need to provide help in developing youth work (and no doubt other interventions, like Early Years work). The Muslim population in the UK experiences the highest rate of unemployment: 14% for men and 15% for women in contrast to 4% for Christian men and women, and between 5% and 11% for other religious groups (NS, 2006: Labour Market). The Muslim population in the UK experiences the highest rate of ill health: 13% for men and 16% for women in contrast to 7-8% for Christian men and women (NS, 2006: Health and Disability). The Muslim population in the UK experiences the highest proportion of having no qualifications: 31% in contrast to

15% for Christian (NS, 2006: Education). These statistics reveal a strong form of multiple deprivation in the British Muslim community that shows how they are 'cut off from the prosperity and opportunities that most of us take for granted' (Tony Blair in SEU, 2001:5). It is a current policy goal of Neighbourhood Renewal to 'narrow the gap' (SEU, 2001:8). Muslim Youth Work appears in this context, not as a minority interest, as a key element in effective Neighbourhood Renewal practice. There are particular issues that need to be addressed in ways that target the particular character of the lives and contexts; general 'one size fits all' approaches have done little to change the situation in the last 20 years. The conference revealed both evidence of good practice, and the need to devote time, resources and thought to the development of Muslim Youth Work. A sign of the dramatic social shifts in the British Muslim community can be seen in the statistic that Muslims born in the UK (irrespective of age) were twice as likely to have a degree than Muslims born outside the UK (NS, 2006: Education).

Why should youth work be one of the key approaches? One reason is that we carry the history of similar transitions in the foundation documents of youth work practice. The mosque in Fournier Street, London E1 is well known as a former synagogue, (Merriman, 1994 plate 2) Methodist Church, and (originally) Huguenot Church. Not far away was the 'house of friendship' developed by Basil Henriques for the Jews in Whitechapel for fifty years in the 20th Century. Henriques described the area as 'an unwallled ghetto, within a mile of the Bank of England, a community almost untouched by the world outside of it' (cited in Jeffs, 2003:138). He was thorough in addressing complex needs: 'new members supplied details of family, interests, employment and health' (2003:142) and the club facilities addressed crowded substandard housing in providing showers and quiet rooms (2003:145). The specific character of that provision would be justified in our own time because of the continuing concentrations of populations in particular areas. Currently 38% of Muslims live in London (less than the 56% of Jews and 52% of Hindus), and they are

*highly concentrated spatially. Muslims made up 8% of London's population overall but 36% of Tower Hamlets and 24% of the Newham populations. (NS, 2006; Geographic Distribution).*

Sometimes it looks as though the ideology of integration has ignored the real character of particular communities, in the hope that a universal service might hide the characteristics and needs of the people who most need to benefit. The arguments used a generation ago against special Muslim projects were not used against Miners' Welfare Halls, because socialism thrived on unity to tackle common issues, and co-operation to give the right sort of support for those distinctive communities.

*We cooperate, we collect together, we coordinate so that everyone can contribute and everyone can benefit, everyone has responsibilities, everyone has rights.... We're not talking about uniformity; we're not talking about regimentation; we're not talking about conformity. (Kinnock, 1987:451)*

Youth work is also a good place to improve the lives of British Muslims because youth work has been used to achieving functioning partnerships between faith groups and the state. The voluntary sector and faith groups in particular, have been a continual source of



youth work. The history of partnership working includes such landmarks as Circular 1486 in 1939, the Albemarle report in 1960, and even the current commissioning of youth work. The key element in this partnership is the development of structures of accountability. Being part of the nation's youth work means subjecting what you do to professional scrutiny expressed in JNC pay scales, National Youth Agency validation of courses, and National Occupational Standards for Youth Work. Accountability means using, interpreting and developing the legal and practical frameworks for Child Protection, Health and Safety, Tax and National Insurance. It means that faith communities choose youth work missions, aims and outcomes; some of which may be shared with public bodies, including government. Accountability in such partnerships means that faith communities take part in the improvement of structures in society so that they are more effective, inclusive and responsive. My impression of the conference in Birmingham was of a group of people who want to do this sort of partnership work. We should seek ways of making this happen more widely, soon.

## In conclusion

Two middle aged men compared notes over coffee at the start of the conference on their childhoods in Birmingham. Both remembered the shock of the pub bombings and the bag searches afterwards that were part of our lives. It was terrorists and not the Irish or the Catholics who were to be overcome in the 1970s. The long term weaknesses in the response to those bombings were based on stereotyping and a failure of the justice systems. Both have spent their adult lives trying to develop youth work and look with horror at the simplistic prejudice reacting to all of Islam's children. As one of those men I remember that a placement report written 20 years ago about some of my first youth work next to the Birmingham central mosque was criticised for being excessively anxious about the future of young Muslims. It was hard to develop the conversation then and we have all been the worse for it. This conference shows a real opportunity to develop understanding, practitioners, and a better practice.

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# Muslim Girlswork: the ultimate separatist cage?

**Gill Cressey**

*'It gets them out of the house' is Muslim Young Women's equivalent of 'it gets them off the street'. Just as young Muslim men have been stereotyped and classified as a monogamous crowd of young people vulnerable to recruitment by drug pushers, gangs and extremists, young Muslim women have been stereotyped and classified as a monogamous hidden domestic army vulnerable to forced marriages and subordination by parents and brothers. Youth workers too often slip into popular discourse of this essentialising kind when justifying their work to funders and communities. This paper explores on what grounds, if any, provision for Muslim young women (separate from other young women as well as from young men) can be justified. It critiques reasons given for single sex work with Muslim young people and challenges discourses that shape uncritical custom and practice of work with young Muslim women. It suggests that different intentions cause different processes and outcomes, some positive and some damaging. Projects that target Muslim young women are compared with generic work with young women and girls. Empirical evidence from interviews with Birmingham young women, parents and youth workers is used as the basis for this discussion.*

**Keywords:** *intentions, space, safety, expectations, restrictions, contest*

My interest in this subject stems from working for a local charitable trust in inner city Birmingham as a community development worker in the 1980s including a significant emphasis on work with young women; and working as a sessional girlsworker for a local authority. Thereafter I have kept in touch with some of the young women and their families and with colleagues focusing on youth work with young women. I have worked with women in women-only settings catering for all local women irrespective of race, age or faith and with young women in gender mixed settings; as well as with specific Muslim young women's groups. Reflecting back on all of those work and life experiences gave me an appetite to explore how the work is being conceptualised and implemented now. Therefore, I entered into enquiry conversations with individuals and groups of people with an angle on the subject: young women, parents of young women, girlsworkers, and youth workers.

Just before the National Conference on Muslim Youth Work I was preparing to give a presentation on the topic of this article and was seeking inspiration. It came to me in a convoluted and unexpected way. I went to Jummah prayer in a guild of students and as is customary there was a khutbah (sermon). The young man who was giving this talk urged us all:

*Brothers, sisters and elders. We all need to learn to live together as brothers.*

I wish I could say that I couldn't believe my ears but unfortunately it was all too familiar. Some of us have to learn to live as sisters and to deal with brothers and elders! His remarks were an echo for me of the irony of starting a revolution allegedly dedicated to freedom and democracy with the idea of brotherhood: Fraternity, Equality, and Liberty. Images of young women being pressurised to stop wearing hijab in public places in France sprang into my mind. More recently, at the opening of the winter Olympics an official from the International Olympics Committee addressed millions of people about the inspiration and philosophy of the Olympics being 'peace, tolerance and brotherhood.' This suggests that there is still a need globally to make space for sisters. Back at the Jummah prayer the young Imam went on to pray in Arabic for 'the young people and women to be corrected from evil and guided to goodness.' How selfless of him in his generous concern for the rest of us! The Youth Service has a history of being accused likewise of trying to correct young men and protect young women.

I set about enquiring about Muslim Girlswork by interviewing individual young women and parents using the following interview guide:

*Experiences and opinions about single sex work.  
Reasons for and against doing it.  
Why is it needed and by whom?  
Should it always be in conjunction with mixed work or can it be 'stand alone'?  
Can you see any need for specifically Muslim girlswork as opposed to general girlswork?*

I also conducted a series of group sessions with youth workers about the reasons for doing Girlswork in neighbourhoods with Muslim communities. I started each session by dividing men and women into separate discussion groups and later brought them back together to discuss a scenario. I will use transcribed material from these young women, parents and youth workers throughout the article. Transcribed speech is written in italics.

Discussion of reasons for doing Muslim girlswork revealed a range of motivations

*Young Muslim woman worker: If it's young women's needs that count, who decides that need: the girls or other people in their lives as usual? Dictating to young people what is needed is counter-productive.*

A young Muslim woman worker made this comment bringing in the intention of basing youth work on the needs of young people at the same time as acknowledging other needs and influences that may compete to define it.

*Girl; If you are in a group of people sharing similar experiences and sharing similar pressures you can share freely and quickly, it flows.*

*Girl: Separate conversations need separate space, that's not negative its just so. You*

*have to be less conscious what you're saying in a single-sex group.*

A number of young women said that they value all-girls' conversations whether at a girlswork session or informally for ease of sharing, feeling quickly understood and offering support from personal experience.

Muslim man youth worker: *It's just realistic that if Muslim parents prefer single sex youth work and will not give consent to their children taking part otherwise that such chances should be provided because it gets over a barrier in a straight forward way.*

Girl: *Girls clubs are good for parents, they feel glad and proud to let everyone see them do the decent thing and escort us about and send us to girls-only this or that or keep us home.*

Returning to the question of whose needs girlswork is designed to meet there were a number of remarks about the demands of parents, and no mention of the demands of girls. Several girls were of the opinion that their parents' concern over what other people in the community thought of the family and their daughter was a decisive factor in parents' insistence on girls-only provision of schools and other services.

Young Muslim woman girlsworker: *I've been asked to get the girls to start coming so we're starting with a girls group for girl's activities- activities the girls want like hair and nails and all that.*

The view that if girls are not currently taking part the best way to get them to come is to start a girls-only group recurred in group discussions by youth workers but was not commented on by young women or their parents. Girls came up with a much wider range of activities that they would like to take part in than beauty and fashion.

Muslim woman arts worker: *For some young Muslim women mixed is fine but what about the others? What about access for those who due to their own cultural codes at the time are not comfortable or willing to be in mixed settings, we are trying to offer opportunities to them too. Some change their codes others continue to stick to women only settings or their home. There's a spectrum and many women who will mix still enjoy some women-only time/events.*

Cultural expectations for women and men not to mix were given as a central reason for the need for Muslim girlswork by many youth workers, by parents and by a few of the young women. However there was acknowledgement of differences of interpretation and degrees of separation expected. Whilst there are Islamic requirements for modesty and decency in relations between men and women these are interpreted differently by different Muslims and there are also different degrees of adherence creating a wide array of gender sensitive cultural practices as well as separated spaces for women and men.

When Muslim girlswork is done by a Muslim organisation the expectation may be to fit in with the existing gender segregation practices of the organisation.

Senior member of Muslim girls' group: *We're part of a wider Muslim organisation. Public spaces are all separate in the organisation for men and women. From aged 9 upwards men and women have different meeting spaces and this includes the youth groups. Planning meetings and some visits, conferences and trips are mixed though. We have some events with speakers where young women and young men sit apart but in the same room, listen to the same talk and join in the discussion together but then they wouldn't mix socially with each other after the formal part of the event, women and men would eat and chat separately. It's our culture to do it like that.*

There is a tension in faith based youth work between transmission of the faith and religious education with the purpose of continuance of religious belief, custom and practice in the next generation and the voluntary relationship of choice on the part of the young person. Islam accepts that there should be no compulsion in religion on the one hand and gives parents a duty to discipline their children if they do not pray on the other hand. This tension is also visible in discussions about Muslim girlswork. Is the only acceptable environment for young Muslim women Women-only, Muslim-only and an educational programme designed to prepare them to be good wives and mothers and to know enough about Islam to be the first religious teachers of their children? *Taqlid* or emulation is a widely used idea in the Muslim world when it comes to children and young people, as is the idea that there is such a thing as an Islamic upbringing. This leads a range of Muslims into a way of thinking about youth work as setting an appropriate example for young Muslims to emulate and many Muslim parents have an expectation that youth workers and teachers must set a good example in their behaviour and conduct.

A father: *There are places I prefer them all not to go, my sons and my daughters nieces and nephews, like ... [a local youth centre] because the behaviour and standards there I disapprove of. What kind of example are those youth workers? There is girlswork and boyswork separately over there but that's not the point. What are they discussing and encouraging there? That is what I don't trust.*

A mother: *It's mixed but I trust the standards of the youth worker. He seeks consent from us about the programme of activities from us and I feel the atmosphere is educational and suitable and provides good opportunities for her to learn and develop herself. It can help her for her future.*

In terms of non-Muslim youth workers working with young Muslim women or men this is a real challenge: how to be well thought of enough to be considered an appropriate person to emulate. The idea of being a role model is not only popular amongst Muslims, it is popular amongst trainee youth workers on our University courses. How can we be good role models without attempting to clone ourselves, disregarding what is in the best interests of the young person? Who is girlswork for, us or them? It is a challenge for each youth worker to become trusted enough by young women and their families to be a suitable example.

Rep. Muslim Women's organisation: *I have been there and lived what they are living. I have been a young woman rebelling in a strict Muslim family so I feel in a good position and amongst other women in a good position to support young women in a way that other women can't because they have not the same life experiences to draw on. We just*

*understand what's going on in the context of the whole family and community setting better by being part of it. We can be familiar with them like sisters or aunties for them to talk things over with.*

*Father: It is important to talk to parents instead of assuming that we all think the same. We need to know what our daughters are being invited to what for and who by before consenting. It's a matter of trust; put yourself in my shoes wouldn't you want to know what you are agreeing to for her?*

The idea of intention is an important Islamic notion. We have an understanding that the intention behind the carrying out of actions is significant to the very nature of the action. If we pray or fast, give charity or make a pilgrimage we start with trying to purify and clarify our intention for doing so. Intentions are important for the way work with young women and girls is constructed and conducted. What are our intentions behind the work? Also what are our intentions behind gender separate work as opposed to gender blind or gender sensitive work?

*Girl: I'd rather go to mixed youth activities so I can learn how to mix sensibly without a big issue over it, after all if I want to work and earn and survive or go to Uni and all that I have to learn to mix confidently.*

Are we trying to socialise young women into existing roles perpetuating control over them by men and by elders or supporting their development by offering a space to be themselves and to make life choices of their own? Are we trying to clone ourselves or to please their parents by cloning their mothers, or are we able to get away from being 'role models' and start to be listeners and advocates? Can we really claim to have got away from being a kind of modern finishing school for dutiful, beautiful wives?

Does any youth worker have the right or the ability to reproduce ourselves in the next generation? Such an enterprise could be either inappropriate or futile. Whether we are middle class professional Muslim women, feminist 'Western' women (or both), or working class non-Muslim men, Arab men....whoever we are what is our agenda and how can we avoid imposition that perpetuates young women's powerlessness? Cultural transmission is a powerful driver for Muslim Girlswork and we need to critique it in order to make Youth Work central again. Girlswork is often wittingly or unwittingly about transmission of culture including gender expectations. However the claim that girlswork is about personal development and choice for a young woman persists in the narratives of girlsworkers.

The idea of a cage comes from Weber's idea of the iron cage of bureaucracy whereby organisational structures are replicated and individuals operate within increasingly prescribed roles and functions. This has been picked up by Powell and DiMaggio in an article about how voluntary organisations reproduce and replicate existing structures under the influence of prevailing trends and funding dependencies. They ask:

*Why does it seem to be so difficult for individuals committed to innovation or diversity to maintain organizations that differ enduringly (in critical aspects of structure, culture, or programming) from other organizations in their industries? (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983:147).*



Work with young women and girls has trends and patterns that tend to reproduce themselves. Here is one example scenario that recurred in my enquiries amongst youth workers. There is a youth centre and a detached youth work project in a neighbourhood. The youth centre is heavily used but only by a certain group of young men. There is under-representation in terms of the race and faith make-up of the local population demonstrated by the youth centre's 'monitoring' exercise compared with census statistics and the youth centre is required to demonstrate equality of opportunity. So they make an action plan to reach 'hard to reach' young people, encouraged by the fact that there is a funding source that likes such initiatives. There are not enough Asians at the centre, not enough Muslims at the centre considering the neighbourhood profile and virtually no women at the centre. So the team jump to an obvious proposal: a group specially designed for young Asian women especially Muslim ones. The next assumption based on the team's understanding of cultural barriers to participation by these underrepresented groups at the club is that young Asian (particularly Muslim) women would only be allowed by their parents to attend women-only sessions and also young women and their families may be attracted to particular activities and object to some activities such as sex education, mixed sport and performing arts, dance and music. This led them to design a planned separatism along gender, age and faith lines. They successfully applied for funds for a Muslim girls' club and after some confrontation with existing users of the centre managed to negotiate a night for the group to have the centre completely to themselves. To further reassure parents and demonstrate public respect for 'cultural needs' they put mirror paper on the windows so that no-one would be able to see in. They advertised a programme of activities that they thought would be attractive to local young women such as hair and beauty including bridal henna, Islamic fashion design, healthy eating and exercise. The group started well but a few incidents undermined the popularity of the group. One of the girls-workers was rumoured to be having an affair with the centre manager. Whether this was true or not it damaged her reputation as a good role model. At the request of some of the young women a dance session was organised. Some young women felt that this was 'unislamic'. Two members of the group who were both very active and participative fell out with each other over a remark being made about a relative, and this caused a family schism in the family that they were both part of and so they were unwilling to attend if the other one was still doing so. The group became under-subscribed. The workers decided that it may be best to try to attract a younger age group and changed the criteria from aged 14-19 to age 11-16. They made an effort to put on some events to include mothers and their daughters and a new group was recruited, mainly of 11 year olds who were only permitted to attend in their school lunch hour due to other commitments after school. The group began meeting in the girls' school at lunch time. The original aim of making the youth centre a resource that is used by a broader cross section of young people was not really accomplished in this process although the girlswork staff could work with this new group. The mirror glass is still on the youth centre windows but the young women are not inside to be shielded from public view, instead their absence is shielded from public view. This scenario was very familiar to the individuals and groups that I put it to and they recognised that there is some pattern to it that is replicated elsewhere. When presented with this real case based scenario the groups of youth workers that I presented it to came up with a number of critiques and problems that they associate with girlswork.

Non-Muslim woman youth worker: *If there was a wider initiative to change the youth service to meet the needs of all young people, then girls would find that all youth work*

*was also girlswork, because all youth work would be a response to the needs of a diversity of individual young people.*

Senior non-Muslim man youth worker: *I have only ever experienced badly thought out provision with poor management and inadequate long term strategy and resourcing.*

Non-Muslim girlsworker: *The problems of a community can never be solved without integration and a willingness to respond to internal and external conflicts, tensions and changes faced by the community as a whole. Separating sections of the community from each other keeps divisions going indefinitely.*

Senior non-Muslim man youth worker: *Separate provision inevitably leads to resentment of those who are not in that group, in this case that could be young men or non-Muslim women or older women.*

Muslim woman girlsworker: *Presenting choices to young people should include choices of provision including gender specific and gender sensitive options.*

Non-Muslim woman girlsworker: *Young men often disrupt the girlswork sessions. Young men's work either as an after-thought or as a reaction to the sexism they come out with when girls-only sessions are introduced can't work well because it is started on a negative note.*

Non-Muslim woman youth worker: *There is a long history of successful girlswork by the Girls' Friendly Society, the Girl Guide Association and the YWCA. Why not open all that up more to young Muslim women instead of reinventing the wheel and duplicating resources?*

There are various reasons given for doing girls-only and women-only work. In *Coming in from the Margins*, Carpenter and Young (1986) summarise these under the headings: numbers, fairness, analysis and demand. When insufficient numbers of young women are using the Youth Service, young women's groups may be set up as an incentive and attraction for young women who may be put off by the appearance of such a male preserve.

Young woman Muslim girlsworker: *We get them to start coming through girlswork and then try to get them interested and confident to join in general activities.*

Young woman Muslim girlsworker: *Young women from these communities are 'hard to reach'*

This reason was cited several times in the interviews that I conducted. Fairness arises as a concern when resources are not used equally accessibly by young women and young men. A young women's group is a way of creating a visible redressing of 'fairness'. Again the need to offer fair and accessible resources and facilities for all young people featured amongst reasons given by workers for girls-only provision. Analysis of the position of women and men in society and the persistence of patriarchy often leads to the conclusion

that an opportunity for women to be together in a space apart will present an opportunity to support one another in addressing concerns and issues without the pressure of either deferring to men or making the effort not to. This was a much less clearly articulated area of my discussions with girlsworkers and other youth workers. There was not agreement about analysis of whether sexism persists and about how best to tackle it if it does. Those who do feel that there is a real need for girls to have their own spaces to gain confidence and opportunities without competition from young men did not give a very clear analysis of why they felt this was needed generally by young women. This is probably not helped by the absence of girls in much of the popular and sociological literature and public discourse on youth (McRobbie, 2000). Demand by young women interestingly was cited less in my enquiries with youth workers and young women and parents than demand from parents was. In fact several youth workers talked of finding it very difficult to get any enthusiasm or commitment from girls and young women for participating in girls work activities:

*Young Woman Muslim girlsworker: It's really difficult to access and contact the young women and to get any commitment out of them.*

Early girlswork such as the girls-work that formed the foundation of the National Association of Youth Clubs (Carpenter and Young, 1986) was set up to support the individual needs and rights of young women, in particular young women who were factory workers. It was not free of the desire to reform and save young women, but it did essentially make an explicit claim to be working with and for young women specifically in order to address their needs. There was a class bias in that often girls clubs were run by middle class women for working class women but in the case of the self help of young workers this was not always the case. Over and above the reasons for girls only work of numbers, fairness, analysis and demand, there is a discourse of young women's needs. In the case of contemporary Muslim young women, there is a particular discourse of 'special need' and 'cultural need' (Alexander, 2000) that distinguishes, even segregates them from generic girls-work. Whilst cultural awareness may be an important aspect of inclusive youth work, stereotypical framing of girls into categories is not and there can be a fine line. Muslim girlswork actually based on fairness, analysis and demand (Carpenter and Young, 1986) rather than special need could be a way out of the cage.

In the foreword to Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Richard Shaull (1972) suggests that education can either function as a means of integrating and conforming young people into the logic of the current system or as a means by which people deal critically with their own realities and discover how to bring about change and development. The language of liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty is out of fashion but is it not relevant to describe the needs of young Muslim women in Britain at the present time? Inferiorisation and exploitation of women are challenged in the Qur'an. The 'cultural need' that is thought to produce a particular need for women-only provision for young Muslim women is about not mingling with young men because of strict expectations not to be attracted to the opposite sex outside marriage. Separation should not be confused with control and subordination. It is the nature of the space allocated to young Muslim women that is important regarding whether the space is controlling or liberating, a place to feel safe, at home, valued and accepted or a place to feel restricted and contained. Getting clarity about which processes are actually happening 'liberty and equality' or control by the 'fraternity' is complex.

*One of the paradoxes is that women collude, seek comfort and even at times gain a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated to them by fundamentalist movements (Sahgal and Yuval Davis, 1992:9)*

In the name of a version of multiculturalism that is about tolerance of preservation of the 'traditions and cultures' of different ethnic minorities, culture is used as a so-called reason for accepting gendered practices and criticism of such practices can be construed as racist (Sahgal and Yuval Davis, 1992).

Pro-segregation Muslim discourse 'ties the control of girls to the dangers of growing up in a secular society in the "morally degenerate West"' (Ibid:20)

Non-Muslim girlsworker: *In terms of the girls-work programme it's difficult to get the curriculum right for everyone. Young Muslim women won't join in sexual health education, dance, music.*

Non-Muslim woman youth worker: *...or sometimes their parents refuse consent or the girls won't ask for consent in case they meet objection; or some times some of them want to do activities against the parents wishes and we are caught in between. We should do sexual health work strictly speaking with parent's consent but if the young women say they need it but without the parents knowing well we are caught and some of us go ahead without involving parents if we feel that the young women may endanger their health and well-being ...*

Muslim woman girlsworker: *It's a matter of trust. If parents and families trust what is going on in terms of decency and standards and boundaries of behaviour then young women could join in the general club. The main thing needed is trust, sensitivity, communication. Some could join in mixed settings others need women-only, others need Muslim women only or even Somali Muslim young women only. We have to start with where they are and what they are free to get involved with.*

Those Muslims who favour strict separation of unrelated young women and men often do so through fear that what they regard as the moral depravity of the West will woo young Muslims away from the straight path of Islam. This means that there is not only concern that girls should not mix with boys but also that they should not mix with 'Western' girls or 'Western' and 'Westernised' youth workers, particularly not 'morally degenerate' ones. Separate schools, separate refuges, separate youth provision can all be proposed from this starting point but they can be suggested for entirely different reasons too. Black women in the early eighties set up autonomous women's groups and took up the issue of domestic violence. Asian women in London Boroughs argued for local council funding for refuge exclusively for Asian women based on the need for Asian women to have separate spaces to live in with women who could understand dealing with racism as well as with sexism. Local councils more often funded such projects on the basis of cultural and linguistic difference and culturally specific pressures, expectations and practices (Sahgal and Yuval Davis, 1992). Relationships between the anti-racist and feminist movements and girlswork stand in contrast with Muslim conservatism. A series of contradictions that girlswork is in danger of ensnaring itself with lie in the contradiction between anti-sexism and multiculturalism's

tolerance of religious organisations without equal opportunities commitments. This could be compounded by being funded or managed by several separate committees with inadequate communication and collaboration e.g. Race Relations Units, Women's Units and Youth Units all diverging from one another in their approaches. Social customs of families and communities of any culture cannot be used as an excuse to tolerate intolerable violence, subordination and control of young women. Youth work should not be condoning young men attempting to control their sisters if youth work is committed to equal opportunities.

The youth service has colluded with funders in basing work with Asian young people and in particular with Asian young women on a perception of cultural need and special need (Alexander, 2000). Provision is often aimed specifically at Asian young women because they are perceived as being 'doubly disadvantaged'. This also slides into being separate provision specifically for Muslim girls, again on the assumption of cultural need to preserve particular gender expectations and roles and on the basis of being 'multiply disadvantaged' through being female, young Muslim and maybe Asian. Several of the young women I enquired of complained about restriction on their freedom to do what they would like to do imposed on them by their families.

*Young woman youth worker: God my brother is doing my head in he is so over-protective. If I am even five minutes late he is pacing up and down fretting about what has happened or what I may be doing. He watches where I go, who I meet, what I say, who I phone, what I wear, how I walk in the street, everything. I like the feeling of being protected... important enough to him for him to bother so much about what happens to me. But it gets too much at times and I just wish he would give me a bit of space and leeway to take care of myself.*

*Girl: They don't even like me relaxing in my room. They just want me to join in with them and do chores and stuff and they are paranoid about me using the internet.*

*Girl: What can I do? I am used to making decisions for myself but I'm also used to people making them for me. I know all about people deciding my life for me.*

*Girl: Young women often are treated like we haven't a mind of our own, we are being told all the time what to do, even how to wear things, how to walk ... constantly told.*

*Girl: They don't even let you have any fun. There's a reason to object to everything I want to do, They don't want me to go out, although I do. They don't want me to spend my money on what I want like a telly for my bedroom. They think the whole family should have it or no one .*

In some cases, they weighed this up against a sense of being protected and prized as worthy of defending.

*Girl: The area is no good, my brothers are constantly in trouble and they are normal here. I grew up more protected from all that, in the house or being taken by my Dad to school and back or by my Mum to visit people nearby .*

Reflecting on their position as young women amongst women several girls spoke about power relations between themselves and other women on age grounds.

*Girl: Women, some of them live too much by tradition, they just don't think for themselves, just follow stories; looking over their shoulders to the past and to what other people think, instead of seeing the present world around them for themselves through their own eyes. They should let themselves wake up to here and now.*

*Girl: They ask me how come you play with the boys and talk freely with them? Like they don't approve of that and my Mum told me to change myself about that because people would talk bad about me.*

Freedom comes in two forms, freedom to and freedom from. Girls-work can be based on either or both. We can emphasise freedom to learn and develop as individuals, freedom to make choices, to take part and have a say, to worship or not, to be safe and healthy, to be respected and to have meaningful relationships in life. Alternatively we can stress freedom from. Maybe we set ourselves up to try to liberate young women from undue control, from unwanted attention, sex and abuse, from force and exploitation, from Islamophobia, racism, sexism and compulsion. Young women are not always prone to use their freedom in the way that adults fear, for their own reasons

*Girl: They worry that I want to meet boys but boys all go around in gangs, use drugs and show off to each other, beating each other up and all that. Why should I be interested in them. Boys are a waste of space.*

It is also possible to aim to achieve both freedom from and freedom to, for and by young women. It is possible but it is a struggle that is rarely embarked upon and sustained due to constant challenges and set backs. It is a challenge to work with young women in a way that does not limit them but equally does not compromise their sense of security and does not get them into trouble with significant people in their lives. Youth workers disagree about what is difficult and what is assumed to be difficult.

*Male youth worker: Obviously it's difficult for me to involve young women as an Asian male worker*

*Another Male youthworker in reply: Not obvious to me why that should be difficult. As an Arab male worker I organised a residential visit to another country and the majority of young people taking part were young women. It's to do with the nature of the activities that are organised, being careful about getting consent from parents and young women, and reassurances about the code of behaviour that will be expected of everyone taking part.*

*Young woman: Come to my school or college or workplace, even come shopping with me up town- girls all over! But our families don't want us to go to local youth services due to their reputation for example they feel young women and men mix too freely and just go there to get off with each other.*

There is a clear image problem that local youth services need to overcome in order to become more accessible and putting on girls-only sessions will not cover it. A range of accessible work with young women is needed, some women-only, some targeted specifically at meeting the needs of young Muslim women and some gender-sensitive and culturally-sensitive general youth work. To be trusted to do this by young women and their families excellent diplomatic communication is needed.

Rep from a women's organisation: *Young women need more than a chance to meet each other, more than a few social activities; they need services and real support with issues affecting them including domestic violence and situations of forced marriages and things that we all wish did not exist in our community but still do. They need legal protection from abuse, from female genital mutilation, from rape... from so many terrible threats to their happiness. This sometimes means, I am sorry to say this but, sometimes means safety and protection from their own families rather than by their own families. Control by fathers and brothers cannot be justified simply as culture or as religion.*

The argument that girlswork should not be based on a generalised stereotypical view of Muslim girls as having 'special needs' does not negate the entitlement of young Muslim women to services and real support with issues affecting them. If work with young women is diverse, as young women are, and wholly focused on the actual needs of young women and girls, then a whole range of different forms of support, campaigns, and services will be required.

This article has discussed reasons given for single sex work with Muslim young people and challenges discourses that shape uncritical custom and practice of work with young Muslim women. It does not come down against specifically targeted youth work but urges that young women's real and diverse needs should be at the heart of this work. Since young Muslim women are varied and diverse in their interpretations and relationships to Islam and to cultural practices they cannot be simply categorised as having a 'special cultural need' to be in single sex settings. Other reasons for doing girls only work with a strong historical basis in youth work in Britain can equally apply to Muslim young women such as analysis of their particular life experiences, demand from young women themselves, and fairness in access to youth work services and resources. Gender specific programmes have a clear place in development of a strategy for youth work with Muslim young people as they do in youth work strategy generally but so do gender sensitive programmes in terms of experiences they offer young women (Mead, 1995).

This research has highlighted for me the importance of re-examining the aims and intentions behind Muslim Girlswork and recognising the diversity of young Muslim women and their needs in order to avoid making a cage for ourselves. It has encouraged me to explore with others how, rather than simply reproducing the status quo and socialising young people into existing power relationships, we can offer meaningful opportunities for young British Muslim women to learn to become the women they want to be. Intentions matter and rather than creating a cage to trap ourselves we need to be really clear about when and why we need deliberately gendered spaces in youth work.

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# Exploring the development of Jewish identity in young people

**Shelley Marsh**

*A community's well-being is the well being of its individual members. Not only can a community not exist apart from its individual constituents, but it has no interests that it does not share with them.*

(Silver, 1998)

*In this article I consider the role youth workers have for developing young people's personal and religious identity within a Jewish youth work environment. Based on interviews with a group of Jewish youth work practitioners, I have explored the dichotomies of British and Jewish identities and their hybridity in the 21st century. The issues of alienation, gender and access to learning are key elements in the formation of the youth workers' own identities and the role modelling they are able to facilitate with young people.*

**Keywords:** *Jewish youth work, identity, informal education, faith*

## Context

*What is Jewish identity?*

Within the Jewish community much has been written and discussed regarding the development of Jewish identity in our young people. The British Jewish community invests in its young people since it perceives that the Jewish future rests squarely on the shoulders of its youth. The Jewish community in the UK has 13 youth movements (see Rose, 2005) and approximately 30 Jewish youth clubs, some based in synagogues and some running from independent buildings. Diversity regarding religiosity within the broad spectrum of Jewish prayer and affiliation is expressed through and by the youth movements and clubs.

Jewish youth clubs in the UK have a rich history. The first were established in the East End of London, the centre of the eastern European Jewish community in the late 1800s. The Jewish youth club offered immigrant young people an introduction into the British way of life – linguistically in English and practically with its trips and educational programmes. The youth club was, for many of the Jewish teenage workforce, their only experience with the English language and it was a crucial part of the Anglicisation of Jewish immigrants, as Rose has argued;

*The first Jewish youth club established in Britain was the German Street Girls Club*

*in London's East End in 1883, and had as its aspiration the integration of young, newly immigrated, Eastern European Jews into mainstream British society. (Rose, 2005:3)*

Living and working in nineteenth century capitalist society brought with it the severance of keeping the Sabbath since business, simply making a living, took precedent over attending synagogue for both employees and employers. The need or desire to work a full day on Friday and on Saturday took this generation of Jews away from the synagogue and into the work place. This became a central concern of the Jewish Youth work pioneers such as Montagu (Spence, 2004) for, as Gutman observes,

*... Work rules conflicted with religious imperatives. On the eighth day after the birth of a son, Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe held a festival, 'an occasion of much rejoicing.' But the work week had a different logic, and if the day fell during the week the celebration occurred the following Sunday. The host ... and guests know it's not the right day and they fall into mourning over the conditions that will not permit them to observe the old custom ... (Gutman, 1966:23).*

The emerging youth clubs and movements were seen as a solution to the emerging clashes of cultures and class, as, Lily Montague believed:

clubs could help to heal class conflict and division if the middle-class leaders were prepared to meet the working-class members in a spirit of friendship. (Spence 2004: 493)

A century later, the Jewish community has needed to adapt again, since, for many, Anglicisation has now gone too far and parents are choosing to send their children to Jewish youth clubs so that they have a circle of Jewish friends with whom to socialise. According to Jewish youth workers at a conference on youth work issues in the Jewish community in 2004 (personal notes) Jewish youth clubs have not adapted beyond these initial aims and they continue simply to provide a friendly environment for young people to socialise, with little Jewish educational content in the activities which they offer.

The Jewish community is both settled and unsettled. The Jewish youth club reflects this as it pushes and pulls its young people. Anglo Jewry, which developed the Jewish youth club for its young people, no longer defines what it wants of its Jewish youth club. Today, some Jewish youth clubs celebrate Jewish festivals and run activities which encourage young people to explore their Jewish identity. Youth workers in these clubs see their role as vital to developing Jewish communal leaders, whilst other youth clubs are social and sport centres for Jewish young people, with little or no specifically Jewish content in their informal education. The original aims of the Jewish youth club have been met, Jewish young people know how to be British, but Jewish youth workers are not confident that they know how or what will keep their young people Jewish as Daniel Rose persuasively argues,

*Jewish communities around the world find themselves waging a war against Jewish assimilation and then drifting away from Judaism and Jewish identity of their youth. More and more they are realising that youth movements and informal Jewish education is an important way to achieve their goals, providing Jewish youth with a strong sense*

*of affiliation to the Jewish community and world, and that these movements should be celebrated and fully supported in every way. (Rose, 2005)*

The specific initial aims of Jewish youth clubs, to aid the process of Anglicisation in the early 1900s (Rose 2005:3) are now no longer necessary. Clubs need to develop further to enable Jewish young people to face the challenges of Jewish identity in the 21st century. The Jewish community, like many other identity groups in British society, faces ongoing social issues with its young people. Eating disorders, self-harm, low self esteem, anger are all manifesting in teens. These are issues which young people are prepared to talk about and want help in assessing and exploring.

Through my work in mentoring Jewish youth workers, and through my own youth work experiences, I became aware that Jewish young people are dealing with a variety of social issues and that their youth workers are in a strong position to support them. This was raised through the diaries the youth workers kept, and through the interviews I conducted. One youth worker commented

*Identity for me is the key social issue because for me, it feeds into everything else that the kids might be involved in, such as issues such as drugs, sex and so on. I see that the Jewish identity of the young people that I work with is diminishing... That for me is the most worrying trend in the Jewish community. And probably also fitting into that are the general issues of class, which is a major issue in Britain. I think class, and the construction of class norms is something that in a way has sort of been superimposed on top of Jewish values and actually Jewish values become warped...*

In order to understand whether youth workers have the skills to offer the support their young people need, over the course of a year, I undertook research with a group of Jewish youth workers into their relationship to Judaism, social issues and Jewish texts.

Although based in the Jewish community, the implications of my research clearly reach out to other faith groups and the work they are undertaking with their young people. While other faith groups would not necessarily consider using Jewish texts, this research may provide a model for educators to explore social issues through their own traditional texts and scriptures. It has also been suggested that young people who are also struggling with the tensions of living in a multi-cultural society (Cantle, 2006) would benefit from discussing the social issues they are facing whilst also developing their own religious identity.

The youth workers, like many of the young people they work with, are struggling to make sense of their dual Jewish and British identities. Jewish Youth Workers, and their young people are grappling with alienation from their own culture, and the expectations others have of them.

## The research

I invited five Jewish youth workers to take part in my research. They were all working (either full or part time) in Jewish youth clubs. One was based in Manchester, working as

a detached youth worker and also going into a Jewish day school to deliver some specific youth projects. Three were in North London, all working in synagogue based youth centres, two in Reform synagogues and one in an Orthodox synagogue, and one youth worker was working in a south London Jewish youth centre. The five subjects in my research were asked to keep 'professional reflections' logs, and they also took part in a structured interview. The interviews were designed to allow me further insight into how the youth workers connect youth work practice and social issues with Jewish development and to assess how their own Jewish identities might influence their work with young people.

The interview questions put to the youth workers were

- What do you see as the social issues which you believe are most important to the young people you work with?
- What do you see as the Jewish content which you believe is most important to your work with young people?
- What are the barriers which youth workers have to using Jewish texts with young people?

The interviews were taped and transcribed and in addition I made notes throughout the interviews regarding for example body language, facial expressions which were relevant to the meanings in the interview.

I analysed the interview data by using a three-stage analysis, each stage being designed to give increased focus. Initially I colour coded the themes, giving each of the following areas a different colour:

- Mainstream Social Issue
- Social issue in Jewish Text
- Barriers to Jewish Text or Social issue
- Jewish Identity
- Self – individual identity

Following this colour coding, which allowed me to see graphically how much discourse was allocated to each of my criteria, I then analysed the data further through a critical discourse analysis, based on Gee, who explores discourse through five properties which aim to highlight the sense-fulness of a text. I utilised Gee's system to structure this part of the thesis. Gee focuses on prosody, cohesion, discourse organization, contextualisation signals, thematic organization. Gee, cited in Locke (2004 p:53) explains

*1 Prosody: The ways in which the words and sentences of a text are said: their pitch, loudness, stress and the length assigned to various syllables, as well as the way in which the speaker hesitates and pauses.*

*2 Cohesion: The multifarious linguistic ways in which sentences are connected to each other. It is the 'glue' that holds texts together.*

*3 Discourse organisation: The ways in which sentences are organised into higher-order units (bigger than simple sentences), for example, the scenes and episodes making up a story or the arguments and sub-arguments making up an overall argument for a particular position.*

*4 Contextualised signals: The cues by which speakers and writers indicate and to some extent negotiate the immediate situation of the text's production.*

*5 thematic organisation: The ways in which themes (images, contrasts, focal points of interest) are signalled and developed.*

I adapted Gee's framework which allowed for compatibility with the content of my research. I diverged from Gee's categories and made alterations which would still enable me to explore and interpret my data within a systematic framework. The terms I have used express the following:

*1 Polarisation:* Under this heading I examined the texts for particular positions, possibly polar positions, within the texts and have highlighted them, when appropriate, under polarisation. I explored any argumentation or persuasive language here.

*2 Cohesion:* The cohesive links which pull a text together. The use of a specific word which serves to connect one theme to another. I also included under this heading techniques which emphasise cohesion, such as listing words, or numbering facts, or repetition of one word or term.

*3 Discourse organisation:* Within this framework I looked for the manner in which the speaker used, or omitted to use, certain terms, words or concepts. I scrutinised the texts for rhetoric, ambiguity, to fully analyse the way in which the speaker had organised, or sub-consciously disorganised, their words.

*4 Contextualisation signals:* I used this term to explore the position the speaker had taken, (his/her context/space) and the position the speaker wanted me, the researcher to be in the context of the interview. I also utilised this heading to examine any wider contexts which the speaker expressed and included the cues used by my interview subjects which suggest the situation of the text.

*5 Thematic organisation:* This term allowed a broad space to explore themes and to understand how, and if, one theme is organised in terms of another.

To undertake the critical discourse analysis, I selected excerpts from the interview data collected from each research subject. By analysing and interpreting the data in three separate stages I was aware that the critical discourse analysis allowed me to understand additional layers of information.

In addition to the interviews, the youth workers each kept a diary for four weeks. They were each given a blank page, with no limitations regarding content. I did however, provide a sample sheet for guidance, which outlined conversations they may encounter and how they might choose to note them in their diary. The diaries provided additional empirical data which allowed me to follow each youth worker's individual comprehension of social issues and include this analysis of social issues in my analysis and findings.

## Findings

### *Alienation*

Alienation was the dominant discursive theme which emerged from my transcripts. There are certain patterns and focus points which I found throughout the texts in relation to alienation.

Every interview subject focused on 'them and us' which I included under the heading of polarisation. With each interview subject the 'them' differed. The 'them' became at different times and in different contexts, the religious, the young people, the parents, the secular.

Jewish festivals (including the Sabbath), rituals and practices were the main focal points of alienation for some of the interview subjects. Observing, understanding and connecting to Jewish rituals and practice were defined as being overwhelming, often due to lack of knowledge regarding what would be expected of the participant. The dialogues noted in the youth worker's diaries also highlight the alienation young people have towards some aspects of their Jewish experiences.

One youth worker noted in his diary

*Elizabeth came in to see me at the end of club. She said she didn't believe in God or the Messiah. We had a discussion about this for some time and she seemed quite confused ... I needed to close the building and I asked her if we could continue this conversation when we next meet. She said ok, but added that her Rabbi at school would be disappointed if he knew she felt this way ... I reassured her I was not disappointed in her, and I look forward to talking to her more about this subject. (Honestly – I'm not sure I have any answers for her!)*

In particular, the female interview subjects discussed their own personal themes of alienation from Judaism. Two also brought in their alienation from the Hebrew language. In my interpretation, these themes of alienation are connected, since to the British Jewish women 'Hebrew' was articulated as an insurmountable problem in that two of my three female subjects could not read or write in Hebrew, the language of prayer. This manifested in their feelings of alienation from synagogal experiences, prayers relating to Jewish festivals and the Sabbath and any connection to group or individual prayer. The male subjects did not discuss any personal issues of alienation, which I interpret as intrinsically connected to their gender and explore further below. However, in some way, every interview subject was dis-embedded from either Jewish materials, learning, practice or their communities.

## Gender

The female subjects truly engaged with the research questions and I learnt a great deal about each woman during the interview time. Each woman undertook a great deal of soul searching during the interview process. The interviews with the women were very intimate and personal, with each woman referring to her family experiences, feelings as a young Jewish person as she grew up, and exploring her own personal positionality as the interview progressed. This could be related to a common gender identity between interviewer and interviewee. I am aware that I must have brought my own thoughts, feelings and approach to the research questions and that my own gender cannot be taken away, and therefore do not claim neutrality in my analysis in this matter.

However, I found that my two male subjects did not engage with the interview process

by disclosing any 'personal' information at all. Neither of them made references to family relationships, mentors, or teachers who had influenced them on their Jewish journeys. Discourse analysis identified that this male experience was in complete opposition to the experience of the female subjects. Both male subjects had experienced a period of Jewish study at *yeshiva* (high level Jewish study colleges), yet neither of the subjects viewed their *yeshiva* experiences as being a privilege which they had attained. In fact, both saw their *yeshiva* studies as being a rite of passage that they were entitled to. This must be compared to my female subjects who had received no higher Jewish education at all and had no expectation that they would have engaged in Jewish study.

One female youth worker discussed in her interview

*Because I haven't got a Jewish background. Well, ok, I have, on my mother's side... I'm not aware of it. I don't understand much... Jewish issues and I don't think you can if you... maybe it (understanding Judaism) is just natural and I don't think I've got that natural awareness ...*

In her interview, another female youth worker expressed

*My own experiences, cheder, (religious Sunday school) I was stuck ... it was so boring ... I don't go to synagogue ... if I do go, I feel nervous! I feel like I shouldn't be there! I feel like I don't know what I'm doing, I don't understand the language, the Hebrew language ... For the last Jewish festival I asked one of my voluntary leaders 'what's tu bishvat about?' I had no idea!*

One male youth worker reflected

*You have to have the experience of learning and in finding some sort of meaning and enrichment in the text which many, many people do not have. You know, unless you're frum (religious) and you've been to, you know, yeshiva (seminary for males) or sem, (seminary for females) there's few people outside of that who have had that relationship with the text. Fortunately, I have had yeshiva learning and it's benefited me you know, through my life so then I can apply those principles to my current youth work.*

Even though Judaism is followed through the maternal lineage, none of my three female subjects had ever undertaken any serious Jewish studies, and they did not see it as something they were particularly entitled to do. By contrast to the males, the interviews with the women do not express positive feelings towards their own Jewish experiences or any personal, familial or communal aspiration for further Jewish learning.

Expressing her insecurities about her Jewish knowledge and understanding, one youth worker said in her interview

*I guess because they (the young people) associate me with knowing about social issues ... for me to start using Jewish texts, because I've not done that, I think the young people might think, what's going on? Why is she doing this? What is it? What's her*



*intention? ... I don't know much about the natural awareness of Jewishness ... I haven't got that. I don't know where I would begin to understand Jewish stuff – there's so much to learn ... I wouldn't know where to start ...*

A secular Israeli youth worker expressed her feelings by stating

*I'm ashamed to say I don't know enough and I need to learn more because I don't even know the basics ... and the only things I know by now are the festivals, they are the things that I've been growing up with for all my life ...*

The Jewish community has differing expectations for Jewish boys and girls. The ways in which Jewish girls, and women are able to access Jewish learning do not appear to be open, unless one is already from an Orthodox background.

## Accessing Jewish Knowledge

From a mainstream, secular perspective, it is generally accepted that the influence of the family and the expectations the family unit has of its children are major reasons for both under-achievement in schools, and for high achievement (OECD, 2001; Deforges and Abouchaa, 2003). With this in mind, and in analysing my data, I have found that this phenomenon of family expectations influences whether or not a young person feels they have the right to access their Jewish culture and heritage through Jewish learning.

One male youth worker confidently stated during his interview

*My mother always made it clear to me that she would support me going to study at yeshiva (Jewish seminary). It was what I wanted to do after I finished school, and she was happy with that ...*

Unless another role model comes into the life of a young person and guides them towards accessing Jewish learning, many young Jewish people do not believe they are entitled to learn.

This research found that the barriers that some youth workers have towards Jewish learning stem from their own negative Jewish learning experiences. The majority of youth workers, and young people, appear to be on a continuous journey of self exploration, assessing and re-exploring their own Jewish identities. Some have managed to access Jewish knowledge and are confident in their abilities to transmit that knowledge to their young people. Others feel excluded either by their own self-perception or their fears that 'other people' will judge them as inadequate Jewish people, or Jewish learners/teachers.

One interview subject clearly felt denied access to Jewish experiences and learning by her peers, as she grew up

*I remember when I was in boarding school, I remember some of the guys there, they learned (i.e. studied Torah in a religious environment as well as undertaking school*

studies), *I told them that I don't eat Kosher* (food allowed under Jewish dietary law and supervision) *and everything, and I was taboo, and it was like ... really it was horrible to learn that about me, and I came from Tel Aviv which is like, no one keeps kosher and then I came to a place where people came from more religious families and I was very, in this, I was very excluded ...*

## Interpretation

In this research I explored the concept of Jewish identity as well as the identity of the self. The Jewish identity of each subject was intrinsically connected to their own life experiences. Mentors and role models were key people in enhancing Jewish identity and the influence of being a role model for someone else, particularly in informal education, appeared to have a profound affect on the development of the mentor's own Jewish identity development.

Barry Chazan suggests that Jewish and general informal education share six of the eight defining characteristics. These shared characteristics are:

*both are person-centered, experience-oriented, and interactive, and both promote a learning and experiencing community, a culture of education, and content that engages* (Chazan, 2003:10)

Chazan also argues that informal Jewish education can be considered

*a unique category of its own, differing from general informal education in two major respects: its curriculum of experiences and values and its holistic educator.* (Chazan, 2003:10)

Faith based youth work emanates from the values set in its religious and cultural heritage, allowing young people to explore their ideals through the methodologies which informal education offers.

Chazan goes on to explain that

*informal Jewish education is inherently about affecting the lifestyle and identity of Jews.... Informal Jewish educators are inherently shapers of Jewish experience and role models of Jewish lifestyle, as opposed to the good general informal educator who is focused on helping to develop skills and not on shaping identity or group loyalties.* (Chazan, 2003:10)

Experience in mentoring across the Jewish youth club and movement service in the UK has clearly shown the majority of youth work in youth clubs and youth movements is conducted through peer leadership, taken as a norm within academic research (Rose, 2005:2). Whilst the community invests in its young people, it is understood that the best practitioners for delivering the message of informal education, are other young people. It is through 'hadracha' or 'leadership' experiences that Jewish youth organisations go on to develop future communal leadership whilst at the same time allowing younger participants to

experience summer and winter camps, and educational weekends with their peers. Leading figures in the Jewish community have, almost without exception, been through the Jewish youth club or movement experience and have taken a peer leadership role during their formative teenage years.

Chazan succinctly defines informal Jewish education as:

*Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through the individual's actively experiencing a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture, and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a curriculum of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. As an activity, it does not call for any one venue but may happen in a variety of settings. It evokes pleasurable feelings and memories. It requires Jewishly literate educators with a 'teaching' style that is highly interactive and participatory, who are willing to make maximal use of self and personal lifestyle in their educational work.*  
(Chazan 2003:9)

Chazan reflects on the importance of 'Jewishly' literate educators, the role models who can bring a love of Judaism and an interactive teaching style together to further develop Jewish identity.

This is another major problem in the Jewish community, that young Jewish people have had such negative Jewish experiences, many do not choose to access Jewish learning at all. Synagogue Sunday schools and Jewish day schools have not, on the whole, inspired young people in their Jewish learning. Every one of my interview subjects recalled negative learning experiences for themselves, their peers and now, for the young people they are working with. One youth worker noted in her diary that

*Many of the young people in my youth club attend Jewish day schools. They were chatting about their experiences there and some of them said they would prefer to be at regular schools because the Jewish studies teachers don't understand that most of the students are really secular Jews. The Jewish studies teachers seem to be on a mad mission to make the students believe in God. The teachers are way off the mark for the young people that come to my youth club.*

The formal Jewish education world is failing in its aim to inspire a love of learning in young Jewish people, and thus informal Jewish youth workers must convince young people that Jewish learning can be enjoyable, despite the experiences the young people have had.

## Recommendations for other groups

This research project has focussed on Jewish youth workers and young people. It is apparent to me, however, other faith groups may also be interested in this work, and I aim to share my successes, and understand my failures, with colleagues from other faith- based organisations, who may choose to undertake similar work with their (often disengaged) young people.

In developing Jewish identity, I believe it is not for the youth worker to decide how or what a young person should become. However, if the communities of faith do not allow enough space for our young people to gain entry into our textual sources, at whichever level they choose, then we are not offering our young people adequate opportunities to explore the realms of possibilities available to them.

Janusz Korczak, a Polish doctor and inspirational educator, wrote

*A hundred children – a hundred people  
Who are not ‘maybe sometime’  
Not ‘not now’, not ‘tomorrow’  
But are here and now, today  
People who already exist.*  
(Korczak , 1999:73)

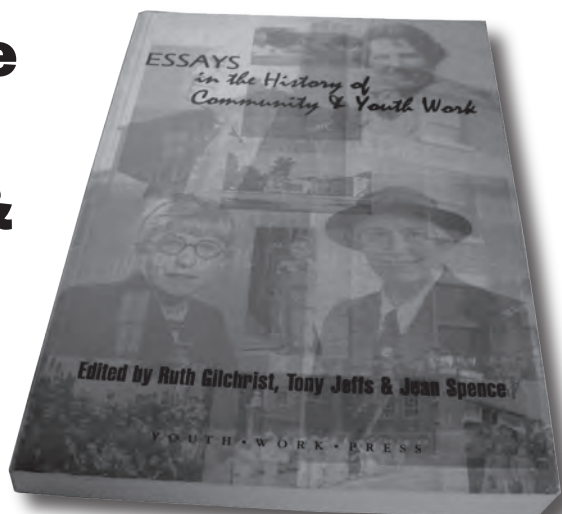
Informal education methodologies encourage youth workers to engage in conversations with our young people, and enable young people to explore their own identities through a myriad of experiences and dialogues, to set them on their own journeys.

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# Essays in the History of Community & Youth Work

**Edited by Ruth Gilchrist,  
Tony Jeffs & Jean Spence**



Any profession that fails to learn from its past is doomed to repeat its mistakes. Community and youth work has made a huge contribution to the wellbeing of communities but, with a few honourable exceptions, it has failed to produce its own histories. By neglecting to record its successes and its failures, it has left itself vulnerable to those who would foist on it warmed-over policies that have been tried and found wanting in the past.

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# French Muslim Youth and the Banlieues of Rage<sup>1</sup>

**Karima Laachir**

*The recent riots that spread across the banlieues of France's big cities from the end of October to the middle of November 2005 have been explained by some sections of the media as an 'Islamic' rebellion even though not all the rioting youth are of Muslim origin. Others, especially some sections of the French media and the Centre-Right interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, have described them as acts of criminality and delinquency. This helps the French State to turn a blind eye on the real problems and causes of inequalities in the banlieues. In this paper, I argue that the rebellion of the youth of the banlieues cannot be explained only in terms of economic deprivation and marginality. I suggest that colonial legacy has played an important role in framing the policies of integration for these young people. Therefore, the revolt is to do more with the way the youth of the banlieues are considered as second-class citizens bearing the legacy of colonial stereotypes.*

**Keywords:** *Banlieues, French Muslim youth, rebellion, colonial legacy, spatial and social exclusion, marginalisation, stigmatisation, second class citizenship.*

The recent rebellions of the youth of the *banlieues* in France from the end of October to the middle of November 2005 have been described in some sections of the American media as 'Islamic', as a form of 'jihad' linked to Muslim extremists in France.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, the media concentrated more on social and economic deprivation as the main causes of the riots. Even though most of the rioters are of North African Muslim origin and despite the fact that Islam is a highly stigmatised religion in France, the revolt was far from being mobilised by 'Islam' or around an 'Islamic identity'. One can clearly see the proof of the non-religious nature of the riots when the umbrella organisation UOIF (The Union of French Islamic Associations) issued a Fatwa in which it condemned the riots as anti-Islamic and called upon the young people to stop them. This had no, or very little effect in stopping the rioters.<sup>3</sup> It is not enough to trace the causes of the revolt of youth simply to economic and social marginality; I argue that the colonial legacy has played an important role in framing the policies of integration for these young people. The revolt is to do more with the way the young people of the *banlieues* are considered as second-class citizens bearing the legacy of colonial stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> I trace these ideas back to colonial narratives based on binary oppositions between the centre/inside/French Empire and outside/periphery/North African colonies seen as the uncivilised and inferior 'Other' of France. I focus the postcolonial debate in France on the site of the marginalised and stigmatised space of the *banlieues* (or outer city suburbs mainly inhabited by France's North African and African diasporas), not least because of the recent riots that have been taking place there. I suggest

the juxtaposition of the violence of the colonial past with postcolonial marginalisation of the youth of the *banlieues*.

## The 'immigrant problem' in France

France's five million Muslims are mostly of North African origin, that is, from France's ex-colonies. North African immigration to France started in the 1940s, 50s and 60s because of France's need to rebuild its war-torn economy. Sociologists like Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) argue that North African immigration to France is the product of the destructive consequences of the modernisation of the villages that had started during the colonial times and that had broken the traditional organisation of North Africa, pushing the peasants to proletarianisation and poverty. France has refused to consider the phenomenon of North African immigration as being historically bound to colonialism. When France ordered an end to labour immigration in 1973, a new phase in the history of immigration began based on family reunion started. The immigrants and their families were located in very poor housing conditions in the form of shantytowns and then transferred to HLM *banlieues* (the equivalent of British council estates) on the periphery of French society with more or less the same poor housing conditions (Sayad, 1995; Laronde, 1993; Hervo and Charras, 1971).

With the end of economic prosperity, the immigrants started to be seen as a 'problem' and the theme of immigration started to acquire an increasing degree of visibility within French public life, especially at the beginning of the 1980s (Silverman, 1992; Ben Jelloun, 1984). However, as Neil MacMaster (1995) suggests in his research, the inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930s in France saw the development of anti-Maghrebian<sup>5</sup> racism, especially within certain State institutions and written sections of the media. This racism, which was linked with the 'criminalization' of the North African immigrants and which had long been established in the colonies as part of French colonial ideology, still continues to haunt contemporary France. Moreover, postcolonial France has failed to forge a positive history of post-war North African immigration to France, an immigration that has contributed considerably to the prosperity of the country.

For a long time, North African immigrants remained faceless and invisible as positive actors in French society, but since the 1980s, the invisibility of the single male migrant workers of the 1950s and 1960s has been strongly challenged by their descendants who have been marking public space with their various artistic, literary, political and social interventions (Begag and Chaouite, 1990; Laronde, 1993). However, in the French context, these young people are usually called 'second generation immigrants', or 'young Arabs' with all the political and social implications this definition can entail. Thus, they are still predominantly perceived, like their parents, as immigrants. This implies the exclusion of these young people from French society. They are seen as having the same status as their parents though they have not migrated from anywhere, defined by their belonging to the context of their parents' immigration and thus linked to a history which indeed constitutes a part of their identity, but not the only element of it. In these terms they are classified in the same economic roles and social status as their parents (never to climb the social ladder) and thus denied their 'Frenchness' (Laronde, 1993: 54). Nevertheless, France has to face the fact that they are French citizens (Begag and Chaouite, 1990: 82). The debate as to whether they can

be integrated into French society is ongoing, but meanwhile most, if not all of these young people believe that they already constitute a part of that society. There is a problem insofar as integration as 'a de facto historical and social entity' does not correspond to 'a mythical national type' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 223).

French citizens of 'ethnic' origin have tried since the 1980s to politicise their existence in French society by rejecting those political and cultural representations in French institutions that still consider them as 'foreigners' despite their French nationality and identity. This has been expressed through political marches, such as the famous March for Equality in 1983 and 1984; through protests against discrimination in housing, education and employment; and through artistic expression in the form of novel writing, music and filmmaking (Bouamama, 1994; Begag and Chaouite, 1990). However, their grievances have not been considered as the demands of citizens to be treated equally. Instead they have been 'culturalised'. Hence, if the youth of the *banlieues* revolt and burn cars, it is because of their 'different' culture.

## The 'banlieue syndrome'

The term *banlieue* is not only loaded with negative meanings in the French popular imagination, but also in some areas of sociological and social studies in France. The *banlieues* are usually referred to in a pathological way as a '*quartiers en difficulté*', (deprived areas) or '*zones sensibles*' (trouble spots). Since the 1990s, French media representations of the *banlieues* have been largely responsible for their negative perception. These have focused on distorted and selective images of crime and violence and hence emphasised the idea of the *banlieues* as the space of the threatening 'other' (Hargreaves, 1996: 613). The *banlieues* are usually equated with insecurity, crime, violence and a total rejection of French values and the French way of life on the part of their 'ethnic' inhabitants.

Neo-colonial attitudes and indifference to the needs of ethnic minorities within the French state have resulted in policies of spatial exclusion of immigrants and their descendants. As a result, the *banlieues*, mostly inhabited by descendants of North African and West African immigrants, have become known as zones of economic, social and political exclusion (Dubet and Lapeyronnie, 1992, Silverstein 2004).

The recent *banlieues* 'riots' in France are not new, they have been happening in separate *banlieues* since the 1980s. High levels of unemployment, lack of upward social mobility, poverty and exclusion combined with abusive police power had framed the riots in the past. The anger of the young began to be translated into acts of violent protests in 1981 in the *banlieues* of Lyons, in what were called 'rodeo riots', or the burning of cars. Successive riots followed in various *banlieues* (Sartrouville and Mantes-la-Jolie for example) in 1991 and continued sporadically throughout the 1990s. These disturbances have been predominantly represented as acts of criminality and delinquency, helping the French state to turn a blind eye to the real problems and causes of inequality in the *banlieues*. The recent riots that took place in the Northern *banlieues* of Paris are not very different from the past ones; they started when Ziad Benna and Bouna Traore, two teenagers of Tunisian and Malian origin died in a power station where they were hiding from a police chase. What is new about



them, is that they spread quickly from one *banlieue* to another across France's big cities, demonstrating extreme levels of despair and rage among the youth.

Even though the riots were further aggravated by the police throwing a hand grenade into a local mosque in Clichy-sous-bois, they were not instigated by religious feelings or concerns. Nevertheless, the *banlieues* have a history of being represented as a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalists in France<sup>6</sup> and some sections of the media and the authorities encouraged the idea that the Islamists were behind the riots. The UOIF's (The Union of French Islamic Associations') failed attempt to stop the riots demonstrated its weak control over the youth of the *banlieues*. However, by issuing a Fatwa to denounce the riots as anti-Islamic in an attempt to distance the riots from Islam, it reinforced the religious association. The danger of linking the riots with religion is that it represents Islam as a religion of hate: Islam is thus identified as the problem and not the racist policies of the French state.

In its frantic attempt to stop the riots, the French state, led by Chirac's right-of-centre government, revealed its colonial mentality by restoring a 1955 colonial law, designed at the time of the Algerian war to stop support for Algerian independence and which granted unlimited power to police commissioners to impose curfews, to search, stop and place any 'suspects' under house arrest. French colonial mentality is also quite evident in a new law passed 23rd February 2005 which encourages teachers and historians and hence the general public, to glorify French colonialism and its successes, especially in North Africa. This colonial mentality is reflected in the racist discourse of the French interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy and his heavy-handed policies in dealing with the residents of the *banlieues*.<sup>7</sup> He has emerged as the winner from these events for in some recent polls, his approval rating had increased by 11 points since the riots began.<sup>8</sup>

## Colonial Legacies?

The *banlieues* are sites of continuity with past racist and colonial exclusion in postcolonial France, colonial violence haunts postcolonial France. Colonial stereotypes are still exercising power. For example, the belief that the violence of the *banlieues* is something inherent in the ethnicity of the youth and that their physical and cultural differences make them essentially violent and criminal can be traced back to the colonial 'criminalisation' of North Africans. This practice had already been established in the colonies through colonial French ideology with its racist depictions of the natives. Fanon (1961: 353) links the French 'scientific' inferiorisation of the natives in colonial discourse with their criminalisation. Portrayals of young people of the *banlieues* as delinquent and violent regulate public official discourse about them. Powerful colonial racism that was based on the superior 'racial' morality of the colonisers has been perpetuated in the metropolis, not only in relation to the first immigrants who are seen as colonial subjects subordinated to this hierarchy, but also to their descendants who were born in France and are immersed in French values. The history of immigration provides an inter-generational link, which despite the differences between the original immigrants and their descendants, creates a foundation for the continuity of exclusion and marginality. The parents' anti-colonial memory in France at the time of the national liberation in North Africa, especially the events of the Algerian war, provides

particular grounds for their descendants to consolidate internal bonds with their parents' and now their own struggle against racism.

Patricia Lorcin (1995: 253) analyses the *mise à distance* that was widely implemented in colonial Algeria in terms of how the natives and the colonisers were separated not only culturally and 'racially' but also spatially. She argues that a 'clear distinction had to be maintained between the settler and the indigenous population'. Such a distinction has also been at work in the *banlieues* with their supposed 'ethnic difference'. The space occupied by the North African immigrants and their descendants is at the periphery of the social map, which reproduces the past hierarchical colonial relations between France and its colonial subjects. In Said's words, 'The appropriation of history, the historicisation of society'... include the accumulation and differentiation of social space, space to be used for social purposes' (Said, 2000: 93).

Colonial racism has to be seen as the focal point in the exclusion and violence of the youth of the *banlieue*, and not the orthodox official definition of migrancy, an interpretation that has been widely circulated especially by the Right wing of the French media. In other words, when migrancy is seen as the only decisive element in explaining the exclusion of the ethnic *banlieues*, it allows opportunities for descriptions that legitimise the hostility directed against the immigrants and their descendants by their reluctant 'hosts' because they are seen as representing the reaction of 'ordinary people' to 'differences'.

The colonial past with its inegalitarian perception of native cultures has cast its influence in France itself with the arrival of citizens from the ex-colonies who have been assigned a 'subaltern' economic and cultural position firstly as immigrant workers and then as Maghrebians. In so doing it emphasises the perception of 'legitimate' and 'deviant' cultures to cover for any social and economic domination (Guénif Souilamas, 2000: 50). The deviant carries the stigmas of another culture and is thereby labelled as foreigner to the main group. North African or Al-Maghreb denotes in the French context the Other whose geographical origins and culture are both irreducibly different and of an inferior social position (Ibid., 34). The denomination Maghrebien carries the emblematic figure of the foreigner (the Other of France) kept at the periphery and without a face. It also denies any kind of *metisage* that has already taken place between France and its 'immigrants'. The term Maghrebien designates a 'faceless' or a 'nameless' other (Ibid., 36); it is an apparently 'neutral' term that actually interposes between the self and the other; it is the 'foreigner' of the French or the 'almost French' but that can never be French. In other words, it aims at distancing those that contaminate the supposed 'purity' of the French identity, those who interrupt the imagined French 'genealogy' and with whom there had been a long and shared experience of 150 years of agonising colonial history.

Like their parents, the younger generation of North African origin feel excluded and pushed to the margins of society. They live in the most deprived *banlieues* of France's big cities where unemployment, crime, and violence thrive. They also suffer from racist discrimination and stigmatisation, which have accelerated since the 1990s. They are not only represented as outsiders but also as a threat to French society. In the national media, they are exemplified as thieves (*des voleurs*), as rapists (*des violeurs*) as 'veilers' ('*voileurs*') after the affair of the headscarf ban, and finally, in the recent past, as '*la racaille*' or scum.<sup>9</sup> Moreover,

there has always been an absence of mediation and dialogue between the young people in the *banlieues* and the authorities. The only 'mediators' are the police who represent, in the eyes of the youth, 'the System' with all its racism and repression. It is indicative that the violence of the latest rebellions often targeted police stations, shopping centres, municipal centres and any other commercial or state institutions that were perceived by the youth as being linked with their exclusion.

Their neighbourhoods are being ethnicised and spatially segregated because they are claimed not to accept the 'civilisation' of the dominant culture, but beneath this argument lies the fact that this ethnicising of territory allows the concealment of social inequalities and exclusion. Ethnicisation of neighbourhood, which is translated into spatial segregation or territorialisation is the work of society and of social constitutions that convert social inequalities into cultural features (Guénif Souilamas, 2000: 79).

Most of the time, descendants of North Africans are only mentioned in the French media when it is a question of referring to their existence as Muslims. For example, at the time of the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, though Rushdie's novel had not yet been translated into French, the descendants of North African immigrants were asked to define their position very clearly in terms of democracy and after the events of the 11th of September 2001, they were asked to do so in relation to Islamic fundamentalism (Khomeini and Ben Laden) (Begag and Chaouite 1990). In other words, they are always pushed to take a position of a 'yes' or a 'no', to make a choice between two things: Maghrebian or French nationality, to be a Muslim (the choice of wearing the headscarf equals fundamentalism) or a democrat (seen as totally incompatible). This makes their life a matter of simple choosing between what is perceived by the French as the civilised and democratic choice and the irreconcilable and 'deviant' choice of the parents' culture.

The French model of integration considers all the individuals in the Republic as having equal rights as citizens, whatever their origin, religion, or culture. Thus, ideally speaking, citizens are recognised as individuals with rights, but realities on the ground demonstrate the persistent existence of patterns of discrimination against citizens of North African and African origin. The heart of the problem lies in the inability of the Republican institutions to recognise these *de facto* inequalities and treat them in the name of equality of rights. The French abstract model of integration claims, on the one hand, the equality of all citizens whatever their 'race', religion or culture, refusing the discourse of 'difference' and on the other, turns a blind eye to practices of discrimination in employment, housing and education against people of 'ethnic' origin (the majority of North and West African origin). France suffers from a deep institutional racism, but because the Republican law refuses to accept racial discrimination (there are no statistics about such), then this racism cannot be treated institutionally. If there are no statistics for the participation or exclusion of ethnic minorities in work, education, employment, how can discrimination be monitored and stopped?

## Conclusion

The French political discourses of the right and the left have focused on the need for security

in the *banlieues* in their political campaigns, which creates in the popular imagination a sense of those places as a threat, and hence contributes to the depoliticisation of questions of inequality, exclusion and discrimination. Since taking office, Nicolas Sarkozy's government has dramatically cut the funds of the youth associations that were working closely with the residents of the *banlieues*, and has deployed this money to reinforce the police presence, especially after September 2001 and the 'war on terror'. Negative local conditions are further aggravated by the fact that the youth of the *banlieues* suffer from the highest rate of unemployment and school drop-out in France (Mullier, 2004). Their recent rebellion, therefore, must be seen as a revolt against colonial racism, long-term discrimination, stigmatisation, unemployment, racist police behaviour, but above all, an uprising against exclusion and second-class citizenship. What unites these young people of various backgrounds is their rage against racism and marginalisation, and their solidarity transcends ethnic, religious and cultural origins. Their rage has been met by the state's repressive response, but repression will never solve the problem or makes the rage go away.

One must refer to the way racist attitudes and prejudice existed in the colonies and hence permeated French culture in the form of the creation of systems of discrimination against French citizens of 'ethnic' origin. The French model is based on the belief that any form of recognition of 'difference' can lead to the division of society into distinct groups and thus can lead to tension and struggle. Thus, it is theoretically that of the integration of individuals and not that of the recognition of communities. Political universalism replaces any form of ethnocultural particularism and difference (Silverman 1992, 1995, Nair, 1992). Nevertheless, though the state (in theory) adopts the universalist discourse of integration and refuses to recognise institutionally cultural differences, ethnocultural classifications and notions of a 'national identity' are still used to exclude and discriminate against the 'ethnic Other' (Silverman, 1995). Etienne Balibar (1992: 11) recognises how the processes of racialisation and nationalisation of the State are saturated within the hierarchical structures of the State's institutions. Therefore, Balibar argues for a certain *égaliberté*, a concept that perceives *Egalité* (equality) and *liberté* (liberty) as strongly linked (Ibid., 135).

## Notes

- 1 The *banlieue* is a set of small neighbourhoods united only because of their geographical proximity to each other and their distance from the centre. The *banlieues* are located on the periphery of France's big cities. They are in the 'suburbs', but unlike the suburbs in Britain, which are predominantly middle-class areas, the *banlieues* or HLM cités (low-income housing) are similar to inner city areas (council estates). Most North African immigrants and their descendants live in large *banlieues* where delinquency, crime and violence reign. Those neighbourhoods are designated for those on the lowest rung of the social ladder. They are the targets of violent police interventions, which are most of the time marked by prejudice and institutional racism. (See, Begag and Chaouite 1990, Begag and Delorme 1994 Laronde 1993, MacMaster 1997).
- 2 An example of this is Daniel Pipes' article in *The New York Sun* of November 8, 2005 in which he calls the riots a 'semi-organised Muslim insurgency'. See <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/3113>

- 3 See Xavier Ternisien's report in *Le Monde*, 9 November 2005.
- 4 Britain's 'inner cities' areas knew similar riots in early 1980s in Bristol, London, Liverpool and Birmingham (Benyon 1984) and most recently in the summer of 2001 in the Northern cities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley when young British Asians clashed with the police (for an interesting analysis of these events, see Amin 2003 and Worley 2005). These urban unrests have been equated in the public mind in Britain and in France with issues of immigration and 'race'. However, a closer analysis reveals that these riots are genuine protests of stigmatised groups against discrimination, poverty, social inequalities, second-class citizenship and exclusion.
- 5 North Africa is also called the Maghreb, meaning the west in Arabic, the west of the East, or the Arab world.
- 6 This link between the *banlieues* and Islamic extremism started with the events of 1995 when two young men from the Lyonnais suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin (Khaled Kelkal and Karim Moussa) were involved in the bombings of Parisian and Lyonnais train stations, attributed to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) that was linked to the civil war in Algeria between the military government and the Islamists. Some sections of the media have established a link between the international terrorist networks and the *banlieues* and, as Silverstein (2000: 24) argues: 'Young Franco-Maghrebi "delinquents" were, according to these [media] reports, recruited through Islamic associations, indoctrinated in "Islamist Summer camps" and then shipped off to Bosnia or Afghanistan or Algeria proper to fulfil their destiny of "Jihad"'.
- 7 Sarkozy's injudicious language during the riots exacerbated the situation; he called the rioting youth 'scum', 'louts' and 'rabble' and promised to clean them out of the housing estates. See *The Guardian*, Friday December 23, 2005.
- 8 See *The Guardian*, Thursday November 17, 2005.
- 9 See Eric Macé's article in *Le Monde*, 7 November 2005.

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# The place of doubt in youth work – a personal journey

**Bernard Davies**

*This article starts from the proposition that 'doubt' is a defining feature of the human condition, providing the fuel for the questioning of oneself and about the world essential for both individual and societal re-evaluation and renewal. After tracing the sources of this sceptical perspective in my own history, particularly as a secular British Jew, I argue for its increasing relevance to youth work. This arises from the expectation facing young people as they tackle the identity-forming tasks of adolescence that they will face difficult personal and social choices which, though more and more run through with ambiguity and contradiction, have to be made with fewer and fewer 'given' collective ground-rules to guide and support them. As one (very modest) response to addressing simplistic 'either-or', 'for-us-or-against-us' ways of resolving these doubts, the article proposes a training package capable of being tailored to different audiences, timeframes and settings.*

**Keywords:** *Ambiguity, doubt.*

This is an article I have stumbled into writing – without, I have to say, the usual research (except into my own consciousness) and almost without premeditation.

The process started at the first National Conference on Muslim Youth Work held in Birmingham in December 2005. Unashamedly, I went because I felt, urgently, I needed to *learn*. Not primarily (I hoped) as a multi-cultural tourist seeking a quick trip around 'young Muslims in Britain today' – though, I have to confess, along the way there were plenty of humbling, striking and yet somehow familiar experiences of a heterogeneous gathering of professionals and community activists struggling to do their best by their young people.

However, my most conscious motivation for attending the Birmingham Conference was to understand how the Muslim communities in Britain were developing and practising their youth work in a political climate so often driven by moral panic and amidst relentless and overwhelmingly hostile image-shaping by the media. In effect, as one conference participant put it, these pressures demand that this segment of our adolescent population make identity choices which other, even deeply suspect, 'others' are never asked to make: your religion or your nation. My attendance at the conference started from the premise that the developmental and person-centred approaches which lie at the heart of the youth work commitment could have special resonances for these young people.

At that first conference, Muhammad Khan offered a workshop on 'A Muslim conceptual



framework for youth work’ – fascinating and stimulating in its own right but particularly intriguing for me because of Muhammad’s almost passing reference to the place of doubt in his faith and work. What, I wondered (and eventually asked in the workshop) was this place? How did such doubt fit with his faith – the faith of a Muslim? How did it influence his work? And, more self-centredly, how far and in what ways did it mean the same as it means for someone like me who, if I give myself a label at all, am likely to end up calling myself a sceptic.

Our brief public conversation at the conference prompted an exchange of emails which again spoke directly to my ways of trying to understand and act in the world. In one of them Muhammad quoted from the works of Rumi (of whom, then, I had never heard) – an early thirteenth century mystical poet born in what is today Afghanistan:

*The way leads through doubt to the shore of truth  
Just as an answer is reached through questioning*

There then followed an invitation to make a brief input at the second conference (held in Bradford in March 2006) on what is now the title of this article.

In making that input to an audience of 250 people, 60 – 70 per cent of whom were Muslim, I offered two cautions. One was implicit in my emphasis above on my trying to make sense of the world since what follows is a description mainly of aspirations and struggles rather than actual achievement. The other was the recognition that what I was presenting came from a particular perspective. In general this could be defined as white, male and especially ‘western’. More specifically, it was and is very personal, stemming from experiences of family, community and religious and cultural identity which are particular to me. Far from treating such influences as givens, I clearly needed to acknowledge them openly – and as not necessarily universally shared ways of conceptualising or judging human interaction or the human condition.

In doing this I was making (and still make) no apology for these perspectives. In part this is because what I was invited to do was explicitly to filter my presentation through them – my title after all did talk about ‘a personal journey’. But, with the diverse and critical Birmingham audience as my guide, I was also confident that, starting from their own positions of scepticism, questioning and doubt, the Bradford audience would use my contribution as the starting point for debate.

This confrontation with the personal within the professional is for me essential anyway. I start from the proposition that the two can never be wholly separated – that seeking to remove ourselves, our values, our perceptions and interpretations from our work is never a realistic option. Ultimately ‘practice’ – youth work practice no more or less than any other – is delivered by and through the subjectivity of the human being. That subjectivity certainly needs to be checked and balanced by disciplined reflection and self-reflection. However it can never be eliminated. Nor indeed should it be since it is the carrier of the passion, the compassion and the empathy on which all good practice rides.

To help explain the place of doubt in my own efforts to construct such a practice, it thus

seemed appropriate to start by tracing my personal journey – especially of ideas and values. As so often happens, negotiating this process turned out to be a learning experience in its own right. Unplanned, it prompted that form of ‘education’ which often gets least credit or even recognition – making available to oneself what we already ‘know’ but haven’t brought to consciousness and so don’t fully understand. In putting my conference talk together, I found myself making new connections between, and discovering new meanings in past experiences which for years had remained under- or even un- interpreted.

So... what were the key features of that personal journey? For the focus of this piece, perhaps most crucially, one is the strand of Judaism which helped shape my early years. In this, the thread of *religious* identity took the form of a selective range of practices and rituals largely associated with birth, confirmation, marriage and death and with the observance of the Jewish High Festivals and the Passover. Stopping well short of what any strictly orthodox Jew would have expected, these seem in hindsight to have acted more as the glue of family and community bonds than as an expression of reverence for God and the sacred or even of spirituality. Moreover in that period too (the later 1940s and 1950s) and in a community (north Manchester) which had not experienced it directly, even the calamity of the Holocaust remained largely a silent shadow overhanging. Indeed its meaning only really became personal to me when, many years later, a survivor from a country occupied by the Nazis married into my family.

For most days of the year therefore, including most Saturdays (the Sabbath), life was predominantly secular – British secular. The main focuses were not that different from those of my non-Jewish friends, though most of them did have some distinctively Jewish attributes and nuances. There was of course family, which for me, unthinkingly, was ‘extended’, embracing eleven aunts and uncles, their spouses and their children and requiring the negotiation of some hugely complex inter-relationships. There was my father’s job in the waterproof garment industry, which he hated and which could well have accounted for his early death. There was my own and my brother’s education – valued amongst Jews for its own sake as well as for the access it promised to opportunities my parents had never had. There was recreation – especially agonising over whether (as they sometimes did in those days!) Manchester City would finish higher in the league than Manchester United. And there were politics.

For my personal journey, the politics – radical, critical, deeply committed to social and economic justice – were crucial: the magnetic drag on the compass point. An integral part of the Jewish culture and identity in which I grew up, the roots of these politics lay in the Eastern Europe communities which in the last decades of the nineteenth century thousands of Jews, including some my family, had been forced to leave by the pogroms – organised violent anti-semitic attacks. Many of these Jews, brought up on the questioning forms of debate deeply embedded in Jewish religious study and education, had been involved in radical (and indeed sometimes revolutionary) movements then emerging to reform or overthrow the autocratic and oppressive regimes of those countries.

These emigrants thus did not start from assumptions of compliance with or even respect for the status quo, whether institutional or intellectual. On the contrary, deeply entrenched within their Jewishness was a strong tradition of divergent and doubting ways of thinking

which at that time, within the tradition, extended to passionate debates over the emergent notion of Zionism. At the heart of the latter often was the question: 'Should the Jews really be seeking a separate Jewish homeland, rather than committing themselves to fighting for justice and equality within the countries where they were living?'

Looking back over two generations at least, I now like to see myself as a product of that culture and tradition. Not, directly, the critique of Zionism – that I had to work out for myself during my teens and early 20s. This proved to be one of earliest and more painful struggles with the mental and emotional discomforts which doubt can bring, within a community which, even more than today, simply took its commitment to Israel for granted.

More generally though, I have recollections from my later childhood and early teens, vague and barely understood but still credible, of conversations swirling around me, often suffused with powerful feelings such as resentment and indeed anger, on inequality and injustice and the need to confront them. As well as some of his family and friends, they particularly feature my father – including a recalled sense of his euphoria on the day after the 1945 Labour victory for which he had worked.

Though he died when I was 17, through these and other much more targeted conversations, my father introduced me too, to the idea of self-reflective behaviour long before I had ever heard the term, or it had become part of my professional jargon. Insisting on the primacy of intellectual honesty, with oneself as well as with others, he left me with some bottom-line guiding principles – such as:

- Never assume the conclusion you've reached today is the final one.
- Our understanding of world will always be incomplete – a staging post along the way to (perhaps) some greater clarity.
- Face the possibility – indeed the likelihood – that today's certainties will look jaded and even indefensible next year or in five years.
- Always entertain the possibility that the next question will turn out to be much more interesting or challenging or revealing than the last answer.

Underlying all this is a deeper message: that doubt is not to be treated as an aberration – an unfortunate obstacle in the way of achieving the comfortable life, to be eliminated as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Rather it is to be viewed as a defining feature of the human condition, to be valued and embraced as the fuel for driving personal growth and societal development.

So what do I mean by doubt in this context? The Oxford dictionary talks about 'the act or process of questioning truth or fact. That which is open to question'. The focus here, it should be noted, is not on doubts (in the plural) – about specific ideas or actions or choices. It is on doubt in the singular, as a generic concept – a lens through which to refract what goes on in the world in order to assess how to act on that world rather than just receive whatever it throws up.

Asserting a continuously questioning approach of this kind should not of course be taken as a rejection of adherence to some core values. In my case under this rubric I would

list a belief in individuals' capacity to go to where they have often never dreamed of going, collectively as well as separately. For me this includes their right to the freedom, the opportunity and especially the means for attempting to do this. It also includes a commitment to their right as they do this to be treated equally and justly – with respect, caring and compassion.

However, by definition, these are not statements of *knowing* – based on *proof* of the importance of these values or certainly not of their absolute and universal validity and application. They are what they say they are: statements of belief, of conviction and ultimately, once that intellectual honesty kicks in, of *faith*. They therefore require that I – we – proceed on the 'as if' principle: as if they were 'true'.

What 'real life' confirms repeatedly however is that even our most deeply held beliefs and values come into conflict with each other and in doing so face us with choices between them which undermine any claim to their absoluteness. What we are required to do then, is pick our way through different – even competing – 'goods'. At the inter-personal level for example, this may call for a decision to safeguard a young person from harm or even death rather than treat the confidentiality of the relationship as an absolute. Or, in a much more public sphere, it may mean constraint by the media in exercising their freedom of expression both out of respect for the sensitivities of millions of individuals touched very personally by their words and visual images and also, in dangerous times, out of a concern to help maintain some already delicately balanced community and political relations.

For in the end, the process of applying our values and beliefs, including ones that are most deeply felt, requires *judgement*. And this in turn assumes questioning, self-questioning, the avoidance of the arrogance of certainty – an exploration of alternative interpretations and possibilities. In these processes doubt acts as the crucial safety valve.

Finally, what has all this got to do with youth work? Here I need to acknowledge the contribution to my thinking of Bryan Merton with whom I've been working over the past few months to develop the training module set out in the appendix to this article. For me, it represents a grounded example of how the values and the aspirations at the heart of this article might, in a very modest way, be turned into action. This is designed to help prepare youth workers to support young people for dealing with just the kinds of ambiguous and often conflicting choices outlined above. It assumes that such support is particularly important as young people confront the questions of adolescence central to defining a confident personal identity: Who am I? What is distinctive and special about me? Who do I hope and want to become? What do I believe? Where do I belong?

In adolescence, for most young people, the answers to these questions are not yet set in stone. On the contrary they are integral to their transition, as they move out of the taken-for-granted certainties of childhood and start, consciously, self-consciously, in their own way to deal with the world around them. One of the features – indeed the strengths – of the developmental stage we call adolescence is that individuals use the time and space this gives to experiment – to rehearse alternative versions of themselves by trying out different answers to those key identity questions.

In western industrialised society over the last 100 to 150 years, this process has never been straightforward or tension free. The choices, the options, have always been there – some highly contradictory. Often, again especially during the adolescent transition, these have left young people searching and unsure. In the past however, there have been a range of guidelines and boundaries laid down for them, often very firmly, by family, class, gender, culture and community, religious identity, nation.

Today, certainly in a society like Britain's, where they have not already crumbled, those markers are being put under huge strain by fast and unrelenting economic and technological change. As a result, with a multiplicity of possible responses to the available choices being communicated instantly from all around the world, more and more of these are being left to individuals to make on their own, on the basis of their own readings of and judgements on their meanings and consequences.

All this can leave young people confused and even overwhelmed as they tackle those crucial developmental, especially identity tasks of adolescence. They can repeatedly be faced with seemingly irresolvable conflicts of values, loyalties and identities. They can find themselves dealing with ambiguous messages open to a range of interpretations. These experiences then spark ambivalent feelings over possible outcomes, the effects of the choices they make on themselves and on others about whom they care deeply.

In response to pressures exerted today by politicians, the media, anxious parents, anxious communities, we are all, not just young people, open to resolving these very complex questions and dilemmas by settling for simplistic one-dimensional answers. Huge pressures exist, from within the person as well as from without, to 'sort' it; to settle for the less painful solutions and the less taxing ways of reaching them; to conclude, 'If you are not with us, you are against us;' to operate simply on the principles of either / or; us or them: 'I'm in – so you're out,' 'if-it's-not-this-then it-must-be-that,' and (often literally) 'black, or white.'

None of this applies only to young people of course. However, it is particularly important to address these issues with young people because they are at that stage of their development when they are open to dealing with such choices in less stereotyped ways – still experimenting. It is important to do this also for another reason. If at that developmental stage they do not see dilemmas and choices and un-certainties as inescapable features of every day living; if they do not begin to embrace difference rather than treat it as a threat; if they do not recognise the excitement of doubt; and if they do not develop the skills for facing and negotiating these experiences; if they do not work on these tasks as adolescents, then they are much less likely to do so later.

In working out the relevance of these perspectives for youth workers, I start from the proposition that Muslim youth work is at the same time like all other youth work, like some other youth work and like no other youth work. In the ways in which it is like all other youth work it is a practice rooted in unpredictability, operating without the reassuring frameworks of the teacher's set (exam) syllabus, or the social worker's intensive behavioural change programme or the career adviser's listings of course opportunities or job openings. For, as Her Majesty's Inspectorate pointed out many years ago, by definition and tradition, youth

work's reactions have to be made 'on the wing'. As such they require a rapid and highly sensitive responsiveness to where *this* group of young people are starting, to what *they* want and need from *this* youth work encounter, to what *they* are bringing (including their uncertainties, their searching); that is, to what in the *here and now* these young people are saying, doing, *signalling*. Therefore, the youth worker least of all can afford too many pre-determined certainties in developing her or his practice.

Here for me is the point where my personal struggle to working actively and openly with doubt meets my understandings of what is needed today for work with young people, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, secular. My bottom line, (my judgement!), is: if as youth workers it is certainties we are seeking to pass on to young people then, whatever their background or identity, we will be doing them a great and long-term disservice. Youth workers, I conclude, can not afford to be without doubt.

I end with two poems. The first, which this time I discovered for myself while writing this article, is again one of Rumi's:

*I asked, 'What should I do?'*  
*He said, 'That is the question.'*  
*I said, 'Is this all you can say?'*  
*He said, 'Seeker, always keep asking,*  
*"What should I do?"'*

The other I found posted on the wall of a young people's centre and attributed as 'contributed' by a young person in secure accommodation. Since making the Bradford presentation I have discovered, via <http://www.coping.org/growth/risk.htm>, that this did not mean it was written by this young person. Indeed its author is unknown:

#### **RISK TAKING IS FREE .....**

*To laugh is to risk appearing the fool*  
*To weep is to risk appearing sentimental*  
*To reach out for another is to risk involvement*  
*To expose feeling is to risk exposing your true self*  
*To place your ideas, your dreams before the crowd is to risk their loss*  
*To love is to risk not being loved in return*  
*To live is to risk dying*  
*To hope is to risk despair*  
*To try is to risk failure*  
*But risk must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing*  
*The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, and is nothing.*  
*He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love,*  
*live.*  
*Chaired by his certitudes, he is a slave, he has forfeited freedom*  
*Only a person who risks ... Is free.*

## APPENDIX

### AMBIGUITY, IDENTITY AND CONFLICT

#### A proposal for training for work with young people

##### Rationale

Life is a journey towards some kind of truth and everybody has a right to make that journey. On the road we come across those who are different to ourselves. When we do so, do we see danger or a potential enemy or do we see a fellow traveller? Or to put it more simply, do we see threat or opportunity?

At its heart, this proposal says 'opportunity'.

Young people are growing up in complex, fast-moving societies where boundaries and identities can quickly become blurred. A shrinking world without walls brings benefits but also renders people more vulnerable. It falls on adults to bear some responsibility for helping an emerging generation manage the risks this entails. There are some potent contradictions and complexities about being in this shrinking world.

- People want to feel a part of something while sometimes experiencing being apart from everything.
- People are told 'if you are not with us, you are against us'.
- Their sense of who they are and where they belong is influenced by many factors (family, locality, religion), some of which may contradict or conflict with each other.
- Fear of difference may overpower fascination with it and celebration of it.
- The movement of people, ideas and information across traditional boundaries takes place with greater frequency and speed and has multiple impacts.
- Some characteristics are given greater moral and political weight than others – for example, certainty (often mistaken for strength) over uncertainty, knowing and believing over not knowing and disbelieving;
- Gain rarely comes without some pain, winning without some loss (for others if not for one's self).

The two working assumptions underpinning the training would therefore be:

1. In order to help others understand and come to terms with these ambiguities, (young) people must first learn how to manage them for themselves. The 'curriculum' of this training (its content and methods) would therefore mirror the one in which workers aim to engage young people.
2. When seeking to understand and 'manage' the complex and the ambiguous, (young) people have a strong sense of ambivalence. This doubt can cause confusion and sometimes generates strong feelings, some of which may be directed negatively towards groups they perceive as 'out', 'not us', 'other'. For those working with young people, this requires that they are clear about their own feelings in response to these dilemmas and that they share them, their understanding of them and what may underlie them.

## **Potential participants**

- Youth workers in training
- Full-time, part-time and voluntary youth workers
- Service managers
- Young people as young leaders, peer trainers and mentors

## **Potential 'sites' for delivery**

- One-off sessions within a qualifying course
- Whole or part of a module within a qualifying course
- A one-off or short series of sessions within an in-service course
- A one-off or short series of sessions with a staff team (unit/ whole organisation; field practitioners and/or managers)
- A one-off workshop at a conference
- A tailor-made offering to organisations / units
- Promoted as an off-the-shelf offering to individuals

## **Some possible aims for the training**

- To create a climate within the participant group which will encourage and support open, honest and critical (self) reflection.
- To raise participants' awareness of how ambiguity, identity and conflict affect them personally in their own lives and how these experiences affect their personal and professional attitudes and behaviour.
- To increase participants' confidence in facing and negotiating the personal feelings and professional choices these experiences generate.
- To consider and clarify the current contexts of, reasons for and effects of ambiguity and conflict in society generally and in young people's lives specifically – particularly in relation to:
  - the developmental tasks associated with adolescence;
  - roles and relationships in the adolescent peer group;
  - significant social identifiers and categories – for example gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability
- To clarify and practise methods and skills for initiating and developing youth work processes which will help young people to understand and negotiate ambiguity, identity and conflict in their lives
- To clarify participants' support needs for developing these processes in their work with young people

## **Specific content**

### *Baselines for the training*

- Personal introductions: names; how participants' identify themselves
- Negotiating ground rules including the values that form the basis for engagement and collaboration within the training
- Approaches, tools and techniques for aiding reflection during the training



- Definitions: agreeing meanings of 'ambiguity', 'identity', 'conflict' and other key concepts

#### *Underpinning values*

- Clarifying key aims of the direct practice with young people which the training is designed to encourage and support – for example: 'embracing difference'; 'seeking inclusiveness'; 'developing empathetic insight into the situation of "the other"'.  
• Clarifying the beliefs and values underpinning these aims and guiding the practice – for example: 'social justice'; 'truth' and 'honesty'; 'integrity'.

#### *Analysis, contextualisation and conceptualisation*

- Understanding ambiguity, identity and conflict and their significance for young people in current (local, national and international) political contexts.
- Understanding ambiguity, identity and conflict and their significance for young people in wider social contexts – for example, of increasingly individualised and 'atomised' decision-making within a society of rapid and complex communications; of tensions between 'self-chosen' and 'given' (externally imposed) identities.
- Understanding ambiguity, identity and conflict through the use of relevant (social) psychological concepts – for example, 'in-group out group' processes; attitude formation.
- The implications of ambiguity and conflict for identity formation and re-formation within the process of 'the adolescent transition'.
- The incidence (?occurrence) of ambiguity and conflict, the feelings and behaviours they give rise to and how they impact upon the personal, professional and political domains of young people's and professionals' lives.

#### *Practice*

- Planning a specific piece of practice with young people designed to address issues of ambiguity, identity and conflict as analysed and understood within the training – with the aim of clarifying which young people might be involved, why and how.
- Implementing and recording this practice with the aim of clarifying and conceptualising relevant skills, methods, locations, 'hooks' for winning young people's participation and 'vehicles' for delivering it.
- Identifying opportunities for and obstacles to making this practice sustainable by embedding it in current organisational structures and cultures – for example; by linking it into existing curricular frameworks; clarifying support and resource needs; implementing appropriate evaluation and future planning processes.

#### *Format*

- Aims and content will be tailored according to the starting points and needs of specific groups of participants, the 'site' of the training and time available
- However a preferred format is a two day action-learning event with one day of training followed by a two- to three-month period of action by the participants followed by a recall event to review the action taken and the lessons learned.

#### *Process*

- The training will be planned to develop participants' experience from relatively safe

starting-points, through challenge and uncertainty, to increased confidence and clarity in addressing the issues of identity, ambiguity and conflict with young people

*Some possible methods*

- Case studies – taken from participants' current practice where possible – illustrating ambiguity, ambivalence and conflict as a significant feature of:
  - young people's daily experience
  - the adolescent peer group
  - youth workers' roles and relationships with (a) young people and (b) with authority
- Exchanges amongst tutors and participants structured through individual, pair and small group activities – to clarify the nature and effects of ambiguity, ambivalence and conflict:
  - as participants experience them in their lives currently
  - as they experienced them as young people
- Exchanges amongst tutors and participants structured through individual, pair and small group exercises – designed to make more explicit participants' own feelings, attitudes and behaviours when dealing with this kind of material
- Role plays illustrating ambiguity, ambivalence and conflict at work:
  - in young people's lives
  - in youth work situations.
- Focused practice – using prompt and recording frameworks for prior and retrospective analysis through group discussion
- Inputs (facilitators; participants; young people)

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May 2006

# Drawing on the Past

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# Models of Muslim Youthwork: Between Reform and Empowerment

**Sadek Hamid**

*The predictable moral panics from certain sections of the media after the terrorist attacks in London obscure the more mundane challenges that British Muslim young people share with their non-Muslim peers. Despite struggling against socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination, most Muslim youth are concerned with very adolescent concerns about 'fitting in', relationships, and identity exploration, and generally trying to succeed in life. This article outlines different approaches of working with Muslim young people in Britain. It begins by sketching some of the everyday challenges which they face and goes on to describe and evaluate some of the conceptual frameworks and outreach methodologies used. It concludes with some of the challenges that lie ahead for practitioners and suggests how Muslim faith based approaches to youthwork can be supported.*

**Keywords:** *Muslims, Youth work, models, practice*

## Muslim Youth Issues: A Sketch

British Muslim communities are a diverse tapestry, reflecting various strands of global Muslim societies. In the current population of between 1.6 - 1.8 million people, 50% are under the age of 25 and approximately 33% under the age of 16. Around 68% are of South Asian origin (Peach, 2005) with the remaining from Middle Eastern countries, North sub-Saharan Africa, and significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers settled over the last decade after fleeing persecution or war.

From the end of the 1980s to the early 21st Century, British Muslims have become much more of a visible minority. Important developments have taken place in their communities as a result of changing demographics, social marginalisation, increasing religious awareness and the repercussions of local and international events. Young people have been instrumental in shaping some of these socio-political transformations. While many are well integrated and have gone on to become successful adults, an increasing number face a range of challenges which inhibit their opportunities and quality of life. This long list includes poor and overcrowded housing, educational underachievement, unemployment, a lack of parent-child communication, racism, Islamophobia, cultural alienation and increasing social problems such as: substance addiction, rise in criminal, anti-social behaviour and gang violence, teenage pregnancies, mental health problems and lack of political representation. The project manager of the Muslim Youth Helpline telephone counselling service explained that the most frequent forms of enquiry which they receive are about:

*Family, relationships, sexuality, drugs and mental health issues such as depression. 'What exacerbates these problems is that there are no support services, or support from within the [Muslim] community, for people struggling with resolving their identities... There are huge cultural and generational differences within the community which also play a role.' What their experience suggests, says Ms Fulat, is that most young people just get on with their lives.*

(BBC website, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3586421.stm> Wednesday, 31 March, 2004)

Muslim organisations conducting research funded by Brent Council in London discovered that drug abuse and smoking was significantly higher among Muslim young people. In addition mental illness was more prevalent among Muslim youth, especially among refugees. Other agencies and professionals that work with Muslim young people have reported similar patterns of disaffection and dislocation. Other recent reports and fora (e.g. MCB, 2005; FOSIS, 2005) all point to an alarming consensus on the growing crisis among British Muslim youth and the inadequate response inside and outside of the communities.

It is important to note that Muslim young people increasingly identify themselves in terms of their religious identity, instead of their ethnic origin, even though they may not practice their religion on a regular basis. What is remarkable is that in spite of all the difficulties and feelings of social exclusion, the majority also want to be included and describe themselves as British. Talk to British Muslim young people and they will tell you that they feel a sense of belonging but at the same time do not fully feel unaccepted. The pressure on young Muslims has been compounded by the Anti-Terrorist legislation, an increase in police stop and search tactics, dawn raids, irresponsible media attention and a rising general Islamophobic climate after the events in July 2005, adding a further layer to difficulties young Muslims face in trying to live normal lives.

Those concerned with the welfare of young people have major challenges in dealing both the external socio-economic challenges and the internal problems within the communities. However, the quantitative and qualitative response to these issues vary in terms of how people understand the needs of Muslim young people.

## Different Methodologies

Any examination of how Muslims work with their young needs to be prefaced by a discussion of what the difference is, if any, between 'Muslim' and 'Islamic youthwork'. This distinction between the two is explored in greater depth by others but for me, it lies in aims and processes. Islamic youthwork is a confessional approach motivated by the basic goal of reaching out to young people with the message of Islam. It shares similarities with Christian evangelical outreach methodologies where the explicitly stated outcome is for young people to return to and practice their religion. Religiously lapsed youngsters are targeted via the provision of sports and recreation activities intended to draw them back to their faith. I understand Muslim youth work as being a person centred approach which starts with where the young person is at, in his or her life. It is dialogical and facilitates self-discovery and empowerment. It assumes the young person has pressing needs that require immediate

attention but whose style of delivery and ethos is informed by and sensitive to the values of Islam.

Currently very little literature exists on Muslim approaches to working with young people other than indirect advice in Muslim parenting manuals, religious activism worker training books and information scattered on Islamic websites. My own experience would suggest that in the UK, there are broadly three types of Muslim youth work models -the reformist, secular and service based approaches.

## Reformism

Reformist approaches are rooted in Islamic revivalism which originated in Muslim countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dominant ideas were developed in a climate of resistance to western colonialism through a return to Islamic values in the private and public sphere (Abu-Rabi, 1996). The most influential of these have been the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the Arab world and The Jamaati-Islami (JI) in the Indian sub continent. British organisations representative of these two trends were established in the first generation of settlers in the 1960s by organisations such as the MB influenced Muslim Student Society (MSS) and the JI inspired UK Islamic Mission (UKIM).

Reformist models of youthwork are best exemplified in the JI inspired work of the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), Young Muslims UK (YM) and the youth wing of the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), which is modelled on the MB. Reformist approaches to youthwork are primarily about reconnecting young people to their religious heritage and the reversal of a perceived decline in morality and ritual practice. Such an approach is predicated on the assumption that young people require a moral compass and support that will address their intellectual, emotional, physical, social and spiritual needs.

Probably the earliest attempt at reformist youthwork can be traced back to the activities of the Islamic Youth Movement in the 1970s (Gilliant, 1996). Its key activist had been seconded from the UKIM to develop youth work among children who attended after-school religious education. Through work in local schools, he was able to recruit a small core of individuals to form a youth movement, and network with other like-minded youth groups. The IYM held regular weekly meetings, where they studied the works of reformist ideologues with the work growing to include other activities and camping trips and in 1976 created a magazine called *The Movement*.

The remnants of the IYM were repackaged and launched as a national youth movement YM in 1984 ([www.ymuk.net/](http://www.ymuk.net/)). YM caters roughly for the 13- 21 age bracket, has a girls' section and conducts its work in major British cities by hosting religious study circles, lecture programmes, sporting competitions and camps. They attempt to provide a counter-culture for Muslim youth by producing a range of activities and media and alternatives to popular secular youth pastimes. YM produced its own magazine, *Trends*, as well as leaflets, Islamic music cassettes and audio materials explaining aspects of Islam. YM Members have been instrumental in the past in acquiring and running annual Ramadan radio stations in cities where they have a significant membership such as Glasgow, Bradford and London.

Recently, with the assistance of its adult counterpart the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB) the organisation formed the Islamic scouts group, which provides a feeder into YM. After leaving YM members are expected to join the ISB.

The other main leader in Islamic youth work in Britain is the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) ([www.ymouk.com](http://www.ymouk.com)). Established in 1979, it caters for and is run by young people of Bangladeshi origin (Garbin, 2005) and offers most of the same activities as its rival YM. The differences between them are minimal and mainly around YMO's more conservative interpretation and practice of Islamic law. They also have a parallel but separate young women's movement called Muslimat. Though having branches across the UK, the YMO are strongest in East London and have paid more attention to youthwork, which has resulted in a number of their personnel becoming professional or volunteer youth workers. The YMO youthwork approach includes religious education, recreation and the tackling of specific social problems within their communities. In Tower Hamlets, their highly disciplined workers have made significant inroads into raising educational attainment and religious consciousness by working with high schools, colleges and universities and has rewarded Muslim academic excellence through its School Link Project and College Link Project.

MAB Youth ([www.mabonline.info/youth](http://www.mabonline.info/youth)) is modelled on the MB and has similar ideological and methodological objectives to YM and YMO. It was created in 1997, as a response to what it perceived as a failure in youth mobilisation in the other youth movements. Its youth activities again lay emphasis on reforming wayward youngsters and providing education and recreational opportunities. Like YM and YMO, it has systematic procedures for training and channelling young people onto its adult organisation MAB.

All the above three are closely connected to well-organised adult organisations, which not only serve as a graduation destination but also provide a source of guidance and support to their youth sections. There are also similar organisations like Dawatul Islam youth group ([www.dawatul-islam.org.uk](http://www.dawatul-islam.org.uk)). Based in East London they run a successful school, magazines and run regular seminars and conferences. Again they prioritise individual transformation through offering facilities that service religious and secular educational needs.

Reformist youth work strategies have also evolved for example, The Right Start Foundation, ([www.rightstart.org.uk](http://www.rightstart.org.uk)) an organisation founded by popular Egyptian Muslim Preacher Amer Khaled, who is well known in the Arab world through his satellite TV programmes. His youth reform strategy represents a shift in that he has chosen to tackle socially destabilising issues in Muslim societies. In Britain he focuses his work predominantly on drugs prevention, sports and supporting families with their children using a multidisciplinary team of youthworkers, sociologists, scientists, and religious scholars. This method integrates work with Muslim youth into a wider strategy of renewing Muslim families and communities. It is subtle in its approach and omits any reference to religion on its website and has won recognition for its partnership work with non-Muslim agencies.

Another category within Islamic youthwork is individual reformist inspired organisations that are city based. Often set up as youth centres, their mission and method mirror Islamic movement methodology, examples include the Muslim Youth Foundation and Al Islah Youth Centres in Manchester. They offer support with school work and provide spaces for young

people to play sports, relax and where they are encouraged to attend religious study circles and events.

## Youth practice in secular environments

A large amount of youth work with Muslim youngsters takes place within secular voluntary youth organisations or local authority youth services. Here the youth work can be carried out in two ways. Firstly by workers who are nominal Muslims and for whom religion is personally unimportant thus not influencing their youthwork practice. Youthwork here is modelled upon a secular framework but can incorporate a recognition and celebration of ethnic identity. Work is influenced by the passion individual youth workers have for their racial/cultural heritages and can alternate between a hybrid 'BrAsian' identity ( Sayyid et al, 2005) or ones that can veer to towards more nationalistic expressions, privileging for example a 'Pakistani or Bangladeshi in Britain' agenda. In both cases the religious dimension are played down in the youth work practice in favour of different identity markers.

The other possibility is situations where practising Muslims work in secular projects that are run by mainstream youth services. This can be difficult for some practising Muslim youth workers within the aggressively secular culture of some local authorities, who feel constrained when trying to introduce any faith element into the delivery of their work. I have personally witnessed workers initiating religious perspectives in their issue based work being reprimanded and even sacked in some cases.

## Service based

Given the marginalisation of religious perspectives within secular youth organisations, some Muslim professionals have started to develop faith sensitive approaches across the range of services. This has led to the development of service-based organisations whose purpose and values are shaped by Islam but who provide practical intervention, instead of prosleytisation, pioneering religious approaches to mental health, counselling and drugs work. These are projects which specialise in servicing a specific need, focusing on responding to immediate need. Though few in number, more organisations are becoming informed by an Islamic ethos in attempting to deal with issues affecting young people. Organisations like The Muslim Youth Helpline ([www.myh.org.uk](http://www.myh.org.uk)), and Nafas drugs project ([www.nafas.org](http://www.nafas.org)), are engaging Muslim youth in the here and now, in addition to providing religious guidance (See also Rabia Malik's article in this issue).

The Muslim Youth Help Line developed in 2002 has pioneered valuable counselling services to thousands of young people in desperate need of advice and guidance. Its success led to the launching of a website ([www.muslimyouth.net/](http://www.muslimyouth.net/)) in October 2004. In magazine format it addresses in a lively and interactive manner contemporary issues like citizenship and identity, discrimination, bullying, mental health, relationships and sexuality. It has also initiated groundbreaking campaigns on homelessness and supporting young Muslim prisoners and the website contains a wide variety of articles and referral points.



The only organisation of its kind, the Nafas in East London has been operational from 2000, targeting the growing drugs problem among Bangladeshi young people in Tower Hamlets. Its ethos is discreetly Islamic and it offers mainstream drugs services in addition to specialist features that are adapted for work within Muslim communities. The sponsors also provide training packages for parents and Mosques and deliver therapies and abstinence treatment plans from within Islamic frames of reference.

## A critical evaluation

I will limit most of my comments to reformist Islamic youth movement organisations as they form the largest number of organisations that work with Muslim young people. Reformist youth organisations possess a number of commendable features, which have helped many young people to learn about and practise their faith. They also have a number of counter productive characteristics; principal among them is that young people's needs are often an appendage to achieving the organisation's overall aims.

Organisations like YM have political vanguard movement characteristics, which are quite often out of touch with the day-to-day problems of the young people they wish to attract. There is also a tendency towards elitism by recruiting young people from socially stable sectors of society, usually middle class, attending college or university. They function by distributing publicity about the organisation's activities at public events, mosques and colleges. If individuals show interest they are encouraged to attend the organisations activities where they are observed. The screening process continues as experienced members get to know the young person and find out about their background, level of education, future aspirations and any skills they have. If the person demonstrates enough potential they then become targets who are seen as possible future members. They are accordingly allocated a person who will socialise with them and over a period of time will try to persuade them of the benefits of working with the organisation. Throughout this process the need to recruit more people, designed to further promote the group's own interests at the expense of meeting the individual's specific needs, continues.

Another problematic feature of this type of missionary instrumentalism is the ideological indoctrination carried out which attempts to shape the young person's world view into the outlook of the organisation. This mindset encourages the perception of other Muslim youth groups/organisations as competitors who are in some way inadequate or simply wrong. This intolerance frequently has prevented youth organisations with similar goals from cooperating, producing an insular mentality which inhibits personal growth. It is also a huge waste of resources as rival youth organisations will sometimes host events at the same time in the same area for the same target group with facilities in mosques and community centres remaining unused as organisations compete and refuse to co-ordinate work together.

In addition most reformist youth groups are oblivious to wider social trends and changes taking place in mainstream youth culture, British society and government. Their youth leaders are often ignorant of the scale of the challenges facing British Muslim youth today. Furthermore few of the members of the reformist youth organisations have youthwork skills

beyond general organising and supervision. Rather than being able to build empowering relationships with their youth, a heavy emphasis is placed upon socialisation into Islamic norms and behaviour through participation in sports and recreation like football, table tennis, pool and martial arts.

They also tend not to have the ability to take constructive criticism and are not accountable to anyone except the organisational hierarchy. Ultimately young people who could benefit from the resources available to these organisations miss out as they stumble along without making any meaningful impact on the young in their communities. People associated with the organisations may protest that this description is a crude simplification of their modes of operation but I have spoken to plenty of ex-members across the UK who would beg to differ, some even claiming to have been actually harmed by this type of 'youth work'.

On a positive note some reformist organisations are belatedly recognising the importance of social welfare work and some of their members go on to train as youthworkers, drugs and social workers, but the challenge for them remains one of relevance and being able to serve young people without hoping that they will become workers in a movement.

For Islamic youth organisation to engage all kinds of Muslim youth, they have to move beyond the narrow ideological and methodological approaches that arise out of sectarian trends imported by the first generation of people who worked with Muslim young people. They can no longer ignore the totality of young people's lives and go on offering them nothing in terms of meeting the intellectual and social challenges of maintaining a healthy identity in Britain.

## Conclusion

The British Muslim youth population is in many places disadvantaged, both externally and internally. Young people are left facing many critical issues ranging from an increase in socio-economic marginalisation, cultural alienation to increasing prejudice from those that refuse to accept them as equal citizens. The leadership in these communities is generally out-of-touch with the daily realities of young people's lives and the Muslim youthwork being done is dominated by reformist youth movements who often indoctrinate them into their own particular organisational ideologies and priorities. Aside from the notable exceptions mentioned here, reformist approaches have been ambivalent at best in addressing the multiple challenges facing Muslim young people today.

I would suggest that Muslim youth workers should work with mainstream services to help them recognise the importance of the faith and cultures of different ethnic groups. Muslim youthworkers could learn a great deal from the best practice and principles of Christian and Jewish Youthwork, as well as Black youth work perspectives. I believe Muslim service based organisations are perhaps doing what the reformist organisations should have done a long time ago. The greatest challenge facing service based organisations is to be able to secure sustainable long-term funding and increase their representation nationally. Given that over half of Britain's Muslim communities are under 25 and likely to continue to grow in number, Islamic youth organisations, service based agencies and mainstream services need to be able

to work together to meet this anticipated need.

## How Muslim youthwork can be supported

I would suggest the following as steps towards Muslim youthworkers addressing some of the issues covered:

- To develop greater professionalisation of youth work with Muslim young people creating synthesis which draws together the different aspects of youthwork ie. informal education, recreation, personal development and practical support in a cohesive approach that may be described as a distinct Muslim youth work perspective;
- Development of theoretical frameworks with specific characteristics and methodologies and curricula need to be worked out with the co-operation of practitioners, educators and Muslim scholars;
- Development of intervention strategies that bridge the gaps between home, school and mosques. This would be part of a broader process and would involve work with parents and community capacity building;
- Cataloguing and sharing good practice and resources;
- Development of national and international practitioner networks;
- Increase the number of professional Muslim youthwork courses such as the one being developed at The University of Chester.

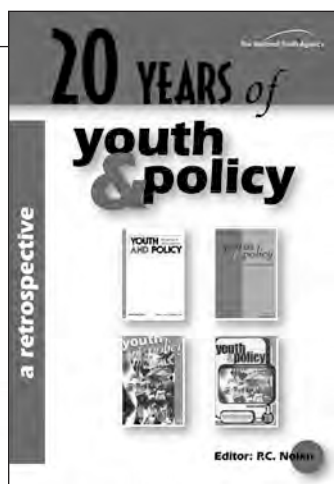
The future of Muslim young people represents the future of Islam in this country. An effective Muslim youthwork should integrate the best practice wherever it is on offer so that all of us working with young Muslim people can help them to navigate the challenges of contemporary British society.

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# British or Muslim: Creating a Context for Dialogue

**Rabia Malik**

*In the current climate, post 9/11 and 7/7, young Muslim identities are the sites of vehement contestation. This paper offers a psychosocial analysis of the construction of Muslim identities. It argues that identities are embedded within a matrix of social relationships and are socially constructed through a complex process of negotiation. Referring to a newspaper article post 7/7, in which one of the suicide bombers is contrasted with one of the victims, both of whom are Muslim – the article illustrates how dominant social discourses tend to construct young Muslims in terms of essentialised dichotomous positions. Such discourses not only have consequences for Muslim social identities, positioning and relationships, but can also be internalised. Psychoanalytic concepts are drawn upon to illustrate how the external world can structure the internal world and sense of self. Young Muslims, however, are contesting socially demonising discourses by asserting and self-defining their own identities. These new articulations draw upon Islam as a meaningful category, linking past and present within a British context. An example from a therapeutic session with a young Muslim woman illustrates how new meanings can emerge which move beyond oppositional thinking. It is argued that the therapeutic space can act as a nodal point where social and personal processes come together but for it to be an empowering space for marginalized groups, a context needs to be created which is cognisant of broader socio-political processes and their impact on identities.*

**Keywords:** *Young Muslims, Islam, identity, psychosocial, therapeutic space.*

## The Discursive Construction and Racialisation of Muslim Identities

Identity is relational and constructed through processes of negotiation from within and without. Jill Johnston (1973) says, 'identity is what you say you are according to what they say you can be' Identities are given meaning through language and the symbolic systems through which they are represented. Post 7/7 there has been a plethora of newspaper articles in the British press attempting to understand the position of British Muslims. These articles in themselves construct dominant discourses that limit the positions on offer to Muslims. This was graphically illustrated in an article in the *Guardian* on the 14th of July 2005. Shortly after the 7th July bombings in 2005, the identities of the victims as well as the bombers were beginning to be disclosed. Young British Muslims fell on both sides of the divide and the front page of the *Guardian* led with a contrast between one of the bombers, Hasib Hussain, and one of the victims, Shahanara Islam.

On the left was Hasib Hussain: the headline read, 'The boy who didn't stand out' (Cobain,

14th July 2005, the *Guardian*). Hasib was described as an 'ordinary', unremarkable 18 year old boy, the son of Pakistani migrants who grew up in a 'close knit clan' in Holbeck, a poor suburb in Leeds. Hasib left school without a single GCSE, and with 'few opportunities'. Around 16, he was described as going 'a bit wild' and was sent by his father to Pakistan to gain some discipline. According to the article, Hasib returned a 'devout Muslim' and, having been described by some, as 'brainwashed'. This 'no hoper', as he is constructed in the article, encountered and made friends with two other members of the suicide bomb gang. The article ends with the statement, 'the struggle to understand who, and what, transformed such an unremarkable young man into one of Western Europe's first suicide bombers is just beginning'.

In contrast, on the right was Shahanara Islam (Gillan, 14th July 2005, the *Guardian*). She is described as 'a thoroughly modern Muslim, a young woman who loved her Burberry plaid handbag and fashionable clothes while at the same time respecting her family's wishes that she sometimes wore traditional shalwar kameez at home'. She was a second-generation Bangladeshi girl, who left school with A levels and got a job as a cashier at a bank. Her family and all that knew her, were proud of her and loved her dearly.

Both Hasib and Shahanara were second generation Muslims, the children of migrants. But on the one hand, the subtext reads, you have a 'good Muslim' – one who is 'modern' integrated and successful, on the other you have a 'bad Muslim', one who is traditional (who had to be sent back home to be disciplined) and ended up politically radicalised<sup>1</sup>. However, the article on Shahanara Islam later betrays a complexity and a matrix of hidden relationships in which identities are embedded (Dalal, 2002).

The owners and customers from the café across from the bank where Shahanara worked said:

*that at first they had not recognised the smiling girl dressed in turquoise silk who stared out at them from the newspaper pictures of those who were missing after the bomb. They had been used to seeing her in her uniform but when they looked past the tunic and scarf they saw the same woman who served them at the bank ... 'I saw her in mainstream clothing, she was eloquent in her speech, a very confident upright sort of girl. She had a nice manicure and her hair was always straightened. She didn't look like some stereotyped ethnic minority'* (Gillan, the *Guardian*, 14th July 2005).

I found myself feeling irritated. Was a good Muslim someone who didn't show their difference, who didn't look like an 'ethnic minority'? It seems that Shahanara Islam's Muslim or Bengali identity wasn't visible to the people in the café; they did not recognise her difference.

Who was Hasib Hussain and who was Shahanara Islam? I do not know. But I am sure they were complex young people who drew on different discourses to construct their identities in context-dependent ways. The dilemma facing them, like many young Muslims, was how to assert their religious difference in a society that at best appropriates difference or at worst denigrates and demonises it. Emergent dominant discourses, such as in the article described above tend to construct two subject positions – a 'good' assimilated and non-visible

privatised Muslim identity or a problematic radical, visible and politicised Muslim identity.

Such simplistic dichotomous positioning of Muslims in social discourses, as a threat to western values or the British way of life, have surfaced fervently around conflicting events such as the Rushdie Affair, 9/11 and 7/7, and are indicative of racialisation. Here I am referring to racialisation as a social process, rather than one that is predicated on race per se. In the words of Stuart Hall (1996):

*Racism fixes human social groups in terms of natural pseudo biological discourses and asserts their belonging or not belonging on the basis of certain arbitrary characteristics, thereby limiting their becoming.*

Racialisation can be broadly described as a reductionist process perpetuated by those in positions of power that serve to fix and limit another group. Such a process underpins the dichotomisation of Muslims in discourses as an opposing force or threat to 'Western ways of life'. It further splits them, as in the *Guardian* article, into good / moderate Muslims, and bad / radical Muslims; rendering Islam, especially a political Islam incompatible with Britishness and needing to be civilised and brought under control. Needless to say such dichotomies are simplistic and obscure the issue of power and wider social relations. For example, in this dynamic, who has the power to name and reify the 'other' and limit and exclude them from belonging and the category of Britishness? Muslims are increasingly represented as antithetical to British values, such as 'freedom of speech'. There has been a re-ignition of debate about how much difference multiculturalism can contain, as if there is one monolithic Islamic viewpoint and the 'difference' and 'problem' lie within the Muslim community per se. Bauman (1999) in *The Multicultural Riddle* argues that underlying the multicultural conundrum is a set of contradictions and paradoxes, which betray a racialised approach to difference. The nation state (majority culture) defines the terms of multiculturalism, obfuscating the cultural and religious values that underlie its own view, whilst putting a spotlight on and reifying the cultural and religious difference of minority groups. Culture and religion thus become superficial essentialised markers of difference rather than deep or meaningful categories that are *embodied* by both majority and minority groups. Bauman points out that religion is even more susceptible to essentialisation than culture. This is especially so in a dominant culture that has itself an ambivalent and estranged relationship with religion dating back to the Enlightenment. Bauman proposes that this unequal process prevents any meaningful integration and dialogue taking place, other than on a superficial level of the majority appropriating only 'differences' that can be consumed and tolerated.

The matrix of social relationships and power dynamics in which identities are embedded and which come to be symbolised and reinforced in discourses, have consequences for social positioning and peoples experiences of reality. This is attested to by the increase in Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust, 1997). The construction of Islam and Muslim (especially in relation to masculinity) as problematic and deviant is institutionalised and finds expression in high rates of unemployment, high rates of criminalisation, increased targeting in stop and search policies, and poorer educational attainment (Open Society Institute, 2005). The consequences of racialisation do not stop here. Dalal (2002) argues that the form and shape of the individual's internal world and its possibilities are deeply embedded within



and constrained by the preoccupations of the socio-historic context, which serve to sustain a certain version of reality and status quo, privileging particular power relationships and access to resources. The external world thus also has repercussions for our psyches and sense of self.

## Internalisation of Identities

Hall (1996) argues that identity is a re-articulation of the relationship between the subject and discursive practices. Psychoanalytic theories can account for the ways in which discursive practices are internalised such that we are likely to take up the subject positions on offer to us in social discourses and socially differentiate ourselves according to the dominant story. Freudian, Lacanian and Kleinian theories can facilitate understanding of the mechanisms of the processes of identification that underlie differentiation processes.<sup>2</sup> These theories suggest that subjectivity is formed in relation to the 'other'. Although originally posited to account for the differentiation between the baby and the primary care giver, the concepts can be extended to explain other social differentiations. For example the Kleinian notions of splitting and projection can be applied to the process of racialisation, suggesting that unwanted or negative feelings about the self are cut off and projected on to others as a defence mechanism against our own anxieties. In turn, projections from others can be internalised as part of the self and leave a depleted sense of identity. In the case of race, Timimi (1996) argues that this has occurred on a widespread social and historical scale and is rooted in the age-old relation between 'whites' as colonisers and 'blacks' as colonised. These massively skewed power relationships organised social splits, in which 'white' objects were coloured superior and 'black' inferior. Ironically though, the processes of projection and splitting tie us to the 'other', as we are reliant on that identification with the other (be it negative) for a sense of completeness or wholeness. Dalal (2002) argues that the illusion of difference that is created by splitting is further sustained and bolstered by the unconscious processes of idealisation and demonisation. These further reinforce boundaries and construct absolute barriers to prevent one kind of 'difference' slipping into another. According to Dalal, idealisation serves to create and strengthen the 'us group' and a sense of belonging which feeds itself by a self-serving bias. In contrast the 'them' group becomes the repository for the split off and negative projections from the 'us group'.

In the case of Muslims the above analysis would suggest the social discursive demonisation of Muslims, which positions Islam as antithetical and a threat to British ways of life and leaves Muslims in a compromised position. Not only do these discourses raise questions about their belonging but they also represent Muslims to themselves largely through the eyes of the 'other' mainly via Western media. Said (1981) argued that Western discourses on Islam are riddled with projections that are undercut by themes which construct Muslims as 'abnormal' 'extreme', 'unchanging' 'traditional', 'backward' and thus needing to be mastered and feared, in contrast to the modernity and reasonableness of the West. Given the dismal potential of a positive sense of self in taking up these demonised subject position on offer to them in more global as well as local discourses, Muslims may be tempted to resist such positioning by either identifying with a defended over idealised position of Muslim, or to take up a split position of 'Good Muslim' and project their 'dirt' onto 'Bad Muslims'. Such strategies for survival in a racialised society can lead to polarisation, a denial

of part of the self and a distancing from the other group or one's own group. How then are young Muslims to position and identify themselves in a way that challenges dominant discourses and enables a positive and dignified sense of self?

## Strategies for Resistance – The Assertion of Muslim Identities

Identity, as argued in the beginning of this paper, is not just ascribed. It is a relational process involving negotiations between groups and the assertion of identities. Muslim identities, as constructed in dominant discourses, do not go uncontested. The issue of naming and whether it is ascribed or asserted is central. Research indicates that young Muslims are increasingly asserting their religious identity (Jacobson, 1998; Tyrer; forthcoming). In her study on religious and ethnic identity in young Pakistanis, Jacobson found that increasing numbers of young people were making a distinction between religion and ethnicity as a source of identity and were referring to religion as a more significant source of social identity than ethnicity. She suggests that this may be due on the one hand to the universal relevance of an Islamic identity over and above the hegemonic confines of ethnic identity and on the other to an Islamic identity which can offer clearer and more pervasive boundaries than an ethnic one on the basis of religious claims to truth.

Tyrer found among the women he interviewed that self-identification as 'Muslim' was an emancipatory experience. They were all too aware that they were expected to identify themselves according to the dominant patterns of symbolising identities – ie race and ethnicity, but rather than be subjectified by these discourses, they took up another position of self-identification which was predicated upon Islam. Tyrer goes further than Jacobson in proposing that this contestation 'erases dominant discourses around race, as it re-constructs social relations in a way that does not conform to the logic of the workings of race'. Dominant discourses of difference configured around race and ethnicity, undermined and de-politicised religion as just one aspect of ethnicity in the primordial sense of kinship ties and practices. By asserting their religious identity, Tyrer argues young Muslims are engaged in a political strategy of resistance which challenges the dominance and hegemony of race as a means of both imagining and structuring social relations and thereby the very basis of the western ideological project, which predicated on the concept of race loses its own conditions of possibility.

Whether this shift in markers of difference is in response to a growing 'othering' of Muslims nationally and globally, or a growing Muslim consciousness from within Muslim communities, what is important is that religion is increasingly cited as the highest context marker of identity by young people. Muslim identities can thus be political and asserted as markers of difference, which challenge the hegemony of social relationships. However, the assertion of Muslim identities is more than a social contestation. New articulations can enable meaningful agency and self-authorship. Bobby Sayyid (1997) elaborates on this in his critique of Said's analysis in *Orientalism*, which he argues, although exposing power dynamics that underlie relationships between the Western and Islamic world, still negates Islam by inadvertently reducing it to a category that does not exist in a meaningful way outside of the Orientalist discourse. Sayyid proposes that contemporary 'Islamic' identities being articulated by Muslims are not traditional ones or secondary to the anti-Orientalist

discourse, but rather that they play a major role in articulating political and social projects in the contemporary context.

Fanon's (1967) writing in the context of the colonial situation can be instructive in understanding the struggles for social and personal liberation from 'the colonising gaze'. He described how this quest typically involves a turning back to retrieve tradition and reclaim history from the point of view of a subject and not an object. However, Fanon realised that a strategy of only looking back and not forward is perilous. A reactive retreat into one's heritage to construct an identity that relies on the past for its authenticity, is in danger of being limited in the meaning it can offer in the present context. It re-creates an imprisoning essentialised discourse that falls prey to the ethnicity paradox (Lal, 1986) whereby the minority group reinforces the very difference that was used to denigrate it.

The potential for this entrapment cannot be under-estimated, given that the majority of young Muslims in Britain come from migrant families and that the Islam they know is mediated through cultural practices and family. This is not to suggest that these practices are incorrect, but that their application does not easily translate directly into a new cultural context and does not meet the demands of the present circumstances. This is a challenge for many migrant communities who, experiencing a sense of drift that migration and rapid change creates, attempt to lay down firm anchors to re-create and replicate what they once knew; a tendency that is further exacerbated by racism and social exclusion. Familial ties introduce an additional emotional and attachment dimension to notions of what it means to be a Muslim, which can be difficult to loosen and in the name of 'Islam' may result in reverting to defending practices and customs (such as notions of honour) for the sake of a felt loyalty to one's family and the past and to defend against the assumption of inferiority that is inherent in dominant discourses that Muslims are constantly subjected to. The tendency to get caught in knots that limit potential is immense.

Young Muslims are thus saddled with the double task of not only being aware of how the assumption of inferiority loaded in dominant discourses can lead to a defensive and reactionary stance, but also of finding ways of critiquing customs and practices which do not fit easily into a new cultural context. It is here that I would challenge Jacobson's (1998) hypothesis that the assertion of an Islamic identity can offer clearer and more pervasive boundaries than an ethnic one on the basis of religious claims to truth. Although she may be partially correct, I would argue that the assertion of Muslim identities not only challenges wider social relationships and racialised discourses but can also challenge community and familial relationships and practices based on the primacy of cultural discourses. The assertion of a religious identity over and above an ethnic one, brings to the fore questions of ethics and morality, and Islam can become a vehicle for change and re-working social, cultural and familial scripts to render religion a lived experience and an integrated part of identity rather than an essentialised past or superficial marker of difference. Islam is thus not only a political, social identity but also a meaningful category. It offers a framework for understanding human experience (Krausen, 2006), which is meaningful because it resonates at the political, social and personal levels. Fanon advocated this process of meaning making, action and activity, of re-engaging and applying one's heritage to the present, as vital to sustain liberated identities. Simply looking back is not enough to take us forward. Fanon proposed that to tackle the effects of racialisation, combined action and transformation

were required at the group and individual levels to produce change. The therapeutic space is a place where social and personal processes can come together, where new meanings emerge and where identities are constructed, and thus it can be an interesting site to observe how Islam may operate as a socially and personally meaningful category.

## The Therapeutic Space – Political and Personal

In her study of Sufi healing practices in Pakistan, Pratt Ewing (1997) argues that the Sufi Pir acts as a nodal point where political and personal processes come together. Likewise, the therapeutic context can also act as a nodal point, as the therapist, like the Pir, is involved in a constituting experience – recognising and validating human subjectivity. The therapeutic space can open up possibilities by providing an opportunity for new relationships and lived experiences to be articulated in individual narratives. However, whether the therapeutic space is able to be utilised as a nodal point and contend with contradictory discourses, depends on the context and the therapist. The therapeutic space is therefore as much political as personal – at its worst it can be utilised for social engineering and its best for self-authorship. During the course of my work I have found that young Muslims' subjectivities are as contested in this space as in any: the splits and assumptions operating are rife and mirror those of wider society. They range from professionals being tempted to rescue and liberate oppressed young Muslims (especially women), to young Muslims themselves being afraid of seeing another Muslim, in case they be judged as not being a 'good enough' Muslim. Either way clients may edit out the parts of themselves they think are unacceptable to the therapist. Most therapeutic models, like other forms of modern knowledge are rooted in the historical relationship and post enlightenment rupture between religion and science, and steer clear of the topic of religion. Consequently, therapists tend not to see religion and spirituality as their remit. In my work though, I have found that leaving out these realms of a young Muslim's experiences, given the socio political context and assertion of religious identities, in the long run can leave these aspects un-integrated. In order to do justice and to allow new possibilities or something more holistic and integrated to emerge in my work I attempt to create a space in which all aspects – the religious, the cultural, the social, the familial and the individual can exist alongside one another. All of these realms are intertwined in the making of identity and young people's lived experiences and 'becoming'.

Thus I think of Islam as a process in my work and not a static state. I like Bauman's notion of a contextual plasticity to the approach to religion, and that religion as a social reality is inevitably inventive and changed as it is lived and applied. He says, 'religion is thus not some cultural baggage that is taken along on migration, wrapped, tied and tagged; even when it is it cannot be unpacked unchanged at the other end' (1999:78). He likens religion to a sextant, which not just points in a direction like a compass, but takes account of positionality – relative time and location – for the navigators themselves.

Young Muslims that I work with often find themselves at the forefront of questions about what it means to be British, what it means to be Muslim and if the two are reconcilable. Not only do they have to contend with simplistic racialised dichotomisations but if they want to assert a Muslim identity they have to find meaningful ways in which religion can

offer inspiration for solutions to the many dilemmas which the rapid social change that accompanies migration or which being a minority in a majority context entails. How do they open up spaces for growth, amongst narrow imprisoning dominant discourses that demonise them and serve to essentialise the options available to them as Western or Muslim, but in a way that is continuous with their religious and cultural heritage and can engage with and meet the demands of their current context?

I will illustrate this with reference to the service we have developed at the Asian and Arab Families Counselling Service in London, and with an example from a session which I conducted with a young Muslim Bengali woman in which she drew upon a Quranic story to construct new meanings and integrate identities.

## **Creating a Context For The Expression of Muslim identities**

The Asian and Arab Families Counselling Service was set up in 1995, within the context of the Marlborough Family Service – a child and adolescent mental health clinic in the NHS. The aim of the service was to provide a therapeutic service to Asian and Arab families who, research indicated, were underutilising services. This could only be established in a meaningful way by developing ways of working with clients that were culturally aware and were isomorphic with their systems of meaning. Inevitably this involved critiquing and modifying dominant models of therapy, which are embedded within a Western cultural paradigm (Malik, 2000). The systemic framework of therapy, with its emphasis on context and relationships provided a broad base in which religious and cultural contexts could be incorporated in understanding communities, families and individuals. From within this paradigm ‘problems’ are viewed as not residing within an individual or group but within the context of a system of relationships, and change is sought by intervening at a systemic level. Thus there is a tradition within the systemic framework of creating interventions that engage with political, social and personal contexts<sup>3</sup>.

Apart from critiquing methods and models of working, the creation of a context for dialogue in which difference could be seen, heard, respected and incorporated into the organisational structure also involved challenging the organisational cultural context. The collaboration and commitment of colleagues was crucial in this, and although it has by no means been an easy process, together we have come a long way in building relationships and a macro context in which there is room for ‘difference’. Post 9/11 we witnessed an increase in clients requesting to see a Muslim practitioner and although we had already found religion and culture were closely intertwined for Asian and Arab clients, we now developed ways of working which engaged more explicitly with religion as the highest context marker for these clients, and integrated it in our work.

It has been vital in my opinion to create a macro context in which it is not only ‘permissible’, but people are encouraged to be able to express their religious and cultural diversity. ‘Difference’ – be it religious or cultural, is understood relationally and not as a superficial marker but as meaningful and embodied. It is only by addressing these macro processes politically and socially that more micro personal processes can be opened up in a way that is collaborative and non threatening or colonising. In fact one of the factors that

has hampered community development is the lack of infrastructure or spaces that feel welcoming. Spaces which young Muslims can identify with; where they are neither demonised nor idealised and where struggles and contradictions are allowed to ensue in the emergence of identities.

I will now try and highlight the kinds of complexities and themes that young Muslims may struggle with through the use of a transcript from a session I conducted with Shima Khan<sup>4</sup> in which we drew upon Quranic story and metaphor to find a meaningful solution and emergent identity that goes beyond oppositional dichotomies.

## **The Good Angel and The Bad Angel**

Shima was referred to me by her social worker. She was a young woman in her late teens, who had been sexually abused by a family member. When she had disclosed the abuse she had been disowned by her family and taken into foster care at the age of fourteen. She had subsequently had a relationship with a young Bengali man – Salim, and when this relationship had broken up under pressure from his family who wanted him to marry a cousin from back home she had plummeted into a depressed state again and was experiencing eating and sleeping difficulties. Shima complained that she felt taken advantage of and abused in relationships, not just with Salim but also other friends. She had previously seen a white therapist and when she was initially referred to the clinic she had requested specifically to see a non-Bengali therapist. I myself am of Pakistani origin, and in the first session with her I had explored the background to her referral and had also, undeterred by her ruling out a ‘Bengali therapist’, been curious about why she had not wanted to see someone from her own community. She had ambivalent feelings about her identity, and her painful experience of lack of acknowledgement of the injustice she had suffered and rejection from her own family had led to her projecting her negativity onto other Bengalis. However, she asserted that Islam was a more important part of her identity. Having listened carefully and respectfully and having made it clear that I was not there to judge her, Shima agreed to working with me.

We worked together intermittently over a period of two years, exploring various issues and themes as they arose. During the course of our work she had expressed a wish to re-connect with her family, especially mother and sisters. She had been seeing her mother in secret for some time and now wanted to be re-integrated into the family, but as who she actually was- a young woman who through her difficult experiences had learnt to become autonomous. I had held a few sessions with her and her older sisters in which we addressed her experience of sexual abuse and whether her sisters could acknowledge the injustice of this and together assure her safety. Her sisters went some way towards understanding Shima. Her mother had expressed the desire to protect her daughter by taking her to an Imam to get a taweez (amulet) to protect her. However, her mum and sisters complained at times of her being too westernised. Together with all of them I had unpacked this and explored what was advantageous and disadvantageous about these positions and if there were any areas of overlap. Frequently Shima would draw on Islamic discourses and stories to question her own and her sisters’ positions and this introduced a more complicated ethical frame to these simplistic oppositional positions. Some time later, during a visit to

Bangladesh she had decided to get married. On her return to England she had come to visit me to tell me the surprising news. However as her husband's pending arrival drew closer she started feeling anxious. The following transcript is from a session in which she had arrived in an agitated state.

*Shima was very upset when she arrived and said she was amazed that she had made it here. She had a bad dream the night before, in which she thought she was going to die. She had asked her new mother in law to send her a taweez (amulet) from Bangladesh, as she often felt scared. When she had worn the taweez she had a bad dream, in which a djin (literally meaning something hidden – but often embodied in a figure) was chasing her. In the dream she ran and hid from the djin, but when it caught her she started fighting it and had awoken scared. She was upset and wondered why people wanted to hurt her.*

She asked if I believed her and asked what I thought of her dream. I said that I believed her and I thought she was in the middle of a tough battle. She looked relieved. I asked her, if the djin was a person or a thing in her life that she was scared of or fighting, who or what would it be? She said she wasn't scared of anyone in this life apart from Allah. I wondered what she would be scared of Allah for? Shima said that there were four things she regretted in her life and asked for forgiveness for, which she proceeded to tell me. However she immediately went on to qualify herself by saying that she did not think these things were entirely her fault, she had been naïve in her first relationship with Salim, and although she had been very angry with people in her life she had changed a lot. I asked her what had enabled her to change. She said she thought this life was a test and that Allah was testing her.

- RM     *So why do you think Allah tests us?*
- SK     *Because He wants to see us happy, He wants us to remember Him and recall His name.*
- RM     *So do you think he sends us trouble so that we recall His name?*
- SK     *He tests us, because we don't call His name, we forget when things are good. He wants us to remember and do the things He wants us to do for Him*
- RM     *What things?*
- SK     *He wants us to pray, cover up (wear hijab), not talk to men.*
- RM     *What else?*
- SK     *I think He wants us to be happy too – to do what He wants us to do and to keep Him happy.*
- RM     *So do you think you are passing the test?*
- SK     *Sometimes I think that maybe I will be happier in the next life.*
- RM     *But do you think He will be happy with you if you end this life not having passed the test?*
- SK     *Maybe I can make changes in my life to do better in the test. It is like we have two angels on either side of us (she looks down at her shoulders) but why does the bad angel always win?*
- RM     *What does the good angel say to you?*
- SK     *He says read namaz (pray), cover your hair, be good to your parents*
- RM     *What else does he tell you about your life?*
-

- SK *Forget Salim, live your life with your husband, you are born once, you die once and so you should marry once. But now there is this little word 'divorce' that comes into my mind. About friends, it says – keep them in their place, meet them sometimes but not all the time. Family it says – say Hi, but do not get involved in their gossip.*
- RM *So what does the bad angel say to what the good angel just said?*
- SK *It says, go out with guys, go clubbing and talk on the telephone.*
- RM *What does the good angel say to this?*
- SK *Don't do this to her.*
- (SK then started recalling the story of Iblis – the fallen angel) *You see Iblis was angry with Allah for having made man and for asking him to bow down to him. So Iblis says to God I will lead man astray. It is Iblis that makes man mad.*
- RM *So what does the bad angel say?*
- SK *He wants me to come with him. He wants to show Allah – see you didn't listen to me.*
- RM *Do you think Allah has let you down or not listened to you in your life?*
- SK *I can't really be disappointed with Him. He has given me all the things I asked for. He gave me my own house, which I wanted. He gave me my mum back. He saved me, gave me life, He feeds me. Allah never lets you down. He knew Salim and I were a bad team so He didn't make it work. Now Salim has Naseema and I have my husband. I don't know what he is like or if he is ok but we will see when he comes here.*
- RM *What does the bad angel say?*
- SK *Allah gave you nothing but pain. I give you fun. I let you go out clubbing. He just wants you to pray.*
- RM *What does the good angel say?*
- SK *That praying is what you are supposed to do – that is why you are here.*
- RM *Do you think that is what you are supposed to do – why you are here? Do you enjoy praying as much as clubbing?*
- SK *If I go out clubbing I chat to men and that is all. If I pray I get peace in my heart.*
- RM *You see I think the praying and hijab are there to help us have a good life, but I don't think that is all Allah wants us to have. He wants us to enjoy our life, and the praying helps you. It doesn't mean you can't have any fun; but within limits. So what do you really want for your life?*
- SK *Don't laugh at me, but I want to meet Allah in this world.*
- RM *How will you know if you meet Him?*
- SK *He is like a powerful person – not a human being?  
Rabia is He like a human being?*
- RM *I have heard He is everywhere. I guess I know him when good things or positive things happen. Even when bad things happen, I don't think it is because He isn't there, just sometimes He lets them happen – like with Iblis. Maybe so that we can learn from them?*
- SK *When I talk to you I feel peace in my heart. I said to my friend that I like talking to her, but when I talk to you I feel peace in my heart because you don't think I am crazy.*
- RM *When else, or with whom else do you feel peace in your heart?*
- SK *When I speak to my mum or pray to Allah*



- RM *What does you mum say?*
- SK *She tells me I am a married woman now and that I shouldn't see Salim. Sometimes she thinks I am going to see him. But I tell her if you people keep thinking this, then maybe one day I will.*
- RM *Do you think they need to trust you?*
- SK *Sometimes I think they think I am mad. Do you believe me about the dream? Do you think I could have died last night?*
- RM *Yes I believe you. I think you are fighting for your life. I think the dream is a warning, to fight for your life. I think it will be a tough battle. But I wonder if you had finished the dream if you would have won the battle.*
- SK *I have this other taweez that I keep on – Surah Kursi – from another Mullah. I think this taweez saved me from the other one.*
- RM *I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing. It is like the good angel and the bad angel, they have to confront each other and talk and fight, for the good to win. If you want to fight the battle, you could also win. What do you want for yourself that will make you happy in the long term?*
- SK *I think what would be really good for me is to start over when my husband comes and to leave my past behind me.*
- RM *What can you do in the mean time before your husband gets here to make sure in the long term you have what you want?*
- SK *Stay out of trouble.*
- RM *How could you do that?*
- SK *Stay away from friends, just see them sometimes. Stay away from Salim, stay away from my older sisters.*
- RM *So what could you do that you like or enjoy?*
- SK *Talk to mum, friends I can trust, my younger sisters.*
- RM *What else do you enjoy?*
- SK *I could listen to music, write and dance in my room.*
- RM *Would that be enough?*
- SK *Oh yes, I really like those things. I would be happy doing them.*

## Commentary

This example of my work with Shima attempts to convey the complexity of externals and internal subject positions that are available to her and how she negotiates these to create new options or an emergent identity. Shima is rightly angry with her family and community for not having recognised the abuse and injustice that she suffered. However, she also wants to re-connect with them, and feels that she has brought shame upon the family. She projects her anger onto other Bengalis and does not want to see a Bengali therapist initially. This places her in a bind as whilst she wants to distance herself from Bengalis and some practices that she identifies as being 'Bengali', at the same time she cannot escape her own 'Bengaliness', in a racialised society. To demonise Bengalis and Bengali culture as if it was monolithic, deep down serves to make her hate a part of herself. I am mindful in my work with her about this simplistic oppositional thinking and how it can leave her own sense of self depleted. I therefore attend to this and challenge her generalising over simplifications playfully throughout our work.

Islam offers Shima an ethical frame for re-contextualising and re-exploring themes and relationships and challenging reductionist cultural thinking. She does this by drawing on a Quranic story – the story of Iblis, who although a favoured angel of Allah refuses to bow down to His new creation – Adam. Iblis is dispelled from Allah’s favour due to his arrogance and vows to tempt people off the right path, creating tension and strife -he ‘tests’ the human condition. Shima makes a link between this story and the notion of a good and bad angel embodied on either side of us, recording the decisions or actions that people choose to make during this lifetime. In Shima’s narrative the ‘good’ angel and ‘bad’ angel symbolise the opposing forces within her, which I encourage her to have a dialogue between. I keep the tension and debate alive by asking her repeatedly what the good angel says to what the bad angel said, and so on. When she is about to close the debate by referring to what she is ‘supposed to do’, I challenge her by asking ‘if she enjoys praying as much as clubbing’. By holding the dialogue open for longer new meanings can emerge, and Shima moves towards a resolution that is meaningful for her for the time being. She decides whom she wants to spend more time with and whom she wants to keep at bay, as well as the boundaries for her enjoyment. I do not see my role to be to either idealise or demonise either of the opposing forces within her, or in other words to judge the good angel or the bad angel, but rather to facilitate a dialogue that enables her to arrive at a meaningful and responsible resolution.

Shima’s dilemma of managing personal desires and social constraints is arguably a universal one, but one that is managed or ‘worked’ differently within different cultural systems. She symbolises her dilemma with reference to a religious meta-narrative. This is important because it connects Shima’s personal narrative to a wider narrative, and to her community, family and to me as another Muslim. Quranic stories can thus provide an opportunity to explore deeper meanings in human experience and to construct subjectivity within a frame that is isomorphic with the ethical system she identifies with, but goes beyond simplistic oppositional thinking that ‘splits’ or pulls her into an either or position of British / Western or Muslim. This gives her a sense of peace.

My ability to explore this story with her requires some knowledge of the terrain. No doubt my own identity as a Muslim helped me to connect with the story in a way that enabled me to remain curious about it and enter her logic. How we listen and the questions we ask are in themselves political, and convey our own subject positions. The therapeutic relationship is thus inter-subjective and not neutral.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that Muslim identities are simultaneously political, social and personal. Identities are constructed within a matrix of social relationships. The current construction of Muslims within the British context is argued to be racialised and based on simplistic dichotomous positions. Dominant social discourses fix and limit what young British Muslims can be – by either demonising them as ‘bad Muslims’ who are politicised or appropriating them as ‘good Muslims’ who relegate their ‘difference’ to the private realm. Thus Muslim identities are the sites of vehement contestation.

The social construction of Muslims not only has social repercussions but also can be internalised to exert psychological control, which unless resisted, subjectifies Muslims to the dominant constructions of them. Psychoanalytic concepts were used to illustrate how the external world comes to be internalised and how subject positions can be taken up unconsciously. Identities are, however, not only ascribed but also asserted and research suggests that more and more young Muslims are asserting their religious identity as a way of challenging racialised hegemonic discourses, and exerting their own agency and self authorship. Thus Muslim identities that are being asserted not only challenge social dynamics and relationships but are also personally meaningful. The paper stresses that Islam is not only a superficial marker of identity politics but also a meaningful category. This is illustrated through the use of a transcript from a session with a female Muslim client, which highlights the complexities of identities and the process of creating a dialogue to facilitate new possibilities that go beyond simplistic oppositional idealised and demonised positions. It is argued that to enable the emergence of empowered and self-authored British Muslim identities, contexts need to be created which address the socio-political context and racialisation processes and can thus genuinely tolerate and contain difference.

To facilitate such an approach three broad recommendations are made that may be useful for practitioners working with young Muslims.

1. Practitioners, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, need to be aware of the dynamics of racialisation and how they themselves may unconsciously embody assumptions that idealise or demonise marginalised young Muslims. Thus they need to be conscious of how their own identity is structured by, and embedded within, a matrix of social relationships, if they are to be able to work with and tolerate the tensions of difference and take an inter-subjective, as opposed to colonising approach to young Muslim clients.
2. Contexts need to be created which provide a safe space for open dialogue and self-authorship for young Muslims. This however requires addressing the social relational dynamics of racialisation, which are instituted. One way of addressing this may be to set up specialist services, where although boundaries are drawn to address the needs of young Muslims, there is sufficient room for 'difference' and for dialogues to be facilitated within the Muslim Community and across communities.
3. Islamic stories and sources can provide a rich resource for creating personal and social meanings and finding solutions to contemporary challenges. Using sources from within the tradition can connect individuals to communities and the past to the present in a coherent way. Stories have plots, which can help structure our experience and have implications for agency and morality.

The paradox in the story of Adam and Iblis is that they are both creations of One God. If there is a 'sin' in racialisation, it is in arrogance and a superiority complex, which – like Iblis – refuses to bow down to the diversity in creation.

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## Notes

- 1 The argument being made here is not intended to excuse the actions of the suicide bombers but to analyse the rhetoric and more general discursive construction of Muslim identities and their consequences.
- 2 These theories will not be elaborated on in detail for the purposes of this paper. The reader is referred to Hall and Dalal for a more detailed description.
- 3 For example the work of the Just Therapy Team in New Zealand and Fifth Province in Northern Ireland.
- 4 To ensure confidentiality the client name has been changed and other features of the history have been altered to conceal her identity.

# Reaching socially excluded young people

A national study of street-based youth work

*David Crimmens, Fiona Factor,  
Tony Jeffs, John Pitts, Carole Pugh,  
Jean Spence and Penelope Turner*



The National Youth Agency



*"When you've worked in an area for some time, you get known and then you get trusted. This credibility extends beyond the young people you've actually worked with to the others on their networks; young people you've never met ... This only happens because you're there, because you've been there."*

This research, undertaken by a team from the Universities of Durham, Lincoln and Luton, addresses the question of the role of detached and outreach youth work in the post-1997 policy environment of outcome-driven youth initiatives, and in particular, how mainstream detached and outreach youth work might articulate with the Connexions Service to facilitate the involvement of socially excluded young people in forms of education, training and employment which are both relevant and accessible.

The research aims to explore the nature and range of street-based youth work with socially excluded young people in England and Wales, to identify the effectiveness of agency strategies and practice interventions, and to establish how street-based youth work can best contribute to the Connexions Service and its key partnerships.

**ISBN 0 86155 310 1**

**Price £15.95**

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# Working Islamically with young people or working with Muslim youth?

*Taniya Hussain*

*Working Islamically with young people or working with Muslim youth?  
Using case studies, this article describes the daily struggle I face as a social worker practising in a multi-disciplinary youth offending team and how this highlights the development of my practice. I describe how this section of youth have been demonised by society and forgotten by Muslims. I highlight a sinister trend in South London of young people becoming Muslims not for spiritual reasons but to acquire reputation via involvement in criminal gangs. I outline the process of setting up a group to enable young people to discuss how this trend affected them, The article also focuses on the group process, and discusses the group's effectiveness..*

**Keywords:** *Muslim young people, social work, youth offending*

I have been working as a social worker for nine years in a multi-disciplinary Youth Offending Team (YOT) in south London with one of the most marginalised and demonised section of society – young people who are in the criminal justice system. The Borough where I am currently employed serves a multi-cultural population that includes a significant African, Caribbean and Asian population. The YOT comprises of a YOT Manager who overlooks the work of three teams. The first team is called the Pre Court team. This comprises a Deputy Manager, two Police Officers, a Remand Management Co-ordinator, Remand Workers, a Senior Court Officer, two Connexions Personal Advisors and an Education Welfare Officer. The second team is the Crime Prevention team and consists of a Crime Prevention Manager, two Crime Prevention Officers and a Police Officer. Lastly there is a Post Court team that is managed by a Deputy Manager and comprises three permanent YOT Officers, a Drugs and Alcohol Worker, an Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme Co-Coordinator, a seconded Probation Officer, a Resettlement and After Care Programme (RAP) Co-ordinator and a RAP Worker, a Senior Practitioner who is also the Parenting Co-ordinator, three Locum YOT Officers, two part time student social workers and myself as the Senior Social Worker. Finally the YOT employs a Referral Order Co-ordinator, a Clinical Psychologist, and a Reparation Co-ordinator, two administrative assistants who also act as Receptionists as well as an overall Office Manager.

My caseload includes young people of both genders aged between 10-18. They have been sentenced by the Court and are usually subject to any of the following Court Orders, Community Rehabilitation, Supervision, Action Plan, Detention and Training Orders, Section 91/92 custodial sentences as well as Referral Orders. As well as supervising young people on Court Orders, I am also requested by the Court to prepare Pre-Sentence Reports (PSRs) on young people who plead guilty or are found guilty by the Courts and prepare Panel Reports for those young people made subject to Referral Orders.

Therefore I work with the persistent and the first time offender, covering serious to petty offences and including those being found guilty under the terms of the recent controversial anti social behaviour legislation. Some clients have been Muslims who have Somalian, Pakistani or Palestinian cultural origins as well as being British or living in Britain but the vast majority are young people from White English, African or Caribbean cultural origins and mostly non-Muslim backgrounds i.e. mainly from Christian backgrounds. Many have no faith. Over the years I have discovered I work similarly with young people irrespective of their faith.

Despite working in a multi-disciplinary team and having different styles in how we work with young people, all staff appear to share the same principles and ethos and values in the way we work. All my colleagues are non-Muslim (with a recent exception of a Muslim student social worker who is training with us for several months) but they share what I identify as an Islamic ethos, (Islamic I say with a small i and not a big I). This involves firstly, respect for young people, having a child centred approach, and balance in assessments in terms of justice to the young person, victim and wider society whilst taking into account the welfare of the young person. The approach is also Islamic because all members of the team are also firm but honest with the young people and their families.

Over the years, I believe I have successfully integrated an Islamic approach with my psychodynamic counselling training and using cognitive behavioural techniques in working with young people who have different faiths or no faith.

Payne (1997: 72) defines psychodynamic as being

*based on the work of Freud and his followers, and on developments of their work. They are called psychodynamic, because the theory underlying them assumes that behaviour comes from movements and interactions in people's minds. Also it emphasises the way in which the mind stimulates behaviour and both the mind and behaviour influence and are influenced by the person's social environment ... Psychoanalytic theory has three parts; it is a theory of human development, of personality and abnormal psychology and of treatment ... Two important basic ideas underpin the theory ...*

*1 Psychic Determinism – the principle that actions or behaviour arise from people's thought processes rather than just happening*

*2 The unconscious – the idea that some thinking and mental activity are hidden from our knowledge*

Payne (1997:115-116) defines the cognitive behavioural approach as follows:

*Cognitive theory argues that behaviour is affected by perception or integration of the environment during the process of learning. Apparently inappropriate behaviour must therefore arise from misperception and misinterpretation. Therapy has to correct the misunderstanding so that our behaviour appropriately reacts to the environment ... Cognitive behavioural methods are therapeutic procedures which focus on changing thoughts and feelings alongside, instead of or as a precursor to changing behaviour.*

The integration can be illustrated by my approach to Raymond's case.

## Raymond's case

I worked with Raymond from 2000 to 2004. Raymond was born in the UK to Caribbean parents. His working class black family live on an estate that is notorious for crime. My involvement with him began in Spring 2000 when I was appointed to write a PSR. When he received an Action Plan Order one month later, I became his Supervising officer. However my involvement with him did not end after three months. This is because he received a ten months sentence, a Detention and Training Order (DTO) in Summer 2000 for offences of assaulting police, various motor vehicle and dishonest crime. The court was particularly concerned about him committing the following offences of criminal damage, affray and common assault at his school during that summer.

The magistrates when sentencing Raymond stated:

*You went on a rampage of violence subjected people to a barrage of abuse, threw stones, stabbed the head in the back with a pen, continued abuse, spat in a teacher's mouth. Your offending is persistent.*

Whilst serving the DTO, Raymond was sentenced for committing assault against custodial staff. In late Winter 2001, due to him demonstrating a pattern of aggression towards professionals in authority, firstly police, then teachers and then custodial staff, I assessed him as presenting a high risk of being violent to YOT staff. This assessment became reality in Spring 2002 when Raymond took out a penknife in a session with a Locum YOT officer whilst I was away on maternity leave.

From Summer 2000, Raymond mostly lived at home with his mother and stepfather. There were periods when he lived with his brother Ben or was placed in bed and breakfast accommodation because his mother could not deal with him being threatening towards her and his stepfather as well as his offending behaviour and staying out with peers. Social Services had been involved with Raymond since 1988. In 1992 he disclosed to professionals that a private foster carer had physically and emotionally abused him. Social Services staff were also concerned that Raymond might have been sexually abused there too.

When I worked with Raymond until 2004 when his case was transferred to the adult probation service, I offered him weekly or fortnightly one to one sessions. Sessions often focused on his relationship with his mother and using cognitive behavioural exercises I addressed his anger management difficulties.

The main breakthrough with Raymond's case came when during a cognitive behavioural exercise he revealed that he saw himself as evil. In this session I used my understanding of what evil is from an Islamic perspective and merged this with my understanding of what evil is from a Christian perspective taken from the writings of M. Scott Peck (1990) to help Raymond to understand that he was not evil because he had the ability to refrain from offending behaviour. I broke this down for him verbally in the session and then passed him a hand written copy for him to keep. By doing this I perceive I not only engaged him but also used his honesty to provide him with a sensitive and supportive service. This demonstrates an Islamic way of working with any youth irrespective of faith enabling me



to grapple with deep emotion and spiritual depths and facilitating his own understanding of his offending behaviour. The revelation that he was 'not evil' was used to 'prevent offending' which 'is the aim of the Youth Justice System' (Crime and Disorder Act, 1998).

There have inevitably been times when I have felt the tension of integrating spiritual principles with a psychodynamic perspective and cognitive behavioural techniques. To deal with this demands bravery and the willingness to deal with friction. In the world of YOTs today there is pressure to abandon psychodynamic techniques and use only cognitive behavioural approaches because the Youth Justice Board and the Home Office favour the latter approach.

McGuire et al (2003:6) refers to the following research studies: Lipsey and Wilson 1998, Redondo et al 1999 and Dowden and Andrews 1999 as well as Andrews et al 1990 to 'show the most effective programmes employ the following methods ... interpersonal skills training, behavioural interventions ... cognitive skills training'. I was interested to discover that 'the value of classical psychotherapeutic models emerge as questionable.' (McGuire, 1995:9) and that 'ineffective programmes typically entail ... Unstructured individual or group programmes for example using open ended counselling' (McGuire et al, 2003:4). Research studies by Lipsey, (1995), Lipsey and Wilson (1998) and Wilson and Lipsey (2000) as well as Petrosino et al (2000) (McGuire et al, 2003:8) demonstrate that offending behaviour programmes that involve 'open ended individual counselling which is diffusely focussed or unstructured' are 'ineffective'

However I was heartened to read that my integrated approach should not be abandoned because research studies cited by McGuire et al (2003:5) also

*demonstrate that there is no single solution to the problem of offending behaviour, or to this attempt to help young people to reduce its frequency or severity. No single approach can be designated a 'magic bullet' method that works well in one context with one elected sample it may work well, less well in others ...*

I was also relieved to discover that:

*There is a view that the advent of structural programmes within services for young people implies that the relationship between the young person and the worker is of marginal importance. On the contrary it has been found to be a significant contributor to beneficial outcomes. (McGuire et al, 2003:46)*

The case of Raymond highlights the possibility of integrating an Islamic and Christian perspective into a language that Raymond, coming from a Christian tradition understood. Yet it is difficult to verbalise this process as it was not really an intellectual exercise or consciously intended in professional terms, but rather a reflection of my inner journey.

The above case highlights the importance of respect for the young person, irrespective of the offence they have committed. I respect them as a human being irrespective of the religion, class or cultural background they come from or what skin colour they have and this is integral to my Islamic approach to working with them. I have worked with young

people who have committed sexual offences as well as very violent assaults and this applies to even them. While I have been abhorred by their crimes, they, as individuals have not abhorred me. I have not demonised them as sections of this government and sections of this country's media like to do.

## **Paul's case**

I recall personal abhorrence of an offence when working with Paul who had committed grievous bodily harm, nearly killing a boy after he had robbed him. Paul had tied the victim up and repeatedly kicked and punched his head. In a PSR interview, I told Paul that when he had the courage to be truthful to me about his involvement in this offence, I would be able to respect him. Paul had no faith and did not express any remorse for his crime but when he was able to admit to himself the grave situation he was in and acknowledge what he had done to another human being, I believe I was able to assist. My intervention enabled him to start a process of accepting and living with a truth rather than evading it, resulting in him wanting to reform. This case also signifies an Islamic approach to working with young people.

## **Working with Muslim youth specifically and sensitively**

Although it is important to work Islamically with youth generally, this does not negate the importance of organisations working with Muslim youth specifically. Muslim young people do have specific needs and they sometimes need specific services that are sensitive to their faith, background and context. However, from the perspective of a professional working within a statutory youth offending team service, despite the increasing trend of Muslims coming into the criminal justice system, it is my assessment that more funding is needed for this to be done properly. As a YOT worker I have to finish my 'bread and butter' work first before I can do anything specific, my bread and butter work being supervising young people on my caseload, writing PSRs and Referral Order Panel reports. I therefore just continue to carry on trying to deliver a faith and cultural sensitive service as a personal commitment despite the lack of funding and acknowledgement of the needs of Muslim youth by government bodies such as the Home Office or the Youth Justice Board.

This faith and culturally sensitive approach which I attempt to pursue can be highlighted by two cases: Umar and Fatimah.

## **Fatimah's case**

I never discussed her religious background or religion with Fatimah, a Somali girl rejected by her family for trying to be too western. She was deemed as high risk, very difficult to place educationally, with mental health needs and a hot fiery temper. It was apparent that her primary needs for accommodation, independent living skills, benefits and training needs were not being addressed and I knew these needs had to be met before I could effectively work with her on her anger management difficulties or her offending behaviour, addressing

them as a priority. Her family who saw her as giving the community a bad name had kicked her out. I struggled with her and other professionals to ensure that she was not also rejected by society and put into prison for her attention-seeking and childish ways. Fatimah eventually proved to me and the other professionals that despite her temper, she could hold down a training course and stick at independent living and be a young adult in London. Being Muslim myself and also being familiar with the needs of refugee communities and some of the dynamics occurring in the Somali community, gave me empathy towards her difficulties. I therefore did not have to discuss with her the rejection of her family and her need to experiment with western lifestyle. It was generally understood that I respected that she needed to explore this to find herself. When I closed her case, she had stopped offending and was much calmer than before. I was able to perceive that perhaps Fatimah was escaping a very emotionally and physically abusive family and hence had a lot to be angry about. My instincts suggest that maybe when she is older she may wish to return to her Islamic roots.

## Umar's case

With Umar I saw a British Palestinian boy involved in gangs and serious robberies who was angry about Palestine. The Psychologist in the team recommended he be referred to mental health services for anger management sessions. Because I am Muslim, I recognised Umar's anger as real and not imagined and worked with him on channelling that anger constructively and looking at his identity, which was not just Palestinian but British too.

## Trends among Muslim youth

Over the years I have observed more and more Muslim young people entering the criminal justice system for a variety of reasons. Many of these young Muslims are from immigrant or refugee communities who due to family conflict, the pressure of forced marriages, cultural conflicts or sexual, emotional or physical abuse leave home or struggle living at home and enter the criminal justice system. A few of these young Muslims enter the system because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong crowd. Their attempts to fit in or be accepted by their peers, result in disaster. For many young people crime has become a lifestyle to fund a drug habit. But whatever the reason, as well as being demonised by society in general, these young people are ostracised by the Muslim community.

Usually, their parents have run out of ideas on how to deal with them. The Muslim parents I have worked with seem to oscillate between the two extremes of heavy restriction on their child's liberty, for example, sending their child back to Pakistan, or they do nothing about challenging the offending and pretend nothing has happened.

Apart from a few local initiatives and national voluntary organisations like An-Nisa Society, Muslim Youth Helpline and Muslim Women's Helpline, in general the Muslim Community's attitude and response to these young people is complete denial as to their existence. There is a feeling, little voiced in the Muslim community, but nevertheless present, that such young people cannot be part of the Community if they continue with their offending or

drug habit or both. They are therefore rejected by their families. This parental mentality is reflected onto the community in general and then is mirrored by local and national policy towards the issue. If few are actually voicing concern about the increasing trend of Muslim young people entering the criminal justice system, it is perhaps not surprising that apart from the appointment of a Home Office Muslim Advisor for the Prison Service in the late 1990s, little has been done by statutory and voluntary agencies to address the issue.

The silence around the issue results in the young people and their immediate family having nowhere to go and no one to turn for help to express their feelings of shame, pain, guilt and remorse. There is usually no one in the community to encourage and motivate the young people towards leading a law-abiding lifestyle. Sadly many of them also feel mistrustful of the professionals in the system like YOT Officers, Prison Officers or Youth Workers. They feel, at best, that these professionals don't really understand their experience of racism and Islamophobia and their cultural and religious needs or, at worst they are met in reality with a complete lack of recognition of these needs.

Having no support from the Muslim Community and little understanding or validation from the criminal justice system results in some of these young people becoming more aggressive and criminal, provoking a vicious circle of marginalisation and incarceration. It is even more of a tragedy to state that in my fifteen years as a qualified social worker, I have witnessed a growing number of Muslim young people in the care system end up in the criminal justice system to experience a similar neglect of their cultural and religious needs.

## **Muslim gangs in South London**

From the perspective of practice, there appears a sinister and disturbing trend in South London. An increasing number of Muslim young people strongly identify themselves as Muslims and many are converting to Islam via prison, gangs or via word on the street. This has become more apparent since the events in USA on September 11th 2001. Some young Muslims I have supervised inform me that they just socialise with Muslims and no one else.

This strong sense of identity seems to have had negative repercussions for some. Instead of mobilising them to practise the spiritual and humanitarian elements of the faith, it can lead to more criminalised behaviour or gang culture. For example, after a group of 20 year olds converted to Islam inside prison in 2004, they came out with their criminalized version of Islam and formed into Muslim gangs, one called the notorious SMS. I do not know what SMS stands for. Members of my team have heard anecdotal and also court case evidence of this gang intimidating others into becoming Muslim, gang- raping girls and robbing non-Muslim teenagers. Some of the young people we were supervising had been victims of this gang crime and the gang had also recruited some of those we were working with.

Members of the team were all very worried. I heard that South London mosques were recruiting centres for this gang. I heard police were putting these mosques under heavy surveillance worried these gangs may end up as breeding grounds for terrorism. While this perturbed me, my principal concern was for the young people we were working with, irrespective of whether they had become members of the gang or were victims of the gang.

## Working Islamically with youth

In response to this, I suggested to my team that a group be set up within the YOT to explore identity. Initially I wanted to create a group specifically for Muslim young people who had come into the criminal justice system, but a Christian colleague pointed out that many of the young people who had been recruited by the gang had not changed their non-Muslim names into Muslim ones and also it was observed that in sessions with their YOT Officer, these young people were denying they were Muslims or involved in any gangs, despite evidence to the contrary. Running a group for Muslim young people would not address the needs of the clients we were concerned with, as they would say they could not attend because they were not Muslim.

It was therefore decided to keep the group open to both Muslim and non-Muslim young people, girls and boys, black and white. There was much support in the team for setting up the group, because identity was defined as more than faith, including for example, gender and ethnicity. Because it was not exclusive every one in the team felt they could contribute in delivering sessions.

Overall the group was called 'Me Myself and I'. Although the young people attending had no choice in coming as they were ordered to attend by the court, we decided to make it more appealing by naming the workshops using language the young people were familiar with. Below is the programme listed including the title of the workshops.

### Me Myself and I Programme of Workshops

1. Introduction to Workshops
2. Thug Life
3. My yard
4. Why do you do what you do?
5. Who am I?
6. Me Myself and I and You
7. Pink or Blue Which one are You?
8. Celebration Workshop

### The Me Myself and I group

There were eight sessions in all and different workers from the team; both female and male, white and black assisted in facilitating the workshops. The YOT management team were persuaded to give a small budget for outside facilitators. Fifteen young people were referred to the group. Although the maximum number of people that attended was eight in any one session, a core group of up to six young people were consistently attending the last four sessions. Those who attended over the eight weeks included one white English non-Muslim boy (David), four African Caribbean non-Muslim boys (Carl, Sean, Bob, Len), one mixed parentage non-Muslim girl (Norma), two mixed parentage boys (Wesley, Sam) and four Muslim boys mostly of African and Caribbean or mixed parentage backgrounds, (Sam, Joel,

Ossie, Chris).

Three of the four Muslim boys had told their YOT Officer that they had converted to Islam and one alerted the YOT as to his new faith in the group session. Two of these young Muslim boys had evoked concerns from family and teachers that they were expressing gang tendencies or there were rumours that they had joined a gang and had become Muslim for this. The Me Myself and I group ran over the Summer of 2005. During the programme, London witnessed the events of July 7th 2005.

The first session was a difficult one. It was facilitated by myself, the RAP Co-ordinator and RAP worker, the latter both being from African Caribbean backgrounds. There was a lot of resistance from the young people in attending a group at the YOT. Interestingly the only young person that didn't show any resistance and seemed quite happy to participate was the only white boy in the group, David. In explaining to them the programme and telling them the next session was entitled thug life, the young people were keen to point out that they were labelled often as thugs. We reassured them that the titles of the group sessions were there to make the session sound interesting thus encouraging them to come and that the word 'thug' did not describe how we see them. David stated that

*it really gets to me that on the road I can be with my mates and I will just get arrested or pulled over just because I am with other young people. I really hate it that I am seen as a criminal just because I am young and dress young whereas a middle aged man dressing young would never be treated like a criminal and given that look that you are not worth it.*

The young people then used the first session to express all their self-hatred and mistrust of the system to us. Joel expressed his newfound interest in Islam and kept stating he had to leave to go to the mosque. He tested our authority with his mobile phone going off every few minutes and then apologising for his offensive language when he answered it. Joel said he didn't get any knowledge from school as teachers had made their minds up about him due to his family. He had cousins so by the time he finished primary school he was seen as bad and they thought there was no hope for him. Joel kept asking, 'What is the point in getting knowledge from the system? What's the point in being part of the system?' It was pointed out that it was really good at his age that he was able to question the system. The RAP Co-ordinator, himself from an African Caribbean background stated that he thought what he heard from Joel is that he and the others perhaps never felt part of the system.

Although I left this session downhearted because I had received a high amount of resistance from the young people, resulting in low levels of participation, I was surprised by their honesty and felt the group had a future and more could be achieved.

The second session was very structured and was delivered by a very experienced White English Youth Offending Team Officer. He focussed on how young people were perceived when in groups and in particular football hooliganism. Clips from a violent film depicting football hooliganism were screened and the young people's thoughts and feelings elicited. While many of them had no schooling or limited education, they were astute and articulate enough to spot that groups had a uniform and violence became a lifestyle. They were open

about the gangs in the area and spoke about how they were treated as less than humans and disrespected by adults when in a group even when they were just talking. They talked about their dreams and their future and I left that session upbeat and very excited. Mobile phones had not gone off and the young people had been frank and respectful about their experiences.

The next session was an eye-opener for me as the programme co-ordinator but also for the young people. It was facilitated by Hakim, an outside facilitator not employed by the YOT, but a mentor in East London experienced in working with its large Muslim Bangladeshi youth population as well as being an active member of his African Caribbean community. Hakim is also experienced in facilitating groups involved in gangs. Hakim talked in the street language used by the young people. Norma, the only girl, was new to the group that week but she held her own and was pleasantly surprised by the respect she got from the facilitator who addressed her as 'young sister'. The group however were shocked by Hakim's questions and insight into their world. He got them to question everything. Why they liked their music? Why they wore their clothes the way they did? Did they know where those fashions stemmed from? Why did the men talk about the women as dogs, bitches and whores? Why they wanted the 'bling'? Why they were after money?

Hakim openly described their facial expressions apologising if he was boring them. Then he took them on a journey about gangs from a micro level to a macro level, from South London to an international level looking at countries behaving like gangs and robbing poor countries like Sierra Leone of diamonds or Iraq of oil. The body language of the young people changed. They sat up. They stopped pretending to be bored. Even the one white young man, David was not threatened by the facilitator's brutal honesty of his perception of the world. VH even voiced his subscribing to conspiracy theories to explain events in the USA on September 11th 2001. At the end of the session after exploring why young people get into gangs and how to get out of gangs, they all admitted to having learnt something.

The young people were then set for the next session to explore why they did what they did, their attitude to faith and religion. Again many started out looking bored and being resistant to the outside facilitator Humera, an experienced freelance trainer and an active youth and community worker of a Muslim voluntary organisation, An-Nisa Society which is trying to promote the well-being of Muslim families in North London. However this resistance decreased as the session progressed; the young people wanted to watch the video she had brought challenging the way the West looks at Islam. They were also very interested to discover why she had sought after spirituality. Humera herself was surprised that they did not share the Islamophobic views often held by adults. Most of the young people were intrigued by her passion for spirituality and they were frank about their views in regard to events in London on July 7th 2005, these views betraying their anti establishment sentiments.

Half way through the group programme, a core set of young people started attending regularly: Norma the only girl, Sam and Wesley two mixed parentage boys, Chris, one African Muslim boy and Sean, one African non-Muslim boy and David the only white boy. They started to enjoy the group and started interjecting, interrupting facilitators with their views and also interacting with each other by challenging each other's views. They were

honest about whether they saw themselves as black or not, their sexuality including their views on homosexuality and relationships, how the boys treated girls, being violent to girls, how boys saw girls, how their families treated them, why they offended and why some of them couldn't stop.

The last, celebration session ended with them being intrigued and entertained by two rap singers, both from African Caribbean backgrounds, but one Christian and the other Muslim who had left a life of crime and turned to music. The young people paid a lot of attention to the personal narratives of the rap singers and it seemed that the musical lyrics impressed the point further by affecting them on a deeply emotional level. Overall, I received positive feedback from the young people as to how the sessions had gone with one criticism, to make it shorter without a break. This criticism probably betrays the context in which YOT staff are working ie. the fact that the young people we work with are involuntary clients and are instructed to come to the YOT by the courts. When the group ended I was still enthusiastic and had energy and interest to pursue more group work, because it had been proven to be effective in getting the young people to express their feelings and thoughts about their lives.

## Conclusion

Whether the group was effective in preventing them from offending, as is the aim of the Youth Justice System is still to be seen and perhaps could be measured and monitored by following the offending patterns of those that attended via a long term funded research initiative. More time and staff need to be given in planning, structuring and delivering the group: I personally discovered that I could not devote sufficient time to my caseload and administrative duties whilst undertaking this programme.

In retrospect, I enjoyed working eclectically and not exclusively just with the young people, but also with all my colleagues irrespective of faith, culture or gender. I believe that this eclectic and inclusive approach is an Islamic way of working with young people. This is because an Islamic approach values, respects and promotes difference and dialogue.

However the impressions I gained during the group made me conclude that there is a need of working with Muslim young people not only in a statutory setting but also in a voluntary way. Exploring identity constructively in a community venue away from statutory settings or the mosque would help overcome resistance and enable young people to share their experiences that they find confusing, difficult or painful. I have come to this conclusion as the responses I received from the young people in the Me, Myself and I group were much more rich, honest and reflective when the session had not been facilitated by YOT officers but by outside facilitators such as Hakim and Humera. It is my assessment that this occurred because the young people knew Hakim and Humera were not professionals in a position of authority and as a result they did not perceive them as such and were hence less resistant to them. I believe however many Muslim youth view Imams in the mosque in the same way they view YOT Officers because they are in positions of authority and this prevents young people from being able to express what they really feel in a mosque setting.



My professional experiences, illustrated by the cases studies I have discussed, highlight the importance of working Islamically with youth. The reflections from these cases and the 'Me Myself and I' group also implies a convincing case for the need to work with Muslim youth specifically, and especially in a voluntary context.

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# Alternative Visions: International Sporting Opportunities for Muslim Women and Implications for British Youth Sport

*Tansin Benn and Aisha Ahmed*

*The purpose of this article is to establish the global context for alternative separatist sporting events such as the Women's Islamic Games, for example by acknowledging the polarised debate of secular versus Islamic feminists' perspectives of Muslim women in sport. The discourses underpin the early research of Aisha Ahmad, who was one of thirteen British Muslim women to compete in the Fourth International Women's Islamic Games in Tehran, Iran, September 2005. Her research is based around a case study of participation in the event as competitor and observer. This paper does not offer analysis and interpretation of that experience but provides glimpses of its significance for Muslim women and raises implications for British Youth Sport and provision of opportunity for Muslim girls and women.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim women, sport, Islam, feminism, Women's Islamic Games, British Muslim.*

The road to international representation for British athletes is long, whatever their chosen sport. Before a small number realise their dream of selection for international representation, the path normally involves a series of interlocking factors, that take young people with potential from the early stages of talent identification, through complex processes of nurturing and training and much medical and scientific screening, with sponsorship support. Aisha, a British Muslim woman, answered a newspaper advertisement in 2003 that invited expressions of interest in participating in the Women's Islamic Games of 2005. Hers was a two-year journey of weekend training in London, with poor facilities, limited financial support and no medical or scientific back-up, before final selection to join the British futsal team (five-a-side football) of thirteen women to represent their country in the 2005 Tehran Games (Bee, 2005). The Tehran government paid for accommodation and the athletes financed their own flights.

Behind the glaring disparity in mainstream and Muslim athletes' struggles to national representation lie complex issues of equity at the interface of gender, religion and sport. The cultural context of western dominated models of international sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, is problematic for some Muslim women who wish to adhere to Islamic requirements for modesty which affect dress code and the need for all female environments (Taherian, 2005). One solution has been to start women-only international sporting events that comply with these prescriptions and enable Muslims to participate.

To proactively encourage the inclusion of Muslim women in sport, the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS) was established in 1991 in Tehran, Iran, and one of its activities is to

organise the four-yearly Women's Islamic Games which started in 1993. Although started initially for women in Islamic countries, in 2001 and 2005 there was representation at the international event from a small number of women from non-Islamic countries, including British Muslim women (*Muslim News*, 2005c). In 2005 the event was opened to women who share solidarity with the Muslim women's cause for the right to participate in sport and keep their religious identity. This is a global issue that has implications for all sports providers at every level of participation and competition.

## Gender, sport and religion

In terms of gender, both sport and religion have been arenas of discrimination which have excluded girls and women from equal opportunities. In sport gender hegemony has manifested itself in many ways, for example in terms of differential rules and regulations, unequal resourcing and coaching, media recognition, sponsorship and rewards (Ehsani et al, 2005). Indeed, in 1896 with the birth of the modern Olympics, the founder Pierre de Coubertin decreed that all women were banned from participating and were fit only to crown the victors with laurel wreaths.

Throughout the twentieth century, moves to improve the rights of girls and women to participate in sport were slow. However, as Pfister (2000) acknowledged, wide-ranging scientific perspectives shifted from an excluding to an including discourse for women's participation in sport. By the 2004 Athens Olympics 44 per cent of participants were female. David (2005) recognised the increasing influence of the women's movement that improved awareness and subsequently opportunity for girls and women in sport. This includes the opening of more teams and clubs for women, increased knowledge of the health benefits of sport and realisation on the part of enterprise entrepreneurs that the inclusion of women doubled commercial potential. Nevertheless, radical feminists still claim that progress is limited and 'cosmetic' and is based on a deficit model of women having to catch-up the men (Brackenridge, 2001). All women have struggled in the male domain of sport but Muslim women have had a harder struggle for the right to participate in sport, particularly at the level of international competition.

## Islam, Women and Sport

Muslim women are virtually invisible in high level international sporting competition such as the Olympic Games (Hargreaves, 1994). Different interpretations of Islamic requirements by individuals and governments across the world ensure varied experiences for Muslim women athletes. For example, the gold medallist 400-metre hurdler Nawel El Moutawakel from Morocco became the first Muslim, Arab woman to win a gold medal at Los Angeles in 1984 and she was heralded in her country as:

*... a figure of national triumph and Arabic pride, a sign of radical womanhood made possible by forward-looking government.*

(Hargreaves, 2000:46)

The western media portrayed her as triumphant over a restricted (Islamic) way of life that constrained international sporting opportunity for women. The experience of Hassiba Boulmerka from Algeria was very different. When she returned home from Barcelona in 1992 with an Olympic medal in the 1500 metres event she received a more negative reception from some groups who thought her appearance in athletic shorts and vest contravened religious requirements. As a consequence she has lived much of her life in exile. Such criticism and effects:

*... symbolized poignantly the struggles over women's bodies throughout the Muslim world and the powerful links between sport, politics and religion.*

(Ibid:46)

It is interesting that both women have used their success positively and politically to increase opportunities for other Muslim women since their athletic victories. In response to a newspaper interview in 2005, Moutawakel, speaking from her home in Casablanca said:

*Islam is a tolerant religion which understands the value of sport and the lessons it teaches us about solidarity, self-esteem and discipline ... this applies to both women and men, although it will take time to convince those of a fundamentalist persuasion to accept this. We have to go slowly. It is much better to gently encourage those with a different cultural perspective than simply to criticise.*

(Syed, 2005:76)

Fundamentalist opinion can be very powerful. Recently, a young Muslim Indian tennis player, Sania Mirza, was proclaimed as the fastest rising star in women's tennis, moving from 326 to 31 in world rankings in 2005.

*In India she became something of a nationwide obsession, swiftly embraced as a symbol of modernity and celebrated as an icon of Islamic emancipation and Indian empowerment.*

(Gentleman, 2006: 57)

Sania's popularity grew with multiple sponsorship deals. On 8th September 2005 a backlash from a group of Muslim fundamentalists called Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, issued a fatwa (religious opinion) warning that she '...would be stopped from playing if she did not start wearing "proper clothing"' (Ibid). One cleric suggested: 'We cannot consider her a good Muslim because she exposes her body in front of male spectators' (Ibid). A team of bodyguards now protects her.

Negative stories dominate western reporting of Muslim women's participation in sport. Bee (2005) reports on another example which illustrates that there is intra-group tension amongst Muslims as well as the more frequently highlighted 'Islam and the West' differences:

*... 500 Bangladeshi Muslim activists staged a protest in Dhaka against their country's first women's soccer league. They were informed by the deputy chief of the Islamic*

*Constitution that Bangladesh's national sports council will 'be put under siege for an indefinite period if the satanic women's football league is not immediately abolished.'*

With growing globalization, the increase of diasporic communities and the rising politicization of Islam, the issues at the interface of religion, sport and gender become equally pertinent across Islamic and non-Islamic countries (for example, see Walseth's 2006 study on Muslim women in sport in Norway). All stakeholders, including participants, politicians, policy-makers, sports entrepreneurs and providers in the sports business, should engage in the debate about facilities, events and opportunities at every level. The complexity of this debate is illustrated by Hargreaves (2000) through her analysis of the politicization of the 'Muslim women in sport' issue. She highlights the need to acknowledge both local and global effects, for example the differences in political influences on Muslim women in sport between Islamic countries of the Middle-East and North Africa. Growing awareness of global Islam impacts on 'mainstream' sport organisations, through pressure group lobbies and the emergence of separatist events: 'There is a progressive sense of global Islam in the international Muslim women's sport movement, which grows in strength and effectiveness' (Ibid, 68).

Many scholars have stated that Islam supports the participation of girls and women in physical activity (Sfeir, 1985; Daiman, 1994; Pfister, 2003; Murray, 2003; Koushkie Jahromi et al, 2005; Ehsani, 2005). However, if sport is differentiated into levels such as education, sport for all, championship and professional, it is apparent that the latter two levels of participation are most problematic islamically. This was a main theme of the fifth International Sports-Science Congress of the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS 2005) which focused on advocacy for more positive representation of the rights of Muslim women at championship and professional level. It is apparent from discussions that general consideration of the role of women in Islam must be a starting point before engaging in a debate on the Islamic ruling of women participating in sports.

In terms of believing, living a righteous life and meeting religious obligations, men and women are equal; men are not regarded as superior to women in the sight of Allah. However differences between the sexes occur when addressing their prescribed roles. These hinge around divisions of labour that are attributed to natural and biological differences and consequently different duties. The role of Muslim woman as mother includes the obligation to educate children in three respects: physical, intellectual and spiritual. This suggests ongoing attention to health and exercise is a natural progression from attention to 'physical' education in childhood, and that sporting pursuit would be a natural extension. 'Islamic religion in no way tries to deprecate, much less deny sport for women. On the contrary, it attributes great significance and function to physical strength and sport activities' (Sfeir, 1985: 300). There is evidence that the Prophet Mohammed encouraged his sons and daughters equally in pursuit of physical activity and even competed in races with his wife Aisha, indicating no prejudice against girls and women's participation (Ibid). In support of the positive role of women in Islam, Daiman (1994: 14) summarises the Islamic perspective and highlights distinct differences from some western interpretations:

*From its very outset, Islam was a liberating religion that uplifted the status of women and gave them rights ... In the West it can be said that the mainstream of the women's*

*movement has viewed religion as one of the chief enemies of its progress and well-being. Muslim women, however, view the teachings of Islam as their best friend and supporter. The prescriptions that are found in the Qur'an and in the examples of the Prophet Muhammad, or Hadiths, are regarded as the ideal to which contemporary women wish to return. As far as Muslim women are concerned, the source of any difficulties experienced today is not Islam and its traditions, but certain alien ideological intrusions on our societies, ignorance and distortion of the true Islam, or exploitation by individuals within society. That is why some 'Muslim' practices today oppress women and deny them the equality of human dignity granted in the Qur'an.*

Daiman is not denying that some Muslim women are oppressed but suggests such behaviour is not attributable to Islam. In the same article she concludes that Muslim women have equal rights to participate in sport, provided Islamic requirements are met.

The most frequently discussed issues surrounding Muslim women's participation in sport are related to Islamic requirements for modesty which impact on dress codes and sex-segregated participation. It is clear why the Olympic Games, and similar western constructs of international sporting competition in mixed-sex environments with sportswear regulations determined by secular sports governing bodies, create an impasse for some Muslims. Many Islamic countries send male teams but no women's teams to the Olympic Games, which indicates a stricter code of gender segregation for women. This is related to the concept of honour and upholding the protection and standing of the family / community, where '... control over female (sexuality) is achieved not through the internalisation of moral precepts but through gender segregation.' (Pfister, 2003: 221). Hargreaves (2000: 52) states:

*The social construction of women in Islam is linked to the power of symbol and control over the body. This lies at the heart of attitudes to women's sport in the Muslim world. Hijab (religious modesty) is fundamental and precious to all Muslims ...Although the Qur'anic concept of modesty applies equally to men and women, in practice it has been used almost exclusively to regulate the attitudes to, and usages of, women's bodies – as a result, the emphasis on traditional female dress has become a pivotal feature of the recent resurgence of Islam. All styles of dress relate to hijab, but it is the veil that has become the most potent signifier of Muslim womanhood and, arguably, 'a basic requirements of Islam' (Karam, 1998:135 cited Hargreaves 2000:52).*

For some the hijab is a symbol of oppression and lack of freedom; for other Muslim women it is a symbol of choice, identity, faith, and liberation. For sporting Muslim women it is not participating in high level sport that is the issue but a question of how they can protect their religious identity by retaining commitment to hijab whilst participating. For many Muslim women it means adherence to the requirement to cover hair, arms and legs in mixed-sex company.

Muslim women can compete in the mainstream international sporting arena in those sports where the wearing of Islamic dress does not inhibit performance, for example shooting. Many Muslim women would feel unable to compete in sports requiring more revealing sportswear, such as swimming and gymnastics. The mixed-sex and public environment

would compromise their religious identity. Nassin Hassanpour from Iran competed in the shooting event at the Athens Olympics but said: '... if dress code was not an issue, I would have preferred ... gymnastics ... I've been doing that since the age of three' (E-Zan, 2005). Islamic feminists have worked hard to increase the recognition of, and opportunities for Muslim women in sport within the boundaries of acceptable religious practice. They have been successful on many levels including establishing international events such as the Women's Islamic Games (originally named the Solidarity Games).

To some women's rights activists the exclusion of women from mainstream international sporting competition on religious grounds is regarded as a human rights issue, rooted in fundamentalist control of women. Their struggle is for secularized sport (Hargreaves, 2000). The term 'Gender Apartheid' was used by these lobbyists requesting a boycott of the Olympic Games in Atlanta, Sydney and Athens on the grounds of gender inequality because Islamic countries were sending all-male teams. Originally formalised by two French and one Belgium woman, exponents are predominantly European and USA based. Started as 'Atlanta Plus' the group is now called 'Atlanta, Sydney, Athens Plus' (Feminist Majority Newsletter 1996, La Linga do Droit 2004, Darabi 2004). The group challenges the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban all Islamic countries which allow male-only teams on the basis of the equality section of the Olympic Charter which states:

*Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics and gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement.*

(IOC, 2004)

Representation has been made to the IOC, UN Human Rights, the Council for Europe and the European Parliament. Their concern is with the

*... most oppressed group in relation to international sports participation (women), yet those who suffer some of the worst deprivation and atrocities (Muslim women) 'remain without defenders in international sporting enclaves ... because they are represented at such conclaves by governments that repress them'.*

(Goldsmith, 1995 cited in Hargreaves, 2000: 71-72).

The group also objected to the IOC acquiescing to demands from male Iranian athletes at the Barcelona Olympics who requested 'men only' to present medals, and who refused to enter the opening ceremony arena behind a Spanish woman holding their country's placard. In addition, the group '... decry the IOC's support of the Women's Solidarity Games which, they claim, Iran used as part of a political campaign to extol their way of life and beliefs.' (Ibid: 72).

There are competing viewpoints on the struggles and achievements of Muslim women in sport. Islamic feminists and western feminists would see separatist events such as the Women's Islamic Games differently. For the former such events are hard won opportunities that allow women to keep both religious and sporting identities. The latter view such events as a retrograde step that does little to challenge perceived disadvantage for Muslim women by exclusion from the mainstream international sporting stage. The words of one of the

founders of 'Atlanta Plus', Linda Weil-Curiel, and the current Head of the Islamic Women's Sport Federation, Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, illustrate the polarity of the debate:

*What I denounce is the participation, the support of the IOC. I see it as a double betrayal, a betrayal of the spirit of sports and the Olympic Charter, the Universalism of the Olympic Spirit, and I see it as a betrayal of the Muslim athletes who think it normal to participate in international competitions with the normal sports gear ... Why should we admit such a difference which is a clear discrimination. If it is a matter of religion why should Muslim men continue to compete amongst women, wearing shorts, because Islam is the same for men and women, chastity and modesty is also for men so why do men continue to compete? Are they less good Muslims?*

Weil-Curiel (BBC, 2005)

*I think the system that there is only one model in the world for sport, like the Olympic Games, is indirectly discriminatory for Muslim women ... the wearing of shorts and tops – Islamic clothing requires different conditions, effects records. They do not say 'don't come here' but in reality I cannot because I want to stay in my hijab and I can't go to that competition because I must do that without hijab.*

Faezeh Hashemi (BBC, 2005)

Hashemi has been a major leader and reformer of women's participation in sport and social life in Iran (Hargreaves, 2000: 56 – 57). As President of the IWSF and the Women's Islamic Games four-yearly international event, she has championed developments that led to the inclusion of non-Muslim countries in the games. This brings us to the British Muslim women's futsal team at the 2005 games in Tehran.

## The Women's Islamic Games – history

The Women's Islamic Games are a recent but rapidly growing phenomena. To date they have occurred in 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2005. The Games were first named the Islamic Countries Sports Solidarity Games (1993, 1997). Stressing that they were for Muslim women regardless of nationality, they were renamed the Muslim Women's Games (open to non-Islamic countries) in 2001; and the Women's Islamic Games (open to non-Muslim women who wished to share solidarity with Muslim women) in 2005. The Games also include opportunity for disabled women's teams to compete at international level bringing much pleasure and high standards of competition to further marginalised groups (De Soysa, 2005). The event remains a safe-space for Muslim women to compete in sport at an international level, where their religious requirements of hijab are met, and they can compete in the normal usual sporting attire away from public gaze. Opening and closing ceremonies are public and women wear Islamic dress. In-between 'the women spectators, judges, journalists, doctors and coaches proved that such events can be successfully held without any men in the stadiums, gyms or swimming baths' (Pfister, 2003: 217).

The following table shows the growth in the number of countries participating, sports events included, and participants in the Women's Islamic Games between 1993 and 2005.



Year of competition	Number of Countries participating	Number of Sports Events	Number of Participants (Athletes and Officials)
1993	11	8	829
1997	24	12	1,234
2001	24	15	1,241
2005	44	18	1,600

Whilst there are Muslim women in Iran who would like to be able to compete in the ‘mainstream’ international sporting arena, others see separatism as the only way forward (Pfister, 2003). In this context it is interesting to hear the experiences of British women who represented their country at the 2005 Tehran Games. As participant athlete and researcher Aisha Ahmad (co-author) gathered a range of data including: a personal narrative of experiences, media coverage, questionnaires, interviews, observations and documentary materials, for her research. The stage of Aisha’s analysis and interpretation is too early to be presented in any depth here but an ‘insider perspective’ of the event and experience can be glimpsed from some of the data gathered.

### British Muslim Women’s Team in Tehran 2005

*I would best describe my identity as a British Pakistani Muslim woman. I’ve always had happy experiences of sport during school, competing and playing everything and anything that was remotely sports related. On leaving school there were no local opportunities to play sport that met Islamic requirements; consequently I was unable to participate in any sports after the age of 16. Some years later in 2003 I was filled with enthusiasm on finding a newspaper advertisement calling for applicants to compete in the Women’s Islamic Games to be held in 2005. Four hundred people responded to the advertisement and due to limited resources and sponsorship (all from The Muslim News) thirteen travelled to Tehran in September. We were the British Muslim women’s futsal team.*

(Aisha’s narrative)

*I guess everyone’s dream is to play their favourite sport and represent their country – (the Games were) a dream come true.*

Team interview (BBC, 2005)

*The Games meant the best of both worlds to me; the opportunity to compete in sports, which is something that I have always loved, whilst retaining my religious identity, being Muslim, which is who I am. Finding the newspaper advertisement opened a doorway*

*for me where I could start competing in sports again, in fact the Islamic Games offered me the only opportunity as a Muslim woman to compete in sport at a national and an international level.*

*The experience brought solidarity between forty-four nations. The games saw 1,600 competitors competing in eighteen different sports. Participating and adhering to Islamic requirements symbolised unity through sport and solidarity between nations, oneness between Muslims and non-Muslims (this was the second Games opened to non-Muslim countries but the first to also be opened to non-Muslim competitors). We were able to compete wearing the usual football attire, as all sporting arenas were closed to men. There were no male spectators, officials or journalists within the actual competition arenas.*

(Aisha's narrative)

Media coverage was scant in both Iran and in the UK. The *Muslim News* gave most coverage, understandably since the editor Ahmad Versi facilitated the British team's participation through advertising and sponsorship, (*Muslim News*, 2005 a, b, c, d). It is interesting to note that he is an international advocate for Muslim women's participation in sport in his role as Vice President of the IFWS, with responsibility for non-Islamic countries. In addition the *Guardian* newspaper ran one article (Bee, 2005) and *The Times* newspaper gave a full page coverage to the event and the views of the 2005 team captain Rimla Aktar and Vice Captain Ayesha Abdeen (Syed, 2005). Both broadsheet newspapers gave a positive view of the event as a means of increasing opportunity for a group predominantly excluded from international sporting events but links with notions of women's oppression conducted in the name of Islam were never far from the surface:

*The concept of Muslim women congregating in Tehran for a multisport festival will come as a surprise to those who associate Islam with genital mutilation, polygamy and other forms of female repression.*

(Syed, 2005: 76)

*Triumph over adversity is a phrase used loosely in sport ... but occasionally the physical, social or cultural barriers to competition are truly adverse. Such is the case for young Muslim women, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, who want to participate in sport but whose cultural ideal can present what many consider insurmountable obstacles to putting on a pair of trainers.*

(Bee, 2005, 9)

Interestingly the BBC sent two female reporters to the event to produce a Radio Four programme called 'Taking on Tehran', first broadcast on 9th December 2005 (BBC, 2005). This included snap-shots of the event, for example the opening ceremony, pre and post match talks, interviews with the British team players, coach, and key protagonists / antagonists (Hashemi and Weil-Curiel mentioned above) in an attempt to capture different perspectives on the Games and something of the atmosphere.

The coach to the British team was a non-Muslim woman who the team thought was very committed '... really striving for our cause and we really appreciate that' (BBC, 2005).

She did not enjoy having to cover whilst in Tehran, or being excluded from use of the swimming pool at the hotel, available for men only. She had shown long term dedication to helping the team do as well as they could, in months of pre-training and in motivating and consoling the team through their four matches. They lost them all but in the end agreed that '... losing did not matter – (the Games) provided Muslim women with opportunity to play sport in Britain (and internationally). This is not the end it is just the beginning ...' (Ibid).

The report of the opening ceremony from Aisha and the BBC programme gave a flavour of the music and atmosphere. Here the press were allowed, and for medal ceremonies, because the women were covered:

*The opening ceremony was spectacular with a dance, each person holding up an umbrella representing the flags of each country participating in the games. It is interesting to note that the dance included both males and females who refrained from physical contact quite skilfully.*

(Aisha's narrative)

The athletes processed into the arena, as in the Olympic Games, behind placards of their country and flags. The ceremony was described as:

*Overwhelming ... here come Indonesia, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Japan, Kuwait, Iran ... and I can see a great big Union Jack. There are two women from America – and a tiny American flag – there are about 20 press people around them – they are creating much interest – these are brave women down there.*

(BBC, 2005)

*Much media attention also focused on the British team during the games and this reinforced our purpose at the games. The experience brought my religious and national identity to the surface, I am a British Muslim. It was an honour to be representing my country and maintaining my religious belief. We were required to defend this when we were interviewed on British Islam Channel (Television) before we went. The team wore the British tracksuits and some British Muslims telephoned in to ask why we were wearing the British flag which incorporated the symbol of the Christian cross. We said because we were British and we were proud of that.*

(Aisha's narrative)

The opportunity to spend time with fellow athletes competing and socialising was very much appreciated and they enjoyed being together despite the difficulties of language barriers. The Iranian and British teams spent much time together despite not being able to converse at all. The Kuwait women did ask the British team about the hijab. They were very surprised and shocked that the majority of the athletes chose to wear it in England: they said they did not wear it at home. 'You are free not to wear it and you chose to wear it!' They seemed to find that difficult to understand (BBC, 2005).

*The outstanding levels of achievement at the games were far beyond my expectations. The quality of competition was higher than I had anticipated. Looking back at the*

*experience I now see that there is a world of sporting opportunity out there that most of us (British Muslim women) know nothing about. An early reflection I had made was in terms of funding and resources, travelling to London every week for training proved very expensive. Sponsorship for our kit and for our coach was limited; all these make a poor comparison with parallel events. However a good comparison with other events such as the Olympics and Commonwealth Games was the high quality of play.*

*For me, this event demonstrates that sport can build bridges between cultures. Sport is a universal language that is understood by all who take part. We share so much in common through the spirit of struggle and achievement.*

(Aisha's narrative)

The glimpses above highlight the significance of the 2005 Women's Islamic Games for the British women attending. Permeating the data there is: a feeling of privilege amongst the team at having been given this opportunity to participate in the Women's Islamic Games; pride in representing both country and religion in an environment which did not compromise their British Muslim identity; a sense of injustice at the differences in support for their endeavours in comparison with other athletes who reach international standards; and a sense of awe at the size and standard of the event.

This paper raises awareness of issues influencing Muslim women's participation in sport. The secular versus Islamic feminist viewpoints (although it is recognised these are simplistic uses of complex positions) highlight the polarisation of global views. Due to restrictions on media coverage of many events involving Muslim women there is little global coverage, which some would see as further marginalisation of major, newsworthy human achievements. In the west 'problems' encountered by Muslim women in sport appear to have more attention than positive images of the women and their supporters. The voices of Muslim women, as shared here, are important in contributing to discussions on how people lead their lives, on generating resources, influencing policy and increasing choices and opportunities to make the world more equitable.

## And British Youth Sport?

Examining the context and some of the experiences of the British Muslim women's futsal team at the Women's Islamic Games in Tehran 2005 is important. It raises the complexity of competing views of Muslim women's participation in top level sport which appear to be irreconcilable. Is the 'alternative vision' of separatist sporting arenas for women a sensible solution or anathema to equity progress? To date, Iranian people, as innovators and hosts of the Women's Islamic Games, have empowered many women in the sports business through training, managerial roles and athletic opportunity. Pfister (2003: 221) discusses both the '... opportunities and the limits of women in a country (Iran) in which Islam and sport are not contradictions', an assumption too easily made in the west:

*Gender segregation in sport has in some respects proved to be an advantage ... nevertheless it must not be overlooked that however difficult it may be to reconcile the sharia (Islamic law) with practising sport, it is all but impossible to reconcile the sharia*

*with practising (mainstream) sport at international level. ... The derestriction of gender segregation and giving up the hijab would shake the very foundations of Islam.*

The size and power of Muslim groups in the west is growing and there is a need to listen to the views and aspirations of young Muslims. It is interesting to note that the Muslim Council of Britain backed the 2012 bid for London to host the Olympic Games and actively encouraged other Muslim countries to vote that way (*Muslim News*, 2005a). On the other hand the Foreign Office declined the opportunity for the Women's Islamic Games to be held in Britain. How will the community, education, local and national sports bodies plan to cater for the needs of those Muslims who become inspired to participate in physical activity, in a way which will enhance and improve their lives, whilst retaining their Islamic way of life? As seen in this paper British Muslim women, who, as fellow sports women in Tehran recognised 'did have choices', chose to attend the international event that would enable them to retain both religious and national identity. The authors' recommendation is that there should be more opportunities for British Muslim girls and women to participate in sport and physical activity. If separate activities are the only means of engaging for some, then provision should be made in this time and space.

It is recognised that any proposal for greater provision of female-only sports opportunities is a challenge to us all. The following final questions are for all people involved with youth sport policy and practice in Britain and will require much further research and commitment:

- How can we tackle differences between religious and cultural views on the rights of Muslim girls and women to participate in sport?
- How extensive are current sporting / physical activity opportunities for British Muslim women who wish to adhere to Islamic requirements of hijab?
- Are there ways in which current rules and regulations of national and international sporting bodies could be modified to accommodate the needs of Muslim women?
- How do national and regional sports bodies currently use resources to accommodate cultural and religious differences?
- How can media coverage of Muslim women in sport become more positive and visible?
- Where are the role models and how could they be used?
- Are there pockets of good practice that could be shared?
- How aware are community sports workers of the religious requirements of Muslim girls and women, for example for private, single-sex environments with same-sex staffing?
- Should more be done to support Muslim women in Britain to develop their potential for the next Women's Islamic Games in 2009?

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# Intervention for Transformation: Activities among young Muslims of Britain

*Imran Mogra*

*The loyalty, identity and participation in nation building of the Muslim community, in particular that of the youth, has been under discussion in the context of educational and social participation. How are some young people reforming their lives and what motivates them to do so? In what way have they benefited through this process of change: personally, socially and spiritually? To consider the above transformation, questionnaires, and group and individual interviews were conducted to elicit the intervention, the process and the transformation among young Muslims in an inner city area of the West Midlands. These young Muslims share their experiences of restructuring and the value of engaging in two specific religious activities with global networks. Based on the evidence gathered and personal testimonies, suggestions are offered for extending the remit of the characteristics of youth work provision.*

**Keywords:** *transformation, religion, spirituality, youth, authority*

*There is no increase ... Once we join as individuals, we get engrossed in people that are practising and forget about the other people outside, we can have a romanticised picture of the ummah and fool ourselves as to the real situation.*

There is a serious concern about the future of Muslim youth in terms of their welfare, identity and loyalty among both Muslim and Non-Muslim circles. The recent demonstration in London against the depiction of Muhammad in cartoons has intensified this anxiety further. The loyalty, identity and participation in nation building of the Muslim community, in particular that of the youth, has been under discussion in the context of educational and social participation.

It is therefore significant to appreciate how some of the oft less reported Muslims are reforming their lives and what motivates them to do so. In what way have they benefited through the process of change and transformation: personally, socially and spiritually?

In this paper attention is drawn towards the role of the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) movement, as it is popularly known, in meeting, addressing and changing the lives of young people. The purpose is to identify the nature and prominent characteristics of this reforming movement which have assisted in transforming young people and to share their experiences based on their testimonies. Data from youngsters who have benefited from the guidance of spiritual guides within Sufi centres have not been included for brevity and maintaining distinctions. First, it is relevant to become familiar with the foundations upon which Muslim life rests.



## Springs of revelations

The Qur'an and Sunnah<sup>1</sup> remain the ultimate sources of guidance for the lives of Muslims the world over. The role of Muhammad<sup>2</sup> as expounded by the Holy Qur'an is manifold. Muhammad was sent to the world to recite the Qur'an, to purify and transform souls and lives, to educate communities and to illustrate the teachings of the Qur'an. In other words, the Qur'an is the word of God and Muhammad its practical manifestation.

During his lifetime, the Messenger encountered people from all walks of life and he engaged with them all; friends and foes, males and females, young and old. It is noteworthy that his earliest followers were young people. He moulded these young people using a range of methods. For example, the incident of Amr ibn al-As and the manner in which he was trained to exercise moderation, in worship, in conjugal relations and in physically resting the body, is a point in case. Indeed these young people in only a few years became leaders and models who were envied by many a nation. What was it that brought about such dynamic change and transformation? How did he lift them from the destitute conditions and from being considered downtrodden individuals to shining stars? What is it that can be learnt from the Messenger about matters of youth?

### *Youth in the Prophetic Era*

His traditions reflect the fact that he focussed on the youth with much enthusiasm sometimes addressing them directly. Drawing attention to the significance of youth, the Messenger once directed his followers to take advantage of five conditions prior to five others, one of which was youth before old age.

Returning to the roles of the Messenger, it is well-known that after his passing away from this world, Muslims continued to fulfil his roles. As a consequence, some engaged in reciting and memorising the text, others were occupied in spreading the message that he was bestowed by God, others chose to teach, whilst many were concerned about the spiritual, social and moral state of the community. This tradition continued throughout history. The Muslim community in the UK is not different. A cursory review of the activities among Muslims of the UK reveals a phenomenal range of activities. In a well organised manner, at grass root levels, there are voluntary groups, youth clubs, anti drug initiatives, radio stations, help lines, magazines, camps, scouts, conferences, public talks and discussions, retreats, seminars, web sites and publishers serving all sections of the community.

These activities are organised in a variety of modus operandi. Some function under the auspices of umbrella national or international organisations and movements, others are mosque based or community orientated and others are independent, to meet the needs of their community and this includes the youth.

## Preparing the ground work

A questionnaire consisting of thirty items was distributed both randomly and selectively to Muslim young people who attended mosques frequently. Their age ranged between 17 and

21 with a couple between 22-36 years old. The questionnaire was specifically created for this purpose and it was preferred as an instrument because it afforded the advantage of standardising the questions. In addition, because some of the questions measure the degree of their awareness post and prior to participating in these activities, the questionnaire was more flexible in achieving this. Questionnaires are usually time and cost effective and can be used for searching facts and views (Wellington, 2000). For this group, interviews were not preferred for more participants because of the suspicion that surrounded the time of this field work which coincided with the disturbances in Lozells. Having said this, only one person was able to provide an interview. With regards to completing the questionnaire there were a few young persons who were reluctant to participate as they were 'not sure who will end up receiving the information'. There was another person who was sceptical about the potential benefits of engaging in such an activity. He did not feel that such an exercise 'would benefit the community' rather 'it served the purpose of others'. Nine questionnaires were not returned for various reasons including forgetfulness and being too occupied. The possibility that some of the questions were not inspirational existed. For such persons asking them for an objective view, of the activity in which they experienced immense satisfaction and passionately believed in its successful intervention in their lives, was difficult. In the current climate there are some young people who are reluctant to participate in such work unless they know exactly what is going on and what it is for. Indeed it is tricky negotiating with respondents whilst trying to gain genuine responses. Most people respond after they gain trust. Some posted their replies. Others preferred to use the e-mail and a few delivered it by hand.

#### *Design and exploration*

The variables included age and gender. Thereafter the questionnaire was divided into three sections: information about themselves, eliciting thoughts about their suggestions of getting others to join in their preferred activity and a general area considering the role of religious activities in Britain.

Participants were invited to share a short biography of their lives to identify the events which influenced and contributed to make them change their life. A description about the routines which they followed both whilst at home and away was requested. The analysis and availability of routines would assist in searching the types of possible activities that could be incorporated within youth work settings. This, as a necessity, entailed obtaining their subjective views of such experiences. In addition to other questions, a statement enquiring the multi-dimensional impact and the varied benefits in terms of their development formed part of the first section.

Another question pursued the investigation of the personal value that the participants attached to their activity in relation to the benefits that they had experienced and judged to be beneficial for their fellow Muslims by joining them.

Finally, religious activities in Britain was a general section wherein an attempt was made to ascertain opinions on the role of various activities in promoting social and religious cohesion. One of the questions endeavoured to elicit whether these young people thought that engaging in such religious activities had developed within them a sense of being a good civilian.

Before discussing the findings it is important to consider the possible reasons for the attraction of Islam and a brief description of the TJ.

## Restoration Islam

In the wider context, there have been a number of key Muslim revival movements worldwide. Many young Muslims living in some inner cities of Britain have turned to religion as a response to 'lack of hope for the future' and due to an 'alienation that directs others towards criminality, drugs and violence'. They find in Islam a way out of a society which exhibits social, moral and personal ruin. As explained by Basheer, 'Muslims are being attacked from all corners and this is moving people to be defensive of their deen [religion] in doing so they are having to become more practising.'

Islam as a system for politics has appealed to some after the failure of communism as an alternative to capitalism and socialism. The critical appraisal of these systems is part of the discourse which also appeals to some young Muslims toward the way of life of Islam.

The media stereotyping, the perceived hostilities towards Muslims in the shape of the anti-terrorist legislations, the unfortunate state of some Muslims in various Muslim dominated countries are invoking an enthusiasm of returning to Islam. Islam is attractive as it is an anchor of identity, hope and salvation.

On the other hand there are serious concerns about the state of some Muslim youth for instance in view of their increased prison population and other crimes. However, there are some pragmatists among them. A young person once conveyed the following sentiments regarding his views on the extent of Muslim youth participation in religious endeavours.

*There is no increase ... Once we join as individuals, we get engrossed in people that are practising and forget about the other people outside, we can have a romanticised picture of the Ummah<sup>3</sup> and fool ourselves as to the real situation.*

It is the concern of improving the condition of the Muslims that TJ was developed and initiated in its current style and system.

## The Faith Movement

The Faith Movement, as the founder called it, is an international preaching and spiritual movement whose main aim is to revive the principles of Islam and bring back to Islam those of its followers who have strayed and become negligent. The character and mission of the founder has been compiled by Nadwi (1983). In analysing the intellectual basis of the movement, the founder Maulana<sup>4</sup> Ilyas, noted that 'nothing was being done for those who were the victims of complacency and oblivious to the need for improvement' (Nadwi, 1983:134). Not only was a change of outlook essential for reform but in addition instead of challenging the widespread evil directly, 'the promotion of religious conscience and giving rise to lawful and virtuous acts and practices' was critical and wiser (Nadwi, 1983:143).

The first tour to Britain took place in the latter part of the 1940s (Sikand, 1998:174; Ansari, 2004:348; Metcalf, 1996:111). The TJ programme endeavours to improve the participants themselves. It is 'professedly a non-political organisation' (King, 1997:129) but that does not mean that they 'eschew utilization of facilities offered by the state' (Metcalf, 1996:115). As an international movement, King (1997) discusses its vitality and methodology in transmitting Islam geographically and between generations and considers their framework to be the foundation upon which a world wide Islamic society can be built.

Both King (1997) and Metcalf (1996) provide some descriptions of the characteristics of their activities and Sikand (1998) has dealt with these in much more depth in the British context and the appeal that it had to early migrants and the crisis of credibility among the youth. A perspective was sought from the participants of this study as well. The following were deciphered from the various replies.

*We participate in the morning prayer which is followed by a short talk on six topics. Each member gets a turn to give this talk over the days.*

*Consultation – a circle is formed and all the day's activities are agreed and responsibilities are delegated. Independent time is available for individual activities followed by a rest until late morning.*

*Breakfast prepared by those with serving responsibilities – all brothers get a turn to do this. Thereafter there is collective reading of the text whereby individuals reflect over the virtues of various actions and the qualities and achievements of previous Muslims. They also revise and rehearse in smaller groups portions of the Qur'an. After prayer and lunch some rest and others use this time to learn whatever is needed.*

*Usually after the third prayer some of them go out for the ghaṣṣ<sup>5</sup> to local houses with local brothers reminding them about Islam and inviting them to the mosque. It is common to deliver the main speech after the sunset prayer, the conclusion of which will consist of encouragements to others to set off in Jamaat. Collective food is served after the last prayer which is followed by a reflection on the day's activities.*

With its simplicity and characteristics of genuineness and openness, hope, achievement and contribution are instantly afforded to all new comers. Service is the essence of their programme for creating mutuality and cohesion. Some of the other characteristics that are encouraged include being steadfast when confronted with hardships, exercising self-restraint, developing piety, sacrifice, strengthening will power, creating sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden and being courageous. There is a particular emphasis on gaining knowledge and education combined with the centrality of remembering God using prescribed formulae.

## **Towards an avant-garde**

There is a growing recognition and acceptance that the needs of Muslim youth call for the consideration of alternative approaches, to address their issues and concerns, with new

perspectives of youth work that utilise a better understanding of the role of Islam in the lives of Muslims and to connect more deeply with young people. Therefore, in this paper an attempt is made to suggest that some of the characteristics from the activities in which Muslim young people are engaging themselves in should be considered for the framework and techniques of youth work. The testimonies from these respondents reveal the impact that participating in these activities have had on them personally, morally, socially and spiritually. In turn it provides a glimpse into how this impact is affecting people who are close to them as well.

## Outcomes and analysis

Fictitious names have been created and used to maintain anonymity. Of the twenty distributed eleven were received all from males. This paper contains data from selected questions only from those respondents who considered themselves to be participants in the activities of the TJ.

### *Looking back*

The study of biographies allows the exploration of the experiences of people's individual lives (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). It also allows their voices to be heard and facilitates an insider view. To contextualise the impact of TJ, on the life of these young people and to draw attention on the potential significance of providing the characteristics of these activities in youth work settings, it is valuable to consider aspects of the lives of some of these youngsters prior to their joining TJ.

The turning point for some came about through the 'understanding of the importance of daily prayer' and 'tolerance of people'. The company of the learned and being among friends who have an outlook to life that these young people describe as 'religious' has also been influential.

One of the respondents, Adam, relates his story:

*I was brought up in a home environment which encouraged Islamic and secular development. I studied at the local maktab (mosque school) and even memorised the Qur'an, however, with no real knowledge about Islam, therefore became Hafiz<sup>6</sup> for the sake of it, with aims to become a professional. I did not wear Islamic attire or grow a beard; rather I was embarrassed to be seen in such a light.*

The wider society and institutions are increasingly knowing and becoming more aware of the religious and cultural manifestations existing in Britain. Barn (2001:68) notes that 'ethnic and religious diversity cannot become part of the general fabric of society as long as it is exoticised and ghettoised as alien'.

At sixteen, Adam then participated in TJ. At that time, however, 'the intention was not one of reform, rather, a social residential with my friends'. Unsurprisingly, there was no reformation after returning from weekend visits and as such participation ceased once there was separation from friends.

### *Who am I?*

It is compulsory for every child to attend school and become formally literate. Despite this there seems to be a crisis of identity. Some youth do not have a clear grasp of understanding the fundamental question of *Who am I?*

A significant crisis occurs once Adam is out of his community.

*It was not until I moved away from home and went to university, where I realised how much of my faith I had been practising because of the environment I lived in .... When I moved away from this environment, I stopped praying salaah, stopped reading the Qur'an, started listening to music and was attracted by the freedom of university life, which I had never experienced.*

*At the end of my first academic year at university, I became very restless and at unease, staying up many a night wondering why I was pretending to be someone else. I don't know what stopped me from indulging in invites to smoke drugs and go clubbing, later I realised that it was the light / noor of the Qur'an I had in my heart. I started fearing death because I had distanced myself from God, I was crying out for help, yet had no one to turn too, not even my parents, as my lifestyle had made me arrogant and distanced me from my family.*

But this restlessness was restored during the summer vacation when 'a friend invited him to go in Jamaat'. He 'jumped at the opportunity' with 'the intention to mend my ways and as a sorry to Allah.' Thereafter, Adam recollects, 'Allah guided me in these three days, and filled my heart with peace. It was at this point I decided that I wanted an Islamic lifestyle and embarked on a tablighi journey of forty days.'

In a way he was empowered to achieve his professional career that he set out to accomplish and simultaneously he was reassured regarding who he was and what he wanted from life.

## **Gain upon gain**

### *Psychological*

Basheer was introduced to TJ by a close friend. Prior to this he described his self to be detached from regular practice. However as a result of the experience at TJ he 'became regular in basics of Islam, and acquired a thirst for knowledge'. He observes, 'It was easy to drift back into the world when not in contact with the jamaat'. Except that a pertinent quality that he acquired was long lasting. Furthermore, the regular practice of zikr [remembering God] which he had adopted in those early stages continues to provide him solace and is therapeutic. Even today, it affords him much needed psychological comfort following a near death accident. For Basheer, the phenomenon of acquiring the thirst for knowledge had far reaching consequences. 'The thirst acquired has been instrumental in having a link with other Islamic Movements'.

Basheer has not been out in TJ for the last 17 years for several reasons. What is relevant from his past experience, before his accident, is that he had judged that 'it was not

intellectually challenging’ and so he had experimented and participated in other Islamic activities. Nevertheless, for him despite such a long absence from TJ and being unfit to participate, ‘somehow the effects of Jamaat have been long lasting.’

Changes to life prior to engaging with TJ work are not limited to religious domains as the following paragraph extracted from the interview reveals. The need for and contribution of experienced role models is also evident in the case of Cassim.

*Basically before TJ my attitude was all wrong, respect for elders, and parents was all over the place. ... then I went in TJ in Year 10. [Age?] 15 I think. It was my first time ... and it made an effect. It affects if you spend time properly, otherwise, if you waste your time then there is little effect. Especially if you go with elders you learn a lot – nearly or all my life is affected – because of 3 days my jazbah [enthusiasm] was a need to go for 40 days to see how it is and my dad says ‘no’. But it changed and helped me with my studies.*

Contributing in the activities of TJ assisted in disciplining him, developing communication skills and redirecting him towards the pursuance of a career – likely to be the result of some wise words during the three days – which is quoted later. Psychologically, great benefits are deciphered in terms of the ‘peace of mind’ that is afforded and the fact that it helps a person to become ‘patient and to think before acting’ and makes them increasingly more aware of God.

#### *Critical and risky*

According to a draft report from the Foreign Office and the Home Office, there are two groups of Muslims who are at most risk of being drawn into extremism: disaffected underachievers and educated young people targeted by recruiters on college campuses.

*Education is a potentially large influence on individual propensities to offend and possibly an important source of area-level variation in crime rates. Crime statistics for England indicate that crime rates are lower in areas with higher levels of educations, which are also areas of higher per capita income and contain a higher proportion of families belonging to the higher socio-economic status (Home Office, 2003:3).*

For Cassim the intervention could not have come at a more critical time. He reflects and acknowledges how he was brought back on the path of education. Currently he volunteers at a youth centre supporting courses on ICT skills whilst continuing his studies.

*Like basically I was not predicted good grade let alone other subjects Maths and English was not even Cs but I got 7Cs, 1D, 2Es, and a U. Now I went to 40 days I did not know I was going to pass ... but I made dua [supplications] you know you get to get up for tahhajjud [late night prayer] ... the Wednesday when the results were going to come I came on the Tuesday and before I went to collect my results I prayed ... your approach to things change.... Where to go? Didn’t want to go [to get results]. ... but ... This year I will get an award for diploma and in English mock I got top mark. ... I did not believe that I could change ...*

### *Towards holistic achievements*

The multitude benefits that participants derive through such participation are also beyond the physical and esoteric. Williams (2005) has noted that spiritual development received a single mention in the Green Paper. He desires deeper thought on what it means and how faith can be made to be a force for good rather than bad. Some general areas are highlighted to demonstrate the potential of the TJ programme in adding to understand faith and spirituality and their functions.

Young people find that the TJ activities revives their weakened faith and increases their knowledge as it 'helps to create worry and concern when listening and reading' the prescribed manual. Whilst it provides emotional and intellectual satisfaction to some, the practical nature is highly useful as well. Nacif (2005) observed that often spirituality is neglected in youth work. Indeed, some characteristics of the activities of TJ are very beneficial as it keeps people spiritually rejuvenated and encourages them to try to remain in regular contact with the mosque and offer their prayer in congregation. In a sense this creates a greater awareness of God and the love for his prophet and to prepare for the Hereafter. In other words there is recognition of the 'oneness' of God and how a slave of God should behave. Along the path of spiritual progress the prospects of Divine qualities such as love, compassion, harmony and righteousness are unlocked. Faith is not a necessity for appreciating spirituality and therefore there are opportunities for youth workers to be creative with some of the effective activities identified within the work of TJ.

In addition, socially, there are individuals in whom the zeal and yearning to perform good actions is being created and are also assisted 'to keep away from bad actions'. Furthermore, individuals are able to go through a process of self introspection and rectify their beliefs, morals, characters and make 'good pious friends' through the creation of a 'vital connection and love with the mosque'. However, for some, these activities limit participation in other activities such as learning Arabic and attending sessions on the commentary of the Qur'an because 'members are advised to give preference to jamaat activities'. Others find the simple monotonous routines as impediments to joining them. Indeed it is recognised that not all are suited to the methodology of TJ as people have different personalities and preferences. Nevertheless, perhaps it is the former typical sentiments that have led King (1997:142) to argue that Tabligh rather than being 'retrogressive' is 'essentially innovative and pioneering.'

### *Personality*

Young people often have rare opportunities to demonstrate leadership qualities and take initiatives and address audiences. In the case of the TJ movement individuals are given the opportunity to contribute and take an active part in all its activities – from the mundane to the profound. Among the myriad responsibilities and initiatives encouraged some are involved in talking to people in the community and to deliver a short address and read texts to those gathered in the mosque. This enables them to become confident communicators. For others the experience is a novelty as they may also 'learn how to wash dishes, clean bathroom etc' and on a more serious note they learn 'how to perform the prayer, ablution and other fundamentals of Islam'.

A 17 year old provided the following insight into the dynamic transformation he had gone



through.

*I did not pick my plate at all before. Now I help my mum make roti [chappati]. [Who did it earlier?]. No sister did that thing. I spoke little but now I can speak out and have community skills developed. I gave a talk in ... to about 50 people. Allah put things in your brain, it was good, it especially helped. I was in college and the English teacher said my work was focussed. Once I had something to do like an assignment to hand in. I do hand in but this time I put my head into it like something I did for the talk. What basis was it on? Now I built that in my assignment and enhance my progress.*

#### *Duties and responsibility*

An element that has appeared in these discussions is that of being aware and educated about social and family responsibilities which in a sense may contribute towards parental skills. This is significant in the transmission of inter-generational advantage and may assist in encouraging educational activity, avoidance in criminal involvement and establishing stable family units in young people (Feinstein and Sabates, 2005:24).

Parents attempt to raise children in their own preferred way. Some will be indifferent to Islam while others will be strong. Others may be strong in faith and weak in practice or vice versa. Initially, Cassim as stated above had some reluctance from his father but for Hidayat it was a different case.

*No problems at all, everyone was very welcoming. I think this is because the neighbourhood I live in has very deep roots with the tabligh effort, and my family fully support it. I was very lucky, I know many people when joining the effort are tested from friends, family etc. who are not sympathetic with the movement.*

This is also a signal towards the difference of view regarding the TJ within the diverse make up of the Muslim community (Lewis, 2002). A recent review is provided by Ansari (2004) of the success and limitations of the numerous Muslim youth organisations in Britain established since the 1960s.

#### *Morality and self consciousness*

The moral conscious is also affected. One of the respondents declared that morally being with the TJ enabled him 'to be truthful and more honest'. Others develop a 'greater respect for other Muslims and non-Muslims'. Since, the orientation of the movement is to present both the information and practice of the sublime character of the Holy Prophet, as a model for emulation. Indeed when such prophetic disposition is manifested it can have a powerful influence. The following is a brief account from a convert who is also a keen environmentalist.

*I am revert Muslim and have been for 6 years from an English background. I met a Jamaat from .... in my local mosque and I was instantly attracted by their good character and religious zeal and ... I have remained an active member ever since.*

Some of the stories that are regularly read in TJ present dilemmas in life situations. Kohlberg (1981) considered it to be essential to offer individuals with moral dilemmas for

discussion which assist them to see the reasonableness of a 'higher stage' morality and encourage their development in that direction. Social interaction is a strong medium for this. TJ provides considerable opportunity for interaction and reflection over the incidents of people in the stories available in their text. For others there is an opportunity for 'moral rectification and knowledge of right and wrong'. Although there is lack of discussion of particularities in the formal sense nonetheless the exposure to such material promotes self understanding and self examination. Perhaps youth workers could select some of these appropriately and draw on them with their audiences to explore what is right or wrong based on their reactions to the decisions made by the characters of the stories in a more concrete and realistic manner.

## Salient Features

Probably the single most instrumental factor that has given the movement so much success is the change in environment its participants experience once they leave home. They change from an environment at home which predominantly draws them to the attractions of the world, to a spiritual environment which prepares them for 'the eternal bliss in the Hereafter'. The result of this is that in many cases it transforms youngsters 'drowning in sin to God fearing Muslims'. In other words, success and the impact of this movement for some individuals require departing from home. Although, it appears to be simple, yet this very reason is occasionally cited for not wanting to join in.

The key features of TJ which the participants felt they would like to share with youth workers were solicited. The suggestions quoted below provide elements that could be incorporated into the broader framework of youth work among Muslims.

*Getting to know our youngsters and guiding them which are so important right now. In this way it is hoped that the glamorous 'gangster' lifestyle will be replaced with the noble way of life of the holy prophet Muhammad peace be upon him.*

*The six points<sup>7</sup> of Tabligh are of universal importance for the youth but it needs to be packaged for the current times and move away from being Indo-centric.*

*Taking them away from their daily routines on a residential, giving them time alone to reflect on their lives and ambitions.*

*To treat EVERYBODY with respect regardless of age, race, background, history etc therefore giving people the opportunity to create a fresh start for themselves. [original emphasis]*

The riots in Bradford, Oldham and the recent disturbances in October 2005 in Lozells point towards the role of the government to address the emotions and actions resulting from racial tensions and socio-economical factors. Prior to the events in London on July 7, 2005, attacks on Asian people were more likely to be stopped than their fellow white Londoners under counter terrorism powers according to police figures. The gulf grew bigger after the attacks (Dodd, 2005). When minority ethnic communities sense no racism or discrimination

in society and Muslims of Islamophobia, and when they experience belonging, then there is more hope of solving the problem of integration. What led to these events remains ambiguous. According to Burnett (2004:3) it stood for the 'frustrated anger of a generation of marginalised Asian youth'. Several combining factors are attributable: mistrust of the authorities and the perceived police inactivity, unemployment, poverty, right wing activities, health and educational problems. Seddon (2004) has asserted that the misconception that Muslims cannot synthesise their religious and national identities, into a new definition of Britishness, is often challenging to express due to marginalisation and social exclusion.

However, the depiction emerging from the young people in this study is that of having a purpose, being secure in what they are doing, having a sense of achievement, developing a concern for fellow beings and recognising their accountability in the Hereafter.

Perhaps there is also a need to critically examine the predominance of 'secular' activities that are made available to young people in what seems to be an absence of anything religious. Ghalib in the following assertions depicts such a tension.

*Since joining the effort I am much more aware of the laws of Allah, understanding of the deen [religion] has deepened. Character, personality and outlook of life has also changed for the better. Also a worry and concern for others; Muslims and non Muslims has been created.*

Hence youth workers can assist the youth to think about their values and inspire them to apply these in their community.

*In this day and age youth are looking everywhere for attention, joy, 'buzz', worldly pleasures etc but Jamaat teaches that true success (and true failure) lies in the Hereafter.*

## Ummah

From an international position, oppression by dictators supported by foreign powers in some Muslim dominated lands, the double face position of the UN in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, growth in Muslim revival movements, the issue of Kashmir, attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan and the silence in Chechnya are among some factors which have made some Muslims to look toward the state of the *Ummah*. In this age of advanced communications it is difficult to keep at a distance from the ramifications of the events taking place in one corner of the world on the Muslims living on another. Some Muslim youth find solace in the Divine message of Islam and find affinity with the *Ummah*. It seems to be offering 'a superior identity to any on offer in Britain' (Appleyard, 2005) and by connecting with the world wide Islam they are able to foresee themselves as part of a potentially powerful community (Ansari, 2004:19).

In addition, this universal bond gives a strong alternative to isolation. Indeed as Metcalf (1996:115) observed, TJ links diverse populations from far flung areas. The texts which are the main readings for participants in TJ provide them with pride and a glorious history which reflects a multi-national existence and a promise of success. Practically, TJ gives them

a framework with guidelines on how to live.

One other aspect of the cosmopolitan ambition of the TJ movement is their non-political nature and their 'stated good relations with the civil and political structures of the non-Muslim societies in which many of them live' (King, 1997:144). This has drawn criticisms from some Muslims in Britain as they consider such a stance to be pacifying in the wake of political crisis in Muslim countries in particular.

## Role models

Young Muslims are also discovering the significance of the benefits achieved through the implementation of the rules of Islam in a modern technologically progressed age and the possibilities of both. This has been taken by some to be a form of dawah<sup>8</sup> by becoming role models in a community that is increasingly losing its moral and social fibre. There is growing frustration with some media presentation of Islam and their fuelling fear and demonisation of Muslims (MCB, 2002). The stringent anti-terrorist laws which are perceived to be directed towards the community are contributing towards the creation of discomfort and anxiety. The importance of role models was also evident from Cassim's experience earlier and Erfan lists some challenges: 'materialism, greed, lack of guidance, too many attractions like mobiles, cars etc. lack of role models' which are creating discontentment in some youths and are channelling them towards religion and reassessment of the purpose in life.

## Whither civilians?

Do these young people feel that by engaging in the activities of TJ a sense of being a good civilian is developed? There is a view which permeates that being a good Muslim is being a good civilian. Others seem to view Islam as being a medium that has transformed their orientation. This is declared by another convert to Islam who considered himself to be a 'wayward youth who didn't benefit society in any way whatsoever. Now as I am aware of my duties as a Muslim, I strive to be a good citizen.' Gaining the knowledge of right and wrong and becoming morally rectified allows young people to see that their existence within society is fruitful as the following quotation from a 19 year old demonstrates.

*I have changed. My dad knows we used to swear and it has cut down. I respect parents. I used to be street wise and the next door neighbour we swore and she got angry. Now she said you have changed. I used to be angry and have lots of fights in the house with my brother and this white Irish would be called and the Kokni geezer next door. Now all that has changed, they do salaam and she says hello and stuff. She knows I go to pray and stuff.*

Gaining money is one of the most cited reasons to engage in criminal activities (Palmer et al, 2002:3). TJ's programme affords its participants to be obedient to God and to the laws. It also inculcates within them the virtues of integrity, self-denial, renunciation of excessive wealth and materialism thus promoting an austere and simple life.

Anger and inappropriate behaviour was changed by being in the company of less acquainted people and by serving others. Being taught to be truthful and honest in actions and the fact that some realise that 'no matter how much one may try to hide bad actions, they cannot hide from Allah' is not insignificant for being a good civilian. In other words, ultimately, these Muslim youngsters having developed a profound sense of accountability in the Hereafter were conscious that their actions should not harm members of the society.

All the participants indicated that their awareness of the rights of children, families, Muslim and Non-Muslim neighbours increased considerable after being exposed to the teaching and ethos of TJ.

Knowledge and education appear to have had a deep-seated impression upon Kamyabi. He found that when listening and reading to stories in circles it assisted him by generating a worry and concern about himself. More significantly, he felt that it 'helps to create zeal and yearning to perform good actions and helps to keep away from bad actions and makes you more aware of Allah'.

## **Wider application**

Although the opinions may reflect preconceived notions and subjectivity, it was relevant to determine their justifications for extending the principles and characteristics of TJ to others. There were a few who thought that the internal divisions among Muslims are perpetuated by such groups. However, the majority recognise many advantages. For instance, some thought that joining TJ will allow others to 'make a good network of friends that will guide them away from anti-social behaviour'. 'It will change their mentality. They will not pick a fight for no reason like Asians and Afro Caribbean happened ... I reckon you learn and your heart changes ... you don't pick a fight for no reason'. Unsurprisingly most thought it was relevant for others to experiment and participant in TJ as the current situation of the youth is 'solely due to irreligiousness'. They are also invited to participate to 'clarify any doubts or misgivings' that they may have. Social cohesion makes it relevant too. Some of them consider that TJ assists to 'unite with other Muslims' as 'people of different backgrounds bond together in this work'. In addition, TJ 'will teach them the spiritual aspects of the religion rather than the political aspects'.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Whilst the scope and the findings presented in this paper cannot be generalised they do provide indications for further work in this area and give opportunity for the following points to be raised cautiously.

Lewis (2002) observes that such an effective movement is unsympathetic to youth work outside revivalist activities. Are there any features or characteristics that could be considered for youth work from TJ to meet the diverse needs of Muslims in modern day British society which could assist youth workers in engaging with young people to provide them their rightful position and dignity that they deserve in our communities?

Islam provides the principles and values that underpin the daily living of Muslims. Individuals can derive self esteem and confidence from religion and religious beliefs. Spiritual meaning and purpose is also bestowed in life by religion. A successful project, *Himmat* ['one's own effort'], working with the Probation Service and Youth Centre, in Halifax, identified the need to understand cultural dynamics and to maintain the empowering of the youth within the ethos of religious sensitivities and cultural boundaries (Lloyd, 1997).

Whereas TJ does not operate on some of the techniques of youth work such as art, creative work, guided discussions and music, the application of such techniques using the principles and appropriate content and the sharing of the values and morals encapsulated by the TJ which are confirmed by these respondents will assist young people to engage in community service and enhance self worth from a faith perspective. For greater success it is significant to be responsive to diverse needs. Green (2005) suggests opening up to sensitivities and informed debate around the critical concepts of faith, spirituality and religion.

It is common to find many a young person who had read the Qur'an in Arabic at a young age during their study at *maktab*. But there is good reason to believe that many young Muslims have not had the opportunity to access and interact with the Qur'an in the English language. There is certainly a need for youth workers to sit down, discuss and study it. In their context, youth workers can incorporate the journey of exploring scriptures rather than preaching from it.

Islam is the antithesis of ignorance. It is ignorance that leads people to become victims of exploitation, moral lapses, social unrest, spiritual deprivation and intellectual bondage. The lack of proper education in Islam has a detrimental effect on individuals. There are many young Muslims whose engagement with Islam is at a superficial level. Through their participation in various activities some of these youth have come to appreciate the following of Islam and have come to believe in it with understanding and conviction. Some are making a personal choice rather than taking on received tradition.

'An idle mind is a devil's workshop'. Another crucial feature was the deficiency in idle time available to these young people whilst they were participating in the activities. Therefore the specification of structure as an essential part of any programme especially when it is combined with routine which reduce the opportunities of negative behaviour seems potentially effective for youth work. TJ addresses this issue by providing its participants with a structure and routine activities for most of the day. There is independent and free time for pondering and silence combined with collective sessions available for them.

There are numerous theories and programmes working for and with young people. The programme envisaged by Islam is that of a way of life and to be holistic in nature. Youth workers addressing and coming into terms with the issues of Muslims could take this as a starting point for their work. An approach whose boundaries are set and dominated by materialism and secular ideals needs to consider shifting their boundaries to accommodate and apply alternative strategies and reconsider the characteristics of their existing methodologies.

The inclusion of a spiritual element in youth programmes, the like of which have been outlined above, potentially provides a much needed balance between the various needs of people, perhaps some young Muslims in particular. Within their activities, a routine which is directed towards the self introspection can be built either at the start of or end of a programme. The emphasis on implementation and practically applying the knowledge gained was evident from the response of these young people, highlighting the areas of serving fellow humans, fulfilling duties and responsibilities – some thing that young people could be encouraged to consider adopting. The impact of strengthening the family as a unit of society and the effects of its absence on their stability is acknowledged. The limited evidence from this study points towards the increased possibilities of young people becoming rooted within their families and communities when an appropriate and well-balanced activity is made available.

Central to any youth programme is how young people see, know and describe the world they find themselves in. For some young Muslims of Britain there is an approach which is theologically based in search for spirituality that is a mirror of contemporary British Islam. Whilst this is grounded in tradition, youth work can make this available to a wider audience by applying its techniques and thereby afford the basis and environment for rationalisation. This paper has identified and illustrated some of the opportunities available and the challenges that have arisen in implementing such a methodology and the impact it has had on the lives of these participants. In addition it has provided an insight into our understanding of how Islam functions across boundaries of faith, spirituality, religion and morality to provide well rounded individuals.

## Notes

1. Sunnah – the practice or statements of the Messenger Muhammad
2. Muslims usually send salutations of peace and blessings following the mention of the name of Prophet Muhammad. It is also abbreviated as (pbuh)
3. Ummah – the world wide Muslim community
4. Maulana – scholar, title of respect
5. Ghusht – also khuruj excursions, tour, outing
6. Hafiz – person who has memorised the entire Holy Qur'an
7. i.e. Faith, daily prayer. Knowledge and remembering God. Honour of a Muslim. Sincerity of intention and inviting and propagating. To quit futility also included.
8. Dawah – invitation, notification, propagation

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# Muslim Youth Helpline: A model of youth engagement in service delivery

*Shareefa Fulat and Raza Jaffrey*

*Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is an integrated support service currently offering two forms of telephone and e-mail counselling, supported by a community outreach programme. This is achieved via the Helpline, which operates seven days a week. muslimyouth.net is an online web-guidance and support channel. The website aims to support, and profile issues such as mental health and related social problems. MYH specialises in reaching out to marginalised ethnic minority communities by responding innovatively to the cultural conflicts and religious sensitivities of Muslim youth. This short paper discusses the history and operational functionality of MYH as an example of Youth Work for minority communities.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim youth, guidance, support, service, social issues.*

The Russell Commission (March 2005) highlights the importance of involving young people in the design and implementation of volunteering activity, as a key theme. Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) has for over four years recognised that young people are often, through their own experiences, uniquely placed to help other young people. In reflection of this, MYH has developed a culture where young people are in charge of the services which benefit other young people. We recruit young people to deliver our peer support service, and the management team are all under the age of 27. This youth led vision extends to the Board of Trustees, which has 5 out of 7 members under the age of 25. Through the experience and achievements of MYH, it is clear to see that young people can excel when given the opportunity, and responsibility.

Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is an integrated support service offering telephone and e-mail counselling, supported by a community outreach programme. It specialises in reaching out to marginalised ethnic minority communities by responding innovatively to the cultural conflicts and religious sensitivities of Muslim youth.

Muslim Youth Helpline is not just about listening to someone in distress. The service recognises how differently social problems are perceived in the Muslim community, and how resolving those conflicts with empathy, can help reconcile conflicting identities and integrate Muslim youth within the folds of British society. By empowering young people with a sense of dignity and social stability, Muslim Youth Helpline confronts radicalism and intolerance, and promotes good citizenship in marginalised communities.

## The Need for MYH

Whilst 54% of the Muslim community in London is under the age of 24 years, there are few, if any, support services that have successfully engaged Muslim youth and demonstrated a cultural understanding of the social situation of many Muslim youth. Furthermore, in the current political climate, many Muslim young people distrust mainstream services or endure discrimination. As a result a social crisis amongst Muslim youth is looming.

Growing up as a Muslim in Britain today is a difficult experience when there is no one to turn to for support. The absence of support networks for young people within the Muslim community and the feeling of being misunderstood by mainstream service providers, who fail to comprehend the cultural conflicts caused by multiple identities, can be an isolating experience. For many young Muslims, the feeling of never quite belonging and having to meet conflicting social expectations, creates despair during the formative years of adulthood. In a community where more and more young people are resorting to illicit drugs for escape and where mental health problems appear disproportionately higher, the excesses of drug abuse and the despair of self-inflicted harm can no longer be ignored.

In March 2003, the NIMHE report *Inside Out, Improving Mental Health Services for BME Communities in England* identified that NHS plans for mental health 'do not adequately address the particular needs of BME groups'; that individuals from BME groups are more at risk of developing mental health problems than majority ethnic groups; that the risk of suicide is elevated most notable among South Asian women and cultural conflict is suggested as a factor precipitating suicide in young South Asians. The report also highlighted increased inequalities in mental health service provision amongst all ethnic minorities. Deprivation has also contributed to severe psychological and behavioural problems amongst young Muslims, who according to the HM Prison Service are five times more likely to offend and receive a custodial sentence. As a result, there is an urgent need to engage Muslim youth by providing culturally sensitive support services that bridge the gap between young Muslims and mainstream services and opportunities. The report identified that the voluntary sector has led the development of culturally appropriate services for minority ethnic groups and effective delivery of culturally sensitive services will be best sustained through partnership between statutory and voluntary service providers, service users and 'most importantly BME communities themselves'.

MYH was set up to deliver faith and culturally sensitive (FCS) support nationwide, which mainstream services are failing to provide. Our experience shows that young people from BME Muslim backgrounds are less likely to access mainstream services for fear of being misunderstood and being unable to receive faith and culturally sensitive advice. Those that do access mainstream support services are less likely to benefit from the support given or follow up on advice or options presented to them for much the same reasons.

Similarly, referral requests received by MYH from other service providers, such as Childline, Samaritans, local social services and counselling services in schools and colleges indicates that mainstream services are struggling to understand the needs of faith based communities and have little knowledge or expertise of how to serve their interests. As a result, a growing section of young Muslims who identify themselves by their faith over ethnicity are unable to

access mainstream support services for fear of being misunderstood, leading to increased isolation and marginalisation.

Where other services have failed to engage Muslim youth, MYH has reached out to the forgotten margins of society and transformed the lives of many disillusioned young Muslims. Over the last four years, the demand on the Helpline for its services has proven the need for faith and culturally sensitive support services when dealing with taboo issues such as depression, sexuality and relationships.

## Background

Muslim Youth Helpline began when a group of young Muslim college students (16-19 years) identified the need for culturally sensitive support and guidance for young Muslims facing a range of social problems. In response to the vacuum of specialist services available, the young Muslims formed a committee to research possible ways in which to reach out to young people from Muslim communities. The concept of a freephone helpline and e-mail support service was seen as the most effective method of helping young people across a wide area, guaranteeing their anonymity and confidence. The committee emphasised the need for peer-support as a means of building trust with disillusioned young people and overcoming the generation gap within conservative Muslim communities.

Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) was established in February 2001 and constituted on 8 August 2001. Charitable status was awarded on 16 July 2002 (Registration No. 1108354). In August 2004 MYH registered as an incorporated company and continues to operate as a charitable company.

The Helpline launched a 12-month pilot scheme in August 2001 operating 6 hours a week. The first call was received following the turbulent events of September 11, and by July 2002, the service had responded to 126 enquiries. With increased volunteer staffing and small funding from local agencies, the service was officially launched in December 2002, opening two days per week. In October 2004, MYH launched muslimyouth.net – an online forum designed to be a safe space in which young Muslims can discuss social and mental health concerns affecting their lives. The project engages young Muslims as volunteer writers and photographers to produce content for the site. To date muslimyouth.net has over 2,000 registered users and has received over 250,000 hits.

Widespread publicity through voluntary sector agencies led to heightened interest in the work, and acclaimed media coverage. Since its launch, Muslim Youth Helpline has won 4 national awards for innovation, youth participation and community development. Recently MYH has been awarded the Investors in People accreditation, for its continued investment into its staff and volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

We have since inception moved twice, and are in the process of moving again to larger offices, in the Finchley Road area. The new office space is required for training purposes, and to accommodate expansion in office staff. Currently the Helpline service operates 7 days a week, Monday – Friday 6pm – 12am, Saturday and Sunday 12pm – 12am. There

are approximately 37 Helpline workers, with an additional eight Helpline supervisors. Six full time paid members of staff are currently employed. The management team consists of the Director, (who oversees the work of both the Helpline, and muslimyouth.net), a Helpline Development Manager, a Helpline Development worker, a muslimyouth.net Project Manager, a muslimyouth.net Site Editor, and an Administrator (who is shared across the Helpline and muslimYouth.net).

The values and ethos of MYH are instilled into every member of MYH. As an organisation we would summarise our values, principles, and objectives as:

- To provide faith and culture sensitive support, guidance and counselling to young people from the Muslim community;
- To respect the confidentiality of the client and deliver non-judgmental support;
- To offer a flexible and client centred service, placing primary emphasis on the needs of the young person;
- To promote peer support and encourage service user participation in all aspects of the organisation;
- To meet quality standard measures in accordance with professional codes of conduct;
- To ensure that all volunteers and employees are able to work in a safe and secure environment and to support their personal development within the organisation;
- To become a pioneer in delivering support services to Muslim youth and promote greater understanding of social problems within Muslim communities and the wider society.
- To provide training and volunteering opportunities for young Muslims and to develop their skills as future leaders and social entrepreneurs.

## Organisational Overview

The organisational structure of MYH has evolved dynamically with its growth. MYH is currently run by Trustees, paid members of staff, and volunteers. A member of MYH is defined as any person who belongs to one of the above mentioned groups.

### *Board of Trustees*

The Board of Trustees are legally responsible for the wellbeing, and direction of the charity. The Board currently comprises of the chair, a treasurer, and a secretary, and four other members. Each trustee, leads on a specific theme. Current areas of responsibility include: strategy, internal communications review, fundraising, and the muslimyouth.net steering committee.

As part of the MYH ethos of engaging young people, and allowing young people to develop leadership and management skills, MYH trustees range in age. The youngest member of the board is 18. All trustees bar one are under the age of 28, the eldest being 39. MYH believes it is essential that young people are at the core of the decision making process, and therefore the board should have young as well as older more experienced members. This is in line with the Russell Commissions vision where 'young people feel connected to their communities, seek to exercise influence over what is done and the way it is done' (Russell Commission, 2005). Trustees are recruited on their ability to fulfil the functions of a trustee, and are interviewed and tested against a range of competencies. During this time the chair,

and existing trustees actively seek out those with the potential to be leaders.

Many of the trustees have previously or currently still volunteer on the helpline. This ensures, that they can empathise with Helpline workers. This also ensures that trustees are viewed as experienced members of MYH, and hence trusted members of the organisation.

The Board of Trustees meet at least eight times in a year. Four of these eight meetings are to discuss the quarterly progress of the charity which is reported by the management team, and Director. This is measured against the objectives set out in the Business plan for the current year. The targets for the next quarter are agreed between the Board and the Director, in line with the Business Plan. The first half of all Quarterly trustee meetings, are open to all members of MYH if they so wish to attend, to enable members to ask questions of the Board and raise any concerns or ideas.

#### *The Management Committee (MC)*

The management committee comprises the full time paid members of the MYH team. They are led by the Director, Mrs Shareefa Fulat (27 )who has a wealth of experience, from previous work in the City (JP Morgan Chase), and at FAIR (Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism). She has played a pivotal role in developing MYH, and managing the MC. Shareefa during her time as Director, devised and implemented many of the policies and procedures of MYH from scratch. She has been responsible for recruiting all of the paid staff, and developing them as a cohesive team.

All members of the MC work in agreement with quarterly objectives, which are stated in the Business Plan. Their workplans are devised by the Director, and approved by the Trustees at a Quarterly meeting. The MC has fortnightly team meetings to discuss ongoing work, the minutes of which are circulated to the Trustees.

All staff undergo 360 degree annual reviews, to check progress and development. Each member of the MC is reviewed by two peers, colleagues, one person who either directly reports to them, and their line manager. This ensures the review is not subject to any personal bias, and takes the opinions of peers, line manager, and direct reports.

#### *Volunteers*

MYH recruits volunteers in the 16-25 age group to deliver its front line services as Helpline Workers (HW). Helpline Workers are managed by a team of part time paid Helpline Supervisors (HS). As HS are paid staff, they are required to fulfill a management role, in guiding the HW's under their care.

Helpline workers are selected via an interview process, whereby their skills and potential are assessed against a range of criteria. We specifically look for people with the ability to remain impartial and non-judgemental, who can think clearly, and who are empathetic towards our clients. The interviews are conducted by a panel, comprised of the Helpline Manager, a current Helpline Supervisor, and often an experienced Helpline worker, or a Trustee.

#### *Training and Development*

All Helpline Workers undergo a ten-day training programme which includes modules on

faith sensitive counselling, telephone and email counselling skills, and training on dealing with mental health, drugs, family, relationships and sexuality based on case studies.

The training programme has been tailor made to equip volunteers with basic skills and awareness to be able to effectively deal with telephone and email enquiries on the complete range of issues dealt with at the Helpline. Individual modules are delivered by a combination of external and internal trainers, as well as professionals who have experience of working on the ground with young people and specific issues.

MYH recognises that mental health problems do not arise in isolation from other social problems and can manifest in a multitude of ways, for example in the use of drugs, involvement with crime and social disorder. The training programme therefore includes modules on specific issues such as drugs, family relationships and sexuality and is delivered by professionals who work with, and are themselves from, the BME community.

After the initial ten day training period, Helpline Worker volunteers undergo a three week induction period in the Helpline office when they are able to answer mock as well as real calls to put their skills and training into practice. All mock calls are monitored for evaluation and feedback is given to individual volunteers at the end of the three week induction period. The feedback meeting is also used to highlight areas of excellence as well as areas of improvement. The Helpline Development Worker/Manager will agree with the Helpline Worker areas of improvement, and work with the Helpline Supervisors to support volunteers in these areas.

Helpline volunteers are then reviewed every four months to support ongoing development. Areas are identified for personal development and are used by the HDW to plan ongoing update training for all Helpline staff.

Feedback is a two way process, the Helpline Worker can express any concerns he/she may have about the Helpline or Supervisor. MYH ensures that Helpline workers are also praised for the good work that is completed. We run a Helpline Worker of the month competition, where current Helpline Workers/Supervisors can vote for a colleague who they feel has contributed exceptionally to MYH in the past month.

On an ongoing basis, Helpline Workers are also provided with a monthly update training session in order to continuously improve and refresh their skills. Update training sessions can involve anything from case meetings to discussing ongoing cases with Supervisors, to training modules on specific issues, such as schizophrenia or presentations from other service providers to increase awareness of the network of support services available to clients.

MYH believes strongly that the training of volunteers is an investment not just for the organisation but for the wider community and society. Volunteers are given training and support in the belief that the skills they develop will be transferable to other areas of their lives and will be used long after the end of their voluntary commitment with the Charity. Where possible, MYH sends its volunteers on external training programmes provided by other organisations.

The provision of training and support to volunteers has resulted in the empowerment of young people in other areas of their lives, boosting their confidence and personal skills, improving their educational achievements and in some cases, it has provided the inspiration to consider furthering a career in health and social care or education. Some of our volunteers report using the skills they develop through their volunteering at MYH in other areas of their lives. For example, one volunteer who works as a full time teacher reports using her counselling skills to provide support to her students in school.

Upon joining, volunteers are requested to make a minimum commitment of 12 months although we find that many of them contribute far above this minimum requirement. In addition to this, volunteers are often found to be making a contribution in areas of work not directly related to their immediate roles, such as administration, publicity and fundraising. In order to cover volunteer turnover, as older volunteers reach the end of their twelve month commitment period, and to recruit for the expansion of opening hours MYH currently holds three training programmes per year for Helpline Workers, recruiting 14 volunteers at a time.

#### *Helpline Supervisors*

The Helpline Supervisor's role in the organization is pivotal in supervising and providing support to Helpline Workers, monitoring service provision and ensuring the service is delivered in line with the Helpline's policies and procedures.

Supervisors have a call debrief with their Helpline Worker after each call. The Helpline Worker is given the chance to talk about the call with their supervisors, and essentially offload. The Supervisor must ensure that by the end of the 3-hour shift, each Helpline Worker has been properly de-briefed and any concerns have been addressed. The Supervisors can de-brief to other supervisors or the Helpline Manager if they so wish to.

Supervisors communicate with each other via an email group at the end of each shift; a supervisor is required to send a brief update email outlining any major events/issues which may have occurred during the shift. This ensures communication between all Supervisors is constant.

Supervisors learn a unique mixture of skills. They are experienced counsellors in that they are all promoted Helpline Workers. However to be a good Helpline Supervisor requires managerial skills. MYH is currently looking into ways of providing more managerial training for helpline Supervisors.

It is evident that Helpline Supervisors learn a vast array of soft skills, which are highly regarded in any employment sector. The ability to motivate, manage, and provide pastoral care to their Helpline Workers, often considerably adds to the skill set of these young Helpline Supervisors. Experienced helpline workers who can exhibit management skills are subsequently promoted. Age is not a barrier to promotion: one of the best Helpline Supervisors currently serving at MYH is only 18 years old, and manages Helpline workers many years her senior.



## MYH - Helpline Operations

### *What the Helpline Does*

MYH is Britain's first support service dedicated to providing support to young people from Muslim community backgrounds. By using young people from Muslim community backgrounds who are from the same age as the target client group, MYH is able to better meet the needs of the young people it seeks to serve. By using young people to deliver a peer support service, MYH has been able to overcome the restrictions of adult run services and to deliver a service which has greater empathy with its clients.

During helpline hours counsellors are able to respond to telephone calls from vulnerable young people, listen to their concerns in a non-judgemental manner, reassure them by offering support, explore feasible options and, where necessary, make referrals to specialist agencies. In October 2003 the Helpline launched its freephone number to facilitate access to the service.

Clients contact the Muslim Youth Helpline about a range of social issues, particularly those that are regarded as taboo within the community like homosexuality and mental health problems and require culturally sensitive support.

With many of our clients requesting face to face counselling and requiring support in person, MYH also operates an outreach service outside helpline hours across Greater London providing home-visits, face to face counselling, family mediation and a befriending service. Counsellors and befrienders are also available to visit youth offenders in prison.

Although Muslims make up less than 3% of the UK population, they constitute almost 10% of the prison population. Over the years, the Helpline has received hundreds of letters from Muslim youth in prison who are eager to access support to prevent re-offending upon their release. Again the lack of community support and faith and culturally sensitive services available to support the re-habilitation of young ex-offenders results in a high re-offending rate. Muslim ex-offenders are often in a situation of social isolation and increased marginalisation. By reaching out to some of the most vulnerable sections of our community, and appealing to the community itself to lend its support by volunteering their involvement in existing mentoring and befriending schemes, MYH aims to build stronger support for ex-offenders.

MYH is in the process of building partnerships with prisons and youth offending institutes to deliver services to the UK's Muslim prison population. Recent statistics show that the UK Muslim prison population is 7% compared to the 3% of Muslims in the UK in general. Given that statutory services are struggling to deliver culturally and faith sensitive services to the general BME population, there should be serious concerns about the mental health care provisions available for BME and Muslim populations within prisons.

In order to address this issue, MYH has built relationships with Feltham Youth Offending Institute, Royal Holloway Prison and Wandsworth Prisons and regularly receives letters and arranges face to face visits with prison clients.

### *Bridging the Gap*

As well as providing direct support to young people, MYH also aims to bridge the gap between marginalised Muslim youth and mainstream service providers. To this end, MYH operates a comprehensive referrals system whereby young people are encouraged to access mainstream or other specialist support agencies (such as Brook Advisory Centres) to supplement the support provided by MYH. Often the referrals process can involve reassuring clients that their faith or culturally sensitive needs and concerns will not be overlooked by referral agencies or simply making clients aware that such services do exist.

For many clients the contact with the Helpline signifies the first attempt to access support for their problems. As the charity is uniquely placed to access a hard to reach minority group, we recognise the importance of bridging the gap between mainstream services and our target client group. The Helpline works with clients to overcome the barriers of reluctance which prevent young people from BME communities using mainstream services, by encouraging contact, providing reassurance about mainstream service delivery whilst providing complementary support.

As well as referring clients to mainstream services, the Helpline also receives referrals from local authorities, social services, schools, colleges and university counselling services who are unable to meet the mental health care needs of BME Muslim clients, or whose needs are poorly met.

### *Long Term Clients*

Unlike many other mainstream service providers Muslim Youth Helpline does not discriminate against clients who may use the service more than once. Other service providers may argue that a client who utilises the service more than once, may become dependent on the service. MYH ensures that the clients' expectations of the service are within reasonable boundaries, and that the progress of the client is closely monitored by the Helpline Development Worker/Manager and Supervisor.

In the case that a client is using the service frequently, the Supervisor/Helpline Worker will discuss the clients' progress, and will constantly monitor conversations in order to assess the level of dependency. Some clients may simply find comfort in knowing that the Helpline is available to them, and will use the service, but on an infrequent basis. Others may become reliant on the service for regular attention or support. In this instance the Helpline Development Worker/Manager, Supervisor, and Helpline Worker will together assess the exact level of dependency, and any further steps needed. In the past this assessment has resulted in clients being informally limited to a 20 minute call; particular clients who may be vulnerable to becoming attached to one specific Helpline Worker, are encouraged to speak to a wider range of Helpline Workers. Any dependency on a particular Helpline Worker is always strongly discouraged.

Client case meetings are often held, where all Helpline Workers/Supervisors who have dealt with a particular client are brought together to formulate an appropriate strategy for the specific client.

As a service we do continue to support our clients, with constant monitoring. A few of

our clients have used the service for over 18 months, however with varying frequency. A particular client who suffered repeated sexual abuse by various people, initially used the service intensely two or three times a week for the first month. After the first month, her usage fell to once a week, after six months, the client was accessing the service every two or three weeks. After one year the client would utilise the service once every six to eight weeks. Throughout this client's counselling, she was always encouraged to find other means of support in her life, such as friends and family.

In the event when clients require specialist advice on an issue, such as an Islamic legal ruling, we refer them onto the specialist contacts that we hold in our referrals database. The referrals database holds contact information of individuals, and professionals. We currently have Lawyers, Imams (of different schools of thoughts), careers advisors, amongst others on the database.

It is worth noting that the Helpline only deals with clients who choose to access the service themselves. We are therefore a self referral-only service. We do not ring up clients, if family or friends wish us to do so. We would ask the client themselves to access the service, and would encourage the relatives or friends to encourage the person concerned to contact the Helpline.

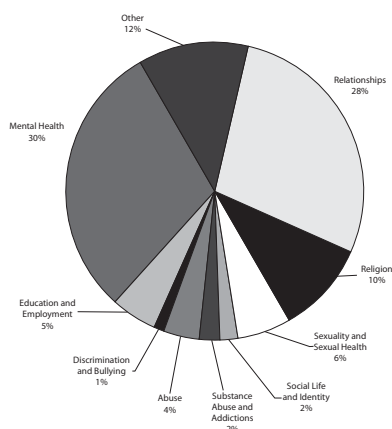
### *Client Profile*

MYH is based in London but deals with clients from all over the UK. In the past year, 45% of client calls were received from London and 55% from other regions of the UK. The demographic distribution of clients dealt with by MYH is an almost exact reflection of the distribution of the ethnic minority population across the UK which highlights the effectiveness of the charity in reaching all parts of the community it serves.

### *Client Statistics July 2004 – August 2005*

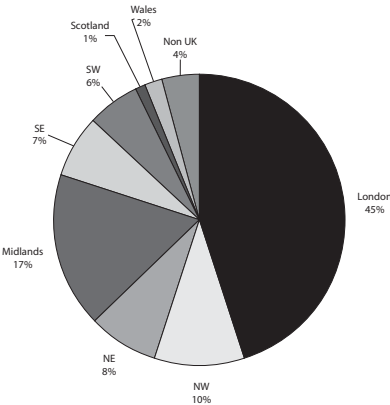
Over the past twelve months, the Helpline has responded to 4,618 enquiries, and just under 10,000 to date at the time of writing this paper (December 2005). The exponential increase in the number of clients responded to is a reflection of the level of need for the service as well as the increase in the Helpline's capacity to reach greater numbers of clients.

## **ISSUES**



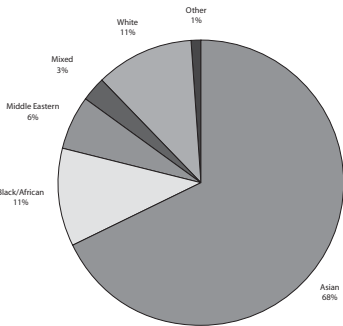
Issues of Concern	%	% male	% female
Mental Health	30	40	60
Relationships	28	24	76
Other	12	59	41
Religion	10	66	34
Sexuality and Sexual Health	6	75	25
Education and Employment	5	63	37
Abuse	4	21	79
Social Life and Identity	2	52	48
Substance Abuse and Addictions	2	68	32
Discrimination and Bullying	1	65	35

LOCATION



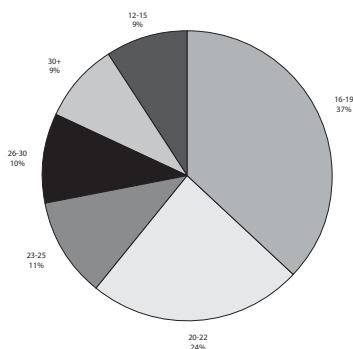
Location	%	% male	% female
London	45	47	53
NW	10	32	68
NE	8	45	55
Midlands	17	54	43
SE	7	76	24
SW	6	66	28
Scotland	1	50	50
Wales	2	18	82
Non UK	4	50	50

ETHNICITY



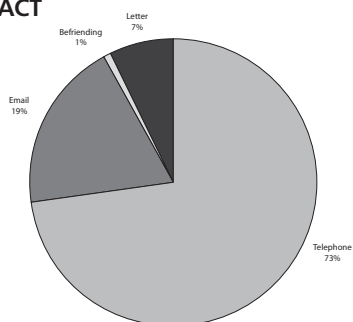
Ethnicity	%	% male	% female
Asian	68	36	64
Black/African	11	63	38
White	11	52	46
Middle Eastern	6	25	75
Mixed	3	13	87
Other (Black Caribbean/Chinese)	1	50	50

## AGE



Age of Clients	%	% male	% female
12-15	9	42	58
16-19	37	27	73
20-22	24	49	51
23-25	11	52	48
26-30	10	43	57
30+	9	44	56

## METHOD OF CONTACT



Method of Contact	%	% male	% female
Telephone	73	42	58
Email	19	39	61
Befriending	1	75	25
Letter	7	97	3

### *Diversity and Equal Opportunities*

MYH operates an Equal Opportunities Policy which governs the recruitment of paid and voluntary staff and which complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and 1986 and the Race Relations Amendment Act 1976.

When recruiting Helpline Workers to deliver the front line service, the Charity always seeks to ensure an equal gender balance is retained as well as an ethnic diversity from all community groups. Our current team of Helpline Workers is able to speak eight different community languages between them and represent the ethnic diversity of our client groups.

The Helpline also records the statistical information of clients who access the service which enables the Charity to monitor equal opportunities amongst the young people we work with. Where there is an under representation of an ethnic group amongst either staff or clients, we actively seek to implement measures to redress the balance. For example, we recently made extra efforts to advertise voluntary positions to the Somali community, resulting in an increase in applications from Somali youth.

## **muslimyouth.net**

### *Web-Guidance and Internet Counselling*

Following its launch, Muslim Youth Helpline received numerous requests from clients to develop a web-based guidance forum and an internet counselling service. In December 2003, Muslim Youth Helpline was awarded £89,338 over 3 years from the Camelot Foundation to fund the project and muslimyouth.net was launched in October 2004.

### *Vision*

From the onset, Muslim Youth Helpline has been concerned about the prevalence of mental health and related social problems amongst young British Muslims primarily due to identity conflict, increased social exclusion and the pressures of discrimination and deprivation in the community. Since social problems are interrelated and often impact several aspects of life, muslimyouth.net aims to support and profile all these issues in a single forum. The site will increase access and information to support services and complement MYH's existing telephone and e-mail counselling service.

Muslim young people who suffer mental health and related social problems are often forced to suffer alone in silence because of the fear of family reprisal and the stigma attached to these issues within Muslim communities. Fear of dishonour may exacerbate this isolation and act as an obstacle to seeking help and accessing support services. muslimyouth.net aims to utilise the anonymity of the internet to educate and inform young Muslims about social problems, provide comprehensive access to referral agencies and encourage the development of peer-support networks.

By placing these issues in the public domain for the very first time, the forum aims to confront the cultural stigma attached to such problems, encourage young people to care for their mental and social wellbeing and support one another as well as promote good

citizenship through social integration and a reconciliation of conflicting identities. Besides bringing taboo issues to the forefront of the community in a culturally sensitive manner, the site aims to provide young people with an open space in which they can safely discuss the issues and concerns affecting their daily lives without condemnation or censure.

This project is the first of its kind to combine interactive online resources on mental health and related social issues with an internet counselling service (launched in January 2006), discussion boards and referral databases.

The site hosts an interactive forum to encourage debate and discussion on taboo subjects and allows young people to make informed opinions. By sharing experiences and aspirations, young Muslims may feel inspired and supported to challenge stereotypes and reach their individual potential in British society.

#### *Volunteers, Training and Development*

As well as serving young people as users, the site is produced entirely by young people with personal experiences of many of the issues and who are struggling or have succeeded in reconciling many of the cultural and social conflicts profiled. Again this is in line with the Russell Commission's key objective that young people should be the drivers of services to young people. muslimyouth.net has been created by a dedicated group of male and female volunteers between the ages of 16 and 25 years. The team represents the ethnic diversity of Muslim communities in Britain today.

To participate in the project, all volunteers are expected to complete a short-course in writing skills, attend an audio and visual skills workshop and train in editing and moderating online forums. As part of their training, volunteers are introduced to the array of social problems endured by young people and they are encouraged to explore their reflections on society without incurring fear or prejudice. Training is provided in conjunction with BBC and freelance journalists.

#### *The Site*

The site incorporates:

- Interactive Channels and Guidance Pages

The main section of the forum provides information on a multitude of social concerns relevant to young Muslims. Articles are written to reflect the cultural context within which these problems arise, and are presented in the form of narratives, personal accounts, case studies, interviews, surveys and reviews. The opinions and views of young people are the focus of each article, sharing their ideas, aspirations and coping mechanisms in order to challenge the stigma associated with social problems in Muslim communities.

- Access to Support Services

A comprehensive database of support services and referral agencies relevant to Muslim youth.

- The Forum

Moderated message boards encourage open and anonymous discussion on taboo subjects and create opportunities for young people to provide informal support to one another.

- Events Diary

A calendar of social and recreational events in the community encouraging young Muslims to develop multifaceted interests and make positive contributions to society.

- Campaign Zone

Quarterly campaigns on health and social issues serve to raise awareness of particular social issues and challenge community perceptions and cultural practices. Each campaign has an associated event designed to encourage individual and community action to make a difference to the chosen social need.

- Interactive Zone

Weekly polls and competitions.

- Internet Counselling

From January 2006, the forum will host an internet counselling service in private internet chat rooms facilitated by MYH Helpline Workers and will be available between 12pm-6pm, Saturday – Sunday as the initial pilot. The service will increase accessibility to culturally sensitive support and counselling for young Muslims across the UK.

- Celebration of Cultural Diversity and Social Contribution

The forum celebrates the cultural diversity and heritage of Muslims in Britain in order to combat deprivation and low self-esteem. By highlighting the achievements of Muslim youth through articles, interviews and pictures, the forum creates role-models, promotes good citizenship and encourages social integration amongst Muslim youth.

#### *muslimyouth.net Campaigns*

muslimyouth.net delivers unique campaigns on a quarterly basis, which are designed to raise awareness of social concerns. Each campaign has an associated event to encourage members of the community to make a difference. Over the past year the following very successful campaigns have been pursued:

#### *Prison Campaign*

Eid is a time when Muslims spend time visiting friends and families. It is a time of happiness, and celebrations, and for those young Muslims in prison it can also be a time of great loneliness, and isolation.

The Ramadhan prison campaign was first launched during Ramadhan 2004, as muslimyouth.net's first campaign. The aim was to raise awareness of Muslim youth in prison and to encourage the community to reach out and support young offenders. Through this campaign over 1,000 Eid gift boxes were sent to Young Muslim Prisoners across the UK. Each gift box contained a Quran in Arabic and English, a dua book, a box of dates, a writing pad, MYH service information, and a message of support from a member of the public. All the boxes were sponsored by community donations.

The Campaign received an overwhelmingly positive response from the community, Muslim chaplains working in prisons, the families of prisoners and from the prisoners themselves. After the gift boxes were sent MYH received over 100 letters from prisoners thanking the



community for their support, and accessing MYH's support services.

Due to the success of this campaign, it was agreed that it be repeated on an annual basis on Eid. For Ramadhan 2005, 2,000 gift boxes were delivered to young Muslim prison inmates. Through the campaign MYH managed to provide a volunteering opportunity to young people who are not directly involved with MYH. Muslim Youth Helpline advertised for volunteers to come forth, and help with the packing of the gift boxes. This attracted over 30 new volunteers. This opportunity gave these young people a good insight into the workings of Muslim Youth Helpline. We hope that many of these young people return to volunteer in other aspects of the organisation in the future.

Since the prison campaign MYH has been replying to the letters from prison clients. Many prison clients write in regularly as a result of the campaign, and some request prison visits from our Helpline Workers.

A response from one young prisoner

*Dear Muslim youth, I would like to thank you for helping me to have a happy Eid and I like to thank you for the gifts. So THANKS, even though I'm in prison I still enjoyed myself. I would like you to know that you've gave me my first Quran and I'm so grateful – (17 Year Old Prisoner, Huntercombe)*

*2Dayz of Street Life (Homelessness Campaign) – March 2005*

This campaign was aimed at highlighting the plight of young people who are faced with difficulties of homelessness. muslimyouth.net recruited four volunteers aged between 21 and 30, to spend a weekend on the streets of London on a daily budget of just £3. The campaign was highlighted on the website, and the participants were asked to write journal accounts of their experience.

*Youth Voices*

The Youth Voices project, was an opportunity for young Muslims to express their social concerns through music. Eight talented young Muslim artists were chosen to work on producing a musical CD, each track highlighting a different social concern that young Muslims could face in modern day Britain. The project culminated in a musical performance evening, where songs from the CD were performed live on stage.

This project was funded by a Home Office grant. This allowed muslimyouth.net to hire professional studios to complete the recording, to hire professional voice coaches amongst others. The project enabled the eight volunteers to receive support, training and coaching from professionals from the world of music production. Through the project, the unheard voices of Muslim youth were able to be expressed in a creative and innovative way.

## **MYH – Impact on Clients**

By empowering young people with a sense of dignity and social stability, MYH confronts radicalism and intolerance and promotes good citizenship in marginalised communities.

MYH recognises that the alienation and social isolation of Muslim youth can contribute to increased chances of radicalisation. It is our belief that providing support to young people in the most impressionable and vulnerable stages in their lives; encouraging positive lifestyle choices and greater integration, does prevent the disillusion and disengagement from wider society which makes them vulnerable to being targeted by extremists.

Below are just some of the many positive messages of client feedback we have received over the last few years which are a testament to the real and lasting difference our work has made to young Muslims. All messages retain the original words and typing of the authors:

*Thank you all at the Muslim Youth Helpline for trying to get me off when I was out, and I have only one more favour now and that is for everyone to forget at the Muslim Youth Helpline that I was ever on something called heroin.*

(Letter, 21/01/02 :first client to contact MYH).

*i just wanted to thank you for such an amazing reply i have never felt so understood and supported in my whole life, you have no idea how much it helped!!!! Everything you said made sense and was so right.. i have been crying all night because i feel so relieved that u actually understand what i am talking about. I just wanted to say thank you again for being so great and everything seems so much better after reading your email*  
(Client Email, 07/09/03)

*When you sent a reply to my email I just felt that somebody cares about me. Thank you for the job you found me. I could not thank you enough* (Client Email, 10/04/04)

*Thank you to the people who I have now declared my guardian angels... The counsellors of the Muslim Youth Helpline ... Thank you for your kind words and advice. Your warm emails were the only thing that kept me going for a while and though it all happened so quickly your emails have touched my heart in an outstanding way that will stay with me forever. A final thank you and I wish you all the best.* (Client Email, 10/05/04)

*i wanted to thank you ... i first contacted myh a year ago - with worries about memories of past sexual abuse and an eating disorder. i was in a very bad state at the time – both mentally and physically - i couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and had no one to talk to – i had tried getting help but nothing was working. a friend had come across myh on a website and suggested it to me, for me this was a last resort, i had decided this was the last time that i would try to get help. It was difficult at first – talking to a complete stranger about such personal issues, but as time went on things changed – it did take quite a while, there were times when i swore i wouldn't call in again, but here i am today and i thank Allah that i came across Myh.*

*my counsellor has had a great effect on me- for months i told him he wasn't helping me at all – and to think how wrong was i! i can now truly say that no one has ever helped me as much as he has.*

*myh seem to have well trained counsellors who are caring and very hard working. i have come along way since last year. there were times when i had contemplated suicide, barely eating or sleeping, was lacking in confidence. my experience with myh has been*

*such that my whole life has turned around.*

*my counsellor has helped me rebuild my confidence over the months. i feel so much better about myself and i have learnt to value myself.*

*these days such care is virtually impossible for some of us to get from our families and friends. with my problems i have felt all alone as i haven't had anyone to speak to but Myh has changed all that.*

*I know I am not alone now, and have learnt to open up to others when im feeling alone.*

*i've had an eating disorder since i was 14 and saw quite a few dietitians in order to help me, i stopped seeing any dietitian and even my doctor as i didnt feel it was helping, yet my counsellor helped me more than they did over those years, it didnt seem to matter that the dietitians were trained specifically to deal with health issues, they werent considerate towards my feelings and didnt seem to understand me as my counsellor has done.*

*there is so much that i could say about the benefits of myh, but all i want to say is that myh successfully provides the services they say they offer. my experience with myh has been such that im sure never to forget it as myh helped me at a crucial time in my life. Thank you. (Client Email, 06/04/04)*

*mDear muslimyouth.net, I jus wanted 2 thank-u 4 your grt website, I jus wanted ur site has reali helped me 2 find other peeps who r goin thru the same struggles that i am. I was close to killin myself b4 i came across ur site, i hav made sum gud friends here though, some peeps who have been thru the same stuff that i am now have been helpin me to get back on my feet. Jus wanted to thank-u for all your work, jus wanted to let u know that we do appreciate ur efforts. Jus wanted to let u know, that i'm still alive cos of ur site and the gud peeps her Nuff Love (Email, August, 2005)*

## **MYH – Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement**

As well as providing integrated support services to young Muslims, MYH aims to promote civic engagement and active citizenship by providing training and support for its volunteers, many of whom commit to stay with the projects for a minimum of 12 months.

Most of the young people who volunteer for the Charity do so because of their personal experience of the issues that the Helpline deals with which allows them to empathise with the wider aims and objectives of the Charity. The majority of volunteers express a desire to make a positive contribution to their communities and to the lives of their peers and carry the conviction that the service MYH provides is very much needed.

Both Helpline and my.net volunteers receive training for their roles from external professionals. By training and empowering young Muslims to support their peers, and get

involved in the strategic management and running of the Charity, MYH aims to develop leadership skills and capacity amongst both individuals and the community.

As well as benefiting its thousands of clients, MYH has found that its volunteers have also positively benefited from their voluntary experience with MYH. Being a youth led organisation, MYH puts young people at the forefront of service delivery and the centre of strategic decision making at all levels of the organisation.

Through the provision of a wide range of supported volunteering activities, MYH is able to promote civic engagement and active citizenship. Volunteering with MYH gives young people the opportunity to realise their own potential and experience the confidence that arises from being empowered to reach that potential. It is our belief that the skills volunteers develop through their work with MYH will stay with them throughout their lives and have an impact on the wider community and society around them.

Many of our volunteers come forward for their roles because they have personal experience of the issues we deal with and can empathise with the problems faced by their peers. Having grown up in Britain themselves and gone through many of the same issues faced by our clients, our volunteers are in a position to influence the service to make it more appropriate to the needs of our clients. The engagement of young people at strategic levels is invaluable to ensuring the organisation remains responsive to the needs of the young people we seek to serve. As well as ensuring the organisation is effective in service delivery, young people are able to bring fresh perspectives to the organisation and the will to try innovative ideas.

The majority of our Board members are below the age of 25 years, although this is by no means a condition of membership. By encouraging young people to work at a strategic level and putting them in positions of leadership and decision making we hope to nurture the leadership skills of young people. By working with the more experienced Board and management committee members within the organisation as well as leaders and strategic thinkers of external organisations across the sector, young members of the Board will be given the opportunity to develop their own potential as future entrepreneurs and leaders.

## **Muslim Youth Helpline – The Future**

Over the year 2006 we are aiming to achieve the following milestones:

- Launch the pilot internet counselling service in January 2006.
- Increase the capacity of the Helpline by installing an electronic logging system for client enquiries.
- Commence research on the social condition of Muslim youth, based on the statistical data gathered from clients, in order to inform social policy and service provision. MYH's client statistics are an invaluable source of information on the social condition of Muslim youth. MYH is keen to develop a series of reports looking into the social condition of Muslim Youth in greater depth and detail.
- Deliver faith and culturally sensitive (FCS) training support to other organisations.

The plans for the future depend on the availability of resources, capacity, and where the volunteer members feel the priorities lie. In accordance with this, MYH is currently assessing the feasibility of a replication model for local outreach and drop in centres, and for the Helpline service to be set up in other parts of the UK.

In addition to extending the Charity's support services to youth across the UK and to meet regional demand for in-person community support, MYH has been discussing the concept of establishing outreach centres to provide social and educational programmes as long-term objectives in engaging young people from marginalised Muslim communities.

The Muslim Youth Helpline Business Plan for the years (2007 – 2010) is currently in its draft stages, with the Board of Trustees.

## **MYH – Reflecting the Views of Young Muslims**

In light of the London bombings, Muslim youth have become increasingly scrutinised in the media spotlight. Muslim Youth Helpline always attempts to reflect the views and concerns of the Young Muslims who contact us. We strongly feel that Muslim Youth Helpline is not representative of the community, but rather that it is important that we attempt to reflect the views of the young Muslims we work with and serve.

Many members of the Muslim Youth Helpline have been involved in various consultation groups, in an attempt to raise the profile of the voice of young Muslims. MYH appeared before the Russell Commission in 2004 to present MYH's model of youth volunteering and is profiled as a case study in the Russell Commission report. As part of Year of the Volunteer a team of volunteers also made a presentation on their experiences of volunteering to a Select Committee at a British Youth Council event.

Members of the Management committee and Trustees have been involved in reflecting the views of young Muslims to various media, governmental departments, international think tanks. Mustafa Suleyman (Treasurer/Trustee) has represented MYH in an OSCE discussion forum (September 2005) on tackling extremism amongst Muslim Youth in Europe. Raza Jaffrey (Chair) has presented a paper at the Rand Corporation (Washington, USA) on the Isolation of British Muslim Youth. MYH has been represented in the *Guardian* British Muslim Youth Forum roundtable discussions over the past year. Shareefa Fulat (Director) co- chaired the Engaging Youth working group, advising the Home Office in light of the recent London bombings.

MYH often receives international delegates through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, recent delegates include those from the USA, and Singapore. Through this work MYH has raised the profile of British Muslim youth work and Muslim youth voices in Britain, and abroad.

## Conclusion

MYH continues to go from strength to strength due to the dedication and the hard work of its volunteers, staff and trustees.

In twelve months we have managed to go from two paid staff to six, to triple our income, and double our volunteer team. The Helpline has responded to just under 5,000 enquiries and in less than twelve months, muslimyouth.net has attracted 1,800 registered users. And yet in many ways our achievements over the last year cannot be quantified in client statistics or staff numbers. Those working closely with us will know and appreciate the tremendous challenges we have faced in developing and sustaining what has rapidly become a lifeline to our clients. It has been a year of growth beyond our expectations and we look very much forward to consolidating our efforts over the coming years.

The unique model of volunteer engagement that MYH has been able to harness has been highlighted in this short paper. It is the personal dedication of our young volunteers to the cause of serving young people to which we owe the success of the charity and they remain the backbone of our service. The selflessness with which they give their time and themselves to reach out to those in need is truly remarkable and nothing less than inspiring.

Everyone at MYH would sincerely like to thank the supporters of its work; may we continue to successfully serve our community.

## Note

1. Awards received are as follows: AOL Innovation in the Community Award 2003; National Council for Voluntary Youth Services Young Partners Award 2003; BT/Telephone Helplines Association Helpline Volunteer of the Year 2003; Phillip Lawrence Award 2003; Muslim News Community Development Award 2003; Whitbread Young Achievers Award 2004 (Mohammed Sadiq Mamdani, Founder, MYH); Purple Youth Award 2004 for Best Support Site (muslimyouth.net); The Education Network Newsletter; Telephone Helplines Association Newsletter; Investors in People Award (September 2005).

# ▷ NEW PERSPECTIVES ◻◻◻

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## Jeremy Brent – an appreciation

*The Editorial Group and readers of Youth and Policy were very sorry to hear of the death of Jeremy Brent earlier this year. His articles were distinctive and of the highest quality, wrought from committed and long term experience in face to face work with young people. His words managed to convey the values at the heart of practice without sentimentalising, exaggerating or apologising and we shall miss his contribution.*

*The appreciation below was written by Doug Nicholls of CYWU*

Delegates at the 2006 Community and Youth Workers' Union (CYWU) national conference stood in silent respect and sadness at the death of our dear friend and lifelong active member, Jeremy. We celebrated his life also and appreciated his magnificent contribution to youth work practice and theory and to trade unionism.

Nationally CYWU is greatly indebted to his consistent, reliable, good natured and influential contribution. Of course our Bristol members have lost a wonderful friend and comrade and like us all, will always remember him with affection. Bristol Youth Service has lost one of its most talented and respected workers.

Jeremy was a very complete person and professional, he recognised that thought without action leads nowhere and action without thought is useless. Consequently he combined his great commitment to young people with a commitment to other youth workers. By helping to get youth workers organised to defend themselves and improve their position and improve society's view of them, Jeremy recognised that individual youth workers would be stronger. He consequently gave freely and generously of his time to be an active trade unionist in the Bristol Branch of CYWU. He was always there wisely, quietly and modestly giving support and encouragement to collective work.

No person or youth centre is an island, we all exist in a wider landscape and Jeremy was always aware that unless we considered the wider picture, our little worlds would be less colourful and less protected. He believed that we cannot really achieve fairness for young people and a better deal for them, unless as professional workers we can achieve justice and respect for ourselves. That is why his trade unionism was an integral part of his youth work.

It was the same with his youth work practice. He always put daily occurrences in a context. From the minutely observed events of life for young people in South Mead to the closely considered interventions of himself and colleague youth workers, Jeremy reflected deeply and shared his thoughts for the benefit of others in some eloquent and moving articles that we will as a Union and a profession re publish. Because his work was grounded in real life



and practice, Jeremy was able to say more effectively and powerfully in a few pages what many more theoretical writers take chapters to say. His writings should inspire all youth workers to write more about the simple everyday things that are so full of interest and insight to our shared humanity.

These are dangerous times when mighty world powers strut the globe destroying young lives. Jeremy's life and work remind us of the virtues of the local, the peaceful and the carefully crafted. Global powers like to move people from country to country, or destabilise local communities or tell workers that they must be infinitely flexible on the labour market and change from job to job and career to career, being Jacks and Jills of all trades. Jeremy's commitment to one community and one skilled profession demonstrate the virtues of stability and perfection of a craft. By being rooted and confident and knowledgeable and committed he was able to fly and take many young people with him.

He did not want promotion out of face to face work. He wanted to be alongside young people as they became more creative, more responsible, more ambitious, more caring and more able to enjoy each moment as it flies by in this wonderful human world.

Some people have lofty monuments built in their name. Jeremy was worth far more than such superficial things. He left a living real legacy of values and styles of work that will never be extinguished and will unobtrusively influence generations to come. We all owe Jeremy and his family a great deal.

**Doug Nicholls**  
**General Secretary**  
**The Community and Youth Workers' Union**

# Youth & Policy

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*Youth & Policy* is issued quarterly. It has a circulation not only throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, but also as far afield as the USA and Australia. Many academics and professionals subscribe to what has proven to be a valuable contribution to those involved in various forms of youth study and youth work.

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### Submission Details

#### Articles

The Editorial Group welcomes the submission of unsolicited articles which take an analytical approach to theoretical, policy or professional matters relating to young people in society.

Articles must be the original work of the author(s) and must not be under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Manuscripts should normally be between 3,500 and 8,000 words, including diagrams and references. In addition, authors should include an abstract of up to 150 words and three to five keywords.

If considered suitable, articles will be subject to anonymous peer review by two referees. This can sometimes take up to six months. The final decision regarding publication rests with the Editorial Group, who may occasionally recommend revisions and re-submission.

When submitting articles for consideration, in the first instance e-mail copy to jean.spence@durham.ac.uk. Alternatively send hard copy and disk.

Each manuscript should be accompanied by a cover sheet containing the following information:

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