Social work with Muslim communities

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Treading a critical path over the crescent moon

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Contextualising social work with Muslim communities

Islam is part of the triumvirate of Abrahamic religions and the youngest of this group, which includes Judaism and Christianity. Accordingly there are many points of comparison across the three faiths, whose communities of believers are known as ‘the people of the Book’: those guided by the sacred texts of these religions; although with highly distinctive elements to each of the Abrahamic religions. The Holy Qur’an is the textual foundation of Islam, being the sacralised writings venerated by Muslims who believe that it holds the sacred word of Allah as revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (570–632 BCE), peace be upon him. Death overtaking all mortal beings, upon his demise his followers sought to capture Mohammed’s teachings in form of the *sunna* (the prophetic tradition), in which can be found the *hadiths* – the sayings of the Prophet guide followers in terms of religious belief, practice and conduct. A feature of Islam, which means ‘to submit’, is its holism in combining these three elements and encompassing the five fundamental duties for Muslims:

1. **Shahadah** – bearing witness that there is only one God and Mohammed is his Prophet
2. **Salat** – prayer, practised five times a day and fixed according to the movement of the sun
3. **Zakat** – an alms tax to support the needy in society as distributive wealth
4. **Saum** – fasting from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan
5. **Hajj** – the pilgrimage that should be undertaken at least once in the life of the believer to the Ka’aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

(Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.* 2008)

Denominational differences are found in Islam in terms of Sunni and Shi’a sects, where sectarian oppression of the latter can be observed. Sufism forms another devotional tradition, which also extends across several Muslim societies, although this is also under sectarian pressures (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.* 2017).

Contemporary demographic data indicate that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the Global North (Al-Krenawi 2012). Gündüz (2010) comments on the rapid expansion of Muslim minority ethnic (ME) groups across Europe, which at 23 million now represents 5 per cent of
the overall population (Gündüz 2010). Nevertheless, Muslim groups tend to be concentrated, with the majority (65 per cent) of Muslims in Europe residing in the UK, France and Germany (Ashencaen Crabtree 2014; Jikeli 2013). Diversity is wide in terms of ethno-cultural heritage, custom and practice (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008) and where Muslim communities are subject to very different social policy drivers across national boundaries (Ashencaen Crabtree 2014).

Regarding professional services and Muslim communities, the secularisation of social work as enacted in Britain and other countries has been challenged as insufficiently responsive. Over the past decade, there has been a notable increase in a social work canon focusing on religion and spirituality (Furness and Gilligan 2010). However, attempts to address spiritual need have been piecemeal owing to continuing and uniformed professional assumptions. The needs of many service user and client groups have been overlooked across a range of religious and spiritual beliefs, including those of Christians, where stereotypically a self-identification of Anglicanism is too often interpreted as effectively that of ‘non-believer’.

Consequently the landscape of religious piety in Britain is frequently assumed to be primarily confined to minority ethnic (ME) groups, of which Muslims form a sizeable, if somewhat unfamiliar, group, around which have coalesced many contested positions and debates. Whether or not it forms part of the new awareness of religion and spirituality as being important but often professionally neglected domains of the human experience, there is a welcome rise in the research literature on Islamic perspectives. There is a growth of research literature interrogating social work values, practice and education in terms of religio-cultural differences, in addition to a burgeoning exploration of health and social welfare services as affecting Muslim service users (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008). These have added much to our emergent understandings of the holism of Islam in terms of belief, daily practice and how personal needs and professional responses are accordingly influenced.

Islamic perspectives have to an extent now begun to populate a vacuum of professional knowledge regarding what might be construed as appropriate and/or sensitive intervention with multifaith groups in keeping with a cultural competence agenda. While holding clear merits in raising social work awareness of the need to work effectively with diverse communities, the cultural competence approach has been critiqued on the grounds of homogeneity – the essentialising of generalised groups of people who may be quite distinctive in most characteristics, apart from a common identity as Muslims (Ashencaen Crabtree 2014).

Casting illumination over pathways to improved social work intervention with Muslim individuals, families and communities does not disguise the divergent forks in the road that are apparent. Along with greater social work awareness of these important aspects of diversity in multicultural and multifaith societies are found representations of Muslim minority groups as socially problematic in Westernised, democratic spaces; particularly when these are associated with civil subversion and terrorism.

The conception of Muslims as legitimate would-be recipients of sensitive social work intervention or the construction of Muslims as socially subversive security risks controversially carries an unavoidable common element. The latter form a symbolically ostracised group representing contested areas of belief, practice and lifestyle, feeding into contemporary mythologies of the feared and alien ‘other’ in our midst. However, equally the validated and thus normalised Muslim service user/client is a conceptually nebulous entity. The crucial point of similarity between the two stereotypes is that through being unlinked from familiar, ‘known’ identifiers such as ethnicity or nationality, Muslims are therefore recast as a unique but isolated category, as opposed to a diverse group of people of multiple heritage and customs, like any other population.
Admittedly the Islamic concept of *Ummah*, the community of the Muslim faithful, acts to form a sense of common principles of belief and common identity. This serves as a conceptual glue aiding the proselyting mission of Islam in its rapid move from a locally confined belief system to a global religion (in common with comparable elements to Christianity, unlike that of Judaism). However, whether the notion of *Ummah* was conceived as displacing ethnic and regional identifiers is, from this historical perspective, a question for further theological debate.

Here both a paradox and a hazard are together found, in that in contemporary society among nearly all other minority ethnic groups, it is the religious identifier rather than that of the ethnic identifier that demarcates Muslims from other peoples. It is also this imposed marker that can create both a specifically defined, seemingly static identity as well as a risk of separation or alienation from the wider multicultural community.

Let us pause momentarily in considering the specifics in order to better contemplate the ambiguous and ambivalent. The constructed space that is viewed as ‘known’ includes well-established but mutable ethnic classifications, but is juxtaposed by that which is ‘unknown’ represented by unfamiliar, misunderstood or misrepresented belief systems. This latter space creates an area of supposed emptiness that may be filled by opinion, assumptions, misunderstandings, negative associations and prejudice. However, such spaces also hold an unbounded liminal vacuum working between the spaces of perception and realities. It is here, therefore, in this fertile void of ignorance that an exploration of how social work addresses the needs of Muslim service users, families and communities begins to establish a definite point in a complex and often poorly illuminated terrain.

In this brief chapter, areas of ambiguity and tension can merely be outlined as a backdrop to a rich tapestry made up of diverse peoples self-identifying as Muslims who, over the course of centuries, have been subject to a range of recognised citizen (and resident) entitlements. This pattern of migration and settlement (as well as conversion) is today threaded through by a current discourse of alienation with society and the threatened fragmentation of multicultural democratic ideals (Grossfoguel and Mielants 2006; Gündüz 2010: 45). It is within this uncertain and tense milieu that social work as an institution must operate; and where to compound problems in Britain, English social work is fighting a politicised rear-guard action to maintain its professional autonomy and to halt the erosion of its erstwhile splendidly expansive social work education from collapsing into a narrow training protocol to serve neo-political ends (Parker and Doel 2013).

**Muslim families in Britain**

The areas for intervention from micro practice to macro engagement appear legion. What is often referred to as ‘effective social work practice’ seeks to address micro-level need at the individual level, which in turn is embedded in meso-level community dynamics and circumstances. However, social work must also engage in problematising overlapping and competing discourses that shape macro policy and social attitudes, and in so doing articulate clear responses to events taking place in the civic-political space impacting upon local people.

The somewhat inadequate and hackneyed term ‘challenge’ and the barely supportable, nonsensical cliché ‘making a difference’ barely begin to address the magnitude of the task. Nor do these phrases adequately express the moral and civic dimensions of the professionalised duty, and the complexity of negotiating compassionately, sagaciously and skilfully both the bounded territories and those areas of ‘no man’s land’ that are made up of diverse peoples and multiple identities, representing numerous communities in need.

In the first edition of *Islam and Social Work* (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008), the relative
socio-economic underprivileged status of Muslim communities living in Britain was considered in terms of access to employment, housing and education. The national picture has altered somewhat since then, with growing numbers of Muslims (albeit subject to gender differences) attaining university education and professional employment at a comparable rate to the general population and where unemployment of Muslims stands at 7.2 per cent compared to 4.0 per cent of the general population (Muslim Council of Britain [MCB] 2015). Despite these socio-economic changes, the MCB notes:

Just under half (46% or 1.22 million) of the Muslim population lives in the 10% most deprived and 1.7% (46,000) in the 10% least deprived, Local Authority Districts in England, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation measure. In 2001, 33% of the Muslim population resided in the 10% most deprived localities.

(MCB 2015: 46)

Disadvantageous life circumstances combined with other negative and pejorative experiences create a toxic mix of perceived discrimination marring and deforming victims and perpetrators alike. In respect of Muslims this phenomena is often classified as conforming to Islamophobic prejudice.

**Islamophobia**

Discrimination arises in part through the assumption of the existence of an essentialised Muslim identity, immutable and alien, which is encapsulated in the concept of ‘Islamophobia’. This is another contested term, differing from other determinants of discrimination in being neither solely prejudice against ethnicity nor religious affiliation but situating itself somewhere between the two (Hussain and Bagguely 2012; Lorente 2010).

The definition of Islamophobia, which first appeared in the UK in 1997 in *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, remains in currency, summing up a portrayal of Islam as:

1. Monolithic and static
2. Separate and ‘other’ – not sharing other values
3. Inferior to the West
4. An aggressive enemy
5. Muslims as manipulative
6. Critical of the West
7. Patriarchy and sexism are implicit to Islam.

(Runnymede Trust 1997)

Taras (2013) has since then added other characteristics of Islamophobia: Muslims as irrational and aggressive; Islamic ideologies as used for political and military agendas (we assume, Taras means predominantly assumed, rather than used at all, which would be an untenable position). Islamophobia for Taras includes an assumption of intolerance towards Western critiques, as then deserving of exclusion and thereby making anti-Muslim hostility natural and normal (Taras 2013). Other examples that have been given of Islamophobic attitudes include not serving halal food in institutional settings (Bloul 2008), and banning of headscarves in school settings (Haque 2004).

In exploring the ambiguous construction of the concept of ‘Islamophobia’ as a problematic and somewhat incoherently defined all-inclusive concept, Lorente (2010: 117) concludes that
it acts as a ‘universal container of social practices and meanings regardless of the contextual conditions upon which those built until present have been based’.

Fleischmann et al. (2011) consider the social repercussions of disaffection among Muslim youth, who are deemed more likely to react towards perceived Islamophobia by constructing a stronger religiously-based identity, which may also be linked to political action, than the reaction of the previous (migrant) generation. The authors articulate that the European mission in consequence must be based on achieving social and political integration for Muslim minority groups. Richards (2013) offers an interesting analysis of the cyclical nature of reaction through an examination of a series of ‘tit-for-tat’ clashes between extremist groups in Britain: Islamist and British supremacist nationalists; duly hypothesising on the symbiotic dynamics of this destruction interplay.

Parenting, youth and counter-terrorism

The overall national picture of a young Muslim population has remained reasonably consistent over the past decade, where 33 per cent of British Muslims are aged 15 years old or under (MCB 2015). This carries important implications in terms of the overlapping factors of potential underprivileged conditions relating to child poverty, inadequate housing and the nature of the community infrastructure. In respect of children other factors such as education form important considerations, whether in relation to mainstream schooling or the new British social policy initiative of Free Schools, enabling faith groups (among others) to set up their own schools for specific purposes.

Parenting in Britain and many other countries of the West is no longer assumed to be a dependable domain of personal expertise. Increasingly that private domain is now viewed as subject to social policy strategies and surveillance by professionals as part of a risk prevention approach (Fathi and Yakak in press). The context of extremism provides the tense backdrop to the issue of parenting and the begetting of normative citizens. The London bombings of 2005 were notably carried out by what was described in the media as ‘four home-grown suicide bombers’ (Campbell and Laville 2005). Chillingly, the Madrid Jihadist bombers of 2004 were also assumed to be successfully socially integrated into Spanish society, albeit in their case Maghrebian migrants (Jordan et al. 2008).

Accordingly, in response to the conversion of a few Britons to violent Islamist causes, the domain of Muslim parenting has come under general scrutiny. This is tacitly subject to the suspicion that such families are insufficiently inculcating the necessary social values and conduct for children to smoothly acquire normative citizen values. Concerns have also been raised in the political and media arena at a perceived lack of a coherent and strongly articulated moderate Muslim voice protesting against Islamist propaganda, implicating the role of imams and where some mosques are viewed as potential sites of radicalisation.

In response to the so-called threat of global terrorism, the ‘Prevent’ strategy is an important plank in CONTEST, the British government’s counter-terrorist strategy. Prevent is aimed at tackling the radicalisation of Muslim youth and works across a wide range of community and statutory provisions. Controversially, British schools and institutions of higher education are required to engage with the Prevent strategy, to identify conspiratorial conversion of young people while promoting ‘British values’, a contested notion in itself and previously considered tacit rather than explicit, but is now defined in a predictable list as including tolerance, democracy, individual liberty and the supremacy of the rule of law (Citizenship Foundation 2015). This strategically organised approach attempts to steer the impressionable minds of young people away from perceived malign, socially disruptive influences, but in so doing adds a heavily
Social work with Muslim communities

... politised policing role to that of educator, which continues to generate deep disquiet within those professions (Parker in press).

In addition to the perceived dangers of an ‘enemy within’, the recruitment of a number of Britons, including the absconding of a few British schoolgirls, to the notorious ISIS cause has created a wave of concerns of the hazards facing disaffected young Muslims. The increasing awareness of ISIS’ very sophisticated and vicious use of social media to recruit as well as advertise its latest atrocities has been noted. The possible infiltration of Jihadists smuggled into Britain camouflaged among groups of legitimate refugees is a perturbing threat to many, however unlikely; escalating public anxiety and serving to obscure the plight of the real victims of ISIS in the Middle East, both Christians and Muslims. It also acts as superb propaganda for such groups and unwittingly plays into their agendas.

Regrettably, therefore, perceived Islamist threats and responses to these threats do not create a particularly auspicious environment to closely scrutinise and challenge counter-terrorist strategies and the potentially damaging consequence of these. Prevent, for example, is in danger of creating a controversial conceptualisation of democratic dissent in citizenry of crude polarised proportions (Parker in press). In so doing, concerns are raised that these strategies may actually be fostering a deepening sense of alienation and grievance in Muslim communities. The latest counter-extremist strategy by the British government is to place the responsibility of policing young people upon their parents, who are now expected to apply to have their child’s passport confiscated by the State, if they are concerned that the minor may abscond to join terrorist groups. Failure to take due precautions will in turn rebound upon such parents as constructed within a discourse of responsible citizenship. However, a sense of proportionality is also required to put the threat of Islamist radicalisation among the British public into proper context, where we learn from that of 2.7 million Muslims in the UK, official estimates are that around 700 individuals have travelled to Syria, which amounts to 0.026 per cent of the self-identifying Muslim population (BBC News 2015).

To bridge a widening gap between vulnerability as a classified criteria for social work intervention and vulnerability as requiring social work support in consequence of State intervention, Surinder Guru’s (2012) illuminating study offers some powerful insights. Here she focuses on the impact of counter-terrorist surveillance on the families of suspected terrorists in the UK, revealing how terrifying the State response can be to families subjected to sudden police raids:

The kids were frightened—crying … screaming. They even wet themselves standing. They were so scared when they saw their father on the floor … Even the older ones urinated themselves because they were so scared. I tried to reassure them that he would be back soon … but I could not stop them crying…

(Guru 2012: 1166)

Guru draws essential connections between the personal and political ramifications bearing down on individual families. In so doing she urges that social workers need to engage with the political sharp-end of these forms of vulnerability and to draw the links between individual circumstances and macro policy enacted at meso-level community intervention (Ashencaen Crabtree 2014).

Gender normativity

In respect of Muslim families, MCB (2015: 68) note that there is a ‘surprisingly high’ number of lone parents with dependent children, standing at 77,000 compared to 260,000 cohabiting couples with such dependents. How far lone parenting constitutes an actual social problem is
highly debatable, and where religious, cultural and politicised opinions will be formative in putting forward a range of social constructions and associated polemics.

Lone parenting is often used as a short-hand for parenting by a majority of lone mothers, which in itself is laden with socio-religio-cultural and political constructions. Ashencaen Crabtree and Husain (2012) argue, however, that the issue of representation of women as the embodiment of culture and religion is a general patriarchal device that seeks to appropriate or reject, but in both cases serves to objectivise and control women as bearers of cultural values. Representations of Muslims are conventionally conveyed by images of Muslim women in enveloping dress, head covering and veil. Macdonald (2006) dismisses this stereotype as serving to metaphorically obscure more important areas of relevant debate. By contrast, Mernissi (1992) disagrees, in viewing dress as a quintessential signifier of social representation of Muslim womanhood, within a socio-historical context (Ashencaen Crabtree and Husain 2012). Zine (2004) asserts that the projected image of the hijab-covered women in itself represents global terrorism, fanaticism and sexist oppression – and indeed one can see such conflict-worn images of idealised Muslim womanhood as intentionally visibly invisible – and thus inevitably an image also adopted by ISIS.

The iconography is complete in Moallem’s (2008) discussion of the symbolised figure of ‘Muslimwoman’ as a site of contested discourses between the ‘imperialist West’ and Islamist groups, replete with the struggle to take ownership of the right to speak on her behalf. It would be easy to construe in consequence that feminism, for want of a better term, has but a very tenuous hold in the Muslim world. While the term ‘feminist’ may resurrect a number of assumed political and identity positions particularly resonant in the Northern hemisphere, Muslim women’s emancipatory struggles for recognition and rights within Islam are to the fore among such activist bodies as Malaysia’s Sisters in Islam. However, similar action groups do not necessarily reject Islam as such but rather seek to deconstruct masculine interpretations of the Holy Qur’an by stripping text back to its original empowering content, uncontaminated by subsequent gender politics (Ashencaen Crabtree and Husain 2012).

Ageing

In consideration of life span issues the elderly minority ethnic population of the UK is increasing, where the majority of such elders are likely to be first generation migrants to the UK. This is also true for the UK’s Muslim elders, whose access to appropriate services may be compromised by English language proficiency, dietary requirements, together with inhibitions concerning receiving care away from the family context. In the Holy Qu’ran can be found numerous injunctions urging filial respect and care of ageing parents:

> Your Lord has enjoined you to worship none but Him, and to show kindness to your parents. If either or both of them attain old age in your dwelling, shown them no sign of impatience, nor rebuke them: but speak to them kind words. Treat them with humility and tenderness and say: “Lord, be merciful to them. They nursed me when I was an infant.”

(‘The Night Journey’, Holy Qur’an: 17)

Guided by these readings many families may well feel conflict regarding acceptance of external help. Additionally, assumption behind the notion that ‘they care for their own’ has been implicated in the failure of social services and other welfare groups to offer sufficient levels of services to ME groups, beyond the issue of potential client groups not opting to become service users (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008).
Gender norms governing social interactions are other important considerations in relation to offering appropriate services, where female- or male-only groups may be viewed as essential, but often run counter to the mixed-sex groups operated in many services. These socio-religious demarcations of gender can also extend to the use of transport to services, preventing some elders from reaching day services from the outset. Yet increased longevity and age-related decline in combination with individual health, cultural and faith-based suggests huge systematic challenges (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2017).

In respect of how old age is constructed in Islam, this provides a portrait that is both unvarnished, stark even, and yet dignified in its stoic acceptance of the inevitable. The Qur’anic verse, ‘Al Asr’ uses the familiar metaphor of old age as constituting the late afternoon of life descending into night. This is no golden time but one where loss is acknowledged as cumulative and inevitable. Al Asr is austerely cast and in so doing rebukes the mythology and pursuit of eternal youth, long associated with the West, as a desperate flight from reality. Decrepitude of body and even of mind is to be expected and it is no dishonour at all to recognise that – in some senses quite the reverse. For the pious Muslim, the ultimate destination and goal of human life is death, where judgement awaits and believers will be admitted to Paradise (Ashencaen Crabtree 2014; Moody 1990).

As described, uneasy tensions gripping British society equally enmesh Muslim migrant elders, particularly those from the Middle East, where both the events of 9/11 and the later London Islamist bombings of 7 July 2005, and resultant social attitudes of Islamophobia, generate a troubling sense of vulnerability and exposure among Muslim communities (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyehm 2010), which bears down across all generations.

Concluding remarks

An expansive area has been traversed in critically examining the current socio-political context surrounding British Muslims as a problematised community within a tense multicultural discourse, which does not implicate other ME British groups to any similar degree. A highly complex and indeed fraught confusion of intertwined positionings requires cautious unravelling and here we return to the useful metaphors pertaining to the known and the unknown, the seen and unseen. It is difficult to imagine any contemporary, and well-established organised religious group to which are attached so many contradictory messages and so much inflamed debate. This can well be viewed as deplorable, where the impact of this legacy is likely to fall heavily on individual families and their immediate ecological network, with much damage done in consequence.

That which remains less seen and thus less known pertains to the Islam of the Abrahamic traditions, a religion fundamentally of peace and tolerance, although this message is increasingly drowned out by the volley of discordant voices competing for dominance. The credibility of this ancient message, however, is greatly undermined by the conflagration of harmful and dangerous messages and discourses emanating from many quarters, projecting destructive images of both Muslims and non-Muslims that contorted and deformed though they are, are received as accurate depictions by the receiver. The right to speak of what Islam is appears to have been wrested and usurped from ordinary Muslim citizens, whose voice requires orchestration and amplification for reasoned exchange in the civil forum of multicultural debate, and by so doing decentralises immoderate and prejudiced voices and thereby destabilises the centrifugal axis of threatened extremist violence.
Note

1 A convention often used as a mark of respect and frequently shortened to (PBUH).

References


