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Religious nurture in British Muslim families: Implications for social work

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Abstract

Some recent commentary on the relevance of religion and spirituality to social work emphasises a liberal Western individualised notion of spirituality, rather than the significance of formal religion. Evidence from sociological research on religious nurture in British Muslim families challenges this emphasis. Sixty Muslim families from diverse backgrounds in one UK city took part in a qualitative study, consisting of interviews with adults and children aged 12 and under; observation of formal learning and oral and photographic diaries. The paper focuses in particular on the importance of religious nurture in Muslim families and parents' views about 'spirituality'.

Introduction

Religious nurture is an important issue for social work with children and families, given that bringing children up within a faith can be of central importance to family life. The specific domain of this paper is religious nurture in British Muslim families. The paper presents some findings from sociological research with Muslim families in one British city and the discussion of these findings is situated within the recent literature on social work, religion and spirituality.

Religion and spirituality in the social work literature

There has been a proliferation of publications within recent decades on the role of religion and spirituality within social work. Amongst this literature, competing definitions for the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' have arisen, with varying understandings of how they may be of significance to service users (Crisp, 2010; Gilligan and Furness, 2010). On the whole, religion tends to be associated with collective traditions and 'spirituality' with flexibility and individualisation. A particularly dominant trend in the social work literature, stemming largely from the United States, advocates a definition of spirituality which is:

> A universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being and profound

> relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality (Canda and Furman, 2010, p.5)

Crisp's (2010, p.8-12) approach similarly proposes a view of spirituality focusing upon the concepts of 'transcendence', 'connectedness', 'identity', 'meaning' and 'transformation.' These liberal understandings of spirituality are said to be of relevance to social work with a variety of groups of service users and to be flexible in contemporary practice. Attempts to construct over-arching definitions are well-meaning and often motivated by a desire to be inclusive. However, it is becoming increasingly noted that we should be cautious in assuming the acceptability of such definitions. Indeed, other professional groups, such as nurses, have already had to critically evaluate their assumptions around the limits and scope of spirituality (Gilliat-Ray, 2003; Pattison, 2001; Walter, 2002). For Wong and Vinsky (2009, p.1349), the discourse of spirituality within such social work texts can be understood to be an innately 'Euro-Christian construct' which may have limited relevance. Gray (2008, p.175) suggests that such a definition of spirituality draws heavily upon modern, Western notions of 'individualism' and the 'New Age'. In light of such an analysis, the utility of this definition of spirituality in international social work becomes questionable.

The suggestion that a 'spirituality- religion binary is a defining characteristic of the literature' where 'religion is theorized as a deeply contradictory social phenomena' in contrast to liberal and encompassing notions of spirituality raises questions about the implications of the spirituality discourse for practice with service users who adhere to more traditional forms of religiosity (Henery, 2003, p.1109). Henery (2003, p.1111) warns quite dramatically that 'rather than redress Western racism, the spirituality project may provide for a new expression of it' because minority ethnic people tend to be in the 'disfavoured half' of the spirituality-religion binary. At the very least, there are dangers of making inappropriate assumptions.

There are some notable exceptions within the literature, including Furness and Gilligan's (2010, p.3) volume, which advocates a 'pragmatic' approach focusing upon the definitions of religion and spirituality offered by service users themselves, rather than offering their own classification. But such approaches seem relatively few and far between in comparison with the predominant discourse within much of the literature.

Holloway and Moss (2010, p.44) propose that when discussing the notion of spirituality 'too heavy an emphasis upon finding the right definition may be counterproductive.' In line with this, we would suggest that the attempts at producing an over-arching and all-inclusive singular definition of spirituality may hinder rather than progress culturally competent social

work. Whilst the intention to find an inclusive notion of spirituality that is flexible enough to work for everyone might be laudable, individualised notions of spirituality are not necessarily as inclusive as they seem if they do not work for people with a strong affiliation to an organised religion which has a body of doctrine and prescribed practice. There is a need to explore the notion of spirituality in greater depth, as it is understood by members of different faith groups, and to consider the implications of this for social work theory and practice.

Social work and Islam

An emerging body of social work literature seeks to focus upon the perspectives of Muslim service users and to suggest adaptations to practice when working with these communities. The earliest texts of significance to social work with Muslims emerged following migration into Britain during the post-war period. Khan (1979) discussed the needs of Mirpuri migrants living in Bradford and Dryden (1982) explored service provision for Bengali communities in Camden. However, the focus in this period was largely centred upon the ethnic identities of migrants, and religious identities were not emphasised. During subsequent decades, the emphasis within social work literature shifted to anti-racism (Dominelli, 1992) and an increasing consciousness of 'black perspectives' within which Muslims were included (Ahmad, 1990).

The needs of Muslim service users during this period can be seen to be subsumed within a wider focus on race and ethnicity and it is only more recently that literature on religion and spirituality has become more prominent. As the British Muslim population grows, there is a need for social work e to recognise the renewed significance of faith identity for Muslim communities and to consider the impact this may have on service provision. Gilliat-Ray (2010, p.262) highlights how 'the religious identity of Muslims in Britain has come to the fore over the past two decades', with the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Rushdie affair in 1989 constituting two particularly conscious-raising moments. The need to consider the needs of Muslim service users is particularly heightened by contemporary levels of socio-economic deprivation experienced by many sectors of Britain's heterogeneous Muslim population. Hussain's (2008, p.182) analysis of the 2001 census notes the 'vicious cycle' experienced by British Muslims where 'poor educational qualifications' lead to 'poor job prospects' and 'unfavourable tenure patterns.' Furthermore, the 2007-8 Survey of English Housing (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009) indicated that Bangladeshi

communities in England, which are very largely Muslim, represented one of the largest ethnic groups accessing social housing.

A small body of literature has focused specifically on social work with Muslims, highlighting their service needs and suggesting how 'Islamic perspectives' may be integrated into practice (Crabtree and Baba, 2001; Barise, 2005; Hodge, 2005; Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Graham *et al.*, 2009). Much of this literature highlights the importance of the family, with Crabtree *et al.* (2008, p.67) suggesting that it is a 'central institution'. Within these publications, consideration is given to issues such as marriage, divorce, gender, and domestic violence (Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Graham *et al.*, 2009), although religious nurture has not been explored in depth. Barise (2005, p.7) suggests that 'the uniquely comprehensive view of spirituality in Islam is significantly different from the dominant viewpoint in mainstream social work.' There is a therefore need to further explore what this 'spirituality' means for contemporary Muslim individuals and the implications of such beliefs for social work.

Overall, relatively little work has been published in this field, and Crabtree *et al.*'s (2008) *Islam and Social Work: Debating Values, Transforming Practice* remains the only book focused on working with Muslim service users. As the authors assert, there is 'a serious dearth of social work texts dedicated to illuminating the needs of Muslim families in social work intervention' (Crabtree *et al.*, 2008, p.4). As such, there is a need to engage more fully with the challenges which diverse, expanding Muslim communities are bringing to contemporary social work and to consider the implications of this for practice and theory. In discussing qualitative data from research involving British Muslim families, this article aims to contribute to these discussions. We do not mean to suggest that Muslims have wholly unique needs with regard to social work but rather that Islam is an example of a formal organised religion which expects its followers to conform to doctrinal, ritual and behavioural prescriptions and this expectation challenges individualised flexible notions of spirituality.

Research methods

The study featured in this paper began with secondary analysis of the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey of England and Wales (see Scourfield *et al.*, 2012). This showed the intergenerational transmission of Islam to be much higher than that of Christianity and also slightly higher than that of other non-Muslim, non-Christian religions, which had to be aggregated into a single category for purposes of statistical analysis. The statistical analysis was a separate element of the research, but its findings informed the qualitative research which followed. In particular, the subsequent qualitative research aimed to understand, with

reference to the sociology of religion and childhood, how it is that the transmission of Islam across generations seems to be relatively successful. The study involved 60 Muslim families living in Cardiff, a city of around 300,000 people in the UK. Cardiff was selected because it has a more well-established and ethnically diverse Muslim population than most of the UK. The main criterion for recruitment to the project was maintaining diversity in terms of ethnicity, social class, Islamic 'school of thought' and density of Muslim population in the area where the family lived. The diversity of the sample is summarised in Table 1, although it should be noted that a thorough discussion of diversity is beyond the scope of the paper (for more detail, see Scourfield *et al*., forthcoming). Families were recruited via primary schools and a wide range of Muslim social networks, with strong support from local Muslim organisations. Multi-lingual flyers were produced, with separate versions for adults and children, but most families were recruited through face-to-face invitation by one of the two Muslim researchers. A general population of Muslim families was sought and most therefore had no experience of social work. This was not a social work research project as such, although the principal investigator is a social work academic.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with adults and children aged 12 and under; oral and photographic diaries kept by some of the children, and discussion of the photographs; and non-participant observation of formal religious education classes run by Islamic organisations. Parents gave formal consent for children's involvement and this was further checked out with the children themselves. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then thoroughly anonymised. Interpreters were offered, but most interviews were conducted in English. A few were conducted in Punjabi or Arabic by the researchers who were fluent in these languages and a couple of mothers chose to use family members or friends as interpreters. A coding framework was developed by the whole research team in order to organise the data set into themes which arose in the interviews and the data were then coded thematically using NVivo 8 software. NVivo coding was undertaken by Asma Khan and Sameh Otri and a sample of this coding was checked for consistency by Jonathan Scourfield. An in-depth discussion of method can be found in Khan *et al.* (in press) and a detailed description of research findings is presented in Scourfield *et al.*, (forthcoming). In what follows we summarise some key themes from the research findings, focusing in particular on the importance of religious nurture and tensions between the concept of 'religion' as collective doctrine and practice and the more individualised notion of 'spirituality'.

Research findings

Islamic nurture: The big picture

Those who identify as Muslim in the UK do not of course constitute a homogenous category (Gilliat-Ray 2010). As Crabtree *et al.* (2008) recognise, there is variation between and even within families: different levels of engagements with religious practice; different emphases in terms of being a 'good Muslim'; different schools of thought; emphasis given to different collective identities. Amongst the families we interviewed, some parents prayed five times a day, with children joining in when present. Some families only prayed in the mosque. There were debates about what is and is not Islamic and a certain amount of negotiation about religious practice, including different views about when children should start to pray. For example, Sahra Adam[1] (aged 11) told us that regular prayer would start on reaching puberty; Muhammad Jawad (aged 6) said he was currently 'practising to pray' and would have to do it all the time when he turned seven; and Asad Rahman (aged 11) told us you have to 'pray and fast and everything' from 15.

Predictably, we see some variation according to school of thought. One example relevant to children is birthdays. Some families would think it wrong to celebrate a birthday as such, although they might think some kind of gathering is acceptable. Others would happily celebrate a birthday. The point of difference between the two rests upon the idea of birthday celebrations as possibly 'innovative' and therefore a deviation from the Islamic path as exemplified by the Prophet.

There is certainly some evidence of individualisation and some negotiation over aspects of practice. Parents were reflexive about their own upbringing, often making distinctions between 'religion' and 'culture', with the latter term referring to backward-looking non-Islamic practices from Muslim countries of origin of the interviewees or their parents. Islam is often seen as something which needs to be 'embraced' rather than being taken for granted, except perhaps by the youngest children. A certain amount of agency is expected in some families. For example, we came across a couple of examples of parents or children explicitly saying interpretation of Islam was something children can choose as they get older. However, when we consider the big picture of Islamic nurture and the ways in which contemporary children are brought up to be Muslims, we would question how useful it is to emphasise individualisation or to exclusively focus on diversity, when what is more striking about

[1] All names are pseudonyms

religious nurture in Muslim families is continuity in regimes of learning; conformity to collective traditions; and fairly conservative belief, if not also practice.

The most striking aspect of Islam in the UK is not really the individual faith decision. Arguably, to emphasise individualisation in Islam is to fail to see the wood for the trees. When we consider religious nurture, more striking is collective practice and continuity of tradition. For example, with few exceptions, the families we spoke to arrange for their children to learn to read the Qur'an in Arabic. The importance of this, even when the children's functional Arabic language may be very limited, is not fundamentally questioned. Some parents choose to send children to Islamic Studies classes, in addition to Qur'anic learning, or may themselves endeavour to explain key beliefs in the language the children best understand, but the importance of reading the Qur'an in Arabic remains (Gent 2011). The religion the children are being taught is therefore fundamentally a traditional Islam. That does not mean there is no diversity amongst the families we have spoken to. But it is important to keep in mind that there is more that unites the families than separates them.

The practice of sending children to religious education classes is almost universal amongst the families in our study, and many Muslim parents see this as an important way of fulfilling their parental responsibilities (Gilliat-Ray 2010). Almost all the parents brought up as Muslims had themselves attended such classes when they were children. The age at which this process begins varies, but some children attend classes from as young as 5 years of age. In many cases this means classes five days a week, typically from 5-7p.m. For the select few who aspire to memorise the Qur'an and become a *hafeez*, the classes will be 4.30-8.30pm six days a week (Gent 2006). This more intense learning is relatively rare , but going to classes at a mosque every evening during the week is a fairly mainstream experience (Gent 2011). Other children have less intensive teaching, perhaps as little as one class a week, but will nonetheless be expected to recite the Qur'an on the basis of thorough teaching. The range of classes attended by the children in our sample includes at least three different kinds. Children attended at least one of these kinds of classes in all but one family with children old enough to attend:

1 Primarily Arabic language tuition, with some Islamic input – these classes would especially be used by the children with at least one Arab parent and may meet only once a week (five of the families in our sample).
2 Learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic, preceded by a basic introduction to the Arabic language. This is the commonest type of class and can take place in a variety of setting. In our sample, children from 27 families attended home-based classes and children in 24 families attended mosque-based classes.

3 Islamic studies classes, which are focused on the main teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith, and typically meet only once a week (eight of the families in our sample).

There is plenty of nuance revealed in our study about how parents and children understand the practice of Islam in the context of their lives in largely non-Muslim, largely secular Cardiff. This understanding does involve negotiation and not simply straightforward acceptance and application of a detailed set of rules. Nonetheless, the 'big picture' is of religious teaching which is more marked by collective practice than by individualisation. There is diversity but the families we have interviewed are arguably more marked by what unites them than what divides them.

The centrality of religious nurture to family life

We see the centrality of religious nurture to Muslim family life in situations where parents have separated. We focus on separation because within this study (which is not a social work research project) it is one of the aspects of family life of most relevance to social work and indeed a couple of the children had encountered social workers. As in the general population, regardless of religion (see Smart *et al.*, 2001), there is a range of different experiences of divorce and post-separation parenting amongst the families in our sample. For example, Mrs Rana told us her ex-husband was abusive and controlling, isolating her from her family. She spoke of the children not enjoying seeing their father but only doing so to fulfil a legal agreement about contact. In contrast, Mr Asaad was very positive about his child's new step-father, a devout *Salafi* who sends all his children to a Muslim school. He highlighted the man's positive influence on his son's learning about Islam.

It should be noted of course that any issue can potentially become a cause for disagreement after divorce and aspects of the moral framework of a child's up-bringing can be debated in any family, regardless of religion. However, there were a couple of examples in our study of where religious nurture seemed to be the main issue of disagreement between biological parents. The Mir family had recently moved from London, following a divorce. The father of the two older boys (aged 8 and 9) was still living in London and their mother had re-married to a man from Cardiff who brought his six-year-old son to live with his new family. In the interview there were fairly open tensions between the boys with different parentage. The two older boys were quite preoccupied with the difference in religious regime in their new family. For example, they said that 'they', that is, their mother and step-father, would not let them do the *isha* prayer (last prayer of the day, late in the evening), as they had done with their father. It was evident from all the interviews with this family (i.e. separate interviews with mother,

stepfather and children) that the older boys' father was more visibly practising than their step-father and that this had become both an issue of disagreement between the adults and also a further justification for the older boys' unhappiness at having moved to Cardiff and being separated from their father.

In another case, the Uddin family, the ten year old son, Fakhir, expressed sadness about his parents' divorce, saying 'because my family is broken I'm heartbroken too'. He did not seem to miss his father, unlike the Mir boys, but clearly the split had been very difficult and he thought he was implicated, saying 'it's because of me that my parents got divorced'. He mentioned disagreements about his 'education' and how Western it should be, which implied that religious nurture was one of the issues at stake (although his mother's account suggested there were also other problems).

As noted above, these cases of difficult divorces are amongst the issues arising in our research which were most likely to come to the attention of social workers. The Mir children had been interviewed by 'child workers'; most likely child and family reporters from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and Fakhir spoke of waiting in a police station, which we took to mean there had probably been an incident of domestic abuse. These family situations emphasise the centrality of religious nurture in Islam and its relevance to social work, in addition to the complexities for practitioners working with Muslim families that are noted in existing social work texts (e.g. Crabtree *et al.*, 2008).

<u>What does 'spirituality' mean to British Muslim parents?</u>

The whole data set for this research project contains interviews with 99 adults and 120 children, but an NVivo text search shows the terms 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' were mentioned by only nine adults (and no children). Of these nine people, one grandfather brought up in Pakistan, Mr Hamid, was referring to Sufi traditions which do involve an explicitly spiritual element. The rest were all parents. Mr Asaad, a black British convert to Islam, used the term in connection with his Christian upbringing. Mr Shirazi used the term 'spiritual leaders' in connection with his home country of Iran. This leaves six parents. Three of these (from two families – Morris and Rasheed) used the term in connection with the alternative school their children attended. One mother, Mrs Morris, born in India but brought up in the UK and married to a white Welsh convert, was enthusiastic about the concept and in fact taught classes on 'spiritual parenting'. For the Rasheed and Morris parents, the term 'spiritual' did have meaning. However we would argue that these three people out of a sample of 99 adults were outliers. The lack of mention of the terms 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' can be

explained by examining interview data from the three remaining parents who did use these terms.

Mrs Adam, a British-born Somali, used the Christian term 'born again' in relation to her decision as a young adult to properly embrace Islam, having been influenced by some Muslim women friends who took her to Regent's Park mosque when she was living in London:

> These sisters, what they were teaching me was better than what my parents taught me and I was going regularly, every week, to *halaqas* and talks and Islamic events and then next thing I'm going into work with my *hijab* on. And there was a lot of things I stopped doing, like not going down to the pub with friends and stuff like that, things like that I used to do with my work colleagues like now I would not do at all. And (…) just stopping things basically that (…) was really forbidden for me to do which totally relegates my Islamic values so as I was learning more, I became more, I would say more spiritual. (Mrs Adam)

Mrs Adam is not talking in this excerpt about a flexible individualised spirituality, but about conformity to religious practices and avoidance of behaviour that is proscribed. Mr Mahmood, a British-born Pakistani, explicitly addressed the relevance of the terms 'spirituality' and 'religion', arguing against any separation. He effectively said that spirituality makes no sense without religion under-pinning it.

> If you're a member of any religion they're not distinct. You can't attain one without the other I think otherwise there's no structure to advance those beliefs or spirituality. What are you going to be spiritual over? I don't know. (Mr Mahmood)

He went on to say, with reference to bringing up Muslim children, that you 'can't teach them to be spiritual', but you can as a parent give children 'a structure' in the form of knowledge about religious background and history so that they will come to see 'its relevance to their life and how they need to conduct themselves'. He clearly took a view that children should be taught the *meaning* of Islamic practices, in contrast to some practice in mosque-based classes where the emphasis is on rote learning of the Qur'an. He thought it was important to go beyond what could be a purely 'physical observance by Muslims' so that children can make informed decisions about morality. But he thought these decisions should be informed by Islam's 'prescriptive rules'. The final parent who used the term 'spiritual' was Mr Miller, a white English convert. He contrasted a 'by the book' Islam with an approach which was more

to do with ‘your relationship with God’ and said that he and his wife favoured a middle way; a ‘spiritual relationship with God but following the rules as well and doing the juggling act’.

Of course it may simply be that the term ‘spirituality’ is not understood by the research participants, or it is not within their vocabulary, but their religiosity could indeed be described as spiritual. We certainly do not mean to suggest that Muslim parents and children have no personal sense of connection to Allah. However, the general picture from the data set is that obedience to the rituals of Islam and appropriate behaviour for a Muslim are what tend to be prioritised. The children in particular spoke about needing to learn the rules of Islam, as illustrated here by Adam:

> Asma: What do they teach and when do they teach you about Islam?
> Adam: They teach me like the right stuff and like good stuff and bad stuff.
> Asma: What’s good stuff and what’s bad stuff? Maybe you can give me an example?
> Adam: Bad stuff is like when you don’t pray and you don’t read the Qur’an and good stuff’s when you read the Qur’an and when you pray.
> (interview with Adam Omar, [11])

The general picture from the data set is that an individualised ‘spirituality’ does not sit easily with Islam. Although some parents born or brought up in the UK saw the value of a personal relationship with God and negotiation about morality, they did not think these could be separated from prescriptions about religious practice and behaviour. The findings add further nuance to Barise’s (2005) intimations, highlighting that Islam’s fundamentally collective body of belief and practice does not easily lend itself to the individualised conception of spirituality which is conjured up by most contemporary use of the term, including the way it is employed within the social work literature.

Implications of the research findings for social work

The most important implication from the research findings summarised above seems to be the need to appreciate the importance of religious obedience in Islam and the centrality of traditional religious nurture within this. The concept of ‘spirituality’, whilst useful perhaps in working with a range of different interpretations of meaning and purpose in diverse populations, is inadequate to explain the significance of Islam to most Muslims. Whilst Barise (2005, p.7) suggests that spirituality for Muslims is ‘uniquely comprehensive’, social workers

should not assume that such a concept will therefore be given primacy by Muslim families when talking about their religious beliefs and practices. There is thus a need for greater awareness of the multiple nuances of such a concept and its vernacular usage amongst Muslim families.

It is important to appreciate diversity and recognise that there is not just one 'Muslim community' but a diverse collection of communities, ethnic backgrounds, schools of thought and individual religious histories (Crabtree *et al.*, 2008). But there is a common core, when it comes to religious nurture –an important tradition of formal supplementary education. The significance of this tradition needs to be borne in mind when working with Muslim children. One example of a relevant social work domain would be the placement of Muslim children with foster carers, who even if not Muslims themselves could nonetheless facilitate the children's involvement in formal religious learning. Digital stories, made as a 'spin-off' from our research and available on-line (http://vimeo.com/channels/learningtobeamuslim) describe in children's own words their experiences of learning to be Muslims, including supplementary education. These are useful tools for social work education. Horwath and Lees (2010) note that practitioners often feel ill-prepared for exploring the significance of religion for parenting and family life. Learning about regimes of religious nurture in at least some faith groups could be an important part of improving this preparation. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, so practitioners should ideally learn some things in more depth and also balance this with caution against any crude generalisations when making assessments of individuals who of course have unique circumstances.

Given that the intergenerational transmission of Islam is relatively strong even in a generally secular UK context (Scourfield *et al.*, 2012) and Muslim families are likely to have a clear monotheistic world view, social workers might need to explore the potential for services being provided from an Islamic perspective. One example of this would be parenting education, which has been found to be very effective but has not seen much cultural adaptation. To combine behaviour management techniques or the strengthening of attachment with messages about parenting from the Qur'an and Hadith would seem to have great potential for supporting Muslim families. This is currently being attempted in the UK via the Family Links 'Islamic Values' version of the Nurturing Programme (see http://familylinks.org.uk/training/nurturing-programme-islamic-values.html). There are examples in some British cities of professional Islamic social welfare organisations being established in recent years, such as the Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre in Glasgow, Sakoon Muslim Counselling Services in London and Manchester, ISSA (Ihsaan Social Support Association) Wales in Cardiff and the well-established An-Nisa Society in

London. Such organisations may also offer talking therapies integrated with Islamic tenets and principles, which authors such as Hodge (2005) suggest may be significant. These third sector social work organisations are likely to be part of the picture in future and their development would seem quite appropriate in responding to the needs of British Muslims. Social workers in the statutory sector might wish to think seriously about referring Muslim service users for support from such organisations. It is recognised that the development of 'the Islamic voluntary sector is still embryonic' and that the services on offer from such organisations may not be able to meet the needs of some Muslim service users (Smith, 2003, p.29) because of diversity within Islam. Ongoing doctoral research by Roz Warden aims to explore the development of these services and the potential contribution which they may make.

To conclude, it is important to note that whilst this paper has discussed research from the UK, there are obvious parallels in other countries, especially in Europe, which have been becoming increasingly secular over time but which also contain minority populations for whom religion (rather than spirituality) is central (Davie, 2000). More generally, it may be that for many social work service users, in an international context, formal religion continues to be central.

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Table 1: Sample description (number of families out of a sample of 60)

Ethnic backgrounds	*Social class (NS-SEC 3-class version)**	*Islamic school of thought (researcher inferred)***	*Density of Muslim population in local area (3.7% is city average)*
20 Pakistani 10 Bangladeshi 5 Indian 5 Somali 9 Middle Eastern 7 Mixed ethnicity couples 4 Others	15 managerial and professional occupations 24 intermediate occupations 18 routine and manual occupations, never worked and long-term unemployed 3 unclassified (students and asylum seekers)	17 Islamic movement 11 Barelwi 10 Salafi 9 Deobandi 4 Shi'a 3 Tablighi Jamaat 1 Sufi 5 not known	23 living in a ward with 10% Muslims or more 18 living in a ward with 4-9% Muslims 19 living in a ward with the city average proportion of Muslims or less

* This relates to the three class version of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (ONS, 2005, p.15). 1 = managerial and professional occupations; 2 = intermediate occupations; 3 = routine and manual occupations, never worked and long-term unemployed; U = unclassified because a current student or asylum seeker (and therefore not allowed to work)
** inferred because most interviewees, although asked about their school of thought, did not categorise themselves as anything other than 'Sunni'.