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Islamic Social Work in the UK: The service user experience

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Abstract

There has been growing interest in religion and spirituality within social work literature. However, little empirical research has explored Islamic welfare organisations and especially their significance for service users. . This article presents findings from an evaluation of a British Islamic social work organisation (ISSA Wales), drawing on qualitative interviews with Muslim service users (n=8) and quantitative findings from the service user database (n=495), a quality of life assessment (n=42) and a satisfaction survey (n=36). In discussing the qualitative findings, religious authority, authenticity, culture, gender, and the role of mosques are considered in analysing why the organisation's services were perceived as beneficial to their Muslim service users. Over three-quarters of those responding to a satisfaction survey reported that the help from the organisation had improved their wellbeing, but quantitative data from assessment and review showed no evidence of either improvement or deterioration in quality of life over time, with the exception of social life where there was a significant improvement. Overall, in exploring the experiences of these service users, the findings highlight the diversity within the category of the 'Muslim service user' and the potential contribution that Islamic social welfare organisations may make in meeting the needs of British Muslims.

Introduction

The diverse and expanding Muslim population in Britain has experienced a wide variety of welfare challenges, from the time of the earliest significant communities in the nineteenth

century until the present day. There has been a notable Muslim population in Britain from the late nineteenth century onwards, when sizeable numbers of Arab and Yemeni seafarers emerged in British port cities such as Liverpool, South Shields and Cardiff (Ansari, 2004,). Subsequent waves of post-war South Asian migration from the 1950s onwards saw the Muslim population expand in cities including London, Birmingham, and Manchester where there was a ready availability of unskilled and semi-skilled labour (Ansari, 2004). A number of studies have highlighted the welfare challenges these early communities faced as well as the internal forms of community support which emerged during these periods to meet welfare needs. Lawless (1995) highlights the emergence of Arab boarding houses in the late nineteenth century for seafarers in areas such as South Shields, which Gilliat-Ray (2010, p.36) notes 'provided a physical, social, religious and economic basis for Muslim seafarers.' Similarly, research by Werbner (1990, p.20) depicts the importance of the 'bachelor housing' system which assisted new Pakistani male migrants in Manchester in the 1950s by providing accommodation and financial assistance upon arrival in Britain.

Charting the growth of community development during the twentieth century, scholars have noted a proliferation of mosque building in Britain from the 1960s onwards when the 'myth of return' began to fade and residency in Britain was increasingly viewed as permanent. Ansari (2004, p.345) notes that 'by the mid-1980s mosques were serving a wide range of functions' for these growing communities including 'funeral services and advice on immigration and social security and counselling services.' This period also saw the emergence of services specifically for Muslim women, such as the An-Nisa Society in 1985 and Muslim Women's Helpline in 1990 (Ansari, 2004). Despite a body of academic work documenting the emergence of such institutions over time, very little empirical and evaluative research has been done exploring these grassroots community welfare initiatives and their potential impact for Muslim service users.

The need to analyse the welfare services available to British Muslims today receives further impetus following the findings of the 2001 census which highlighted that Muslims constituted the most socio-economically deprived faith group in Britain (Hussain, 2008; Analysing the census data, Peach (2005, p.23) comments that the British Muslim population is 'poor, badly housed, poorly educated, suffers high levels of male unemployment' and also has 'a very low female participation rate in the labour market.' Gilliat-Ray (2010, p.127) notes that the census reports Muslims in Britain as experiencing 'the highest rates of ill-health' and 'of disability' in comparison with other faith groups.

Recent decades have seen growing academic interest in the topics of religion and spirituality within Anglophone social work texts, as evidenced by the emergence of publications including Canda and Furman's (1999) *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* and Furness and Gilligan's (2010) *Religion, Belief and Social Work: Making a Difference*. Within this growing genre, Holloway and Moss (2010, p.33) note the challenge of trying to define exactly what the 'broad concept' of spirituality means. Whilst there have been a growing number of texts exploring social work and spirituality, authors including Wong and Vinsky (2009, p.1349) have questioned the notion of spirituality as being a 'Euro-Christian construct,' and there is arguably a need to further explore the perspectives of minority faith communities (Scourfield *et al.*, 2013).

A growing body of contemporary literature, including Barise (2005), Crabtree et al (2008), Hodge (2005), and Graham et al (2008, 2009), has focused specifically on professional social work with Muslim service users and has explored the development of faith-sensitive interventions to meet the needs of Muslims in Britain, the United States and Canada. Barise (2005) offers an 'Islamic Social Work Practice Model' in which he highlights the parallels between certain social work processes and Islamic values and practices. In relation to social work assessments, Barise's (2005) model shows that the process in which a social worker and

service user analyse an individual's problems has an affinity to the Islamic concept of *tafakkur* (thinking).

In addition to this literature, there have also been a number of studies exploring voluntary social work carried out by Muslim communities in Europe. Research by Borell and Gerdner (2011) and Bartels and de Jong (2007) has sought to map out voluntary social work initiatives amongst Muslims within Sweden and Amsterdam respectively. Describing the community services offered by four mosque organisations in Amsterdam, Bartels and de Jong (2007, p.467) explore their 'bridging function' and 'bonding function' in Dutch society. Whilst such studies give us an insight into the roles and activities of social welfare organisations established by Muslims in Europe, there is a paucity of research exploring the views of Muslim individuals who are beneficiaries of these services.

This article presents the findings of a multi-method evaluation of one British Islamic social work organisation, the Ihsaan Social Support Association (ISSA Wales). The establishment of the organisation, located in Cardiff, a diverse and multicultural British city, was proposed by members of the local Muslim community shortly after the Millennium and grew into a third sector organisation by the time the research began in 2010. The organisation has two main funded projects, a mental health project and a prison chaplaincy project. This research in particular focused on analysing the mental health 'Minds at Ease' project given that it was the subject of a commissioned university evaluation (see Methods section below). Services offered by the mental health project include advice and information, Islamic counselling, befriending, mediation, advocacy, Islamic divorces (including *khul*, a divorce initiated by the wife) and *ruqyah* healing, described by the organisation's Director as referring to 'spiritual healing using the Qur'an and Sunnah'. As of August 2011, when an anonymised version of the service user database was analysed by the research team, almost 500 individuals were recorded as having accessed the project's services.

Methods

In 2010, the organisation commissioned an evaluation of their mental health project from Universities with a primary focus on assessing the significance of the project for their service users. The evaluation utilised a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to capture feedback from service users. . The mixed methods design followed what Hammersley (1996) has termed a ‘complementarity’ approach to mixing methods, that is, the different data generation strategies were employed for different, but compatible purposes. The study was given ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee.

The design of an assessment tool to measure service user outcomes was based on the Manchester Brief Assessment Quality of Life (MANSA) (Priebe *et al.*, 1999), which measures overall satisfaction with life and specific life domains on a Likert scale. The MANSA was adapted for the organisation into The Minds at Ease Assessment Tool. In an attempt to respond to some of the challenges of cross-cultural research, the assessment tool was developed collaboratively with ISSA Wales staff. It contained items on service users’ perceptions of their overall quality of life as well as areas such as mental health, spirituality, employment and relationships. The assessment tool was used by the organisation’s staff members with service users at referral stage and at six month review to give an insight into the impact of the organisation’s intervention over time. As of June 2014, 42 individuals had completed the Minds at East Assessment Tool at both initial assessment and review. The data were not normally distributed, so Wilcoxon signed ranks tests were used to compare the ranking at the two time points.

A service user satisfaction survey was also developed by the evaluation team and organisation’s staff. Questionnaires were posted to a sample of 152 service users in June 2011 following an initial pilot. A total of 36 questionnaires were completed, a response rate of

only 23.6%. The covering letter offered service users the option to complete the questionnaire in a community language but all completed questionnaires were in English.

The satisfaction survey also facilitated semi-structured interviews, with service users being asked to leave contact details on their returned questionnaires if willing to participate in a follow-up interview. A total of eight service users were interviewed (of which seven took place via telephone). Procedures were put in place to minimise any potential distress for vulnerable service users. For example, the identity of those service users nominating themselves for interview was checked with the organisation's project manager prior to each interview to ensure that no individuals experiencing acute distress took part (service users were made aware of this). These individuals were also assured that they were under no compulsion to take part and that choosing not to participate would not affect services received. Post-interview, service users were also given an information sheet with contact details of a range of other relevant organisations offering support. The qualitative interview data were coded in NVivo 10 software to identify key themes. The qualitative data were analysed by the research team and although a draft report was discussed with ISSA staff, neither they nor service users were involved in the process of analysis.

An anonymised database of the organisation's service users (consisting of current cases, closed cases and those awaiting allocation) was analysed in SPSS 20 to map the demographic profile of the service users and uncover any association between variables such as ethnicity, age, languages spoken, sources of and reasons for referral, and services accessed. After importing the dataset from Microsoft Excel to SPSS, the data was cleaned and re-coded to produce descriptive and inferential statistics (using a Pearson's chi-square test for the analysis of categorical data).

Overview of the service user population

The analysis of the service user database (n=495) revealed the diversity of the organisation's service users, with a total of 31 different languages being spoken by the service users who identified with a total of 39 different ethnic identities. The largest ethnic group of service users recorded was Pakistani (30.9%, n=153), followed secondly by Bangladeshi (13.3%, n=66). Although almost half (47.8%, n=237) of the service users were recorded as being of Asian ethnicity, there were also notable numbers of Arab (5.3%, n=26), Somali (3.8%, n=19) and Sudanese (3.6%, n=18) service users. This profile differs slightly to the overall profile of the British Muslim population of which approximately three-quarters are of Asian ethnicity (Gilliat-Ray, 2010).

Service users were recorded as speaking 31 different languages, with almost three-quarters (71.5%, n=354) of them recorded as being able to speak English. The other three most frequently spoken languages were Urdu (21.6%, n=107), Arabic (16.4%, n=81) and Bengali (9.3%, n=46). Other languages spoken included Bargo, British Sign Language, Hinko, Sarani, Slovakian and Swahili. The majority of the service users (82.2%, n=407) were listed as following Islam and for a further 17.2% (n=85) of service users' religious affiliation was not listed in the database. The largest age group of service users was aged 25-39 (37.4%, n=185). Data on gender were not available in the anonymised database of service users and could therefore not be included in any cross-tabulations. However, a gender profile emerged from a smaller sample of current service users only at a different point in the evaluation. The majority of the organisation's service users were recorded as being female (72%, n=172).

The four most popular services accessed at the organisation were advice and information (38%, n=188), counselling (27.7%, n=137), advocacy (18.6%, n=92) and Islamic divorces

including *khul* (17.2%, n=85). In terms of reasons for referral, almost one-third of service users were referred due to issues surrounding marriage or divorce (29.1%, n=144). Other frequent reasons for referral included family and parenting problems (11.3%, n=56) and issues of serious mental health (10.1%, n=50). Over a quarter of referrals were self-referrals (25.3%, n=125) and a similar number were by family/friends (24.4%, n=120). Less than 10 per cent (9.5%, n=47) of referrals were from statutory services.

After running the Pearson's chi-square test in SPSS, there were nine statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) out of 41 tests. These included higher numbers of referrals from statutory sources of individuals aged 0-24 and 56+ and individuals of Arab and Bangladeshi ethnicity. There were also higher numbers of statutory referrals due to serious mental health problems but lower numbers for reasons relating to Islamic guidance and marriage/divorce (arguably to be expected given the remit of statutory providers).

In terms of reason for referral alongside age, there were higher numbers of referrals of individuals aged 0-24 due to serious mental health problems and of individuals aged 25-39 due to marriage/divorce. However, there were lower numbers of referrals for individuals aged 25-39 for reasons linked to advocacy and aged 56+ for marriage/divorce

In relation to the counselling service, the results showed lower than expected levels of usage by Bangladeshis or Bengali speakers but higher usage by individuals aged 0-24. Higher than expected number of individuals aged 56+ were accessing the advocacy service but it was accessed by lower numbers of English speaking service users..

The qualitative interview data explored below add further insight into why some of these results were significant, particularly for young Arab service users accessing the counselling service.

Quality of life and satisfaction with services

Comparison of the Minds at Ease Assessment Tool data at initial assessment and review shows no significant evidence of change in any of the quality of life domains, except for social life, where the improvement at review stage is significant at the 0.01 level. The results of the Wilcoxon signed ranks tests can be seen in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Lack of improvement in quality of life in almost all domains is disappointing for the agency but an optimistic interpretation could be that there was also no evidence of deterioration, possibly meaning that ISSA Wales support had a role in preventing difficulties from getting any worse.

Of the 36 responses to the satisfaction survey, equal numbers of questionnaires were returned by male and female service users. Over half of respondents (52.7%, n=19) were aged 25-39 and over half were of South Asian (Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian) ethnicity (60.9%, n=22). Of those respondents who indicated which service they received, 17 individuals had accessed the counselling service, five individuals received *khul* divorces and five individuals selected 'other' (which included receiving 'information on prayer times', 'landlord mediation' and a 'consultation meeting with Director.'). The remainder had accessed the advocacy, *ruqyah*, mediation and befriending services.

One of the key questions on the survey asked respondents '*Do you feel that the help from ISSA Wales has improved your well-being?*' Over three-quarters (78.2%, n=28) of respondents either 'agreed strongly' or 'agreed' that the help from the organisation had improved their wellbeing. Of those who selected 'disagree strongly', two respondents noted that this was due to having little contact with the organisation.

To try and ascertain which elements of the service may have been beneficial to the service users, one of the survey questions asked ‘*What, if anything, did you find helpful about ISSA Wales?*’ Service users had the option to tick both pre-existing categories on the questionnaire or to leave extra written comments.

Nineteen individuals, over half of the survey respondents, felt that confidentiality had been helpful for them. Responses also showed the importance for service users of their culture being understood and being able to talk about religion. Relatively low numbers of respondents selected being able to talk in their mother tongue as being important but this is arguably in part due to the survey being completed by English-speaking service users.

Insert Table 2 about here

Additional feedback left on the questionnaires in relation to the counselling service is discussed below alongside the qualitative interview feedback.

Qualitative Feedback

Eight service users who responded to the satisfaction survey agreed to follow-up interviews to further discuss their experiences. Half of the interviewees had accessed the counselling service, one had used the advocacy service, one had obtained a *khul* divorce, one had received *ruqyah* healing and one had utilised the information service (to access information about prayer times). One interview focusing on the counselling service took place with the foster carer of an asylum seeking service user (who was aged under 18) and another interviewee had attended counselling sessions with his wife due to his her serious mental illness. The service user who recounted experiences of the *khul* service participated in a telephone interview with her support worker.

A range of cross-cutting themes emerged from the discussions which underpinned the respondents' levels of satisfaction with the counselling, *khul*, advocacy and *ruqyah* services which are discussed in turn.

Counselling

Interviews focusing on the counselling service highlighted the importance placed by service users on the religious identity and knowledge of the counsellor, suggesting the need for an Islamic counsellor to be denominationally-neutral and non-proselytizing. Comparisons were also drawn with other institutions within the Muslim community to highlight why services from ISSA Wales were felt to be beneficial.

The importance of an Islamic counsellor being religiously knowledgeable was highlighted by a young South Asian woman when describing her satisfaction with the service:

“I was really impressed with the fact that when I was given the evidence that it was always backed up... It was always backed up with evidence from the Qur’an and Sunnah.”

This was shared by another young South Asian woman, commenting that:

“He [the counsellor] will give you examples of different schools of thought, OK this group of people say this and this group of people say that, this is stronger, this is weaker, you know.”

The importance of an Islamic counsellor having a broad religious knowledge and being able to offer sound, authentic advice from a range of different Islamic schools of thought was highlighted by these young women as underpinning their perceived satisfaction with the service.

During an interview with the foster carer of a young Arab asylum seeker experiencing depression, the religious identity of the counsellor was also highlighted as significant, despite

the fact that the asylum seeker had not sought Islamic advice. The foster carer explained how the counselling sessions explored the asylum seeker's social life, diet and exercise and how the counsellor:

"...said very similar things to the GP but I'm not sure that because it came from a British White doctor it maybe wasn't take on board"

Although this young person was not primarily looking for Islamic guidance, the religious identity and attributes of the counsellor were nonetheless perceived to be important for this individual in accessing what was felt to be a relevant service. The foster carer explained that during the sessions:

"We did speak about religion, you know, [the counsellor] did ask whether [client] was attending the mosque and [client] said no... And that was fine. I didn't feel there was any pressure on [client] or any guilt."

The importance of an Islamic counsellor having a non-judgemental and non-proselytizing approach was shared by several of the counselling clients. As one of the young South Asian women commented:

"She [the counsellor] gave me a few options and then it's up to me to choose what I wanted to do"

Although the experiences described by these interviewees praised the balance which they felt their counsellors had achieved, one young South Asian woman (who did not take part in an interview) gave written feedback on her questionnaire stating that:

“The counselling service was somewhat helpful. I received spiritual/religious guidance but I would not relate when it was drummed down to me to pray namaz as the answer to everything”

Namaz is a term for ritual prayer. Such feedback highlights the importance of a non-proselytizing approach and also indicates the careful balance required when imparting religious advice or guidance during a counselling session in order to achieve it.

In contrasting their experiences of seeking help from ISSA Wales in comparison with other Muslim community institutions, one of the young South Asian women explained how:

“I went to different imams and things and they often gave a more cultural perspective on a certain topic”

Similarly, the other young South Asian woman explained that in her view *“We need one Muslim organisation; we don’t need a cultural organisation”*. Such a religion-culture dichotomy as presented by these individuals has also been highlighted in research by Jacobson (1997). Jacobson’s (1997, p.240, 243) research with young British Pakistanis explored how they made a ‘religion-ethnic cultural distinction’ and attempted ‘to establish greater orthodoxy in their beliefs and practices by purifying Islam of its cultural accretions.’ The comments by these interviewees here indicate how such perceptions may impact upon the social welfare services which young British Muslims choose to access.

Despite these comments seemingly dismissing the importance of a culturally-orientated service, one older South Asian migrant who had accessed the counselling service with his wife described his perception of why the service was significant as being partly due to *“the*

Islamic culture”. He refers to *Hadith* which is the collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad:

“There was a lot of confidentiality, there were parts of religion, there were parts of Hadith... So you can’t just say there was one specific thing, that it was the Islamic culture or the Islamic Hadith which helped us. It was the combination of many things.”

Furthermore, 52.7% of satisfaction survey respondents indicated the importance of cultural understanding.

Overall, these comments highlight a range of factors which underpinned the service users’ satisfaction with the counselling service. They highlight that an organisation which advocates a non-sectarian Islamic approach, can offer non-proselytizing, non-judgemental and denominationally-neutral support and may be felt to be more relevant than other institutions within the Muslim community for some individuals seeking assistance, particularly for younger, diverse British-born generations.

Contemporary research has noted not only ‘the plethora of comment, claim and competing interpretation’ about Islam which is ‘available nowadays at the click of a mouse’ but also the desire of some younger generations to practise an Islam free from the perceived cultural traditions of older generations (Mukadam et al, 2010, p.18;) The ability of a British Islamic social work organisation to engage with these issues of religious authority, authenticity and diversity appears to be intrinsically linked to several of the service users’ levels of satisfaction with the organisation’s services.

Khul

When discussing the experiences of one *khul* service user during a telephone interview with her and her refuge support worker, comparisons were again drawn between ISSA Wales and the services offered by certain mosques. In particular, the support worker praised the organisation's attitude towards domestic abuse as a legitimate grounds for a Muslim woman to initiate divorce proceedings. Recounting her perception of certain mosques, the support worker described how:

“They tend to favour men and say “oh no you must go back” ... but it's not the man's right to put his hands on his wife... they tend to twist what the law, Shari'ah law, says. Women are allowed to get divorced from their husbands...”

Whereas the support worker felt that other community institutions including some mosques *“disregard the emotional, the mental, the financial, the sexual abuse”*, she was satisfied that ISSA Wales *“took all that on board.”*

In similar fashion to some of the counselling clients, the Islamic approach of ISSA Wales was dichotomised with the cultural approach of other community institutions:

“They forget it's culture and they turn it into religion... When you look at the true Islamic way women do have rights, it's their cultural interpretation but they say it's religion when it's not.”

From a practical perspective, this service user was also satisfied that she had been able to obtain a free *khul* divorce from the organisation as she was currently living on benefits in a women's refuge.

To contextualise these experiences, Ali (2003) notes the varying approaches of different Islamic law schools regarding the grounds when a *khul* is permissible (which can include

impotency, leprosy, cruelty) which arguably in part explain the support worker's experiences of different community institutions and their varying approaches to *khul*. Research by Bano (2007, p.53) of Pakistani women's experience in accessing *Shariah* councils also showed that they 'often had to struggle against the prevalence of conservative attitudes endemic within such bodies' and she also noted women being encouraged to reconcile with abusive spouses.

The potential significance of ISSA Wales's free *khul* service is also evident in Ahmad's (2013, p.14) comment that "the Muslim voluntary sector and Muslim women's organisations, already poorly resourced, provide vital services supporting women through access to 'female-friendly' *Shari'ah* councils in order to obtain an Islamic divorce, or by providing faith-based counselling."

Advocacy

ISSA Wales offers advocacy support on a range of issues including tenancy and housing, immigration and asylum, benefits and employment. An interview took place with one service user whose children had been placed with non-Muslim foster carers following his divorce which he felt was contrary to *Shariah* law. As he commented:

"In Shariah it's not allowed to keep the kids away. This organisation or any other organisation should fight for the right of the Muslims."

The service user had accessed the organisation's advocacy service with the hope that they would support him in the ongoing dispute and act as an intermediary between him and the local authority. Although the organisation had written a letter to the local authority advising them about issues on provision of foster care for Muslim children, they had also told the service user that he had to abide by the local authority's decision. As a result, the service user expressed his dissatisfaction with ISSA Wales:

“They have to give the priority for the ethos and the doctrine of Islam, which we call in other words Shariah”

This particular service user was dissatisfied due to the perception that British law was being placed above Islamic law. Such a situation is further complicated by the fact that, as with the *khul* service, there is a variation in Islamic thought about child custody (*hizanat*) within Sunni Islam, as Syed (2004) notes. Such an experience highlights the possible tension that such Islamic organisations may face as intermediaries between Muslim service users and other statutory sector bodies, with the challenge of providing a service which is appropriate to both parties. Such situations also highlight the lack of available foster parents from minority backgrounds which Crabtree et al (2008) note.

Ruqyah Healing

An interview took place with a service user who had accessed the *ruqyah* healing service alongside his wife as they were experiencing fertility problems. In describing what this service involved, he explained how the staff member:

“Told us certain things to read at various times of the day, various prayers and things and he actually read them for us as well.”

When asked why he and his wife had chosen to access the service, alongside statutory healthcare treatment, he described how it was “*complementary*” as:

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive so we felt that it’s worth trying this as well.”

In describing his satisfaction with the service, there was again a focus on feeling that the religious advice and support given was “*authentic*.” In similar fashion to the other young South Asian service users who accessed the counselling services, he noted that “*it wasn’t really a factor, the culture*.” Such co-usage of medical services as well as treatment involving religious or spiritual healing practices has also been noted in studies of British Muslim Bangladeshi populations by Dein et al (2008) and Rozario (2009). The experiences of this service user indicate that it should not be assumed that individuals accessing faith-sensitive social work services are using them exclusively in isolation from mainstream health and social care services.

Discussion and conclusions

The evaluation of ISSA Wales gives an insight into the perceived benefits that such an organisation may have for Muslim service users. Despite a relatively low number of service users participating in the evaluation, the data nonetheless highlight a range of factors which service users indicated were important in receiving a service which met their needs. A range of themes emerged in the data which underpinned levels of satisfaction, including the religious authority and knowledge of staff, a non-proselytizing and non-judgemental service, a culturally sensitive approach and also the importance of services being free of charge and confidential. As such, it is difficult to pin-point one specific ‘faith-factor’ which underpinned service users’ positive experiences with the organisation (Von Furstenberg, 2006, p.39).

The findings of the assessment tool showed no evidence of improvement or deterioration over time, except in relation to social life. This one area of improvement is encouraging for ISSA Wales, as social support is central, appearing in the organisation’s name. However, it might be expected that there would also be improvement in other domains, such as mental health. The user satisfaction survey showed a different picture, with 78% of respondents

reporting that help from the organisation had improved their well-being. The assessment tool did not specifically ask about well-being, although the question about overall life satisfaction covers similar territory. It is possible that there was response bias in the user satisfaction survey, as more satisfied people may have been more likely to take part, whereas the assessment tool should have reached a representative sample of service users. It is not uncommon for evaluations to find that an intervention which is highly acceptable to service users nonetheless does not result in the intended outcomes (see, for example, Barnes *et al.* 2011; Robling *et al.*, 2015). The fact that there was no evidence of change in social relationships might suggest that the quantity of social life improved, rather than the quality of relationships. This might nonetheless be important, however, if the amount of social capital available to an individual is a factor in improving mental health. The evidence on social capital and mental health shows that this is complex terrain, with social capital being potentially both an asset and a liability (Almedom, 2005). It would be important to test change over time in a larger sample of service users, as it can be difficult to observe change in a sample of 42. Furthermore it would be useful to compare ISSA Wales service users with similar people who did not receive their services, via an experimental or quasi-experimental study.

The analysis of the service user database and the qualitative findings give some insight into particular sub groups who may benefit from the organisation's services. In particular, the data suggest that such services may be beneficial for young Muslim individuals looking for an authentically Islamic counselling service, for Muslim asylum seekers, and for Muslim women experiencing domestic violence or seeking a religious divorce. The need to consider services for Muslim women in particular has been highlighted in research by Chew-Graham *et al* (2001) who noted that social factors such as racism, poverty and domestic violence may contribute to higher rates of depression amongst South Asian women. Similarly, Ahmad and

Sheriff's (2001, p.8) research on the Muslim Women's Helpline argued that 'the fact that women themselves choose to seek support from an Islamically defined organisation instead of one that is ethnically focused suggested that a need for this form of service exists.'

This paper has been all about social work, as ISSA Wales sees itself as a social work agency. It was originally founded under the name 'Islamic Social Services Association', referencing the primary organisation providing statutory social work in England and Wales from the late 1960s to the 2000s and this was only changed to 'social support' after some concern that the title may lead to confusion with statutory services. In keeping with the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), the organisation is in the business of addressing life challenges and enhancing wellbeing, promoting social change and social cohesion, especially for religious and ethnic minority populations. In the UK, 'social work' is sometimes thought to refer more narrowly to mainstream statutory social work services, however, and to practitioners who have the protected title 'social worker'. The work of ISSA Wales also has implications for these practitioners. Faith-based organisations potentially represent a useful avenue of support for some Muslim service users who require referral to specialist services. However, the service user database analysis showed that less than 10% of the organisation's referrals were from statutory sources, indicating that work may need to be done in continuing to build the profile of these organisations. The situation of one particular advocacy service user, as noted above, also highlights a challenge for Islamic social work organisations in being situated as intermediary bodies between diverse Muslim communities and statutory organisations, with a need to provide services which meet the requirements of both.

For service users with a strong theistic world view, wherein everything is interpreted through a religious lens, faith-based services should be seriously considered, however. Scourfield *et al.* (2013) have argued, on the basis of research with Muslim families that services such as parenting programmes could be provided from an explicitly faith-based perspective. A recent

example of an Islamic adaptation of a parenting programme is described by Scourfield and Nasiruddin (2015). Faith-based services will not suit all Muslim service users of course. Of paramount importance is for all social workers to conduct a thorough assessment of service users' religious and spiritual needs, with recognition that Muslim identity is 'a fluid concept' (Crabtree et al., 2008, p.61). Furness and Gilligan (2010) provide a useful conceptual model encompassing the core aspects needed to achieve practice which is sensitive to religion and spirituality.

This paper represents one of the first empirical studies of Islamic social work in the UK. Whilst this research suggests a number of important themes, there is a need for further research to explore the bigger picture of Muslim service user experiences and outcomes, given the heterogeneity of British Muslim communities. It is also interesting to note that despite a growing focus on the topic of spirituality within current social work literature, there was little reference made to the notion of spirituality by Muslim service users here in recounting their levels of satisfaction and spiritual well-being did not change as a result of receiving ISSA Wales services. This apparent lack of emphasis on spirituality might reflect the term's Christian origins. Although the assessment tool was developed in collaboration with ISSA Wales staff, the item on spirituality may not in fact have been culturally attuned to the organisation's service users. It may also reflect that for ordinary British Muslims, it is obedience to a body of doctrine, including behavioural prescriptions, that predominates in their practice of Islam, as noted by Scourfield *et al.* (2013). Future studies could explore the importance of spirituality for Muslim service users in greater depth in the context of social welfare services. There is also a need to explore the work of other similar organisations and to 'map what Muslim voluntary organisations exist and what they are already doing' in order to develop a broader understanding of the numbers of British Muslims currently utilising such services (An-Nisa Society and Radical Middle Way, 2012, p.22).

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Table 1: Results of initial and review assessment using the Minds at Ease Assessment Tool. Wilcoxon signed ranks test

Outcome (self-report)	N	Initial assessment mean (sd)ⁱ	6-month review mean (sd)ⁱ	Zⁱⁱ	p
Overall life satisfaction	41	3.85 (2.04)	3.98 (2.07)	-0.05	0.96
Health	42	4.52 (1.73)	4.55 (1.74)	-0.02	0.99
Mental health	42	3.95 (1.91)	4.11 (1.96)	-0.51	0.61
Spirituality	41	4.39 (1.91)	4.43 (2.00)	-0.61	0.54
Close relationships	42	4.40 (2.21)	4.57 (2.17)	-1.41	0.16
Social relationships	42	4.71 (1.95)	4.74 (1.89)	-0.43	0.67
Professional relationships	41	4.70 (2.12)	4.76 (2.14)	-0.45	0.65
Social life	42	3.88 (2.06)	4.12 (2.07)	-2.45	0.01**
Living arrangements	42	4.71 (2.10)	4.69 (2.04)	0.03	0.98
Living circumstances	42	5.10 (1.90)	5.17 (1.89)	-0.80	0.43
Employment	41	3.66 (2.04)	3.68 (2.09)	0.80	0.43

ⁱ 1-10 scale, with 10 as high

ⁱⁱ Wilcoxon signed ranks test

** significant at 0.01 level

Table 2: Aspects of ISSA which service users found helpful

Category	N and % of respondents	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
"I could talk in my mother tongue"	6	16.6
"I could talk about my religion"	19	52.7
"I received religious guidance"	17	47.2
"They understood my culture"	19	52.7
"The service was confidential"	20	56.5
"The service was not helpful"	2	5.5
"Other"	9	25.0
Question left blank	2	5.5