

British Muslims' Experiences of Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

For British Muslims, participation in interfaith dialogue has become increasingly popular, a trend that has similarly occurred in other 'Western nations' where Muslims constitute a minority group. This is due to numerous factors but one motivating dynamic appears to be interfaith being seen as a means of countering negative stereotypes currently being constructed and reproduced through mass media and political discourses. This research looks to shed light on the relatively undocumented experiences of British Muslims who participate in interfaith. These experiences will be explored by focusing on three important concepts surrounding interfaith dialogue; its impact on identity, the construction of a sense of community and its effects on attitudes that are held with regards to the Other.

Through conducting and analysing five semi-structured interviews with British Muslims who have a large amount of experience in engaging in interfaith dialogue I find the experiences surrounding the three above concepts are generally positive ones. In contrast to some arguments, Muslim identity is, in fact, strengthened whilst role identities associated with participating in interfaith and outreach work are perpetuated and confirmed providing the opportunity to improve self-esteem. At the same time, the creation of symbolic communities occur based on common religious perceptions, particularly associated with achieving social justice and carrying out work from a faith perspective. Through participation in interfaith dialogue, mutual aid or self help groups also create a form of community allowing people of faith to support each other, particularly pertinent for Muslims who find themselves under intense public scrutiny, often resulting in experiences of Islamophobia. Finally, this research provides an insight into the process through which the view of the Other is altered, finding that intimate contact aids in countering stereotypes surrounding particular groups whilst the position of the Other can be re-categorised through similarities in beliefs and shared goals being found through interfaith dialogue.

Chapter One: Introduction

Interfaith dialogue has become increasingly prominent in Britain with 'forty-three percent of interfaith bodies in the United Kingdom set up between 2000 and 2003' (UK Interfaith Network 2003). However, interfaith dialogue is by no means a recent tradition and 'at various times in history, in various diverse contexts, people of various religions have engaged in interreligious exchanges' (Ramadan 2004, p. 200). Interfaith dialogue has an important history, providing the opportunity to 'understand one another better' and encouraging people of different faiths 'to work together on shared endeavours' and it continues to be a tradition of great significance in the 21st century. As Prideaux (2009) has noted, interfaith dialogue can come in various forms and has been subject to changes and developments both at a local, national and international level. There is however, some debate regarding the most useful and appropriate forms of interfaith dialogue. Those such as Laing (2012) and Cheetham (2010) believe theological dialogue can forge good relationships between participants whilst helping to create 'appreciation' for the 'Other'. Conversely, some believe that this form of dialogue is problematic (Prideux 2009) and promote what has been termed by the Roman Catholic Church as Dialogue of Life or Dialogue of Action (Balmer 2005, p. 9)

Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue in Britain, at a more official level at least, began in 1973 when several institutions 'joined hands and sponsored a tripartite dialogue at Linton, Wetherby in the North of England titled 'Islam in the Parish' (Siddiqi 2010, p. 239). Participation from British Muslims was perceived as relatively limited, at least until recent years, and it has been argued that they have 'not sufficiently equipped themselves with exploring the situation in which they find themselves in', a multi-religious and multi-cultural context within a dominant secular environment, whilst it does not seem 'that interfaith dialogue is a theological priority for Muslims in Britain (Ibid, p. 250). British Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue increased exponentially, however, in the last decade of the twentieth century 'as Muslim communities were frequently at the centre of crisis events in the late 1980's and early 1990's' including the Satanic Verses controversy and the first Gulf War, as well as a rise in Islamophobia 'fermented by divisive discourses emanating from state actors and the media' (Halafoff 2011, p. 455). As a result of these factors, 'Muslim

communities became proactive in countering negative stereotypes', often through 'multi-faith activities' and 'new alliances were formed between Christians, Muslims and Jews' (Ibid, p. 455).

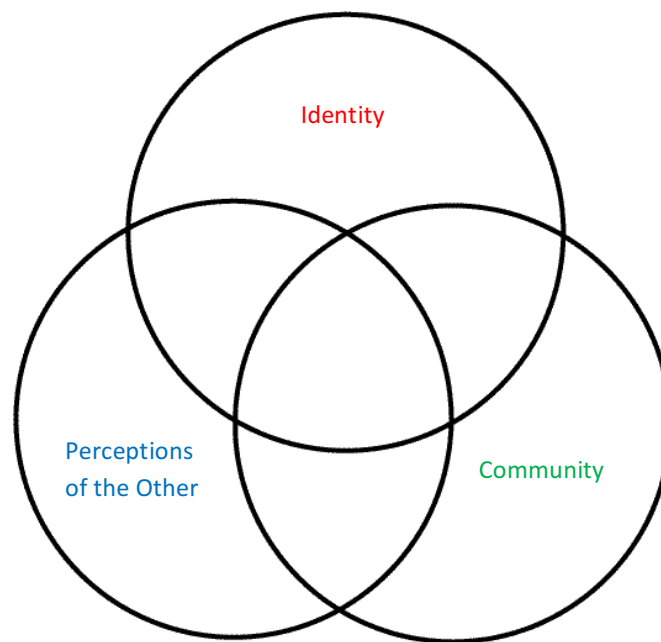
In terms of assessing the experiences of British Muslims who participate in interfaith dialogue, I have narrowed this study to focus on the three important concepts of identity, community and Othering or Otherness. The research questions are thus:

- What impact does participation in interfaith dialogue have on identity for British Muslims?
- In what ways does interfaith dialogue create a sense of community?
- How does interfaith dialogue influence the ways in which the Other is viewed?

Firstly there is evidence to suggest interfaith dialogue can have an impact on an individual's identity. Rachel Reedjik (2010, p. 4) concluded that despite concerns about 'Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue', that 'are fed by the assumption that one cannot simultaneously stand behind one's own faith community and spend one's precious time with other religions' or 'cherish one's identity and let one be inspired by alien practices', continuity and change could in fact occur simultaneously. Reedjik (2010) found that interfaith dialogue, in many cases, increases an individual's religious identity and strengthens the bond they 'feel with their religious roots' (p. 316). Certainly, Waardenburg (2000) highlights that if the 'decisive shaping of identity takes place in interaction with other people' then the 'occurrence of encounters, co-operation and dialogue between Christians and Muslims unavoidably involves change and development' in identities (p. 161). It can be stated therefore, that 'no religion is immobile and no identity is without change' (Ibid, p. 162). Associated with the effect that interfaith dialogue is likely to have on identity construction, it may also be that participating in dialogue can influence perceptions of the 'Other'. The importance of 'discussing' and 'valuing' the 'Otherness of the Other' (Siddiqi 2006) is often seen as one of the main aims of interfaith dialogue though the experiences of prejudice reduction and its processes have perhaps generally been assumed. Community is another important concept in which to study experiences of British Muslims and participation in interfaith dialogue and work. This is largely due to ideas of interest, attachment and locality – all important notions related to concepts of community, and similarly associated with

interfaith dialogue. Likewise to identity and perceptions of the Other, the importance of 'similarity and difference' and the 'relational idea' associated with community, is likely to be of relevance when studying experiences of interfaith dialogue (Cohen 1985, p. 12).

It should be made clear however, that these concepts are unlikely to be continuously distinct from each other and there is expected to be overlap as shown by the Venn diagram below:



This overlap is likely to occur largely due to importance of the Other or an out-group within these three concepts (Allport 1954; Tajfel 1978; Cohen 1985). Each concept may also have some degree of influence upon each other. A change in identity or creation of community may alter how the Other is perceived, for instance if one begins to relate to a larger religious identity, this would likely improve the view of the Other. Another example of this dynamic influence is the claim that individuals make community a referent of their identity (Cohen 1985, p. 118). I will later return to this point regarding connections between the concepts, but it is important to highlight that this idea is frequently referred back to throughout this research.

Through data gathered from interviews with British Muslims who have considerable experience engaging in interfaith dialogue, and an exploration and assessment of the

relevant theoretical literature, the effect that dialogue can have on these three concepts is to be considered. There is a rationale and relevance for this research as participation in interfaith dialogue is a more recent, but rapidly increasing and relevant phenomenon for British Muslims, but also because little qualitative research has been carried out on the subject. The findings from this research have the potential to hold significant value for a number of reasons. Firstly, a study of Muslim experiences may negate claims made by groups such as the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain that interfaith dialogue 'becomes a tool through which the religious rights of one group, Muslims, are slowly eroded away' whilst 'undermining Muslims' much needed sense of collective identity' (Hopkins and Hopkins 2006, p. 258). It may also challenge certain worries held by some British Muslims that interfaith dialogues may have missionary tendencies, particularly from Christian groups (Prideaux 2009). Similarly, this research may also uncover important information with regards to the positive impacts participation in interfaith dialogue and work can have upon identity and the formation of a sense of community. Finally, this research may provide an insight into the processes improving the perception of the Other, having established that contact, in this case through interfaith dialogue and work, in general, improves the way in which the Other is viewed.

In terms of the structure of this dissertation, a review of the relevant literature associated with this project will follow the introduction. It will examine the literature regarding interfaith dialogue in general, its variations and its history in the UK, before discussing the scholarly work conducted on British Muslims and interfaith dialogue. Literature concerning identity construction and interfaith dialogue will be highlighted, as will a wider review of theories of identity, Otherness and community. This last section of the literature review will therefore show the relation and importance of these concepts to interfaith dialogue. Following this, the methodology of the study will be highlighted and discussed. This will firstly consider the decision for a qualitative based study, and then move to assess the relevance of using interviewing as a method for data collection as well as the potential associated shortcomings. A discussion of ethics associated with this research will then follow and the importance of reflexivity throughout the research. The analytical methods will finally be presented, which focus largely on the constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2008). The three chapters following this are directly devoted to

the research and constitute the findings from the interviews conducted. Chapter four discusses the impact that interfaith dialogue and work can have on the identity of British Muslims. The fifth chapter focuses on the creation of community through participation in interfaith whilst highlighting the practical benefits participation can have for British Muslims. The final findings chapter will focus on how perceptions of the Other shift and develop through interfaith dialogue. These findings will be brought together more thoroughly and their implications assessed in the discussions section.

Chapter Two: British Muslims and Interfaith Dialogue in the Literature

This chapter will provide an overview of the relevant literature related to British Muslims and interfaith dialogue. As mentioned above, little research has been conducted on the status of Muslims and interfaith dialogue in the UK whilst the experiences of British Muslims taking part in interfaith dialogue at any level also has had little focus. Notwithstanding, literature regarding the practice of interfaith dialogue is available and some qualitative research has been carried out on the experiences of partaking in dialogue, much of which is related to identity construction. This section will also assess the literature related to concepts of identity, community and the 'Other'.

Interfaith dialogue and the surrounding controversies

Firstly, it is important to highlight the literature produced regarding interfaith in general, its importance, and the various forms of dialogue available. As Prideaux (2009, p. 460) notes, the 'enterprise of interfaith dialogue has never been an easy to identify unchanging activity' and therefore the literature regarding the phenomenon varies quite considerably. Due to its diverse nature, different forms of interfaith dialogue have been assessed by scholars and there are differing opinions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the available approaches. As Balmer (2005, p. 9) has noted, there are four umbrella terms for different types of dialogue as first laid out by the Catholic Church. These include: Dialogue of Life, described as living together for friendship, Dialogue of Social Action, involving working together for peace and justice, Dialogue of Intellect, the process of seeking deeper understandings and truth through discussion and debate, and finally, Dialogue of Religious Experience where individuals share insights from prayer or meditation. There has been much written about theological dialogue, particularly in assessing texts, often described as 'scriptural reasoning'. A prominent view of a number of scholars is that there are a number of reasons 'why it makes sense for interfaith engagement among Jews, Christians and Muslims to make scriptures a primary focus' (Ford 2006, p. 346). Not only is it believed that focus on the scriptures themselves create an environment acknowledging the core of the Abrahamic traditions' but is also able to forge good relationships between participants (Cheetham 2010). Scriptural reasoning is both perceived as informative and a way of appreciating the 'Other' (Lambkin 2010). Conversely, there are those that believe the 'needs and experiences of people living in religiously diverse communities' within Britain,

are not 'met through the formal level of dialogue' that many theologians attempt to work (Prideaux 2009, p. 461). Instead, they believe it is the 'informal practical reality of sharing space and activities' that is the most important form of dialogue (Ibid, p. 461). Others, (Forward 2001; Ramadan 2004) promote the importance of theological dialogue but argue the phenomenon often involves specialists, members of 'fairly closed circles' who are not 'always in contact with their own religious groups' (Ramadan 2004, p. 200).

Development of dialogue, its history in the UK and increased government interest

The history of the interfaith movement in the UK has been documented by a number of scholars who have described its background and development. Jorgen Nielson (1991, p. 106), has studied the rise of interfaith activity in the UK from a 'number of local groups' which often failed to 'establish some kind of continuity', to the Interfaith Network, founded in 1987, a well-represented and active body receiving 'substantial grants'. Similarly, Cracknell (1985, p. 452) has described the development of the interfaith movement, which was accelerated by the large-scale emigration to Britain during 'the fifties and sixties' which in turn, drastically altered the religious makeup of the British Isles. More recently, literature on the state of interfaith affairs in Britain and throughout 'Western' nations in general have largely focused on increased governmental involvement. Smith notes that 'in recent years, religion has moved up the political agenda' and an 'official discourse and policy initiative structured around the notion of faith communities has emerged' (Smith 2004, p. 185). As governments have realised the 'social capital' obtained from faith communities and the beneficial work they do, not only contributing to society but occasionally providing services that may have previously been expected from the Welfare State, they have become increasingly interested in interfaith dialogue and action (Smith 2004; Dinham 2012). Finally, and more closely associated with British Muslims, increased government interest and a development in policy towards interfaith communities has been associated with security. Halafoff (2011) has argued that since the attacks on 11th September 2001, state actors in the UK and other Western nations such as Australia have 'increasingly initiated and supported' what can be termed 'multi-faith' activities 'with a focus on social inclusion and countering radicalisation' (p. 453). Some authors (Braybrooke 2007; Halafoff 2011, 2012), have noted that engagements between different communities of faith have shifted emphasis onto promoting social cohesion and countering radicalisation, particularly of young British

Muslims, and therefore the philosophical and theological basis for interfaith initiatives and dialogue have more recently been marginalised.

Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue

As highlighted above, there has been little academic literature produced regarding British Muslims' participation in interfaith dialogue. However, despite a coherent body of literature missing, some studies have been undertaken. Siddiqi (2006; 2010) has documented the development in the participation of British Muslims and interfaith dialogue in Britain from the 1960's. Initially Muslim communities failed 'to seize' on the 'valuable examples' of interfaith dialogue promoted 'by the Churches' and therefore 'very little or any progress in early inter-faith encounters' was made (Siddiqi 2010, p. 238). Despite increased participation in interfaith dialogue from the 1970's onwards, Siddiqi has argued that 'Muslims have not sufficiently equipped themselves with exploring' the multi-religious and multi-cultural context' in which they find themselves in, which has constrained their ability to partake in interfaith dialogue, perhaps compounded by interfaith dialogue seemingly 'not being a theological priority for Muslims in Britain (Ibid, p. 250). Halafoff (2011) has highlighted that 'whereas prior' to 9/11, Christian communities reported difficulty in engaging Muslim communities, 'after the attacks, Muslim communities became more proactive in initiating dialogue and educational activities' (p. 460). This interest intensified after the July 2005 bombings, leading to 'Muslim communities and Imams becoming far more proactive and open' to dialogue and interfaith activities (Halafoff 2011, p. 461). Other literature on Muslims and interfaith dialogue has focused on the contemporary practice in the United States (Smith 2004; Takim 2004) where 'increased dialogue and interaction' represents a significant paradigm shift and 'for most members of the Muslim community dialogue between people of different faiths in an environment of mutual respect and acceptance is a relatively new phenomenon' (Takim 2004, p. 345).

Identity construction and interfaith dialogue

There is a limited amount of research on Muslim experiences of interfaith dialogue, though this has mostly been restricted to the European continent and the United States. What research that has been produced, for a large part, focuses on identity construction. Charaniya and Walsh (2001) studied Christian, Jewish and Muslim responses to participating in dialogue. In *Adult Learning in the Context of Interreligious Dialogue* (2001), it was found

that taking part in interfaith dialogue not only affected the way individuals saw 'the Other', but it also had a considerable impact on one's own identity. 'Participants described' a transition from 'a monolithic to a multidimensional understanding of the Other manifested through an intimate, personal and interpersonal engagement of Self and Other' (Ibid, p. 201). Identity was often affected and strengthened through representing their religion whilst additionally being forced to study their own religious tradition in a different way. Crist (2014) has concluded in *Maintaining Religious Identity in the Wake of Interfaith Dialogue* practices of interactions with people of other faiths can lead to higher identity complexity and therefore a reduced motivation 'for in-group bias' and 'out-group' intolerance. Despite 'one of the end goals of interfaith dialogue' being to 'reduce the intolerance and prejudice' in people's religions, Crist believes certain forms of dialogue can have a negative impact on individuals' personal and collective identity (p. 17).

On the other hand, there are those arguing that interfaith dialogue has the ability to have a positive impact on identity construction (Waardenburg 2000; Reedijk 2010; Hedges 2014). Rachel Reedijk, in her work, *Roots and Routes: Identity Construction and Christian-Jewish-Muslim Dialogue*, studies how identities are developed and constructed through dialogue, particularly as many argue that 'one cannot stand behind one's own faith community' and spend time with people of other religions – in other words, they cannot 'cherish one's own identity and let one be inspired by alien practices' (Ibid, p. 4). Reedijk believes participation in interfaith dialogue not only contributes to 'the continuity and reinforcement' of collective identities but is also important in helping to reduce prejudice (Ibid, p. 316). Through contact, Reedijk argues that views of the 'Other' are developed and often become more positive. Despite this work including Jewish and Christian interview participants from Britain, all of the thirteen Muslim participants were from either Holland or France, meaning a British voice was absent in this research. Hopkins and Hopkins (2006; 2007), from a social psychology perspective have focused on British Muslims and their experiences of intergroup contact, some of which has involved studying participation in interfaith dialogue. Conclusions drawn from qualitative interviewing suggest intergroup contact and the friendships made 'allowed the realisation of one's Islamic identification' whilst acting as a representative of 'their group both in narrow and broad sense' contributed to Islamic identity (Hopkins 2007, p. 690).

Theories of Community/Identity/Otherness

There is an abundance of literature relating to theories of identity, the concept of community and the importance of the Other. Although these concepts are likely to influence each other in their formation, it is important to highlight the individual bodies of literature available regarding each theory. Theories regarding identity have been largely developed from the Symbolic Interactionist (Mead 1934; Blumer 1962) and Social Constructionist (Berger and Luckmann 1966) perspectives. Continuing on from Mead's ideas that individuals adjust their behaviour and self-image based upon interactions and self-reflection regarding these interactions, Irving Goffman concluded in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that identity is largely a 'performance'. In *Stigma* (1963), Goffman claimed that there were three types of identity – social identity, personal identity and ego identity. It has been argued by some (Burns 1992; Clarke 2008) that Foucault was influenced by the work of Goffman regarding the construction of identity. In *Madness and Civilisation* (1964), Foucault notes how the self is constructed in relation to external discourses defining 'normal'. Foucault concluded in a *History of Sexuality*, Volumes 1-3 (1976 – 1984), that the scientific idea of sexuality had been constructed, and, through technologies of the self, believe experts can help constitute the truth about our sense of being, of self, and of identity.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, more specific theories of identity were produced. Stryker (2000, p. 284) notes that the 'language of identity is ubiquitous in contemporary social science' and there is 'considerable variability in both its conceptual meanings and its theoretical role' - even when 'consideration is restricted to sociology and social psychology, variation is still considerable'. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) is one important concept of identity and is often associated with social psychology. With the intention of being a theory of intergroup relations, group processes and the social self, the general idea is that individuals see themselves as belonging to a particular social category and that these memberships are represented as a social identity that influences how one believes one should think, feel and behave. Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner 1985) is a further development of Social Identity Theory which emphasises the processes of categorisation, concluding that the self and Others are categorised into in-group and out-groups which defines people's social identity and influences their perceived similarity to the defining features of the groups. Despite Social Identity Theory coming from the field of

social psychology, some have noted (Hogg et al 1995) how it is relatively distinct in ways, making it comparable to sociological theories as it attempts to explain group behaviour in terms of concepts that articulate societal and psychological processes, recognising the primacy of society over the individual. Secondly, Identity Theory (Stryker 1968, 1986; McCall and Simmons 1978) in sociology, explains social behaviour in terms of reciprocal relations between the self and society. It views the self not as an autonomous psychological entity but as a multi-faceted social construct that emerges from people's roles in society. The theory maintains that individuals acquire role identities which they distinguish from counter roles, and ultimately it is through social interaction that identities acquire self-meaning (Burke and Reitzes 1981). Finally, Collective Identities (Melucci 1989; 2003) developed as a method of understanding how social movements form. Collective identity in short is a process by which a set of individuals or groups 'interact to create a shared sense of identity or group consciousness' (Andriot and Owens 2012) and therefore has explicit connections with ideas surrounding community.

'Community' is a term widely used by those in the social sciences and humanities and as Crow and Allan note, its use does 'not have one single meaning but many' (1994, p. 3). According to Crow and Allan, community research 'has had a chequered history over recent decades, with three broad phases being identifiable in the period since the Second World War' (ibid, p. 13). During the 1950's and 1960's community studies focused on local social life with a specific interest in family and kinship networks, political and religious attachments and work patterns at a local level. This descriptive style was critiqued in the 1970's by those believing that these previous studies neglected explicit discussion of methodological and theoretical implications of the research (Elias 1974). Little empirical research was carried out and the concept of community was 'slowly being evicted from British society' (Abrams 1978, p. 13). Gusfield (1975), during this period of increased theoretical research into the concept of community, argued that there was a relational theory of community, different to an objectively given entity in which one belongs (p. 7). This use of the concept of community expresses the importance 'to the quality of character of human relationship without reference to location' and through this usage, community 'is a characteristic of some human relationships rather than a bounded and defined group' (ibid, p. xvi). However, an interest in community studies re-emerged in the 1980's and

1990's as Crow and Allan highlight (1994, p. 17), both explicitly by those such as Bulmer (1985) and Wilmott (1985), and by those who wanted to distance themselves from the term, such as Cooke (1989), who developed his argument that the term 'locality' should be used for this field of research, rather than 'community'.

Anthropologists also contributed greatly to the study of community in the latter half of the twentieth century, directing attention 'to the symbolic boundaries around communities' (Crow and Alan 1994, p. xv). Cohen's *A Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985) was an important contribution to the field which argued that communities could be understood as 'communities of meaning' which play a symbolic role in creating and sustaining people's sense of belonging. Important in Cohen's work is the idea of the symbolic construction of boundaries, meaning that communities have an 'oppositional character' and are 'relational'; they 'mark the community in relation to other communities' (Ibid, p. 62). It is also important to note McMillan and Chavis' *A Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory* (1986) which provides a number of ways in which a sense of belonging and community can be constructed, and looks to provide a 'theoretical understanding of what sense of community is and how it works' (Ibid, p. 8). Finally, building on Durkheim's ideas, the idea of emotional community was put forward by Maffesoli (1996) in *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. These are formed when individuals display 'empathy with likeminded people' and through a desire to 'form solidarity based on shared ethical and aesthetic values' (Hetherington 1998, p. 64).

Lastly, and largely connected to the concepts of identity and community, is the idea of 'Otherness'. George Herbert Mead's work *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), one of the foundational texts regarding Symbolic Interactionist Theories, highlights the importance of Others in the formation of identity, through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation with other people. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) later argued that Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought and that no group ever sets itself up without simultaneously establishing an Other, for example, in de Beauvoir's work, women were always defined and differentiated with reference to men. Similarly, Michel Foucault (1964; 1978) argued that the process of Othering is linked to power, often influencing behaviour and interaction whilst highlighting that the negotiation of identity also often involves the Other. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) also discusses the process of Othering where he argues that ideas

and practices from the 'West' or the 'Occident' have always been privileged over, and compared and contrasted with, those from the East or Arab countries - those of the Orient.

In terms of reducing prejudice towards the constructed Other, research predominantly in social psychology has been carried out, based on Gordon Allport's (1954) 'contact' thesis in *The Nature of Prejudice*. Allport (1954, p. 281) hypothesised that 'prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals'. Pettigrew (1998) has argued that there are four processes of change which help to reduce prejudice – learning about the out-group, changing behaviour, generating affective ties and in-group reappraisal. More recently, a number of approaches have been developed to assess how positive experiences of contact can be extended and generalised to the out-group. These have included making group saliency low so people focus on individual characteristics and not group level attributes (Brewer and Miller, 1984), emphasising the importance of group saliency so the effect is generalised to others (Johnston and Hewstone 1984), and making an overarching common in-group identity salient (Gartner et al 1993).

These theories of identity, community and prejudice reduction of the Other will be revisited in the findings section and applied when appropriate to explain the experiences of British Muslims' participation in interfaith dialogue and work. A review of the literature shows that in general, little attention has been given to British Muslims experiences of dialogue. Identity is an important concept to study due to some debate surrounding the effects of interfaith. Similarly, contact in terms of interfaith dialogue in general is often assumed to improve the views of the Other. However it is important to detail the processes of how it occurs. The similarities and differences between the concepts will also be highlighted but it is crucial at this point to reiterate that these concepts overlap, as previously mentioned. This is largely due to the importance of out-groups in the formation of identity and community, and in the way in which the Other is viewed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

A 'researcher's methodological approach' is 'underpinned by' and 'reflects specific ontological and epistemological assumptions'; it is therefore important to highlight the 'research methods adopted' (Grix 2002, p. 179). With regards to the ontological approach, the study of things that exist and the study of being and the study of what exists, this research is based upon the Constructivist or Interpretivist approach. This position, often described as relativist, posits that the world is 'interpreted through the mind' and 'although the world is not considered as unreal', reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively (Williams and May 1996, p. 59). In terms of epistemology, the 'relationship between what we know and what we see', I rely on these ontological assumptions and therefore take a 'transactional or subjectivist standpoint' which highlights the importance of 'co-created findings' (Guba and Lincoln 2005, p. 195). This perspective supposes that overarching, inseparable ideas form what we know and how we think. As noted above, it is crucial that these ontological and epistemological assumptions are realised as not only do they impact the choice of methods used to conduct research, but they further influence ideas related to research values, ethical issues, 'inquirer posture' and issues of reflexivity (Denzin and Lincoln 2013, p. 226).

The decision for a qualitative based study

Having addressed the relevant literature and outlined the research questions and objectives, it is important to explain the reasons behind the selection of qualitative methods for this project. The two overarching methods used in the social sciences, quantitative and qualitative research, are often described in opposition to one another, although 'qualitative and quantitative methods can link in the design of a study, and the use of 'mixed methods' is becoming increasingly popular' (Flick 2009, p. 25). Quantitative research relies on the collection of quantitative data in numerical form and focuses on hypothesis or theory testing. Although a quantitative study would have offered a wider sample - for instance a survey on the influence of interfaith dialogue surrounding identity, community and attitudes towards the Other, the emphasis of this research attempted to understand the experiences of partaking in interfaith dialogue and assessing its impact on the above concepts. In addition, as literature on interfaith dialogue notes, it is difficult to define and there are a variety of ways in which dialogue is conducted. Due to the subjectivity of the practice and

the potential for a wide diversity of experiences, 'a standardised framework', implemented 'in order to limit data collection to a certain predetermined response of analysing categories', appears problematic (Patton 1980, p. 22)

Qualitative methods on the other hand, can get 'under the skin of a phenomenon' (Balnaves and Caputi 2001, p. 8). Research based upon qualitative methods is more suitable when the aim is to 'find out what people's lives, experiences, and interaction mean to them in their own terms' whilst describing 'their experiences in depth' (Patton 1980, p. 22). Although quantitative methods are more appropriate when looking at 'causality', qualitative methods are 'more suited to looking at the meaning of particular events' (Balnaves and Caputi 2001, p. 8). Therefore a qualitative approach certainly lends better to discovering the diversity of British Muslim experiences through interfaith dialogue participation, whilst obtaining a data set of 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), promoting a greater depth of analysis. Finally, 'exploratory qualitative research' is more likely to 'develop' theories which remains an important part of this study. (Balnaves and Caputi 2001, p. 8).

Interviewing as an appropriate method

As the research aimed to gain information regarding British Muslims' experiences of partaking in interfaith dialogue, the most suitable method to obtain this data was through the use of interviews. A semi-structured lifeworld interview format was chosen, a method which aims to understand 'social phenomena from the actor's own perspectives...with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015, p. 30). As Cook and Farmer (2011, p. 2) explain, the purpose of this interview is 'to obtain descriptions of the life world of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon' - in this case partaking in interfaith dialogue - in order to 'interpret the meaning of that phenomenon' and is 'closely aligned to the goal of the phenomenologist': to 'describe the essence of an individual's lived experience of a particular phenomenon'.

When designing the project, a range of qualitative methods were considered as a way of researching the experiences of British Muslims. Observation methods, particularly in the form of observer-as-participant was one alternative method that could have potentially been used. Gold (1958) describes the observer-as-participant method as a researcher who

participates in group activity with the main focus of collecting data. The group being studied is aware of the researcher as an outsider, someone who is interested in participating as a means of generating more complete understanding of the group's activities. It may for instance, have been possible to view the developing of better relations with those of other religions through changing body language and talk in 'settings that are the natural loci of those activities' – interfaith dialogue meetings, discussions and activities (Agrosino and Mays de Perez 2000, p. 673). Certainly, observation can be beneficial and an 'appropriate method of data collection...when you want to learn about the interaction in a group' (Kumar 2014, p. 172).

Notwithstanding, I foresaw a number of issues associated with adopting observation as a method for obtaining data. Firstly, it has been noted that 'when individuals or groups become aware that they are being observed, they may change their behaviour' (Kumar 2014, p. 174). This could have potentially occurred whilst observing dialogue groups where individuals tried to stress the positive effects of dialogue, and overly articulated a more positive sense of community. Secondly, it is unusual for interfaith dialogue or activity to occur on regular occasions and observation appears to be a more appropriate method where the researcher is able to view interactions on multiple occasions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the aim of this research is to assess the experiences of British Muslims who partake in interfaith dialogue and whether concepts such as identity and community were affected by interaction with other faiths. Axiomatically, 'we cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions', nor 'situations that took place at some previous point in time' or 'how people have organised the world and the meaning they attach to what goes on' (Patton 1980, p. 196), which limits the use of methods based on observation in this research.

One other method considered as an alternative to interviewing was conducting a focus group. A typical focus group session consists of a discussion among a small number of participants under the guidance of a 'moderator' who if suitably skilled, can 'effectively draw out the feelings and ideas of the members of the group involved in focus group interviewing' (Berg and Lune 2013, p. 167). There were potential advantages to conducting focus group research, not least because it may have allowed for an increased number of participants in the study, particularly if I had been able to 'travel to a place' where the

‘target population’ had ‘already congregated’, for example following an interfaith meeting or event (Ibid, p. 168). In addition, the focus group has often been commended for being ‘more naturalistic’ (Wilkinson 2004, p. 180), than one-to-one interviews, meaning they include a range of communicative processes, allowing for the production of a more diverse data set. Reduced researcher control is a further common characteristic of focus groups, which can provide a more ethical interview procedure ‘enabling participants to develop themes important to them’ whilst also drawing the researcher’s attention ‘to previously neglected or unnoticed phenomena’ (Ibid, p. 181).

Despite the variety of benefits associated with the focus group method, ‘if the purpose of the research’ is to study individuals through categorisation and comparing the ‘lives that they lead or the views that they hold, then focus groups are less appropriate’ (Wilkinson 2004, p. 194). In addition, definitions of interfaith dialogue and the concepts of identity, community and Otherness are likely diverse and personal to individuals therefore making one-to-one interviewing more appropriate. Furthermore, as Berg and Lune note (2013, p 175), ‘traditional interviewing styles permit a more detailed pursuit of content information than is possible in focus group discussion’. In other words, important concepts associated with this research such as identity may not be adequately covered in the focus group. Lastly, it has been noted that the moderator must be thoroughly experienced in the process, a quality that I did not confidently possess, and would therefore have to spend time ‘practicing the pacing of topics and questions, handling resistant overzealous participants and drawing out information from participants’, which was not feasible for the time scale or size of this research (Ibid, p. 172).

Although coming to the decision to adopt interviewing as the appropriate form of data collection, I was aware of the potential disadvantages of this method and was reflexive and critical in both interview design and conduct. Similarly, as Katherine Roulston (2010, p. 224) has highlighted, ‘researcher’s theoretical assumptions about qualitative interviews have implications for how research interviews are structured, the kinds of research questions made possible’ and the questions posed’. I therefore took into account the ideas of those who advocate a constructionist approach to interviewing (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Roulston 2010), which focus largely on ‘the processes through which social realities are constructed and sustained’ (Silverman 2015, p. 24-5). Despite taking these views into

account, I have assumed that, through critical reflection of my own position and preconceptions, I have successfully generated useful data. As Charmaz and Bryant (2011, p. 299) note, 'interviews may be special social spaces in which research participants can reflect on the past and link it to the present and future in new ways', and we should 'not disqualify interviews from providing rich data and sparking analytic insights'.

There are numerous benefits to using interviews as the basis of a project, and 'the majority' of the contemporary 'qualitative research articles use interviews' (Silverman 2015, p. 168). Interviews can be used to 'find out from them those things we cannot directly observe', including 'feelings, thoughts and perceptions', all of which were important focuses of this dissertation (Patton 1980, p. 196) and therefore perhaps make interviewing more appropriate than other qualitative methods such as participant observation. Open ended and flexible questions are likely to obtain a considered response and provide 'access to interviewee's views, interpretations of events, understanding, experiences and opinions' (Silverman 2015, p. 171). The semi-structured approach to interviewing fits between the structured and unstructured methods of interviewing. A structured interview consists of a fixed set of closed questions, with little scope to move beyond the particular topic and is often associated with quantitative research. The unstructured interview involves presenting open questions and the researcher looks to minimise their impact during their encounter. This method is often been described as being close to an everyday conversation. The semi-structured interview to a large degree, combines the benefits of the two above methods of interviewing, providing an interview guide with specific questions to focus on important themes whilst allowing the participant to raise and expand upon alternate points of interest.

Issues of reflexivity and ethical considerations

As my research involved gaining access to interview participants and subsequently acquiring information regarding their experiences, thoughts and opinions, it was necessary to gain approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University. Central to most ethical guidelines is the idea of informed consent (Silverman 2015, p. 149). This means that the research subjects have the 'right to know that they are being researched, the right to be informed about the nature of the research and the right to withdraw at any time' (Ryen 2004, p. 231). It was important that this information was presented prior to conducting any

research. In addition, this right to 'to be informed' means that 'potential research subjects' should be given a 'detailed' but 'non-technical account of the nature and aims' of the proposed study (Silverman 2015, p. 149). Although it was proposed that there was not any realistic risk of the participants experiencing psychological distress or discomfort, or a detriment to their interests as a result of participation, it was important to take into account that interviewees were members of a minority community often subjected to prejudice and discrimination (Allen 2010; Petley and Richardson 2011). The opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any time was therefore stressed to all of the research participants.

As Silverman (2015, p. 153) notes, 'Semi-structured interviews allow individuals to disclose thoughts and feelings which are clearly private' and this method of data collection in particular relies on the interpersonal skills of the interviewer, the ability to establish a relationship and obtain rapport - qualities that are 'valuable but ethically very sensitive'. It is crucial therefore, that 'the types of questions to be asked, issues of confidentiality and at times anonymity have to be thoroughly assessed' (Ibid, p. 153). Initially, I considered providing the option for participants to be identified in the dissertation as 'certain people in certain contexts may actually want to be identified' in reports produced on research and may 'feel let down if their identity is concealed' (Silverman 2015, p. 146). Certainly, as Clark (2006, p. 9-10) notes, it is 'worth considering whether research participants want to remain anonymous' as 'if an individual chooses not to be anonymised in research outputs' preferring to 'tell his/her story up front, this raises important questions about who has ultimate control over the research data'. Despite these concerns, after discussion with my supervisor, I concluded that it would be best to attempt to anonymise the data as far as possible.

Anonymising identifying information was important, particularly because interfaith dialogue has been seen by some individuals and groups in the British Muslim community as a negative practice and a detriment to group interests (Hopkins and Hopkins 2006). There were, however, practical, ethical, and epistemological considerations associated with anonymising the data collected that needed to be considered. I attempted to ensure the privacy of the research participants through ensuring that the interview transcripts did not include 'concrete information about real persons and sites' (Flick 2007, p. 75). This however was not always possible as background information and 'context were crucial in

understanding real life' (Clark 2006, p. 12). The importance of context and the issues of anonymising data sets has been highlighted by Clark (2006, p. 12), particularly how context should not be viewed as a single layer of background data as it 'is crucial to understand how this context contributes to the constructions of the social world' and therefore can have ethical implications associated with the validity and reliability of the research. The importance of context in analysis of the interviews conducted, therefore, meant that some of the data collected was not anonymised immediately. Consequently, I ensured that once the interviews had been transcribed, they were kept securely on a password protected computer and backed up on a password protected USB flash drive. Complete anonymity in most social research may be impossible to achieve (Singleton and Strait 1999; Clark 2006) and 'if the potential for identification exists, then being open and honest with participants is of course the most ethical of all anonymisation strategies' (Clarke 2006, p. 14). Thus, despite attempting to anonymise identifying features of the data, I informed the participants of the potential issues of identification.

The issue of reflexivity was also important, as 'unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable' (Flick 2009, p. 16). The importance of the practice of reflexivity has been grounded in post-structuralist and constructionist studies which renounce the idea of researcher objectivity and espouse the idea that multiple truths and interpretations come from the interplay between individuals (Steedman 1961, pp. 57-8). Because it is 'indispensable for the subject as self to participate with another subject as Other', it was crucial that I actively engaged with my interview participants (Maranhão, 1991 p. 226). This can be done through acknowledging and scrutinising 'actions and observations in the field' along with 'impressions, irritations, feelings' and this becomes data in its 'own right' (Flick 2009, p. 16). To ensure that this was thoroughly practiced, I kept a research diary where I could reflect on feelings and biases at different stages of the research process and analyse how these views and perceptions may have impacted upon my research. One other way that I attempted to practice reflexivity was during the time of interview where I attempted to create a dialogue with the participants to ensure better interaction and understanding. This was carried out in attempting to 'de-

privilege the research class' and thus deconstruct preconceived ideas to create a reality that is dependent on the participants (Steier 1991, pp. 7-8).

I also noted that my identity and background, whether perceived or real may affect the way my participants interacted with me during the interview stages of research. Not only was I likely seen as an 'outsider' or 'Other' as I did not come from within the Muslim community, but I also do not come from a religious background, which may have reduced the amount that my participants either wanted to tell me or believed that I would be able to understand about interfaith dialogue. Both Bolognani (2007) and McLoughlin (2000) describe their religious background of Catholicism as having an impact on their participants, with Bolognani (2007, p. 286) describing it as encouraging the Muslim community in her study to view her as someone who had 'good morals' and 'followed a religious code', and therefore as someone who 'could be trusted'. On the other hand, it may have been that my position as someone who is not a member of the 'Muslim community', at a local or national level, allowed my participants to open up to a larger degree. This is due to the fact that there have been those in the Muslim community who have seen interfaith dialogue as a problem, perceiving it as a method used to dilute Muslim identity, a method used by governments to monitor British Muslims, or simply that it risks conversion to other religions. Similarly, as I do not come from a religious background, my interview participants may have had the opportunity to more openly express their views regarding the impact that it had on their attitude toward other religions or the sense of community it created. Finally, because I had not taken part in interfaith dialogue – apart from attending two events prior to conducting the interviews, I had little personal experience of the concept. Although experience or the status as an 'insider' can enable the researcher to gain rapport with research participants and understand certain issues or even statements more thoroughly due to shared experiences and language, I may, in some cases, have been advantaged as personal experience or attachment can potentially 'cloud the researcher's perceptions' or mean that they have difficulty separating 'these experiences from those of the participants' (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, p. 58). I therefore ensured that I studied how subjective realities can influence the creation as well as the interpretation of data.

Data analysis

I adopted some of the key tenets of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in the analysis of the data. I attempted to study the interviews as they were ongoing, allowing for early data analysis to occur and provide the opportunity to discuss interesting and unforeseen topics with future interviewees. As well as encouraging the integration of analysis and data collection, the practice of Grounded Theory meant adopting the technique of open coding where all of the data collected was initially coded, leading to core categories eventually becoming apparent. The practice of coding simply meant providing a 'word or short phrase' as a symbol for a portion of data that is 'summative, salient, essence-capturing or evocative' (Saldaña 2009, p. 3). Theoretical memos were produced regarding the potential relationships of various codes before more selective coding was implemented. This process was implemented to ensure coherent and well-grounded theories regarding interfaith and its impact on the above concepts were precluded.

Although taking into account the methods and instructions of the classical Grounded Theory approach, I based my data analysis largely upon the Constructionist Grounded Theory method which meant being aware of the 'research practices' as a social construction in addition to 'research worlds' (Charmaz 2008, p. 396). More specifically, adopting this position required the assumption that 'reality is multiple, processual and constructed but under particular conditions' whilst also acknowledging the 'researcher's positionality as well as that of the research participants' (Ibid, p. 403). Not only did this highlight the importance of general reflexivity at all stages of research, it also 'disavowed the idea' that as a researcher, I would be able to begin the research without 'prior knowledge and theories' about the topic. (Ibid p. 403). This method therefore ensured reflection on the prior theories relating to identity, community and Othering and although 'recognising them as prior knowledge', subjected them 'to rigorous scrutiny' (Ibid, p. 403). As Charmaz notes (2008, p. 43), Constructionist Grounded Theory accounts for 'an interpretive understanding of the studies phenomena that accounts for context' and opposes giving 'priority to the researcher's views', instead seeing the research participants' 'views and voices as integral to the analysis and its presentation' and extracts of this data are evident in the following chapters.

The following three chapters will focus on the data produced through the interview process and through analysis and evaluation will provide information regarding experiences that British Muslims have of participating in interfaith dialogue and work. Due to limitations on space, the findings chapters will be restricted to analysing the impact that interfaith dialogue can have on identity, community and perceptions of the Other. Despite interesting themes emerging from the data regarding the importance of seeing increased British Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue and work, and beliefs surrounding increased government interest, both at a local and national level, unfortunately, space does not permit a discussion of these important subjects.

Prior to disseminating information concerning the findings it is important to provide some limited background information regarding the interview participants. Although, as noted in the section on methodology, all of the interviewees' names have been changed and all identifying information anonymised, it is important to provide some degree of context and background to the participants who have contributed to this research for the reader's benefit and understanding. This is a difficult process 'for qualitative researchers, maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting rich, detailed accounts of social life presents unique challenges' (Kaiser 2009, p. 1632). Notwithstanding, some limited background information to the participants will aid in the presentation of information here without jeopardising the interviewees identities.

Michael (Interview 09/07/15), a young British Muslim male, holds an outreach position in a mosque in his city. He has been involved in interfaith work for five years in the city that he was born and brought up in. Liam (Interview 11/07/15), another young British Muslim male holds a prominent leadership role at his town's interfaith group and has been involved in interfaith dialogue and work for nearly five years. Lydia (Interview 14/07/15), a young British Muslim convert, has been part of an interfaith group for three years and has recently taken up an organisational role. Her position as a convert may be an important point to note, as British Muslim converts may be more inclined to participate in interfaith dialogue and the practice may impact them differently and their experiences could potentially vary from those who have grown up in Muslim households. Sarah (Interview 21/07/15), is a South East Asian Muslim who has been living in the United Kingdom for ten years and holds British Nationality. She has been involved in interfaith work for ten years,

has built relationships through this practice, and is a member of interfaith groups in three cities. Sarah has held leadership and organisational roles but initially started the 'day after' she arrived due in part to perceiving immediate differences in the way people of different faiths act in Britain in contrast to countries in South East Asia (Interview 21/07/15). Sadia (Interview 29/07/15), a female British Muslim, has been involved in interfaith work for over three years in her city and has taken on a number of leadership roles.

Chapter Four: The Impact of Interfaith Dialogue on the Identity of British Muslims

The responses from the interview participants appeared to suggest that interfaith dialogue had a varied impact on their identity, and it should be noted that this is perhaps to be expected as it is often understood that we have as many 'identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles' (James 1890 in Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 286) and there are different theories and types of identity. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1979; Hogg et al 1995), a social-psychological theory which proposes that a 'social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of a category' (Hogg et al 1999, p. 259). Identity Theory (Stryker 1966; Stryker and Burke 2000) on the other hand, refers to identity as being the 'parts of a self, composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies' (Stryker and Burke 2000). Identity Theory is therefore 'principally a micro-sociological theory', and perhaps provides more emphasis to the individual (Hogg et al 1995, p. 255). The above theories, whilst providing an appropriate introduction to this chapter, also posit multiple explanations for how participation in interfaith dialogue can impact identity. These theories will therefore be revisited in this chapter as appropriate.

Islam as distinct and a strengthening of Muslim identity

Responses from the interview participants appear to suggest that through taking part in interfaith dialogue and work, Islam as a religious identity and their position as British Muslims became more distinct. Lydia, for example, noted that participation encouraged her to 'recognise the things that Muslims as a community are quite good at' whilst she later suggested that interfaith work makes her 'grateful for the things' that her 'faith brings' (Interview 14/07/2015). More specifically Lydia described 'the five daily prayers' as being something 'unique to Islam' that was a reminder throughout the day of her religious identity, and by looking to 'other faiths that do not have that' she noted that it encouraged her to feel grateful and is 'something that emphasises' her faith (Interview 14/07/15). This would suggest that participating in interfaith dialogue and work can in fact strengthen one's social identity, as opposed to what has been argued by some that interfaith dialogue may dilute or weaken religious identity (Crist 2014). As Hedges notes in his work on *Interreligious Engagement and Identity Theory* (Hedges 2014, p. 209), Social Identity Theory highlights a

‘very important point which is that identity is not just individual’ and ‘indeed where an individual identity is claimed it is always an identity claimed in relationship to, with, or against others’. Through taking part in interfaith therefore, as Lydia suggests, British Muslims may compare Islam and their position as Muslims to those of other faiths, which may occur due to ‘two underlying sociocognitive processes’ that ‘Social Identity Theory invokes’ (Hogg 1995, p. 260). This includes ‘categorisation that sharpens intergroup boundaries’ and assigns people, including the self to a relevant category (Ibid, p. 260). Secondly, ‘self-enhancement’ means that comparisons between the in-group and the relevant out-group occur in ways that favour the in-group (Ibid p. 260). This sharpening of intergroup boundaries can be seen in the interview with Lydia where she describes interfaith dialogue as a process highlighting elements of Islam as distinct and ‘unique’ from other religions, and therefore reinforces her identity as a Muslim.

Self-enhancement also appears to be prevalent in responses from the interviewees. Michael stated that ‘by having this dialogue it makes me feel, again more confident, more proud that I feel that I am on the right path’ (Interview 09/07/2015). This suggests that taking part in interfaith dialogue and work with people of other religions, not only confirms identity through comparisons with an out-group, in this case non-Muslims, but it may also strengthen identity as British Muslims who participate in interfaith ‘see themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant Others’ (Hogg et al 1995, p. 260). It should be noted therefore, that in opposition to the beliefs of the Muslim Parliament of Britain (Hopkins and Hopkins 2006), British Muslim identity can be strengthened through interfaith dialogue, whilst analysis of the interviews appear to show that through participation, individuals saw their Islamic identity more clearly. Certainly, Rachel Reedjik (2010, p. 91), notes similar findings in her research on those who take part in interfaith dialogue, stating that ‘a large minority’ of her participants reported that ‘dialogue reinforced the connection with their roots’. This is because ‘individual and collective identities are being shaped in the relationship with significant others (the outer landscape) and by means of introspection (the inner landscape)’ (Ibid, p. 97).

Muslim identity also appears to be confirmed and even strengthened with responses from the interviewees suggesting that taking part in interfaith work and dialogue was part of being a Muslim, and therefore solidified their Islamic identity. Sarah reported that

‘spending time with other people of faith’ made her a ‘better Muslim and a stronger Muslim’ (Interview 21/07/15). Similarly, Liam stated he thought that his ‘experiences within the interfaith environment’ made him ‘a better Muslim’ and that in comparison to a period in which he did not take part in interfaith dialogue or work, his ‘Islam had become richer’ (Interview 11/07/15). The perspective that through taking part in interfaith dialogue and work they were closer to meeting a true Islamic identity is grounded in the belief that the practice of interfaith is central to the teachings of the Qu’ran and is emulating the Prophet Muhammad. Liam noted that ‘the experiences of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him, was with interfaith, open experiences and open charitable work with the Christians of Medina, with the Jews of Medina, and with the Pagans’ (Interview 11/07/15). Lydia emphasised that much of her motivation behind participating in interfaith dialogue and work was the teachings of the Qu’ran, sharing a verse that inspired her: ‘O Human Kind! We have created you from male and female and have made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another’ (Interview 14/07/15; Quran 49:13). For Lydia, the verse ‘emphasises’ the importance of ‘getting to know each other’ and therefore ‘encourages her to take part in interfaith’ (Ibid). These responses are similar to the findings of Hopkins (2007, p. 690) in a study of British Muslims representing their ‘group to others’ through intergroup contact, which highlighted that several of the participants discussed ‘how acting as a representative of their group’ had ‘contributed to their Islamic identity’.

Creation of a larger spiritual identity

The British Muslims interviewed also suggest that participating in interfaith work led to the creation of a larger spiritual identity. This is likely due to the fact that those participating in interfaith dialogue realise the similarities with those of other religions. This may be particularly important when living in a non-Muslim society such as Britain which emphasises secularism. Liam believed that ‘learning about Sikhism or Hinduism’ or other religions, ‘gives a stronger spiritual identity’ due to realising similarities and a commitment to God (Interview 11/07/15). Similarly, Lydia stated that:

‘I think hearing from people of other faiths and recognising similarities, and that we are all kind of working towards worshipping God and knowing who God is, loving God...and we are all trying to do it, and we are talking here from a faith perspective, trying to do it for God’s sake, does strengthen you in some sense, because you

recognise...that God is a common thing for lots of people so I guess in that sense it strengthens you and your faith' (Interview 14/07/15).

These statements suggest, as noted, that a strengthening of a faith identity is created through participating in interfaith dialogue. Social Identity Theory states that 'group prototypes define groups as distinct entities' and they are constructed in a way that minimises intra-category differences whilst attempting to maximise inter-category differences (Hogg et al 1995, p. 261). However, 'relatively enduring changes' can occur in prototypes and thus in 'self-conception', if 'comparison to the out-group changes over time' (Ibid, p, 261). The responses from interviewees suggest that through participating in interfaith dialogue, there is a creation and strengthening of a faith based identity. This is due to a widening of the in-group with regards to Social Identity Theory, in opposition to an out-group. The creation of a faith identity is likely to be more profound in countries which have more secular notions such as Britain and where the out-group created is secular society.

Interfaith dialogue itself as a role

Although there are links between the two theories of identity (see Stets and Burke 2000; Hedges 2014), Social Identity Theory has focused on category based identities whereas Identity Theory has primarily studied role based identities (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 293). Participation in interfaith dialogue and work appears to confirm an outreach role or what could be termed as an interfaith role in the local Muslim community or for individual Mosques. Michael claimed that 'we all have a passion and my passion is interfaith, interaction with external communities, others have a passion for raising the youth you know...one of my colleagues runs a girls scouts group' (Interview 09/07/15). Michael noted that being on the outreach committee at his mosque meant that he took part in and help organised a number of interfaith activities, from having discussions around beliefs at the local Mosque to meals with members of church groups. Identity theory posits that 'the core of an identity is the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation into the self of the meaning and expectations associated with the role and its performance' (Stets and Burke 2000, p. 225). Through participation in interfaith dialogue and work therefore, Michael could perform his role as a member of the Muslim community who took part in and organised outreach and interfaith work. Similarly Liam stated that he 'personally

represented the Muslim faith, the town's Muslim interfaith community' (Interview 11/09/15). Liam noted that:

'I would identify myself as first and foremost a British Muslim, of Pakistani origin, I am a family person and I am an active member of the Muslim community but certainly I see that aspect of my life as a role...I think it is a very important role' (Interview 11/07/15)

Liam therefore suggests that participation in interfaith is not only an important role, but one which contributes to his identity. Being part of interfaith groups and participating in events appears, perhaps, to provide an avenue for these meanings and expectations of the role of representing Islam to be expressed while simultaneously providing an environment to learn about and create better relations with members of other faiths. Certainly, as Michael noted, through his interfaith work and participation, he felt that he was 'doing a job for Islam' (Interview 09/07/15). This was likewise reflected in a statement made by Lydia that it is not 'something that you do, not necessarily like an everyday thing, like being a Chaplain or something but something that is still part of you, something that you partake in and do' (Interview 14/07/15).

Chapter Five: The Experience of Community Through Interfaith Participation

Crow and Allan (1994, p. xv) note that the concept of community 'enters into the way in which we express ideas of solidarity, interest and identity'. However, although community is in many ways linked to identity, for instance the above paragraphs related to identity show the importance of group membership in Social Identity Theory and the importance of communal action and solidarity in collective identity, community is a concept with different connotations to identity and is a separate subject of study. Similar to identity, there are a number of different theories associated with the idea of community, and responses from the interview participants appear to highlight how individuals gain an understanding of interfaith dialogue in relation to experiences related to community. The concept of symbolic community, where 'community' is a 'boundary expressing symbol...held in common by its members' (1985, p. 15) and is one form of community British Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue may experience. Cohen (1985, p. 57), has argued that 'the most striking feature of the symbolic construction of community and its boundaries is its oppositional character... [boundaries] mark the community in relation to other communities', which are created through symbols of commonality. Another form of community that may be created through participation in interfaith dialogue is an emotional community, developed in large part by Michel Maffesoli (1996, p. 52), in which communities can be built on 'affectual forms of sociation'. Tied into this concept of emotional community may be 'a new kind of interest community...the self-help or mutual aid group' which has emerged in recent years (Alan and Crow 1996, p. 22). Finally, participation in interfaith work and membership of interfaith dialogue and community groups may emphasise and confirm a sense of 'territorial community or place community (Alan and Crow 1994, p. 3).

The creation of a symbolic community

Experiences of interfaith dialogue and work described by the interviewees suggest that a symbolic community can be formed through participation. This kind of community is not related to geography or territory but can be instead described as a 'relational community' and as Gusfield notes, 'points to the character of human relationships', and therefore is a 'characteristic of some human relationships rather than a bounded and defined group' (1975, p. xvi). Lydia stated that within her local interfaith network, 'you

realise the similarities partly between the faiths, but also...everyone is working towards, from a faith perspective, worshipping God, and we have a lot of shared things that we understand about God and we can talk about God, and we can work together...on moral and ethical issues' (Interview 14/07/15). This statement by Lydia perhaps suggests the construction of a symbolic community through participation in interfaith dialogue and work, with common symbols consisting of 'shared things that we understand about God' as well as 'moral and ethical issues' which were mentioned by all participants in terms of working towards achieving social justice, tackling environmental problems and taking a stance on human rights (Interview 14/07/15).

Cohen (1985, p. 16) notes that 'the quintessential referent of community is that its members make or believe they make a similar sense of things, either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests' and that this sense may 'differ from one made elsewhere'. It therefore appears from the responses of the British Muslims interviewed that important symbols such as having faith and worshipping God, leads to the creation of a community which attempts to tackle ethical issues in Britain together. This is not to say that this is in opposition to what communities in secular society believe in terms of tackling these issues, but perhaps more in these symbolically constructed communities, motivations are largely collectively attributed to carrying out social and environmental work as a way of worshipping God. Liam, for example, noted that:

'And not just talking about it from a purely kind of ecological perspective like maybe Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace or whatever, talking about with a person of the interfaith community, they are approaching that subject from a faith perspective, from a spiritual perspective and from their role as religious custodians of the earth and they view that as part of, and they view the earth as the creation of God, so something to be looked after, to be you know, cherished, so that kind of subtle difference' (Interview 11/07/15)

This statement suggests that Liam believed he made a similar sense of things, in this case related to specific interests regarding the environment which likely contributes to the creation of a symbolic community. It also suggests that these similar understandings and interests may differ from those elsewhere, in this case non-religious organisations such as Greenpeace. Similarly Sadia claimed that 'for me, being faithful means that you are ethical,

you have morals, you are moral' though she reiterated that this did not 'mean that atheists are immoral or unethical' (Interview 29/07/15). Sadia did however, believe that there are 'family values for example, manifested and deeply rooted in Islam and Judaism and Christianity' and 'charity, if you look at charity, they donate more than the Atheist community and at a national level, you can see the contribution of faith communities, you know for charitable work they are more motivated because they believe in God' (Interview 29/07/15). Similarly to Liam, this shows that common symbols such as family values, charitable giving and belief in God meant that people who took part in interfaith dialogue made similar sense of issues and had shared interests which created a feeling of community. As with Liam, Sadia did not imply that people of faith were more moral or ethical than others, but implied that religiosity encouraged a shared and mutual understanding on issues, creating a connection. It should be highlighted here that it certainly appears possible for members of different religions to form communities in symbolic terms and 'their disagreement is not necessarily' an 'impediment to their successful interaction', implying that more intricate, particularities, of belief systems can be overlooked to meet more fundamental beliefs of worshipping God, carrying out ethical and morally sound work, thus leading to the creation of a larger faith community (Cohen 1985, p. 17).

Interfaith dialogue: an emotional community and self help or mutual aid group?

Responses from the interview participants also suggest that interfaith dialogue can also create emotional communities. Liam emphasised the shared passions that he found with members of other faiths and found that 'with people of faith it is easy to talk about faith topics, they know what you're talking about and they know more importantly about that spiritual connection' whilst he 'emphasised that it is hard, on a secular level to explain faith' (Interview 11/07/15). Liam gave the example of Ramadan, stating that:

'when I talk about fasting during Ramadan...to a class of children or teachers and other people, they will instantly focus in on the depriving yourself of food to feel what it is like to be hungry, and that is a natural way for people to interpret fasting, but then if I talk about fasting with people of other faiths and tell them that it is actually a way of elevating my spiritual self, that is something that only a person of faith can understand, or kind of get' (Interview 14/07/15).

Maffesoli (1996, p. 13) argues that the creation of an emotional community often involves 'passion' being expressed, whilst 'common beliefs are developed and the search for those

who feel and think as we do takes place'. This appears to occur through the participation in interfaith work as Liam notes, 'it is easy to talk about faith topics with people of faith, they know what you are talking about and they know more importantly about that spiritual connection' whilst noting that it is 'hard to talk' on 'a secular level...to explain faith and the components of faith' (Interview 11/07/15). This search for those who think and feel (Maffesoli 1996) similar to those British Muslims who participate in interfaith, is perhaps most clearly shown by Sarah who states that 'finding people who are appreciative and understand the importance of interfaith dialogue and get along, and have a lot more in common than what we believe [Religion], that for me is my community...that is the community in which I feel that sense of belonging to' (Interview 21/07/15). Evidently then, interfaith dialogue provides the opportunity for British Muslims like Sarah to find those who are passionate in working with other faiths, who feel and think in similar ways.

Emotional communities are created because 'people want to belong' and 'want to have some way of showing their empathy with likeminded people', forming solidarity based on shared ethical values (Hetherington 1998, p. 64). Similar to the concept of an emotional community being formed through participation in interfaith dialogue and work, responses from interviewees suggest that interfaith groups and relationships perhaps form a community similar to what has been described as a 'self help or mutual aid group' (Alan and Crow 1994, p. 22). Lydia gave the example of a 'shared thing' of the 'issues of burials' which was something that a local Muslim organisation had been 'working on to get burials done within 24 hours', something that was also a concern of the local Jewish community and those involved in interfaith work realised the importance of this issue to both religious communities and work to ensure more opportunity for burials to occur within the required time period (Interview 14/07/15). To a similar degree, Michael implied that interfaith participation had strengthened the 'faith community' in his city and believed that if there was 'an issue', instead of a 'disparate response, whatever [that issue] might be, let's just say that the government introduced some new legislation and you had all three faiths [Abrahamic faiths] disagreeing...it's a stronger message as all three stood together, united' (Interview 09/07/15). This statement again implies the creation of a community through interfaith where people of different groups and religions are able to provide help and support to those in need or collectively if a blanket issue arises. Likewise, Liam remembered

that 'they wanted to open a third lap dancing club' in his city and that it was the 'interfaith group that prompted [an objection] and said we object to this and we want to come together as people of all faiths' in the city to 'lodge our [objections]' (Interview 11/07/15). Writing in 1994, Alan and Crow (p.22) note that Peter Wilmott, a founding member of the Institute for Community Studies, suggested that 'recent years have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of interest community...the self help or mutual aid group whose members are linked by a common bond through shared experiences'. Certainly then, interfaith groups for British Muslims, and likely similarly for those of other faith groups, create an interest community of this sort, providing the opportunity to tackle issues together with those of other religions.

This statement by Michael perhaps suggests that interfaith dialogue and work with those of different faiths creates emotional communities, perceiving themselves as having similar passions and ethical values, and encourages the creation of mutual aid or self help groups based on shared experiences, in opposition to secularism. Lydia shared a similar belief, illustrating that 'you can work on shared things but you also generally tend to support each other in each other's shared struggles...because there is kind of a secular, atheist feeling amongst some' who she described as an 'outspoken minority' (Interview 14/07/15). Liam noted that not only did members of his interfaith group share a 'common view point' but that another

'important part of interfaith work is that there is increasingly a rising kind of, and I will be careful how I, I don't want to make it sound like a sinister thing, of secularism...where people of faith in a very subtle way are being marginalised and I think it is very important that people of the faith community come together' (Interview 11/07/15)

As with Michael's point regarding faith groups uniting to oppose restrictive legislation, Liam's statement about the positive impacts of interfaith on coming together in opposition to secularist tendencies suggests that a mutual aid or self help group is created therefore forming a community. Liam confirmed this belief, stating that British Muslims could 'benefit greatly' from participating in interfaith dialogue and work, and that they 'really, really sort of find allies you know amongst people of faith (Interview 11/07/15).

Liam's belief that 'allies' of faith could be made through interfaith participation leading to the creation of mutual aid or self help groups which in turn could provide benefit to British Muslims was also confirmed by some of the other interviewees. Michael remembered members of the Christian faith coming to the aid of the Muslim community in one city, encouraging the local authorities to ensure the provision of a Halal restaurant in a popular tourist and leisure area, stating that 'we saw how much they stood by us you know and stood together with us...and I hope to be able to repay that' (Interview 09/07/15). The support that was provided through the creation of a self help or mutual aid form of community was also acknowledged again by Liam, but also by Sarah with regards to the attacks on the French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo's offices in Paris in January 2015. Liam explained that 'during the recent Charlie Hebdo incidents and the Charlie Hebdo shootings' it was 'nice that the interfaith community opened their doors' to the Muslim community' (11/07/15). Emotional communities and self help or mutual aid groups are constructed through interfaith dialogue and these shared experiences and emotions are emphasised, meaning that members of different faiths are further motivated to support each other in shared challenges or goals, but also when members of one faith are in need. British Muslims have come under attack in the British press, by politicians and both left and right leaning political groups. Likewise, as suggested above, through the creation of these communities, British Muslims are likely to benefit due to these contemporary issues they face.

Increased geographical ties

Membership of a local interfaith group and the building of interfaith relationships within the towns and cities that the British Muslim interviewees resided in also appears to have strengthened their geographical sense of community. This form of community can be described as 'territorial' and the 'concept appears in a context of location' (Gusfield 1975, p. xv). Although community studies have, since the latter half of the twentieth century focused largely upon the idea of interest and attachment communities, there is still a common agreement that 'community ties may be structured around links between people with common residence' (Alan and Crow 1996, p. 1). Liam stated that 'it is nice to meet people face to face, see what we share as fellow' members of the town, 'you know sharing and getting other people's perspectives on certain sorts of local issues' (Interview

11/07/15). Liam also highlighted that through his interfaith group, members 'joined together' and made 'collective efforts to carry out community work and community activities' (Interview 11/07/15). These two statements suggest the importance of local interfaith groups, and meetings helped to create a sense of belonging and attachment to the local community. Liam noted the importance of seeing what he shared with other members of the town, whilst also stressing the importance of community work, likely to create an attachment to the geographical location through the spending of time and effort, along with the building of relationships through this activity.

Interviewees also emphasised that participating in interfaith dialogue allowed them to get to know other residents of the town or city which they lived or worked in, who they would often encounter whilst going about their daily activities and discuss matters other than faith or issues related to their interfaith groups. Liam, discussing his local interfaith group stated that 'I have met a lot of very very nice people and we sort of bump into each other on the street and it is a very very nice experience to chit chat and to communicate' (Interview 21/07/15). This was strengthened by the emphasis of local social activities in his interfaith group, as well as visiting places of worship, inviting religious leaders or prominent figures to speak and hosting discussions regarding faith. His interfaith group also held 'an annual cricket match' and held 'film nights' at different member's houses (Interview 11/07/15). Lydia also noted that relationships built at a local level, and the regularity of meeting the same people meant that she became 'more familiar' with other local people of different religions, stating that 'you can then talk about, you don't just talk about the interfaith work or about specific queries you have, you talk about anything like how's life, how is the family – whatever' (Interview 14/07/15). For Lydia, in terms of community, this created a feeling of attachment to a geographical locality, which she described as often lacking in contemporary society: 'this interfaith work is important...[in] getting to know people, I think building stronger communities and just generally because that sense of community sometimes at least in Britain, they say it is diminished or it is lacking or everyone used to know their neighbours' (Interview 14/07/15). Lydia therefore appears to see interfaith dialogue as providing her with the opportunity to meet local people and 'get to know her neighbours', and therefore creating a community in terms of geographical location. Sarah similarly noted that you 'meet people when you are out on the street doing

shopping and...you sort of see each other and it is then a local connection' (Interview 21/07/15). For Sarah being part of a local interfaith group and building relationships in her city meant a lot for her. Sarah is 'a migrant to Wales' and participation in interfaith created a 'sense of community' whilst she stated that it 'strengthened' her 'bond to this country' (Interview 21/07/15).

Chapter Six: Interfaith Dialogue: a Vehicle for the Bettering of Perceptions Towards the Other

As hinted in the previous two chapters, it appears that for British Muslims, interfaith dialogue and work can help improve views of the Other – those of different religious backgrounds, particular those of the Jewish and Christian faiths. The importance of contact for the initiation of the reduction of prejudice and more positive views of the Other, or an out-group is well established as shown by Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of studies related to contact. However it is important to see the process of how the reduction in negative views of the Other occur, which can be gleaned from information provided by interviewees on their experiences of dialogue and work. As previously noted with creation of identities and the construction of communities, there is a need for an oppositional entity – an out-group or Other, in which to define oneself or one's community. This has been importantly shown in the works of social scientists (de Beauvoir 1949; Foucault 1976, 1984; Bauman 1991). According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p. 6), the 'category of the *Other* is as primordial of consciousness itself', noting that 'in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of duality – that of self and the Other'. The change in how the Other – those of a different religion, are viewed due to the practice of interfaith dialogue, can be largely associated with the Intergroup Contact Hypotheses, initially produced by American Social Psychologists Robin Williams (1947) and Gordon Allport (1954). Interfaith dialogue meetings firstly appear to constitute a 'situation' which 'fosters personal intimate intergroup contact' for British Muslims which leads to a number of positive impacts on the way people of other religions are viewed (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005, p. 263). A changing of views also appears to occur because interfaith dialogue and work often involves groups sharing the 'similar interests' whilst the activities promoted often 'cut across group lines' (Williams 1947). This perhaps leads to the creation of common in-group identity being created, also known as re-categorisation. Finally, working towards 'common goals' is an important contributing factor to the improvement of group relations, and appears to be experienced by the interviewees in their participation in interfaith (Allport 1954, p. 281).

The importance of an intimate encounter

A common assertion made by the interviewees was the importance of meeting those of other religions, having actual contact in face to face situations, and the impact that this

had on their reduction of prejudice. Liam expressed that 'the main reason' that his views regarding those of other religions was impacted on in the process of interfaith dialogue, was 'because you are able to put a human face to that religion' and by interaction, 'it prompts you to think and reassess anything that you may have felt previously' (Interview 11/07/15). Lydia also highlighted the importance of talking to individuals of other faiths on a 'personal level' and described how it enabled her, for example, to grasp a better understanding of the Christian belief in the Trinity:

'actually when you talk to people and ask them what it actually means, you hear them talking about it you realise, and for them, it actually makes sense, and it is not necessarily that they believe that there are three separate Gods' (Interview 14/07/15).

This situation which fosters intimate personal contact (Williams 1947) is explicitly expressed by Liam who emphasised that interfaith dialogue promotes greater understanding, providing the opportunity to 'actually speak to someone' where they 'tell you about what they believe and how valuable their beliefs are' (Interview 11/07/15). These responses appear to be similar to the findings of Charaniya and Walsh (2001, p. 199) who highlight 'how interreligious dialogue was different from learning about the Other through reading and formal classes', noting that those who participated in dialogue stressed its impact was due to 'sitting down with people who have had a completely different upbringing and viewpoint of life and the world' which is realised in a personal and intimate situation.

Reduction in prejudice and a more improved view of the Other through personal contact in interfaith dialogue and work may be due to a process of 'de-categorisation'. This occurs where 'group identities are deemphasised so that group members conceive of themselves as separate individuals' (Tausch and Hewstone 2010, p. 548). Although this does not happen intentionally during interfaith dialogue in the sense that the Other is still seen as part of a large out-group, through meeting at a personal level, it is likely that individual identities are accentuated. Lydia for example stated that 'when you know someone at a personal level' there is a recognition that the other people with whom she came into contact with are 'human beings with feelings and emotions...families...worries and all the same sorts of things that we have as well' (Interview 14/07/15). An important version of the de-categorisation approach is Brewer and Miller's (1984) personalisation perspective which 'suggests that contact should promote opportunities to get to know the out-group

members and disclose personal information' (Tausch and Hewstone 2010, p. 548). The interviewees spoke of events which occurred at a less formal level, more social events providing the chance to get to know one another and an example of these opportunities to disclose personal information. Liam for example, spoke of an 'annual cricket match' organised by his interfaith group, 'film nights' and other informal events which occurred in tangent to 'introducing theological beliefs to one another' and carrying out 'community and charity work' (Interview 11/07/15).

This opportunity to meet members of different religions and build relationships is important in breaking down stereotypes. Sadia explicitly stated that interfaith dialogue for her was about 'breaking stereotypes' in how British Muslims are seen by those of other religions and the wider British public, but also in the views that British Muslims take towards those of other religions (Interview 29/07/15). The example of the Israel-Palestine conflict was highlighted by a number of the interviewees, and Sadia noted that before participating in interfaith dialogue and carrying out interfaith work, she had 'never met a Jew', simply because there 'aren't many Jews' in her city, and described her experience as 'insightful' (Interview 29/07/15). Through participating in interfaith dialogue she met Jews who campaigned against 'discrimination that Muslims and Arabs face' in Israel and Palestine, which led her to conclude that 'there are so many like that, so many of them, they are against any discrimination against any human being of whatever faith so it did break a lot of stereotypes that I had' admitting that she had not known 'it all from the beginning' and thus emphasising the importance of interfaith work in prejudice reduction and deconstructing stereotypes (Interview 29/07/15).

Certainly, it appears that for British Muslims, contact with those of other religions through interfaith dialogue, leads to a reduction of prejudice by diminishing negative effects such as anxiety or threat whilst inducing positive effects such as empathy (Tausch and Hewstone 2010). A reduced perception of threat was noted by Sarah who emphasised that 'for me, you know, interfaith dialogue with good people reminds me that actually we have got enough room' (Interview 21/07/15). As shown in the creation of a sense of community in the form of an emotional community, interfaith dialogue promotes empathy with other religious groups, much of which is shown towards the British Muslim community due to the current political climate; Sarah providing an example of a Jewish Rabbi providing aid to the

Muslim community who attended a 'Bravanese Mosque in North London which was burned down' by a member of a radical far right group (Interview 29/07/15). Sarah also provided an example of empathy created and directed towards those of the Christian faith, remembering how at an interfaith event, she had heard of how 'Christians had been treated by Israeli forces in Jerusalem', noting that she 'shared the same concern' and that 'they cried together' (Interview 29/07/15). Through sharing 'hopes', 'fears' and 'concerns' with those of other faiths at a personal level, therefore, these positive effects such as empathy can be strengthened.

Interfaith dialogue promoting re-categorisation

The interviewees also implied that for British Muslims, a more improved view of the Other was encouraged through interfaith dialogue and work because they often found similarities in beliefs and values through contact with each other. Liam stressed that, for him, 'it is really interesting to learn a lot more about each other's faith and sort of see what makes people tick, see what people are driven by, and very often, you find that there is a whole lot more that binds us together than pulls us apart' (Interview 11/07/15). Sadia clearly expressed the similarities she experienced regarding religious teachings, recollecting the time when she read the Old Testament where she 'cried sometimes' when she 'came across verses' that 'are absolutely the exact same wording in Arabic in the Quran' (Interview 29/07/15). As well as common values, British Muslims who participate in interfaith also appear to share common goals with those of other faiths. Sadia noted that there are 'common values... especially between the Abrahamic faiths' (Interview 29/07/15). These were highlighted as being 'common goals in promoting community cohesion', 'eliminating all sorts of discrimination' and 'to focus on the common good of the community as a whole...' from social care to affordable housing to health care to education and employment' (Interview 29/07/15).

The importance of similarities has been noted by contact theorists. Williams (1947), believed that a crucial factor in contact was that the 'activities cut across group lines'. Allport's 'positive factors approach', similarly stresses the importance of 'common goals' and 'intergroup cooperation between groups' (Pettigrew and Troup 2006, p. 263). For Allport (1954, p. 276), 'only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in changed attitudes', showing the importance not only of common values, but

mutual ventures. Lydia for example spoke about an interfaith organisation who had 'campaigned' for the 'idea of a living wage' (Interview 14/07/15). Similarly, Liam advocated the importance of the joint projects between people of faith that his interfaith group had implemented, including a 'gardening project' and other 'charitable works' (Interview 11/07/15). It is therefore evident that interfaith dialogue and work not only often includes shared discussion on similarities or joint activities for the sake of mutual benefits for the religious communities, but it also involves working towards common goals based on collective values, which is an important factor in improving the view of the Other.

The realisation of shared beliefs, interests and values, in addition to working towards common goals, perhaps leads to a re-categorisation of those of other religions, from being members of an out-group, to being part of a common in-group. Dovidio et al (2009, p. 7), drawing 'on the theoretical foundations of Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory', emphasise 'the process of re-categorisation whereby members of different groups are induced to conceive of themselves as a single more inclusive superordinate group', rather than 'separate groups'. Responses from the interviewees suggest that this occurs to some degree due to the realisation of common values and interests which creates what could be perhaps termed a larger faith community. Lydia, as noted above, highlighted that, 'everyone is working towards, from a faith perspective, worshipping God and we have a lot of shared things that we understand about God and we can talk about God and we can work together for those reasons so it can be moral or ethical issues' (Interview 14/07/15). By 'focusing attention on the overarching category of superordinate group' contact in the form of interfaith dialogue and work can perhaps 'make salient similarities among members of the superordinate group' meaning that differences formerly emphasised between groups tend to fade into the background' (Krochik and Jost 2011, p. 159). This can perhaps be seen in the statements made by Liam that interfaith dialogue encouraged him to see that there is 'a whole lot more that binds us than pulls us apart' (Interview 11/07/15).

However, participation in interfaith dialogue appears not to dilute individual or group identity as the 'subgroup and superordinate group identity' are made 'simultaneously salient' (Hogg 2001, p. 73). Michael noted that the interfaith discussions and 'relationships do not need to be built on common agreement' and that 'we agree to disagree' through 'having an open conversation' about religion and this provides 'richness' to the relations

made (Interview 09/07/15). Michael highlighted that 'real mutual respect' can be built between those of different religions 'by getting to that level' where he is able to put aside the fact that the Other's belief systems 'violates' his own (Interview 09/07/15). Certainly, as Hopkins (2007, p. 682) notes 'while there are many different commonalities between those of different faiths' there are 'also important differences that really do make all the difference to faith group members and which they wish to be recognised and respected'. This was acknowledged by the interviewees who stated that this was an underlying tenet of their interfaith groups and relationships.

Harmonious relations are therefore likely to occur for British Muslims in their experience of interfaith dialogue and work as their religion remains distinct despite perhaps being reclassified under a banner of faith, or a member of a larger in-group constituting people of faith. This argument has been put forward by Hogg (2001, p. 73) who notes that 'inter-subgroup relations were considered more harmonious when the subgroups were salient within the context of a salient superordinate group'. This appeared to be acknowledged by Sadia who stated that 'it will never be the same but you know that is not a problem...I do not believe that unity means uniformity...we can all be united but we do not have to be the same' (Interview 29/07/15). Responses from the interviewees suggest that under a label of common faith they are able to 'find ways of respecting group difference even when one may believe that the Other's beliefs deviate from what one considers central to one's own identity' (Hopkins 2007, p. 683).

Chapter Seven: Discussion

As can be seen from the findings above, participation in interfaith dialogue and work appears to have an impact on British Muslims' perceptions of identity, sense of community and attitude towards the Other – those of other religions, with these changes occurring in various ways. The discussion below will expand on these conclusions and attempt to associate the importance of this practice to British Muslims.

Identity

Strengthening and confirmation of identities

These findings regarding the effects that participation in interfaith dialogue can have on identity are important in relation to contemporary issues surrounding British Muslim communities. Firstly, that British Muslims find that participating in dialogue and work with those of other faiths solidifies their view of Islam as distinct whilst similarly contributing positively to their role identities is important to note, as there are members and groups in British Muslim communities who believe interfaith has the ability to dilute Muslim identity (Hopkins and Hopkins 2006). This is similar to the findings of Takim (2004, p. 346) who notes that 'understanding the faith of others should strengthen rather than weaken a person's commitment to his or her tradition' largely because those of religious groups are 'are able to better express' what they believe and 'in the process understand more deeply the meaning of what it means to be committed to a particular faith tradition'. Secondly, these findings suggest that participation in interfaith may perhaps provide an avenue for British Muslims struggling to ground themselves in an identity which has been cited as a major issue in recent research regarding British Muslim communities (Geaves 2005; Kabir 2010; Meer 2010). Through participation, it may be that British Muslims 'see themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant others' (Hogg et al 1995, p. 260), therefore strengthening their religious identity, whilst their role identity may be confirmed, hence improving self-esteem (Ibid p. 257).

Ready for encounter

Notwithstanding this, it should be highlighted that the interviewees appeared firmly grounded and comfortable in their identity prior to taking part in interfaith dialogue. Sadia believed that she had 'never felt' that her identity was 'fragile' and stated that 'I am very confident in my faith, Islam, and I am a confident Muslim' (Interview 29/07/15). Similarly,

Lydia noted that as she became more 'confident' in her faith, it became 'a lot easier' to 'talk about being a Muslim' (Interview 14/07/15). These statements highlight that for British Muslims, being secure and comfortable in terms of your identity as a Muslim will likely increase the benefits of participating in interfaith dialogue and work, and perhaps to a large extent is in fact, a precursor to taking part in this activity. As Charaniya and Walsh (2001, p. 189) found, taking note of Fowler's (1995) conjunctive faith stage, those who took part in interfaith dialogue and received the benefits of participation, were 'ready for encounters with traditions other than their own' and 'through these significant encounters in the interreligious dialogue process participants were challenged to let go of old conceptualisations of self and their world and to embrace new understandings'. Certainly, as shown from the findings of this project, participation in interfaith dialogue and work is likely to have an impact on identity in various ways, whilst strengthening religious identity as a Muslim, however, the ability to be more inclusive is perhaps the result of being 'secure in his or her own identity' (Smith 2004, p. 167). The responses of the interviewees therefore suggest that a degree of confidence in one's identity, particularly religious identity, is likely to improve the experience and benefits of participating in interfaith dialogue and work.

Community

A sense of belonging

The findings above suggest that participation in interfaith dialogue can act as an avenue for 'generating people's sense of belonging' – an important idea related to community (Crow and Allan 1994, p. 6). This may occur through the perception of being part of a symbolically constructed community that acts to achieve social justice and environmental betterment with common perceptions regarding religious motivations. Alternatively community and attachment occur from geographical communities being enhanced and appearing more prevalent from built relationships through local interfaith groups. This is a pertinent topic for British Muslims particularly as their place in the public sphere and in British society has recently been called into question with 'Muslim identity being seen as the illegitimate child of British Multiculturalism' (Modood 2010, p. 121), which, similar to problems with identity, has certainly had negative effects on some British Muslims (Modood 2003; Lyon 2005). Interfaith dialogue and work may be able to increase

feelings of community attachment as noted by Sarah who emphasised that it actually increased her sense of 'belonging to this country' (Interview 21/07/15).

Supporting one another

Participation may also help counter negative and accusatory narratives suggesting that Muslims do not fit in with the social fabric of British society, are self-segregating and are absent from the wider community (Phillips 2006; Modood 2006). In addition, as Liam noted, interfaith is an important opportunity to meet 'allies...amongst people of faith' (Interview 11/07/15), associated with the self-help form of community. This form of community which bears certain similarities with ideas surrounding the creation of emotional communities, may be crucial for British Muslims due to the contemporary situation in which they find themselves and the openness in which they can practice their faith increasingly coming under attack (Birt 2006; Modood 2006). This group, perhaps more traditionally for minorities, reflected the fact that the Anglican Church has taken the role of 'protecting the public role of religion in what is seen as a secular society' (Birt 2006, p. 688). However with the rise in the Muslim population and increase in the amount of Islamic institutions, organisations, and the number of interfaith groups in Britain, British Muslims are perhaps beginning to believe that they can be of more importance and influential in these mutual aid communities and self-help groups. Through interfaith work, Michael noted that 'let's just say that the government introduced some new legislation...it's a stronger message...stood together united and saying we are not happy with this legislation, we are not happy with this approach' (Interview 07/09/15). It can therefore be concluded from the data that interfaith dialogue and work importantly provides an avenue for the creation of a community which could be described as a mutual aid or self help group. For British Muslims this can be beneficial when focusing on certain issues affecting the Muslim community, or people of faith in Britain in general.

Perceptions of the Other and prejudice reduction

Intimate contact, de-categorisation and re-categorisation

As alluded to in the findings with regards to improved views of the Other, the data gathered presented how interfaith dialogue reduced prejudice. One way that this occurs is through a process of de-categorisation, allowing participants of interfaith dialogue to see the encountered Other as an individual, to some extent disassociated from the group in

which they have been identified. However, it also appears that re-categorisation of others occurs through dialogue, with commonalities naturally emphasised in terms of religious beliefs and similar values and goals – perhaps to be expected as evidenced by the formation of community through interfaith dialogue. Initially, this may be seen as an argument against British Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue in that it has the potential to ‘drum down something as powerful as Islam and wishy wash everything into one religion’ (Hopkins 2007, p. 687). On the contrary, on closer inspection, it appears that subgroup identities remain as evidenced by Michael’s statement that the Other is ‘accepted’ for their beliefs and for who they are as an individual as well as a member of a different religion (Interview 09/07/15). ‘Subgroup and Superordinate group identity [are] simultaneously made salient’ therefore allowing the distinction of being a British Muslim to fall into place with being a person of faith (Hogg 2001, p. 73). This approach to interfaith and the contact it involves therefore promotes the ‘recognition of original group identities within an overriding superordinate identity’ and can ‘ameliorate identity threat that can otherwise exacerbate intergroup bias’s (Dovidio et al 2009, p. 7).

Bridging the three concepts

This research has attempted to show the importance of interfaith dialogue, and the influence this activity has on concepts of identity, community and perceptions of the Other for British Muslims. Some previous research on interfaith dialogue (Charaniya and Walsh 2001; Reedjik 2010; Hedges 2014) has discussed the concepts of identity and Otherness together, though ideas of community are rarely included in these considerations. The findings from this research show that although these are distinct individual concepts, there are ways in which they overlap and influence each other. Firstly, social identity – in brief the groups that one identifies with, was shown to be strengthened in terms of links to Islam and Muslim identity but the interviewees also suggested a creation and strengthening of an overarching faith identity. Social identity is also important in terms of contact and the changing view of the Other as the ‘process of re-categorisation’ draws ‘on the theoretical foundations of Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation theory’ (Dovidio et al 2009, p. 5). This phenomenon occurs because re-categorisation involves altering the in-group and the out-group and the ways they are perceived, both important aspects in the creation of

social identity. Thus interfaith dialogue and work is likely to impact British Muslims' social identity linearly to a development in their perception of the Other.

Social identity is likely to be associated with community as influences on social identity may come from the construction of an interfaith community working towards achieving social justice for the purpose of God. The construction of emotional communities and self help or mutual aid groups may also provide another referent to the social identity of British Muslims, as a person gains a sense of who they are based on the groups in which they belong. In terms of interfaith dialogue, the group is more abstract, with wider faith communities more visibly, and structurally formed (James 1890, Tajfel 1979). Community is also likely to overlap with identity for those taking part in interfaith dialogue, in particular social identity, because both concepts rely on comparisons to an out-group, for example secularism. Certainly, a direct link between community and identity has been made by Cohen (1985, p. 118), suggesting that people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.

Chapter Eight: Concluding Thoughts

This study has attempted to give an insight to the relatively recent, but increasingly popular and important practice of British Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue and work. Through assessing the impact this work can have upon identity, the formation of a sense of community and perceptions towards the Other, I have endeavoured to portray and record the experiences of British Muslims who partake in interfaith. Evidently, this study has been restricted to the insights of only a small sample of British Muslims who participate in interfaith dialogue, and the ‘issue of generalisation’ in terms of the extent to which the ‘findings from a study based on a sample can be said to be of relevance beyond the sample and context of research itself’ is important (Lewis and Richie 2003, p. 264). Issues of reliability and validity are significant when attempting to generalise any research and the ability to replicate studies has been questioned extensively: because there is no one reality to capture, usually proposed by constructivists (Hughes and Sharrock 1997), phenomena under study are often too complex or tied up in context to replicate (Lincoln and Guba 1985); and because qualitative research is dynamic it should not be repeated (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). I would argue however, that representational generalisations can occur – in other words British Muslims partaking in interfaith dialogue, to an extent, have similar experiences to the ones highlighted here. Taking note of Lewis and Richie’s work (2003), however, I understand that this can only occur within a particular framework taking into account factors such as research design and conduct, and display of research methods.

The responses from the interviewees suggest that British Muslim identity was affected in a number of ways through participating in interfaith dialogue and work. This is likely due to the idea of identity ‘having considerable variability in both its conceptual meaning and its theoretical role’ (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 284). In terms of the influence that interfaith dialogue and work had on the social identity of those interviewed, it appears that interfaith strengthened their affiliation with Islam whilst simultaneously contributing to the creation of a larger spiritual identity. Identity Theory can be used to show the impact that participation in interfaith has in relation to the roles of the individual as participation is seen as a role in itself.

Participation in interfaith dialogue and work also largely impacted upon the creation of community for British Muslims. A symbolic community was constructed through the intensification of common symbols, including the worshipping of God and carrying out voluntary work through projects of shared interest. Similarly, emotional communities may be created through interfaith dialogue and work where members share similar passions whilst overlapping with the idea of self-help or mutual aid groups; the interviewees emphasised the importance of support gained for collective interests, particularly within a secular atmosphere. Community in terms of 'geographical expression or locality' (Greene 2014, p. 127) appears also to be enhanced through participation in interfaith dialogue and work. A 'sense of community' therefore appeared to be created at both a relational and geographic level (McMillan and Chavis 1986). These different forms of community that are created through participating in interfaith dialogue and the activities that it often entails appear to collectively form a sense of community (Ibid, 1986). A number of elements compose the sense of community: *membership*, including the existence of boundaries, a common symbol system and a sense of belonging or identification, *influence*, in other words the ability to influence and be influenced by the group, *integration and fulfilment of needs*, consisting of competence within the group and shared values, and a *shared emotional connection*, including positive interaction, shared experiences and spiritual bonds (Ibid 1986). Participation in interfaith dialogue forms communities in different ways and they appear to be both relational and geographical. The diverse and different ways, however, in which community is formed contributes to a sense of community as shown by the responses of the interviewees.

Having established that the idea of Otherness is evident in all societies throughout history (De Beauvoir 1949, Foucault 1978), and that Othering is important in terms of its effect on social identity (Tajfel 1978), and the symbolic construction of community (Cohen 1985), the findings have shown how the practice of interfaith dialogue alters, and generally improves the perception of the Other. Interfaith dialogue and work can be seen as an example of intergroup contact and comparable to Allport's contact thesis (Allport 1954). Rachel Reedjik (2010, p. 2) highlights this in her work on interfaith dialogue between members of the Abrahamic faiths, noting that 'as a concept [Allport's contact thesis] it is closely related to the views of prejudice reduction and interreligious hermeneutics with

which Jews, Christians and Muslims enter into dialogue'. Certainly, Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 44-45) in their seminal work regarding Social Constructionism, state that 'the Other may confront me with attitudes and acts that contradict' a pattern of unfriendly relations in 'face to face situations' and therefore 'both misinterpretation and hypocrisy are more difficult to sustain in face to face interaction'. The responses of British Muslims' interviewed regarding their experiences of interfaith dialogue and work, appear to affirm that in general, direct and more intimate contact with those who are considered as Other, aids in the reduction of prejudice. Re-categorisation also appears to occur leading to the creation of a larger out-group, including the Other. This does not however diminish Muslim identity or Islam as being a distinct religion.

Participation in interfaith dialogue is likely to have a more positive impact on the development of the viewing of the Other than, for example, contact occurring in a work place. This is not only due to the opportunity for people of different faiths to discuss theological differences and similarities, thus fostering a greater understanding of the Other, but as Williams (1947) and Allport (1954) note, prejudice reduction through contact is likely to occur when members of different groups work together on shared projects or goals. This unification more likely occurs within interfaith groups and relationships, as it often involves working together on issues that concurrently effect members of different faiths; as Lydia noted, for example, diverse individuals united to discuss the issue of burials in the Jewish and Muslim faiths (Interview 14/07/15). Similarly through interfaith, those of different religions are also able to work on shared concerns and values such as achieving social justice. Furthermore, direct participation in interfaith dialogue and work is more likely to bring about both de-categorisation of members of other religions whilst also re-categorising members of other religions in to a larger out-group. Participation in interfaith dialogue and work is also likely to improve views of the other in comparison to a faith based debate where members of different groups attempt to negate the Other's theoretical bases for their beliefs. This is largely because the debate will lead to the social identity of members of different faiths coming under threat, potentially leading to a reduction in self-esteem (Branscombe and Wann 2006).

Clearly then, for British Muslims, participation in interfaith dialogue and work can have a positive impact on identity, community and perceptions of the Other. Taking into

account that I have interviewed those involved in interfaith for a number of years, suggesting they hold positive views of their dialogue groups and the practice itself, whilst also having leadership or organisational roles in interfaith groups or at their mosques, realities perhaps encouraging them to promote interfaith dialogue and work, the responses, nevertheless highlight the importance interfaith can have for British Muslims. The positive impacts that interfaith dialogue and work can have on ideas surrounding identity and community is pertinent due to contemporary issues facing Muslim communities in Britain (Geaves 2005, Lyon 2005; Modood 2006). Interfaith dialogue through ideas of emotional community and the creation of mutual aid or self help groups, may also provide an avenue of support when tackling issues that affect British Muslims or religious groups generally. Finally, as this study has shown, interfaith dialogue and work for British Muslims can improve the viewing of the Other without, as some worry, diminishing Muslim identity, diluting Islam as a religion or creating confusion over identity.

There are, however, questions that have arisen both from the relevant literature on the subject from the research process itself. Thus it appears that there is scope for further study regarding the types of interfaith dialogue and work that are most beneficial to British Muslims. As highlighted in the introduction, there is some debate over which form of interfaith dialogue is more useful. This certainly is not an easy question, particularly as different variations of interfaith dialogue and work have alternative aims and objectives whilst they often overlap. However, there appears to be some clear contention between those who promote theological dialogue (Cheetham 2012; Laing 2012), though there is perhaps further dispute over who should participate in this form of interfaith, and those who believe interfaith should focus largely upon shared aims and objectives for community benefit. As noted, in reality, interfaith rarely takes one form and may encompass different aspects of these variations. Despite this, further research could perhaps compare the experiences that British Muslims have through participating in the different forms of interfaith dialogue, studying its benefits, and potentially using concepts of identity and community and their influence on perceptions of the Other to gauge the impact of these methods of dialogue.

Conducting this research has confirmed and grounded my initial thoughts that interfaith dialogue and work can benefit British Muslims in a variety of ways. I hope that this

research serves to promote this reality, and I am optimistic that further research will help to detail the importance of this activity for British Muslims, whilst providing a more detailed approach in how to bring about these positive experiences. Certainly, with increased participation, British Muslims have the opportunity to improve this beneficial practice and see the broad and diverse benefits extensively reproduced.

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Interviews

- Michael (09/07/15)
- Liam (11/07/15)
- Lydia (14/07/15)
- Sarah (21/07/15)
- Sadia (29/07/15)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent Document

Information on the Project: This interview is being carried out for a dissertation studying British Muslims experiences of interfaith dialogue, associated with the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK at Cardiff University. The purpose is therefore to understand how British Muslims understand and evaluate their experiences of partaking in interfaith dialogue and the affect that it has had upon them.

Your participation: Your participation in this study will involve an interview lasting around 30 - 45 minutes with a single interviewer. You will be asked questions regarding your experiences of partaking in interfaith dialogue. You are not required to answer any question and may ask to stop the interview at any time.

Confidentiality: The interview is planned to be recorded. At any point, you can ask the interviewer to stop the recording. Your name and any identifying information will not be included in any part of the report on this research and all information will remain confidential.

Benefits and Risks: Your participation in this project is greatly appreciated and it is hoped that it will help to enhance the understanding of British Muslim experiences of partaking in interfaith dialogue. There is little risk involved with this study, however if you are to feel emotionally distressed or uncomfortable at any time you can stop the interview, and your participation in this study if you feel it necessary.

By signing this consent form, I certify that I _____

agree to the terms of this study.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

1) General

- Could you please just confirm that you have read the informed consent document

2) Interfaith Dialogue Participation

- What would you define interfaith dialogue/work as being or consisting off
- I would first like to begin by asking you generally about your participation in interfaith dialogue.
- How long have you been involved with interfaith work?
- What has/does your participation consist of?
- How often do you participate in interfaith?
- Do you take an organisational or leadership role in interfaith work?

3) Identity / Community / Other

- Do you find that participating in interfaith work strengthens your identification with Islam as religion and British Muslims ?(Identity / Community)
- Do you see your participation in interfaith work as one of your roles? (Identity)
 - Similar to roles such as your job or a member of the local muslim community
- Would you say then that interfaith is part of your identity?
- How important are your interfaith relationships? (Identity)
- Do you feel that your identity is impacted on in the short term or does it affect other parts of your life? (Identity / Community / Other)
 - For example in the way that you interact with others?
 - Can you give me an example of this?
- Does taking part in interfaith work impact on the way in which you compare Islam to other religions or groups in society. i.e. do you compare Islam less with Christianity/Judaism and more with secular society? (Identity / Community)
 - For example does the view of those who you perceive to be different to you change?
- Do you feel part of a larger community through taking part in interfaith work? (Community / Other)
 - Can you explain how you feel that this comes about?
- Does your local interfaith group or the relationships that you have built through interfaith work create a feeling of community at a local level? (Community)
- By taking part in interfaith in Dialogue do you feel emotionally connected with those of other religions? (Community / Other)
 - Can you give me some examples of this?
- Do you feel that you have common goals during interfaith work?(Community / Other)
 - Do you believe this help fulfils personal needs or wants?

- **Do you feel more positively about those of other religions?**
 - Can you explain to me particular experiences that have encouraged this change to occur?
 - Do you think this occurs for people of all religions?
- **Does this take place just at a local level or do you see all members of these other religious groups in a better light? (Other)**
 - How does this happen?
 - Can you explain to me particular experiences that have encouraged this change to occur?

Appendix 3: Example of transcribed interview

IP: But me personally, my personal input would be religiously to represent Islam and Muslims and the Muslim point of view, and beliefs, I guess with regards to whatever particular issues we might be discussing and to represent my community on a general social and community level erm holding a door open really to other communities whether its if you want help, if there is any way we can help, with assist with, we might need help, recently with the Charlie Hebdo incidents and the Charlie Hebdo shootings whatever in Paris, it was quite nice that the interfaith community through open their doors and came to me really and said to me if there is anything that we can do, if there is anything that we can help with publicity work or press releases, that kind of thing that was very much appreciated because at that time, the community did start to feel you know, there was a danger of becoming quite insular -

IE: The Muslim community?

IP: Yeah yeah absolutely, feeling that we have been kind of focused on, you know there was a magnifying glass being pointed squarely at the British Muslim community in you know, it has happened in France is anything going to happen in °Town° or in the UK, So things like that have been very very appreciative, of and likewise if there is anything that we can do to help other communities

[then

IE: [Yeah

IP: Any assistance then that is always there and that is always part of the work we do from an interfaith level.

IE: And I mean perhaps two questions, how long have you been involved and how often now do you participate?

IP: With the interfaith, I started going along with errr maybe about four or five years ago, there was some other people who were running there was one Muslim Brother who was chair of the °Towns° interfaith group, he subsequently moved away and he was kind of encouraging me along to come along to the meetings and events because I have been involved with other local

projects and have been enthusiastic with other community work so I decided to go along, met a few people and found it really really interesting. Errm it was nice to speak to people of other faith and it not being in a kind of debate or confrontation, not a confrontation but in a kind of, in a debating kind of way or just through the media or that kind of thing, it was nice to meet people face to face, see what we shared as fellow °members of the town° you know sharing and getting other peoples perspectives on certain sort of local issues and things like that, getting a wider understanding of other faiths whether that is Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism errrm Bahai, unification church, Buddhism it was really interesting to learn a lot more about faith and sort of see what makes people tick, see what people are driven by, and very often, you find that there is a whole lot more that binds us and binds use together than pulls us apart there is a lot more that we have in common than not ok and that is always surprising.