

An ‘Islamised Australian Way of Life’: Developing an Islamic Social Capital Framework

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The data presented in this paper shows that the participants actively contribute towards building ‘Islamic social capital’ through the pursuit of religious education outside of their local mosques. The data further suggest that the participants’ understanding of Islamic values encouraged them to participate in non-Muslim social networks. These values focus on the importance of ‘neighbourliness’, inclusively, equality, fairness and social justice. This participation in non-Muslim social networks is further supported by what the participants understand to be an overlap between Islamic values and ‘normal’ Australian values.

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Introduction

Some immigrant communities have managed to prosper due to their capacity to build social capital resources (Pieterse, 2003). Little is known, however, about the building of social capital by Muslim-Australians. In order to bridge this gap in the literature, this paper explores how Muslim-Australian migrants' subjective understandings of the Islamic faith assist in the development of social capital.

This paper forms part of a larger ethnographic study which explores the social support available to first and second generation Muslim-Australian migrants through their social networks. The data presented in this paper show that in contrast to recent suggestions by researchers, mosques are not central to the Muslim participants' understandings of social capital (Lewis, 2006; Zokaei & Phillips, 2000). Rather, the participants in this study were found to actively contribute towards building 'Islamic social capital' through the pursuit of religious education outside of their local mosques. Further to this, while theorists have suggested that diversity in social networks can have negative implications for social capital, my data demonstrate that Muslim *and* non-Muslim social ties serve to facilitate social capital for the Muslim participants of this study (Farooqi, 2007; Putnam, 2006). This is due in part to what the participants understand as an overlap in Islamic and Australian values.

I begin by reviewing the use of social capital as a concept in contemporary social science literature. I introduce the concept of 'Islamic social capital' as proposed by Farooqi (2006), and describe how I have developed this concept for the purpose of my study. This will be followed by an overview of the methodology of my study.

Finally I present data that will show some preliminary findings about the role of Islamic values in the development and maintenance of social capital.

Social capital

The concept of social capital has remained difficult to define, despite enjoying popularity in recent years (Islam, Merlo, et al., 2006). Bourdieu sees social capital as ‘the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network’ (1986: 248). This definition focuses on the ability to capitalise on the assets that result from social connections. These assets can be material, such as resources and services, or non-material, such as support or prestige. In contrast, Putnam defines social capital as ‘social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness’ (Putnam, 2007:137). The focus here is on the norms and values which he suggests underpin effective networks, such as trust and civic participation. These two definitions epitomise the distinction between what has been referred to as ‘relational social capital’ and ‘institutional social capital’, with the former relating to an individual’s ability to derive material or non-material assets from social connections, and the latter referring to the values and norms which encourage collective action (Prendergast, 2005). Neither theorist has focused much on religion, although other research has suggested that religion offers ‘a dimension of social support and... networks of relationships that can be described as a social capital resource’ (Smith, 2001:128). Religion therefore needs to be considered as a forum for developing social connections, and as a forum through which values and norms are transmitted.

In order to gain a complete picture of social capital, I argue that it is important to consider both *what* brings people together, and *how* these connections can be utilised, particularly in the case of minority religious communities who may not share the culture of their host community. Farooqi (2006) demonstrates how these two understandings can be brought together in his exploration of factors which drive network formation in relation to Muslim community development. As Farooqi describes it, ‘Islamic social capital is the networking that helps to create the linkages, which in turn motivate people to follow up the Islamic conventions and norms’ (Farooqi, 2006). This networking is driven by Islamic values which he suggests are focused upon ideas of ‘social well-being’, ‘brotherhood’, ‘socio-economic justice’, and the ‘continued development of human potential’ (Farooqi, 2006:114). In this way, Farooqi’s (2006) understanding of ‘Islamic social capital’ encapsulates both Putnam (2007) and Bourdieu’s (1986) understandings of social capital, as it considers both the values that underpin social networks, and how these networks are used to reinforce Islamic solidarity and values.

Farooqi (2006) argues that Islamic social capital can be undermined by factors which erode solidarity, such as the process of migration. Similarly, Putnam suggests that ethnic diversity may decrease social capital, because people living in ethnically diverse communities seem to ‘hunker down’, or socially isolate themselves (2007: 149). Bourdieu (1986) however, refers to a minimum degree of social cohesion that makes it possible for individuals to develop and capitalise on social capital resources. He terms this ‘minimum homogeneity’, and in contrast to Farooqi (2006) and Putnam (2007), it implies that individuals can negotiate relationship boundaries based on subjectively defined notions of solidarity that do not have to be as obvious as religion

or ethnicity. As will be demonstrated in this study, this solidarity might be derived from the idea of shared values – in particular an overlap in what the participants understand to be ‘Islamic values’ and ‘Australian values’. The idea that Islamic and Australian values are synonymous has been explored in a recent research report which assessed the state of relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians (IDA, 2007). This study found that Muslims believe that some Australian values are synonymous with Islamic values, including equality, fairness, reciprocity, socio-economic justice and honesty. Other studies also find that Australian culture is understood through similar democratic ideals (Phillips and Smith, 2000).

I suggest that social capital can most usefully be understood as the capacity to capitalise upon resources that are created through active participation in social networks. These networks rely on a perception of shared values which work to encourage social participation, and in turn such values reinforce social boundaries. In this case, Islamic values that are seen to increase social participation and solidarity might be usefully interpreted as increasing ‘Islamic social capital’. Like Bourdieu, this understanding of social capital focuses on the social assets that are available through connections with social networks, and the shared values which facilitate the development of durable relationships and maximise the ability to capitalise on social assets. Within this paper, only non-material social assets (such as religious and moral support) will be explored in relation to social capital.

Literature on social capital in relation to Muslim communities places an emphasis on the role mosques in facilitating social capital (Lewis, 2006; Zokaei & Phillips, 2000). This makes it difficult to understand how social capital may be produced or used by

individuals in their everyday lives outside of the mosque, or how this process may occur between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. To contribute to this understanding, the data presented in this paper will build upon the argument that Islamic values are a key facilitator of Islamic social capital. While Farooqi (2006) discusses the values that underpin Islamic social capital in strict reference to Muslim communities, I argue that Islamic values also facilitate valuable connections between Muslims and non-Muslims. These connections are facilitated by a perceived relationship between Islamic values (such as 'social justice'), and what the participants see as complementary Australian values (such as the idea of a 'fair go'). I suggest that the social construction of values constitutes an important resource that helps to establish a sense of 'commonality' that the participants use to construct meaningful social connections with non-Muslims.

The next section discusses the methodology of my study.

Methodology

This ethnographic study has two components. The first component involved attending five seminars hosted by various Muslim community organisations in South Australia. I also conducted informal interviews with representatives from five Muslim organisations, two of which are affiliated with mosques, and I visited a further three mosques. The second component involved five in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions. These interviews covered family and friendship groups, new friends and acquaintances, sporting or hobby groups, and community

and charity organizations. The mosque, Muslim organisations and knowledge of Muslim services were also discussed.

Participants were either first or second generation Muslim-Australians, aged between twenty-one and twenty-nine years of age. All were in full time or part time employment, and they were tertiary educated. Two participants were of Pakistani descent, two were of Bosnian descent and one of Afghani descent. Participants were recruited through the organisations I visited; therefore participants' pseudonyms will not be linked to age, ethnicity or organisational membership to ensure anonymity. Due to this sampling method, the findings of this study are not representative of the wider Muslim-Australian population. Despite this limitation, the findings contribute to valuable knowledge about the creation and maintenance of social connections both within and outside the Muslim-Australian community.

Being a non-Muslim researcher engaged in a project that is both topical and political, I acknowledge the potential for participants to engage in image management strategies. The ethnographic component of the project meant that I was privy to events where I was able to witness non-Muslim participation, and that participants were familiar with me prior to our formal interview. The participants understood that I had an interest in and knowledge about Islam, which further facilitated rapport.

The next section will use participant quotes to explore the concept of Islamic social capital, drawing only upon the data derived from the in-depth interviews.

Practice what you preach

The participants discussed their participation within mosques and Muslim organisations, and how they felt about their mosques' position within the Muslim and non-Muslim community in Australia. While all the participants attended mosque regularly, they did not perceive it as a primary source of social capital. For example, when I asked Tasneem about the role of the mosque, she thought that 'people are now so disconnected to it, and they just come there to pray'. Waleed echoes this sentiment, explaining that he doesn't have any friends through his mosque, and that his socialisation through the mosque is mainly confined to Ramadan festivities. What these comments suggest is that the mosque is seen as a place of prayer for the participants, but not a place to facilitate social connections. This stands in contrast to suggestions that mosques are important sources of social capital for Muslim communities (Lewis, 2006; Zokaei & Phillips, 2000).

All of the participants interviewed pursue some form of Islamic scholarship outside their local mosque. This includes informal Quran readings and discussions with peers, scheduled weekend classes held at community centres and libraries, Islamic tertiary studies, and attending seminars held by various independent Muslim organisations around South Australia. Ahmed explains that it's 'One of the parts of the religion, you know, the first word that was delivered to [the] Prophet was "*Iqra*"! You know, "Read"! So... I'm basing everything on those principles'.

Participants seek, and in many cases organise, opportunities to learn about Islam. The participants hear about and join small, independent Muslim groups, which provide a place for them to learn about their religion, and to socialise with other youth who similarly want to reconnect with their religion. These religiously-based social activities therefore signify an ideal context for the development of non-material social capital resources, such as religious and emotional support.

While the desire to learn about Islamic values features as a precursor to joining religious groups, the desire to act in accordance with Islamic values also encourages involvement in non-Muslim groups. These groups include sporting groups, book clubs, environmental programs, and volunteer work for migrant and refugee services, aged care services, and youth programs. Samina comments that ‘Practically applying [Islam by] doing community work and organising events’ helps her to enact and embody her Islamic values. In a similar way, Waleed describes the rationale for his involvement in an Islamic community program as a desire to ‘Apply Australian values to Islam, and employ Islam in everyday life’. Tasneem cites her obligation to God as the incentive for her volunteer work:

Because it’s my responsibility to take care of the environment I live in.

Because God has given it to me as a trust... not to destroy it, but to look after it, [and] the people around me.

All of the participants engage in civic activity to varying degrees, especially through volunteering their time to both Islamic groups and secular, not for profit

organisations. Their reasons for doing so are based on their need to both educate themselves about Islam and the desire to apply those teachings and values to their everyday lives – to practice what they preach. What they preach is that both Islamic and Australian values can be applied in a positive way that can yield benefits for Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike. This participation in Muslim and non-Muslim groups extends also to Muslim and non-Muslim sociability at the interpersonal level, which will now be discussed.

The ties that bind

Throughout the interviews I asked the participants to talk about the people that they feel close to, and the importance of these relationships. Ahmed spoke about the importance of having Muslim friends to ‘encourage’ him to act according to Islamic values:

We are human beings and we make mistakes [pause] like [if I] start drinking alcohol... my other Muslim friend would come to me and say, ‘You know that’s not right. Maybe you should cut it out’.

Ahmed’s comment suggests that his Muslim friends support his adherence to Islamic values, such as alcoholic abstinence. According to Samina, her Muslim friends ‘inspire’ her to think about and apply her Islamic values, but she also suggests that her non-Muslim friends provide a similar incentive:

They're curious, they'll ask you questions... and sometimes you don't know the answer and you're like, I should know the answer! If I believe it I should know why I'm doing it. And so that kind of makes you go and learn.

Iris also makes it clear that religious support can be provided by friends who are not Muslim:

Like sometimes I don't wear my hijab perfectly, right, so hair will come out and they'll... warn me, 'Hey, your hijab is coming undone. Don't you want to fix that?', you know? And I'll be like, 'Geez man! You're more Muslim than me now. Far out!'

While such friendships with non-Muslims are understood to support Islamic values, Islamic values are also seen to support their friendships. Ahmed comments that Islam encourages him to 'Approach [his neighbours] from a nice Islamic perspective', something which he discusses doing in relation to his daily 'chats' with his elderly neighbour. He comments that he doesn't 'Care if you're not religious, you know, there's no compulsion in religion', and that he has 'A lot of Muslim and non-Muslim friends' that he is willing to help. Tasneem believes that everyone is equal under God, and should therefore be equal in her mind also. This was not always the case, as Tasneem explains:

Before realising some of the teachings of Islam, I must admit... I thought that there was no way for me to be able to be good friends with people of other

faiths... And that we could have same visions of goodness, no matter where we come from.

This quote suggests that Tasneem's new found understanding of Islam, which has developed through her participation in Muslim groups and networks, makes it possible to be 'good friends' with non-Muslims, because people should not be differentiated by faith. For the participants, the success of a relationship comes down to a 'common vision' of what is 'right'. This could come from an Islamic perspective, or from a more secular notion of social justice. Tasneem suggests that the success of her social connections has to do with a similar 'vision of life':

For example... with the non-Muslim friends that come and help with the (environmental program), I find more commonality with them than with some Muslims who live like me in everyday life, but their vision of life is very different than my own.

Samina also discusses her Islamic values as 'normal' everyday values. Speaking about Islamic values she says:

It's just your normal, like, what anyone would really agree with you know? I think the basic values [are] the same really, like honesty, [pause] trustworthiness, you know, giving everyone a fair go.

The idea of a 'fair go' is quintessentially Australian (Phillips and Smith, 2002), yet Samina has no trouble integrating this value, with its underlying premise of fairness, with those of her Islamic education. Waleed also believes that the 'Islamic and Australian life do not clash. They are very compatible'. He tells me that he leads an 'Islamised Australian way of life', which he suggests requires knowledge of both Islamic and Australian values and an ability to reconcile the two. This belief that Islamic values are complementary to Australian values facilitates the development of non-Muslim social networks for the participants. This finding supports what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as 'minimum homogeneity', as the participants draw parallels between their Islamic 'way of life', 'visions of goodness' and 'basic values', and what they see as 'normal' Australian values such as 'a fair go'. These parallels create a shared vision, which forms the foundations for the participants' relationships with Muslim and non-Muslim people alike, and provide diversity and scope to the social capital resources at their disposal.

Conclusion

My definition of Islamic social capital focuses on the social assets which are available through individuals' social connections through their social networks. These networks are developed through and supported by the participants' understanding of Islamic values. Participants reported high levels of mosque attendance, but this attendance did not necessarily transfer into a source of social capital for them. Rather, the data suggest that the participants actively sought and created opportunities for participation in educational and civic groups and that the learning and application of Islamic values served as a catalyst to these social connections.

The data further suggest that Islamic values encourage participation in non-Muslim social networks. These values focus on the importance of ‘neighbourliness’, inclusively, equality, fairness and social justice. The participants’ involvement in non-Muslim social networks is further supported by their understanding of an overlap in the values of their Islamic education, and those held by the wider Australian community. These findings suggest that ethnic and religious diversity do not have to erode social solidarity, but rather that the opposite might be possible – that the impetus is on people to discover the values which can hold society together, irrespective of religion, rather than those which may keep people apart.

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