

Working with Muslim Youths

Understanding the Values and Beliefs of Islamic Discourse

David R. Hodge

January 2002. Accepted October 18, 2000.

Contents

Islam—A Diverse Construct	3
Significant Islamic Beliefs and Values	4
Conflict between Islamic and Secular Discourses	7
Possible Value Conflicts in School Settings	8
Advocating for Muslim Students	9
Advocacy and Self-Examination	11
General Practice Implications	13
Interventions	14
Conclusion	15
References	15

Muslims constitute a significant and growing percentage of American youths, yet no articles have appeared in the social work literature to orient social workers to this population. This oversight may result in ineffective, or possibly even detrimental, practice outcomes with Muslim youths. This article reviews the nature of Islamic discourse, significant Islamic values, and potential value-based conflicts with the dominant secular discourse. The article concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive and effective practice with Muslim youths.

Key words: adolescents; Islam; Muslims; religious diversity; youths

It is estimated that the percentage of Muslim students in the public school system in the United States may exceed 5 percent (Carter & El Hindi, 1999). The rapidly expanding Muslim population, currently four to six million (Smith, 1999), in conjunction with relatively high birth rates (Haddad & Smith, 1996), suggests that Muslim youths' presence in the public school system will continue to be significant. Yet, no articles have appeared in the social work literature to orient social workers to Muslim youths, and social workers are not likely to have been exposed to this population during their graduate training (Canda & Furman, 1999).

This oversight may have serious ramifications. Because Islam represents a distinct cosmology, many Muslims have had difficulty integrating into U.S. society while concurrently maintaining their Islamic identity (Haddad & Smith, 1996). Consequently, when Muslim students' values differ from those of the dominant culture, which is secular, school social workers may be unprepared to mediate value conflicts, proactively advocate for students' concerns, interact with Muslim students and their families in counseling settings, or otherwise help Muslim students adjust to public school environments. Professional providers unfamiliar with the religious values and associated family structure of Muslim youths and the cultural issues they encounter may provide ineffective services or engender negative outcomes (Sengstock, 1996).

This article discusses the diversity among individuals who self-identify as Muslims; significant Islamic beliefs and values about family, community, modesty, morality, and nutrition; the conflict between Islamic and secular discourses; and the potential value conflicts that Muslim youths may encounter in secular school settings. The article concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive practice with Muslim youths.

Islam—A Diverse Construct

It is important to preface any discussion of Muslim youths by noting the diversity that exists among individuals who self-identify as Muslims. African Americans account for approximately 30 percent to 40 percent of Muslims in the United States (Smith, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997); roughly 75 percent of adult Muslims are foreign born (Haddad, 1997). These individuals, drawn from a population of roughly a billion, come

from all corners of the globe and innumerable cultural settings (Husain, 1998; Waines, 1995).

Although most Muslims in the United States come from the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, where Islam is the predominant religion (Denny, 1995), the United States is home for Muslims from more than 60 nations (Williams, 1998). Indigenous cultural, social, and class factors associated with the family's country of origin affect how Islam is interpreted and practiced. In many cases, the cultural dimension may be more salient in determining beliefs and practices than Islam itself (Eickelman, 1998). As a result few, if any, universal statements can be made about Muslim youths. Individuals may construct their reality from religious, cultural, and secular U.S. spheres.

Significant Islamic Beliefs and Values

Despite the diversity that exists among Muslims, Islam is a discrete cosmology with a number of widely held tenets (Eickelman, 1998; Esposito, 1988). Islam is generally conceived of as a complete way of life, a worldview that unifies the metaphysical and material and gives structure and coherence to personal existence (Izetbegovic, 1993). The compartmentalization of life into a public sphere, which is secular, and a private sphere, which is religious, is alien to Islam. Rather, Islam provides Muslims with "a comprehensive life plan" (Haynes, Eweiss, Mageed, & Chung, 1997, p. 273).

Revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (570/80-632), and specified in the *Quran*, the revealed word of God, *Islam* means submission to Allah, the one and only God. Individuals who practice this submission are called Muslims. In gratitude for God's mercy and compassion, Muslims seek to follow the straight path of God's precepts: the *shari'a*, derived from the *Quran*, and the *hadith*, the recorded collections of the sayings of the Prophet. The *shari'a* provides guidance for all aspects of life (Waines, 1995).

The manner in which the *shari'a* is interpreted and practiced depends on a number of factors. There is, however, general agreement that the "five pillars" constitute the common core of a wider reality (Esposito, 1988). These pillars are the declaration of faith, the daily performance of five ritual prayers at set times throughout the day, almsgiving, the yearly sunrise to sunset fast during the month of Ramadan, and a one-time pilgrimage to Mecca (Eickelman, 1998). The degree to which families and individuals adhere to these pillars may indicate the salience of religion in their lives.

The *shari'a* also affirms several values and associated practices. Five of the most pertinent for Muslim youths are family, community, modesty, morality, and nutrition. In keeping with the holistic nature of Islam, these values are viewed as interdependent.

Family. The family is highly esteemed in Islamic culture. Muslim youths are likely to be raised in stable families with strong emotional ties between members. The concept of lifelong singleness is foreign to Islam, and divorce, although permitted, is strongly

discouraged. Family includes the nuclear dyad and their offspring and the extended network of relatives (Fernea, 1995). Marriage is perceived as a union of two extended kin networks. For many Muslims, marriage is arranged, or at least guided, by the wider kin network, who base their decision regarding appropriate pairings on the received wisdom of the community (Smith, 1999). Husbands and wives are held to be of equal worth but to have complementary roles (Corbett, 1994). Men are the material providers and leaders of the family; women are responsible for maintaining the home and raising the children. Men generally oversee and have the final word on decisions in the public sphere, but women make the decisions about child-rearing and household concerns, with spousal consultation a common practice (Kulwicki, 1996). The complementary model does not necessarily preclude women from working outside the home (Corbett, 1994), but women's employment outside the home is held in tension with providing a nurturing environment for the family in the home, particularly for young children.

Muslims consider children a blessing from God and generally encourage large families. Women believe that a secure mother-child attachment is critical to the child's wellbeing and for the future health of the Islamic community. Consequently, mothers generally prefer to spend as much time as possible with their children, which allows them the opportunity to instill Islamic values and preserve their heritage (Smith, 1999). As a result, Muslim children may spend more time with their parents than children with primarily secular values. Muslim parents often assume a role similar to that provided by peer groups in North American settings, with girls participating in various activities with their mothers, and boys often accompanying their fathers (Haddad & Smith, 1996). Children typically bond closely with their parents, siblings, and other family members. Muslim youths are considered to be men and women on completing puberty, but there is little expectation that postpuberty- youths will differentiate from the family unit, because Muslims value interconnectedness among family members (Daneshpour, 1998; Haddad & Smith, 1996).

Community. Community is closely related to family. Depending on the context, the family can be understood as the Islamic community, the *ummah* (Fernea, 1995). A reciprocal relationship generally exists between the individual and the community (Haynes et al., 1997). Individual freedom is circumscribed to protect other members of the community, for it is this same community that safeguards and empowers the individual (Jafari, 1993). For example, Muslim youths, along with other family members, may sacrifice personal freedom to help members of the community, such as giving up living space for elderly relatives instead of placing them in nursing homes (Smith, 1999). Every Muslim has a responsibility to protect and safeguard the community (Haynes, et al., 1997). Thus, some Muslim students, perhaps male youths in particular, may feel a responsibility to defend siblings, family, and faith when these manifestations of community are attacked in schools (Mahmoud, 1996).

Modesty. Modesty, particularly around members of the opposite sex, is a widely affirmed value for all Muslims. Muslims generally perceive the Western secular emphasis on sexuality as particularly denigrating to women, reducing them to sexual objects or

depicting them as commercial entities and contributing to the breakdown of family and community (Altareb, 1996). The manner in which modesty is expressed varies by the culture of origin, local Islamic norms, the interpretation of the shari'a, and personal preferences.

What constitutes modest clothing in the U.S. context is a subject of dispute among Muslims. The issue is not as keenly felt among Muslim boys, for whom standards of modesty overlap with those of mainstream culture. Views of modest clothing range from what many Americans with secular values consider modest to apparel that covers everything except the hands and head. Some adolescent Muslim girls express their modesty through the practice of wearing a scarf, or veiling, *hijab*, a practice that has no mainstream cultural counterpart (Smith, 1999). Veiling also may signify rejection of Western colonialism, the secular discourse that commodifies women as sexual objects, or pride in Islam (Reece, 1996).

Muslim views regarding the mixing of the sexes are related to modesty. Many families believe that youths should not interact socially with members of the opposite sex (Mahmoud, 1996). Others believe that supervised interaction is permissible. Some Muslims believe that, outside of interactions in the family, boys and girls should be separated after kindergarten (Simmons, Simmons, & Allah, 1994); when such beliefs are held, parents usually are forced to bear the additional costs of either home schooling or private Islamic schools.

Morality. According to Islamic thought virtue and morality provide the foundation for human happiness (Ashy, 1999). Islam affirms a set of moral and ethical norms that have parallels with those of Christianity and Judaism.

Behavior that is mentally, physically, or morally harmful to others is forbidden. Muslims believe in the equality of all individuals before God; they also value treating others with respect and honesty, as well as respect for elders (Corbett, 1994; Haddad & Smith, 1996).

Muslims affirm the sanctity of human life, generally from conception to natural death. Thus, Muslims do not typically permit euthanasia, suicide, and abortion, except in instances when the mother's life is at stake (Haddad & Smith, 1996; Zuhur, 1995). Sex is affirmed within the context of marriage; homosexuality and sex before marriage are not sanctioned (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998; Islamic Society of North America, 1999).

Other Islamic norms include benevolence, care for others, cooperation between individuals, empathy, justice, social support, and positive human relations (Kelly, Aridi, & Bakhtiar, 1996). Western individualistic values such as personal success, self-actualization, and self-reliance may not appeal to Muslim youths, who are more likely to find meaning in group success, community development, and consensus (Kelly et al.).

Nutrition and Cleanliness. As part of a holistic cosmology, the shari'a calls for certain practices regarding health and hygiene (Kemp, 1996). Ideally, ceremonial washings should be conducted before engaging in the five daily prayers. Many Muslims consider dogs unclean and thus avoid them (Kulwicki, 1996).

Adhering to an Islamic diet can sometimes cause difficulties, depending on the particular proscriptions followed. For example, some Muslims do not eat food prepared by non-Muslims. Others only eat meat that is considered *halal*, a term used to describe beef, poultry, and sheep that have been slaughtered according to Islamic specifications (Smith, 1999). Often x-Muslims choose a vegetarian diet to avoid meat that is not halal (Kemp, 1996). The most commonly followed proscriptions are those against pork and mind-altering substances, with alcohol being the most conspicuous. Products containing pork or alcohol, such as lard or certain cold medications, in some instances are often not considered halal. School lunches that include pork or pork products (such as hotdogs) may present difficulties for Muslim youths. (Carter & El Hindi, 1999). When halal meats are not available, kosher meals may be acceptable (Kulwicki, 1996).

Conflict between Islamic and Secular Discourses

Secular values in Western society are widely held to glamorize hedonism, immorality, unrestrained sexuality, and disrespect for religious values (Haddad & Smith, 1996; Smith 1999). Simmons et al. (1994) demonstrated the difference in values among adolescents raised in a secular (that is, British) culture compared with those raised in Islamic culture. These authors found that Saudi adolescents were concerned with Islamic values, with religion serving as an ideal. British adolescents were concerned with secular themes, such as idolizing and desiring to meet famous media and sports figures. Given the significant effects of socialization during the teenage years, many Muslim parents fear that their children will be socialized into Western secular values that they believe will do little to advance their children's well-being in this world or the next (Smith, 1999).

To preserve their Islamic heritage, Muslims have formed organizations, such as Islamic "Sunday schools," to instill Islamic values among their youths (Ahmed, 1991; Denny, 1995; Smith, 1999). The Islamic Society of North America sponsors youth activities, such as religious summer camps, either directly or in partnership with one of the more than 2,300 local mosques and Islamic centers and organizations (Haddad & Smith, 1995). The Muslim Student Association, with more than 500 chapters throughout the United States (personal communication with A. Husain, August 25, 1999), provides support to thousands of college students.

Also, Islam itself seems to instill resilience. Muslim youths may be less likely to assimilate than youths from other religious traditions (Cox, 1983). For example, Ghuman (1997) examined the degree of assimilation among Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh adolescents in the British public school system and found that Muslim adolescents, in particular boys, were much more likely to retain their own values than Hindu or Sikh adolescents.

Barazangi's (1991) study of primarily second generation North American Muslim youths ($N = 56$) found that many Muslim youths strongly desired to retain their Islamic values. Only 2 percent thought that Muslims should "adopt North American

social norms,” and none of the youths thought they should “become like North Americans.” The largest group of respondents (50 percent) felt that Muslims should “retain Islamic values even if they are different from Western values and culture.” Twenty-seven percent felt that it was “ok to hold on to some important things,” while presumably letting some perceived nonessentials drop.

Possible Value Conflicts in School Settings

The desire of many Muslim youths to exercise their religious faith can result in conflict, particularly in U.S. public schools, in which secular discourse predominates (Carter & El Hindi, 1999; Shaikh, 1995). Compliance with the five pillars generally begins when Muslim adolescents have completed puberty (Smith, 1999). However, the observance of prayer and fasting may be difficult without the cooperation of school officials (Mahmoud, 1996). Two of the five calls for daily prayer occur after the sun has passed its highest point during the day and in mid to late afternoon when Muslim youths may be in school. Prayer holistically involves the body and soul. Thus, a separate room is required for the various postures assumed during prayer. As noted earlier, symbolic washing is required before prayer can begin. Teachers may be reluctant to excuse students from class or other events during times when prayers should occur. School officials may be unwilling to provide access to showers for preparatory cleansing or a room in which to pray (Eickelman, 1998; Smith).

Muslim students may require special allowances when the month of Ramadan, which is based on a lunar calendar, falls during the academic year. Students who are fasting may not have the physical stamina to complete rigorous tasks such as those that might be required of them in physical education classes (Carter & El Hindi, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Attempts to follow Islamic injunctions in the area of modesty also may be difficult in public school settings. Physical examinations, including wellness examinations conducted by a member of the opposite sex may violate religious values and be traumatic for Muslim youths (Kulwicki, 1996). Coed physical education classes may present a conflict, as can clothing worn in those classes. Muslim youths, especially girls, may prefer to wear sweat pants and long-sleeved T-shirts instead of shorts and tank tops in physical education classes (Shaikh, 1995).

Islamic dietary proscriptions can be difficult to follow in public school settings. School lunches that contain pork may cause some children to go hungry, if they have not been informed of menus in advance. Furthermore, officials may be unaware of, or even cavalier, about the need to inform Muslim students of future menus so that accommodations can be made (Carter & El Hindi, 1999; Mahmoud, 1996).

Muslim youths also may experience a significant degree of peer pressure because of their beliefs. Muslim youths may be ridiculed or worse for failing to follow secular

values. Muslim girls who choose to wear the veil as an expression of their spirituality may be particularly targeted for ridicule. (Mahmoud, 1996).

Teachers influenced by prevailing norms may not support or encourage an Islamic perspective. For example, teachers may not accept projects that deal with Islamic themes on a par with projects that address secular topics. Educators also may present distorted depictions of Islam, which can deeply offend Muslim youths (Carter & El Hindi, 1999; Mahmoud, 1996).

In addition, students may encounter conflicts because of differences in sexual values (Shaikh, 1995). ‘Traditional secular dating habits, which may include sexual relations, are incompatible with Islamic values, which for many Muslims preclude youths from spending any time alone with members of the opposite sex without supervision. Many Muslims endorse chaperoned or group dating, with an adult present as an alternative to secular dating. Such practices can leave Muslim youths open to derision. Although boys can simply refrain from asking girls out, girls who are asked out may have difficulty providing an “acceptable” explanation for choosing not to date (Haddad & Smith, 1996).

Sex education classes are likely to violate the Muslim value of modesty. Material that depicts complementary marriage roles as inferior to egalitarian arrangements may conflict with Islamic values. Similarly, the presentation of homosexuality as a lifestyle that is as equally valid as heterosexuality conflicts with Islamic values (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998). Unfortunately, some school officials may assume that certain secular values are “universal” and make no effort to demonstrate sensitivity to Muslim youths (Sayyid, 1997). A teacher, for example, might understand diversity- only from a single perspective and ridicule a student who disagreed with the validity of a homosexual lifestyle.

Advocating for Muslim Students

School social workers can be instrumental in helping Muslim students exercise their religious rights in schools. Social workers can serve as a bridge between Muslims and school officials to broker solutions that address the needs of all parties (Carter & El Hindi, 1999).

Many problems can be alleviated by dispelling misinformation. Because of powerful special interest groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, many school officials misunderstand the concept of “separation of church and state” and believe that public schools cannot allow religious expression (Flesher, 2001). Social workers should be knowledgeable of legislation on rights to religious expression in schools, such as former President Clinton’s (1995) memorandum on the free exercise rights of students in public schools and the Equal Access Act (P.L. 98–377) to help Muslim students exercise these rights (Riley, 1998).

The free exercise clause of the U.S. Constitution protects students' right to freely express their faith. Within parameters related to school functioning, school officials may not discourage students from participating in religious activities or expressing religious viewpoints. Schools cannot ban students' personal expression of their faith or discriminate against religious perspectives in classroom settings. For instance, schools must not discriminate against students by refusing to accept a paper on Muhammad or the *Quran* simply because it addresses a religious topic. Muslims may wear religious clothing such as the veil or appropriate apparel during physical education class. Under the Equal Access Act, Muslims have the same right to school facilities as secular students. Schools cannot, for example, allow a chess club to meet in an empty classroom and refuse to provide a classroom for Muslim students to perform daily prayers (Clinton, 1995; Riley, 1998).

In accordance with applicable state laws, school officials have the constitutional freedom to excuse students from classes for prayer and fasting and to exempt students from participating in activities and classes that Muslims deem to be in conflict with their religious values (Riley, 1998). In addition, the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232h) provides federal protection for parents and students rights whenever federal funding is involved. Under PPRA, parents have the right to inspect instructional material that addresses a number of controversial areas, including sexuality, to ensure that it conforms to their values. Schools must make parents aware that such material is being presented and obtain written consent from parents before exposing children to any of the material. In addition, the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution prohibits schools from implementing meditation, mantra-like chanting, New Age visualization, and other religious practices that may be offensive to Muslims (Clinton, 1995; Riley).

Muslim students, however, may be reluctant to exercise their rights because of peer influence or fear of being singled out or appearing to be different. Problematic peer interactions and lack of understanding of Islam by adults in school settings suggest a need for raising awareness about Islamic beliefs and values.

Resources are available for school social workers to educate themselves, other school officials, and students about Muslim youths and their families. Islamic organizations publish materials that present the community's own construction of reality unmediated by secular bias and that provides a more accurate portrayal of the Islamic community. The Council on Islamic Education furnishes factual information on the Islamic community through a publications called *Teaching about Islam and Muslims in the Public School* (Shaikh, 1995). Social workers may find this text to be a good resource for increasing their understanding of Islamic values and possible areas of concern for Muslim youths. Smith's (1999) *Islam in America* provides a concise overview of the U.S. Muslim community and related issues. Social workers can share information during in-service training sessions, in workshops, with individuals, and in classrooms.

Alternatively, many Muslim parents are willing to come to school and share an authentic perspective on Islam. Teaching about well-known Muslims, such as Malcolm X, may help create positive images of Islam (Carter & El Hindi, 1999).

Highly publicized events in which Muslims are framed as terrorists or as enemies of the United States can be a particularly important time to adopt proactive strategies. Events such as the Gulf War, the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, or popular movies that depict Muslims as terrorists can foster negative images of Islam, with deleterious consequences for Muslim youths, who often face increased harassment or worse after such incidents. Social workers can help by pointing out how the dominant secular culture uses its power to actively propagate positive images of secular groups while selecting negative images of Islam. Certain unstable individuals will misappropriate aspects of particular belief systems and use them to justify the use of violence to attain certain objectives. For example, Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, misappropriated elements of the environmentalist worldview to support his program of death and destruction. Although Kaczynski self-identified as an environmentalist and had a significant following in the environmental movement, the dominant secular discourse carefully distinguished Kaczynski from the wider environmental movement (Taylor, 1998). Just as it is inappropriate to judge environmentalism by those who would misappropriate its teaching, so too, it is inappropriate to judge Islam by those who misapply its tenets. Much like environmentalists, the overwhelming majority of Muslims condemn the use of violence in the name of Islam. Helping students and adults distinguish between the negative images selected by the dominant secular culture and the wider reality through such comparisons can help humanize Muslim youths and facilitate greater understanding and respect.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are gray areas regarding the extent to which public schools may be willing to accommodate the religious practices of Muslim students. In some cases, the solutions are relatively simple. With school menus, merely asking the official in charge to relate in advance the days when pork is being served may solve the problem. However, schools may have more difficulty accommodating students with facilities for cleansing and classrooms for prayer because of lack of space or scheduling problems. Unfortunately, some public schools may be unable or unwilling to respect Muslim students' values. In such cases, workers may explore other possibilities with Muslim families, such as home or private schooling. However, school social workers should advocate for accommodation and explore home or private schooling only as a last resort, rather than exclude Muslim students from public benefits supported in part by taxes from Muslim families.

Advocacy and Self-Examination

The NASW *Code of Ethics* (2000: 6.04 (b)) stipulates that workers are to advocate on behalf of all individuals, particularly populations (such as Muslims) who may be

vulnerable to oppression or otherwise disadvantaged because of their minority status. Advocacy also should address systemic issues. 'To prevent the dominant culture from imposing its values on Muslim students, school social workers in all school jurisdictions should advocate for rights to excused absences and release time for religious observances and parental notification. As a matter of social justice, social workers should advocate for federal provisions in educational spending packages that prohibit denying funding for any group of U.S citizens or individuals because of their religious expression, beliefs, or identity. Just as the federal government is prohibited under the 1964 Civil Rights Act from denying federal benefits on the basis of race, color, or national origin, it should not discriminate against individuals or groups because of their religion. The *Code of Ethics* (4.02) expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious belief and stipulates that social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for diversity (6.04 (c)) and act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, especially those who are oppressed by the dominant culture (6. 04 (b)).

'The *Code of Ethics* (2000) must be applied in interpersonal relations as well. Social workers must respect the autonomy of Muslim youths and refrain from imposing their own socially constructed values and norms on Muslim youths (1.02). Feminists who disavow gender-based role distinctions, gay men and lesbians who repudiate the social construction of sexual orientation, and other workers who adhere to Western secular values need to examine whether they can effectively provide services to Muslim youths. School social workers must be able to respect Muslims' right to self-determination, be responsive to their needs, empathize with their dilemmas, and advocate on their behalf to find solutions consistent with their values. For instance, social workers should, if necessary, be able to advocate on behalf of Muslim students for curriculum content that promotes an understanding of the Islamic perspective and does not attempt to "convert" Muslims to secular values regarding homosexuality, sexual expression outside marriage, and egalitarian marriage roles (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998). Practitioners who hold value constructs that differ from Islamic norms, yet work with Muslims, must carefully monitor any indication of prejudice or religious countertransference evoked by Muslim youths (Mahmoud, 1996).

This self-examination is especially important given the perceptions among Muslims regarding professional counselors. iMany Muslims believe that practitioners adhere to Western secular values and consequently may not respect Islamic values (Altareb, 1996; Daneshpour, 1998; Kelly et al., 1996; Kulwicki, 1996; Mahmoud, 1996). In a study of American Muslims ($N = 121$), Kelly et al. found that 53 percent of respondents desired a Muslim counselor; 75 percent felt that it was important for a potential counselor to have Islamic values; and 86 percent indicated that it was important for counselors to have an understanding of Islamic values.

General Practice Implications

School social workers should typically avoid counseling postpuberty youths of the opposite sex. If this is unavoidable, meetings should be held in open venues such as a schoolyard, in which participants can be seen but not heard. Such efforts demonstrate respect for Islamic values and are usually appreciated by Muslims (Carter & El Hindi, 1999).

Involving the family in the counseling dialogue at the beginning alleviates concerns that the social worker is trying to undermine Islamic values and incorporates the greatest source of social support Muslim youths have, the Islamic community. Addressing the father first, seeking his permission to speak to other family members, and obtaining his consent on any proposed course of action implies purity of intent for many Muslims. Immodest dress, particularly for women, such as low necklines, short sleeved shirts, and short skirts, may create barriers, because such attire is frequently associated with a lack of respect for women and Islamic values (Mahmoud, 1996).

Muslims generally value education highly and desire to see their children perform well in school (Smith, 1999). Indicating a desire to serve the family and address practical needs that are perceived by all to be a concern may build trust and help bridge cultural differences (Al-Krenawi, 1996). In cases where school social workers suspect that religious values and school regulations are in conflict, respectful questions about the family's construction of Islamic values are usually appreciated. School social workers, as professionals associated with the educational system, are often expected to initiate such inquiries and provide a degree of structure to meetings (Carter & El Hindi, 1999).

Although direct inquiry is appropriate for issues related to religious values, a more indirect approach is advisable when addressing the affective realm. 'The direct individualized communication style favored in the Western context (for example, I feel ...) may be perceived by Muslims as a lack of respect for others, particularly when dealing with emotional issues. Many Muslims favor indirect communication styles that allow individuals to negotiate a consensus within the community-while being sensitive to others' feelings (Daneshpour, 1998). An indirect communication style when addressing emotional issues may be particularly important with Asian Muslims (Al-Radi & Mahdy, 1994).

In cases where Muslim youths have deviated from Islamic norms to such an extent that it brings them into conflict with parents and their cultural heritage, social workers may be tempted to side with the adolescents' struggle for independence, especially if the youths affirm values that are similar to those held by workers. However, in such situations it is usually best to inform parents of the difficulties their children encounter in secular U.S. culture and support the decision of the family. 'The perceived support, in conjunction with exploring possibilities that are consistent with the family's values, may produce unconsidered alternatives. The goal should be to find solutions within the family's framework of autonomy and interconnectedness (Almeida, 1996).

Interventions

Interventions that support Islamic values are usually appreciated. Muslim youths often are ostracized because of their beliefs and may feel pressured to conform to secular norms. Pressions surrounding pressure to conform to secular norms can underlie more overt maladaptive behaviors (Mahmoud, 1996).

Social workers can link Muslim youths with Islamic organizations that sponsor programs to foster coping skills while enhancing Islamic values. Ross-Sheriff (1986) found that adolescents' participation in Islamic summer programs resulted in an increased level of comfort in self-identifying as Muslims. Participants also recorded a corresponding drop in concern over conflicts related to the clash of Islamic and secular values. Linking youths with such organizations may provide peer social support that can mediate the oppression youths may encounter in secular settings (Byng, 1998).

Genograms may be used to sketch out the assets that exist in the extended family. Ecological interventions that tap into family and community resources are likely to be received favorably. Mentoring relationships between youths and older Muslims also may be effective (Daneshpour, 1998).

Exploring possible spiritual resources is also important for Muslims (Mahmoud, 1996). The activation of Islamic values has been found to improve motivation and outcomes (Al-Radi & Mahdy, 1994; Altareb, 1996; Jilek, 1994). For example, increased religiosity may moderate the effects of stress (Jamal & Badawi, 1993) and discrimination (Byng, 1998). Although a number of assessment approaches are available (Hodge, 2001), spiritual eco-maps may be effective for assessing and operationalizing spiritual assets (Hodge, 2000).

Because Muslim youths often are reluctant to express emotions with people outside of the community, cognitive interventions based on youths' spiritual beliefs may be more effective than approaches that directly address the affective dimension of human personality. (Carter & El Hindi, 1999). Within this framework, counseling consists of identifying unproductive beliefs, which are then modified or replaced with beliefs derived from the shari'a. Three studies have revealed that this counseling strategy with adults is as effective as traditional forms of therapy for anxiety disorders (Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994), bereavement (Azhar & Varma, 1995a), and depression (Azhar & Varma, 1995b), while ameliorating problems at a faster rate. Social workers may also wish to consult with a local Imam, a Muslim religious leader, about Islamic beliefs.

Group counseling, widely used in school settings, may not be appropriate for Muslim youths. Group counseling is not widely accepted among Muslims and may be seen as a violation of family privacy, particularly if the group is not restricted to one gender (Shaikh, 1995). Family and individual counseling is usually advised. Youths past puberty should not be expected to participate in coeducational counseling groups, unless parents and youths are comfortable with this format (Carter & El Hindi, 1999).

Conclusion

The NASW *Code of Ethics* (2000, 1.05 (c)) stipulates that social workers should attempt to procure competence in the area of religious diversity. As a result of elevated rates of immigration, conversions to Islam, and high birth rates, Muslims may either soon become or have already become the second largest religious population, after Christians, in the United States (Melton, 1999). Consequently, Muslim youths are an increasingly vibrant component of the nation's multicultural mosaic. The distinct nature of Islam challenges school social workers to proactively meet the needs of Muslim students and work to generate understanding of this growing community so that all populations can exist peacefully' in an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation.

About the Author

David R. Hodge, MSW, MCS, is a Rene Sand doctoral fellow in social work, Washington University, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, 1 Brookings Drive, Campus Box 1196, St. Louis, MO 63130-4899. The author would like to thank Lucinda Cobb of Washington University for her suggestions and encouragement.

References

- Ahmed, G. M. (1991). Muslim organizations in the United States. In Y. Y. Haddad (Ed.), *The Muslims of America* (pp. 11–24). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Al-Krenawi, A. (1996). Group work with Bedouin widows of the Negev in a medical clinic. *Affilia*, 11, 303–318.
- Almeida, R. (1996). Hindu, Christian and Muslim families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. K. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (pp. 395–423). New York: Guilford Press.
- Al-Radi, O., & Mahdy, M. A. (1994). Group therapy: An Islamic approach. *Integrative Psychiatry*, 10(3), 106–109.
- Altareb, B. Y. (1996). Islamic spirituality in America: A middle path to unity. *Counseling and Values*, 41(1), 29–38.
- Ashy, M. A. (1999). Health and illness from an Islamic perspective. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 38(3), 241–257.
- Azhar, M. Z., & Varma, S. L. (1995a). Religious psychotherapy as management of bereavement. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 91, 233–235.
- Azhar, M. Z., & Varma, S. L. (1995b). Religious psychodierapy in depressive patients. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 63, 165–168.
- Azhar, M. Z., Varma, S. L., & Dharap, A. S. (1994). Religious psychotherapy in anxiety disorder patients. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 90, 1–2.

- Barazangi, N. H. (1991). Islamic education in the United States and Canada: Conception and practice of the Islamic belief system. In Y. Y. Haddad (Ed.), *The Muslims of America* (pp. 157–174). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Byng, M. D. (1998). Mediating discrimination: Resisting oppression among African American Muslim women. *Social Problems*, 45, 473–487.
- Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (1999). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice*. New York: Free Press.
- Carter, R. B., & El Hindi, A. E. (1999). Counseling Muslim children in school settings. *Professional School Counseling*, 2(3), 183–188.
- Clinton, W. J. (1995). Memorandum for the U.S. secretary of education and the U.S. attorney general [Online]. Available: [http://w3.trib.com/ FACT/lst.pres.rel.html](http://w3.trib.com/FACT/lst.pres.rel.html) (Accessed 12/11/99).
- Corbett, J. M. (1994). *Religion in America* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cox, D. R. (1983). Religion and the welfare of immigrants. *Australia?! Social Work*, 36(1), 3–10.
- Daneshpour, M. (1998). Muslim families and family therapy. *Jouwal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 24, 355–390.
- Denny, F. M. (1995). Islam in die Americas. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the modern Islamic world* (Vol. 2, pp. 296–300). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eickelman, D. F. (1998). *The Middle East and Central Asia* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Esposito, J. L. (1988). *Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ferne, E. W. (1995). Family. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the mode?-?! Islamic world* (Vol. 1, pp. 458–461). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Flesher, J. (2001, August 23). School to change policy on distributing religious literature. *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, BC cycle.
- Ghuman, P.A.S. (1997). Assimilation or integration? A study of Asian adolescents. *Education Research*, 39(1), 23–35.
- Haddad, Y. Y. (1997). Make room for the Muslims? In W. H. Conser Jr. & S. B. Twiss (Eds.), *Religious diversity and American religious histo?y* (pp. 218–261). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Haddad, Y. Y., & Smith, J. I. (1995). United States of America. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the modern Islamic world* (Vol. 4, pp. 277–284). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haddad, Y. Y., & Smith, J. I. (1996). Islamic values among American Muslims. In B. C. Aswad & B. Bilge (Eds.), *Family and gender among American Muslims* (pp. 19–40). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Halstead, J. M., & Lewicka, K. (1998). Should homosexuality' be taught as an acceptable alternative lifestyle? A Muslim perspective. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 2^(1), 49–44.

- Haynes, A. W., Eweiss, M.M.I., Mageed, L.M.A., & Chung, D. K. (1997). Islamic social transformation: Considerations for the social worker. *International Social Work*, 40, 265–275.
- Hodge, D. R. (2000). Spiritual ecomaps: A new diagrammatic tool for assessing marital and family spirituality'. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 26, 229–240.
- Hodge, D. R. (2001). Spiritual assessment: A review of major qualitative methods and a new framework for assessing spirituality'. *Social Work*, 46, 203–204.
- Husain, S. A. (1998). Religion and mental health from the Muslim perspective. In H. G. Koenig (Ed.), *Handbook of religion and mental health* (pp. 279–291). New York: Academic Press.
- Islamic Society of North America. (1999). Homosexuality' [Online]. Available: www.isna.net/iq.htm (Accessed October 21, 1999).
- Izetbegovic, A. A. (1993). *Islam between east and west* (3rd ed.). Plainfield, IN: American Trust Publications.
- Jafari, M. F. (1993). Counseling values and objectives: A comparison of western and Islamic perspectives. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 10, 326–339.
- Jamal, M., & Badawi, J. (1993). Job stress among Muslim immigrants in North America: Moderating effects of religiosity. *Stress Medicine*, 9(3), 145–151.
- Jilek, W. G. (1994). Overview: Traditional healing in prevention and treatment of alcohol and drug abuse. *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review*, 5/(3), 219–258.
- Kelly, E. W., Aridi, A., & Bakhtiar, L. (1996). Muslims in the United States: An exploratory study of universal and mental health values. *Counseling and Values*, 40(3), 206–218.
- Kemp, C. (1996). Islamic cultures: Health-care beliefs and practices. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 20(3), 83–89.
- Kulwicki, A. (1996). Health issues among Arab Muslim families. In B. C. Aswad & B. Bilge (Eds.), *Family and gender among American Muslims* (pp. 187–207). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mahmoud, V. (1996). African .American Muslim families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. K. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 122–128). New York: Guilford Press.
- Melton, J. G. (1999). *The encyclopedia of American religions* (6th ed.). London: Gale Research.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2000). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* [Online]. Available: www.naswdc.org/Cocie/ethics.htm.
- Reece, D. (1996). Covering and communication: The symbolism of dress among Muslim women. *Howard Journal of Communication*, 7(35), 35–52.
- Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (1997). *A spiritual strategy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Riley, R. W. (1998). Religious expressions in public schools. Available: www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html. (Accessed 11/7/2001).

- Ross-Sheriff, F. (1986). Cultural conflicts experienced by Indo-Pakistani Muslim youth in die United States. *Journal of the Asian American Psychological Association*, 11(1), 51–54.
- Sayyid, B. S. (1997). *A fundamental fear*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sengstock, M. C. (1996). Care of the elderly within Muslim families. In B. C. Aswad & B. Bilge (Eds.), *Family and gender among American Muslims* (pp. 271–297). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Shaikh, M. A. (1995). *Teaching about Islam and Muslims in the public school classroom* (3rd ed.). Fountain Valley, CA: Council on Islamic Education.
- Simmons, C., Simmons, C., & Allah, M. H. (1994). English, Israeli-Arab and Saudi Arabian adolescent values. *Educational Studies*, 20(1), 69–86.
- Smith, J. I. (1999). *Islam in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, B. (1998). Religion, violence, and radical environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10(4), 1–42.
- Waines, D. (1995). *An introduction to Islam*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, R. B. (1998). Asian Indian and Pakistani religions in the United States In A. W. Heston (Ed.), *The annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (Vol. 558 [W. C. Roof, Special Ed.], pp. 178–195). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Zuhur, S. (1995). Sexuality. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the modern Islamic -world* (Vol. 4, pp. 35–37). New York: Oxford University Press.

The Ted K Archive

David R. Hodge
Working with Muslim Youths
Understanding the Values and Beliefs of Islamic Discourse
January 2002. Accepted October 18, 2000.

Children & Schools, Volume 24, Issue 1, January 2002, Pages 6–20. CCC Code:
0162-7961/02. <doi.org/10.1093/cs/24.1.6>.
2002, National Association of Social Workers. Inc.

www.thetedkarchive.com