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Sport, Muslim identities and cultures in the UK, an emerging policy issue: case studies of Leicester and Birmingham

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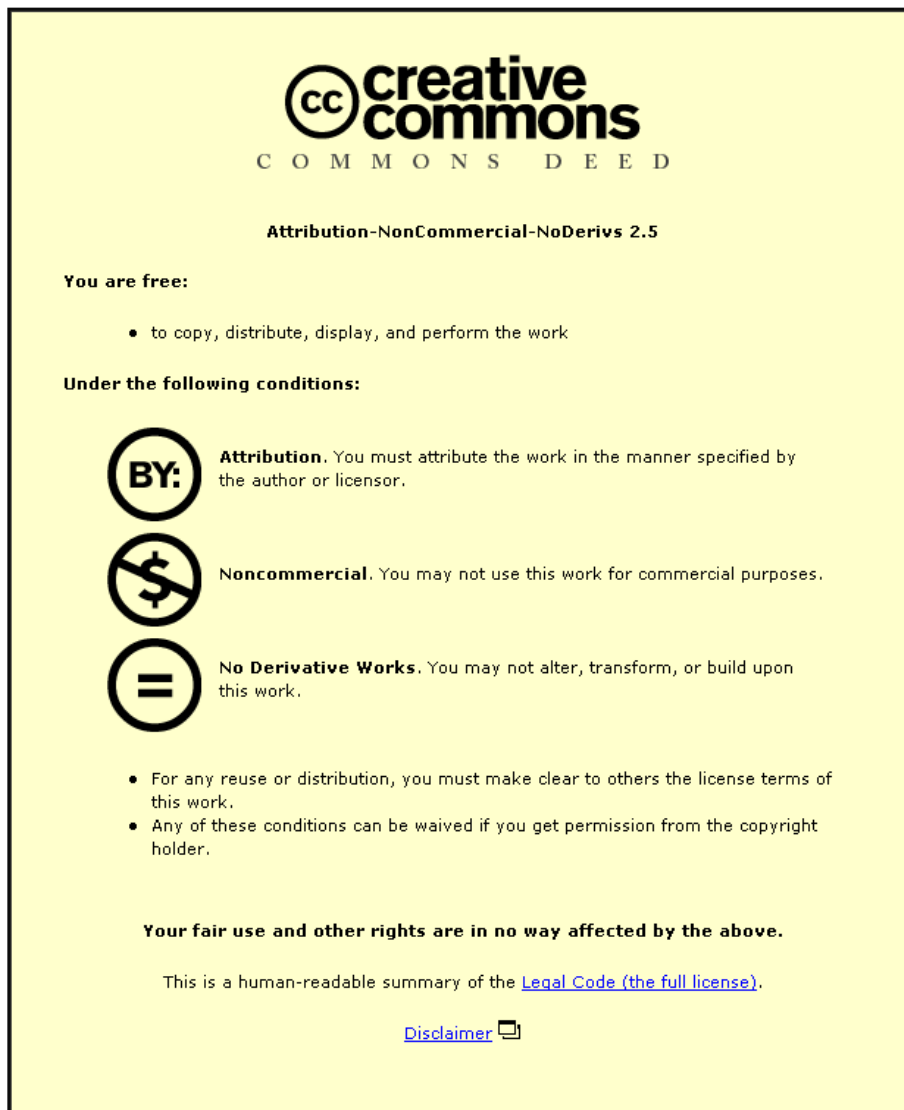
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Sport, Muslim Identities and Cultures in the UK, an Emerging Policy Issue: Case Studies of Leicester and Birmingham¹.

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The dominant line in Western literature on the emergence of modern sport in nineteenth century Europe argues that it was associated with the advent of capitalism, industrialisation, urbanisation and the nation-state system. Thus, based on the idea of regulation, disciplining of the body, aestheticism, meritocracy, division of labour, bureaucratic organisation and rational measurement of performance, modern sport, particularly in its competitive form, constructed its meaning and value system in opposition to 'traditional' (magic-ritual/folkloric, 'pre-modern') physical practices (Guttmann, 1978). Accordingly, the acceptance of modern sport practices, has been seen as a sign of 'assimilation' of (Western) modernist values, and thus, of the Western (universal) 'civilisational' project. This is also true in relation to the debates on integration or socialisation through sport in Europe which apply modern sport as the norm and as a reflection of some core values of western culture and civilisation. Yet this linking of modern sport to Western secular and rational modernity has consigned those physical activities attached to religious belief to the domain of tradition, and thus the non-engagement with (or resistance to) modern sport by Muslim minorities is seen by some as reflecting a lack of integration into European societies and cultures.

Within this context, the focus of the research reported in this paper is an evaluation of how Muslims in two specific local contexts, in the UK (Leicester in the East Midlands; Birmingham in the West Midlands) make sense of the relationship between their religious (Islamic) identities and sporting interests. Leicester in the East Midlands and Birmingham in the West Midlands have been selected because they represent respectively one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Britain (Leicester) and a domicile of one third of the Muslim population in Britain (Birmingham) (Office for National Statistics, 2001).

¹ We would like to first thank the British Academy for financially supporting this study. We also thank representatives of Muslim organisations in Leicester and Birmingham as well as representatives of local authorities and sport organisations in both regions for sharing their experiences and their views around the focus of this study.

The concerns of this paper are particularly relevant to the principal issues addressed in this special issue in that a major focus is on the engagement of the local sports policy community with the cultural diversity of communities in contemporary multicultural societies, and specifically with Muslim communities. The encounter of policy communities with pluricultural contexts is a neglected issue but one of growing importance for sport policy makers and service managers in increasingly ethnically diverse societies.

A principal aim of this study is to understand how the status of Muslim communities' existence as a minority in the West (in these two English cities), has affected the way that Muslims conceive their identity, their Islamic practices (*Shari'a* or ways of living) and their relationships with the West. Of particular interest was also how this influences Muslims' meaning systems around the uses and practices of sport and the role that it can play in the process of social, cultural and intellectual re-positioning of Muslims in the West in general and in the UK in particular. A further aim was to identify the roles of sport in the social cohesion agenda and in cross cultural dialogue between Muslim communities and other communities in Leicester and Birmingham. To this end we explored perspectives of representatives of local authorities and national sport organisations on the state of affairs as regards Muslim participation in sport and their rationale for policy in respect of the financing and provision of sport activities for Muslim organisations in Leicester and Birmingham.

As regards the structure of this paper, the literature review which follows is divided into three main sections. The first explores the current debate around multicultural policy and the question of the Muslim population in Britain. This is followed by a discussion of the current literature on sport and the question of Muslim minorities in the West. The methodology section subsequently highlights the philosophical and methodological positions of the authors and the approach adopted to data gathering and analysis. This is followed by a brief overview of the demographic and socio-economic profiles of the Muslim communities in both cities. The subsequent discussion is devoted to the examination of examples of emerging themes from the critical discourse analysis of interview transcripts and policy documents relating to the nature of sporting engagement by Muslim communities and their organisations.

Multicultural policy and the question of Muslim population in Britain

The riot provoked by Salman Rushdi's novel *The Satanic Verses*, and the Bradford incidents in 2001, are considered to be a turning point in the discourse around the question of integration of the Muslim

population in Britain. These events accelerated or at least amplified demands by Muslims for legislation which would take into account their specific religious and ethnic identities (e.g. state funding of Islamic schools; laws which protect the status of Islam as a faith; and political representation), outside the realm of the dominant (black versus white) race discourse. In other words they increased pressure from Muslim groups to gain the same legal recognition as other religions (Christianity, Judaism and Sikhism), and the same protection as Catholics in Northern Ireland as regards legislation against religious discrimination. According to Modood et al. (2006: 42),

...what was striking was that when the public rage against Muslims was at its most intense, Muslims neither sought nor were offered any social solidarity by any non-white minority. ... it was inter faith forums rather than political black organisations that tried to create space where Muslims could state their case without being vilified. Political blackness ... was seen as irrelevant to an issue which many Muslims insisted was fundamental to defining the kind of 'respect' or 'civility' appropriate to a peaceful multicultural society, that is to say, to the political constitution of 'difference' in Britain.

The adoption the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, recognised formally for the first time a requirement of equity of treatment of individuals by virtue of religious affiliation or belief in the context of Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union. This article thus provided the basis for religious and faith groups to be formally recognised in the UK's adoption of the 1998 Human Rights Act. The British government agreed to fund seven Muslim Schools (on the same basis enjoyed by approximately seven thousand Anglican and Catholic schools, some Methodist and 36 Jewish schools: Modood et al., 2006, Cowell, 2006). A further positive step toward monitoring the integration of minority religious groups, particularly Muslim communities, came in the modification of census questions in 2001 to include a question on religious affiliation, although this was not popular among secularists or among Muslims who did not want to be recognised on the basis of their religious identity in the public sphere. In 2004, Europe's first Islamic bank, the Islamic Bank of Britain, opened its first branch in Birmingham and Alp Mehmet was appointed as Britain's first Muslim Ambassador (to Iceland).

While a small number of Muslim organisations such as the Federation of Student Islamic Societies established in 1962 and the UK Islamic Mission had already been in existence since the early 1960s, this period also saw the appearance of a number of new organisations which found their identities in Islamic roots. The largest Muslim organisation is the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) which was officially established on 23rd November 1997. The same year saw also the founding of The Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE) and the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body (MINAB). Such activity led Kristiansen (2006: 21) to

describe in an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* the period after the election of New Labour as “a golden era of secured relations with British Muslims”.

The Muslim community in Britain is not of course homogeneous in terms of its religiously related social practices or religiosity. The ethnically diverse nature of the Muslim population inevitably reflects a culturally diverse spectrum. In addition, in terms of theological interpretation/traditions, British Muslim communities comprise a diverse range of traditions, in which four major tendencies are identifiable. The largest numbers of followers come from the Barelwi tradition, followed by Deobandi, then Jamaat-i Islam inspired institutions, and finally the Ahl-i-Hadith network. All of these are theological and interpretive trends imported into the UK with the arrival of the early South Asian communities in the 1960s and 1970s (Hammid, 2008). The other minority groups are: *Shia'a* represented by Al-Khoei Foundation, Sufi represented by the Sufi Muslim Council (with 102 affiliates) linked to the wider Naqshbandi Sufi movement.

The 9/11, and the 7/7 bombings represented a seminal moment for British Muslims. These events fostered an atmosphere of fear and brought to the surface the debate around Multicultural policy in Britain. Trevor Phillips, Chairman for the Commission on Racial Equality, in April 2004 argued that Britain's policy of multiculturalism had gone too far, and that there was a need to ensure that a core of British values remained intact (Baldwin and Rozenberg, 2004). The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, publicly opposed the wearing of the veil by Muslim constituents in particular contexts (Sturcke, 2006), and there was evidence, in some areas of government and the quasi-government sector, of a shift away from a dominantly multiculturalist agenda (which had come to be seen as encouraging 'separateness') and towards interculturalism to promote common interests and a shared sense of belonging'. This debate leads Mahajan (Mahajan, 2007: 318) to identify uncomfortable questions emerging in British political debates around integration:

Will multiculturalism survive in this milieu? Will the emerging conflict reinforce the belief that immigrants/'outsiders' must integrate into the host society? Should a liberal democracy accommodate cultural diversity and make space for the expression of cultural differences?

The significance of sport in debates around multiculturalism is regularly cited. Sardar (2006) for example points out that sport is often invoked to celebrate Multicultural Britain:

There is no doubting the pride and hope many young British Pakistanis find in such England players as Sajid Mahmood, Kabir Ali and Owais Shah. Because of them, some will be supporting

England; others will support both England and Pakistan with equal passion. This is the fruit of multiculturalism; and a product of manifold and hybrid identities.

In addition the rhetoric of multiculturalism was very present in the bidding for the 2012 Olympic Games, to legitimate the British readiness to host the Olympic Games (proclaimed to be a wholly appropriate space for the expression/ celebration of 'cultural diversity' and 'cultural exchange'), and by the same token to de-legitimise 'other' rival nations bidding for the Games and their policies toward ethnic minorities (Carrington and McDonald, 2008). This view was still evident on the London 2012 website (London 2012, 2009) was reiterated by the Chair of the London 2012 Organising Committee, Sebastian Coe, in his speech at the Opening ceremony of Islam Expo, one of the biggest Muslim cultural events in Europe, on 7 July 2006 (exactly one year after the London bombing).

One of the imperative reasons why the IOC trusted London to take the project of organising the 2012 Olympic Games was the ability of the UK delegation to explain London's creative, diverse, and tolerant community. That the project of hosting the games was not just a project for six weeks but a project for the next fifty years. (Coe, 2006, transcribed from digital recording by the authors)

To reflect the multiculturalism of the Games at the organisational level and as an important step to incorporation of Muslim communities in the organisation of the Games Coe announced at this event the appointment of Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari, the newly elected General Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, to the board of directors of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games, 2009).

The significance of sport and equity debates is illustrated by the measures adopted in the UK to promote equity generally in relation to access to sport (see Table 1), and measures which relate rather more specifically to Muslim communities (see table 2).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Literature on Sport, leisure and the multiple identities of Muslims in the West and in the UK

We should distinguish between three types of endeavour relating to sport and Muslim thought, and therefore between three types of literature. These are: (a) material on sport in Islam, including the question of sport in Islam in the West; (b) sport in Muslim societies; and (c) Sport in Islamism. Each of these domains has its own ontological and/or epistemological debates, in other words, diverse ways of questioning the existence of, and knowing about, sport (Amara, 2008) though our focus here is predominantly on the first of these.

Among the relatively few empirical studies of sport and multiple Muslim identities in the West is that of Walseth (2006a, 2006b). Data from Walseth's interviews illustrate how the sporting needs of young Muslim women who express an overt attachment to the values of the community might be different from those of a second group, which is more attached to the values of the host society, and that of a third, which takes both a religious and liberal attitude towards the traditions of the community and the values of mainstream Norwegian culture (See also, De Knop and Theebom, 1995, Carrington et al., 1987, Taylor and Toohey, 2002). Thus Walseth's approach takes into account the hybrid position which is adopted by many Muslim Norwegian women (particularly from second and third generations of immigrants) between the values of the community and that of the host society. This is commonly interpreted in the literature as a position between 'tradition' and 'modernity', or using Parry's (2004) typology in his work on sport and multiculturalism, between 'illiberal' and 'liberal' cultures. Walseth goes on to suggest that sports federations in Norway should apply different strategies of integration for different contexts.

The question of the clash between cultural views and Islamic views is raised by Zaman in her work on the perceptions of young Bangladeshi women in the UK with regard to the link between physical education and well-being. In her analysis, Zaman suggests that "they (interviewees) believed Bangladeshi culture tended to disapprove of women doing sport" (Zaman, 1997: 61). Carrington and McDonald (2008) in analysing the different discourses shaping policy making around sport and social policy in the UK assert that the shift in the past was from a concern for social control toward managing racial inequalities, whereas in the contemporary context, the shift is from racial equality to Human rights. It was in the 1980s that in response to 'race riots' anti-racist policies based on the concept of multiculturalism "were most vigorously pursued" as a substitute for an "assimilationist model of race relations" (p.236). However, the authors, in referring to the work of Barker on new

racism, Hess on fluid ethnicity versus static race, and Gilroy on ethnic absolutism, express their reservations about the term multiculturalism (Barker, 1981, Gilroy, 1987, Hess, 2000).

Tariq Ramadan is well known for his attempt to develop an 'alternative' or 'extended' Muslim position which seeks to be both faithful to the fundamental tenets of Islam and consistent with contemporary reality of European life (2002, 2004). Ramadan is one of the few Muslim scholars in Europe who addresses the question of sport and recreation among Muslim communities in the West, and he argues that there is a problem relating to Islamic thinking about sport and leisure:

If there was a domain where we are finding difficulty to promote an alternative project, it is definitely that of leisure and recreation. If we were to study the activities offered here and there we would notice three major deficits: either everything, or almost all, is 'forbidden'; or we perpetuate activities coming from 'elsewhere' which are inadequate to our current context; or lastly, we propose activities which are mostly child-like, and sometimes childish, without considering the age of those (males and females) to whom these activities are offered. By looking at adolescents (of both sexes) as if they were perpetual children of eight or ten, we will end up pushing them to search, elsewhere, for what they think are fitting leisure activities for their age and expectations. We need to embark upon the universe of leisure by intelligent selection and ethical complement. (Ramadan, 2002: 60–3, translated by the authors from the French)

There is a number of other recently published papers which address the question of Muslim youth identities, migrations and the pursuit of leisure in western contexts. Stodolska and Livengood (2006) interviewed 24 Muslims immigrants from Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt. They stress the relation between leisure, faith and family ties, "the effect of Islam and leisure behaviour manifests itself through the emphasis on strong family ties and on family oriented leisure among Muslims" (Stodolska and Livengood, 2006: 293). Silverstein, focussing on young immigrants in the UK and France argues that host (ex-colonial) societies such as Britain and France are witnessing the beginnings of "reverse colonisation" characterised by the loss of control by the state over 'immigrant bodies'. In Britain the effects of this are being felt in the sports sector, particularly within cricket and soccer. The threat of a loss of control over immigrant bodies in Britain and of political Islam in France has led, Silverstein suggests, in the French case at least, to attempts by the state to 're-master immigrant bodily practices' through sport at youth level (Silverstein, 2002: 11).

Methodological approach

It should be noted that the approach adopted in this study, at what might be described as a meta-level, is bi-directional. It rejects the twin opposing perspectives, which are mirror image forms of ethnocentrism, namely: (a) Orientalism (Said, 1991), which tends to link 'violence', 'superstition' and 'irrationality' to Islam as a revealed religion; and (b) Occidentalism, which builds its identity (Muslimness) exclusively in relation to the 'other'; in the form of the 'evil', 'atheist', 'imperialist', and 'morally corrupt' West. In addition we differentiate between modernity as a project for society, which may take different (local and global) forms, and modernity as a 'dogma' displacing religious absolutism with an anti-traditional, anti-religious (anti-clerical), and scientific essentialism. Haddad (2001) stresses that the use of anti-Islamism for ideological, mediated and mercantilist aims should be condemned. However the same is also true for the exploitation of Islam for purely temporal and political interests. Our endeavour is thus neither to impose a Western-centric vision of Islam in Europe (or what should be an 'European Islam') nor an Islamic judgement (in the sense of *Usul ul-Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence) of what is permissible *Halal* or illicit *Haram* in Islam) but to provide an approach which embraces and encompasses the dynamics associated with the Muslim presence in (and of) the West, as an alternative to 'Occidental' versus 'Oriental' polar views.

The Muslim population in the Cities of Birmingham and Leicester

Birmingham

There are 140,033 (14.3%) people resident in Birmingham who declared themselves to be Muslim (the average for England is 3.1%) in the 2001 census. Only 6 of the 354 English Local Authorities have a higher percentage Muslims. However, with this total of 140,033, Birmingham has a greater number of Muslims than any other local authority area. Of Birmingham's Muslim population, (71.7%) live in 7 wards of the City. These wards are Sparkbrook (19,372), Bordesley Green (18,629), Washwood Heath (16,847), Springfield (13,461), Aston (12,381), Lozells & East Handsworth (10,853) and Nechells (8,822). 104,017 (10.6 %) have a Pakistani background while 20,837 (2.1%) are of Bangladeshi origin. The other Muslim minority communities living in Birmingham include: Albanians, Bosnians, Somalis, Kurds, Afghans, and Iranians. In relation to geographical concentration many of the city's ethnic minorities are found in the older, de-industrialised areas around the city centre, known as the 'middle ring' (Ethnic minorities in Birmingham based on ward profiles in the 2001 Census, Office for National Statistics, 2001) Birmingham's Muslim population is twice as large as the

single highest concentration of Muslims outside of London. In April 2001, nine per cent of all 1.6 million British Muslims and 16 per cent of Britain's entire Pakistani population of 658,000 were found to be in the city of Birmingham.

In terms of religious affiliation, Birmingham's Pakistanis are Barelvi, Tablilghi, Deobandi, Hanifi or Jamaat-e-Islami, which are all variants of Sunni Islam (Robinson, 1988 in Abbas). Abbas (2005) explains that "one-in-seven of the city's inhabitants are Muslim and their unemployment rate is three times that of the overall city levels", and that they continue to be concentrated in some of the city's poorest wards. In addition he highlights other forms of disadvantage experienced by Muslims in the city.

In the Birmingham Sport and Physical Activity draft strategy (Birmingham City Council, 2003) it was argued that, according to national research, people from the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities are one and a half times more likely to suffer ill health, and that diabetes amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi people is over five times higher than in the general population. The same report indicates that research conducted through the City Living Panel showed that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities participate less (in sport) than other groups in the City. For example, under a third (30.5%) had used a leisure centre/pool/club/gym in the last twelve months, compared to 42.7% of the overall City population. The proportion drops to 12.7% for those of Bangladeshi heritage.

Leicester

The city selected as a second case study was Leicester which is one of the most diverse communities in England, with a 30 per cent BME population, the largest group being Asian/Asian British. This proportion is expected to rise to 50 per cent by 2010 which will make Leicester the "first non-white majority city in Great Britain" (Omaar, 2008). It is a designated cluster area for dispersal of asylum seekers and an estimated 52 different languages are spoken in the city (Leicester City Council, 2004). Muslims represent 11.03% (30,885) of the total population of Leicester. 4,276 (1.53%) have a Pakistani background while 1,926 (0.69%) are from a Bangladeshi origin. More recent arrivals from East Africa, Kosovo Bosnia, and Somali. The national rankings placed Leicester 17th in terms of the size of its Muslim population, (3rd for Hindu and 10th for Sikh). An analysis of 2001 census data states that "at 30,885, the Muslim community of Leicester was larger than had been expected, and was the only religious community to have increased significantly in size since an informal survey held in 1983, indeed it constitutes the 10th largest community in England and Wales" (Bonney, 2003:36).

Outside London, Leicester is Britain's most religiously diverse city (European Commission, 2008). Sardar (2008) describes Leicester as "a good example of a city where the Asian communities are well integrated".

In terms of the geographical concentration of the Muslim population, in Highfields, an inner city area, 75% of inhabitants are Muslim. Leicester has 19 mosques, and the most dominant Muslim organisation (affiliated to the Muslim Council of Britain) active in education, social welfare, policing and interfaith work, is the Federation of Muslim Organisations (FMO), which refers to itself as "the voice of the city's 50,000 Muslims" (Kristiansen, 2006).

Method of Data collection and Analysis:

Fieldwork in this exploratory research study addressed two groups of organisations in relation to both cities. The first group was Muslim organisations (or organisations whose members were predominantly Muslim) using sport as part of their activities to target Muslim communities in Leicester and Birmingham. The second was public sector or quasi-governmental organisations serving the local populations in general, and Muslim populations in particular. In both cases interviews were undertaken and secondary sources reviewed. The secondary sources included annual reports, policy papers and statements, strategic plans, web pages and publicity materials.

Six interviews were conducted with each group, thus twelve in total. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted for between 40 minutes to two hours, were digitally recorded and transcribed, and subsequently subjected to analysis (following a Critical Discourse Analysis approach) employing Nvivo software. Each of the interviewees was informed that anonymity would be respected in order to facilitate an open and frank exchange. In the case of the representatives proposed by the Muslim organisations all were male, and the members of the policy community interviewed included one female and one member of an ethnic minority group only. None of the interviewees from the policy community was a Muslim.

For the purposes of this research, access to six faith based organisations in total was obtained in Birmingham and in Leicester: a sport organisation; and two non-sport (educational-community services) organisations in Birmingham, and three faith based organisations in Leicester. Although they were all non-sport organisations, sport plays an important part in the strategies of each of

these organisations. For the interviewees from these organisations the interview questions were centred around the following issues:

- Islam as a frame of reference to reflect upon identity, who Muslims feel they are and what they want to be;
- perceptions on modern sport; sport and the construction of Muslims identities;
- the role of sport in cross and intercultural dialogues within Muslim communities and between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK; and
- obstacles and challenges for participation in sport, access to funding and sport facilities.

To complement the analysis of the perceptions and accounts of representatives from Muslim organisations, six interviews (and analysis of secondary material) were also undertaken with a number of public sector and quasi-governmental bodies in both cities, namely the local authority, the County Sport Partnership (CSP) in each of the cities and the regional office of Sport England for the East Midlands, and the West Midlands. As an exploratory research approach the focus was on unpacking the perspectives, the 'assumptive worlds' (Wolman and Ford, 1996, Young, 1977) of the interviewees from the policy community (and those of authors of supplementary materials in these organisations) rather than on obtaining an 'objective record' of policy initiatives. The perspectives of the interviewees who had been selected on the basis of their strategic roles in policy within these bodies and the authors of the documentation from their organisations, was what was sought rather than an 'objective' description of the projects themselves.

The idea behind this strategy for collecting data was to have insights into both "top down" (policy actors) and "bottom-up" (local Muslim actors) approaches to make sense of the positions of Muslim participation in sport, and of provision of sport for Muslim communities in Leicester and Birmingham, as well as of the policies/programmes adopted to meet the specific needs of Muslim population.

Critical Discourse analysis was employed as the principal method of analysis in order to grasp the pluralistic (hybrid) discourses of the interviewees from the Muslim organisations and the policy community relating to sport and Islam and related policy. Our rationale for applying discourse analysis was informed by our research position which seeks to give to 'others' (Muslim scholars, leaders, intellectuals, members of Muslim movements and associations) a voice to define their own

concepts of sport without privileging one discourse over another. CDA is particularly appropriate in such contexts since it focuses on understanding discourse “in relation to social problems or structural variables such as race, gender, class, and power, and seeks to unmask ideologically permeated and often obscured structures of power, political control and dominance, as well as discriminatory inclusion and exclusion” (Wodak et.al 1989: 8) .

This kind of discursive construction or “analytical intervention” is helpful in illustrating how Muslims construct their religious identities in relation to their religious practice, the institutionalisation of their religion and as members of the national community as a result of their current situation (as minorities in a western secular context, in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7). Specifically, the study also attempts to identify, the action and strategies adopted in relation to modern sport in a western milieu, In particular we ask whether the strategy is one of, in Akbar’s terms “accepting”, “preserving” or “synthesising”. According to Akbar,

Islam attempts to differentiate its various approaches or worldviews, some of which overlap while some are in opposition. These approaches can best be summarised as “accepting”, “preserving” and “synthesising...Hence Islam’s response to the forces of globalisation also takes at least three distinct forms: mystics reach out to other faiths, traditionalists want to preserve the purity of Islam, and modernists attempt to synthesise society with other non- Muslim systems. (Akbar, 2007: 33)

Finally the analysis of the Muslim actors’ accounts is juxtaposed with the ‘top down’ analysis which seeks to uncover aspects of the world view of policy actors and their understanding of policy approaches adopted and the ways in which, and extent to which, they perceive themselves and these policies as serving the needs of Muslim communities.

Examples of Emerging Discourses on Sport, Identity and Policy

(a) Selected discourses among representatives of Muslim Organisations in Leicester and Birmingham

The theological considerations around sporting practice and sport provision in Britain and the (religious) criteria for the selection and organisation of sport activities were constructed in interviewees’ responses around the general rules or *Shari’a* guidance and not necessarily following the specific interpretation of a particular scholar or a *Fetwa* body either in Europe (e.g. the European

Council of *Fetwa*) or in other parts of the Muslim world. Some of the religious parameters cited involved the dress code (for males and females) in a public domain; general Islamic rules of *halal* and *haram* (e.g. alcohol and gambling); and code of conduct or *Muaamalat*, which regulates relations within the Muslim community and between the Muslim community and other communities, as well as in relation to the laws of the state.

Most of the organisations which participated in this study emphasised that Islam as a tradition and a bodily culture, is rich enough to make sense of sport. What has changed since the early history of Islam is the type of sport practices being undertaken. The emphasis as explained by a representative of an organisation in Leicester has been to encourage values such as team spirit and sense of “brotherhood” (sic) and to endorse a healthy life style among Muslims. The selection of sport activities to promote these values tends to be dictated by the available sport facilities and not necessarily by a literal interpretation of *the Sunna* (the Prophet’s tradition)

there are some organisations in Leicester that have gone down the very traditional route and have introduced Archery clubs, because it was Sunna (tradition) of the Rasul (PBUH). That’s a great practice. If we had the space and there was a demand we would encourage that within this facility here as well. We haven’t taken a strict literal interpretation of what the Prophet was doing when he encouraged horse riding and encouraged archery. Because both of those are means of keeping men (sic) strong. Keeping them active. So we’ve tried to encourage those sports that a) we can accommodate; and b) those sports that encourage team playing, encourage sense of community, encourage sense of brotherhood (sic) and c) and where obviously the individuals can get some benefits from doing their physical exercise. (Interviewee from Leicester, 11 June 2008)

Clearly in this quote (and many others) the focus on sport for and by Muslims is on male Muslims, even though riding and archery are sports for which there is a widely recognised Koranic authority for women’s participation. This is a point to which we shall return.

For some, the mosque as a religious and extensively a social institution can provide the ideal environment for Muslims to practice sport, as well as for non-Muslims (as long as they respected or adhered to the Islamic values which organise the social relations in the mosque).

Elders were very quick to realize that just to provide religious facilities and the core religious events: speeches, seminars and lectures, won’t to be sufficient to encourage young Muslims to feel that they were actually involved in Muslim activities and actively part of the Mosque. We

had experienced in other parts of Leicester young Asians Muslims who wanted to get involved in sport activities but the only facilities that they were available to them were mixed facilities with other ethnic (sic) groups. And as a result they were introduced to elements that were not considered Islamic i.e. drugs, mixing with the opposite sex and so on. That kind of environment wasn't really conducive to the Muslim environment we want to develop. It was clear that we wanted to have a sporting environment within the bound of the Mosque, within the Mosque complex, where young people and old people could come and enjoy sport in an Islamic environment. In a single sex environment without any influences that are not Islamic. The benefit of that was obviously on personal basis they manage to get the physical exercise they desired, but also ensured that they formed a relationship with the Mosque. Traditionally the sporting facilities were provided around prayer times.. so they'll be coming in our Mosque for prayers and get involved in sporting activities. It allowed us to really build a sense of community, especially amongst young Muslims. (Interviewee from Leicester, 11 June 2008: emphasis added)

The other major discourses that emerged from interviewees' responses include the traditional discourse of "Us" and "Them" in identity formation. This was discussed by interviewees in relation to the West and Western culture. This was apparent in the discourse relating to the status of faith organisations in a secular milieu, or with regards to the "tactics" that westerners or those representing western interests (largely local authorities, Sport England, the church and schools) adopted in providing justification for not supporting Muslim organisations financially (at least back in late 1980s). "Us" and "Them" discourse was also evident *within* the Muslim community particularly in relation the debate on majority and minority interests (defined more in ethnic rather than in theological terms i.e. Somali rather than Pakistani Muslims as opposed to *Sh'iaa* versus *Sunna* interests).

Furthermore, interviewees' responses emphasised the question of prejudices relating to Muslim communities in the UK, particularly after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks. This is reflected in the following responses:

it appears that the whole Muslim community is being put in the dock and made answerable for the criminal activities of a tiny, tiny number of people. All these pressures that are on us have created an atmosphere of fear among the Muslim community. It is a community that feels under siege. They have got a siege mentality in their mind. To bring up their confidence in themselves we need the outside forces to understand when they are looking into the Muslim community (...) what is it they want to do. The majority are law abiding citizens. In fact Islam is a law – *Shari'a* based faith, and within this *Shari'a* faith base our love for justice, law and order is very strong (...)

I think there is need for a more aggressive marketing policy to encourage talents from these communities into main stream sports. Many times when we have those events I do invite people like FIFA to come down for the football ground to see some young talents...to see whether they can identify that there are potentials within our community. But it means that we have to do the step forward to try to encourage them to recognise the Muslim community. No body come to us and say there is under representation of your community, what can we do to help? So barriers still exist. (Interviewee from Leicester, 27 May 2008: emphasis added)

Note the curious shift (which might be interpreted as an East-West shift) from a religious set of concerns in the early part of the quote, to those emphasising marketing and the development of sporting talent.

Some interviewees expressed resentment at what they perceived as uneven treatment of different faith communities.

...since 9/11 everybody is talking about targeting faith communities...asking faith communities to talk to each other...but it is a non-sense (nothing is happening in reality). They are not thinking seriously about the subject (...) The Muslim community is not receiving any money... the local authority did not put any penny here (i.e. in the building of the Central Mosque). They give churches more money. Every Church (in the area) has been supported by the central government, but not mosques. These have all been built by the community. (Interviewee from Birmingham, 4 July 2008)

In relation to the gender issue, women's participation in sport was treated by the male interviewees as a theological-legal question. The non-mixing of genders is a core issue in the interviewees' responses in differentiating between Muslims and non-Muslims needs in relation to sport provision and in shaping the meaning of the "(un)suitability" of the environment/space provided for, or accessed by, Muslims to practice sport. However, the prejudice previously highlighted about Muslim communities in general was also formulated in relation to preconceptions that local authorities and Sport England have about the exclusion of women within the Muslim community and the rigidity that Islam may present with regards gender mixing.

The greatest obstacle I think ... is the issue of religious sensitivities. To fully understand how, for example, the issue of gender division can be brought. We must not look at gender as an obstacle but we have to try and to find a way around it, which will meet the needs of that community. It is when we do not look at it as a problem but as a challenge...how we can find answers to it is the way forward. We are at the moment in a culture where we seem to be critical of the Other

...they will say that we don't want to participate with us. Rather than saying they are different we are different...we are all different. Thus, how we can meet somewhere, where we can mutually respect each other. That is the challenge out there. We need to create that culture

(Interviewee from Leicester, 16 May 2008: emphasis added)

To summarise this brief set of illustrations of the “bottom up” perspectives, a shared aspect which links the emerging discourses together is the discursive strategy of “positioning” (Davies and Harré, 2006), as a product of both interaction with ‘the Other’ and reflexive self evaluation. These processes reflect Akbar Ahmad’ s categorization of Islam’s responses to the forces of globalisation which he characterises as being “accepting”, “preserving” or “synthesising”. The interviewees exhibit with regards to the nature and function of sport, aspects of:

- Acceptance of western culture: accepting sport as a non political domain, a universal culture or language, and as an element of the rich Islamic tradition and history.
- Preserving Islamic cultural heritage: regarding *Shari’a* as a dominant interpretative discourse in interpreting the meaning and the space (environment) where the practice of sport should take place. The practice/ and access to sport in the vicinity of the mosque becomes a means of strengthening the relationship of the youth with their religion and thus preserving them from the negative elements of British society (e.g. drugs, crimes) as well as from extremism. Moreover, there is an avoidance of those forms of the equal opportunities debate which are seen as not in favour of preserving the purity of Islam.
- Synthesising Muslim and non-Muslim traditions: integration of British values of active citizenship, inter-faith dialogue, community cohesion and marketing strategies in attracting funds; as well as women’s rights, or at least their right to accommodate their sport practice to their faith (rather than in relation to equal representation within the organisation).

(b) Selected discourses among representatives of Governmental and Quasi-governmental Sporting Organisations in Leicester and Birmingham

For the purposes of space we focus here on two elements of the discourses of members of the policy community, namely religious identity and the adoption of faith groups as policy targets; and gender as ‘*the*’ problem of Muslim sports participation.

As we noted earlier the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 was a turning point in defining discrimination on the basis of religious difference as contrary to the basic Articles of European Union. This was followed in the UK and elsewhere by adoption of human rights legislation and the adoption of related changes in strategy documents concerning equity goals to reflect this view.

As one might expect, equity issues had been clearly acknowledged as a policy focus in both the local authorities and County Sports Partnerships and at the regional and national level by Sport England. However in all three contexts the descriptions of this formal acknowledgement placed less emphasis on defining disadvantaged groups by virtue of their religious identity, rather focusing on ethnicity or spatial concentration in disadvantaged areas, to frame equity policy for sport. Sport England, for example, in the definition of its equity policy specifically acknowledged ‘religious belief’ as a dimension by which inequity is to be addressed.

Sports equity is about changing the culture and structure of sport to ensure that it becomes equally accessible to all members of society whatever their age, ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs or socio-economic status. (Sport England, 2002: p. 3; emphasis added)

Similarly in the introduction to an updating of the equity policy, with the replacement of the Race Equality Standard by the more generic Equality Standard outlined in Sport England (2007: p. 7), clear reference is made to promoting diversity and equality of opportunity in ways which are sensitive to religion or belief.

We aim positively to promote diversity and equality of opportunity in Sport. We can only achieve this if we are sensitive to differences of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, transgender, age and religion or belief and free of discrimination as an employer and partner. We also believe we make better decisions if we are truly representative of the community we serve. (emphasis added)

However when the specifics of what is *required* by the legislation are identified there is effectively no mention of religious difference as being a dimension to which policy actions will be addressed. The document simply outlines “race specific duties”, and is silent on how these duties might entail engagement with faith groups.

Against this background gauged from the policy documentation where there is little other than a generic commitment to the forms of inequity experienced by religious or faith groups, the interviews

provided interesting commentaries on related issues. At regional level one of the officers interviewed held a policy brief for equity policy beyond the region. He pointed to profiling work with the Active People Survey (Sport England, 2009) and to engagement with faith groups in discussion or dialogue and de facto engagement with groups which drew their membership predominantly from Muslim communities. However, with the exception of three schemes for Muslim women, he did not identify specific projects which overtly addressed religious groups' specific needs.

My work has incorporated dialogue with the West Midlands Faith Forum for example where that's been a discussion in relation to the impact or the contribution that religious communities make to the kind of wider sports agenda around community cohesion but also the impact in terms of participation through participation in particular groups and there are...I am conscious there a number of specific organisations working with faith communities around. Some of the Sisters Games is a good example in the Birmingham area where there's work with Muslim women around sporting opportunities that are culturally appropriate and opportunities for them to participate. In terms of the work... (Interviewee, West Midland Office of Sport England, 17 July 2008)

One should note here the emphasis on how faith communities might contribute to "Sport England's agenda" rather than a focus on meeting the needs of the groups per se. These ends are not necessarily incompatible but the rationale, even for this limited engagement, is on the usefulness of targeting religious groups to meeting other governmental goals. Furthermore, despite this specific example of a group which was defined in terms of the religious affiliation of their members (see the Sisters' Games web site which is located within the pages of Ummah.com – Muslim Forum; Sisters Games, 2009), the interviewee suggested that this was an exception to what was generally evident in the Birmingham context.

Interviewees from the East Midlands Regional Sport England Office were even more cautious about whether religious affiliation should be used as a means for defining target groups. In terms of identifying religious affiliation at the regional level they observed little effort made to even monitor the activities of faith groups. Indeed, the defining characteristics of sporting disadvantage are seen as being spatial (defining neighbourhoods as the locus of policy focus on the basis of spatial indicators of the concentration of disadvantage) and thus spatially based responses simply dealing with the symptoms of disadvantage (its spatial concentration) rather than its causes:

I suppose one of the big drivers for us was the Policy Action Team 10 report which talked about the role of sport and arts in terms of regeneration and the big policy shift at the time was around

... the Index of Multiple Deprivation and that's where over the last 7 years there has been all sorts of iterations but IMD has been pretty much a constant source of focus for us and again that takes you down to community areas rather than necessarily the communities they're in. (Interviewee, East Midland Office of Sport England, 19 July 2008)

At the local level of the CSP and local authority, a similar reticence to focus on religion was evident. In Birmingham the city's Race Equality Scheme 2007-2010 explicitly identified religious or faith groups as a subsidiary issue in race and equality:

The Equality and Diversity Division of the City Council was formed in 2004 with the aim of developing a more holistic approach to tackling inequalities based on faith, race, gender, sexuality, age and disability (Birmingham City Council, 2007: 3)

And monitoring of faith groups in relation to disadvantage was required of those responsible for equity policy in sport in the City Council and CSP which was seen as problematic if only because of the cultural complexity of the target populations for equity policy:

historically our attention has been focused on gender, BME, disability and more recently have faith, sexuality and age being considered as priorities for us as a city. So the priorities have previously just been around maybe three focused areas, but it's now been extended because of legislative changes. ... we could certainly improve with our data collection linked to faith, because at this moment in time we don't particularly ask about faith, about users, so we don't really know who our users are in terms of faith, or should we say, we're inconsistent with this because sometimes we ask, sometimes we don't, ... so I would hope in the future we'd in a better position to be able to look at our profiles linked to faith and then be able to plan to how we need to deal or respond to issues like that. (Interviewee Birmingham City Council and CSP, 7 May 2009)

The situation in Birmingham was thus described as one of sporadic rather than systematic monitoring of differences by religious groupings, and limited intervention along faith group lines. Notwithstanding, there were two schemes which were cited by the Birmingham CSP interviewee as examples of targeting groups on the basis of religious identity. One was *The Aston Ward Proposal: Young People, Muslims and Community Cohesion* (Birmingham City Council, 2008). This project, which was described as a direct product of security concerns, sought to link directly with Muslim youth in Aston a ward with a 48 per cent Muslim population, and with religious schools. It proposed a,

Three pronged approach looking to tackle (through sports) the problems related to community cohesion, disaffected young people in Aston and the engagement of the Madressas. ... Given that every Muslim child (under 12 with very few exceptions) will be attending a Madressa (normally for 2 / 2.5 hours in the evening between 16.00 and 19.30 (Madressa count in Aston – at least 12 officials [sic], with maybe at least as many unofficial ones). To target these young Muslims we will look to create links with all these Madressas, with a view to integrate / engage them into sporting activities of Aston Sports Club. Benefits to include: engagement of Muslims at an early age; engagement with Madressas with a view to integrate them into extended schools / supplementary schools networks; healthy / sporting activities. (Birmingham City Council, 2008: 1)

The second project which was mentioned by a local authority interviewee (and was also identified by the Sport England regional representative) was the Saheli Women's Project. This group though serving an almost wholly Muslim female population had chosen to identify itself simply as a women's organisation without a religious connotation to its membership or aims.

The perception of our interviewees in the Leicester context painted a broadly similar picture. Leicester had had the benefit of a funded Sport England scheme which had supported the Leicester Race Equality in Sport Project. However this project was described as having operated without a focus on faith groups per se. Although it had sought on occasion to work through religious leaders, inter-group tensions were evident. However, since the project had ended in 2006, little progress was reported in trying to engage religious, particularly Muslim, groups. The establishment of Local Sports Alliances is a national initiative intended to promote the engaging of local groups in local decision – making about sport but one of the problems facing Leicester was that it had adopted a single city-wide LSA which was too big to promote engagement at the local level.

So in that sense we've tried to work to develop the LSA, but we've had dozens of meetings now ... and predominantly the people, the community, the people that we're able to get, apart from a few of the earlier meetings, ... it's been white middle class, often males So we're not getting those people from those communities representing their voices there. (Interviewee Leicester-Shire & Rutland CSP, 16 September 2009)

One project which was mentioned by interviewees involved sporting matches between Muslim, Christian and Jewish clerics in the city, though this was initiated by the clerics themselves rather than being a project derived from the city or the CSP.

Although as we have noted the members of the policy community who were interviewed referred only rarely to the sporting and leisure needs of religious groups, the one area which attracted regular comment and attention was that of Muslim women. In essence raising the 'problem' of Muslim sporting needs was often simply reduced to the issue of how to deal with the position of women in Muslim communities and how to go about making separate forms of provision. For example the Sport England West Midlands regional officer identified three female organisations, two of which, the Muslim Women's Sports Foundation and the Sisters' Games were explicitly focused on meeting the needs of Muslim women, while the other, the Saheli Women's Group, which de facto served local Muslim women and girls, adopted a more neutral approach to the market it served. In an interview featured on a promotional DVD for example one of its members describes the organisation as serving the needs of "women and girls from any background, not just Muslim girls" (Saheli Women's Group, 2006). Two of these groups were also cited by CSP and City Council interviewees. The implication of these differing strategies is that the implicit definition of we / us and they / 'the other' promotes a reaction in terms of who 'the other' is for the women engaged in these groups, and for whom these women will themselves constitute 'the other'.

The approach of the Birmingham CSP was described in the following terms:

In terms of the work of the County Sports Partnership they've certainly been in discussion around a more kind of cultural brokerage approach, that is actually around appropriate provision for local neighbourhoods and certainly looked in terms of a neighbourhood model and certainly Birmingham for its action partnership in some of their sort of publications and national dialogue have tried to encourage an approach that's based around the identity of Muslim communities as people within the community rather than specifically highlighting Muslim faith as a kind of target group (Interviewee, West Midland Office of Sport England, 17 July 2008)

This description emphasises the notion of *brokerage*, with the CSP acting as a link between groups rather than accepting groups as part of the greater common whole, in other words reflecting the diversity of faith groups and associated religiosities. One way of dealing with some Muslim women's sporting needs is to refer to them as part of the sporting needs of a sub-set of women, those for whom participation is preferable or only possible in an all female environment. However while the need for most Muslim women for separate single sex provision was recognised as a religious matter, and lack of women's participation was therefore seen as a bi-product of religious norms, men's low levels of participation was much more likely to be explained by factors associated with the spatial concentration of social deprivation.

Separate provision for the sexes however implied a cost in terms for example of staffing arrangements, and practical rather than ideological issues were cited as reasons for not providing such services. There were however examples cited of separate provision having been made but with a lack of care in implementation which may have been a reflection of a lack of appreciation of the requirements of, or empathy for, such an approach even though these were not new initiatives. Indeed the political acceptability of this policy was not always clear cut and could provoke resentment among some:

There are areas where women's specific provision, not actually in Birmingham, but women's specific provision particularly mindful of the needs of Muslim women around sort of dress code and single sex participation has created local kind of flashpoints, ...response back from the British National Party kind of representatives ... there's been some kind of hot issues if you like although less so in Birmingham than in other areas that I'm aware of. (Interviewee, West Midland Office of Sport England, 7 May 2009)

Conclusions

A major premise of this paper is that policy development and management of provision in sport will be more effectively delivered in a context in which understanding of the world views of policy makers and targeted religious minorities is developed. A range of issues have emerged from our exploratory research on the questions of sport practice among, and sport policy for, Muslim communities and these may be summarised as follows:

The debate on multiculturalism in Europe, and in the West in general, is today faced with a new challenge, which is to find a mechanism to reconcile western culture and the western history of modernity with so-called 'non-western' and ethnically more diverse cultures. Within this context there is a growing recognition of the specificity of Islam as a religion in the UK. New questions are thus being raised in relation to the practice of sport in the west. Demands are being made by Muslim organisations and Islamic faith centres (i.e. Mosques) — in the name of democracy, citizenship and rights to cultural and religious difference — to accommodate sporting practices to the specifics of Islamic religious practice, and for funding to build sports facilities and / or organise sport activities in suitable (e.g. gender segregated) environment for males and females.

Despite the increased interest (within the public and voluntary sectors) in sport and Islamic faith as an emerging policy issue in the UK, multiculturalism in practice, particularly when it comes to dealing

with the specific religious needs of Muslim communities, is constrained by other rhetorics, such as that of social inclusion and the ideology of western liberalism. Hence, demands made by Muslim organisations for funding, or for access to sports facilities, or to adapt sports practices to Islamic beliefs, are perceived as an obstacle to cross-cultural encounters and social integration. In the light of this difficulty, negotiation and re-appropriation of the space where sport practice by Muslim organisations should take place, and the redefinition of the central role of the Mosque as a place of worship but also a community centre offering diverse educational, cultural, and even sporting activities, are ingredients of the dynamics in identity formation within Muslim communities in the UK.

Although recent changes in legislation have resulted in some public bodies formally acknowledging religious and faith communities as appropriate targets for sport equity policy, interviewees reported a lack of practical action. An area of exception is that of (some) provision of women-only sessions in public facilities. However for some in the policy community the issue of provision for Muslim women appeared to be perceived as 'the' (only) issue in relation to provision for Muslim communities. This policy was perceived as an issue relating to increasing participation rather than necessarily an issue in regard to (western liberal norms of) emancipation per se. This issue is not well communicated by Muslim organisations, in part because of the relative lack of female representation among representatives in the Muslim organisations on which this study focused.

Policy goals on the part of the sport policy professionals for Muslim communities tended to be expressed in terms relating to the broader agenda of "sport (and health) for all", increased participation and enhanced access to existing provision, and community cohesion. This might be interpreted as an assimilationist approach concerned with getting Muslim groups to reach British norms of participation, rather than identifying these communities' expression of their own needs.

Finally, we would argue that these tentative conclusions constitute elements which can contribute to the development of an intercultural understanding of the nature and roles of Muslim communities in contemporary western / UK society. Such a task in the current climate is both relevant and important. As a consequence our conclusions contain insights which, we would argue, are of direct relevance for policy in the field of sport and other social domains.

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