Sport, Physical Education, and Islam: Muslim Independent Schooling and the Social Construction of Masculinities

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This qualitative study of a British Islamic independent school explores the construction of religious masculinities within the lives of a cohort of Muslim adolescent males. An ethnographic analysis is presented whereby boys’ physical education is located as a strategic site for the development of Muslim masculine identities. Adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective, the article discusses the representation of pupil masculinities within the school and the specific role that Islam, sport, and physical education played in respondent lives. Findings highlight how religion provided a central mechanism through which pupils sought to construct and negotiate their masculine selves. In turn, physical education served as an avenue through which respondents could embrace and embody their sense of self and express a series of broader religious ideals.

Cette étude qualitative au sujet d’une école britannique islamique indépendante porte sur la construction des masculinités religieuses dans la vie d’une cohorte d’adolescents musulmans. Une analyse ethnographique est présentée et révèle que l’éducation physique des garçons constitue un site stratégique pour le développement des identités masculines musulmanes. À partir d’une perspective d’interaction symbolique, cet article discute des représentations étudiantes masculines au sein de l’école et du rôle spécifique de l’Islam, du sport et de l’éducation physique dans la vie des participants. Les résultats mettent en lumière le rôle de la religion dans le mécanisme central par le biais duquel les étudiants cherchent à construire et négocier leur soi masculin. En retour, l’éducation physique sert de moyen par lequel les participants peuvent célébrer et incorporer leur sens du soi ainsi qu’exprimer une série d’idéaux religieux plus larges.

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In recent times, Asian masculinities have come to represent an increasingly popular area of academic inquiry. In mainstream sociology this upsurge has coincided with changes at the wider political level and the various connotations which have come to be attached to Muslim male identity in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, and related events in the UK (see Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera, 2008). In the sociology of sport such research has a more extended history (see Burdsey, 2007; Dimeo & Mills, 2001; Ismond, 2003). Common within this literature is the assertion that sport is viewed as relatively insignificant within Asian culture when compared with broader lifestyle activities such as earning power, family commitments, social mobility, and academic achievement (Fleming, 1994; McGuire & Collins, 1998). More specifically, Islam’s position on sport and physical education has been largely overlooked and certainly there is little research on the interface between independent Islamic schools and physical education.

Against this backdrop, this research presents a qualitative analysis of the construction of Asian masculinities among a cohort of Muslim pupils at an independent all-male British Islamic school. The interrelationship between masculinity and Islam, within the context of physical education and sport, is explored to better understand how respondents negotiated and constructed their masculine identities within this social setting. While acknowledging that masculinity is conceptualized in a number of ways, this research gives precedence to the symbolic interactionist perspective in which masculinity represents a socially constructed and situational form of self-identity.

Islam, Sport, and the Body

Islam is widely accepted as a Divine ideology that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by God (Allah) (Ruthven, 2006). As a monotheistic religion, it is grounded on two fundamental principles: (i) the oneness of God (Tawhid), and (ii) the acceptance of the Prophet Muhammad as God’s last and most beloved messenger (Risala) (Muslim Education Trust, 1994). Literal interpretations of religious scriptures, such as the Qur’an and the Shar’iah (the Divine law which imbues Islamic culture) are pervasive among Muslim communities as they strive to live within the guidelines set out in the Shar’iah and those reinforced in the Qur’an (Mawdudi, 1989). For example, in keeping with the Shar’iah, Muslims often seek to dress modestly and to avoid premarital or extramarital cross-gender interaction(s), and pastimes or recreations that might stimulate sexual expression between men and women (outside of wedlock). Other directives include looking after one’s body, following a controlled diet, practicing Zakah (a welfare contribution), keeping the annual fast during the month of Ramadan, and offering disciplined Salah (regular prayers five times a day (al-Qaradawy, 1992).1 Humility, respect and kindness toward others are all valued qualities within Islam and stem from its core premise of peace. Excessive individualism, selfishness, jealousy, anger and aggression are actively discouraged in line with the principle of Jihad-e-nafs: self-control over one’s negative desires and urges. Needless to say, for many Muslims, Islam is not just a faith or a religion but the central focus of their social existence.
In recent years Islam has come under increasing scrutiny as a consequence of a series of events on the broader political stage (Modood, 1990; Modood, 1997). Most notable perhaps are those of 9/11, 7/7, and the related rise in suicide bombings and violent protests in various countries. In turn, public interest in Muslim males has increased. In the UK, for example, it is not uncommon for newspapers and other media to feature negative images of Muslim men. Certainly, there exists a degree of consensus among social commentators that, in the aftermath of urban disturbances in a number of UK towns and cities in recent years, British Muslim males have been subject to negative profiling at a media level, variously being labeled militant, aggressive, rebellious, and fundamentalist (Dwyer, et al., 2008; Hussain & Bagguley, 2005; Hopkins, 2007). Academic debate concerning the alleged deviant and violent nature of young British Muslim men has also increased (see Goodey, 2001; Macey, 2002, 2007). These discourses have subsequently engendered wider conjecture as to the existence of a fundamental conflict between Western societies and the values embraced by Muslims and endorsed through Islamic teachings (Esposito, 2002; Vertovec, 2002). Likewise, speculation as to the possibility of a crisis in Islam, particularly in relation to the behavior and identities of Muslim males, has grown (see Lewis, 2003). For example, Dwyer et al., (2008, p. 117) highlight how, in the wake of the London bombings of 2005, young British Muslim males have been the targets of a “reactive politics of fear” that necessarily delineates such men into two simple categories: those who are for us (read: the West) and those who are against us (read: Terrorist, Islamist and Fundamentalist; see also Amin, 2002; Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra, & Solomos, 2002).2 Amid these descriptions, the plurality of British Muslim masculinities is largely ignored, and a male adherence to Islamic principles over-simplistically associated with Islamic fundamentalism. With these issues in mind, it is our contention that there is a need to better understand the multiplicity of Asian masculinities among young British Muslim men, and to more readily recognize religion as a category of influence for identity construction.

Interest in the role and place of Islam within sport has been gathering momentum since the 1980s. This has culminated in an abundance of literature exploring the issue of Islamic teaching on sports and physical activity (see Dagkas & Benn, 2006; de Knopp, Theeboom, Wittock, and de Martelaer, 1996). The consensus within this literature is that Islam is an ideology that exhorts its followers to take up recreational, physical, and/or competitive activities. The use of religious texts such as Qur’anic verses (sura) and written accounts of the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings (Hadith) have been frequently used by some Muslims to portray Islam’s positive view of sport (see Walseth & Fasting, 2003). For example, Islamic literature stipulates that the Prophet Muhammad and the second caliph, Omar Ibn Khattab, recommended that Muslims “teach (their) children swimming, archery, and horseback riding” (al-Qaradawy, 1992: 296), as well as encouraging competitions involving physical exercise and discipline.

The juxtaposition of sport and Islamic principles regarding the physical body has also been explored. For example, the disciplined use of the body and strict control of food and drink intake in Western sports is similar to Islam’s requirement for Muslims to take care of their bodies and to monitor their health (Daiman, 1995), to acquire high levels of physical fitness and strength (Zaman, 1997), and to strive for a cleanliness and purification of the mind, the body and the soul.
Farooq and Parker (Mawdudi, 1989). A small number of studies have explored how physicality and the body are linked closely with Islam. For example, Walseth and Fasting (2003) have discussed how Muslims view the physical body as a God-given entity that has specific needs and that should be cared for. There are also numerous studies that locate sporting activity and exercise as an ideal means through which Muslims can fulfill the needs of their body within the precepts of Islam (Abdelrahman, 1992; al-Qaradawy, 1992).

Sport, Religion, and Masculinity

Academic analyses of the interface between Islam and the construction of masculinity are lacking both within and beyond the social and political sciences (Ouzgane, 2003). This is particularly evident within the sociology of sport where it is more common to find discussions on the construction of masculinity through the relationship between Christianity and sport (Dunn & Stevenson, 1998; MacDonald & Kirk, 1999; Stevenson, 1991, 1997). A topic that occupies a preeminent place within this literature is that of “muscular Christianity,” an ideology that is perhaps best known for embodying the pedagogy and ideals of the Christian Socialists Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes (Kidd, 2006; MacAlloon, 2006). Concerned with the prevalence of weak and effeminate men in Victorian society, Hughes and Kingsley merged traditional Anglicanism with a form of manliness that favored physical and moral strength, courage, and aggression above sentimentality, reflection, and gentility (Tozer, 1985; Watson, 2007; Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005). Physical education and organized competitive sports were also promoted within the English public schools (Holt, 1989; Mangan, 1986; Neddam, 2004). These activities were seen as valuable social tools via which unruly boys could be transformed into disciplined Christian men (Hall, 1994; Morford & McIntosh, 1993). More recently, of course, a plethora of work has endorsed the notion that sports participation immerses young men in a social institution that has its own ideology and embedded norms regarding appropriate, desirable, and acceptable masculine behaviors (see, for example, Messner & Sabo, 1990).

Masculinity, Sport, and Schooling: Context and Method

The present study is underpinned by a symbolic interactionist perspective of the self. This approach necessarily sees the self (and what individuals do) as being influenced by the social milieus in which they live and the expectations that such milieus hold regarding acceptable forms of identity and behavior (Hall, 1992, 2000). In this view, identity is not solely about the self, but about how individuals construct themselves in accordance with broader social processes through interaction, communication, and negotiation (see Jenkins, 2008; Woodward, 2002). As a specific form of identity, masculinity is situational; that is individuals mold the self within the social, historical and political specificities of their immediate surroundings and settings. A number of researchers have identified schools as heavily gendered social institutions that facilitate the construction of particular masculinities in and through various activities, including sport (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mar-
Teachers are seen as active agents in this process and are believed to trigger, support, and guide socially acceptable forms of identity construction by controlling the gestures, movements and locations of pupils through the processes and practices of discipline, surveillance and normalization (Connell, 2005). Masculine construction has come to be viewed as a series of social processes that portray images of what boys do to or with their bodies (Swain, 2003, 2006). In fact, the physical body is believed to be an integral part of self-identity (Shilling, 2005). Some researchers highlight how boys consciously locate the physical body in particular social spaces to actively develop and maintain their identities (see Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002). Likewise, sport and physical activity have been recognized as key sites for the construction and display of identities (MacClancy, 1996; Hargreaves, 2000; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002).

The findings presented here derive from research carried out during the spring and summer (March-July) of the 2005/2006 academic (school) year at Dar-ul-Islam, an all-male Islamic independent school situated in the English West Midlands. Located on the outskirts of one of UK’s most deprived urban areas, Dar-ul-Islam serves a largely Sunni Muslim clientele of predominantly Pakistani origin and, at the time of the research, had 1300 pupils on roll aged between 11–23 years, approximately 52% of which were residential borders. Like many British Muslim schools, Dar-ul-Islam seeks to provide a secure and stable learning environment alongside a conventional Islamic ethos (Sarwar, 1994). Although the school delivers the core National Curriculum subjects across the 11–16 age range, after age 16 Islamic education is emphasized. The purpose of this is to equip pupils to follow the “path of the Right (al-Haqq) and the Light (an-Nur)” and abhor “ignorance (al-jahiliyyah) and darkness (az-zulumat)” (Sarwar, 2001: 5). State funding is deemed neither desirable nor feasible for the maintenance of Dar-ul-Islam, because it is the freedom to prioritize an Islamic education that is celebrated by the founders of the school and those who choose to attend. Academic fees are set at between £1,200 and £1,600 per year, well below the UK average for independent schooling. The empirical data presented are taken from interviews conducted with 16 British born Pakistani Muslim males aged between 14–19 years, all of whom were borders at the school and who had attended for between 3–6 years. Gaining access to the school proved challenging with both teachers and parents being concerned about the welfare of pupils. Following various negotiations with the school hierarchy access was granted. Letters outlining the research aims were distributed to a random sample of 50 families whose sons had been boarding at the school for more than three years. Consent forms were provided with each letter. In total, 16 pupils volunteered to participate in the study. Parents expressed no further concerns.

The research used those methods of sociological inquiry traditionally associated with ethnography (i.e., participant/observation, semistructured interviews and documentary analysis) to explore the day-to-day lives of the individuals concerned. Decisions over when and where interviews took place, and which lessons could be observed, were made entirely by the head teacher. A fieldwork journal was used to record observational events and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Observations were carried out on 2–3 days per week in term time. Alongside interviews with pupils, discussions also took place with a
selection of the school’s governors and teaching staff. To further enhance the data collection process (and in line with established practice concerning respondent validation), interview transcripts were sent to all interviewees for verification and feedback (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Numerous educational studies have based their analysis on the symbolic interactionist approach (see Burgess, 1983; Woods, 1983), central to which are assumptions surrounding the potentially dynamic and creative nature of social action and the definitions which individuals attach to situations and their interactions with others. From the data analysis a series of key themes emerged relating to the way in which pupil respondents sought to construct their masculine identities and sense of self in accordance with the internal values of the school and, what they saw as, predominant external (broader social) discourses surrounding Muslim men. What we present here is a discussion of the most common religious identities that were evident from the data. It is not implied that these are exclusive or fixed identity types. Rather through an exploration of the way in which these identities were constructed we seek to demonstrate the plurality and fluidity of the various masculinities on show and frame them in accordance with three specific modes of self-identification. These comprise: the “rational self,” the “disciplined self,” and the “united self.”

Islam, Schooling, and Masculine Identity

Perhaps not surprisingly Islamic education was the core feature of schooling at Dar-ul-Islam. Arabic lessons, Qur’anic classes, and teachings of the Shar’iah and Hadith took place everyday, including weekends, the central purpose of which was to prepare pupils both for life here on Earth (Dunya) and after death (Akirah). An in-depth analyses of interview data revealed that religion was an important indicator of the self for all respondents. By identifying as Muslims, pupils viewed Islam as a fundamental aspect of their individual identities (Nielsen, 1992). For example, like many of his peers, Usman expressed how he saw himself as “Muslim before anything else in this dunya (world).” Embedded within such sentiments was a total acceptance of the Shar’iah and the personal struggles to attain “one-ness” with Allah. All pupils saw it as their duty, as believing Muslims, to follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah as instructive manuals for life on earth. Many held beliefs around a literal interpretation of the superior principles of the Qur’an and the Shar’iah, thus accepting Islamic texts and concepts such as Tawhid, Risalah, and the Akirah as absolute truths:

Naveed: As a Muslim, I . . . live for Allah. He is the Creator of all the universes, the most Gracious and the most merciful. I also believe that [the] Prophet Muhammad is Allah’s last and most beloved messenger.

These comments epitomize Dar-ul-Islam’s approach to Islam reflecting, in particular, how pupils’ lives were imbued with idealized discourses about the practice of Islam in very orthodox ways. Pupils were encouraged to consider religious scriptures from the Qur’an, and exemplars from the Shar’iah and the Hadith
when making decisions about their personal and social lives. However, a key issue that emerged during the course of the research was how participants’ understandings of what it meant to be a young Muslim man were shaped by the school itself and by wider social discourse. Indeed, over time it became clear that pupils made informed decisions about themselves (i.e., about being Muslim and being male) on two distinct levels: (i) the internal level, which comprised their identity within their immediate school environment; and (ii) the external level, which represented factors exterior to their everyday educational context.

**Negotiating the Self at the Internal Level**

The school environment was an integral part of respondent existence. It symbolized a “second home” and, as such, provided a physical and social space in which they could fully embrace the Islamic way of life (*Bilal*). In fact, many expressed how they had chosen to attend Dar-ul-Islam simply to learn more about Islam. There was also a very real sense that pupils wanted to become better proponents of their faith:

Shazad: I just wanted to become a better Muslim, I wanted to learn more about my *deen* (religion), I wanted to strengthen my *Iman* (commitment to faith) . . . ’cos without Allah in my life, I felt like I had nothing in life, no meaning, no purpose . . . no direction.”

Every facet of institutional life at Dar-ul-Islam was infused with Islam, from the décor in classrooms, corridors, and dormitories, to the volume of space designated for the public and private worship of Allah. This was also evident in the content, style, and structure of lessons and in the ways that pupils looked, dressed, and behaved. In keeping with the precepts of Islam, a modest and simple dress code was prescribed for all pupils. This manifested itself in the form of long flowing gray robes (*thorb*), white hats and socks, and casual footwear. Elaborate designer clothing and expensive fragrances or cologne were discouraged to prevent feelings of jealousy or superiority among pupils. Those who had reached puberty were encouraged to wear a beard as this was viewed to be the most natural way for Muslim men to follow the *Sunnah* (exemplars) of the Prophet (Sarwar, 1994).

High priority was given to discipline with regards to everyday behavior. This was intended to facilitate the moral and psychological well being of pupils, to enhance their self-esteem, build confidence, and to motivate them to pursue excellence in all their worldly endeavors. Head teacher, Mr. Khan, spoke of the role that Dar-ul-Islam aimed to play in its pupil’s lives:

Teaching boys how to become men of personality and character . . . establishing truth and goodness in their lives . . . [and] eradicating the temptations of *Iblis* (Satan) . . . is what we’re all about. If the boys didn’t want to become better Muslim men . . . they wouldn’t have chosen to come here. We don’t force them to attend; they choose us.

Mr. Khan also believed that it was his responsibility, as head teacher, to ensure that pupils “got what they (were) seeking,” that is, guidance in embracing
Islam as a way of life by adhering to the literal teachings outlined in the Qur’an, the *Shari’ah* and the *Sunnah*. Living amid such values and ideals meant that pupils were enveloped by religious law and culture and this, in turn, encouraged them to embrace Islam in strict orthodox ways:

Imran: Every morning we get up for *Fajr* [prayer between dawn and sunrise] and hear the *azhan* [call to prayer]. The [loud] speakers are everywhere and the sound is so loud that sometimes even the walls vibrate. You have breakfast as the sun rises and all the while you think about Allah. There is a quiet satisfaction in knowing that everyday you open your eyes and ears to the world, and your heart to Allah.

Implicit in Imran’s statements here is that a “God-consciousness” permeated pupils’ sense of self: “Allah’s immanence” and presence governed their every thought and action (Farooq). As Bilal explained, *deen* (faith) provided a specific medium through which participants sought to make sense of themselves and to understand their existence in the wider world. This is consistent with previous research findings that have located spirituality as a channel through which followers can seek a particular identity (Parry et al., 2007). With its emphasis on discipline and order, Dar-ul-Islam ensured that the gestures, movements, and behaviors of pupils were regulated in line with institutional values and beliefs (Kirk, 1998). For example, strict antibullying policies were in place to punish those who hurt their fellow “Muslim brothers” and the precise (and heavily policed) scheduling of classes and wider school activities ensured that elements of Islamic culture dominated both the educational and social experiences of pupils. This was evident not only in the way that respondents were preoccupied with the desires of Allah, but reflected also in the rituals that they were encouraged to undertake. The following comments are illustrative in this respect:

Jameel: Living in the school, we’re taught how to live as Allah and the Prophet recommended. We consciously follow Islam and the Shar’iah. . . . We recite and interpret the Qur’an. . . . We learn about the Shar’iah, the Sunnah, and the Hadith and offer our prayers on time. I couldn’t achieve these things without the school environment.

When asked to explain why he felt he could not follow Islam in this way outside of Dar-ul-Islam, Jameel talked of his everyday struggles to commit to the faith, explaining that at times when he should be praying or reading the Qur’an, he struggled to resist watching television and simply “having a laugh” with his friends and siblings.

Teachers were important agents in this overall process. They were the ones who by “always (being) there” and offering “guidance” to pupils (Salim), ensured that individual and collective behavior was monitored. In this way, teachers were key components in the disciplinary and regulatory regimen at Dar-ul-Islam, ensuring that identities were normalized and constructed according to the belief and value structures in place. Indeed, a recurring issue that emerged from discussions with respondents was how teachers shaped pupil understandings of what it meant to be a Muslim man. All interviewees stated that they were taught to aspire
to the Prophet Muhammad as the Khulafah had done⁸ and to accept and revere the Prophet and His companions as setting the best example for humankind to follow. Pupils talked about the “nobility and loyalty of Hazrat Abu Bakr” (Salim), the “justice of Hazrat Umar” (Bilal), the “reserve and modesty of Hazrat Uthman” (Jameel), the “bravery of Hazrat Ali” (Shazad), and the “infallibility of the Prophet Himself” (Mohammad). Many articulated how, in their view, Muslim men should aspire to engendering such characteristics in their own lives given that they reflected an ideal representation of Islamic masculinity. Alongside teachers, school friends and peers were identified by respondents as providing an important source of social and moral support to help individuals retain a heightened awareness of the behavioral and cultural expectations of Islam and, in this sense, served as inspirational role models for respondents:

Naveed: At school, you’re surrounded by others who are just like you. You have your friends and companions who, as your Muslim brothers, always look out for you and make sure that you’re close to your deen (faith).

Although it was apparent that, at the internal level, teachers and friends helped to maintain and support respondents’ sense of self, what also emerged from interview discussion was that external factors similarly fed into identity formation. The reliance of pupils on external factors in the negotiation and renegotiation of their identities as Muslim males demonstrated a clear relationship, not only between the self and the school, but also between the self and wider society.

**Negotiating the Self at the External Level**

Common amid pupil discussion was concern over the ways in which the British media portrayed Muslim males. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the role and effect of (largely) negative media discourses had significantly influenced the personal lives of all interviewees. As Mohammed noted, there was a strong sense of awareness among pupils regarding the “animosity” surrounding “young Pakistani Muslim men living in Britain.” Moreover, there was a dominant belief that, in seemingly representing the opinions of wider Western society, the British media was attacking the identity of young Muslim males, their existence in Britain and, perhaps more importantly, their overall “way of life” (Ramzan). Consistent with previous research findings, participants discussed how, in their view, the media had more recently come to portray Muslim men in an often derogatory and vilifying way (see Dwyer et al., 2008; Shah, 2006; Vertovec, 2002):

Imran: They [the British media] belittle us in every possible way. . . . Everyone associates the image of a Muslim man with a bushy beard and pajri (long-tailed turban), with the face of an Islamic fundamentalist, a terrorist or a culturally narrow-minded misogynist. It makes me so angry.

During initial discussions on this topic pupils were clearly disturbed about the way in which they believed Muslim men were being portrayed in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 (Ahmed, 2003; Esposito, 2002). This was reflected in their discontent when reflecting on media reports of the turbulent cultural, political and legislative
climate in the UK surrounding issues such as the profiling of Muslim males, police raids on the homes of Muslims, and subsequent interrogations in connection with terrorist activity. As interview discussion progressed, many pupils articulated their distress at the way in which they perceived their religion and identity to have been “hijacked by jahil lork [ignorant people]” (Abdul). There was widespread belief among respondents that the brutality of 9/11 stemmed not from Islam but from “a contradiction between the ideals” embedded in Islam and those beliefs held by “some men claiming to follow Islam.” (Mohammad). Amir expressed his own concerns at how the majority of young Muslim men lived their lives against the codified rules prescribed by the Shar’iah, yet still claimed to be Muslim. Ramzan too stated that, in his view, many Muslim men were caught in a “web of confusion and sin and didn’t know who they are and what they’re supposed to do with their lives.” In articulating their belief that a crisis did not necessarily exist between Western societies and Islam, a number of respondents argued that the real problem for Muslim men was the inner conflict that they faced in trying to stay within the realms of Islam amid the cultural temptations and distractions of Western life:

Mohammad: A lot of Muslim men feel they can’t relate to Islam anymore. They’re stuck between . . . two parallel cultures, one that gives them freedom . . . and the other one that they feel constrains them. It’s a shame that what they see as constraining is Islam.

It became clear over time that as young Muslim men themselves, respondents were experiencing their own sense of inner conflict when attempting to reconcile the value structures of their everyday lives with that of the broader social world (see Lewis, 2003). For Usman, this conflict was characterized by “losing it when people say Muslim men are violent” yet feeling “bad for feeling like this.” Such anger made Usman “aggressive,” thus confirming what “everyone already (thought) of Muslim men.” For Usman this personal struggle (or crisis regarding his sense of self) was born out of everyone else’s discontent with his identity, his character and his way of life. In turn, his aggression was directed at those who violated the precepts of Islam thereby giving “Muslim men and Islam a bad name,” and toward the British media for portraying all Muslim men as “radical terrorists.” This sense of conflict and crisis made it hard for Usman (and those holding similar views) to fulfill the duties of jihad-e-nafs.9 Within the context of the school, teachers and friends provided a safe environment in which pupils could dress, behave, interact, and exist as Muslim men. Yet where external discourses were concerned, respondents felt subject to personal attack. It was evident that both individually and collectively pupils were negotiating a self that was more valued by themselves and the school than by the external society in which they lived. One of the central ways in which they sought to further embrace and to reinforce this sense of self, and to reconcile their inner conflict, was through the physical activities that they encountered in school. Hence, it is to a closer analysis of these activities that we now turn.
Identity, Islam, and Sport: The Emergence of a Valued Self

Physical Education (PE) and sport were afforded high priority at Dar-ul-Islam with PE representing the second largest subject (in terms of time allocation) in the school curriculum. Each pupil received six hours of PE per week with an emphasis on team sports such as hockey, basketball, football (soccer), and cricket. Interview discussion revealed that PE, sport and physical activity constituted the second most important aspect of respondents’ lives, after religious studies. All interviewees perceived PE as an essential element of their school experience and as a specific time, place, and space in their daily routine where they could practically apply their religious beliefs. Adopting literal interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunnah, respondents argued that positively embracing physical activities and sports was important since it was in keeping with the requests of Allah, the Prophet and the Khulafah. For instance, Usman believed that his body was a “gift from Allah” and that he was charged with the responsibility of taking care of it (see Walseth & Fasting, 2003; Zaman, 1997). Pupils used PE and sport as sites in which they could recreate and affirm a valued sense of self. As we have seen, all respondents felt that they were under pressure to (re)negotiate the boundaries of their masculine identities in line with various social factors. PE and sport were seen to be useful tools via which to achieve this. Amid the turmoil of identity formation and the conflict, which individuals experienced between the internal values of the school and external media discourses, physical activity provided a social environment in and through which the production of the ideal self could be achieved.

The Rational Self

The ability to be more rational was something that many pupils felt was integral to becoming a good Muslim man, particularly those who were distressed about their persistent feelings of anger and resentment at “everyone’s discontentment” with their perceived identity. These respondents were concerned that harboring negativity and aggression was destructive to their relationship with Allah and wanted to resolve this. Many turned to the texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith for guidance on the ideal character and persona of Muslim men. For example, Hussain referred to a Hadith, in which the Prophet told Muslims that Allah abhorred violence, anger, and aggression in human society: “Allah calls to the home of peace and grants to rifq (gentleness) the many pleasures and blessings that He does not grant to unf (violence).” Similarly, Ali noted how he saw the Prophet’s life as a practical example for humankind. The majority of respondents also talked about the Hudaibiyah peace treaty in which the Prophet is famously revered for accepting all the conditions of the enemy to prevent violence and mass panic in turbulent times. In fact, many respondents took this story to imply that the Prophet disliked hostility and aggression and requited evil with good intentions. This interpretation influenced respondent views on the ideal character of Muslim men and had important consequences for the ways in which individuals viewed and used PE and sports.
A dominant belief that emerged during both interviews and in everyday discussion with pupils was that PE provided a neutral environment in which it was acceptable for young men to dispel negative energies and emotions (Morford & McIntosh, 1993). Referring to the cathartic effects of sports, Imran reasoned how after “a hard game of footy [soccer] or basketball [his] mind and body [felt] refreshed.” When asked why he thought this was, Imran replied: “Cos’ in sport you can sorta’ get angry and be violent and by doing that you get rid of your bad feelings . . . your head is clearer, you’re calm and at ease.” This was important to Imran because this state of being calm, peaceful and having a clearer head better enabled him to “focus on Allah.” Similarly, Shazad and Usman discussed how their involvement in physical activity helped them to “relax the body and mind after letting it all out” (referring here to the discharge of negative energies). Hence, participation in sport and physical activity constituted time spent doing good and virtuous work since it allowed for the expulsion of negative feelings, in return ensuring the replenishment of mind and body. This was reinforced in the classroom as teachers actively encouraged pupils to engage in sports to care for their physical, social, and mental well-being. “Allah rewards Muslims who take care of their bodies . . . it is a trust from Him that we will return,” explained Shazad. For the pupils these explicit endorsements of sports participation were invaluable because they helped rekindle their relationship with their faith and with Allah. In fact, many respondents reasoned that because the control of one’s negative feelings was an important premise within Islamic law (as it constituted Jihad-e-nafs), and because physical activity enabled them to do this, involvement in PE and sports was an important obligation for Muslims.

The Disciplined Self

Alongside the desire of some respondents to generate a sense of rationality through physical activity, a number of interviewees looked to PE and sport to help them engender a more disciplined sense of self. Bilal and Jameel, for example, identified how it was not the “violent aspect of sport” that necessarily led them to regard it as a lifestyle priority, but the “importance of following rules.” Jameel inadvertently made this point during a half-time break in a football game:

Jameel: The rules of sport are all about controlling yourself . . . controlling, disciplining your nafs [negative desires and urges that stem from the psyche] as opposed to letting it [the nafs] control you by getting angry and punching or kicking someone . . . this is important if we wan’na be good Muslim men ’cos Allah rewards discipline.

Jameel’s comments explicitly imply that sports have the potential to control and regulate the body. In particular, he viewed team sports as an important tool through which he, and others, could “tame” or curb and control their negative tendencies as opposed to releasing them in less appropriate ways. Of course, what Jameel alludes to here is the potential of sport to immerse the body in rule-bound activity and regulate its conduct (Connell, 2005; Kirk, 1998). For Jameel, sporting participation had the potential to restrain the physical body from exerting aggression and violence and to present alternatives to this type of conduct (such as goal setting and learning to control one’s “inner demons” or nafs). Under this concep-
tion we might reasonably assume that for those respondents seeking to cultivate an altogether more disciplined self, a precise and strict regulation of the physical body was essential to the achievement and maintenance of their idealized masculine identities. It also highlights how the physical body was centrally located in respondent visions of the disciplined self. This emerged as pupils made reference to a Hadith in which the Prophet states, “A strong Muslim is better and more beloved by God than a weak one, even if both are good” (see Abdelrahman, 1992, p. 9). This association between “being strong in one’s faith” and engaging in physical exercise was important to this particular group of respondents simply because they identified the latter as the “only way” through which they could achieve the former. In other words, participation in sport (or disciplined and rigorous physical exercise and training) were viewed as practices through which boys could actively and consciously “become” what God wanted them to be:

Jameel: Doing a sport . . . sorta’ gets you used to a routine so that eventually you become that routine. . . . So if . . . we [referring to Muslim men in general] need to be strong and disciplined to show everyone that we’re not savages, we have to physically and visibly show that we are everything it means to be disciplined. Embedded in Jameel’s comments here is the view that sport and physical exercise are mechanisms that facilitate the production of a muscular and strong physical body, which subsequently reaffirms the vision of a controlled and disciplined Muslim. These respondents believed that being muscular symbolized an image of control and discipline because it took a controlled and disciplined regimen to build and construct such a body. Echoing previous research findings, these views reflect how the body can serve as a physical anchor for (socially defined) roles and behavior (Shilling, 2003). They also portray how the physical body might act as a site of expression and appropriation for the image of a valued social self (Swain, 2006). This is because sport and physical exercise enable the social self (habits and behaviors) to become inextricably connected with visible aspects of the physical self (bodily appearance; Shilling, 2005).

The United Self

The third identity category, which emerged from interview discussion, was that of the united self. Respondents in this group viewed PE and sport as a mechanism by which they could embrace notions of unity and cohesion. These issues were articulated by a relatively small number of interviewees who believed that there existed a crisis in Islam and that this was a consequence of Muslim men losing sight of what modern-day Islamic life should comprise. These pupils believed that a revival of Islam’s most basic principles was needed to reshape the character of young Muslim men who had lost their way personally and, in so doing, had also lost their religious identities. For some of these respondents, this meant reminding Muslim men of Islam’s respect for “mercy, peace and living in unity with your neighbour regardless of (ones) differences” (Mahboob). For others, it meant seeking a lifestyle where the central, if not defining, feature of Muslim masculinity was less attached to “brutality, aggression and terrorism” and more in tune with the image of a “kind and considerate Muslim brother” (Amir). The self that these pupils advocated incorporated an identity that encouraged Muslim men to turn to “each other for social guidance and support” (Farooq) and to “Allah for spiritual
guidance” (Amir). Such sentiments stemmed from the desire among these pupils to live in harmony with their faith, with their Muslim brothers, and with their immediate surroundings. Sports, and in particular team activities, were actively embraced for their cohesive characteristics (Carron et al., 1998, 2002). Respondents identified sport as a social setting through which men could learn to turn to each other for social support and to Allah for spiritual and moral guidance. According to Farooq, this was possible especially in team sports because of a relationship between the player, the team, and Allah:

Farooq: There’s a connection between you and your teams ’cos you rely on teammates for tips and support; they rely on you because you’re a part of that team, and there’s a connection between you, the team and Allah.

Farooq fervently believed that this connection existed because fate, he argued, rested in Allah’s hands: “There’s only so much that you can physically do, the rest is up to Allah.” This was a recurring theme among those pupils who aspired to the united self. The majority believed that recognizing God’s control over one’s fate was essential because “it (applied) to all aspects of Muslim life.” Amir expressed how this belief was necessarily entwined with a Muslim’s identity: “Turning to Allah for guidance in times of uncertainty or struggle is a part of who you are in Islam.” The positive benefits that an adherence to religion has on sports (such as instilling values such as fair play or overlooking the importance of winning) did not interest these individuals. Rather, religion was the driving force behind their identity construction with sport serving, once again, as a mere tool to assist that process.

Conclusions

This article has examined the production of masculine identities within the confines of an independent British Islamic boarding school. Our findings highlight how the process of making sense of the self required respondents to continually negotiate the relationship between their immediate institutional lives and the wider social context. The juxtaposition of the values evident in these two different settings caused pupils to experience elements of conflict and crisis over their religious identities. This was because what respondents learned about the ideal character of Muslim men and the precepts of Islam within the school was neither confirmed nor reflected by the external discourses to which they were party. The article highlights how respondents sought to resolve these inner conflicts by (re) negotiating the boundaries of a series of idealized masculine identities. All pupils used religion to shape their perceptions of the valued self, turning to the Qur’an and the Hadith for guidance on how their Muslim masculinities were to be constructed (i.e., in terms of being rational in their behaviors and actions, disciplined with regards to their emotions, and/or united in their relations with each other). In a postmodern world predicated upon the dissolution of traditional and unified religious theologies, the reassertion of particular identities through spirituality
highlights how, for some, religion remains a pervasive and cohesive influence in the construction of the self.

We have also explored how pupils used physical activity to embrace different versions of their valued sense of self. Evidence from interview discussion highlights how physical education and sport were used as sites through which young men could actively assume, and consciously embody, particular masculine identities. Although respondents’ general source of motivation for involvement in PE and sport was fueled by their understanding that participation in such activities was honorable in terms of their broader religious beliefs, the specific meanings and interpretations that pupils attached to sport meant that, in reality, it served a variety of purposes, and was used in different ways, by different individuals. To this end, participation in sport was not a neutral event, rather it presented a physical and social space through which respondents could create, regulate, and police their masculine identities. In this way, the physical body acted as an integral part of the making of the self. It served as both an anchor of socially defined roles and behaviors and as a site of interaction, expression, and appropriation for the social (and idealized) self. It was also a mechanism through which the social self (habits and behaviors) became inextricably connected with visible aspects of the physical self (bodily appearance). By dedicating a significant amount of time to the study of Islam, physical education, and sport, Dar-ul-Islam authoritatively and selectively regulated the cultural resources available to its pupils and, in turn, necessarily shaped the contours of their identities.

Where, then, does all this leave us with regard to broader conceptions of the relationship between sport, religion and identity? What we have attempted to illustrate here are some of the principles upon which differing masculinities might be constructed amid a climate of social and political ambivalence toward Muslim men in the UK. Within a symbolic interactionist framework, respondent behaviors can be understood as a fundamental endeavor to construct more desirable, socially acceptable forms of the self. In turn, the self can be recognized as a provisional, fragmented, and contingent entity, subject to constant (re)negotiation and change (Jenkins, 2008). With regard to the evidence presented, the school itself, and the institutional experiences of pupils, characterize how masculinities are (re)-shaped in line with both internal and external social forces and how particular identities may emerge at specific points in time. At Dar-ul-Islam, religious masculinities that embodied violence, aggression, and deviance were devalued and marginalized. In contrast, masculinities that embraced rationality, self-discipline, and unity were encouraged. We are not implying that rational religious masculinities were in any way hierarchically located as more important or superior to disciplined religious masculinities, or indeed to the united masculine identities on display, nor that these three identity categories were the only ones evident among the pupil populace. There was variation in masculine construction both within and out with the parameters of these categories. In sum, the majority of our respondents constructed their masculine identities in accordance with the internal values of Dar-ul-Islam, however, this was not without its difficulties in terms of the recognition (and ultimate dismissal) of competing external discourses.
Notes

1. The term Zakah refers to the monetary contribution which working Muslims are obliged to give to the “poor and needy.” This expected level of contribution is 2.5% of annual income. Daily prayers (Salah) are offered in the direction of the Kabb’a in Mecca.

2. For a similar example in the North American context see: Lieberman and Collins (2008).

3. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

4. Like most mainstream state secondary schools in the UK, Dar-ul-Islam groups pupils according to their respective ages. Thus, during the compulsory years of secondary schooling (11–16 years) pupils are taught the full range of National Curriculum subjects alongside Arabic and various other Islamic Education classes. However, after the age of 16, the educational emphasis centers more on the study of the Qur’an (Hifaz), and pupils are streamed according to their respective rates of progress. At the most basic level, (i.e., pupils who are learning the first five of the obligatory 30 chapters of the Qur’an), the age range is 16–21 years. At the highest level (i.e., pupils who are learning the last five chapters of the Qur’an) there is a mixture of pupils between 18 and 23 years of age. Some pupils progress faster than others, completing Hifaz by the age of 18. The training and qualifications that pupils attain from their post-compulsory education at the school better enables them to undergo further professional training to become Imams (Islamic priests). However, not all pupils follow this route—some progress to further education and to university.

5. According to the UK-based Independent Schools Council (2007), the average cost of independent schooling in Britain is in the region of £9,000 per academic year.

6. The decision to recruit pupils who had been boarding at the school for three years was taken because this was considered to be a long enough time period to enable participants to offer in-depth accounts of school life.

7. While recognizing the dangers of essentializing respondent accounts into fixed identity-types, we have chosen to present our analysis in this way because these were the predominant meta-themes that emerged from the data collection process in relation to identity formation among respondents. In turn, these categories allow us to demonstrate more fully the ways in which a variety of masculinities were constructed amid a series of broader religious and social influences. It is not implied that these self-identifications apply to all young British Muslim men, as this would be an overgeneralization that ignored the very diversity that makes up any such population.

8. The Khulafah were the male companions and disciples of Muhammad who became the figure-heads and leaders of Islam once the Prophet had departed from earth.

9. The term Jihad-e-nafs refers to the need for Muslims to control their negative urges and emotions, such as anger, frustration, and aggression. Control of these emotions is important because it is believed that they can potentially provoke one to behave in a manner contrary to the expected norm.

References


