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“Open, Honest, Passionate and with Some Humor”: Understanding Trust Building Between British Muslims and the Wider Community

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Abstract

The “Trust Building” initiative, launched in the United Kingdom in April 2016, aimed to dispel myths about Islam and build trust between Muslims and the wider community. This community-led initiative involved trained Trust Building “Ambassadors” delivering workshops at places of work and other community settings to talk about Islam and facilitate open dialogue. Previously, the project reported trust among participants had significantly improved, but the reasons for this were not explored. In this paper, we unpack how and why trust was being built. Providing a forum that permits open dialogue between Muslims and the wider community allowed opportunities for stories and experiences to be shared, enabling negative stereotypes to be uncovered and addressed, and for mutual values to be recognised. With negative media portrayal and rise in hate crime towards minorities, this research is a promising model that has important implications to address the trust deficit seen within our society.

Keywords: community; ambassadors; hate crime; Islamophobia; Muslim; trust building

1. Introduction

For a truly inclusive and connected society, *trust* is central and works to establish collective social and commercial relationships.¹ Trust between people is particularly important

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wherever risk, uncertainty or interdependency exists.² Trust is a broad, multi-faceted and contested concept and is difficult to measure since it has numerous and varying uses. For example, it can be used to describe a “trust in something” or “in someone” or a characteristic (i.e. honesty); it depends upon the social context in which trust is used, who the actors are and the language used.³ An interdisciplinary definition of trust is that of a “psychological state”, accepting vulnerability (of another) based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another.⁴ Others may consider trust to be defined differently, dependent upon social interaction or the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of the words, actions and decisions, of others in.⁵

In societies where there is an absence of trust between communities, mistrust, suspicion and doubt emerge leading to raised levels of threats, perceived unpredictable behaviour or other concerns that may cause worry.⁶ This largely appears to be the case for Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim societies where Muslim favourability is suggested to be lower than other groups.⁷ Negative stereotyping of groups who are perceived to be a greater risk or threat may weaken community trust with research consistently demonstrating a negative relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust.⁸ The consequences for minority groups experiencing racial prejudice, discrimination and even violence can result in mental illness, employment discrimination and social isolation.⁹ In the United Kingdom (UK), Muslims form a minority of the population, much like other European countries. Numbers have grown from approximately 0.2% in the 1950s to approximately 4% in 2020.¹⁰ Since the terror attacks on 11th September 2001, there has been a substantial trust deficit and fear that has resulted in a significant impact on the lives of Muslims in Britain.¹¹ The resulting rise in islamophobia has led to Muslims experiencing discrimination, racism, and rise in hate crimes.¹²

This focus of this paper is Trust building between the British Muslim and the wider community. In 2016, a “Trust Building” project (now relaunched as ‘HumanKind’), was set up to build trust between the British Muslim and the wider community. Here, trained Trust Building “Ambassadors” delivered workshops at places of work and community settings to interact with participants, explain about the religion of Islam and to dispel myths. An evaluation in 2017, found these workshops significantly improved participants’ knowledge of Islam and that levels of trust had improved.¹³ However, the reasons and mechanism by which this trust had been built were not investigated. Understanding and explaining this process is important if this model is to be adopted or become more widespread. This study, therefore, examines the experience of workshop attendees and Ambassadors of the workshops and explains how and why the Trust Building initiative was able to build trust with participants.

2. Media Narrative of British Muslims

Particularly over the last two decades, there has been sustained media negativity towards Muslims. Discriminatory rhetoric, policies and practices at state level, has created an environment that signals the legitimacy of public hostility toward the Muslim communities.^{14, 15} It has been estimated that the majority (approximately two thirds) of the coverage of British Muslims in the national print news media focuses on Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general).¹⁶ The negative media portrayals of Muslims have been shown to influence societal beliefs society and may even impact on support for public policies that exclusively harms Muslims.¹⁷ Consequently, spikes in Islamophobic-related hate crimes

have been shown to be correlated when media conflate the issue of terrorism with Muslims and Islam.^{18, 19} The term Islamophobia is thought to constitute two-strands of racism, rooted in both the “different” physical appearance of Muslims and also in an intolerance of their religious and cultural beliefs.²⁰ In 2016, there were 1,223 anti-Muslim attacks in England and Wales; 67% of which were “street-based” i.e. between a victim (or property), an increase of 47% increase over the previous reporting period.²¹ The majority of victims were females (56%) particularly if they are visibly Muslim (i.e. wearing Islamic clothing such as a headscarf, face veil, abaya, etc.) whereas more than two-thirds of the perpetrators were reported as being male.²²

The mainstream media construction of a Muslim and Islamic identity has largely failed to separate the peaceful religion of Islam from terrorist activity leading to notions that Islam is incompatible with Western values.²³ This media coverage has contributed to ideas of Islam being incompatible with western values, diminishing the trust between Muslims and wider society. Brexit, the rise in far-right and anti-Muslim sentiment have also provided fuel for racial prejudice, discrimination and violence.²⁴

3. The Trust Building Project

The Trust Building Project was launched in April 2016 as an initiative to build trust between Muslims and the wider community. The project, now known as ‘HumanKind’, is operationalised by the recruitment of a network of volunteers who would receive training to become Trust Building “Ambassadors”. This model involved Ambassadors attending a pre-arranged workshop at public and private sector workplaces and at community gatherings to facilitate one-to-one engagement and open discussions about Islam. The workshops delivered of a presentation on the religion of Islam, highlighting the contribution of Muslims to British society followed by an open question and answer session. The purpose is to improve knowledge about Islam, to “myth-bust” and to address misconceptions.

This paper explores how workshops held at workplaces and community venues can help build trust in the Muslim community. Through interviews with Ambassadors and workshops participants we seek to explain the reasons and mechanisms by which trust was being built in these forums.

4. Methods

To unpack the complexity of trust building, twenty semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with workshop attendees ($n = 13$) and Trust Building Ambassadors ($n = 7$). With permission and written consent, all twenty interviews were audio-record and transcribed verbatim. Interviews took place between the autumn of 2018 and summer 2019. Ambassadors were asked to interview one or two participants from seven Trust Building workshops. The number of attendees at workshops varied but had on average approximately 12 participants. The workshops themselves were promoted locally and organised through a variety of venues at places of work and other community events. Further details of this process and types of places and events that were held are reported in detail elsewhere.²⁵ To reduce bias Ambassadors were instructed to actively invite participants who may have had fewer positive views. Interviews with workshop attendees explored views about the Muslim community, experience of attending the workshop and the extent to which they felt the workshop had affected levels of trust. To contextualise interview data, field notes (i.e. brief details on how the workshop went and response to the invitation to take part in the research) were written up following

all the interviews. Transcripts were not returned to participants for comment and/or checking as this was not deemed practicable.

All active Ambassadors (approximately 10 at the time) were invited to take part in one semi-structured interview at a place and time that was convenient to the Ambassador. Seven Ambassadors took up the invitation. Interviews sought to explore experiences of delivering the workshop, participant reactions and whether they felt this had impacted on levels of trust. Interviews were conducted by AL and by a previous Trust Building Manager (RD). Interviews explored experiences of delivering the workshop, participant reactions and whether they felt this had impacted on levels of trust.

Following transcription of the interviews, qualitative data analysis followed an interpretivist epistemology; this is where the inquirer interprets data and acknowledges that this can never be fully objective.²⁶ An inductive phase of open coding was used to describe the data (undertaken by AL) and coded extracts were analyzed through a process of constant comparison. The credibility and trustworthiness of the resulting themes were enhanced with all authors interpreting and examining the consistency of codes and conceptual relationships. In line with our theoretical interests, the coded data were systematically related back to the concepts of trust, with emphasis on understanding how this was built and through the realisation of the Trust Building project.

4.1. *Ethical Considerations*

All participants received an information sheet about the aims of the study. This was a relatively short optional one-to-one interview, so few ethical issues were expected to arise, and none were encountered. All participants completed a consent form before the interview, and it was emphasised that transcripts of audio-recordings would be fully anonymized in any published reports.

5. Findings

1. *Attendee Expectations*

Project attendees cited a variety of reasons for attending the workshop. They were unaware of the aims of the Trust Building project and most attended because this had been arranged as part of their organisation's staff development or equality training session. A few attended out of personal interest, with active involvement in interfaith or equality work. As a result, there were few prior expectations. Most participants had an open mind and reported having an interest in learning more about different cultures, including Muslims and the religion of Islam. Where the Trust Building session was arranged outside of work (i.e. during a community-led Ramadan gathering), some felt slightly apprehensive of whether they would be welcomed or whether they could raise potentially controversial issues. Participants who worked face-to-face with communities, welcomed having a frank discussion and the opportunity to increase their understanding of Islam, feeling more equipped to challenge inappropriate attitudes should they occur during their work:

I have done a lot of interfaith work not just with Muslim communities but also other faith groups as well as looking at Islam and Islamophobia. I just wanted to kind of build on that really ... just thought it would be an opportunity to carry on the discussion about those kinds of issues, and there's been increased

islamophobia within different communities since 9/11 and Brexit and increase in hate crime. [Participant 5 Female Community development worker]

2. *Open dialogue between Muslims and the wider community*

I wanted to feel more confident in the messages I was relaying when I was meeting people and confidence in challenging inappropriate comments or behaviour in meetings or out in the community. ... I imagined it might make people feel a bit uncomfortable in the room because your talking about things that people wouldn't feel they're confident talking about. Which I think is a good thing because I do think we need to address those things. [Participant Female 13 City Council staff member]

3. *Trust building and experience of the workshop*

All participants enjoyed attending the session, felt welcomed and included in having in-depth discussions about Islam, Muslims and being able to raise issues that had been reported in the media. They found the enhancement of their knowledge about Islam useful and appreciated learning about the positive moral values that underpins the faith. Trust building was seen to have been achieved in several diverse ways. Firstly, participants recognised that the open and safe format of the workshop was important. Having a friendly face-to-face discussion cultivated warm interactions between participants and fostered a trusting environment:

Incredibly open, honest, obviously passionate about Islam and with a sense of humour, which is great. [Participant 2 Female collage tutor]

The interpersonal interaction with Ambassadors was a proactive way to break down barriers, tackle stereotypes and brought about a change in participants frame of mind on how they viewed the Muslim community:

I think I have even more trust and confidence in your community and I'm happy that I've learnt something I never knew. I'm so busy that I never have time to stop and think and read. Ramadan is such a big event generally in our community and I never knew much about this, so I think it's very good you guys hosted this event so that we can learn something ... There's always the stereotype that the Muslim community don't want to engage with the rest because if you're not a Muslim, we don't want to engage with you, we don't want to speak to you, stuff like that, which I think is just not true. It was amazing that, even just you inviting us, like we were not fasting, we're not doing Ramadan, but you still invited us to show us how iftar [breaking fast] is done. It's just building trust and it was successful. [Participant Female 14 Police administrator]

So, I think [Ambassador's name] talk was brilliant. I think she's very clear and very human and very approachable and I think its, taking out the seriousness ... and in that perhaps reducing the fear of offending and that it's okay to sort of ask and get things wrong a bit. [Participant 11 Female Council worker]

Secondly, participants particularly welcomed hearing about personal stories, day-to-day lifestyles, and experiences of living as a Muslim. By Ambassadors sharing their experiences, they exposed misconceptions, negative beliefs, and challenged stereotypes about Muslims. The workshop therefore provided dedicated time for participants to

reflect on their own assumptions and openly think about issues that were otherwise considered to be “off-limits”. For example, one strong belief that was often dispelled was the forced wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women:

Well, they talk from personal examples which was great. The lady presenter was talking about the head scarf, how she can wear it. [Participant 4 Male Environment Council Worker]

Thirdly, was enabling participants to reflect on the commonalities rather than differences that exist between themselves and Muslims. The open dialogue allowed reflection on shared moral values and for participants to re-evaluate their beliefs that stemmed from what they had heard and seen in the mainstream news and on social media. This realisation provided a counter narrative to negative preconceptions and contributed towards dispelling myths about Muslims:

Whenever I have these conversations, you always take away new things or new understandings or it gets you to challenge your own position and viewpoint. ... I've got no faith, very often the value base that I share with the people who are in that forum for example, many of them I think we're on the same page, we are just in a different place ... Again, it goes back to the thing about, we've got more in common with people than we are different [Participant 12 Female Council community Co-co-ordinator]

6. Ambassador Views

6.1. *Confronting Negative Stereotypes, Sharing Experiences and Stories*

The findings from ambassador interviews corroborated the ways trust was being built during the Trust Building workshops. There was a strong feeling that a forum was needed to provide a counter narrative to address the negative feelings of Muslims that were often portrayed in the media. The workshops empowered Ambassadors and offered an opportunity for open dialogue as they looked to dispel myths about Islam and tackle Muslim stereotypes in a neutral and safe setting. Their overall experience at workshops was found to be positive and helped challenging discussions and deeper understanding of one another.

I am a revert to Islam and I'm familiar about the misconceptions and read them enough in newspapers where the narrative is pushed quite negatively ... so I wanted to provide that counter narrative and have that discussion where you can find out about the real Islam rather than the false one that is being pushed. [Female Ambassador 1]

Having received training, all Ambassadors reported feeling confident and prepared to deliver the workshop. A few would have preferred more specialist knowledge, guidance, and skills on how to handle difficult, confrontational, or controversial issues. Ambassadors explained that they were not expected to be knowledgeable about everything and were comfortable to be able to defer questions they were unable to answer to the lead Imam (MH):

It was sufficient for me to deliver those presentations and a get out of jail card whereby if we didn't have the answer we would find out and get back to them. We are not universal experts knowing everything about Islam, we are normal

average Muslim people within the UK. The knowledge we are sharing is on that level. [Male Ambassador 5]

6.2. *Ambassador Experiences of Delivering Workshops*

When asked to reflect on their experiences of delivering workshops and building trust, Ambassadors reported positive feedback and felt appreciated. There was a strong feeling that they were achieving their aim of building trust between Muslims and the wider community. Sharing stories and personal views allowed them to show the many commonalities between Islam and British values and the contribution of Muslims to British society. This allowed them to build the foundations of trust:

You see a lot of people appreciating the qualities and values of Islam and how it allows Muslims to be effective in British society ... At the end of the session people come up, they thank you and talk about their experience and how it reminds them of traditional British values and traditional Christian values, charity, family values, loving your neighbour. It's a great feeling to hear that. [Male Ambassador 5]

When asked to reflect on more challenging conversations, these tended to be centred on misconceptions (for example on Sharia law) and led, in some cases, to provocative and even antagonistic questioning. The forum allowed controversial questions to be raised and negative media stereotypes of Muslims to be openly exposed and discussed. The workshop participants usually had limited knowledge of Islam and Muslim practices and this enabled them to talk confidently and create a safe, relaxed, and light-hearted environment. It was felt that Ambassadors were able to build trust in most instances, by responding appropriately and providing an alternate viewpoint underpinned by shared values. However, there were a minority of cases where it was difficult to address strongly held views:

When we get argumentative people, who have seen things on the Internet or the TV, the news, I can then perhaps put them right - well actually I've been involved in it and it's not quite how it's perceived in the press.' [Non-Muslim Ambassador 3]

We had a hostile crowd. It was an open Q&A challenging people's beliefs and what people thought Islam was. We had one extremely challenging member who said he was an atheist and didn't like religion. He was adamant that Islam was the cause of terrorism. That was interesting. How do you change someone's opinion that is so firmly grounded? [Ambassador 4]

In these minority cases, it was felt that building trust would be an ongoing process and one that would be built incrementally and hard-won:

Some people are still sceptical but in the main we are achieving our objective, although behind your back it may be a different story. But we should not be judgemental about their beliefs. About 95% of the people are accepting of what we are delivering that Islam is not a religion of terrorism. [Male ambassador 6]

7. Discussion

Questions remained from our earlier work as to how and why attending a Trust Building workshop achieved significant improvements in participant's levels of trust in the Muslim

community. The findings of this study revealed that trust was being built in three main ways. Firstly, the workshop itself allowed a dedicated time and safe space for candid conversations to take place. Through these discussions, the Ambassadors explored controversial issues and challenged media beliefs and attitudes that would have otherwise remained hidden. The mainstream media have negatively framed the Muslim community and have dominantly portrayed Islam as a violent religion. British Muslims have arguably been portrayed as an “alien other” and that the religion of Islam follows themes of “deviation” and “un-Britishness”.²⁷ It appeared the Trust Building workshop was an opportunity to redress negative stereotypes and reassure them through a process of deliberative, conscious reasoning to foster trust.

Secondly, the sharing of stories and engaging in a dialogue with a Muslim appeared to promote understanding, reduce apprehension, and humanise the Muslim community. Others have also suggested that building community trust can be achieved through understanding and sharing one another’s perspective, storytelling and cultivating a space for trust and healing to occur.²⁸ In this instance, trust may have been built through confidence in another’s predictability, dependability, and reliability, or what Lewicki & Bunker²⁹ term “knowledge-based” trust. The basis of this is working together and communication leading to deeper interpersonal familiarity and understanding that emerges over time and with repeated interaction.

In addition to building relationships, has been acknowledged that there are social taboos against openly expressing racist sentiments which leads to the development of other lengthy strategies. These tend to present negative views of out-groups as reasonable and justified while at the same time protecting the speaker from harsh charge of racism or prejudice.³⁰ The study illustrated that supplying opportunities to openly discuss otherwise contentious topics, Ambassadors were able to expose and then challenge misconceptions and negative beliefs. Others have used strategic storytelling, non-prejudice, and intergroup contact factors to reduce tensions, for example, among Thai-Buddhist and Thai-Muslim students resulting in fostered multicultural understanding, tolerance, and respect.³¹

Participants appreciated learning more about and had a better acknowledgment of the commonalities and shared values that exist between Muslims and the wider community. It has been suggested that people display “out-group” aversion i.e. they are less likely to trust those who appear different from themselves.³² Sharing values during the workshop may have helped offset the physical differences that may be particularly pertinent for Muslims in the UK, for instance, most are from ethnic diverse backgrounds and may adhere to religious attire or appearance (e.g. headscarf, beard). The opportunity to meet and engage in conversation with a Muslim may have reduced othering or the way Muslims are framed as “outsiders”. This mechanism for building trust may therefore stem from individuals developing personal familiarity and may be the first step to develop in Putman terms—“thick trust” (i.e. trust embedded in personal relationships).³³

8. Conclusion

There are several important implications for this research. For Muslims, it should be acknowledged that knowledge of Islam in the UK is fragmentary and that community leaders should support educational awareness programmes to improve mutual understanding and reduce incidents of discrimination or hate crimes. Policy makers and communities should invest in programmes that look to open dialogue. In the workplace, it is recognised that there is employment discrimination against Muslim and Arab individuals

in the hiring context resulting in fewer job opportunities and reduced employment options.³⁴ The Trust Building model could support implicit bias training, specifically interventions that expose employees to counter-stereotypical exemplars, which have promising effects.³⁵ We do recognise several limitations to this work including issues with self-selection, the fact that workshop attendees may have had higher levels of education or may, because of the work environment, be less likely to reveal religious and racial prejudice. The positionality of interviewers (both Ambassadors who interviewed workshop attendees and those who interviewed the Ambassadors) may have also influenced responses and so elicited more favourable answers. Regarding the impact on sustained changes to media representation of Muslims, further work needs to be done on the longer-term impact of the workshops on attendee views. Others have noted that attempts to repair the image of Muslims may lead to on occasion, negative reactions when positive information about Muslims is presented.³⁶ Further longitudinal research is needed to observe whether or not this is pertinent to the Trust Building initiative.

9. The Way Forward

This trust building initiative provides insights into a method that can improve trust between Muslims and the wider community. Given the rise in Islamophobia and related hate crimes, the Trust Building model has proven that knowledge of Islam and trust in Muslims can be presented. This paper unpacks three main ways this is achieved; namely supplying a forum for open dialogue between Muslims and the wider community to occur, for Muslims to confront negative stereotypes by sharing their experiences and stories and lastly promoting understanding of one another through shared values. These findings have the potential to contribute towards the development of a Trust Building framework to deepen our understanding of this complex process. In an era when trust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities requires improvement this work offers new ways and strategies to foster understanding.

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