Academic Paper

How Muslims in the UK Experience Coaching using the Ershad Framework: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how Muslims in the UK experience coaching using the Ershad framework. The data was derived from four semi-structured interviews that were conducted after a coaching intervention. The study adhered to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for data analysis. Four themes emerged from the data: "it aligned with our faith"; "I felt comfortable"; "an eye-opening experience"; and connected to deeper self. Findings highlighted that participants valued a culturally sensitive approach, grounded in the principles of effective coaching, and thus support the idea that culturally specific coaching approaches may be beneficial for certain groups of people.

Introduction

As the globalised and multicultural nature of societies intensifies, the significance of a cultural perspective in coaching has gained growing attention among scholars and practitioners. Approaches to coaching have emerged from a predominantly 'Western' perspective, which has raised questions about their applicability in other cultures. This research therefore sets out to explore how Muslims in the UK experience coaching using the Ershad framework. The study begins by providing an overview of the Ershad framework (an approach specific to Islamic culture). Relevant literatures on cross-cultural coaching, coaching in Islamic cultures and the Ershad framework are reviewed and related to literature from counselling and psychotherapy. The main section outlines the study's methodology and presents its findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings within the existing literature, highlights the study's limitations and suggests future research areas.

Studies in therapy suggest that framing treatment methods within religious and spiritual contexts positively impacts the experience of religiously observant clients (Martinez, Smith, & Barlow, 2007; Hook et al., 2010). Despite its scarcity, literature on the intersection of coaching and Islam also highlights the importance of culturally sensitive coaching approaches. Van Nieuwerburgh and Allaho (2018) developed the Ershad framework, a culturally sensitive framework for coaching in Islamic cultures, that weaves Western-based coaching practice with Islamic principles. The Arabic term *Ershad* (guidance) is derived from the term *murshid* defined as the one who provides one-to-one spiritual guidance. Ershad describes the role of the coach who accompanies individuals on their journeys of development and growth towards their desired state. This framework presents three elements of effective coaching: a set of skills, a coaching process and a way of being (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) underpinned by Islamic precepts.

Given that there is currently limited research into the use of the Ershad framework with Muslims, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Muslims in the UK experience coaching using the Ershad framework, using interpretative phenomenological analysis, and to create a basis for further research on the use of culturally specific approaches in coaching.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural coaching

Leading cultural theorists (Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012) have provided a wealth of information that coaches who work internationally can draw upon and build on. Terms like cultural intelligence (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Thomas, 2006) and global mindset (Javidan & Bowen, 2013) have been used to explain an individual's ability to work across cultures. Additionally, cultural group dimensions provide a language to facilitate the discussion of cultural differences (Abbott, 2018). Hofstede (1991) developed one of the most famous cultural, nonspecific coaching frameworks. Its five dimensions provide a broad understanding of key cultural differences between groups. Similarly, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) identified seven dimensions that assess cultural differences. Cultural frameworks have however been criticised for having the potential to lead individuals towards thinking in an 'either/or' perspective (Plaister-Ten, 2013) which could lead to sophisticated stereotyping (Osland & Bird, 2000). However, considering each dimension as being on a wide spectrum (van Nieuwerburgh, 2016) alongside understanding the complexity of opposing values can enable individuals to look from a 'both/and' perspective (Plaister-Ten, 2013).

Rosinski (2003) was the first to explicitly weave a cultural perspective into coaching. His 'coaching across cultures' model provided a solid foundation for cross-cultural coaching and paved the way for others (e.g., Abbott, 2018; van Nieuwerburgh, 2016) to bring a cultural perspective into their work. Although various definitions of cross-cultural coaching (CCC) exist, a single definition remains elusive. Nonetheless, the fundamental basis of CCC is the "commitment to the sensitive treatment of relevant cultural beliefs, dimensions, preferences, orientations and practices" (Abbot & Salomaa, 2016, p. 444). Plaister-Ten (2013) suggests that the key to becoming a successful cross-cultural coach is developing culture-appropriate awareness and culturally derived responsibility. Culturally derived awareness comes from exploring cultural meanings and differences that may be affecting the coaching issue and relationship, while culture-appropriate responsibility refers to "adapting frameworks and models to accommodate an individual's, team's or organization's cultural opportunities and constraints" (Plaister-Ten, 2013, p. 65). Coultas, Bedwell, Burke, and Salas (2011) support this stance, suggesting that coaches should not only "have a deeper understanding of cultures ... but also be able to adapt (i.e., individualise) coaching strategies for maximum effect when dealing with culturally different others" (p. 150).

Despite aiming for universal application, current approaches to cross-cultural coaching tend, as already noted, to be dominated by Western thinking and bias, with 'Western' being synonymous with universal (Abbott, 2018). This perspective raises significant questions about their applicability in other cultures (Milner, Ostmeier & Franke, 2013; Plaister-Ten, 2009) and emphasises the need for culturally sensitive approaches. However, developing culturally sensitive frameworks is similarly contentious. While Abbott and Salomaa (2016) argue in favour of developing culturally adapted frameworks, others (e.g., Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010) suggest that culturally indigenous coaching approaches could be challenging, given that coaching is a relatively emergent field which aims to set universal standards.

Coaching in Islamic Cultures

While academic and scientific research on the intersectionality of coaching and Islam is still in its infancy, a growing body of literature from counselling (Dwairy, 2006) and psychotherapy (Skinner, 2010; Rothman & Coyle, 2018) highlights the need for culturally congruent approaches grounded in the Islamic tradition, predominantly because many Muslims are hesitant to seek support from mainstream counsellors and therapists due to concerns that they will not provide treatment framed within their religious teachings and principles (Amri & Bemak, 2013). In light of this, professionals and scholars (e.g., York Al-Karam, 2018; Keshavarzi, Khan, Ali & Awaad, 2021; Rothman, 2021) have developed Islamic models of psychotherapy which operationalise concepts such as the soul, the heart and the self as a foundation for Islamic theory and practice of human psychology.

Williams (2005) proposes that having counsellors who demonstrate cultural sensitivity when working with Muslims is key to building rapport and empathy—two key elements of a successful coaching relationship (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi, and Rothman (2016) add that clinicians should acquaint themselves with the Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices as these relate to their clients' orientation and approaches for culturally sensitive care. Intimately understanding a client's religious framework can be very useful in helping to direct them towards self-development from within their own tradition; however, Coyle and Lochner (2011) caution, "even when the psychologist has substantial background knowledge about a client's religious or spiritual tradition, it is still necessary to explore the client's interpretations of that tradition" (p. 268).

The Ershad framework

The Ershad framework presents three elements of effective coaching: a set of skills, a coaching process and a way of being (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) grounded in key Islamic concepts. The coaching process (van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho, 2018) is further comprised three aspects: partnership conditions, a conversational framework and an alignment wheel. The conditions outline the roles and responsibilities of the coach and client to ensure an effective coaching relationship that can lead to sustained behavioural and cognitive changes. The partnership conditions are underpinned by two core Islamic values: trust and respect. The conversational process that includes four stages: discovery, intentions, pathways and efforts. Finally, the alignment wheel sits at the center of the framework and can be referred to at any point in the conversation. Employing the wheel invites multidimensionality in the conversation and supports coachees to make decisions aligned with their values as they evaluate their intentions, thoughts, and actions against four key areas: beliefs, self, people and the universe.

A fundamental pillar that makes the Ershad framework culturally sensitive is that it invites individuals to speak about their intentions within a safe conversational space. Intentions are simply understood to be "a compass for directing, navigating and adjusting human behaviour" (van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho, 2018, p.80). In other words, they encompass motivations, reasons and goals that underpin an action. From an Islamic perspective, intentions represent one of the most important and multifaceted phenomena. Al Ghazzali (2016) defined it as "the aim/purpose of the heart aiming towards action and desiring God's countenance" (p.10). Good intentions are set

sincerely and faithfully for the sake of God. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, stated that the value of an action accords with its intention, and God will judge and reward people based on what was intended. For example, during the migration from Mekkah to Medinah, it has been narrated by Omar Ibn Al Khattab, may God be pleased with him, that he heard the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, say

> *The reward of deeds depends upon the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. So whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration was for what he emigrated for"* (Al-Bukhari, 1996, p.45).

This narration highlights that intentions lie at the heart of how Muslims are judged and rewarded by God. A detailed look at the importance of intentions in Islam is beyond the scope of this paper; Al Ghazzali (2016) and Al-Aydarus (2010) convey a much deeper understanding of the subject.

A broad array of literature suggests that, theoretically, the Ershad framework could be a viable tool to support Muslims. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder of the Cordoba Institute which is dedicated to improving relationships between *Islam and the West and author of Islam: A Search for Meaning* and *What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West*, wrote in the forward of Coaching in Islamic Culture

> *For the benefit of Muslim readers, the authors have placed the value-free practice of coaching, as understood and applied in the West, within a framework of Islamic ethics. For, by way of an ingenious Alignment Wheel unique to the Ershad method, Muslim coaches help their clients test their goals, and prospects for reaching them, against a framework of Muslim beliefs about God, self, others, and the world* (xviii-xix).

This study therefore aims to explore how Muslims in the UK experience coaching using the Ershad framework.

Methodology

As this study explores in-depth idiographic accounts of participants' individual experiences, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was deemed an appropriate methodology. According to Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011), IPA can help researchers understand the richness of individuals' experiences in coaching.

IPA is a qualitative research methodology grounded in three key areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp.11-31). Qualitative research invites the researcher and participants to co-construct their understanding of the participant's experience by engaging in a two-stage interpretation process (i.e., double hermeneutics) (Smith, 2008). Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) posit that IPA is of great value when exploring an under-researched area. This point is particularly relevant to this study, as research into the use of a culturally-specific coaching approach with Muslims appears to be scarce.

Participants

The study's inclusion criteria stipulated that participants were Muslims living in the UK and that they were willing to be coached using the Ershad framework. Participants had a coaching session using the Ershad coaching process in attempt to homogenise the sample's coaching experience before their interviews. Homogeneity is a key characteristic of an IPA study sample and it can be achieved by sampling participants who share, and can therefore offer insight into a particular common experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to IPA's in-depth exploratory nature, the recommended number of participants for an IPA study is three to six participants (Smith et al., 2009). Ethics approval was granted from the University of East London before starting the recruitment process. The criteria for individuals to partake in the study was that they had to be Muslim, living in the UK and were willing to be coached in English using the Ershad framework. Recruitment was open to males and females, yet the first four who signed up, and met the criteria, were females. This study's sample consists of four Muslim participants who were self-selected by responding to an online offer to take part in a study on coaching Muslims using the Ershad framework (Table 1). The first author of this study carried out all of the coaching sessions.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality
Asya	Female	40;	Nigerian/British
Safiya	Female	35	Russian
Sarah	Female	23	Bengali
Mariam	Female	25	British

Procedure

Data collection involved two stages: coaching sessions and semi-structured interviews; the first author of this study conducted both. Throughout the entire research process, the second author held supervisory conversations with the first author in which he provided guidance on using the Ershad framework, reviewed and discussed coded data, supported iterative analysis and ensured reflexivity.

Figure 1: Ershad coaching process (van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho, 2018, p. 72)
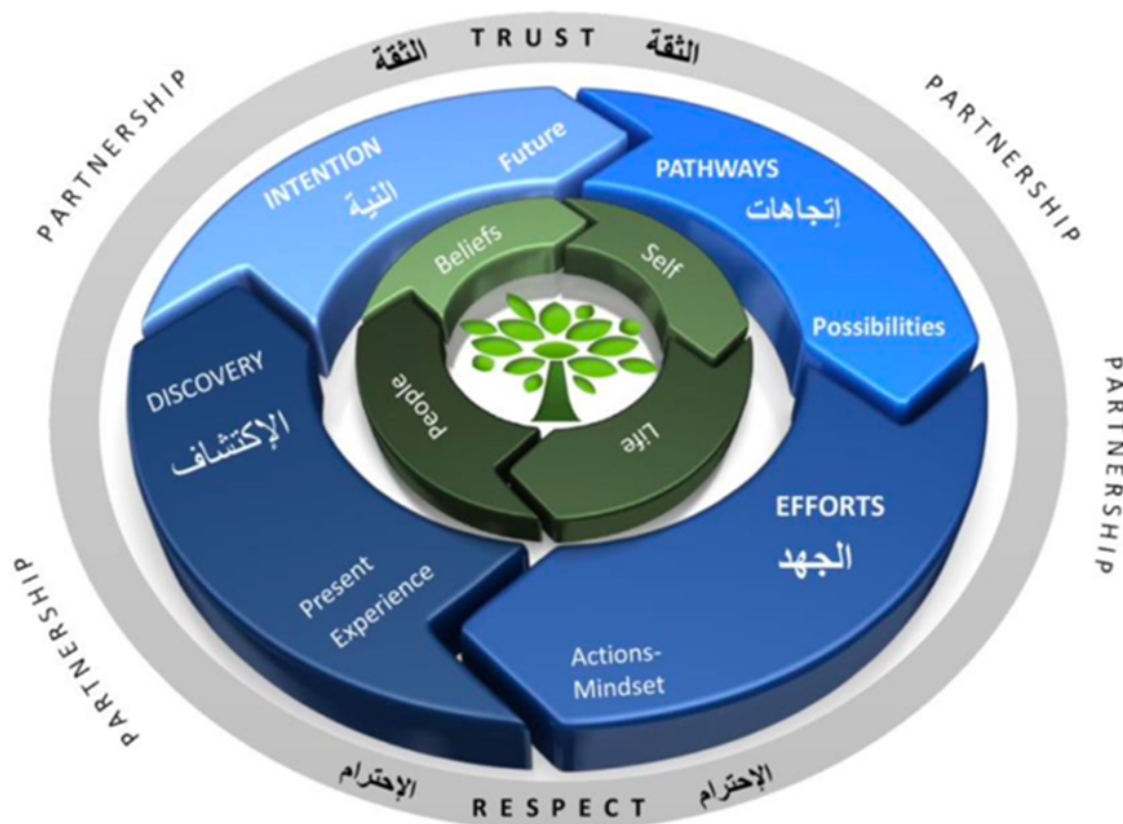
Stage one: Coaching sessions

To ensure that all participants had a similar coaching experience before the interviews, they all participated in a 75-minute online coaching session on a topic of their choice using the Ershad coaching process (Figure 1).

At the beginning of the session, participants were briefed on the conversational process and the alignment wheel. Coaching was nondirective and focused on asking participants about their intentions in relation to the topic they brought to the session. They then evaluated their pathways against the alignment wheel towards the end of the session. After the session, the participants were sent a set of open-reflective questions regarding their experience in preparation for stage two.

Stage two: Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for analysis. The benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they invite flexibility when exploring the participants' experience in depth (Drever, 2006), whilst also ensuring that areas pertinent to the research question are addressed (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams and were initially scheduled for 60 minutes with the flexibility to extend to 90 minutes. The questions covered: the experience of the entire coaching process; the experience of discussing intentions in the coaching session; the experience of discussing participants' intentions and ideas in relation to alignment in the coaching session; and the importance of incorporating intentions in the session. Questions were initially open and empathetic (Langdridge, 2007). The researcher followed up with the probing questions 'what else?' and 'can you tell me more?' to delve deeper into their responses and used closed questions to clarify her understanding of what the participant had shared as well as reduce the influence of her own assumptions.

Data Analysis

Employing Smith et al.'s (2009) and Langdridge's (2007) IPA approach, data was analysed in an iterative manner to explore different layers of meaning (Smith, 2008). Each participant's data was analysed in-depth before patterns of convergence and divergence across all participants were sought. In step 1, the first author reviewed the initial automatic transcripts multiple times to ensure they were transcribed verbatim. In step 2, transcripts were given a preliminary read to familiarise the first author with the data; initial reflections and impressions were noted in a journal. In step 3, line-by-line analysis was performed, honing in on words and phrases that stood out in the text (descriptive comments) and on specific word choices (linguistic comments). Tentative themes developed at this step; however, these were kept close to the participants' language to reduce bias from the first author's interpretation. In step 4, analysis moved away from the "explicit claims" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 88) of the participant to adopting a conceptual level of interpretation to explore deeper levels of meaning to capture the essence of each participant's experience. Superordinate and subthemes were established between the two authors and transcripts were checked to ensure that themes were consistent with participants' language. In the final step, patterns were investigated across all participants by both authors.

Reflexivity

Given the high level of involvement and interpretation in IPA, researchers aim to bracket their preconceptions and assumptions from prior experiences and to perceive the phenomenon for what it is (Smith et al., 2009). According to Gadamer (1975), bracketing must be done in a cyclical manner since some of the researchers' assumptions may be clear to them at the initial stages of engaging with the text while others may only become apparent later in the process. This point had implications for this study as engaging in reflexive thinking was an ongoing process throughout different stages of the research process.

Results

Analysis of the participants' experiences of being coached using the Ershad framework yielded four superordinate themes along with seven constituent subordinate themes. (See Table 2). Each theme is discussed and connected to extracts from the transcripts to portray the participants' experience in their own words.

Table 2. Summary of Superordinate and Subthemes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Prevalence
1. "It aligned with our faith"		4/4
	1.1. All actions are by intentions	4/4
	1.2. An opportunity to verbalize intentions	3/4
2. "I felt comfortable"	2.1. Relatedness to coach	4/4
	2.2. A safe space	3/4
3. "An eye-opening experience"	3.1. Clarity of priorities	3/4
	3.2. A wider perspective	4/4
4. Connected to deeper self		2/4
	4.1. Centrality of the divine	4/4

1. "It aligned with our faith"

Participants foregrounded framing the session within the principles of their faith as a central element that positively impacted their experience. The consensus among participants, highlighted in their own words, was that they valued a session that was oriented towards their faith where they felt they could reflect on their whole self:

> *I love this framework because it ties back with all my, the faith background … starting with the intentions and the alignment, the values looking at how it fits with my faith and others, myself (Asya).*

> *I love that there was always intention to everything like the coaching session and that it was related to religion. … I think that was a key element for me that made it like a highlight … it automatically made me feel like I could be myself (Mariam).*

1.1. All actions are by intentions

All the participants referred to the Prophetic teaching "all actions are by intentions" numerous times, highlighting the significance of that teaching to them and the importance of including intentions in the session. They identified the inclusion of intentions as an appropriate starting point for a conversation with Muslims:

> *That's a very valuable point for me, and for any Muslim as well, just because I feel like we always need to monitor our intentions.... So, it's a core thing in our religion because any action is linked to the intention … it was, very, especially important to think and talk about intentions (Safiya).*

1.2. An opportunity to verbalize intentions

There was a sense that participants appreciated the opportunity to talk through their intentions. They recognised that the session crystalised their intention, as it is an aspect that they often do not discuss out loud and actively think about:

> *I think saying it out loud and having someone actually delve deeper into those reasons, and find connections between them, like actions as well as intentions, really cements it for you (Mariam).*

I felt and it felt nice being able to, because you don't really have these conversations with yourself. Like this is why I'm intending, you don't resist, you sort of do it. You do it in the heart … but actually talking about this is what I'm doing and this is why I intend to do it. That was useful (Sarah).

2. "I felt comfortable"

2.1. Relatedness to coach

All the participants described feeling comfortable discussing their intentions in the session because it was conducted by a Muslim woman. Having a woman give the session was of importance to the participants, yet what seemed to be more important is that she is Muslim as they felt that they were able to relate to the coach because they shared similar values and religious beliefs:

And again, I think the whole Muslim aspect is obviously so important because it's relatable and I say look I'm doing it for the sake of Allah (God) and you're able to understand that without me having to further clarify that and so that definitely is really important (Sarah).

Knowing that they came from a shared culture invited participants to discuss their faith, as they perceived it to be understood and accepted by the coach:

Obviously, you're a Muslim woman …. obviously if you weren't a Muslim woman doing the session, I would have probably been like probably shouldn't say that, and just like people thinking you're a bit weird because I feel, you know, obviously that thing of like when you talk about religion, there's in our society, is very much almost frowned upon that you don't discuss religion (Mariam).

I know you're Muslim, you understand and that's important for you …. you will accept this. This is like something that is important for you as well probably (Safiya).

Even though participants identified that their value congruency with the coach increased their comfort in the session, they also emphasised that feeling comfortable with the personality of the coach was key:

Your own style of questioning … it is always the case if you're comfortable with the coach, then you'll be more comfortable to speak your mind (Asya).

Just the fact that I feel comfortable talking to you possibly (Safiya).

2.2. A safe space

The data illustrates that participants felt that they were given a 'safe' environment for sharing. Experience of a non-judgmental coaching approach created a safe environment in which the participants could comfortably speak openly about their intentions:

I think it's just that whole and non-judgmental environment that you're in and it feels like a sort of safe place where you're not even being sort of manipulated to bring up those intentions … you've just been given the environment to talk about it (Sarah).

This sense of safety made participants feel comfortable which encouraged them to delve deeper into the topics discussed:

It just allows you to actually feel comfortable and actually talk about more than just the surface because I think for that sometimes you can just talk quite surface and not delve in deep to the

things that matter the most because you just feel quite apprehensive talking about certain things (Mariam).

Comfortableness invited participants to provide candid accounts as they felt they were not going to be judged:

I was quite confident to say maybe this is not my real intention … I think I was feeling comfortable to think is this my like real intention, and I was like able to share it with you, my thoughts or my doubts about it, so I found it like comfortable (Safiya).

3. "An eye-opening experience"

3.1. Clarity of priorities

Participants said that discussing ideas in relation to the alignment wheel helped them clarify their priorities by providing a clearer image of what they need to work on first in relation to God, themselves, others, and the world:

All of them will be very important, that's all I would say. That's where I have found the greatest clarity in terms of where I should prioritise my decisions and my actions and what about alignment that makes it important in prioritising and making decision … so the alignment helped me to exercise, helped me to put things where they are, where they belong (Asya).

The coach's questioning style and allowing the participant time to think about a question seemed to play an instrumental role in helping participants to clarify their priorities and reflect on what mattered to them:

And also, the best thing … is how you ask the question and let me think about it and process it and give me the opportunity to you to rephrase some of the questions so that I can clarify in my own mind ... so it has helped me prioritise myself for the first time in a very long time (Asya).

Basically, you know, talking about intentions, the real one to think about it, to reflect on it to put it like which one (intention) was actually mine. They were leading from the questions that I was asked, and that led me to reflect and that reflection kind of changed some points in my priorities (Safiya).

3.2. A wider perspective

Participants found that discussing their ideas in relation to the alignment wheel invited multidimensionality in the conversation and enabled them to evaluate their identified pathways in a constructive manner:

We see it one dimensional; rather this provided quite a few dimensions …. the best, most important main benefit is the structure it provided. So, not only do we have pathways, but we also see how this pathway affects this relationship. It's all linked. I found it to be a really good relationship with each other. They're not just having enough about understanding why you have the pathway by going back to the intention but then also understanding how it affects those relationships (Sarah).

Exploring different perspectives situated the topic of the conversation in a larger context, which seemed to help participants to identify multiple problems and solutions:

It really put context to everything … so, by discussing those four factors it really made me understand how there was more than just one problem or that there was more than one solution

(Mariam).

After getting a well-rounded evaluation of their pathways, participants identified that they were able to make an informed decision regarding the steps they needed to take to actualise their intentions:

… and then feel comfortable with the results because you've discussed all the possible solutions and the outcomes (Mariam).

… but now I can think about that and also in the context of, from a grounded perspective and not from a defensive, you know perspective, I know that deep this is what I need …. so, I don't have to feel bad or I don't have to justify I can stand in my truth because yeah, it's yeah, it's just deep how to say it (Asya).

Alongside gaining new perspectives, participants also managed to achieve deeper levels of insight.

4. Connected to deeper self

Participants' accounts demonstrate that they were able to connect to inner aspects of themselves, achieving deeper levels of insight as the coaching session supported them to reorient their focus to what truly matters to them:

It also allows you to delve deeper into the person that you are as a person (Mariam).

… but this one is more I feel about understanding ourselves at a deeper level … I actually went into my soul, because this one I was saying, I knew, I know already in my soul. So, going into the intention, it goes to the depth, to the core. It helped me connect deeper with myself, not trying to understand outside or the reality of things but the reality of me (Asya).

4.1. Centrality of the divine

Foregrounding intentions helped the participants become more connected to the centrality of the divine in their decision-making process and in turn helped them readjust their thoughts and actions accordingly:

I feel it's very important for our faith, for us Muslims …. so, the more we get in tune with our intentions, which is where Allah's focus is, then the more we are aligned with Allah. The more we align our intentions with Allah's will and what he wants, then we can do more and achieve more, be more (Asya).

I wasn't sure if I'm actually putting God first, but I want to put him first, like, that's something that I want to achieve in everything in life (Safiya).

Discussion

The study found that the participants' experience of being coached using the Ershad framework reflected a significant overlap between the principles of effective coaching practice and the benefits of employing a culturally sensitive coaching approach that accommodates the Islamic worldview. Its findings aligned with generally expected coaching experiences where clients valued aspects such as gaining new perspectives, rapport, having a space to reflect, the coach's style of questioning and a nonjudgmental approach. Similarly, participants illustrated that grounding the session in the principles of their faith was key for experiencing a positive coaching session. Given these results, it is worth noting that the experience of coaching Muslims using the Ershad framework can be

attributed to two main things: an approach rooted in the Islamic culture and the elements of effective coaching.

An approach rooted in the Islamic culture

Findings demonstrated that participants valued the fact that the session's approach was grounded in Islamic teachings and principles, as they considered their faith to be a compass that guides their thoughts and behaviours. Addressing intentions was central for participants, as they became more conscious of the centrality of the divine in their thoughts and actions, which in turn helped them evaluate their situation against the principles outlined by their faith. This finding mirrors those in psychotherapy literature (e.g., Martinez et al., 2007; Hook et al., 2010) that state that therapeutic approaches informed by clients' religious values and principles are crucial, as they hold their faith as the ultimate standard which guides their development and decision-making. This finding is also consistent with Salomaa's (2015) conclusion that adapting to coachee's needs is crucial to the success of cross-cultural coaching.

Participants indicated that including intentions in the session allowed for a more comprehensive approach where they were able to view things within the larger context of their lives and to evaluate their situation against the principles and values of their faith. This ability was attributed particularly to the indigenous alignment wheel which is central of the Ershad framework. Its invitation to discuss participants' intentions in relation to fundamental Islamic beliefs such as striving for the afterlife as an end goal and seeking God's countenance further reinforces Rothman's (2021) argument that "without an established Islamic paradigm that the psychologist is rooted in and operating from, he/she can have such blind spots to in fact compromise the most fundamental of beliefs" (p. 29). Moreover, this study's findings not only indicate that having purely 'Western' approaches to coaching—even though these have proven effective—can undermine coaching in other cultures, as they can potentially overlook some of coaching's fundamental values, but also supports coaching literature (e.g., Abbott & Salomaa, 2016) that argues in favour of culturally adapted frameworks that cater for different cultures.

The data highlighted the positive emotional effects of sharing the same faith with the coach. Participants expressed that being aware that the coach shared similar religious beliefs and values increased their personal comfort, disclosure and connection to the coach in the session, echoing Martinez and colleagues (2007) findings. Even though participants said that sharing similar cultural values with the coach was instrumental in their openly discussing issues related to religion, two participants shed light on the importance of the coach understanding the coachee's particular interpretation of their religious culture and not simply relying on their own understanding of this shared culture. When asked what could have made her experience better, Sarah replied:

> *I think understanding intentions as a Muslim (coach) would be a good way to perhaps style conversation with that person (the coachee) to understand what does intention mean to you? What does it mean in Islam? What does it mean when you intend? Who do you intend for? I think having those conversations early allows us to start honestly.*

Sarah further explained the importance of inviting the coachee to become their authentic self in the session and to cater for their own individual understanding of religion. In stating that Muslim experiences vary due to the vast array of locations where societies transformed Islam to fit their unique local context, Geertz (1975) captured the idea that what one individual identifies with in terms of their identity as a "Muslim" may significantly vary from that of another.

This perspective is consistent with that of scholars who argue in favour of not generalising a religious culture and for the importance of understanding the individual's experience of that culture (Coyle & Lochner, 2011) to avoid stereotyping the coachee based on their cultural group (Osland & Bird, 2000). Moreover, it is worth noting that researchers such as van Nieuwerburgh (2016) and

Abbott and Salomaa, (2016) have focused more on coaching across cultures, supporting coaches to navigate with clients who come from a different cultural background. Abbott and Stening (2009) also suggest that the coach should be aware of his/her own cultural background. Nevertheless, the literature has paid little attention to how a coach can navigate differences within a shared coach-client's culture, given diversity exists within shared cultures and specifically within religious contexts.

Elements of effective coaching

Regarding participants' feeling comfortable in the session, two aspects working in tandem were found to be crucial. Alongside sharing common values with the coach, rapport seemed central to participants' experience. Boyce, Jackson, and Neal (2010) as well as Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) found that rapport reflected better outcome satisfaction, compliance and greater self-disclosure among participants. Safiya highlighted the significance of a comfortable coaching relationship:

> *Researcher: Could you tell me more about what made you feel comfortable?*
> *Safiya: So, I was feeling comfortable, first of all, I think because of the personality but if it was just a random, I don't know, like I don't know specialist, but even if she was Muslim, for example, but if I didn't have that connection with her … I don't know if I will be comfortable or not.*

Safiya's statement suggests that sharing cultural values and rapport were mutually inclusive elements that supported her being comfortable. In fact, her comment further suggests that the absence of rapport with a Muslim coach can result in a reluctance to share. Growing evidence suggests that rapport, the role of trust and transparency, commitment, stages of the coaching relationship, and attributes of the coach and coachee all shape the relationship (Gan & Chong, 2015; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). One of this study's novel considerations for future study may be the impact that value congruency and shared faith have on the coaching relationship.

Participants further noted the positive experience of verbalizing intentions, which not only allowed them to discuss their faith, but also helped them to voice their internal dialogue around intentions. As the participants noted, intentions related more of an internal dialogue and were formed in the heart. Stelter (2007) states that the coach should support the process of verbalising experiences and knowledge and that the aim is to "facilitate the focus person in getting in contact with his/her implicit knowledge and felt sense in relation to a specific situation" (p. 194). This study's participants were able to tap into implicit knowledge in relation to formulating and clarifying their intentions. Verbalising intentions enabled participants to engage in a process of self-insight, i.e., clarifying "thoughts, feelings and behaviour" (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002, p. 821).

Participants also valued a nondirective approach that fostered self-reflection. The coaching space invited an element of introspection where participants arrived at their own answers. They valued an approach whereby the coach was like a mirror that supported reflection on their intentions and actions. They indicated the style of questioning around their intentions was a key tool that supported this process, generated new insights and helped clarify their priorities. Hawkins and Smith (2010) suggest that powerful questions are vital, as they "enable the coachee to explore the situation from different standpoints and generate new perspectives and possibilities" (p. 239). Kemp (2008) too identifies questions as vital and suggests that "insight-driven questions" (p. 42) can stimulate deeper personal awareness and reflection. King and van Nieuwerburgh (2020) found that Emirati Muslims used a more directive approach to coaching where participants used their coaches as role models or mentors to gain new knowledge. Similar to the argument made above, their study strongly emphasises the importance of not stereotyping the coachee based on their cultural identity given that, as already mentioned, Muslims' identities are formed by a dynamic interplay of geographical context and their interpretation of Islam.

This study's exploration of the experiences of Muslim participants coached around their intentions using the Ershad framework revealed that they appreciated cultural specificity rooted in core coaching competencies, thus indicating that adapting coaching approaches to align with cultural values and principles can be beneficial for certain groups of people.

Limitations and future research

This study investigated how Muslims in the UK experience coaching using the Ershad framework. While IPA's idiographic approach that focuses in detail on an individual's lived experience was appropriate, it should be noted that IPA does not permit generalisation, as the researcher's focus is on the particular rather than universal (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, a number of limitations should be acknowledged when considering the study's findings. First, the first author conducted both the coaching sessions and the interviews. This factor could potentially have impacted the findings because participants may not have been open to sharing any negative experiences. However, the first author providing the coaching sessions was an attempt to ensure the consistency and homogeneity of the participants' coaching experience—two of the key characteristics of an IPA study sample (Smith et al., 2009). In an effort to put participants at ease and make them comfortable in sharing their whole experience, rapport was built before the interviews. Building rapport has been shown to mitigate social desirability in qualitative research (Bergen & Labonte, 2019). Furthermore, the first author's interpretation may have been influenced by her positive experience of the coaching sessions and interviews, despite efforts at bracketing. However, preserving an orientation towards openness during analysis and ensuring that the interpretation was grounded in the data and not imposed on it, helped mitigate researcher influence. Iterative analysis, reflexivity and supervisory conversations with the second author further supported this process.

Exploring the experience of Muslims being coached around their intentions highlights benefits that similar studies could investigate. Future research may explore the use of culturally adapted coaching approaches within other cultures or in the context of religious or any other cultural groups to enrich the discussion about the need for and use of culturally adapted frameworks in coaching. Moreover, they may expand on the participant demographic of this study (female Muslims only) exploring the use of the framework between Muslim males or Muslims in other countries. It would also be interesting to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Muslims who are coached in Arabic. Future studies may expand on the scope of this study by delving deeper into the intersection of coaching and Islam. A quantitative study may explore which specific Islamic principles are valued in coaching. Finally, future research could move beyond integrating Islamic principles in coaching, and investigate developing a coaching model rooted in an Islamic understanding of the soul.

Conclusion

This study aimed to fill in a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth account on how Muslims experience coaching using the Ershad framework. This study adhered to IPA as a methodology from question formulation through to an in-depth analysis and write-up. The data highlighted that participants valued a culturally sensitive approach grounded in the principles of effective coaching.

In sum, the study provided insight into the use of culturally adapted frameworks in coaching within Islamic cultures, supporting the idea that culturally specific coaching approaches can be helpful. It further supports the call from other fields of psychology like counselling and psychotherapy regarding the need for an approach that is rooted in the Islamic paradigm. Overall, this study's findings give preliminary indications that culturally adapted frameworks in coaching may be beneficial and valuable. Further research that builds on this study's findings may provide valuable insights into the use of culturally sensitive approaches in coaching.

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