

Personal Narratives and their Potential for Dialogue: Stories told by young Muslim women

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Muslim women wear headscarves that make them visible in societies as being different. They are undervalued or misvalued and the stories told about them are usually fuelled by and also reinforce narratives of patriarchy, subjugation and difference.

In my research I aimed to give a voice to Muslim women and reinstate them as storytellers. I believed such an exercise could clarify Muslim women's diverse roles in British society and help to find common ground from which the process of dialogue can begin.

The dynamics of storytelling

We recognise people and places by the stories that we know about them. National identities, for example, are created in part by national histories consisting of stories of significant individuals, wars and events. Such stories influence our present and future actions. However storytelling is not always democratic and may be determined by power hierarchies. Authority may decide who the storyteller is, who the story is about, what story is told and how it is told. Sometimes individuals and groups may be marginalised and understood as 'different' 'different' by the stories being told about them.

However, when stories are told by marginalised groups, they have the potential to empower the heretofore disempowered, dismantle stereotypes and facilitate understanding of 'difference' 'difference' in pluralist societies. As more groups and individuals tell their stories and these stories are *heard*, a more complete and complex picture of shared reality is created. My inspiration began here; I wanted to reinstate Muslim women as tellers of their own stories.

Finally, a story is complete only when it has been *told* to a listener or is shared. The audience to whom the story is told completes the purpose of the story: "Storytelling is *for* another as much as for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as a guide. [...] The other's receipt of that guidance not only recognises but *values* the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the

space of the story *for* the other" (Frank 1995: 17-18).²

Muslim women's stories

I used digital storytelling techniques³ in order to empower Muslim women to tell their stories and then help their stories to be heard in pluralist contexts. Muslim women were briefed to tell stories that could demystify them, challenge stereotypes and further inter-community dialogue.

Rather than narrate long-winded defences of Islam or anti-media tirades, Muslim women presented vignettes of everyday life, telling them in a way that challenged misconceptions and built bridges. By narrating stories of everyday routine (work-life balances, motherhood, university education), the storytellers hoped to challenge the stereotypes that they knew existed. Islam, as represented by some storytellers' headscarves and the language others used, usually only featured in the background of the stories. The stories reflected the women's personalities and myriad life experiences. These stories were poignant, fun, thought-provoking and routine, and they all asked for the story-teller to be understood.

Listening to Muslim women's stories

The stories were screened to participants who belonged to various faith groups. These groups were then encouraged to reflect on their understandings of Muslim women. Participants' reactions to Muslim women's stories provided an insightful vision into the potential of personal narratives. They were often visibly moved. Over and over again participants stated how a particular storyteller reminded them of a female relative or a friend.

Even in areas where there were disagreements, common ground was sought and found. For example, when a storyteller mentioned segregation between sexes as something that Muslims practice, audience members said that they did not agree with 'forced' segregation, but also pointed out that women from other backgrounds may on occasion enjoy the company of all-female groups. Audiences also commented

about "media scare-mongering". They did not accept media stereotypes but did not know what to replace them with.

However, as they watched the stories, they often recognised, questioned and then rejected these stereotypes.

Significantly, there was a unanimous recognition of the universality of the woman's struggle. Muslim faces and voices were telling the stories, but they could have been women from any socio-cultural, religious or racial background. The Muslim woman's story was now perceived as a familiar story and not a story characterised by difference.

The Effect of Personal Narratives

In my research, personal narratives enabled *all* participants to see the commonalities in their lives.⁴ Muslim women showed how their life stories resembled those of others through narratives of everyday routine including, among other things, queuing at bus stops, eating crisps and sharing images of children's art work. For audiences watching Muslim women's stories, these mundane activities were vested with new meaning: of similarity and commonality across difference.

Moreover, the potential of personal narratives to facilitate cohesion is evident. The dynamics of storytelling makes it possible for diverse groups to share cultural milieus, experience, emotion and opinion. Stories can capture a nuanced and complex picture of a group that includes not just differences but also similarities. As we learn to recognise and celebrate these similarities, we also learn to respect the differences among us, and stories cease to be divisive and become a means of better understanding ourselves.

References

1. Arthur Frank's emphasis.
2. Frank, A. (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller – Body, Illness and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. A digital story may be defined as a 3-minute long narrative accompanied by still photographs.
4. Full findings of this research will be published as Contractor, S. (2012). *Muslim Women in Britain: Demystifying the Muslimah*. London: Routledge.