Exploring halaqah as research method: a tentative approach to developing Islamic research principles within a critical ‘indigenous’ framework

Farah Ahmed

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Published online: 27 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Farah Ahmed (2013): Exploring halaqah as research method: a tentative approach to developing Islamic research principles within a critical ‘indigenous’ framework, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, DOI:10.1080/09518398.2013.805852

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.805852

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Exploring halaqah as research method: a tentative approach to developing Islamic research principles within a critical ‘indigenous’ framework

Farah Ahmed*

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

(Received 29 November 2012; final version received 16 April 2013)

This paper explores a traditional Islamic pedagogy known as halaqah as a potentially useful authentic research method and contributes to discourses about critical and indigenous research methodologies through an analysis of Islamization of Knowledge and other ‘critical indigenous’ movements amongst Muslims. Islamic research principles are tentatively proposed and then used to assess the effectiveness of halaqah as an authentic Islamic research method through analysis of a small qualitative study. The study involved Muslim mother-teachers participating in halaqah to collaboratively reflect on their work as holistic Islamic educators who are developing a ‘critical indigenous’ education to meet the needs of Muslim children in contemporary Britain. This paper argues that halaqah is a more authentic research method in this study than a group interview or focus group as it enabled participants to articulate themselves within their own epistemological and ontological context and engage in critical reflection within an Islamic paradigm.

Keywords: indigenous research; Islamic research methodology; culturally relevant; Muslim education; holistic education

Introduction

A growing number of Muslims are seeking to reassert their Islamic identity by emphasizing Islam as a way of being and knowing. In this endeavour, the need to ‘construct’ or ‘discover’ knowledge becomes intertwined with tafakur (reflection) on how to live Islam in a globalized plural world. Whilst in the Muslim world these issues are played out increasingly on the political stage, there has also been a continuum of postcolonial scholarly discourse both within the Muslim world and in Muslim diasporas in the global North on the role of Islamic education and its relationship to society and global politics (Hefner & Zaman, 2007). This intellectual discourse is also a context for the provision of Islamic education and the rise of Islamic schools (Niyozov & Memon, 2011). For many Muslims, Islamic education has become a point of resistance, revival and renewal; a shield against the onslaught of western culture from colonialism and neoliberalism and the consequent de-legitimization of Islamic and other ways of knowing (Niyozov & Memon, 2011).

*Email: fa287@cam.ac.uk

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
This paper emerges out of my personal experience as a Muslim practitioner-researcher in an ‘alternative’ Islamic school in Britain, namely Islamic Shakhshiyah Foundation (ISF), which is developing ‘holistic Islamic education’ (HIE); it looks specifically at the role of research methodology at the interface between theory, practice and community action. I begin with an analysis of the movement to re-centre the Islamic ontological and epistemological paradigm in scholarship and research and attempt to demonstrate parallels between this movement and wider qualitative research discourses, namely critical pedagogy (CP) and indigenous knowledge (IK). I then tentatively propose some ‘Islamic research principles’ as a guiding framework for devising a methodology that emerges from the Islamic paradigm. The principles were formulated to meet my personal need to translate my epistemological beliefs into my research design. The second half of this paper uses these principles to evaluate halaqah\(^1\) as an Islamic research method. Both the research principles and the use of halaqah as research method arose out of my journey as a Muslim practitioner-researcher which, like the experience of other Muslim researchers (Zeera, 2001), consisted of tensions between two worldviews. Thus, the theoretical first half of this paper is the foundation for the practical second half, articulating my reflexive journey of theorizing and evaluation of my research design.

**Locating Islamic research in the indigenous research discourse**

Researchers from the global South have identified research as an arm of the colonial endeavour (Connell, 2007; Smith, 1999) and are seeking to reclaim intellectual space that centres their indigenous worldviews. Indigenous researchers tend to have a commitment to CP (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008) and believe in the transformative nature of education as a means of challenging power. These postcolonial movements go beyond race and gender equality to equality of thought/worldview; challenging a colonial concept of ‘progress’ that privileges ‘knowledge’ as constructed in the global North. Denzin et al. (2008), Reagan (2005), and Connell (2007) all place Islamic educational theory within the IK and CP discourse on the basis that the Islamic worldview shares many of the concerns of IK and CP. Although, it could be argued that as Islam has a rich tradition of documented scholarship, then it should not be classified as IK on the basis that IK is essentially about oral traditions which are less structured than literate traditions of ‘scholarship’; however, this position reveals a continued disrespect to IK, considering it to be less rigorous or illiterate and therefore in need of separation from ‘scholarly’ types of knowledge. The argument also demonstrates the continued muddled perception of Islamic knowledge as generated by a positivist modernist epistemology. Islam does not fit into a secular rationalist or secular empiricist model and is therefore decried as invalid, despite sharing an intertwined history with the development of European modernist thought. On the one hand, we know that Islamic scholarship of the eleventh and twelfth centuries laid down a fairly rational and rigorous approach to knowledge generation, including principles of empiricist research which were later developed into the ‘scientific method’ (Al-Hassan, Ahmed, & Iskandar, 2001, p. 104) and adopted in the European renaissance; however, this scholarship was nonetheless framed within a deeply religious context and is therefore classed as pre-modern and medieval (Gunther, 2006). This is further compounded by the fact that Islamic learning will not compromise on the supremacy of Qur’anic revelation and
Prophetic tradition as sources of unassailable knowledge. How then is Islamic scholarship to be seen as IK and Islamic education to be seen as CP?

These important issues are explored in this paper through a theoretical analysis and evaluation of IK/CP movements amongst Muslims as a context for a methodological analysis of halaqah as an Islamic research method.

**Muslim IK/CP movements: Islamization of knowledge, traditionalism and the Ijmali movement**

There are several Muslim intellectual movements which need to be considered as a context for any analysis of an ‘Islamic’ research method. The most recognized is known as ‘Islamization of Knowledge’ (IOK) (Al-Faruqi, 1988). The term ‘Islamization’ is sometimes seen as problematic for two reasons. First, it is too closely linked to Al-Faruqi’s 12-step work plan, which is seen as unfeasible by many IOK advocates. Secondly, the term ‘Islamization’ inaccurately implies imposing Islam onto existing knowledge or methodology, rather than reconstructing knowledge and methodology from Islamic epistemology. Nevertheless, as the movement is extensively known by this name, I will continue to use it. The IOK movement was launched through a series of ‘World Conferences on Islamic Education’, first held in Makkah in 1977. These conferences spawned an extensive debate in the Muslim world and Muslim academics in western universities. Although some see it as a defensive response to modernity and have criticized its intellectual association with political Islamization (Panjwani, 2004), others have seen its roots in the earliest encounters between Muslim and other intellectuals (Niyozov & Memon, 2011).

Like other IK movements, IOK is part of postcolonial repositioning within the social sciences and thus naturally has a critical and political dimension. Its internal discourse has approached an impasse however, since the death of leading proponents including Ismail Al-Faruqi (d. 1986), Syed Ali Ashraf (d. 1998) and Syed Naquib Al-Attas (d. 2006). Nevertheless, the movement’s various projects continue through institutions such as the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences and International Institute of Islamic Thought in the USA, the Islamic Academy in Cambridge, UK and the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in Malaysia. IOK proponents argued that the prevalence of western secular education systems in postcolonial Muslim nations is the cause of poor educational achievement and the decline in intellectual thought in the Muslim world. Their key premise is that a return to Islamic ontology and epistemology is essential for Muslims to regain the dynamism to address educational and social failure. Ashraf, Al-Attas and Al-Faruqi sought to develop research, knowledge and education on the basis of the Islamic paradigm. As an appreciation of the Islamic paradigm is essential to understand this paper and to understand halaqah as research method, an explanation of the Islamic paradigm quoting from a previous publication on this study (Ahmed, 2012) is given in Appendix 1.

‘Traditionalism’ is another movement that draws upon this paradigm to respond to western cultural hegemony, self-consciously locating itself in a wider renaissance of pre-enlightenment thought. Traditionalists perceive secular positivist science as reductionist and opposed to holism. Modern western science is an ‘anomaly and deviation’ (Niyozov & Memon, 2011) from the shared spiritual/sacred perspective that is the natural and perennial worldview of humankind (Eaton, 1990; Nasr, 1989). Much of Nasr’s work in particular shares the concerns of indigenous
movements whose views of the sacred are undermined by the intellectual hegemony of the global North. For Traditionalists, the multiplicity of global beliefs about the sacred strengthens the argument that the spiritual and sacred are essential elements of human knowledge (Nasr, 1989, p. 281). Reviving Islamic and other traditional knowledge is seen as essential to returning humanity to its rightful heritage of a holistic epistemology and way of life. Traditionalists are more aware of the shared heritage of European modernism and Islamic traditionalism through the intellectual encounter between Islam and Europe during the medieval period. Indeed, Nasr sees the Traditionalist movement in Islam as an aid to the revival of the *Sophia Perennis*, an awareness of the sacred that exists also in the western intellectual tradition (Nasr, 1989, p. viii).

Whilst these two movements recognize the need for engagement with modernity and postmodernity, their emphasis has generally been on reviving and maintaining the classical tradition as a basis for reformulating knowledge in accordance with the Islamic paradigm (Al-Faruqi, 1987) or refocusing the pursuit of knowledge beyond the rational realm (Nasr, 1989). On a practical level however, their principles, beliefs and values have seldom been translated into practice and there are concerns about absence of methodology (Safi, 1993; Zeera, 2001). The *Ijmali* movement, in contrast, has argued that developing a methodology at this stage is premature if not counterproductive (Sardar, 1991, p. 56).

The *Ijmali* movement was a heterogeneous group of intellectuals led by the British-Pakistani scholar Ziauddin Sardar. Sardar has adopted a more critical and radical attitude to the problem (Stenberg, 1996a), arguing that in a postmodern world, tradition provides meaning, identity and purpose. Traditional cultures need to provide meaningful engagement with modernity and postmodernity on their own terms. For Sardar, postmodernity is as much a western phenomenon as modernism and is equally dependent on western secularism. He argues that the crisis generated by postmodernity needs to be addressed by traditional cultures including contemporary Islam. This can be done through a ‘Transmodern’ approach where traditional cultures draw on their own epistemologies and ontologies to transcend modernity and to generate a more authentic and just plural reality.

Sardar’s critique of IOK is that it remains inauthentic as it seeks to Islamize approaches that have arisen from the modernist paradigm. His critique of Traditionalism is that it is too deeply rooted in the intense esotericism of Sufism to be practically useful for building a contemporary Islamic intellectualism (Stenberg, 1996b). Sardar’s approach however raises further questions. Whilst he accepts that Islamic ‘tradition’ has to be revitalized from within, in his view intellectualism within the tradition, i.e. amongst the *Ulema* (theological scholars), has declined in that they uphold an outdated, uncritical and fossilized methodology whose focus is on understanding prior readings and rulings instead of generating new ones. Therefore, the new approach to *‘ilm* (knowledge) must come from concerned Muslims who understand the complexities of the contemporary world and uphold the Islamic worldview but are not hindered by the constraints of narrow-minded traditional scholarship (Sardar, 2012, Chapter 4). Sardar’s argument demonstrates some frustration with those whose lived experience is not beset by the challenge of modernity or postmodernity. In his view, Ulema who live in the cocoon of an ‘outdated’ culture and who have responded to the challenges posed to their world by retreating into and clinging onto ‘medieval’ scholarship are incapable of dealing with the challenge of making Islam meaningful for contemporary Muslims. For him, they are,
‘obscurantist scholars who have little knowledge of the complexity and problems of the modern world’ (Sardar, 2012, Chapter 4). One question that arises here is that perhaps such a retreat is a legitimate response to a cultural threat. Where two worldviews collide, is it not reasonable to simply continue to uphold your own and to live and think within that framework, particularly within a globalized world where real power is clearly in the hands of outside forces? A second question that arises from this standpoint is to do with what is meant by authenticity? Can any new reading of the Qur’an and hadith (Prophetic sayings) claim to retain an authentic interpretation whilst generating new and contemporarily useful knowledge? For example, is a young suicide bomber’s understanding of jihad authentic and useful despite his lack of traditional scholarly methodology? The issue again becomes one of methodology.

As Sardar himself recognizes, methodology was a constant point of discussion amongst classical scholars and the interaction with ‘other’ ways of knowing has a long tradition in Islamic scholarship. Sardar’s point that more recent Ulema have shirked critical thinking in exchange for the conservation of tradition may be accurate, but his argument that the early spirit of engagement with the other needs to be revitalized to generate new interpretations surely needs to be qualified with a sound methodology. Sardar often criticizes the IOK movement as being overly influenced by modernity and reactionary, however it must be recognized that any Muslim working within western academia/research will to some degree be influenced by ‘non-Islamic’ ideas and that any attempt of engagement with the other necessarily involves a synthesis between different thoughts at some level, which is inevitable in human interpretation. Nevertheless:

Islam itself, for Sardar, is beyond change and therefore ahistorical – Islam is extraneous to history. It is the unified voice of God in the multiplicity of worldly texts. Islam has a singular eternal origin, whereas the text of the world is profane with its beginnings, middles and ends. (Ur-Rehman, 2002, p. 74)

If Islam is the ultimate truth for Muslims, it is a truth that cannot be completely and fully realized; the duty of the Muslim is to strive to seek ‘ilm ul haqq (true knowledge) whilst continuously being aware that the seeker of knowledge is always fallible in his/her understanding. The position of the Muslim scholar is as the great Muslim jurist Al-Shafi’i once famously stated, ‘My ruling is correct with the possibility of being in error whilst the ruling of another is in error with the possibility of being correct’. Thus, ikhtilaf (diversity) of rulings has always been acceptable within Islamic jurisprudence, law and in wider knowledge.

This view has some parallels to the interpretivist paradigm and its multiple meanings, although it is qualified with the existence of an ultimate objective truth in the metaphysical realm. The Islamic concept of fitra (human nature) would accept the qualitative dimensions of Interpretivism. Islam requires the study of human societies to be approached from a human, not scientific perspective. Human beings differ from the material world and are not amenable to ‘examination’ in the same manner. Thus, positivist and postpositivist methodologies are inappropriate for social research. Quantitative methods may be useful in gathering data but should be used within a qualitative methodology which centres human beings. A scientific notion of objectivity is not possible; values should be openly declared because no human exists without values. For the Muslim
studying Muslims, values must necessarily be Islamic whereas in the study of non-Muslim societies (by Muslim researchers), there should be sincere effort to understand society from its own perspective, because Islamic ethics require seeking out truth.

Thus, Islam embraces the realism of positivist ontology and human potential to realize truth and observe the workings of nature. Critically, Islam also embraces human fallibility and, to some degree, the relativism of the interpretivist paradigm. Both paradigms, however, have a western source and, although able to be incorporated into Islamic epistemology, are essentially alien to it (Zeera, 2001). Neither paradigm would accept the pre-eminence of Qur’an as a reference that cannot be challenged. The hermeneutic tradition within interpretivism would be uncomfortable with the insistence on the internal coherence of Qur’an, central to traditional Islam and traditional Qur’anic exegesis.

Early Islamic scholarship laid methodological foundations in interpreting and applying the Qur’an and hadith, culminating in the establishment of Madhahib (Schools of Thought). The Madhahib ensured consistency in methodology whilst generating diversity in rulings, as opposed to fragmentation through personal relativist interpretation (Murad, 1999). The vast majority of Muslims uphold this approach as authentic; however, it is challenged by some recent scholars, intellectuals and activists, notably Sardar (2012). Some IOK proponents challenge classical methodology: Hussien (2007) and Zine (2008) argue for an Islamized critical theory. This is an important assertion as Muslims need to engage in critical thinking to address contemporary challenges. However, Hussein and Zine go on to assert that new, possibly feminist, interpretations of Qur’an are necessary. As a Muslim reading these perspectives, questions of authenticity quickly come to the fore, and the delicate balancing act of being true to the ‘truth’ of Islam whilst being cognizant of the discontinuity that is inevitable in working in a western university setting becomes very real. As a Muslim woman researching an organization founded and led by Muslim women, these questions are additionally poignant, firstly in that ‘ethnic’ research such as mine is often ‘made exotic’ by colleagues’ perceptions (Webber, 2009); secondly in the perception that as a woman I need to be ‘empowered’ by some form of feminism or other.

In my research, I aim to root thinking processes in Islamic epistemology. For me, it is important to locate thought and knowledge about contemporary Muslim issues in classical scholarship; building on what already exists is important for authenticity. Colonialism disrupted the natural development of Islamic hadhara (civilization and culture) which had itself lost dynamism due to internal causes. Whilst modern Muslim scholarship cannot completely pick up where it left off, it can be argued that it needs to be rooted in classical principles to be validated as a revival of Islamic hadhara and as IK. Despite this niyyah (intention), it must be recognized that all contemporary researchers are to some degree influenced by the dominant positivist and interpretivist paradigm as we work in a specific postcolonial context where there exists a state of internal confusion in the Muslim community. Thus, it must be recognized that any one perspective cannot speak for an estimated one-fifth of the world’s population. In this sense, Islam as IK cannot be compared to most indigenous groups who are numerically small in comparison, although internal differences are present in every community.
The study

My experience as a Muslim researcher in a western university mirrors the experiences of Muslim children attending mainstream schooling in western countries, which is the context of the study in which I used halaqah as research method. In a case such as this where the ‘subject’ of the study is your own community, the situation becomes even more absurd for the Muslim researcher. It is as if you are now the orientalist studying your own community through the lens of an outsider, adopting the outsider’s identity to do so.

This research grew out of my involvement in a small-scale community education project which was initiated by home-schooling Muslim mothers to collectively educate their children in a culturally coherent context through HIE. This work eventually led me to engage in educational research to better understand practice in our setting. I had originally intended to study the schools’ use of halaqah as an oral dialogic pedagogy but found that I needed to spend some time looking at the theory that underpinned the practice of halaqah, HIE. I decided to use halaqah as a research method to understand how Muslim teachers understood and practised HIE in this particular setting in contemporary Britain:

Halaqah is a spiritual circle-time instituted by Prophet Muhammad in his tarbiyah (education) of early Muslims; it is conducted purely orally with students and teacher sitting in a circle on the floor. An integral part of traditional Islamic education, halaqah continues to be core practice in Muslim cultures. Halaqah is credited with transformation of personalities, empowerment of individuals and communities through a social-justice agenda, and the development of Islamic intellectual heritage, including sciences, arts and mysticism (Zaimache, 2002). The format varies immensely and can be transmission-based/teacher-led or dialogic/student-led. It can also be a collaborative group effort. The ‘curriculum’ or content is open, but the paradigm is an Islamic worldview and the frame of reference is the Islamic revealed texts, that is, the Qur’an and Sunnah (sayings of the Prophet). (Ahmed, 2012, p. 731)

Findings from this study can be found in Ahmed (2012) and a brief explanation of HIE theory is found in Figure 1.

An Islamic research methodology

Despite the qualifications discussed above, I used an interpretive paradigm as the overarching strategy of enquiry whilst retaining the holism of Islamic epistemology through the principles given below. In interpretivism, interpretations are limited to a particular individual or group. They are valuable in a pluralistic society to gain understanding of the individual or group. It could be argued I am bypassing the more fundamental divide between holistic Islamic epistemology and its principle of an eternal core truth on one hand and the inherent relativism/subjectivism of interpretivism on the other. However, this is a reflection of Islamic wisdom; the human being should accept his/her limitations and whilst seeking truth, acknowledge there is always more to learn. The non-Muslim reader will read my work as purely interpretivist. For the Muslim reader, whose worldview is shaped by Islamic epistemology, my work will be judged on how far it is true to the Qur’anic paradigm as embodied in the principles given below. Had this study used a purely interpretivist paradigm, it may have produced useful findings from a social research perspective but these findings would be a world away from what the community that is
initiating the research would find useful or meaningful; it would not be culturally relevant research.

Arguments for culturally relevant research and education for indigenous and colonized peoples have been made for many years, e.g. Native-American (Klug & Whitfield, 2003), Australian-Aboriginal (Osborne, 1991) and African-American communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Kaupapa Maori (Bishop, 1998; Smith, 2003, 2005) is a comprehensively developed approach to education and research from a Maori perspective. I found it inspirational because like my personal journey, Kaupapa Maori began with the Maori community seeking out culturally coherent education for Maori children. They were responding to fears that Maori culture and language were disappearing. Development of Kaupapa Maori research intertwined

Figure 1. Understanding the relationship between key Qur’anic concepts and ‘HIE’.
with the development of Kaupapa Maori pedagogy and schools. Kaupapa Maori researchers have not developed a unique methodology but rather a framework with which to approach research, including principles given in Table 1, to guide the researcher. Research informed by these principles embraces political activism, empowering Maori communities.

Islamic research principles

This is not the first attempt to produce Islamic research principles. In the late 1980s, Al-Faruqi produced ‘Principles of Methodology’ for IOK, but Safi (1993) critiques them as general, not ‘methodological’ as usually understood in social science. In fact, they indicate some of the epistemological and ethical concerns Al-Faruqi had in observing Muslim researchers and their purpose is to Islamize knowledge rather than to develop research from the Islamic paradigm. Zine (2008) gives principles of ‘Critical Faith-centred Epistemology’. Whilst these are immensely useful, they are limited to a critical theory perspective incorporating religious faith. As I felt that the Maori principles were a holistic and practical model, I therefore used the same sort of approach to cautiously devise the following principles as a means to conceptualizing my research design and testing halaqah as a research method (see Table 2).

These principles are generically derived from the Islamic ontological and epistemological paradigm given in Appendix 1 and have been checked as authentic with a qualified Islamic scholar. I used these principles to design the study of teachers’ understanding and implementation of HIE in ISF schools. In this paper, I will consider how far the research halaqah used in this study as a method of ‘data collection’ fulfilled these principles in practice. Figure 2 outlines relationships between epistemology, methodology and method; at the centre is halaqah.

The research was designed as an ‘intrinsic case study’ (Stake, 1995) of two groups of ISF staff, school leaders and teachers, who uphold and implement HIE in their practice. In devising the case boundary, I felt the perspectives of women who founded ISF and work there would generate the most insightful understanding of HIE as practised in ISF. Stake’s work on case study research (1995, 2005) was used as an appropriate qualitative approach chiming with the Islamic research principles; ‘a view of case studies that draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological and biographic research methods’ (Stake, 1995, p. xi). In emphasizing context as necessary to understanding a case, Stake (1995) allows for research to use an alternative frame of reference to the scientific/positivist model. According to Stake (2005), the end product of a case study should portray its context in depth,
allowing formulation of research design rooted in an alternative epistemology, where knowledge is contextualized in reference to Qur’an and Sunnah.

Through emphasising context, the research generated understanding of the particularity, complexity and multiplicity of participants’ perspectives and narratives as they emerged through reflexive conversation in halaqah. Participant selection was purposive; two groups of five were devised as in Table 3.

All participants volunteered. School-leaders were naturally enthusiastic, supporting the research from the outset and a group of five including myself was quickly devised. Approximately half of all teachers volunteered; the first five who came forward participated. Two groups enabled exploration of how far conceptualizations of HIE formulated by original members of ISF are shared by newer teachers. Voices of new teachers, some of whom do not have children in the school, helped explore motherhood as motivation for HIE in ISF. Devising two groups increased possibili-
ties for ‘triangulation’ as the groups could either enhance a multiplicity of perspectives or confirm findings through amplifying each other’s accounts and views.

Figure 3 outlines various existing strands in qualitative research interwoven into *halaqah* as research method. In analysing these strands, I will demonstrate how *halaqah* meets the Islamic research principles given in Table 2.

Islamic research principles were realised through these collective qualitative processes of *halaqah* adapted as research method; a forum in which school-leaders and teachers could express and develop accounts of their perspectives on implementing HIE. *Halaqah* celebrates the sacred, spiritual and transformative nature of ‘*ilm* (knowledge) and values the beliefs, cultural aspirations and collective autonomy of Muslims in realizing their educational goals. Through *halaqah*, participants are able to express viewpoints as human beings, co-constructors of knowledge and insight. This ‘*ilm* (knowledge) is meaningful for participants as individuals growing closer to Allah through self-development; and as a group, collaborating to achieve aims for their community. *Halaqah* as a method does not treat participants as complex ‘material subjects’ but values human potential for realization of deep meaning and personal growth. *Halaqah* is more than a group interview or focus group. Its format is a traditional reflexive practice in Islamic cultures where the reference point is the Qur’an. The interpretivist aspect is therefore limited and qualified through emphasis on cultural-relevance; that is, by the Islamic worldview.

**Halaqah and critical theory**

Man’s ontological vocation is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. (Freire, 2006, p. 32)
Halaqah as research method enables realization of critical theory through ‘indigenization of knowledge’ (Connell, 2007; Smith, 2005), giving voice to an alternative epistemology. By its very nature, halaqah as research method may be viewed as a challenge to dominant academic and social norms, where Muslim communities are ‘natives’ to be studied by the ‘enlightened’ scientific academy of the metropole (Connell, 2007). By centring participants’ worldview as a credible reference point for ‘findings’, halaqah validates meanings that participants collaboratively generate. This validation is transformative for participants; giving them ‘voice’ and agency in shaping a way forward for their communities, meeting the challenges of a postcolonial world. Halaqah is a dialogical approach to understanding social processes, within an Islamic frame of reference. It is therefore more akin to the critical theory of indigenous movements such as Kaupapa Maori than pure Freirian pedagogy.

Halaqah and reflexive conversation

Are you not aware of how Allah sets forth the parable of a good word? (It is) like a good tree firmly rooted (reaching out) with its branches towards the sky – Qur’an, 14: 24
In this study, *halaqah* consists of ‘reflexive group conversation’. The format is familiar to participants, a pedagogical practice traditional in Islamic culture. Teachers engage in *halaqah* daily with early years and primary children in ISF, and attend *halaqah* as adults. *Halaqah* works on multiple epistemological levels. Whilst Qur’an is paramount as *haq* (truth), knowledge arising from Qur’an (which itself operates on multiple levels) has a reflexive relationship with individuals and the *halaqah* community, who engage with this knowledge within their own contexts, meeting research principle 1. The individual’s *fitra* is recognized as a source of intuitive knowledge drawn upon in *halaqah*, transforming thought, behaviour and character, meeting Islamic research principle 3.

**Participation, collaboration and dialogic discourse**

This reflexive project presumes that words and language have a material presence in the world; that words have effects on people. Words matter. (Denzin, 2001, p. 24)

Dialogue, collaboration and participation lie at the heart of this research design. The context of this study is a learning community of whom the researcher is also a member. If human beings discover meaning from interactions with the world and each other through language (Al-Attas, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986), then it is productive to explicitly develop this research as an inherently collaborative activity. The power of the spoken word as transformative for individuals and society is central to Islamic culture and to qualitative reflexive research; *halaqah* thus meets research principle 6.

**Narrative inquiry and autoethnography**

And We will show them Our signs … within themselves – Qur’an 41:53

Narrative and storytelling are within the *halaqah* tradition. Prophet Muhammad often told stories and parables in *halaqah*. Stories and life histories are a rich part of the Qur’anic narrative of reflection on the purpose and meaning of life. Islamic scholars recorded history through oral accounts verified through a complex ‘science’ of sources⁵. *Halaqah* was a vehicle for gathering narratives and their sources. I am using *halaqah* as an authentic research approach in this tradition, meeting research principle 2. Participants were encouraged to use personal narratives in their contributions, providing a rich, collaborative opportunity to reflect on their own and each other’s views and values, personal and professional. There is also an auto-ethnographic element (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) within this narrative approach. As this work is shaped by my life experiences, my personal narrative is already part of the research. My involvement in ISF means this study can be described as reflexive ethnography (Davies, 1998) or introspection as a means of knowing from the Islamic tradition (Al-Attas, 1997).
Female empowerment and spirituality

Participants are Muslim women who through forming ISF have developed strong professional and personal relationships. They already work in a collaborative ‘sisterly’ ethos as teachers are usually confident in expressing personal opinions. Whilst I remained open to the possibility this assumption of mutual open expression could be proved incorrect through the research, in designing the research I anticipated a feminine and spiritual element to the ‘reflexive conversation’ meeting research principles 3 and 6. Halaqah is a spiritual learning exercise; an act of devotion and drawing closer to Allah. Whilst Islam permits men and women to gather in halaqah, it is common for halaqah to be composed purely of either men or women. Helminski (2003) researched Muslim feminine spirituality, demonstrating the role of halaqah in this tradition and in the lived experiences of Muslim women.

Research ethics

Ethical concerns in the study were addressed from Islam to meet Islamic research principle 5. This is in contrast to what Christians (2005) describes as a ‘biomedical model of ethics’; a value-neutral approach arising from enlightenment rationalism, useful for research within a positivist/postpositivist paradigm. Collaborative research approaches require a different approach to ethics. Where participants’ views on the research design are sought, participants’ values become part of the study. In this study, participants’ anonymity was preserved to protect privacy and encourage openness during halaqah; informed consent was sought at the outset. Halaqah is based upon trust, traditionally trust in the halaqah leader’s capability and sincerity, allowing in this instance the researcher to introduce and sometimes participate in the halaqah. However, it was important for validity that my presence was limited, allowing as much openness as possible. Although I participated in the school-leaders’ halaqah as I have deep relationships and a shared narrative with them as peers and colleagues, the teachers’ halaqah was audio recorded and had no researcher presence except an opening discussion of research purposes and an explanation of the participatory nature of the research design to encourage ‘participatory’ ethics and ownership of the research.

This approach is in some ways akin to the feminist-communitarian model of ethics advocated by Christians (2005). Communitarians stand in direct contrast to the established individual autonomy mode of ethics which is consistent with the Islamic emphasis on community. Morality is rooted in the concept of jam’aah (community of believers) upholding Islamic teachings for the common good and in obedience to Allah:

If one has to present a communication model based on the Sunnah of Muhammad, it would be an interactive, open, universal, mutually beneficial and symmetrical model of communication. Also it would emphasize a universal code of ethics to be followed by all communication actors. (Siddiqui, 2009, p. 143)

ISF is a female-dominated community, using feminine values within an Islamic context, to realize an IK system in a multicultural society. This is very different to adopting a feminist stance and attempting to incorporate it into an Islamic viewpoint. Rather it is an ethical stance regarding the ownership of the research and an
understanding of the needs and values of the participants. Christians (2005) cites Denzin (2003) as enriching feminist-communitarian ethics with the indigenous research ethic of Kaupapa Maori to make ‘the researcher responsible not to a removed discipline (or institution), but to those he or she studies’ (Denzin, 2003, p. 258).

Analysis and findings
In this paper, I am only concerned with analysing halaqah as research method. Findings relating to participants’ perspectives have already been published in Ahmed (2012). I will answer the following research questions regarding halaqah as research method using the experience of this case study:

1. Is halaqah able to generate meaning useful for research purposes and is it more meaningful for participants than a similar method such as a focus group or group interview?
2. How valid/reliable is halaqah as research method?
3. How does halaqah as an IK method influence concepts of the researcher as insider/outsider?
4. Can halaqah as research method be used in a range of contexts?

Is halaqah able to generate meaning useful for research purposes and is it more meaningful for participants than a similar method such as a focus group or group interview?

To facilitate an inductive approach, virtually no formal structure was applied to halaqah sessions. The format was left entirely open to enable participants to have ownership of their conversations and to encourage holistic discussion of HIE. They were informed that they should feel free to use the halaqah as they wished for collaborative reflection and dialogue on their work as Muslim teachers. Participants were provided with six themes relating to HIE (see Figure 4) as a starting point and were free to use these if they wished.

Participants were informed that these themes could be discussed in any way in the context of HIE in ISF. They were invited to relate narratives about their own education and/or reasons for working in ISF. They could choose a group member to lead the halaqah or just engage in reflexive conversation about themes. I hoped this would develop a natural environment to exchange views about personal and professional roles; potentially leading to more honest accounts than posing questions like, ‘what impact does your role as a mother have on your HIE practice in ISF?’ Or, ‘How important is HIE to your planning?’

The intention was to provide opportunity for rich interactive discussions centring participants’ voices and generating dialogue relevant to the research questions. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), people are meaning-finders, seeking out patterns, making sense of the world. In Islam, this relates to fitra, human nature predisposed to recognize Allah through His ayat (signs). The capacity to find meaning in the external world and construct new meaning through internal reflection is unique to human beings. This is what happened in the research halaqah. Teachers and school-leaders comfortably engaged in personal and communal accounts of individual and collective experiences both of their own education and of their work
They identified what was meaningful to them and engaged with difficult issues in some depth, debating varying perspectives and on the whole attempting to build consensus. What was clear was that they saw this as an opportunity to develop their own thinking and understanding, not as an exercise for an outside researcher to benefit from. As participants were not asked to consider *halaqah* as research method, I can only glean their views from the kinds of dialogue that took place within the research *halaqah* as well as what they said about *halaqah* as pedagogy in the school and how they use it in teaching and their experiences of *halaqah* as a staff development activity. The following quotes are representative of views expressed by both school-leaders and teachers. Teachers express the holistic transformative nature of *halaqah*:

Aisha: Halaqah is focal, because we are nurturing these children, their shakhsiyah, their spirituality, their intellectual mind, their understanding … so they can be positive people for the future but with a strong Islamic identity and understanding.

Khadija: Halaqah’s not just about passing information, it’s also about asking the children how they can relate that particular concept being discussed into their own lives and what examples they can give from their own experiences and their own emotions.

They talk about how comfortable a setting it is for exploring ideas, beliefs and viewpoints and its authenticity as an Islamic pedagogy:
Salma: You’re right, the halaqah is the body of the school … the children are open to questioning you and you questioning them and then it’s just like in very comfortable circumstances and they can open up and talk freely and this is what happened before and just like we went back to the original (Islamic) way of teaching.

Participants were at ease in referring to their own worldview and referencing the Qur’an and hadith to justify their positions:

Aisha: Halaqah is all about understanding … their environment and their own creation and reflecting upon themselves, … you know the atheist doesn’t see God in anything but the Muslim, the believer sees God in everything and that’s what you’re reflecting to the children is that Allah subhanawata’ala’s mercy and his rahma and his power is in everything.

They express the practical application of staff halaqah as a useful exercise in reflecting on their teaching:

Ruqayyah: but it’s really for us, it’s a time for us to reflect on ourselves and what we’re doing and ourselves as Muslims and when we have that reflection we can sort of go back and then come back into the classroom with sort of a fresh outlook.

All these participants are expressing the cultural coherence of halaqah as something that they find useful for their own work; here, the research has a meaning for them as it relates to their worldview and life’s work. This format bears a marked difference from other forms of collective data collection, for example focus groups or group interviews.

These observations were echoed in participant feedback sessions where I reported findings. Participants had found halaqah sessions productive and expressed surprise at the quality of meanings generated. They had enjoyed halaqah and felt that the sessions aided personal and professional development.

How valid/reliable is halaqah as research method? How does halaqah as an IK method influence concepts of the researcher as insider/outsider?

In qualitative research in general and indigenous research in particular, internal rigour is concerned with authenticity and trustworthiness, rather than positivist concerns of validity and reliability. Indigenous cultural values and epistemological principles serve as a measure of authenticity and trustworthiness (Bishop, 1998; Smith, 2005). The indigenous researcher as insider is perceived to be valuable in centring the perspectives of the researched community; in rooting research in indigenous ways of knowing. Authenticity to Islamic sources of Qur’an and Sunnah will therefore be a consideration for Muslim readers of this research. These sources shape the aspirations, agendas and cultural practices of religiously observant Muslim communities.

An Islamic researcher will recognize her role in analysis. She engages with ‘data’ internally and externally, finding and constructing meaning from her observations, experiences and perspectives. She consciously uses her ‘aql (intellect) in an attempt to arrive at haq (truth) without bias and to do justice to her task in coming to ‘ilm (knowledge). Analysis should be sincere, recognizing there is more than one way of knowing. Knowledge and its meanings are incomplete; human beings are
prone to fallibility. The researcher’s task is to sincerely seek authentic qualitative knowledge via thorough, reflexive and iterative analysis. In line with my role as an insider researcher, I wanted to capture participants’ perspectives and present them with as little ‘interpretation’ as possible, making their collective interpretations and their voices the focus of the study. I did not however pretend to be neutral but saw my voice as one of many. These many voices are presented as one because there was so much agreement amongst participants. The Kaupapa Maori idea of a connection of the ‘knower’ to the ‘known’ through a ‘participatory mode of consciousness’ (Bishop, 1998) is a useful parallel in explaining this point. As a researcher, I cannot be separated from the research, claiming neutrality, although I can endeavour to step back from it through reflection and be part of it through my reflexive involvement in the school leaders’ halaqah group.

I checked the trustworthiness of conclusions through feedback sessions with the two groups, reading through findings as presented in their collective voice. Participants confirmed that their conversations were accurately reflected and that they could hear their personal views in the collective unified voice. Participants were surprised that they had covered so much and although some time had passed, they could still identify who had said what. They helped clarify some findings by suggesting specific changes in words and phrases. They described halaqah as a useful, enjoyable opportunity for collaborative reflection and for their voices to be heard, counteracting misrepresentations of their beliefs and work.

From a value-neutral perspective, this study has serious limitations. I am an insider heavily involved in ISF; my level of personal commitment raises questions of bias. However, my research is rooted within an indigenous qualitative paradigm, centring Islamic values. I perceive my role as insider as a valuable means to give voice to an otherwise marginalized group of women. I have been open about my involvement and my objectives, as well as the cultural basis of my unorthodox research paradigm.

There remain questions of external validity. Is such research useful, beyond being transformative for participants? Qualitative researchers debate the relevance of terms like validity, reliability and generalization to their work. Should these terms be redefined or discarded (Miles & Huberman, 1994)? This debate is important, particularly when considering external relevance or generalisability of a case study. ISF is a unique case with a unique research method; presented as an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) which can serve to illuminate (Pring, 2000) related discourses, rather than a sample, to be generalized in a scientific manner as in traditional case study (Yin, 2008). In an intrinsic case study, generalization is based on notions of tacit ‘naturalistic’ knowledge, shared through reflexivity and vicarious experience, see Figure 5 (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). To achieve this, the case must be presented with rich contextualized detail through vivid ‘thick’ description and exemplified accounts; in this instance, of participants’ narratives and perspectives. Thick description potentially allows the reader to empathize with the case and relate it to previous experience. Halaqah was devised as a method that elicits this kind of detailed contextualized data, through lengthy opportunity for self-expression and narrative accounts in a collaborative setting.

Stake’s (2005) concept of ‘naturalistic generalizations’ is useful to this study. Women perceived as the incomprehensible ‘other’ to many may become comprehensible through a naturalistic narrative presentation of their stories and perspectives. If greater understanding is generated, then religiously observant Muslims can
move from outsiders to being a better understood group through the ‘vicarious experience’ of the reader.

Can halaqah as research method be used in a range of contexts?

*Halaqah* was an exceptionally useful method in this study, particularly in allowing participants to open up and share their experiences and in drawing out participants’ conceptualizations of themselves. It was also effective in engaging participants in meaningful dialogue to explore differing perspectives. *Halaqah* is an ideal medium for collective *tafakkur* (reflection) and is useful in any context where this is important to the research. It is also useful in providing Muslims with an opportunity to be open and express their personal views from their own worldview, which in any qualitative study of Muslims’ ways of seeing is invaluable.

Reflexivity is important to all types of research, thus even in a large-scale quantitative study or scientific experimental research, a Muslim researcher may benefit in engaging in collective *tafakkur* with his/her team through *halaqah*. This can give meaning to the research activity through providing an opportunity to work
through the Islamic research principles in designing and evaluating the research as well as addressing difficulties that may arise during the course of the research.

Conclusions
Like other indigenous researchers, Muslim researchers still have a long way to go in devising an Islamic approach to research in modern contexts. The discourse is fraught and highly charged because it is a small aspect of the wider problem of Muslim engagement with modernity. The Islamic research principles cautiously presented here add to this discourse and open further debate. The exploration of \textit{halaqah} as research method has attempted to provide an example of how these principles can be translated into research.

Participants’ claims about \textit{halaqah} as effective pedagogy have led to the launch of a two-year collaborative action-research project on the theory and practice of \textit{halaqah} in ISF. The project is wide ranging but is focused around \textit{halaqah} as a means of developing individual autonomy in children within an Islamic conceptualization of autonomy. Teachers have begun to engage in research \textit{halaqah} to explore this issue.

Notes
1. Halaqah is a traditional Islamic pedagogy, an oral circle of learning which has been widely used throughout Muslim societies.
2. ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ is a term coined by D’Oyen (2008) to describe the theory that all education is Islamic based on the Islamic worldview of \textit{tawhid} (holism, oneness, unity).
3. Personal communication with Sheikh Ramzy Ajem, October 17, 2012.
4. The institution researched has been named for reasons given in a prior publication (Ahmed, 2012). However, pseudonyms will be used for individual participants in the study.
5. ‘Ulum ul Hadith’, the science of verifying the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, is incredibly sophisticated, itself divided into several areas.
6. Gender is not a characteristic of Allah whom ‘nothing is comparable to’ – Qur’an 114:4. However, accepted practice is to use the male pronoun.
7. This summary of Islamic epistemology and ontology is from my own reading of Islamic texts supplemented by attending \textit{halaqah} and seminars. See also Al-Attas (1997) and Nasr (1989).

Notes on contributor
Farah Ahmed is a PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests are Islamic education, indigenous research and knowledge, critical theory, sociocultural theory and Muslims in multicultural contexts.

References


Appendix 1

‘Islam begins by asserting tawhid, the holism, oneness or unity of Allah (God) and extending this to unity of creation, unity of knowledge, unity and therefore equality of humanity, unity of those who have testified and submitted (Muslims), unity of deen, Islamic way of life and unity of every other concept and human endeavour within Islamic culture. Human nature, fitra is essentially good; human beings have a natural disposition to recognise, know and love Allah and live by Islam, the natural way, deen-al-fitra. Human beings are khalifa-tul-ardh (stewards of God on earth); our natural role in the kawoun (universe) is to take responsibility for the rest of creation by fulfilling the will of Allah. The literal meaning of Islam is peace through submission; living Islam brings sakinah (inner tranquillity) and salam (outward peace and harmony on earth). Insan (the human), is the best of creation as s/he has unique attributes of irada (freewill) and ‘aql (intellect), the capacity to acquire and use ‘ilm (knowledge). It is through knowledge that man comes to know his inner potential and attains pure submission to Allah in inner and outward actions. The Qur’an repeatedly exhorts humans to use their ‘aql (intellect) and tafakkur (reflection) to come to know Allah through his ayat, signs. In the Islamic paradigm, knowledge is located in the qalb (heart) as well as the mind. The Qur’an makes seeking knowledge an obligation asking believers: ‘Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?’ (39:9).

Thus, knowledge is sought internally and externally. Human beings have been given senses and ‘aql (intellect) to understand the material world. They have been given the Qur’an and ‘aql (insight) to understand the internal world. In Islamic ontology, from the tawhid perspective there is a material world with a unified objective reality. All objective knowledge lies with Allah:

For with Him6 are the keys to things beyond the reach of a created being’s perception: none knows them but He. And He knows all that is on land and in the sea; and not a leaf falls but He knows it. (Qur’an 6:59)

Human beings bring multiple perspectives and interpretive frameworks to our understandings of this world. The limited human mind/heart cannot attain totality of knowledge. Nevertheless it is through seeking external and internal knowledge that we fulfil our purpose. The search for truth leads ultimately to Allah.7 It is through tarbiyah (personal development/education) that human beings realise their purpose and attain their true worth as the “best of creation” (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 729–730).