A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick

Permanent WRAP URL:
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/158975

Copyright and reuse:
This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.
Please scroll down to view the document itself.
Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it.
Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk
An autoethnographic inquiry into the development of my leadership identity as a leader in a Muslim faith school.

By Tariq Hamood

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education

Centre of Education Studies

University of Warwick

February 2020
Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................... 8
Declaration.......................................................................................................................... 9
Abstract............................................................................................................................. 10
Introduction....................................................................................................................... 12
Rationale............................................................................................................................. 16
Muslim Community Work – inappropriate label or incorrect application?........... 19

Background: The Challenges that Young British Muslims Face and the History of Muslim Faith Schools in the UK ........................................................................... 21
The Media and State Machinery ..................................................................................... 22
Marginalisation ultimately breeds unity amongst the ‘others’. ............................... 23
Muslim Schools in the UK ............................................................................................. 29
New directions for Muslim Faith Schools: ................................................................. 39

Leadership studies ......................................................................................................... 41
The History of Leadership Studies ................................................................................. 41
Definitions of ‘Leadership’ ............................................................................................. 43
Social Identity Theory of Leadership.............................................................................. 47

Methodology .................................................................................................................... 49
Qualitative research ......................................................................................................... 50
The Importance of Reflecting When Storying Our Lives........................................... 51
Storying Our Lives ........................................................................................................... 53
We Naturally Think in Narrative .................................................................................. 57
Autoethnography ............................................................................................................ 59
What is autoethnography? .............................................................................................. 60
The History and Growth of Autoethnography ............................................................ 61
The Two Types of Autoethnography.............................................................................. 62
Why autoethnography? .................................................................................................. 64
Writings from the heart that change the world – a desire to understand myself and my social settings. ................................................................. 68
Ethical considerations .................................................................................................... 71

Welcome Home! The Heathrow Gauntlet.................................................................... 74
The other side to the coin............................................................................................... 79
Early memories from Manchester .................................................................................. 85
The Move That Changed Everything............................................................................. 91
My first taste of leadership within the community ....................................................... 96
The interview – Am I the ‘right fit?’ ................................................................. 104
Sowing the seeds of our future leaders – A group’s distinctiveness is what unites them. ................................................................................................. 108
Changing how leaders perceive themselves is key .................................. 112
The importance of reminding one another of our purpose ................... 115
Moulding the collective identity of groups ............................................. 118
Neither was he ‘one of us’, nor was he furthering our cause – A Relational Approach to Leadership .............................................................. 121
When does a ‘good story’ become research? ........................................... 134
Points of Critique ..................................................................................... 136
Issues of publications and breaking the mould ..................................... 136
How do we judge/validate? ..................................................................... 140
Limitations of the study ......................................................................... 145
Reflexivity ................................................................................................. 147
Conclusion ............................................................................................... 153
Knowing when your writing is complete: ............................................. 153
How my writing evolved: ......................................................................... 154
Contributions to the field: ...................................................................... 155
References: .............................................................................................. 159
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Pontso Moorosi. Without her support, patience and constructive feedback, I would not have got to this stage. I am indebted to my mentor, John Gilligan, and my teacher Dr. John Haynes, who were both with me every step of the way. The prayers of my dear mother, whose daily words of supplication carried me through, were more precious and meaningful than anything that anyone could have given to me. Were it not for the belief that my beloved wife had in me and the pride that my beautiful children felt in seeing me grow as a writer, I would not be where I am today. I am truly blessed to be surrounded by such people in life.
Declaration

I confirm that the research described in this thesis has not been submitted elsewhere for any purpose and is completely my own work.
Abstract

The central purpose of this study is to examine the formation and development of my leadership identity as a BME Muslim Briton leading in a British Muslim faith school. This study aims to examine aspects of my professional life in addition to my personal life as a Muslim Briton given the current global, political climate toward to Islam. This is done with the intention of unpacking the complexities and challenges I face on a daily basis to help understand how my Muslim faith identity has influenced the formation of my leadership identity. The fundamental question I will be engaging with is how does my Muslim faith identity affect the development of my leadership identity?

This study examines leadership identity development through the lens of social identity theory of leadership, a concept that borrows from both social identity and social categorisation theories. Using these models, leadership is understood to be a relational process that is the product of the social system and not necessarily held in the hands of particular individuals. Although this study is focused on educational leadership, concepts are adopted mainly from the social sciences such as leader prototypically (is she/he ‘one of us’?), and ingroups/outgroups to frame how leaders are accepted and rejected. The various stages of leadership identity development are explored moving from individual to higher levels of collective thinking, which in its most basic form is the shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’. The particular focus of this study provides a rare in-depth glimpse into the leadership identity development of a Muslim working in the British education system. The thesis is presented as an autoethnography of the experiences of a BME Muslim in a British Muslim faith school holding a position of middle leadership. This has been done in an attempt to address the neglected areas of religious beliefs in concepts such as self-categorisation theory (Shah, 2006) and identities in leadership development (Edge, Descours and Oxley, 2017). This study highlights the importance that followers and
leaders attach to being considered as ‘one of us’ within groups (prototypicality). More specifically, this work brings to attention the importance of taking into consideration how deeply rooted Muslim beliefs are in relation to ‘contributing to their cause’ as a central purpose in life. Research published on social identity theory on the group level is mainly theoretical with limited empirical studies (Haslam et al., 2017), most of which are mainly experimental (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis and Lord, 2017). This study is intended to broaden the approaches to researching this particular area of leadership studies by examining real life experiences.
Introduction

I am a Muslim Briton man of Yemeni descent. I was raised in Manchester in the north west of England. After leaving school, I moved down south to live in London, which has since become home. I completed the majority of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies in London and established my career as a teacher and volunteer youth worker. I have strong links to youth work within Muslim communities in London. Professionally, I am a middle manager at a British Muslim faith school as a head of department (HOD) for English.

The early accounts of my memories growing up in Manchester are intended to illustrate the challenges I faced as a teenage Muslim going through an identity crisis in a predominantly white Roman Catholic secondary school and the testing situations I found myself in as the ‘War on Terror’ was initiated. My short accounts of moving to London bring readers through a period in which I began to explore other aspects of my identity (mainly my faith) that I had not given much thought to prior to that phase of my life. I also go into some detail outlining how I gradually became involved in Muslim community projects and some of the obstacles we had to overcome in light of the heightened ‘war of terror’. All of this is crucial to my story as it gives readers the opportunity to understand my background and the experiences that have significantly shaped how I think and view the world and consequently influence my practice in the field of education as a leader in a Muslim school.

More recent accounts of my experiences of moving into middle management as a department HOD are presented and studied in light of the social identity theory of leadership. This thesis looks at the importance of identity development in leadership studies using my personal accounts whilst in a British Muslim faith school and also holding a position of leadership within the academy. The social identity theory of
leadership is examined through my narratives that depict the challenges I face living in the West as I navigate my way through positions of leadership.

The bulk of this thesis is split between personal narratives of leader identity development and the literature using the autoethnographic approach. Leadership literature is interwoven throughout the narratives which are presented in the form of autoethnographic accounts. I begin with recounting some events of my early life to locate myself in the culture within which I was raised. I then move outwards and talk about issues related to the literature on the social identity theory of leadership, which is more directly linked to my current professional settings in education as a department head.

I hope that this study will contribute to widening the forms of dissemination for autoethnographic research in educational leadership. I also endeavour to further our understanding of the social identity theory of leadership, an aspect that is lacking in the field of educational leadership (Edge et al., 2017) with a particular focus on faith and religion, which is also neglected in the leadership literature that examines the social identity theory and social categorisation theory (Showunmi et al., 2016; and Shah, 2006).

I present a brief overview of my initial review of the literature which predominantly shaped the focus for the remainder of the thesis in relation to how the data was anchored and contextualised against the leadership literature.

Using the key words: ‘leadership’ and ‘identity’ in my search through academic journals, it was noticeable that this area (identity) of leadership studies in education requires further research. Edge, Descours and Oxley’s (2017: 7) comments further support this as they note the concept of identities has ‘rarely, if ever, been explored in educational leadership literature’. The few relevant papers that did appear in my
initial search of the literature formed the foundation for many of the themes in this study (Edge et al., 2017; Armstrong and Mitchel, 2017; Thomas-Gregory, 2014; Notman, 2016; Shah, 2006).

Edge et al. (2017) explore how the different contexts affect how leaders forge their identities in relation to perceived in-groups and out-groups. Personal and professional identities are also discussed with a focus on how they interact with one another. However, my main influence from Edge et al.’s paper (2017) was my first exposure to social identity theory and social categorisation theory. Concepts such as in-groups/out-groups, prototypically and identity formation in the context of leadership, resonated with various accounts in my narratives, all of which are explored in the context of my experiences below.

When reading Armstrong and Mitchell’s paper (2017), I was introduced to the concept of multiple identities and their interaction for the first time. It was the first paper I encountered that brought gender and race to the fore in the cases of the two black female Canadian principals. I could see similarities in this study with my personal experiences and the ideas that were relevant for my study. As a black and minority ethnicity (BME) Muslim man, I hold a unique standpoint from which to study leadership and identity construction. I found it interesting reading the open discussions challenging existing educational leadership literature that ignored ‘whiteness’ and gender (Showunmi, Atewologun, and Bebbington, 2016). Armstrong and Mitchell’s paper (2017) highlighted the complexity of how identity constructions differ for BME educational leaders. With this strong focus on the BME aspect of the principals’ identities, the importance of their experiences growing up illustrated how influential these experiences can be in how we practise as leaders in our professional settings within schools. Thomas-Gregory’s paper (2014) further reinforced these concepts of multiple identities. Showunmi et al., (2016) suggest a framework for taking these multiple identities into account when studying the
leadership identities of BME leaders. Drawing on feminist and multiculturalist perspectives, Showunmi et al., (2016) emphasise the importance of recognising the limiting nature of focusing on specific categories as opposed to the whole person. Their interpretation of intersectionality takes into consideration the various aspects of our social identities and how they simultaneously interact as we look for meaning and form our identities.

Building on this, I learned from Notman (2016) the concept of mutual influence: how these multiple identities influence each other, for instance, how my identity as a Muslim man and a father influences the role that I adopt as a teacher and volunteer community leader and how these roles influence each other respectively. Notman (2016) discusses how personal beliefs and values should be taken into account as they influence leaders’ decision making processes thus reinforcing my conviction for including aspects of my personal life into the professional.

Finally, although Shah’s paper (2006) discusses Muslim youth identity, I was mainly attracted to her in-depth discussions on identity formation that I could relate to as a Muslim Briton. Her paper, unlike any of the others that came up in my initial search, brought religion (Islam) to the fore as a category of influence in identity formation as opposed to the more common concepts such as gender and race. Shah (2006) discusses issues of the current political climate surrounding Muslims in the UK and the challenges that we face linking it all back to concepts such as categorisation, prototypes and in/out-groups in societies that were also mentioned in Edge et al.’s paper (2017).

This initial exposure to the social identity theory of leadership is of significance in relation to how the remainder of this paper is presented. The concepts of in/out groups, prototypicality, leadership identity formation and multiple identities raised further questions for me. Recognising the dearth in educational leadership literature
that acknowledges and appreciates the importance and uniqueness of BME experiences, that celebrates the need for their place within the literature allowed me to start making this research relatable to my personal situation. I felt more emboldened to explore and discuss issues within my own development and experiences that I never thought were possible; issues that I did not really think were of any significance.

The central purpose of this study is to examine the formation and development of my leadership identity as a BME Muslim Briton leading in a British Muslim faith school. Although the context in this study is rooted in educational settings, I have adopted more of an interdisciplinary approach when looking at leadership identity in a broader sense. This study aims to examine aspects of my professional life in addition to my personal life as a Muslim Briton given the current global, political climate toward to Islam. This is done with the intention of unpacking the complexities and challenges I face on a daily basis to help understand how my Muslim faith identity has influenced the formation of my leadership identity. The fundamental question I will be engaging with is how does my Muslim faith identity affect the development of my leadership identity? Exploring my faith identity and its relationship with my leadership identity is central to this research as faith identity, for Muslims, forms the core of who we are. That alone, I believe, qualifies Muslim faith identity to be given more focus in the leadership literature.

Rationale

Ellis (2004) advises that an autoethnographer presents her/his rationale for the study in question. I understand this logic, however, I also wonder how much this may position my readers. A major aspect of autoethnography is to provide the space between the readers and the writers so that the readers can create their own
meanings. At the same time, however, I want readers to be aware of what makes my story unique.

Although there are early examples of studies that look into leadership identity development, for instance, Day (2000), these studies focus mainly on organisational leadership. In 2005, Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen noted that there was no known research within the field of education (according to their findings) on the formation of leadership identity, on the journey one experiences in developing leadership identity. Over a decade has now passed since Komives et al’s paper (2005) and efforts have been made to fill in this gap (see Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis and Lord, 2017). My interest in this study is to further our understanding of leadership identity formation and contribute to this body of knowledge using my story as a Muslim Briton working in a position of leadership within education. Although there is a considerable body of literature on the phenomenon of identity in the social sciences, there appears to be a lack of attention given to the specific issue of religious identity in contrast to ethnic/racial aspects, particularly as it links to leadership. The complexities associated with the religious identities are very different from those associated with ethnicity (Shah, 2006).

Like Chang (2013), I have allowed my research interests when presenting my autoethnography to be largely influenced by my professional experiences as a leader within education. However, the nature of my research approach has also resulted in the inevitable amalgamation of my personal experiences of life with a more general overview.

Life in the UK, a majority white and secular culture, gives Muslims a unique standpoint from which to analyse and interpret their personal and professional identities. The current political conflicts in reference to Islam and our identities as Muslims draw attention to the importance of furthering our understanding of this
element of leadership within the education system. Shah (2006) notes that the new generation of British-born Muslims no longer view themselves as ‘marginalised immigrants’ as they are ‘equal partners in national membership’ (2006: 229). However, how we view ourselves and how reality reflects those views are two very different things. ‘Immigrant’, ‘marginalised’ and ‘equal partners’ are loaded terms, and I know that there are many British-born Muslims who would staunchly argue that significant aspects of our society do indeed marginalise us and compromise our equal partner status. The conundrum of firmly identifying oneself as a Muslim Briton brings several aspects of identity into question. ‘Yes, I am a Muslim, but where am I originally from?’ ‘Is the UK really home?’ ‘Am I British, Yemeni, Yemeni-British, or British-Yemeni?’ Why do these terms still even exist?

According to Sahin (2013: 46), young Muslim Britons are exhibiting a ‘considerable movement’ toward highlighting Islam as an identity marker before other elements such as ethnic origins. This tendency of Muslims to highlight their faith (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 1990; Modood, Berthoud, Lakey, Nazroo, Smith, Verdee, and Beishon, 1997; and Nielsen, 1992), regardless of how practising they may appear to be, is significant (Shah, 2006). I am a strong believer of integration: however, not to the point at which I am expected to become less Muslim. Becoming less Muslim in the name of integration, for me, is not integration; it is assimilation. Evidence from existing studies demonstrates that this belief is not isolated (Kitwood and Borril, 1980; and McLoughlin 1997, cited in Sahin, 2013). As long as there is a failure to develop a sense of belonging among the Muslim community, the longer and more deeply engrained these fears of assimilation will continue. The unique ‘super-ordinate’ identity of being a Muslim (Hopkins and Hopkins, 2004) means that our identity defies borders, languages and passports. We are a nation without a single flag, language or colour.
Maintaining a focus on the religious aspect of my identity is crucial to understanding how I examine the emergence of my leadership identity as an educational practitioner and how it develops. I have made a particular effort to highlight this aspect of my leadership identity development as I believe it has influenced me more than any other single facet of my socio-cultural identity whilst growing up in the UK. Furthermore, it is something that seems to be brushed over at best when studying leadership identity development through the lens of social identity theory as language, skin colour and ethnicity receive more attention in the literature (Shah, 2006). When discussing studies of identity development more generally in the social sciences, Sahin (2013) suggests that the lack of research into faith identity development as an autonomous element of identity constructions perhaps portrays the assumption that faith identities do not play a critical role in the structure of our identities. Sahin (2013) goes further to highlight the coincidental link between recent interests in faith and radicalisation, terrorism and extremism, which expose unfounded presumptions that religion and extremism are linked somehow. Faith, religion and beliefs should be considered more when examining how leaders, Muslim leaders in particular, develop their leadership identity with the Muslim educational leadership context.

**Muslim Community Work – inappropriate label or incorrect application?**

It important to explain what my thoughts are on the terms voluntary ‘Muslim community work’ or ‘Muslim projects’. I often ask myself whether we, Muslims, are a group of misfits that have learned to insulate ourselves within society in order to simply look after our own?

‘Muslim community work’ is a label that is used within our communities to refer to work that is done with the intention of furthering a more comprehensive and genuine understanding of Islam for both non-Muslims and Muslims alike. It refers
to projects that aim to develop our communities ranging from youth work to political movements; from Muslim schools to religious propagation; from aid work to financial institutions. Anything and everything that is perceived to be a part of the struggle to develop the legitimate Muslim message is considered to be ‘Muslim community work’.

I do worry, however, that the notion of ‘our communities’ may have been misinterpreted by a large number of Muslims who naively believe that ‘our communities’ are somehow only the Muslims; that we are our communities; that we should only take care of ‘our own’. We somehow overlook the thousands, if not millions, of others living in our towns, boroughs and cities; the people living on our streets; our own neighbours even! It pains me to accept that, for many, the warped belief of being a Muslim has become the criterion for being a part of our community. However, it would be futile for us as Muslims to deny that this stereotypical perception exists and is widespread.

Whilst compiling this thesis, I have also started to question this term, ‘Muslim community work’, which fails to fully encompass the true nature and wide range of the work that we are doing. ‘Muslim community work’ is not, or rather should not, be limited exclusively to ‘Muslim causes’. As it stands, however, the term, unfortunately, may be a very fitting description of the reality on the ground as many of our projects are, in actual fact, being done for Muslim causes and maybe this is the problem. Maybe our lack of understanding of the true spirit of ‘Muslim community work’ and the label that we have adopted for it has narrowed the scope and potential of our efforts.

Voluntary Muslim community work is, for me, about making the world we live in a better place for all, regardless of race, origin or religion. The inaccuracy of the term that we have adopted over the years has in itself inhibited our understanding of how
to apply it. Perhaps we need a change of terminology. Maybe a more generic term like ‘social reform’ efforts would be more suited, as this is essentially the ultimate goal, or at least should be of all Muslim community projects.

It is too easy to become fired up by the graphic images of corpses of the innocent in the news, or by the moving interviews of the children of detainees closer to home. It is too easy to allow those who raise awareness of the atrocities committed around the world to ignite our emotions so much so that we become blinded to that which is right in front of us: the needs of our own neighbours; those who we have shared memories with at school or at work. I’m talking about our fellow human beings (regardless of religion), who also have the right to call upon us. I am a Muslim community leader and I hold the title with pride, but by no means is my work nor my efforts restricted to Muslims or Islam!

I can, however, appreciate why there may be strong opposition to my view above within our communities. Can a community which finds itself under constant pressure be blamed for adopting a ‘take care of your own’ mentality? Many Muslims understandably feel that ‘if we don’t do it, who will?’; ‘Why spend money, time and efforts on causes that do not support ‘our own’ when most of the time we feel we are in need of it more than anyone else?’ I explore some of the causes that fuel these sentiments within Muslim communities below.

Background: The Challenges that Young British Muslims Face and the History of Muslim Faith Schools in the UK.

In this section, I present a discussion on British Muslim faith schools. This will contextualise their history and develop a deeper appreciation for how these schools intersect within the framework of a multicultural, secular British society. Particular
attention is focused on the challenges that young Muslims face growing up in the UK and how these struggles relate to Muslim schooling.

The Media and State Machinery

Some blame faith identity as the main factor pulling Muslims away from their host societies. However, there is also a *pushing* force that needs to be explored in this argument. There needs to be a recognition of the ‘pushing force of rejection and alienation’ affecting the Muslims in the UK (Shah, 2018: 12). Much has been written on the issue of UK Muslims being targeted, demonized and discriminated against (Richardson 2004; Ahmed 2007; Shah, 2012; Meer, 2007). The largely ‘security centred’ approach towards Islam and Muslims post 9/11 and 7/7 (Sahin, 2013: 36) has condemned many Muslims to feel guilty by association to the faith through islamophobic policies and practices (Shah, 2018). There are countless accusations by prominent political and public figures of Muslims’ apparent inability to assimilate (Shah, 2007). There are open criticisms directed toward the perceived failure of Muslims to integrate due to the desire to hold onto their faith identity (Hains, 2004). There are outright racist attacks on how Muslims choose to dress by the most senior political dignitaries in the state (BBC 2018). This sustained focus on Muslims also has its implications at an institutional level with unbalanced recommendations in Ofsted reports (Office for standards in education) (Tinker, 2009), concentrated police raids, profilings, stops-and-searches, interrogations (BBC 2004) and even mistaken police killings (BBC 2005).

With all of this taking place in the backdrop of society, conditions are ripe for an atmosphere of mistrust to develop, particularly when these messages construct young Muslim boys and girls as barriers to social cohesion and state security. This will only work to widen divisions (Shah, 2018). Feeling vulnerable and under threat (Ahmed 2003; Esposito 2002a; Hagopian 2004; Shah, 2007; Shah, 2006; and Shah,
2012), Muslims consequently, regroup and ‘look out for each other’ as a sheer defence strategy to protect themselves both ideologically and physically.

Then there is the media hype that Muslims face. There is no shortage of the derogatory and vilified nature of how Muslims are portrayed to the masses (Vertovec, 2002; Parekh, 2002; and Shah, 2012). Some examples were the burning of the ‘Satanic verses’; the UK riots in 2001; provocative cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed, and the ‘global war on terror’, of which Muslim countries have, by no coincidence, borne the front of: the Gulf War (1990), the Bosnian War (1992–95), the Palestinian Intifada (2000), the Afghan War (2001), the Iraq invasion (2003) and more recent support for the Saudi led coalition in Yemen through British arms sales and military consultations (Guardian, 2019).

All of this has contributed to the ‘indisputable’ racism that Muslims face at schools in the UK (Hurst, 2000; Ahmad, 2002; Coles, 2004; McCreery, Jones and Holmes, 2007; and Meer, 2007). Teachers and leaders within schools are only human and are no more immune than anyone else to the negative effects of the media (Bhatti, 1999; Shah, 2006; and Shah, 2013). With a lack of professional training to deal with the current climate coupled with state threats to ban teachers from their professions for failing to deal with extremists in schools, the challenges are only being compounded (Shah, 2013, 2018).

Marginalisation ultimately breeds unity amongst the ‘others’.

The attraction to find a common cause or ‘community’ to associate oneself with is expected when sections of society are marginalised. When an atmosphere of fear and mistrust develops, groups perceived as the culprits naturally cocoon themselves within their ingroups (Eggins et al., 2002) in an attempt to survive (physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually and financially). Thus, group categorisation is
something that is influenced and sometimes caused by contextual/situational circumstances brought about by a third party (Ellmers et al., 2004) in response to external factors: one being shared exclusion as a form of collective punishment (Shah, 2006; 2013). As groups engage in this process, they ‘mobile forces, [and] ris[e] above internal conflicts and contradictions’ (Hall, 1992: 255, cited in Shah, 2006: 224). For Muslims, the global identity of the Muslim *ummah* (community) is powerful (Shah, 2018) and has gained momentum in recent years as Islam and Muslims continue to be demonized. The alienation of Muslims by demanding assimilation and enforcing integration has been further compounded by government initiatives such as PREVENT and CHANNEL (Shah, 2017). This alienation through showing a perceived lack of respect for Islam, the Prophet Muhammed and the Muslim way of life has driven many Muslims, young Muslims in particular, to explore their faith identity (CRE 2005; Jacobson 1998; Shah 2008; Esposito 2002; Hagopian 2004, Hopkins and Hopkins 2004; Shah, 2013; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006; and Shah, 2018). Muslims, who once perceived their faith as nothing more than a ritualistic aspect of their lives, are now, on the whole, more aware of their faith (Shah, 2013, 2012) as their identity associations have shifted from ethnicity to faith (Shah, 2018) in reaction to a hostile environment that is perceived as threatening their faith identity (Bigelow, 2008; Fuess, 2007; Kabir, 2006; Merry and Driessen, 2005; Shah, 2008; Sirin and Fine, 2008; Zine, 2007; Shah, 2012; Abbas, 2005; and Shah, 2007). Such is the outcome of shrewdly forcing Muslims to choose their side (Sahin, 2013).

The desire expressed by Muslims to actualise their transnational Muslim identity (the *Ummah*) (Shah, 2018, 2012; Afridi, 2001; Mernissi, 1991; Hopkins and Hopkins, 2004, Shah, 2006; Kelly, 1999; and Meer 2007) is a phenomenon that researchers have observed not only in the UK, or indeed the west; it is growing on a global scale (see Shah, 2006 for examples of studies).
‘[T]he term Ummah in the Quran, which can be interpreted to convey the message that all Muslims the world over constitute a community beyond geo-political bounds, irrespective of the differences of race, colour, tribe, ethnicity, language and others (Shah 2006b).’ (Shah, 2012: 52)

However, it must not be assumed that this phenomenon is gaining momentum due to current events in isolation. Current events are being fused with history spanning back to the era of the Islamic empire and the ‘medieval Christian West’ (Sahin, 2013: 11). This must not be forgotten when looking at how Muslim in-groups and out-groups are formed (Shah, 2018), especially when leaders of western states, such as George W. Bush, liken the war on terrorism to the crusades (The White House, 2001).

The faith identity of Muslims is noticeably stronger than other faith communities (Sahin, 2013; and Shah, 2013). Therefore, forcing Muslims to choose their side, as many feel they are being compelled to do so, becomes problematic. A Muslim parent interviewed in Ali and Bagely’s case study asserted that ‘[f]irst of all they [their children] are Muslims and then they are Canadians’ (2015: 12). When Geaves (2005) interviewed a number of young female Muslim university students, ‘without exception they maintained that their first loyalty was to their religion’ (Geaves, 2005: 75). Female participants from Showunmi et al.’s study (2016) were also noted for emphasising their faith identities over their racial identities. The basis of social identity for Muslims is their faith (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 1990; Modood et al., 1997; Nielsen, 1992, and Parker-Jenkins, 1995, cited in Meer, 2007) regardless of how practicing one may appear (Shah, 2006; Meer, 2007 and Modood et al., 1997). The prediction and ‘naïve expectation’ that the faith identities of Muslims will gradually weaken over the generations in a non-Muslim society is not proving to be the case (Sahin, 2013: 38; Jacobson, 1998; and Shah, 2007). Some findings from Sahin’s study may indeed suggest an ‘implicit secularisation process
taking place’ (2013: 115), however, this is based on the assumption that frequency of prayers is an indicator of one’s level of faith identity, which I do not personally believe to be the case. I view faith identity and religiosity as two distinct aspects of our identities. The former being the level to which one associates oneself to their faith group as an identity marker (which could be likened more to ethnic identity); the latter being the level at which one practises the ritualistic aspects of their faith i.e. prayer, clothing, religious ceremonies, et cetera. Although inextricably intertwined, the two are not mutually dependant. Therefore, I believe that the frequency of performed prayers should not be used as an indicator for measuring a group’s level of faith identity. This point was also raised by the participants in Sahin’s study (2013). The ‘strong emotional tie’ to Islam was a clear theme that came through in the responses from the participants. Their failure to participate fully in religious practices is more an indicator of their ‘lack of personal commitment to Islam’ and its outward practices; not of their lack of faith identity. (2013: 128). In actual fact, with current global events, the exact opposite is happening: The political affairs unravelling in both the west and in the Muslim world, Palestine in particular, are undoubtedly shaping the identities of young Muslims, with a concerted effort to maintain their Muslim Identities as part of a transnational Muslim community or body, ummah (Sahin, 2013: 145). Parekh argues that young Muslims developing this dominant faith aspect of their identities is not a problem given it does not become obsessive in nature whereby other aspects of their identities become eclipsed, which is what some accuse Muslims of (2006; cited in Tinker, 2009). The desire of Muslims to overtly express their Muslimness is not only as a result of understanding Islam more, but for many it is also a political stance aimed at challenging the media, the masses and the establishment. It is for this reason that Shah (2013, 2018) advises policies and practices fully appreciate the importance of Muslim faith identity when they are established. Muslims have started demanding more from their societies and governments in the west (Shah, 2018, and Ali and Bagley, 2015) dramatically changing dynamics within the UK. It is also worth noting that these feelings are not
only felt by second and third generation Muslims and Muslim immigrants: Tinker’s study (2009) included English Muslim converts who also shared these concerns.

However, young Muslims demanding more from the British society is not exclusively a result of marginalisation. British-born and British-educated generations of Muslims expect more due to increased *expectations* of being treated as equals in a democratic society. Young Muslims are less tolerant than their forefathers were of discriminatory policies and practices. They are no longer satisfied with well-intended tokenistic gestures (such as halal food and access to prayer rooms) while their true identity as Muslims is almost scornfully expected to fade away as they integrate and assimilate (Shah, 2018, 2013). Young Muslims no longer seek tolerance; they seek active encouragement for their heritage (Modood et al., 1997). Ironically, the younger generations of British-born and British-educated Muslims no longer view themselves as being Muslim by birth.

Participant responses from Sahin’s study suggest there may be less of a desire to outwardly purport the ‘traditional concept of Islam’ passed down from parents (2013: 115). This, however, should not be interpreted as a decreasing desire to demonstrate their Muslim faith identity. Building upon the initial infrastructure established by the Muslim immigrant generation, young Muslims are now in fact furthering their efforts to protect their Muslim identities in the face of western secular societies (Shah, 2012). As Young Muslims are increasingly able to access religious texts and teachings, they are more actively engaged in religious practices and are willing to overtly demonstrate their interpretation of Islam in public places (Basford 2008; Brasted 2005; Sirin and Fine 2008; Shah 2008; Zine 2007, cited in Shah, 2013). This has paradoxically deepened the state’s concerns in regards to extremism (Shah, 2018). Young Muslims are becoming increasingly empowered and autonomous in their interpretation of Islam. They are now moving away from their
parents’ ‘cultural, inherited’ interpretation of Islam to a more ‘meaningful realisation’ of Islam in the modern world (Sahin, 2013: 116).

However, it should not be assumed that Muslims simply want Muslim institutions and schools for the sake of being around their own. There is evidence that suggests what young second generation and third generation British-born Muslims actually desire more than single faith schools is ‘an inclusive, democratic and equal opportunities environment’ (Shah and Conchar, 2009: 195). This was also raised in the Swann Report over thirty years ago: “the establishment of ‘separate’ schools could well fail to tackle many of the underlying concerns of the communities and might also exacerbate the very feelings of rejection and not being accepted” (Swann, 1985: 509). At the moment, many Muslims feel state schools in the UK are failing them in three main areas: policy, practice and curriculum. It has taken too long for policy makers to recognise the centrality of faith identities within Muslims’ lives (Sahin, 2013). The lack of meaningful engagement at policy levels (Ameli et al. 2005) results in many well intended policies being nothing more than token gestures. If they are intended to be more than that, then there is a problem in the implementation of these policies, which leads to the next area of failure: practice (Ameli et al. 2005).

Staff are perceived as being inadequately trained and prepared to deal with the complexities of growing up in modern Britain as second and third generation British-born Muslims. Racism toward young Muslims in schools has been well documented (Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Billings and Holden 2007; Richardson and Wood 2004; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006). Evidence suggests this problem is one of the key causes of Muslim students failing in state schools (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Abbas 2005).
The third area of concern for Muslims is the National Curriculum, which is seen as failing to incorporate true cultural diversity in the UK (Shah, 2012). Muslims are not satisfied with symbolic pictures of Eid festivals or the odd mention of their prophet: they seek a balanced portrayal of Islam from a Muslim perspective, which they feel is missing (Meer, 2007). These shortcomings negatively affect student engagement at school. It is argued that greater accommodation of religious and cultural values will help improve achievement. The educational achievement of Muslim students in Muslim faith schools can be seen as evidence of this (Shah, 2013).

**Muslim Schools in the UK**

Muslim schooling in the British education system remains an issue of fierce debate (Meer, 2007). David Bell (2005), Chief Inspector of Schools and head of the Office for Standards in Education, claimed that Muslim schools failed to prepare young Muslims for life in modern Britain. Post 7/7 London bombings have further resulted in more widespread protests aimed at Muslims schools (Meer, 2007).

What is interesting, however, is that although most Muslim schools are known to have poor facilities, inadequate buildings, outdated equipment (in comparison to state schools) and charge extortionate fees, they are still chosen by many Muslim parents (Meer 2007) and they continue to grow in popularity across the UK and the west in general. Why is this the case?

This section is intended to support efforts in looking at how we can improve the practices of Islamic educational institutions, as opposed to lambasting them with largely baseless assumptions and anecdotal evidence of radicalization and indoctrination. The impact of Muslim schooling on pupils’ identities and the
implications of this for their integration post-school have not, as yet, been systematically researched (Tinker 2009). I believe we will be in a much stronger position to make a positive contribution to our societies through such schools, academies and institutions if we genuinely examine how we can improve their practices. Tinker (2009) interestingly noted in her study that both sides (advocates for/against Muslim schools) simply wish to maintain their identities and have it respected by others. Therefore, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by the ‘antagonism and misunderstanding which often pervades the Muslim schools debate’ (2009, 539).

Muslim schools are viewed by many as a crucial element in the struggle of making a political stance against the state and media attacks discussed above (Shah, 2018). The increase of Muslim schools in the west is seen as a counter measure against this. They are a manifestation of the Muslim community seeking recognition and respect (Shah, 2013).

The state school environment is seen to contradict many Islamic values and compounds the existing challenges that Muslims already face in the everyday socio-cultural context of secular Britain (Shah, 2013). Muslim schools are viewed as ‘safe havens’ where young Muslims can learn morals and Islamic values. It is within these settings that Muslims believe they can raise role models for their existing and future communities (Shah, 2018; Meer, 2007; and Ali and Bagely, 2015). It should not be assumed, however, that only immigrant parents and religious zealots wish to send their children to Muslim schools for these reasons. Whilst trying to understand the reasoning behind segments of our communities opting for Muslim schools, McCreery, Jones and Holmes (2007) observed that a number of participants, who were educational practitioners and parents from Muslim schools, were actually white Britons (some of whom were not even Muslim). In a separate study with a
similar focus, Kelly noted that less-religious families were also actively choosing Muslim schools for their children suggesting that this could be viewed as evidence of a desire to emphasise a trans-national Muslim identity (Ummah) (Kelly, 1999). Muslims feel that their faith identity is not being developed in state schools (Shah, 2013; and Meer, 2007). The centrality of Islam to the Muslim community and its importance in developing the ummah (Halstead, 2004) is something that Muslims feel state schools and policy makers fail to fully appreciate (Sahin, 2013). This is compelling Muslims to come up with their own solutions, i.e. Muslim schools. (Shah, 2013).

Parents possess the ‘fundamental’ right to teach their children, which will undeniably be coloured by their belief systems. Children, too, have the right to learn about this faith and culture that is being passed down to them (Sahin, 2013: 4). This autonomy also applies to choosing which schools our children attend: both parents and children have a right to be involved in this decision. Exercising these rights, however, does not encroach upon the personal autonomy of children within the framework of political liberalism (Dagowitz 2004). If that was the case, arguing that parents and communities have no rights over their children’s choice of faith (see, Levinson 1999; and Parker-Jenkins 2005, cited in Tinker, 2009) and sending them to non-denominational state schools should also be viewed as infringement of individual autonomy as, in essence, a choice is still being made for the child (Shah, 2018). Faith schools provide an opportunity for young people to establish a base, an identity, which will act as a starting point from which their autonomy will continue (McLaughlin, 1992, cited in Zine, 2007). The Muslim community is demanding the right to have a proportionate number of Muslim schools that reflects their societal make-up in the UK similar to those of state-funded Christian (and other) faith schools. However, secularists and opponents to faith schools disagree with their tax contributions being allocated toward any faith schools (Tinker, 2009). Valins poses
the question of whose rights should be given priority in such a scenario (2003, cited in McCreery et al., 2007). Shah (2018) suggests that the answer may not lie in attempting to answer this question as although it is inevitable that these interests will clash at times, she does not believe that that they must be mutually exclusive (Shah, 2018).

On the whole, faith schools are seen as good promoters of social responsibility and citizenship (McCreery et al., 2007). It is argued that by allowing communities to maintain their faith identities, like the Catholic (Konstant, 1991, cited in Ali and Bagely, 2015) and Jewish communities, (Short, 2002; Ameli et al., 2005; and Thessen, 2001, cited in Ali and Bagely, 2015), Muslim schools can have a positive impact on social cohesion (Shah, 2012; Meer, 2007; and Ali and Bagely, 2015). It would be unjust not to afford Muslims the same privileges as other religious and minority groups in the UK, such as Christian and Jewish schools, based upon the argument that such schools were established within ‘unique circumstances’ of their times. Supporting groups to found faith schools in the UK has been a practice that has historically been viewed as a positive and effective way of integrating religious minorities (Meer, 2007). As the second largest faith group in the Britain, the disproportionately small number of state-funded Muslim faith schools in comparison to the number of Church of England, Catholic and Jewish schools is arguably a denial of their group rights. Furthermore, the individual rights of Muslims are being neglected in this area as they are currently not afforded the same range and choice of schooling options (Tinker, 2009). Muslims choosing to provide their children with firm faith-based foundations before going out into the world are doing the same as many Anglicans, Catholics and Jews through the establishment of their faith schools (Hewitt, 1998: 22, cited in Meer, 2007). Muslims are not demanding preferential treatment to redress this balance; they are demanding their right to equality as British citizens (Tinker, 2009). The UN Convention of Rights of the Child
(UN, 1989) encourages this development of identity, culture and heritage. The fact that the government is making it easier to set up state-funded Muslim schools, could also be viewed as proof of this belief (McCreery, Jones and Holmes, 2007). Although it should be noted that there are Muslims who are apprehensive about this ‘support’ and increased funding from the state as it essentially equates to increased government control (Tinker, 2006).

The immersion within an Islamic environment from such a young age at school will provide the foundations for young Muslims when encountering others outside the faith as they grow (McCreery et al., 2007). This will spring from a firmly established faith identity (Tinker, 2009) based on dignity, confidence and respect (Shah, 2013). Young Muslims are able to experience being themselves as ‘normal’ and thus develop self-confidence in their identity at a crucial stage in their development. Halstead and McLaughlin (2005, cited in Tinker, 2009) recognise the divisive nature of faith schools, yet reject the negative connotations associated with division. The claim that Muslim schools are divisive is seen as a ‘fig-leaf’ for islamophobia (Bunting, 2004). Good faith schools help instil values of acceptance and recognition of others who may be different from themselves (Merry, 2015). However, Tinker (2009) highlights the commonly held belief that exposure to people from other faiths will automatically lead to social cohesion dismissing the importance of faith schools in this respect. However, this belief has been challenged for many years: in 1954, Gordon Allport (1954) advocated that rather than simply forcing everyone to live, work and study together like ‘one big happy family’, a more effective solution to racism lies in teaching about differences in schools, which Short (2002) argues can be just as easily taught in faith schools as in any other school. Through his research, Short (2002) reinforced Allport’s earlier work by challenging the belief that simply exposing people to differing faiths, ethnicities and backgrounds will remedy racism and prejudice. He argues that there is no such evidence of students who
attend other faith schools (Anglican, Catholic and Jewish) in England that display such non-acceptance of others who do not belong to their faith groups. The concern is that this argument is not necessarily applied to all faith groups. Tinker (2009) highlights studies that show higher levels of opposition to Muslim schools in comparison to other faith groups. Paradoxically, there is a plethora of research, as noted earlier, that highlights major concerns surrounding racism within non-denominational state schools (Hurst, 2000; Ahmad, 2002; Coles, 2004; McCreery, Jones and Holmes, 2007; and Meer, 2007). It is not being suggested that racial integration is not an effective form of challenging racism. However, I do believe that with the current political and social climate in the west, enforcing social integration by suggesting that Muslims move away from Muslim faith schools is not a solution. The reality is Muslims are moving away from state schools in an effort to create provisions for themselves and we should be asking ourselves why this is the case. Far from dividing societies, faith schools ‘re-inforce social cohesion’ (Short, 2002, 656). There are many examples of how state-funded Muslim schools actively support dialogue with the wider British society (Tinker, 2009) with parents, teachers and governors from Ali and Bagely’s case study (2015) also expressing such a desire for integration.

Richard Jenkins (2014) explains how other people’s perceptions of us play a critical role in how we form our own identities. People internalize these externally projected perceptions as they construct their own perceptions of ‘self’. This argument is used to challenge faith schools in general as the faith element of one’s own identity construction, according to Jenkins, can become dangerously obsessive when peers are surrounded by people of their own faith for extended periods of time on a regular basis. I would like to respond to this: young Muslims choosing faith schools are largely as a result of the racist and discriminatory acts they are exposed to growing up in the UK. Experiences that I myself have narrated first hand in this
study. The negative images, comments and treatment that young Muslims deal with growing up, too, become internalized in settings such as state schools. Muslim schools are seen as a form of protecting young Muslims from internalizing such negative images. In fact, the studies noted above actually indicate that young generations of Muslims do not necessarily prefer Muslim schools, rather they demand equality and respect. Are Muslims turning to Muslim faith schools out of want or a perceived need to ‘save’ their children? Rather than looking at Muslim schools as cutting off sections of our society from the wider world, perhaps we should view such schools as providing Muslim students with some much needed ‘downtime’. The constant intensity of heightened tensions that have been brewing in the UK due to the current political challenges surrounding terrorism and its suggested link to Islam (2007; Ali and Bagely, 2015) can be tiring for young people trying to establish who they are and how they fit into their societies. As mentioned above, racism within schools is widespread (2001 Home Office Research Study - Weller, Feldman, and Kingsley 2001, cited in Tinker, 2009) with young Muslims at the receiving end of much of this (Hurst, 2000; Ahmad, 2002; Coles, 2004; McCreery, Jones and Holmes, 2007; and Meer, 2007). This has contributed to academic ‘underachievement and social exclusion’ and negative effects on self-esteem (Sahin, 2013). Muslim Schools provide an environment reflecting those of their communities and homes. By providing young Muslims with the time and space they need at an early stage of their development, and the consistency in home-school-community environments, they are able to negotiate a firmer sense of their identities, which will later support them to integrate into the wider society (Akhtar, 1992, cited in Meer, 2007; and Halstead, 2004) and encourage higher academic achievement (Shah, 2013). This was also a ‘dominant perception’ held by the participants in Ali and Bagely’s study (2015) and something that other religious minorities (i.e. Catholics) have commented upon (Meer, 2007). Once minority groups feel safe in their identities and do not feel threatened, that is the point at
which they may seek to establish deeper relationships with those outside their boundaries (Hewer, 2001).

This increased confidence of Muslim students fostered in Muslim faith schools will aid in raising levels of attainment partly as a result of firmly established identities (Short, 2002; and Tinker, 2009). There is evidence of this in the results of existing Muslim schools attaining significantly higher results than the national average (Meer, 2007). It is claimed the cycle of achieving such high academic performance further reinforces confidence, which in turn reaffirms young Muslims’ convictions in their identities, thus supporting integration (Merry 2007; Parker-Jenkins et al. 2005, cited in Shah, 2013; Hewer 2001; and Lawson 2005;). Perhaps state schools have much to learn from these underfunded and poorly resourced Muslim schools given that their Muslims students are achieving so much more with so much less at their disposal (Lawson 2005; and Meer 2010). These higher performing Muslim schools are located in the same areas as the lower performing state-schools (National league tables for England and Wales 2006, cited in Shah, 2013). There is also further evidence that points to improved Muslim performance in state schools that have lower white populations (Shah, 2013), which may point to a link between the performance of Muslim students in state schools and the demographics of their peers within the actual school itself. Shah (2013) believes that such results are achieved due to Muslim schools managing the needs of the students more successfully. Needs such as religious teachings, Islamic values, political pressures and balanced curriculums are all tended to more adequately.

Muslim schools allow teachers and leaders to redress the imbalance of Muslim representation in UK state schools. Muslim parents fear that their children are essentially being brainwashed by the secular culture that permeates throughout state-run education. Schools are run by majority non-Muslims. Schools are attended
by majority non-Muslims. Schools deliver curricula designed by majority non-Muslims for a majority non-Muslim audience. In such circumstances, is it not logical that Muslim parents will fear for their children’s Muslim faith identities? The concern that schools are crucial components of the state machinery in conditioning the masses to accept cultural norms and expectations is nothing new (see Durkheim, 1925; and Parsons, 1959, cited in Tinker, 2009).

‘Liberal’ faith schools are not incompatible with liberal education (Burtonwood 2003, 415; Burntwood 2002; and Williams, 1998). Research based evidence confirms Muslim faith schools do indeed deliver both secular and Islamic education (Meer 2007: 61). Despite the lack of evidence, many would like to believe that Muslim schools are ‘nurturing extremism’; are a breeding ground for extremism (Sahin, 2013: 2; and The Economist cited in Judge 2001, cited in Shah, 2012) simply because it fits the media narrative purported against Muslims. The truth, however, is quite the opposite: an overwhelming majority of those involved in recent terrorist attacks were educated in state schools. Perhaps this is another area in which state schools could learn lessons from Muslim schools (Shah, 2012). Young Muslims from Sahin’s study (2013) demonstrated a vulnerability to radical groups as they negotiate their way through the many challenges of growing up in the UK as young Muslim Britons attempting to establish their Muslim faith identities. Therefore, it is argued that sound Islamic knowledge imparted in Muslim schools will better place young Muslims when engaging with the British public and it will also help them when negotiating their way through life and challenging those with extreme views (Muslim and non-Muslim) (Shah, 2012; and Tinker, 2009). Sahin does, however, believe that ‘contemporary Islamic educational selfunderstanding’ needs to be reviewed (2013: 238). Although Muslim faith schools have much potential to tackle challenges such as radicalisation and extremism, there must first be some drastic changes to how Muslim faith schools interpret Islamic education (this is discussed in
more detail below). Participants from Ali and Bagely’s case study (2015) noted that studying Islamic sciences alongside secular subjects as part of the National Curriculum would strengthen their resolve in adopting Islam as a way of life, particularly in a western society. Studying the Islamic Sciences alongside the National Curriculum will encourage more British-born and British-educated theologians. British-born Muslim scholars will be better placed to advise young Muslims to engage in national dialogue as British citizens (Meer, 2007) as opposed to relying on religious *fatwas* (rulings) from overseas scholars who are disconnected from the British context (Sahin, 2013).

Although single-sex schooling is a contested debate among Muslims, it is clear that such schools are still favoured by many Muslim parents after the age of puberty in keeping with the ‘Islamic environment’ (Meer, 2007). Muslim parents believe that faith schools instil morals, values and have higher expectations of student behaviour in comparison to state-schools (Tinker, 2009). They also feel that they have higher expectations of *Muslim* students in particular (Shah, 2013). It is through these teachings of Islamic principles and having high expectations that Muslims believe their younger generations will again establish their faith identity. It is believed that the preservation of ‘identity and heritage’ for younger generations of Muslims can be achieved through Muslim schools (Sahin, 2013: 4). Co-education schools are viewed by some as a threat to social structures, family structures and religious beliefs (Shah, 2013). Shah and Conchar’s study (2009) presented results that show the majority of respondents (Muslims and non-Muslims) were in favour of single-sex education. They explain that Muslim parents prefer such settings for their daughters out of the concern of what the British secular society promotes in regards to sex, morality and marriage. Yet it should not be assumed that all Muslim parents choose single-sex schools purely for religious purposes. Although Sullivan (2006) notes that the evidence comparing academic performances of both single-sex schools and co-education schools is inconclusive for many reasons (see Shah and
Conchar, 2009 for a more detailed discussion), recommendations like that of the Swann Committee in the UK (Swann, 1985) seem to be affecting policy as there are increased single-sex provisions within schools in the UK and also more recently in the US. This may be due to the multiple ways in which we would interpret ‘success’: Does it refer to grades and scores or does it refer to the holistic development of the individual? Shah and Conchar (2009) believe that such moves have only strengthened the belief that single-sex education positively influences student achievement and emancipates girls, especially in the school environment (Keaton, 1999; and Smithers & Robinson, 2006), and presents boys with the opportunity to focus solely on their studies without ‘distractions’ (Shah and Conchar, 2009). The data from Shah and Conchar’s study also ‘hinted’ at factors such as freedom in regards to how the girls could/should dress. This is an especially critical factor to bear in mind when discussing single sex schools in a Muslim context. Interestingly, young respondents from their study, who favoured single-sex schools, did so not for academic reasons but more so for want of personal space and the ability to not have to mix with the opposite sex at certain times and/or places.

New directions for Muslim Faith Schools:

Studying the Islamic Sciences in parallel to the National Curriculum, however, is not the ultimate aim of the Muslim schooling experience. There is a desire to educate the ‘whole person’ through the incorporation of more faith-based principles in an Islamic environment (Haque, 2002, cited in Meer, 2007; AMSS, 2004; and Hewer, 2001). Tariq Ramadan (2004, cited in Ali and Bagely, 2015), however, does raise an interesting point: he believes, and I agree somewhat from my experience of working in Muslim schools, that the current provisions in place in Muslim faith schools do not incorporate sufficient learning opportunities that encourage students to critically challenge themselves and their identities. Muslim schools need to examine
more closely the process of identity construction for young Muslims (Sahin, 2013). Unfortunately, much of the curriculum tends to centre around a somewhat didactic approach to rote learning; memorization of dates, Quranic verses and important Islamic rulings. Sahin (2013) explores these concerns in some depth. He makes clear his discontent regarding current approaches to Muslim schooling and their tendency to miss crucial opportunities to create meaningful links between academia and the real challenges Muslim students face in the world they are growing up in. Sahin, further cites the trend among Muslim schools to disproportionately focus on predominantly surface level needs and ritualistic practices i.e. dress code, important dates, Quran memorisation, et cetera, all of which are important, but far from educate the ‘whole person’ (Sahin, 2013: 2). Faith should run throughout a student’s experience whilst at school. It should not be viewed as an ‘bolt-on’ studied or observed during specific periods. When running this ‘parallel system’ of both the National Curriculum and the Islamic Sciences, there appears to be a clash of ‘contrasting educational systems’. The central philosophy of modern, western education encourages students to question, challenge, discover and develop autonomy. The current ‘Islami madressa style’ adopted in most Muslim faith schools, however, advocates a much more instructive approach: the teacher ‘passes down’ information as the possessor of knowledge (2013: 4). The focus on retention through this ‘mechanistic’ pedagogy stifles meaningful engagement within current contexts of world affairs for young Muslims (Sahin, 2013: 238). I can personally relate to comments made by teachers in Sahin’s research. Their awareness of these limitations in the training they received as Muslim educators and the scope they are afforded in educating young Muslims within formal educational institutions is restricted. Teachers within our academy, including myself, like those from Sahin’s study, regularly express our frustrations and desire ‘to facilitate the teaching and learning of Islam to reflect the context of today’s world.’ (2013: 241)
Leadership studies

My research focuses on the development of myself as a leader and its inextricable link to the development of my identity. Below, I begin with a brief discussion of leadership studies in general, followed by a more focussed examination of identity development in the light of leadership studies.

The History of Leadership Studies

The relatively recent influx in the study of leadership over the past two decades, mainly coming from management and social sciences, is by no means an indication of when research into this area actually began (Campbell, 2013: 48). The roots of leadership studies go much further back. I am not referring to the early 20th century when many writers tend to suggest it all began. Rather, I am referring to the “long interdisciplinary history dating back centuries and even millennia” (Perruci & McManus, 2013: 49).

The great cities, extensive empires and glorious nations of the past were undoubtedly built upon successful models of leadership and management. The essential traits and qualities leaders needed were undeniably studied, taught and passed on, even if not in the same frameworks that we may recognise in our current age as ‘research’ (Douglas and Carless, 2013). We were learning about leadership long before it was given its label. Nowadays, we find ourselves ever searching for new leadership theories and models, but what if the answers to all of these questions already existed? What if the theories that writers and academics are trying to create already existed? What if we changed the lens through which we view knowledge and suggest that we do not create it, rather we discover it?
I do not feel it is a true reflection of reality when writers trace back the origins of the empirical study of leadership to the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Perruci & McManus, 2013: 49; Brocato, Jelen, Schmidt and Gold, 2011: 37; and Yukl, 2013: 18). It may have been a period in which modern day research in this field was pioneered; however, I do not see how the stories of old and the observations contained within and the pearls of wisdom passed down are any less ‘evidence based’ than contemporary empirical research.

Andersen (2016) takes readers on a journey through over 100 years of leadership studies using a vivid fictional novel as a framework to present his reflections and thoughts upon the theories in light of a single question: “What has leadership research really accomplished?” Andersen’s voyage begins in an era in which systematic social-science studies of leadership were born: the 1930s (House and Aditya, 1997). Areas of leadership scholarship that developed throughout the years were discussed, for instance, the link between personality traits and leadership; managerial behaviours and organisational outcomes; contingency theories. Issues of correlation (or the lack of it) between theories and research are also discussed. Oplatka (2008), however, takes more of a traditional approach in presenting his literature review. The paper organizes a detailed discussion of the various views and themes that have been shaped over the years by scholars, practitioners and policy makers. Details of the theories, philosophies, models and concepts are dated and well referenced. Readers can refer to Oplatka’s review (2008) for further reading. However, the general trend of research in educational administration over the years was that of theory being placed ‘in front of practice’; followed by theory being considered as an indispensable way of developing practice by practitioners implementing theory to judge its robustness (Owens and Shakeshaft, 1992). The nineties were seen as the years in which there was a surge in improvements of published papers, particularly in regards to the utilization of expertise from both
academics and practitioners, although there are still calls for further improvements in this aspect of research (Bush, 1999; and Miskel, 1990).

When studying leadership, depth and richness are essential (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This is why some of the suggested improvements are aspects such as the need for relevant theory in relation to practical needs within schools and other institutions (Owens and Shakeshaft, 1992; Maddock, 1994; and Willower, 1996).

The case put forward by scholars in the nineties for a more comparative and international focus in leadership studies with the intention of varying cultural perspectives is something that I feel very strongly about: this is how we ultimately widen our understanding of the historical roots and cultural understandings that underlie much of what current research is based upon, yet taken for granted and not questioned by many (Oplatka, 2008: 20).

During the 2000s, Oplatka claims that researchers have taken a step back to try to understand what is going on; to try to comprehend the current condition of the field; to try to fathom the issues such as the field’s intellectual work: “it is a time of wondering [and] questions” (2008: 23).

Definitions of ‘Leadership’

Although there have been a high number of definitions of leadership offered over the years, scholars have yet to provide a widely accepted and agreed upon definition (Bass, 1990; Brocato et al., 2011: 38; and Yukl 1994, 4-5). These concerns can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century (Bennis, 1959) with hundreds of competing definitions that seem to have failed to bring academics any closer to an unequivocal understanding of what the term ‘leadership’ actually encompasses.
furthermore, leithwood’s (1999: 4) choice of words when describing leadership as a “moving target”, suggests there exist few signs of any agreement in the foreseeable future.

in art bedeian and jerry hunt’s exchange of letters, the relevance of current leadership publications was considered with substantial discussion on the issue of what leadership actually is as a concept and how it is defined. the conclusion was very similar to those cited above: misrepresentations and even false promotion of the concept of leadership within the literature (bedeian & hunt, 2006: 191). i am not quite sure, however, how such a claim can be measured for its accuracy. if the concept itself is not clearly defined, then how can other writers’ representations be labelled as misrepresentations?

perruci and mcmanus (2013) suggest avoiding the quixotic, romantic and unrealistic notion of a discipline with clear cut boundaries of what should be ‘in’ and what should be ‘out’. they propose having a set of loose epistemological questions that defines the field. they even recommend looking at other disciplines such as economics to see how other fields have also dipped into different subjects to develop their own field. perruci and mcmanus (2013: 51-52) believe that if we could just develop our own ‘intellectual niche’ and a clear sense of distinctiveness within leadership studies, then we may be ready to put the boot on the other foot as other disciplines may be prepared to start dipping into our discipline as a recognised, respected and renowned field: one worthy of reference within studies from other specialisms.

a formal set of loose and agreed standards that works to legitimize contents and topics within the field seems like a sensible middle ground. when pfeffer (1993) made a similar suggestion back in the early nineties, however, the response he received mockingly from respondents was essentially ‘who made you king?’
(Bedeian and Hunt, 2006: 204). This was cited by Hunt as he responded to Bedeian’s letter when discussing this issue. Thus, his lack of interest in pursuing such a solution was clear.

In actual fact, Hunt’s subsequent response to Bedeian’s second letter when discussing the issues of leadership in the literature, for me, summed up exactly how I felt after reading the papers gathered for this review. He essentially said his piece and unequivocally made his intentions clear towards a disinterest in continuing the discussion by shutting down the conversation: “There you have it... [this] is really all I have to say”. (Bedeian and Hunt, 2006: 204).

This, however, is not to say that there do not exist similarities or loosely linked common themes in the field. Yukl (1994) claims that the concept of ‘influence’ is something that appeared to be a common thread in the literature and this is often referred to and well supported (Leithwood, 1999; Bush and Glover, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Hains, Hogg and Duck, 2008; Steffens et al., 2014b; and Haslam et al., 2017). How influence is exerted, what its purpose is and what its outcomes are, for Yukl (2013), elements to which a definition of leadership could be anchored. Leithwood (1999) also used this as the basis for his six approaches to leadership with other researchers following suit, such as Bush and Glover (2003).

I, too, have followed this thread of influence which I feel naturally calls into question the concept of identity. I agree that an essential aspect of leadership studies is understanding how leaders define themselves (Miscenko, 2017) and how the passing of time and changes in contexts naturally influence these self-definitions (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; and Epitropaki et al., 2017). Although interest in the field of leadership is relatively recent, there is already a large body of empirically based research that supports the centrality of identity work in leadership studies.
Carroll and Levy (2010) explain that this recent interest in identity work is reflective of the more recent social constructionist scholarship entering the field of leadership as social constructionism and identity work go hand in hand. By adopting this approach to the study of leadership, less emphasis is given to ‘skills acquisition, and training instruments’, which is more typical of the functionalist ‘how-to’ approach to leadership studies (Carroll and Levy, 2010: 227). When looking at leadership development, we should not neglect the importance of taking into account how we mould our thought processes and beliefs: how we become who we are. Below are some views on how leadership is defined based on the understanding that there is a link between leadership and identity and influence.

Day (2001) believes that leadership is about developing the capacity of those within the organisation to fulfil leadership roles and responsibilities. For Reicher, Haslam, Hopkins (2005), leadership is twofold: it requires a vision and some form of social power in place to realise the vision. This links back to the importance of influence, which van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Cremer and Hogg (2004: 826) also believe ‘is the essence of leadership’. I feel that Hogg’s (2001: 187) definition sums up very much how I view leadership as it is about how individuals or ‘cliques’ have disparate levels of power to influence ‘agenda[s], define identity, and mobilize people to achieve collective goals.’ Identity in this context would be the ‘the culmination of ‘values, experiences, and self-perceptions’ (Day and Harrison, 2007: 365). When I read these words back to myself: ‘cliques’; ‘influence’; ‘define identity’, I ask myself whether or not this definition portrays leadership as something negative, manipulative or even Machiavellian. Maybe it does! Or perhaps it is purely a matter of how we interpret these words and what connotations we personally attach to them.
Social Identity Theory of Leadership

In this section, I discuss two instrumental social psychological theories: social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987). These theories have centralised group processes in our analysis of leadership as we put less emphasis on the traditional functionalist approach (Eggins et al., 2002; and Steffens et al., 2014b). This approach to analysing leadership, referred to as the social identity theory of leadership (Fransen et al., 2015), is supported by ‘two decades of research’ (Epitropaki et al., 2017: 114).

Hogg’s (2001) paper, ‘A Social Identity Theory of Leadership’, is a good starting point for those who are less familiar with social identity theory, especially in a leadership context. He discusses all the main themes of the social identity theory of leadership, for instance, in-groups/out-groups; prototypicality; social identity theory; social categorisation theory and others. Hogg’s (2001) paper is also a rich source of useful further readings.

Hogg (2001) is in agreement with the proposal set out above vis a vis leadership being a group process which is largely dependent upon how well leaders are perceived to fit the prototypical characteristics of the salient ingroup by the other members. This is significant because it essentially reduces the importance attached to generic leadership skills and characteristics. What use are a leader’s tools and skills if she or he is not accepted because they do not ‘fit’? (van Knippenberg, 2011, cited in Showunmi et al., 2016) It could be argued that skilful and experienced leaders will be able to adapt to their situations and contexts in order to gain acceptance. This may be true to a certain extent: however, I believe that we can only adapt and change within certain parameters of acceptability before we run the danger of appearing to try too hard to fit whichever group we happen to be leading. This then brings in questions of authenticity. Characteristics of ingroups are layered.
and some of these characteristics and values (especially those at a deeper level) cannot simply be switched on or off.

Self-categorization theory is a sister theory of social identity theory introduced by Turner in 1982. The underlying principles are very similar, for instance, ingroups/outgroups and prototypicality. However, groups based on self-categorization theory are rooted in deeper belief systems, values and group memberships resulting in a more profound epistemic foundation (Steffens et al., 2014b). ‘Self-categorization theory applies to the behaviour of people as members of large social categories such as nations, religions, political parties, corporations or trade unions’ (Reicher et al., 2005: 556). Although these factors are less superficial than those associated with social identity theory, the boundaries between groups established upon self-categorisation are surprisingly more permeable. Why? Because beliefs and values can be developed, adopted and changed over time. This means more autonomy is awarded to individuals to choose which beliefs and values they espouse and thus the group they belong to. As Muslim Britons, for example, many of us have refused to allow our upbringing in a non-Muslim society to water down our religious identities and many, regardless of how religiously practising they may be, can and do claim to identify with our group (Shah, 2006).

Self-categorisation, like social identity theory, depersonalises individuals to a great extent since values and beliefs determine how people think, act and feel. Furthermore, we do not belong to only one group. Contexts play a significant role in how we perceive prototypes and how we set our boundaries of acceptance. Prototypes, therefore, are ‘contextually responsive’ (Hogg, 2001: 187).

This process of judging people or measuring them against ingroup criteria (depersonalization) has very tangible effects upon how we feel about each other. Our feelings are thus manipulated through social attraction as opposed to personal
attraction: ‘collective social identities... do not require personal relationships among members’ (Epitropaki et al., 2017: 110). We want to feel that our groups are clearly distinct and better than others, even if we do not like to openly admit it (Eggin et al., 2002). This applies when judging outsiders or potential new members and also affects how relationships are differentiated within the same groups depending on how closely individuals are perceived to fit the prototypical ideal. The more salient group membership is, the more apparent depersonalisation becomes (Hogg, 2001; and Hains et al., 2008).

Therefore, the prototype becomes the epitome of perfection, the embodiment of the group’s idea of how one should ‘think, feel and behave’ (Epitropaki et al., 2017: 116; and Haslam et al., 2017). Those who successfully embody this model within the group are more likely to exert influence over less prototypical members. The closer leaders come to prototypicality, the more likely they are to achieve success. This is ultimately the central prediction from the social identity theory of leadership, which Hogg (2001), Luhrmann and Eberl (2007) and Reicher et al. (2005) all assert has been tested and supported in a series of studies. My experiences with Paul’s mis-fit and my interview with Hamed (both narrated below) also affirm this view.

Methodology

Below is a discussion on the importance of reflecting when storying our lives and demonstrating the many ways in which this can be done; the importance of a research approach that meets these needs; and the centrality of reflections and the roles they play in identity formation. The significance of emotions and complexities are explored in relation to our experiences and the need to capture these through research. Following on from this, an examination is presented of the natural
cognitive process of thinking in narrative by drawing links between our stories, our experiences and our identity formations.

Autoethnography is then presented in more depth as a genre within the qualitative approach and how it fulfils many of the requirements outlined above. To begin with, a brief history of autoethnography is presented. This contextualises the rationale for the relatively recent inception of autoethnography and the gap that it has filled within existing research approaches. Aspects such as social difference, identity politics and challenging cultural norms by giving a voice to the silenced are all taken into consideration.

Qualitative research

This study has been developed as an autoethnography, which falls within the broad framework of qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on elements of human interaction that tend to be less measurable than other forms of data and ‘hard evidence’ used to generate general descriptions. The foci of qualitative research include ‘intentions, motivations, emotions and actions’ (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2015: 21). The techniques adopted to explore these aspects of human interaction are constantly expanding. However, a similarity that can be found across many of the approaches within qualitative research is that desire to get close to participants in order to better understand how they think, act and feel in relation to the world around us (Ellis, 2004).

Qualitative research is not one clearly defined approach. The different techniques adopted within qualitative research fall within a wide spectrum with positivist approaches at one extreme and the arts at the other. Qualitative researchers will be influenced in their approach to research by their own ontological and
epistemological stances. Sometimes researchers are also influenced according to what they view as being the most ‘appropriate’ for the particular research focus of their studies (Ellis, 2004).

Researchers who are inclined towards the arts and literature, may be more likely to see the social world as being out there: something to be discovered. Researchers interact, engage and try to understand this world through descriptions of social life looking at issues of position, politics, values, story and even valuing the researcher in the process of research (Cohen et al., 2011).

The Importance of Reflecting When Storying Our Lives.

I am of the belief that reflection is central to how people view their experiences and develop their identities, making reflections upon experiences an essential element of research. Reflecting on the incidents narrated in my study has been a crucial part of my journey in developing my leadership identity whilst writing this thesis. Going back and forth, reliving the scenarios and trying to understand how the different contexts and people influenced events has helped me navigate through this process of forming my identity as a leader (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). Reflecting upon life experiences can be a convoluted process, and there is a requirement for approaches to research that embrace complexity (Ellis, 2004).

Reflection can be carried out in many ways: discussions, written journals, drama, song and poetry (Hickson, 2011). There is a need for an approach to research that is equally flexible in its method of data collection. I investigate how narrative studies in general can fulfil this need through emphasis on the importance of the role of the individual, the power of language and the effect it can have on research in both liberating and restricting our freedom to explore reality.
In an attempt to explain the centrality of ‘storying’ our experiences in our developmental journey, I discuss aspects of cognitive organising processes in the human brain and illustrate how we make links between our stories and experiences and, essentially, how they shape who we are and who we become.

According to Beauchamp (2015) and Hickson (2011), one of the main aspects that is a current preoccupation in the literature on reflection is the concept of identity development. The authors both agree that there is a growing focus on the importance of identity development as central to what reflection is intended to accomplish. Beauchamp (2015), in particular, emphasises a growing thrust towards a more holistic approach to reflection. This may include hopes, beliefs, feelings, values and emotions with Beauchamp’s recommendations (2015) being the need for reflective practice to take place within an understanding of the broad social context in which it is set.

When exploring leadership identity development through reflections of experiences, Collay (2014) notes that reflection is seen as playing a central role in leading to fundamental changes in how people view themselves, their experiences and their worldviews in general. Moss, Springer and Dehr’s earlier study (2008) also supports this view. In Collay’s study (2014), the data gathered were documented thoughts and reflections over a two-year period in the form of self-narratives. These were then analysed through a specific theoretical framework of identity and leadership development. The author recognises that in order to examine our roots, to understand why we do what we do, to understand why we feel so passionately about certain issues in life, personal reflections alone are not sufficient. There must be an increased awareness of how we are affected and also affect wider societal issues. Societies as a whole and the individuals who make up these societies should not be looked at in isolation: they are mutually dependent and therefore require simultaneous treatment.
In order for us to engage and reflect upon our experiences, there is a requirement for approaches to research that take into consideration the complexities of both the individuals involved and the societies of which they are part. There is evidence to support this view in the empirical studies that are published on reflection and experience. These studies are admittedly relatively small in number: however, there are signs of increased efforts to fill this gap (Beauchamp, 2015; and Hickson, 2011). There is also a pattern that can be seen within recent studies focussed on reflection, many of which adopt narrative approaches to the research (see Day, 2000; Halquist & Musanti, 2010; Hyacinth, 2015; and Jindal-Snape & Holmes, 2009).

Storying Our Lives

As narrative studies were initiating the struggle to establish their place in the field of research during the 1990s, Clandinin and Connelly (1991) highlighted this link between narrative studies and reflection upon experiences. I strongly adhere to their belief that ‘life’, ‘education’ and ‘experience’ are inextricably intertwined. The study of identities has taken a more central focus in modern models of leadership identity development. The stories in which they are presented open a window to intimate material in the form of reflections, experiences and personal values, which may help to further our understanding of leadership development (Lord and Hall, 2005: 592).

Two very pertinent points are raised by Clandinin and Connelly (1991) in the examination of ‘personal knowledge’, as an element in narrative studies. The first point is that education and educational inquiry seem to contradict one another on the role of the individual. On the one hand, there are strong vocal academic arguments against the study of individuals due to subjectivity and non-generalisability (Cohen et al., 2011). However, on the other hand, “one of the most
persistent educational polemics is that of the sanctity of the individual in the Western notion of education” (Clandinin & Connelly 1991: 6). The second point raised in relation to ‘personal knowledge’ is Clandinin and Connelly’s (1991) belief that narrative studies are as much a revelation of a culture as they are a revelation of unique individuals; studies of individuals are studies of specific segments of society. Individuals do not simply live in societies, they form them. Therefore, narrative studies look at the individual, social, cultural and personal history simultaneously. This view is widely accepted in post-structural schools of thought (see, Denzin, 2014; and Adams et al., 2015).

Narratives adopt a very non-apologetic stance to the study of individuals. By capitalising on the opportunity to work closely with personalities in an attempt to understand how they perceive their experiences, narrative studies aim to facilitate the process of reflection for experiences to be retold or ‘re-storied’ (Clandinin & Connelly 1991).

Some research approaches are not as sophisticated as others: this often comes down to how well-developed a particular science has become in comparison to others (Cohen et. al., 2011: 13). Like Clandinin and Connelly (1991), Polkinghorne (1995) addresses this issue with a paper that covers several aspects of narrative inquiry in some depth with a specific focus on two cognitive approaches to understanding and analysing narrative data. It is argued that any data in the form of speech or text can potentially be regarded as ‘narrative’ in its widest sense, including observations, recordings and practically any written text (whatever their form). This point is especially relevant when discussing reflection upon experiences. Hickson (2011) explains that people reflect in many different ways, for instance through discussions, written journal entries, and even creatively through poetry, song and drama.
Stories allow for emotion to come through in the data that illustrate the complexities of the situations. This highlights the importance of narratives in capturing human experiences. Through narratives, the separate events that take place in our lives are illustrated in a sequential manner. When looked at in the context of a plot and the wider societal and cultural influences, these events are no longer isolated or insignificant (Denzin, 2014). This allows one to gain a better understanding of how and why things happen in relation to what happened before, whilst not forgetting the uniqueness of each situation. Moreover, rediscovering past experiences through the lens of current events and current experiences means that our perspectives and positions are always changing. Therefore, our stories are always changing (Ellis, 2004: 30 and Denzin, 2014).

Polkinghorne (1995) situates narrative studies in the wider context and history of research in the Western tradition, which strives towards ‘true knowledge’. The cycle of generating hypotheses, gathering evidence and drawing conclusions is rooted in ‘classical Greek heritage’. However, Bruner (1985) explains that although knowledge carried by stories is different and seen by some as unfit to provide ‘true knowledge’ in the Western tradition, it is still a legitimate form of reasoned knowing (Carroll and Levy, 2010).

There appears to be a clear pattern or theme from earlier works that began to surface during the late eighties and early nineties on research methods in education. Many published pieces looked closely at understanding the importance of widening the scope of research approaches: justifying ‘non-traditional’ methods and supporting the views for narrative research. Adams et al. (2015) comment on this, noting that it was actually during the 1980s that researchers started advocating more openly for personal narratives, subjectivity and reflexivity. Researchers who supported this view, I assume, felt the need to justify narrative studies as an approach during the ‘paradigm wars’.
All forms of research are limited in their approach (Adams, et al., 2015). These limitations ultimately restrict our understanding of the phenomena that we seek to understand. If we only ever use one particular approach to research, then we will only ever understand the world from one perspective. We all experience the world in which we live, and we have all been blessed with our senses to recognize these experiences. However, the systems we adopt, or rather the systems we have been taught, shape how we interpret these experiences. They dictate what we can and cannot express. They specify how we should feel towards that which we are studying. There is no such thing as a ‘value-free’ approach to research (Ellis, 2004; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; and Denzin, 2014). All approaches were ultimately devised by a select few who cannot categorically prove themselves free of allowing any values to interfere in their approach, or indeed even the language they adopt (Adams et al., 2015). These boundaries of validity and acceptability come down to differences in values, beliefs and how we view the world (Ellis, 2004). Our use of language and choice of words are a reflection of how we think: our way of thinking affects our choice of words which, in turn, affects our thinking (Eisner, 1988).

However, this capacity that language holds can be both liberating and controlling depending on how it is used. There is a clear contrast between the sciences and the arts and how both contribute in their own right to our understanding and expression of the world we live in. All approaches to research are essentially designed to frame our minds as researchers: to affect and alter the way we think and perceive reality. Even approaches to research that claim to liberate us in our thinking ultimately frame our thinking mechanisms in some way. The approach we adopt to depict the world through our words in our research is only ever going to be one version, and no matter how ‘good’ that version is perceived to be, it is still only one version.
Carter (1993) takes Eisner’s discussion (1988) further in her paper, which presents the notion of narrative (or story to be more specific) ‘as a mode of knowing’. Carter (1993) points out that ‘story is a distinctive mode of explanation’ (1993: 6); distinctive from other more traditional forms of looking at phenomena in the world. What we do as teachers and leaders and, indeed, in life as a whole is the enactment of a story, even if we are unaware of it at the time. Therefore, the study of 'stories' seems to make much more sense when put into this context as we think, act and live in story (Ellis, 2004). This is where the link between story and experience is most apparent. Stories are not simply taken from a vacuum; they are based on our experiences, which require a deeper level of thinking, consciousness and reflection. Stories are a way of organizing our thoughts and knowledge. Stories are another way of looking at the world and trying to make connections. There is also literature in the field of leadership studies that relates to this, that posits our identities as maps to be constructed by ourselves, which require us to make these connections between the events in our lives (Luhrmann and Eberl, 2007). Our identities are how we attach meaning to ourselves (Ashford and DeRue, 2010). This meaning is constructed from relatively surface level knowledge of our competencies, to the deeper levels of our values, beliefs and aspirations (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Our identities aid us in making sense of our world (Epitropaki et al., 2017).

Our minds are constantly developing new links of causality between events and concepts based on our experiences and exposure to life, which is ever changing and constantly evolving. It is through this intricate network of overlapping stories and connections that we understand things. This web of stories is our lens through which we look at the world. The more experienced we are, the more exposure we have to the world and the more accustomed we become in ‘storying’ our experiences, the better equipped we become at understanding our experiences and the world.
around us because we have more knowledge and experience to draw upon: the links between this knowledge and experience are more firmly established (Ellis, 2004).

Polkinghorne’s paper (1991) presents a very convincing case for narrative as a natural cognitive organizing process in humans. He communicates quite complex concepts in relation to organizing structures and human cognition in a way that does not require subject specialists to follow his discussion. Examples are used throughout to contextualize the points being made with references to several studies on cognitive development work. For a more detailed discussion, readers can refer to his earlier book ‘Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences’ (1991: 107-113). However, in short, Polkinghorne’s approach to understanding how our life events can be understood is linked to the schematic structuring process that our brains use to organize information. In order to understand life as fully as possible, we need to create part-whole narrative relations between events in our lives (that may not necessarily be linked chronologically). It is the stories that we tell (our narratives) that act as the vehicle through which this schematic structuring takes place. Narrative ‘gives meaning to temporal events’ (1991: 136). Narratives are real. They are personal, chaotic and some may argue precede our birth and go well beyond the day we die.

We don’t live life as individual units and separate happenings one at a time. We naturally weave everything together. An individual event is nothing more than a single happening that has little (if any) significance until placed into the context of a larger 'plot'. Once this is done, things that may not have appeared as being significant can instantly become critical incidents when looked at in relation to other events and the plot as a whole.

Creating narratives is not just about giving a chronological listing of the events that take place. It is about attempting to organise the events and information in such a
way that will demystify how significant (or not) the ‘parts’ are in the ‘whole’ story. Polkinghorne (1988) skilfully draws the comparison between the events in our lives with the words in a sentence. Just as a group of words can make up a finite number of meaningful sentences, so too can the events in our lives when placed into a plot. Therefore, the number of meaningful interpretations of the events in our lives is also not open to an infinite amount of explanations (Denzin, 2014). Timings, contexts and various other factors limit the interpretations (1988: 143). This is a useful way of looking at the issue of the potential limitless number of interpretations arising from narrative studies.

William James (1981) succinctly explains how our identity is something that we construct through an ongoing process. This process (life) looks at material aspects such as clothes, homes, properties and social values and norms, including aspects of self-awareness and self-understanding. In order to come to an understanding of ourselves, our identities, we need to look closely at our experiences in life from all aspects. We are the collection of our experiences (which are our stories). Hadfield (2012) encourages readers to reflect deeply on their lives and early experiences in relation to how they have shaped their personality and thinking process. Hadfield (2012) feels so strongly about this that she suggests our early experiences in life can even work to change the ‘nature of genetics’. She explains that our experiences in life directly affect our beliefs. These beliefs in turn affect how we think, which ultimately manifests itself through our actions.

**Autoethnography**

The approach I have adopted in presenting this autoethnography is similar to that outlined by Chang (2013): I have attempted to avoid artificially separating descriptions, analyses and interpretations of data. Instead, I have attempted to weave all aspects together throughout. As I work through the thesis, I include details
of how accounts are relevant and related to the socio-cultural contexts and the literature covered in the review. Reading Ellis’s (2004) Research Methods Handbook, which was presented as an autoethnography, as a physical representation of this concept, notably influenced my writing.

**What is autoethnography?**

Here, I discuss in some depth my motivations for adopting autoethnography and the centrality of using such narrative approaches in leadership studies. What exactly is autoethnography? The way in which we present narratives can vary significantly. Polkinghorne (1995) advocates narrative analysis and analysis of narratives; Labov (1982) discusses structural narrative analysis; Riessman (2008) even suggests performance analysis, with Clough (2002) going as far as to encourage fictionalised representation. Autoethnography, a form of narrative research, can be presented in many forms including journals, plays, stories and poems.

Autoethnographic accounts act as both the process and the product within a piece of writing. The actual act of writing becomes a method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005; McCormack 2009; Ellis, 2004; and Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). It is not only the investigation of meanings of past experiences: the process of the research itself is an experience and part of the bigger picture. A lot of the time autoethnographic research can be a process of ‘mutual exploration’ for both the researchers/participants and the readers (Ellis, 2004: 136). Ellis and Bochner (2000: 744-745) stress that it is the journey that takes precedence over the destination.

Autoethnography looks at part auto – self and part ethno – culture (Ellis, 2004). With this in mind, I feel Chase’s definition of autoethnography is the most succinct:
“[Autoethnographic research is] a narrative inquiry where the researchers turn the analytic lens on themselves and their interactions with others [. . .] writing, interpreting and performing their own narratives about culturally significant experiences” (2005: 60).

Autoethnography challenges existing hegemonic approaches to research (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013: 58) using personal experiences as the primary data to help us better understand cultural experiences (Chang, 2013: 108). By breaking such norms in research, the intention is to get the story out to wider audiences (Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 37).

Despite the deliberate focus on the self, autoethnography differs from autobiographical writing as the writers/researchers are expected to revisit their written accounts and give a rounded analysis from a social constructivist perspective to avoid being so entrenched in thoughts and feelings with tunnel vision (Ellis, 2004).

I agree with Anderson and Glass-Coffin who believe that research can be both ‘personal and academic…; scientific and spiritual’ (2013: 58). Traditional social sciences looked more at generalisations, facts and controllability, which I feel are heavily influenced by positivist research. Autoethnography, however, celebrates the details of thoughts, feelings, emotions, spirituality and morals (Bochner, 2013).

The History and Growth of Autoethnography

Sambrook and Doleriet (2009) believe that autoethnography predates the use of the term in mainstream academia. They (2009) suggest that many autoethnographic accounts written as research may not necessarily be marketed or publicized under the banner of autoethnography. The first explicit signs of ‘autoethnography’ as it is known today, however, can be traced back to the works of David Hayno published
Autoethnography was being used specifically as a term/approach toward the end of the 80s with chapters and general research methods books dedicated to the approach emerging during the nineties (Adams et al., 2015). As a result, from the mid-nineties onwards, there have been signs of major growth in the use of the approach (Ellis, 2004; Denzin 2014 and Adams et al., 2015). Anderson’s paper (2006a) presents a wealth of background information about autoethnography, the advocates of the different sub-genres and where it all originated. He suggests that one of the reasons for this growth may be due to the escalation of scepticism over the importance of generalizing knowledge with ‘emotion’ gradually forcing its way into the realm of social sciences. This fairly recent development should not, however, overshadow the fact that autoethnography is still largely rejected in many social science mainstream avenues. It is a challenge I myself have experienced first-hand when submitting manuscripts to academic journals. Below is part of a response I received from a peer reviewer:

“[T]he tone is quite emotive at times. Is this style of writing appropriate for a paper in an academic journal?” 13.04.16, 16:03

The Two Types of Autoethnography

Sambrook and Doleriet (2009) provide a useful figure in which the different approaches to autoethnography can be viewed on a ‘spectrum’. At one extreme, is the ‘researcher-and-researched’: the researcher is part of a team of participants who study a common phenomenon in relation to their culture. At the other extreme, the ‘researcher-is-research’, that is, the researcher is the central focus of the study and therefore the ‘ethno’ is actually the ‘auto’. I would situate my study closer to
the latter: my lived life and experiences become a reflection of the culture. Regardless of where one is on this scale, experiences, interpretations and critical reflexivity are all accepted as knowledge and form an integral part of autoethnography, which naturally make the distinction between the researcher and the researched less obvious.

Autoethnography consists of two main sub-genres: ‘evocative’ and ‘analytical’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Denzin, 2006; Anderson, 2006b; and Dashper, 2015).

The key feature that distinguishes analytic autoethnography is the goal of explicit analysis and the desire to strive towards broader generalisations of the social world rather than simply describing “what is going on” (Anderson, 2006a: 387). Analytic autoethnography according to Anderson (2006a), Charmaz (2006) and Atkinson (2006) also reaches beyond the researchers through dialogue with the participants, which requires an active role by the researcher in the field of study.

Vyran (2006) agrees with this need for explicit analysis. The analytical aspect of analytic autoethnography requires that its success be evaluated in terms of the usefulness of its conceptual developments or theoretical claims as applicable to at least some other people, experiences, and contexts. However, Vyran questions why analytic autoethnography has to be based on other participants. Why can’t it be based on the researcher and still be analytical at the same time? (2006: 406) For Vyran, value to others and research based on individuals do not have to be mutually exclusive concepts and do not contradict traditional symbolic interactionism, which is what Anderson (2006a) claims analytic autoethnography is consistent with. If the research helps us “better understand or explain other people, experiences, and/or contexts” or “contribute[s] to collective knowledge in some way”, then we should not get hung up on the actual number of people on whom the research was conducted (Vyran, 2006:408). I am in strong agreement.
Evocative autoethnography, the most popular amongst published autoethnographic works and the approach that my research more accurately reflects, cannot be framed in relation to ‘conventional sociological analysis’ (Anderson, 2006a). This sub-genre of autoethnography looks more at the links that it can draw with arts and humanities as opposed to truth claims in the traditional Western notion of science and research. Evocative autoethnography encourages the audience ‘to feel the feelings of the other’ (Denzin, 1997: 228). Although this technique may appear to be more typical of novels and literary tales, advocates of evocative autoethnography are undeterred. Should we avoid blurring the line between science and the arts? Why should there be such a binary approach to the social sciences and literature of this nature?

Ellis (2004) argues that we learn by having our emotions evoked. There should be no attempt to separate emotions from our writing when focusing on our lives. I also agree with Adams et al. (2015) who assert that the expectation of writing about our lives without emotions is hard to imagine given that life is so entrenched in emotions. Writing evocatively means that we feel for and with the author/participants; we experience the conflicts, the dilemmas, the difficulties. The author’s self-exposure may remind us of similar personal situations, with which we can identify and may encourage us to share our own stories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Why autoethnography?

In the early to mid-nineteen seventies, a band of sociologists described as a ‘renegade’ group by Ellis (2004) were the first to put structures into place to advance the practice and acceptance of interactionist approaches in the social sciences. Adams et al. (2015) explain that there was a desire to understand social difference
and identity politics through the exploration of culture using different approaches. If there is a genuine desire, want and need to understand a particular group’s perspectives, we must get to the heart of the matter and autoethnography is an effective way of achieving this. Autoethnography foregrounds our personal experiences; it permits me (as the researcher and researched) to present accounts that allow audiences to better understand how we (my ingroup) make sense of certain situations. Although Islam is not the central focus of my study, my identity as a Muslim is a major underlying theme that cannot be ignored. My focus on the study of leadership through an identity lens will, I hope, produce a unique perspective of our cultural experiences using academia as a platform. I agree with Vyran (2006) who explains that there are some things that we simply cannot understand through observations, that are too sensitive to be discussed in interviews. These nuances of everyday life require the feelings and emotions of the researched to come through in their writing. When the data is produced by oneself about oneself, we are reading something that is ‘biographically grounded’ with ‘experientially rich engagement[s] with the social processes’ (Atkinson, 2006: 401).

Taken for granted practices in our everyday lives act as windows that provide glimpses into how our societies operate. Autoethnography works well to intentionally critique these cultural norms; to ‘interrogate and end harmful cultural beliefs, practices and experiences’ (Adams et al., 2015: 114). Autoethnography does this by giving a voice to the silenced with the intention of improving lives (Ellis, 2004; and Jones et al., 2013). Autoethnography is a testimony to the deep respect, recognition and honour we place on our relationship to the communities and the cultures that we are a part of (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). The stories I present are critical to gaining more of an appreciation of the complexity of my identity. The study of identity construction and leadership, using my life as a BME Muslim, provides a unique opportunity as there are issues that are not directly addressed in much of the published literature, which tends to focus on the dominant white male
figure (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). My autoethnographic accounts draw attention to the importance of my wider experiences in life as a BME Muslim providing a window to demonstrate how instrumental such experiences are in my professional practices as an educational leader.

In the early stages of thinking about the focus of my research and my approach, I felt as though I was trying to make a concept that was clear in my mind fit in with approaches that did not feel suitable: square pegs and round holes. I could relate to Bochner’s (2013) feelings of annoyance as he noted that he adopted narrative approaches to research initially out of frustration under the impression that he had to adopt a positivist slant to his research in the social sciences (Jones et al., 2013). There is a similar sense of rebellion in Denzin’s (2014) tone when he notes that autoethnographical writing does not seek the validation or approval of outdated scientific discourse.

Kortens (2007) comments on the lack of a balance in the canonical leadership literature, which mainly contains the general and somewhat distant voices of the academics. Whilst conducting my literature review, I too found this to be the case. I feel there is more of a need for culturally rich internal descriptions from practitioners interlinked with the fuller picture of the leadership landscape from academics. My research contributes to a varied tapestry containing both high level theoretical pieces and also humanistic and sometimes literary based stories.

What draws me to autoethnography is the concept of embracing vulnerability by genuinely posing difficult questions to ourselves in order to be able to better understand our situation, taking on responsibility by making ourselves think and opening up the discussion. If we just wanted to vent, that could be done through blogs, social media and newspaper articles. The objective is that we come to either a solution or at the very least a better understanding of a cultural experience or
situation with the readers (Adams et al., 2015). My intention is not to present myself as a narcissistic individual painting himself and those he associates himself with as victims; far from it. My narrative is intended to be ‘a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to canonical discourses’ (Ellis, 2004: 121).

Whilst presenting some of my accounts below, I experienced a great sense of exposure. It was not an easy process. I frequently questioned myself: What will the audience think of me? Will they develop an inaccurate perception of who I am and of my real intentions? Maybe my writing paradoxically exposes my intentions for what they really are. Perhaps the image that you build of me is not inaccurate after all; could my own perception of self and the image that I am trying to portray be, in actual fact, totally inaccurate? What if my writing does more damage to our cause than good? Autoethnographic writing aims to create a space between the readers and the writers. As readers, you are granted more freedom to negotiate meaning for yourselves rather than being presented with neatly packaged findings and conclusions (McCormack, 2009; and Ellis, 2005). However, as autoethnographers, we are constantly faced with challenging questions that bring vulnerability to the fore.

This idea of autoethnography challenging the status quo resonates deep within me. It is one of the more recent research methods that challenges existing hegemonic research approaches that insist on rules and standards often presented as fait accompli. It is the challenge of being the underdog that draws me in. Early feedback from my supervisor and friends showed instant support for my style of writing: however, at the same time, I was ‘warned’ that the topic/approach could be ‘risky’. This encouraged me to look further into the approach and spurred me on in my quest to challenge. I agree with Goodall (2013) who notes that how we write is just as important as the phenomenon itself. Our chosen research approaches can say just as much about us as individuals as the findings themselves. Lane (1995: 72)
explains that our individual approaches to research “exist as representations of the ways we think... according to our individual quests for meaning”.

I now guide the discussion back to the points raised above vis a vis the proposed centrality of identities in leadership studies. I would like to discuss the role that identities play in creating an understanding of leadership being a relational concept.

Writings from the heart that change the world – a desire to understand myself and my social settings.

Producing an exemplary paper is the best way to showcase a particular approach and Sparkes’ (2007) piece of evocative autoethnography had a huge impact on me. This is what I want my paper to look like. This is the effect that I want my story to have on my readers. I want it to make people sit back in their chairs and think. I want it to stir the feelings and emotions that resonated in the feedback from the readers of his article. I want it to make people feel the need to act; not just those who can relate to my story but also those who may have been less aware of this aspect of our lives. The paper needs to give readers a fuller picture of our situation.

It is since I have started learning more about autoethnography and the importance of personal narratives in our lives that I have taken more of a personal interest in such writings. After reading Hani Khoja’s book “A Global Nomad in Search of True Happiness” (2016), I was instantly hooked on the power of personal narratives. I laughed with Hani at the difficult and awkward situations he found himself in whilst growing up between the West and the Middle East as a Muslim, American and Arab all at the same time. I felt his pain when he realised that the world he was growing up in the West was in reality never his real home. I felt so touched and motivated by Khoja’s social reform efforts in Saudi Arabia that I was compelled to reach out to him and contact him personally. I would never have imagined that another person’s
story could have such a profound effect upon me. Thoughts, experiences and
encounters described by Khoja would play on my mind night and day long after I’d
read his book. I started analysing my life all over again. I started writing my own
story.

This is the purpose of autoethnography: to move audiences to action (Denzin, 2014).
Autoethnography is about producing meaningful research with meaningful changes
and improvements in our lives (Bochner, 2013; Ellis, 2004). This may sound like an
obvious outcome for much of the research out there; however, Foskett, Lumby and
Fidler (2005) highlight the major concern about the schism between research and
practice: the need for investigations to be meaningful and the necessity for studies
to improve practice. I feel autoethnography (albeit not exclusively) works to close
this gap. One of the main aims of autoethnography is to develop understanding,
even if not necessarily to convince the reader of the absolute ‘truth’. As we go
through the processes of reflecting, writing, rewriting, and crafting our stories, we
move from language to ideas and ultimately to tangible action (Adams et al., 2015:
20).

Malcolm X’s autobiography (2008) was another early text that had similar effects
upon me. Many of Malcolm X’s stories paradoxically moved me so much more than
Khoja’s: to tears even. I was shocked at myself, at how hearing another person’s
story could open my eyes to a world unknown to me and also emotionally affect me
so deeply; how hearing the experiences of another person could actually change the
way I think. Nelson Mandela’s ‘A Long Walk to Freedom’ (1995) was yet another
story that moulded me. I could literally observe and feel the changes that were
taking place within me as a person; how I viewed life and dealt with situations as I
was reliving the author’s experiences with him. This, for me, is the power of personal
narratives at its best and something that is required more of in academic research.
My experiences of reading personal narratives, I feel, are concrete examples of what
Anderson (2006a) refers to as a deeper level of ‘analytic reflexivity’, which, when done upon one’s own story, can transform the narrator’s underlying beliefs and even trigger the initial stages of such changes in the audience.

The readers’ feedback presented in Sparkes’ paper (2007) and indeed my own reactions also support Anderson’s comments. The sheer variety of responses and effects that a single story can have on different people; the powerful impression that the story had on the readers came through in the emotive use of language they adopted in their responses. This is what autoethnographers, including myself, strive for (Ellis, 2004; Adams et al., 2015).

Individuals and their stories are a rich source for understanding our societies and the issues that are at hand (Pelias, 2005). We do not live life as individuals in vacuums (Stanley, 1993); rather our societies are an accumulation of lived lives. There is an argument that our societies are essentially a collection of stories: our stories (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). When put like this, it only seems wise we make an effort to try to understand these individual stories in order to better understand our world (Traher, 2009). By centralizing the personal in autoethnographic writing, a backdrop or contextualization of the culture and society in which the writer is living is effectively presented (Denshire, 2014).

Studying the self may be viewed as narcissistic (see, Atkinson, 2006; and Coffey, 1999). Sparkes shares his initial concerns of being reproached for being "self-indulgent rather than selfknowing, self-respectful (...) or self-luminous" (2002: 214). However, I agree with Anderson’s view (2006) that our personal lives and experiences are profoundly affected by the social world we live in and in turn we also affect that very same world with our own stories. Dismissing the importance of studying these lives by those who live them would mean we are leaving out a core aspect of our social contexts (Anderson, 2006a). “Learning about yourself is
justification enough for doing a study” (Ellis, 2004: 37). This universal charge of ‘self-indulgence’ levelled against autoethnographic stories is, I suspect, a result of misapprehensions of the genre. There appears to be a mistrust of the work of the self and a perceived mismatch between the style of writing and the expected norm in academia (Sparkes, 2002b). All ethnographic work is autoethnographic by its very nature. The problem comes when the auto becomes so pronounced that the ethnography fades into the background (Atkinson, 2006).

Our stories (written or spoken) are an ‘enactment’ of the world we live in. A presentation of the world that our readers and listeners also live in. Our stories are our representations. For me, it is about providing a representation of myself as a teacher, a school leader, a Brit, an active volunteer community leader, a husband, son, father and, most importantly, a Muslim.

**Ethical considerations**

Although I have yet to come across a single prescriptive set of ethical considerations in my review of the literature, themes did emerge such as collaboration with the other characters in our stories; identity protection; the use of fiction and, finally, the vulnerability of the writer/researcher and the participants.

I consciously chose not to include the participants in the construction of my stories as I did not feel they were central characters in the accounts. My stories initially began as reflections in my own personal log, which then took on the form of the main data for my research. Although I agree that some accounts may require ‘process consent’ of regularly liaising with the participants (Adams et al., 2015: 57) as it could be argued that the story is also theirs to some extent (Barton, 2011), I do not feel this is necessary in my research. I agree with Adams (2008), who argues that applying blanket ethical guidelines to a research method that is inherently
contingent contradicts the very essence of the approach and including the participants in the process may not always be the safest options for all.

It is practically impossible to avoid mentioning others when narrating our stories (indeed, sometimes it is a necessity) and gaining permission from all those involved would be nearly impossible (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013: 76). The issues of contacting the characters and gaining permission are not the only sticking point for me. Some of my accounts only contained one other character in addition to myself, and yet I still felt that it was not necessary to gain their permission. Why? Because, although they played a significant role in the story through their physical presence, their role was not central to the discussion. Not only that: there is also the question of my level of authority and agency as the main writer/researcher and researched in the process. I do not feel that the mere presence of others in a narrative equates to them possessing a true reflection of the events as they happened.

I fictionalised elements of the scenes and masked all names to avoid any potential negative impact of what I had written about characters or our relationships. I am aware this brings into question issues of accuracy, truthfulness and verisimilitude (Ellis, 2004: 151). I am also aware that this approach only goes so far as to protect the identity of the other participants. However, I avoid fictionalising my identity as the main character to ensure this study will be taken seriously in the realm of academia. I worry that if all characters (including myself) and settings have been fictionalised, what differentiates this paper from a novel?

Adopting fictional techniques to protect myself and others by masking names, places and situations seems like the easiest system to avoid many of the grey areas in regards to ethics. Ellis (2004) believes that when we fictionalise elements of our stories, we are limited to the claims that we make in relation to conclusive truth. It affects and limits how we write the story and cuts us off from previous research. I,
however, believe that authors can fictionalise elements of their stories whilst still avoiding these concerns. In my accounts, only names and places were masked. The description of the events that took place remained unchanged, which allows the researcher to maintain the authority to make claims and relate research to previous works.

One of the main ethical challenges that I have experienced in conducting my research is the fact that it is not only my research that is going to be critiqued. It is my personal life that is going to be scrutinised and this level of exposure, this level of intentionally making oneself vulnerable, is extremely unnerving especially when I know I have very little control over how my audience will perceive me. I have discussed some sensitive topics that I know will be taken as a still shot and preserved as an ever living image of myself by some readers. Dashper (2015) discusses this issue and raises the question of ownership once the story is in print. What if some of my views change? What if I change? My story by then will be out there in print, and I will have to live with the consequences. This is why there are many things I, and others writing, deliberately hold back from saying. What if my perception of the roles played by other characters in my accounts is incorrect? What if they are indeed more central than I think? Who gave me that right to include them in my stories and depict them the way I did? The questions could go on without end.

Ellis advises one of her students in her narrative to think very carefully about how she depicts a situation as she advises, ‘that’s not the picture you want to paint’ (2004: 159). This statement of hers, I feel is especially noteworthy. Is Ellis suggesting that we should not allow the events to paint the picture themselves, rather we should choose the colours in which we paint the picture and the aspects we want to add because we already know how we want to position the audience? One of the main characteristics of autoethnography is to create a space between the readers and the writer and to allow the readers to come to their own conclusions
(McCormack; 2009). By thinking about how we want the story to be depicted, aren’t we already closing down that space? Perhaps we already do this without even thinking about it. Denzin (2014) believes this will always be the case, as there will always be aspects that we intentionally and unintentionally leave out and add in.

Welcome Home! The Heathrow Gauntlet

When looked at in comparison to the many other approaches in leadership research, the study of leadership development over the lifespan of individuals has been neglected (Komives, Longerbeam, Osteen, Mainella, and Owen, 2009), which is a paradox if we study leadership through the lens of identity development (Miscenko, 2017). However, leadership research now appears to be changing and further evolving as attention is slowly turning to the concept of identity development, which is more traditionally associated with social psychology and sociology. As a result, a considerable number of academicians and researchers are picking up on this and further developing the momentum of research in this area, for example Komives et al. (2005) Billsberry, (2009); Luhrmann and Eberl (2007); Hogg (2001 & 2005); Hogg and van Knippenberg (2003); Lord and Brown (2001 & 2004); Islam (2014); Day and Harrison (2007); and van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer and Hogg (2004).

I recall some accounts of my early life to locate myself in the culture within which I grew up before moving outwards and talking about other issues related to the literature on leadership and identity development. I begin with a narrative that depicts one of my routine experiences when travelling via Heathrow airport. The purpose of presenting this story is to give you a glimpse into my life as a Muslim Briton in light of some of the daily challenges I face. Narratives like this are crucial to understanding my identity as they provide a backdrop to many of the accounts that follow in this paper. These experiences stay with me and without doubt
influence my practices at school. Studying my life as a practitioner within the walls of my academy, I feel, would be incomplete. To understand who I am, you must first understand the different aspects of my life that have influenced the formation of my identity (Shah, 2006). I agree with X, Haley and Shabazz (1999), who explain that in order to truly understand a person, their whole life must be examined as it is our experiences that fuse into our personalities and each unique experience is a unique ingredient in our individuality.

The plane lands smoothly on the runway at Heathrow. I am home. This is where I grew up. This is where I studied. This is where my whole life is based. Feeling relieved and grateful for our safe journey, I prepare to leave the plane. After a short wait, the doors open and we begin to shuffle down the aisles of the plane and slowly pour out of the doors thanking the cabin crew one by one. Then, as I make my way through the dull grey airport, I see the black suits and the border security uniforms. The all too familiar feeling of unease and restlessness kicks in. Coming through the airport in the UK is like running a gauntlet. If you are a Muslim, you will understand what I mean. If not, let me explain: the nature of our identities and the relationships that we have with other groups in society are influenced by many factors, one of them being the political landscape (Shah, 2006). Targeted profiling, raids, stop and searches and unlawful detentions, post 9/11, have left many Muslims feeling beleaguered by the actions of both the state and the masses (Ahmed, 2003; Hagopian, 2004; and Shah, 2006).

With the gauntlet in full view before me, there was no way to go other than straight ahead. With the other EU and UK passport holders, I follow the signs to Passport Control. Then there is another sign for the e-gates. All those with new passports that contain the electronic chips can use this option. I am one of them.
The e-gates make life so much easier. Very much like an advanced version of the Transport for London Oyster system. First, the glass gates open; you enter the pod as the gates close behind you. Then you scan your passport and face the screen for a quick photo match; then the second set of rear glass doors open for you to leave and make your way to baggage collection. ‘Is there any point in even trying the automated service?’ I ask myself. ‘It never works for me anyway’. I know the drill. The glass gates slide open and I enter the pod like everyone else. I place my passport on the electronic scanner like everyone else. I follow the instructions like everyone else. Then the glass gates slide open to allow me exit the pod like everyone else. But I am not the same as everyone else. Everyone else leaves their pods through the second set of glass gates, I leave the pod by the same set of gates through which I entered. It would appear the automated pods haven’t yet been programmed to recognise Muslim passports, or my passport at least. Or maybe they have!

I am escorted to the border control staff who then process my details manually. All of this is taking place, of course, whilst the passengers with whom I spent the best part of 8 hours on a plane look on, wondering what is going to happen next. Embarrassment quickly turns into anger. I fight to cover up and save face before the passengers. I need to be the better person. ‘Don’t let them see you lose your cool!’ From this point on, experience has taught me that there are a number of possible scenarios:

First is the border control officer asking me a few questions about where I have been and the purpose of my visit. This is usually followed by an awkward silence as the officer takes a little longer than usual to process my details. Alternatively, I get the ‘Just give me a minute, Sir. I’ll be right back,’ response, after which the border officer leaves his or her desk and disappears into one of the offices in the back, with my passport in hand, of course. Awaiting the verdict from the jury in the back room, I pretend I can’t feel the constant gaze of the rest of the passengers who look on as
they steadily filter through. The officer then returns, processes my passport and lets me through. This is when I get let off lightly.

Then there is quarantine. They make me sit alone like an infected patient with a deadly disease in a specially designated seating area surrounded by barriers to keep the innocent public at a safe distance - conveniently situated immediately beside the long snaking queues of passengers so they can get a nice close look at me (and my wife and children, as was the case previously). This wait usually takes around 20 minutes. I pretend to have a natural conversation with my wife and play with my kids whilst blocking out the stares, sniggers and smirks of the passengers who wait their turn to get a close up as the queues move along. The officer usually returns the passport, politely thanks us for waiting and escorts us through the gates on our way to collect our baggage.

The last possible scenario that could play out, which is easily the most uncomfortable of all, is when the police officer standing guard behind the airport staff processing our passports waits for his or her perfectly timed and rehearsed cue. ‘Where have you arrived from, Sir?’ asks the border control officer, ‘It’s OK Jill, I’ll take this one.’ ‘Here we go’ I think to myself. ‘Sir, could you just follow me please?’ I’m sure the officer’s experience of reading body language and interpreting facial expressions is enough for him to understand how I am feeling. I do not try very hard to hide those feelings.

I am led off like a suspect to his cell, only without the shackles, to be questioned in the back room that already has my suitcase placed in the middle of the table. This is the longest, the most intimidating and least predictive process of all. Alone in a small room with two officers, you soon miss the comforting stares of the passengers in the passport control area. At least they can potentially be witnesses should anything happen. The interrogation can last up to an hour, after which you are free to go, if
they do not find (or stick) anything on you. If you do especially well, as my friend did, they may even offer you a job! A professional snitch! The pathetic fools think that after this whole ordeal, one would be willing to work as an insider for them! Of course, we all know that some poor misguided souls do take up the offer, otherwise they wouldn’t ask.

Anyway, I decide to give the e-gates a go. It’s been a while since I last tried. You see, if I miraculously get through the automated gates, then that lessens the likelihood of being stopped and questioned and having to go through one of the potential scenarios that I am all too familiar with. As I stand waiting in the queue, praying that I get through, I hear a member of staff asking another passenger to join the queue for the automated e-gates. He laughs and opts to stay in line waiting to be seen by a border officer, ‘There’s no point, it never works for me. I’m a regular traveller’. I look over my shoulder and see a well-built man of Asian origin wearing a long white gown with a well-groomed beard: a Muslim. That was the last thing I needed to hear as I edged closer to the next available pod.

‘Number 4 please Sir.’ I calmly walk over to the pod. The glass gates slide open. I enter like everyone else. I scan my passport like everyone else. But I’m not the same as everyone else. I get the all too familiar response as I scan my passport. The scanner cannot read my passport. I don’t even try again. There is no point. I know the drill. I turn to the officer standing outside the pods and give him the look. He knows what the look means. He, too, knows the drill. But this time it’s different. ‘Try it again’, he says. I try it again several times and after a few more failed attempts the gates open. I snatch my passport off the scanner. I don’t even bother thanking the officer. I just need to get through those gates before another ‘error message’ comes up. I’m through! I made it through without any questions, without any delays!
Does this mean I’m no longer on their radar? Was it a complete fluke? To be honest I don’t really care. I just miss my wife and kids. It’s been a long flight. I’m finally home.

It is experiences like these that further entrenched my understanding and acceptance that I, and the group that I am associated with, are ‘different’ from our host society. I am not white. My name is not white. My religion is not white. Komives et al. (2005) refer this as relational recognition: the point at which individuals recognise their uniqueness in relation to those around them. The stage in a leader’s development that signals an understanding that they are different. I am different, and the further I look back in life, the more differences I unearth.

The other side to the coin

The narrative below is an account of the birth of my first son. Again, I feel this account is crucial to understanding my story for reasons similar to those of my experiences at Heathrow. I agree with Notman (2016) who asserts that it is important we understand these aspects of leaders’ identities. It is our experiences that influence our values and beliefs, which ultimately influence our decision-making processes. This story, however, is in stark contrast to that of my experiences at the airport. It links directly back to the issue of identity and belonging. I feel it is important to present a balanced view of my experiences in the UK as a Muslim. It is positive experiences like this that also influence who I am at school.

‘You just start walking with the girls. I’ll lock up and catch up.’ One week overdue, my wife struggles to lift her leg over the door step as she leaves the house with our two girls, both excited as always for any excuse to go out for a walk. Although the health centre is just behind our house, it’s a last minute dash to catch the appointment on time as usual. It’s a beautiful summer’s day. The girls enjoy
observing the people go about their daily business, say hello to any dogs they see out on their walks and ask their usual inquisitive questions about anything and everything they see around them.

Heavily pregnant, I can clearly see my wife is finding it difficult to breathe and struggling to carry the extra weight her body now has to bear. Covered from head to toe in her abaya (Islamic female gown), she doesn’t seem to appreciate the rarity of the summer sun in London; I don’t blame her. ‘It’s nothing compared to the heat out there’, she boasts, referring to the dry desert heat of Arabia. As we approach the centre I hear my wife mutter words in supplication that she be blessed with a mid-wife who will not take her attire as a cue to patronise or make life difficult.

We arrive at the old, run down healthcare centre after a short 5-minute walk and finally escape the blazing rays of the morning sun. However, it’s hardly any better inside: no air conditioning and no fans. A corner of the room is filled with half a dozen pregnant mothers-to-be. The only form of ventilation is the window that is slightly ajar. None dare sit near the window for fear of being struck by the streaks of light piercing through the panes of glass. My wife gets some respite, however. After a quick scan of the room, she flips open her face veil noticing the absence of any males. She takes a deep breath and fans her face with one of the children’s books. I take the book and fan her as our girls rearrange their chairs trying to avoid the sun penetrating through the blinds behind them. A small CD/radio player sits on top of the fridge. It reminds me of my days in secondary school as it plays a mixture of background music from the late 90’s and early 2000s. I can’t believe radios like that still even exist! I thought people only listened to radios in the car when they wanted to catch up on the news.

Finally, my wife is called through to see the midwife as I stay behind with the girls. A few minutes later I hear my wife’s voice, ‘Tariq...’ I look around and see her
standing at the door to one of the midwives’ rooms. She gestures with her hand for me to go in. ‘Come on girls, let’s go... quickly’. The girls clumsily bundle the books they were reading onto the small pile stacked in the corner of the waiting room and rush across to their mother as I follow suit.

The midwife’s room is bare, reflective of the outdated exterior of the Health Centre. It is, however, light and airy with a nice view of the main road just outside. We greet each other, and the midwife spends a few moments flattering the girls. Her experience shows: they love her. She then quickly explains the need for my presence in the room. ‘OK. As your wife is now one week overdue, the usual procedure would be to give her another appointment in three days. If she hasn’t gone into early labour by then, we will need to intervene.’ From past experience I knew that my wife would prefer to avoid such interventions: however, given the fact that she is so far past her due date, it was looking more and more likely as the days progressed that this would be the eventual outcome. My wife then turns to me, ‘but she told me that I can request to give birth today if I want... what do you think?’ I know what I think. I just want this baby out. Seeing my wife so heavy and in such pain and discomfort isn’t a pleasant experience. I can sense that she wants to get this whole thing over and done with. I also know what she thinks but I don’t tell her the obvious. I’m very conscious of the mid-wife’s presence in the room. I need to be careful. I can’t come across as the oppressive Muslim husband whose word is law in the face of his wife’s feeble obedience. I must go out of my way to display our mutual understanding as a ‘happy couple’. It’s quite sad, come to think of it. I feel I have to prove myself out of fear of being labelled. I flip the question back to my wife. ‘How you do feel about it?’ The mid-wife will like that; I quietly think to myself. ‘I’m tired; I just want to finish this.’ I go with it, and we have the midwife arrange her appointment.
My response to the midwife is interesting here as my consciousness of her presence directly shapes the way in which I interact with my wife at the time. Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) explain that people deliberately mould themselves to fit the expectations of the dominant ingroup if they feel the need to do so for whatever reason. I intentionally attempt to distance myself from the negatively viewed image of the dominant Muslim husband whose word is law. I carefully choose my words, fully aware that the mid-wife will interpret them within her framework of acceptance.

Within hours, we are in the hospital. Again my wife repeats her prayers for a sympathetic mid-wife who wouldn’t make her delivery any more difficult than it would already be. The girls are being entertained by my mother at home. They can barely contain their excitement. Mum and Dad are going to bring their first baby brother home. This, by all measures, is going to be far better than the pet they have been constantly begging for over the past few months.

Within minutes the treatment starts to take effect and my wife goes into early labour. A few hours later, and the cries, moans and occasional screams are a clear sign that the contractions are getting more intense, becoming more frequent. As we progressed into the night, the medication being administered for the management of her pain gradually evolves from concentrated painkillers to nitrous oxide gas. My hopes for the laughing gas to be as effective as it was during the birth of our second child quickly diminish as I see her unable to withstand the uncontrollable pangs of pain from the contractions, which are clearly in full swing. ‘I want the epidural! Give me the epidural!!!’ she screams. The midwives are in and out of our bay regularly, and there is clearly some disagreement among them as to what they feel should be done. I am humbled by the midwives’ show of genuine concern for my wife and her baby.
I will divert here slightly to place this story in the wider context. Many Muslims are rather apprehensive in regards to what the future holds for us in the UK. Just as many of the general masses have fallen victim to the false allegations and disproportionate exaggerations of the media tycoons towards Islam, so, too, I feel the Muslims have fallen victim to their mind games. Many of us feel the world is against us: the governments are against us: the people are against us. The attacks that many Muslims (mainly our children and women) are exposed to on a daily basis in the streets, including my own family members on several occasions, only aid in reaffirming such misconceptions (Tellmama, 2018). Racist attacks, hate crimes against Muslims and the relentless media onslaught vilifying Islam to the masses (Vertovec, 2002; and Shah, 2012), in addition to the recent terrorist attacks that have taken place around the world by so-called ‘Muslims’, have put many of us, Muslims and non-Muslims, on a constant state of alert. Feelings of mistrust and insecurity have mounted and compounded post 9/11 and 7/7 (Sahin, 2013; and Shah, 2006). With increasing numbers of Muslims now even being stripped of their citizenships, questions of belonging among us are becoming more and more common. Is the UK, or the West at that, home for us anymore? Are we really from here? Is our time up here? Are we really wanted here? Do we want to be here? (Guardian, 2019)

But what I am witnessing in hospital on this evening could not be further removed from this image. They care for my wife. They genuinely care for the wellbeing of my wife and our baby. As the later stages of a gruelling 18-hour labour develop, so too do the difficulties and interventions by more experienced midwives, doctors, anaesthetists, and paediatric specialists. Each one acts with more professionalism than the preceding. A part of me tries to tell myself that maybe they would act differently if they see how my wife dresses on a daily basis when out on the streets as opposed to being in a hospital bed wearing a gown like every other patient. If they see her all-black abaya and face veil, would they really act towards her as they
are now? But I find the strength to fight these negative whisperings. The nurses can clearly see my beard and my wife’s black gown and head scarf thrown over the arm chair. It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out we are Muslims. So my own ‘woe unto us’ self-pity isn’t really faring well if I look at the situation objectively.

It’s experiences like this at the hospital that remind me so much why I appreciate living here in London and why I feel so fortunate to be British. It reminds me of my responsibility to be a part of society in a productive capacity beyond my role as a professional; to contribute to society and show people what true Islam and real Muslims are like.

However, these experiences feel as though they are too few and far between. The reminders of everyday life in London as a Muslim are far removed from the positivity of that night in the hospital and without doubt eclipse our short-term memories and emotions. My everyday experiences are filled with memories like the attack on my mother on the streets of London in broad day light on more than one occasion; or the coward who swerved across the road in his car playing chicken with my wife as she crossed with our first child in her womb. It is precisely these memories that push me to accept the importance of returning to our Muslim roots, to our Muslim lands, to help our countries develop so that they can too one day not only be on par with the UK but exceed its standards: to find a place we could maybe call home one day.

For many Muslims living in the West, it is a strange position we find ourselves in. Are we British, Muslims, Arabs, Africans or Asians? Will we ever really be accepted into society? In fact, is being accepted really something that we want to strive for?

I am British. However, at times I find aspects of my personal values at odds with those of the society in which I live. Recent changes to laws even threaten to categorise us as being ‘extreme’ if we are not careful in how we articulate and present our views and beliefs. Whilst writing my accounts in this paper, I have had
to write, read, re-write and re-read several times until I felt satisfied the content is not only academically acceptable but paradoxically more so at times politically acceptable, impervious to ‘misinterpretation’.

So then where do we go? I no longer hold the passport to the country where I was born and fear arrest by the British authorities if I dare return to visit family, friends or aid in helping to develop places like Yemen (my country of origin) due to the political turmoil and war that has torn the country apart. As for the many other Muslim countries, the reality is we (Muslim Britons) may always be regarded as expatriate workers on temporary residency permits: there to provide a service. Therefore, setting roots for our families and future generations becomes much more complicated. But again, if we do not return to those lands to help raise their standards, who will? Such is our dilemma.

As I watch on helplessly, the medical staff care for my wife and our new born baby. I am able to enjoy the moment, yet all of these thoughts are swirling in the back of my mind: I am aware of them the whole time.

**Early memories from Manchester**

Malcolm X reflects: ‘even though we might be *with* them, we weren’t considered *of* them.’ (X and Haley, 1999: 28). As I was growing up, I could relate to this. During the first sixteen years of my life living in Manchester, I heard so many racial slurs directed towards non-whites, many times by my own friends. They weren’t necessarily malicious but enough for them to have the decency (or at least that is how they portrayed it) to turn to me when I happened to be standing beside them and tell me that I wasn’t intended to be the recipient of the racist joke or outright verbal attack. It was usually innocent people passing by or shop owners, for example. There was always a feeling of awkwardness when this happened.
However, I think I subconsciously found comfort in reminding myself that I wasn’t being directly attacked or that I was accepted in their group as the ‘token darky’. But like I said, deep down I think I knew I was never considered ‘of’ them.’

These feelings festered below the surface after the devastating 9/11 attacks. Islam was coming into the spotlight, and I was the only Muslim in the school at the time. I specifically recall a member of the British military coming into school to give a presentation to portray the dire situation in Iraq, as they wanted us to perceive it, and the need for the UK to enter the war with the US almost as an act of noblesse oblige. I was questioning the officer out of genuine curiosity for the justification of military intervention given the potential bloodbath that lay ahead. I had absolutely no conscious inclinations to attempt to represent Muslims in Iraq nor was I anti-establishment. I was simply a passionate teenager who wanted to innocently speak out and have his opinion heard, but I didn’t feel the spokesman from the armed forces was quite prepared to be asked such questions. After the presentation, a friend of mine, Tim, told me that he overheard the English teacher joking with the officer in response to my questions. He was openly mocking the fact that it was no surprise that I (the single Muslim in the school) was the only one in the room questioning the rationale behind the military intervention.

Looking back at the incident with the military officer, the work of Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) comes to mind as they discuss the culture of asking whether or not an individual is ‘one of us’, referred to more formally as prototypicality (Steffens, Haslam, and Reicher, 2014a). Although there is no obligation to conform to norms and expectations of in-group prototypes, there is no doubt that for many, actions and behaviours will always be interpreted within this framework of acceptance. Upon realising their ‘misfit’ status, some may decide to move on to different groups or organisations, whilst others will choose to mould themselves to fit the expectations of the in-group. At the time, I was not at the stage in my life where I
was ready to make such a decision. It was too early for that in my journey of leadership identity formation. That is not to say, however, that these experiences were not building up in my memory. I draw upon them later in life when I finally make that conscious decision in relation to associating myself with a group.

The work of Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) is interesting as it suggests several things: for example, identities are formed/moulded and the process of formation by its very nature is a process of change. Therefore, identities also change. In fact, this process is continuous and ends only when our lives end. Our lives are a story of the formation of our identities (Shah, 2006). Also, context has a huge impact on our identity formation. Where we are, where we have been and where we will end up in the future are all highly influential factors in how our identities are formed. With context comes exposure to different people, groups, organisations, cultures, values, and beliefs. As people progress in their own individual journeys, this blend of contextual factors will always be unique and inevitably shape who they become. The relationship between identity and context reflects the symbiotic nature of the two. If contexts affect our identities to such an extent, is it possible that we have multiple identities that are dependent upon where we are and who we are within more immediate situations? Burke (2006) flips this question on its head and asks can it not be the case that our identities affect the context itself, adapting where we must, yet influencing where we can?

It would seem that my questioning the officer in this particular context raised the issue of my ‘belonging’ within the school. Challenging the officer and the English teacher relative to the justifications for war on a Muslim country seems to have accentuated my ‘otherness’. I never really had any issues with this English teacher, yet in this particular setting my actions seemed to raise questions over whether or not I was one of them (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). My prototypical misfit was immediately highlighted as my actions were interpreted in light of the nature of the
presentation given by the military officer and my stance on the subject (Steffens et al., 2014a).

It is funny how reflecting on one thing leads to another. Now that I’ve mentioned Tim, I remember once when his father, a fireman, made a joke right there in front of me when he found out I was an Arab. The funny thing is that I reacted to it as I did to so many of the other incidents over the years: water off a duck’s back. Moments later, he returned to apologise to me in the kitchen after being given an earful by his wife in the living room who had overheard the joke. Poor guy must have felt like a fool. I know he had no ill feelings toward me: after all, I was in his house, and a close friend of his son.

I was very close to Dan, another high school buddy. I would pass by his house on the way to school when I managed to catch the early bus, which was on most mornings. Many a time, I would be invited in to wait for him in the living room, as he was usually late. He’d normally come stumbling down the stairs after around 10 minutes of waiting with smudges of toothpaste around his mouth and clumps of wet gel, obviously missed with the comb, unevenly spread in his hair. On this particular morning, not long after the military personnel paid us a visit at the school, we were already watching live updates with televised clips of the first day of the invasion in Iraq. The whole thing was starting to affect me. I couldn’t get my head around the rationale for the war. Yet there I was, standing in Dan’s living room with his father sitting all smug on his leather arm chair with his feet up on the foot rest toasting his toes in front of the fire. His large mug of piping hot tea on the table next to him whilst he sat glued to the screen rubbing his hands together in excitement, telling me to get a good look at ‘our boys going in’. I felt disgusted: angered! Dan’s father was a nice man. He was tall and slim with a dark, thick, bushy moustache. He’d always smile. I would sometimes have dinner over at their house and his wife, Kathy,
would drop me off home every now and again to save me getting the bus. They were an extremely welcoming family.

I suppose the events that were unfolding were much more sensitive than the blatant racism that I faced on the streets. Perhaps it was the military interventions in Muslim lands over the years that was bringing out my feelings of wanting to support those in need. I could take the racist rants from ignorant thugs on the streets, but when it was the state doing it on a much larger scale, with much more serious consequences, my feelings drastically changed. There is literature (for example Ellmers, De Gilder and Haslam, 2004; and Eggins, Haslam, and Reynolds, 2002) that strongly suggests that, as leaders, we feel the urge to associate ourselves with the weak, especially if we feel we can support them. Feelings of loyalty and allegiance were taking root, even if I wasn’t fully aware of them at the time.

In year 11, academically, I was in the ‘Gifted and Talented’ programme and considered to be amongst the most able in our cohort. I wasn’t exactly a swot. I had my fair share of being called in to the Head’s office over my five years, but it was never anything really serious. I had very good relationships with my teachers and enjoyed a high level of popularity amongst class mates across our year group. In fact, it was the boys and girls in year 11 who chose me to become the Head Boy in our final year at school with an overwhelming majority of the votes. However, the powers that be at the school decided I was neither the best candidate to become Head Boy nor even Deputy Head Boy. Instead, I was given ‘Prefect’ status. This was a level higher than the ‘Monitors’ which was the default status of every student in year 11. Prefects made up around 30% of the year 11 intake. I never quite got my head around why the school decided to go against the vote of the students. I never really questioned it at the time. Perhaps I just dealt with the situation in exactly the same manner as I had trained myself to deal with the racism I faced on the streets with my own friends. The same thing happened with Yu Yan. You can probably guess
from her name that her parents are originally from the Far East. Instead, Sarah and Patrick were chosen to become Head Girl and Head Boy (respectively). I don’t think there is a need to spell out the colour of their skin.

I find it strange how I only remember such incidents when reminiscing on growing up in Manchester as, at the time, I considered myself to be happy and these were not really things that affected me. Or perhaps they did: maybe I just blocked them out?

These were the early stages of realisation (even if subconsciously) that I was slowly falling out of love with the group that I associated myself with for so long. Their actions (and mine) categorised me and were forcing me to make conscious decisions. I could see that I did not fit where I was. I was different. And this was one of the early stages in which my leadership identity began to form.

This change that takes place within leaders through their journeys of development is discussed in the works of Lord and Hall (2005). Their rationale for placing the leader’s self-identity at the centre of the development process is threefold. Firstly, self-identities provide structures and contexts around which knowledge can be understood. Secondly, our identities are our main motivational driving forces. Finally, our stories, values and beliefs can all be tapped into via our identities which further demystify why leaders act the way they do and what factors are at play.

Lord and Hall (2005) believe that leadership skills develop progressively from micro-level everyday skills to deeper or higher level systems thinking skills that influence how we behave, think and perceive our social realities. The rationale explicated for this progression is a three stage process in the development of a leader’s identity. The first level is recognising one’s uniqueness at the most basic level in society: ‘individual internalization’. This process of individual internalisation is what I believe
was taking place during my early years in Manchester. Komives et al (2005) refer to this stage of leadership identity development as *Awareness*. Relational recognition and collective identity are the two stages that follow.

**The Move That Changed Everything**

To this day, I am perplexed at how quickly I was able to let go of my life in Manchester, at how seamlessly I adopted my new environment and left behind 16 years of memories and experiences. Moving to London, after finishing secondary school, was to become a major turning point in my life. I was exposed to a segment of society that enjoyed rich cultural diversity. In South London, there were people from all races and religions. However, I found it interesting to see the different cliques around my school and even around the streets in South London. On the whole, South Asians would be with South Asians, Blacks with Blacks and Whites with Whites. You would always find individuals who crossed the boundaries and found themselves more comfortable with different groups, and they were generally accepted. I remember a pale kid from year 11 with ginger hair. He would hang out with us at our usual spot on the way home through one of the private estates. You could spot him a mile off among the Asian boys, but they loved him.

When I first joined the school fresh from Manchester, although I would see groups of young Asians and Blacks walking around the school, I found myself more at ease with the White kids. That’s all I ever knew from my early years in Manchester. As I carefully observed these new groups of Asians and Blacks, I clearly remember a definite sense of aura that surrounded them. They didn’t have to say anything: it instantly hit me. The way they carried themselves emanated a sense of pride in just being who they were. Secretly admiring their contagious sense of confidence made me instinctively feel proud.
In my new environment, with an increased exposure to Muslims, I started learning more about Islam. My identity as a Muslim started to become more prominent. I began praying, making new friends and even donning some traditional Islamic garments fused with my South London ghetto attire. Thinking back, I laugh and cringe at how I must have looked. The people around me in school noticed the change. Victoria, a friend, asked me what had happened to me. ‘You used to be normal’, she said. That response, I will never forget. If I had stayed on in Manchester, I would probably have gone on living life in my previous bubble of self-denial. I was offered a place at one of the top colleges in the North, and I am sure I would have gone straight on to university to complete a degree maybe in law or even medicine. I certainly had the grades. I am forever grateful that the opportunity to move to London came when it did. I was sixteen and ready to begin my first year at college to study my A-Levels.

Things changed drastically. I was no longer the token dark-skinned Muslim in the class (or the school for that matter). From sharing a classroom with blonde haired, blue eyed Mathew, Thomas, Becky and Kate, I was now being taught by a teacher of Asian origin and sharing tables with Khalid, Javaid, Antione and Bushra. Just months before, I was sitting my exams in the hall of a Roman Catholic high school, now I was preparing for assessments with Muslims, Jews, Christians, Atheists, Agnostics, Hindus and Sikhs.

Reminiscing on his childhood, Malcolm X recalls, ‘...they were the friendliest white people that I had ever seen. In some ways, though, we children noticed, and, when we were back at home, discussed that they were different from us.’ (X and Haley, 1999: 17) When I read Malcolm X’s comments, I laughed to myself as I could instantly relate. Paradoxically, this was how I felt toward fellow Asians and Muslims when I first moved to South London: I felt out of place. As I started crossing the boundary myself, my new friends, most of whom were now Asians and Blacks, would
come to know me as ‘White Boy’ even though I was darker in complexion than most of them. I’m not exactly sure what it was. Perhaps it was the way I walked or the way I spoke. Maybe it was the views I had on certain things in life. Whatever it was, it didn’t really matter. I wasn’t one of them: not yet anyway.

With time, I learned to adjust to my new life in London. There was almost an atmospheric halo of strength and honour that surrounded those who had pride in their origins and faith, who felt dignified in their ability to speak their second language openly, who portrayed a sense of satisfaction in visibly declaring and practising their faith. Seeing them have such a level of self-confidence in a school environment was electrifying. They seemed to defy all the laws I had known about fitting in and being part of the ‘in-crowd’. The theories of moulding ourselves to fit the prototypical ideal discussed by Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) and Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, Platow, Fransen, Yang, Ryan, Jetten, Peters and Boen (2014b) did not seem to apply to this group. Or perhaps they did. Perhaps, the fit they were moulding themselves to was totally different from what I was accustomed to. Perhaps, I was unable to recognise the prototype they were striving to embody. I was now at a stage in my leadership identity development where I was beginning to recognise the distinct boundaries between groups within groups. I continued to explore my own identity and ask questions.

Going back to Lord and Hall’s (2005) three stage process in leadership identity development, I believe this phase of my life illustrates elements of the second stage: ‘relational recognition’. It signals the point at which individuals begin to understand who they are in relation to those who are also surrounding them. Komives et al.’s (2005) grounded theory study suggests that this second stage, which they refer to as ‘Exploration/Engagement’, is the point at which individuals associate themselves with a group and actively engage in activities as part of the group. Within 3 years of moving to London, I was on a plane for the first time in my life going ‘back home’.
This journey was one of my first major steps of ‘actively engaging’ in an activity as part of my new group.

Alone, with little money, practically no Arabic, and no experience of any country other than the UK, going to Yemen was something that many in my family tried to talk me out of. They thought I was going through a ‘phase’. They were right, but nothing was going to stop me. I spent just under 4 months in Yemen and the experience changed much in me. I discovered my place of birth, met relatives for the first time, learned to survive alone. I wouldn’t go as far as to say that I ‘discovered myself’, but I felt so much more confident in who I was upon my return to London. I spoke broken Arabic and returning to live in my country of birth for the best part of the spring and summer of that year automatically gave me a respectable level of understanding surrounding our customs and traditions as Muslims and Arab descendants. I was able to answer questions people had about my background. In subsequent years, I visited Yemen regularly while on extended summer breaks from my university in London. I developed friendships and got to know the city of Aden very well. I naturally developed my communication skills in Arabic. Consequently, I became more and more comfortable with my identity as a Muslim and an Arab.

My position at the time in London was similar to the scenario with the military officer and English teacher several years earlier in Manchester. The new ingroup was judging my fit against their understanding of what it takes to be one of them (Steffens et al., 2014b; and Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). However, this time I was consciously making an effort to change myself in order to be accepted. I took the drastic step of going out of my way (several thousand miles to be precise) to learn about my culture in order to demonstrate to my group that I was worthy.

My journey is an illustration of the process one goes through in identifying with a group in society and working towards becoming a part of that group. Tajfel (1978)
developed the concept of social identity theory to explain how people categorise themselves in relation to their places in society. An individual’s own place in society would be based on characteristics that sometimes are not chosen by the individuals, rather they are inherited, for instance, age, origin and race. Groups then work to enhance and protect their ‘distinctiveness and positive social identity’ (Hogg, 2001: 186). The basic human need for positive self-reinforcement is the driving force behind group formations with distinctive characteristics, and social groups do exactly just that: they satisfy the need for self-esteem through a feeling of belonging (Hogg, 2001).

Thus, the social world we live in is divided into groups: our group is the ingroup and the rest are outgroups. This process of categorising people is referred to as ‘social comparison’ (Ellmers et al., 2004: 462). In order to be part of a group, there are rules and expectations. Abide by them and we are more likely to be perceived as a prototypical fit and consequently be accepted. However, if we fall out of line, we run the danger of being rejected by our group and relegated as a misfit. It goes without saying then that this cycle accentuates ingroup prototypical similarities. The same applies to the differences that are perceived toward those from outgroups. ‘This overall process is called depersonalization’ (Hogg, 2001: 187).

There was an unwritten rule among the Muslims in my new school: one had to have a minimum level of base knowledge in relation to their heritage and ethnicity, otherwise you got slapped with the label ‘white boy’. For me, going ‘back home’ to Yemen was a crucial part of this journey of acceptance. The process of ‘social comparison’ (Ellmers et al., 2004: 462) meant that my new ‘ingroup’ were not ready to fully embrace me until I fulfilled this criterion.
My first taste of leadership within the community

Although moving to London was an important part of my leader identity development, I do not feel it was the most crucial stage in shaping my thoughts, values and beliefs. Whilst growing up in London and going through such a challenging stage in my life, I received a lot of guidance from those around me: I am referring particularly to the voluntary Muslim youth workers in South London. I developed a lot of respect for them and the work that they were doing. They were mostly successful individuals who had achieved much in life or were clearly poised to do so: for example, as consultants, medics and managers. They obtained no material gains from sacrificing their free time on a weekly basis and sometimes for days at a time on retreats. They self-funded the youth organisation. Their aims were quite clear and were reiterated regularly through both words and actions: stay away from drugs, gangs and trouble; remain focused on studies, become successful and achieve excellence. However, there was one element that underpinned everything. Remember who you are! A Muslim! Never forget that. Do not for one second allow that to take a back seat in your life. Before you are English, Yemeni, Jamaican or Pakistani: remember you are a Muslim! Your destiny will be established upon your foundations; secured by your roots.

Over the years, I would be exposed more and more to the projects founded by the voluntary community youth workers, which further reaffirmed my admiration of the work that they were carrying out for their communities, for our communities, for us. The vast majority were charity based, including youth projects; aid relief organisations; legal representation and advice; marital support services; educational support in the form of booster clubs, weekend schools and even full-time main-stream schools; rights campaigners; financial support mechanisms: the list goes on. There is a whole world of voluntary community support networks operating in the background behind the scenes of the everyday rat race in London.
Having a purpose in life and finding a project to be a part of was the bedrock of being an active Muslim.

The ‘War on Terror’ quickly became the mantra of the media and the British Establishment. As young Muslims, we witnessed fellow Muslims being arrested without charge, Muslim organisations being suffocated by the authorities and Muslim lands being torn apart by Western military might. There was no doubt in our minds that the ‘War on Terror’ was a politically more palatable way of waging ‘War on Islam’. It was excruciating to be young, full of energy and ready to stand up for ‘our own’ and yet constantly restrained by our local community leaders and scholars. To sit and listen to the accusations brought against us with, apparently, no chance of defence was agonising. At times, it felt like we were helplessly watching a play from the stands in a theatre. To be in such an unbearable position as a youth was torture. Of course, what I now know is that we were not taught to sit helplessly. We were, in fact, being taught to channel our energies through productive means. Many of our leaders were training us to use the language the establishment understood. Our leaders struggled (and still do) to contain our energy, passion and anger. Convincing us to organise protests, start petitions and facilitate community discussions was always going to be an uphill battle. As Muslim youths growing up in the West, all we could see was our own blood being indiscriminately spilt ‘back home’ and, over time, it was something that the media and political rhetoric had taught us to accept as a matter of course. This, however, was in stark contrast to the equally barbaric acts of terrorism on Western soil, which were often used as triggers to make changes to laws, strip citizens (mainly Muslims) of their rights and even initiate wars in Muslims lands.

The news of terror attacks on white Westerners closer to home would rightfully anger Muslims and cause many to go out of their way to stand in solidarity with the families of the victims. Yet we would see these very same Muslims simply tut and
sigh when hearing or reading of the atrocities committed against their own people. This is something we grew to accept as part and parcel of life.

As emotionally charged teens, we would often discuss and dream of the day Islam would ‘return’ to the greatness that it once enjoyed when we could raise our heads high once again and hold on firmly to our beliefs without fear of being labelled as extreme, radical or any of the other pejorative terms that have been coined for us. Malcolm X’s description of the ‘house negroes’ and the ‘field negroes’ reminds me of how so many of us viewed ourselves during those years. Malcolm X explains that the ‘house negroes’ were those who were happy with the crumbs thrown at them by their oppressors in the knowledge that their brethren, the field negroes, breaking their backs in the field every day, were worse off. But the field negroes dared to do what the house negroes would never do: dream of a better future, of escape. They dared to challenge the status quo. As Muslim youths, we scowled at the very thought of being labelled house negroes. We wanted to be those tough field negroes. We wanted to see ourselves as those who dared to dream whilst many of those educated, well-to-do, bourgeoisie Muslims sold us out, content with the establishment crumbs. During my earlier experiences in Manchester, whilst feeling compelled to speak out against the military interventions, my actions and feelings were not as strong as they were at this stage in my life. After several years in London, my leadership identity was more deeply rooted as I was more aware of who I was and where I stood on certain issues in life in addition to where I physically stood in the societal break down of groups and races. The idea of identifying with an unfavourable group is something that people are attracted to if they feel they can contribute to improving their condition (Ellmers et al., 2004). My feelings and the ‘side’ that I chose, support the argument that being the underdog is a motivating factor for working to bring about change (Eggins et al., 2002).
Whilst reading Mandela’s (1995: 112) views when he was a young activist, I could relate to his description of the 'African Elite' that was 'cultured', 'progressive' and 'civilized' yet did little more than create an illusion that reaffirmed the status quo and helped a lucky few. During a discussion I had with a volunteer community leader during that period of my life, he said something so profound that it stuck with me all of these years: ‘It is not the poor uneducated farmer working in the hills of Afghanistan who will be questioned about what’s happening in the world on the Day of Judgement. It is you and I. *Everything* that has been placed at our disposal: education, wealth, opportunities, and freedoms are blessings that will ultimately come back to haunt us if we do not utilise them to benefit those in need. The young leader within me was being exposed to messages reaffirming the importance of our responsibility to ‘us’, to the collective. My leadership identity development was still far from the level of maturity of Lord and Hall’s (2005) highest level: collective identity. However, the seed was being planted, and over the years it would germinate and take root.

I shudder to think what I and many of my companions could have become at that vulnerable age were we not taken in and nurtured by those dedicated community leaders who harnessed our energy and passion. I am forever grateful for being blessed with their presence in my life. I am not quite sure what it was, but I figure I was identified from quite an early stage as I quickly realised that I was being invited to social gatherings and even more formal meetings, many of which were invite only. I responded to this positively and viewed it as a privilege. I was young, still trying to firmly establish my identity having been raised without a father figure at home. Suddenly, I was surrounded by successful professionals who were genuinely dedicated to a cause they felt so strongly about, and I was one who could bear witness to reaping the fruits of their efforts. I gradually began to view them as my family and my confidence as a Muslim grew with the passing of each day. They were forever encouraging me to develop myself spiritually, physically and academically.
They even provided me with financial assistance to complete my postgraduate studies at university. I was invited to regular meetings to discuss the affairs of the local Muslims and the work that was being carried out; the areas that needed to be developed; future projects that needed to be considered; the progress of other groups and movements across London; the importance of keeping on top of things as individuals; ensuring that our families are given their dues; ensuring the spiritual aspects of our development are not neglected and that we do not lose sight of what is happening around the world and the importance of our work as part of the bigger picture.

The central tenet of Komives et al.’s (2005) grounded theory study is how leadership identity develops over six stages, which is more detailed than that of Day and Harrison’s later study (2007) and Lord and Hall’s study (2005) already cited above. My experiences above show evidence of stages 2: ‘Exploration/Engagement’ and stage 3: ‘Leader Identified’ – leaders are explicitly named and designated. The narrative demonstrates how my leadership identity was becoming more entrenched as I was becoming more actively involved in voluntary Muslim community work. Study participants in Sahin’s research revealed the desire of young Muslim Britons to seek out those who appeared to be striving to carry forward the ‘Muslim cause’ as faith became a central component in their journeys identity construction (Sahin, 2013). As I matured, I was nominated to lead on projects such as strategy meetings and entire sections within youth organisations.

I do, however, question Komives et al.’s (2005) claim of their six stage model being linear as there are aspects of the latter stages that I believe were being instilled within me from a very early stage, even if I did not have a nominated position of leadership to demonstrate this deeper level of understanding. Stage 4 in their model, ‘Leadership Differentiated’, is explained as leadership being viewed beyond the limited scope of a positional role to being a collective responsibility. Stage 5,
‘Generativity’, is described as the point at which leaders begin to see the bigger picture as purpose and passion now become more prominent with beliefs and values becoming the bedrock of one’s leadership identity. It is more about the cause rather than the group or organisation. Both aspects I believe are present in my accounts (even if in their early stages), which suggests that leadership identity development does not necessarily have to take place in a linear progression as outlined in Komives et al.’s (2005) six stage model.

There was a sense of having a greater purpose in life; a feeling of accomplishment in knowing that we were going against the grain in resisting the typical London rat race lifestyle. There was a sense of pride knowing that we had higher aims in life. There was a sense of honour knowing that we were striving for a greater cause. Many knew about the projects, yet few had the determination, drive and bravery to participate fully. I say bravery because over the years there were more and more reports of Muslims being detained, many times unlawfully and without evidence, for terror related allegations: people from our own communities, our own friends! We knew that the establishment placed more emphasis on the danger of ideas than that of numerical strength. Although this added an element of risk to what we were now engaged in, it only strengthened our resolve to continue in our efforts. We were not doing anything wrong. Never did we indoctrinate people with poisonous views or encourage violence. Never did we inspire hatred in young Muslims. Never did we embolden the younger generation to break the law and bring shame upon the Muslim community. However, we had a lot to cause us concern as the negative media hype and political rhetoric directed toward Muslims and Islam quickly spiralled. We would regularly talk about what mechanisms needed to be put into place for our families, should any of us receive the dreaded knock at the door (that’s if it wasn’t kicked in, of course). We would even discuss this with our families. It was (and still is) a reality that we must live with. However, we understood that the fear of suffering will always be worse than the suffering itself. We trained ourselves to
voluntarily face these risks, because doing so forever gives us power over them. The shock of witnessing the establishment hitting out at the first few victims indeed struck fear in us. However, the more common it became, the looser the grip of fear also became. Being wrongfully arrested and/or imprisoned over the years became a badge of honour. When will they understand?

Looking back, I believe that the challenges I faced demonstrate how the different aspects of my identity became more prominent at different periods in my life. Armstrong and Mitchell’s study (2017) presented evidence that the process of identity formation is an ‘iterative... reciprocal and negotiated process of self-authoring’; iterative because the leaders demonstrated the process of going back and forth as they developed through their experiences; reciprocal and negotiated because contexts and other individuals heavily influenced identity formation. This ‘identity shifting’ was seen as essential in order to navigate through the various challenges and contexts leaders come across. The move from Manchester to London clearly changed much in me. My new settings, including those surrounding me at the time, had a profound effect upon how I explored myself and established the foundations for my leadership identity early on. My prior experiences in Manchester, I believe, were just as important as they provided a backdrop for me to appreciate my newer settings in London and reflect upon the differences.

The belief that identities are not fixed is supported throughout the leadership literature. The notion of shifting identities not only applies to identities shifting over longer periods of time as people grow and develop; it is also more spontaneous as people and surroundings change within both our personal and professional lives on a daily basis (Shah, 2006; and Thomas-Gregory 2014). Therefore, identities can be multiple (Ellmers et al., 2004; Day and Harrison, 2007; Ashford and DeRue, 2010; Priest and Middleton, 2016; and Lord and Hall, 2005; Komives et al., 2005; and Komives et al., 2006). Van Knippenberg et al. (2004) prefer not to use the term
‘multiple identities’ which suggests switching from one to another: instead, they refer to identity as ‘being a collection of modular processing structures (self-schemas)’ (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004: 827). Rather than identities changing, aspects of identities become more pronounced at different times (Priest and Middleton, 2016) with only one identity (or self-schema) being active (or more pronounced) at any one time (Day and Harrison, 2007). This is an interesting point as it suggests that the aspects of my leadership identity related to my ethnicity and religious affiliation were always present, even in Manchester. My move to London and the change in the political landscape simply provided the stimuli for these aspects of my identity to become more pronounced.

Following on from this, if our self-schemas (or identities) are multiple, are they neatly compartmentalised and only called forth when the situation requires them or are they organised in a more complex, overlapping structure in which they all ultimately influence one another? Van Knippenberg et al. (2004) believe the latter to be closer to the truth. Depending on the context, differing aspects of one’s identity will be called forth to varying degrees (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Ashford and DeRue, 2010; and Epitropaki et al., 2017). Does not my role as a teacher influence my role as a middle manager and vice versa? Am I only ever a teacher, head of department, father, husband, son or community leader at any one given time? The answer, of course, is no. Although one identity may become more pronounced at a particular moment, my other roles, identities and responsibilities do not simply disappear. This is one of the main reasons why I feel my accounts are important in understanding my leadership identity development. My paternal instincts without doubt influence my roles within education and voluntary community work. My understanding and appreciation of voluntary community work influence how I raise my children. Activity in any one area of this intricate network of self-schemas will ultimately cause activity and effects in others.
Over the years, as laws have become more draconian and media campaigns more intensifies, the sense of distrust has developed on both sides. We have trained ourselves, our families and even our children how to react to situations: how to express our feelings openly. We trust no one.

Years passed, I matured and my skills and experience became increasingly valued. From being a ‘helper’ on the periphery, I was now leading annual strategy meetings, leading entire subsections of the youth organisation and my views, advice and recommendations were given much more weight.

The interview – Am I the ‘right fit?’

I look on at Hamed, the head teacher, smiling and nodding as my responses to his questions naturally flow. You can feel it when an interview goes well; and this was going very well. I felt totally in control. The head’s next question made me realise what I had been doing for the first 20 minutes: ‘Ok so it’s my turn to interview you now.’ He began to shuffle through his papers as he looked down at his desk. I had been totally dominating the conversation (or at least he allowed me to). If truth be told, I was not really concerned too much about the interview. I had been in the field long enough to know that anything over five or six years of teaching experience is considered ‘significant’, which I already had at the time. Armed with experience and higher degrees meant that securing a teaching position should not have been too difficult in theory. I was not being over confident; it is just that experience and exposure had simply taught me enough to understand that adequately qualified and experienced teachers are not exactly flooding the employment market. Education is not for the soft-hearted.

I had just spent the last 5 years working on my Master’s and Doctorate dreaming of progressing onto tertiary education as a lecturer one day. I had experienced
teaching in the Primary and Further Education sectors. I had no interest in continuing as an English Language teacher. My most recent experience was one of the most difficult periods in my professional (and personal) life at a vocational institute that claimed to the world that it was an undergraduate establishment. A bitter lie, as I quickly came to learn. However, I found myself tangled in the web of office politics and bureaucracy with the crippling paralysis of fear to move on. I can confidently say that they were the longest three years of my life. My experiences at that place were to have a profound effect on how I viewed future opportunities.

Just days before the interview with Hamed, I was offered a post at a university as an undergraduate lecturer teaching education related modules, something I had dreamt of for many years. Ironically, though, I did not accept immediately, and a few days later I found myself being interviewed by Hamed for a teaching post at a secondary school. It felt like a step back but again life had taught me to keep my options open, so I did. There was one thing that stood out to me about the school: A well-funded British curriculum school founded on Islamic values.

By establishing the first part of the interview with my questions, I ascertained whether I felt the remainder of the interview was worth my time; it most certainly was. All of the signs seemed positive. Maybe it was my lack of eagerness to please him that impressed; or possibly my clear focus in asking him the questions; perhaps it was just my ruthlessness in probing deeper to determine whether or not this school was right for me.

‘So why our School?’ asked Hamed. I respond, ‘If you’d have told me 6 months ago that I would be willing to apply for a teaching post in a secondary school, I would have said there is no way of that happening, especially after being offered a position in a university as a faculty member. I probably would have laughed at myself. The truth is Hamed, I’m ruthlessly searching for the ‘right’ institution. I don’t just want
to be another member of the team. I want to make a difference; I want my presence to be felt; I want my skills to genuinely contribute to something beyond that of my classroom or lecture theatre. I’m on a good package and I could easily stay where I am for another year or so, complete my doctorate and then move onto a larger university with an even better offer than the current one put forward.’ I tried to sound as humble as I could when I explained this, but at the same time I wanted him to clearly understand my situation. I continued, ‘but I don’t just want to be another number on the books; another teacher or lecturer tucked away in his office in a small corner of an institution with no real presence. I was heavily involved in youth work when living in London, and work with a real purpose is an important part of who I am.’ His smile continued to grow and his nods were more frequent.

Looking back, that was the first interview I have ever had where I think I genuinely wanted the interviewer to understand what I was looking for; I needed him to understand what I was about right from the very beginning. This was the first time in professional settings, where I was in a position that I had the confidence to openly display elements of my leadership identity by demonstrating my deeper level of thinking and appreciation for understanding the purpose in what we do as educators. It was an opportunity to display how this concept was a central aspect of my life inside and outside school. I had so much pent-up frustration that had built up over the previous three years of working in what felt like a professional prison. I couldn’t hold it all in. It all just came flooding out and seemed to manifest itself as raw passion.

The interview continued and Hamed did eventually get round to asking me his questions. At the end of the interview, I was offered the job on the spot! It took around two weeks of email exchanges, WhatsApp messages and phone calls to come to a final agreement on all of the finer details, but we eventually got there. If I was brutally honest with myself, deep down I knew the only thing that really
appealed to me at the university was the title of the post. Neither the feeling that I got from the university nor the overall ethos attracted me. There were a number of issues that strongly contradicted much of what I believe in at my core. This was the first experience I had of looking beyond the actual title of a post to establish whether or not I was actually going to fit into the institution. My leadership identity was now influencing how I viewed job opportunities in relation to how well they would fit around my core beliefs. My identity as a leader was no longer about feelings; it was now having tangible effects on important decisions that I was making in life. It was a first for me: an interview where I sensed both parties genuinely sizing each other up, for want of a better word. The standard JD (job description) was not the chosen measure. We were both trying to establish whether or not I would fit into the school’s ‘in-group’.

As noted earlier, In-group prototypicality is a term used to refer to and establish who is and who is not one of us (Steffens et al., 2014b; Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). My interview is an example of how in-group prototypicality does not simply apply within the organisation to existing members of the team. It begins right from the recruitment process for many (Hains et al., 2008). It is a two-way process both for groups looking at potential new members and also new members looking at potential groups to join. ‘Organisational fit’ in relation to the company’s culture is something that is used to decide whether a candidate is the ‘right person for our company’ regardless of how well their skill set fits the job requirements or JD. Essentially, it is a case of ‘is she or he one of us?’ (or is there at least the potential to mould him/her?) (Tooms et al. 2010; and Mitchell and Armstrong, 2017).

It was about fitting in, knowing my potential future leader and he knowing who I was. If I really know my leader, I can take being reprimanded even if the reprimand is disproportionate or even completely misdirected. I can make excuses for him or her and forgive her/him. If I know my leader, I will be ready to dedicate and sacrifice
my efforts wholeheartedly. If I know my leader, my skills, experience, passion and knowledge are at his/her disposal. But only if I truly know and trust my leader.

Likewise, I need my leader to understand me, my purpose in life: to appreciate my passion for our cause as Muslims; to value my dedication and clearly understand that I have no ulterior motive in my zeal to bond: to appreciate the efforts that are poured into my work. Therefore, some level of forethought must be given to any action that could potentially affect our relationship for the worse, which could be to the detriment of our vision. I agree with Collinson (2005), who explains that this clarity in the leader-follower relationship creates an atmosphere whereby followers are more ready to accept the influence that leaders exert given they are construed as the right person to lead. Teachers’ commitment is central to a school’s capacity to succeed (Geisjel et al., 2002: 232). The foundation upon which this commitment is established is the leadership style of the principals in schools (Hussein and da Costa, 2008). There are many teachers who claim that their commitment to their schools is in actual fact a commitment to their leaders within the school (Joffres, 1998: 170). For teachers working in Muslim faith schools, this is a particularly pertinent point. The emotional ties that teachers feel in Muslim faith schools with their ‘special mission’ given the largely non-Muslim, western societies that they operate within provides a platform from which high levels of commitment can be established (Hussein and da Costa, 2008).

Sowing the seeds of our future leaders – A group’s distinctiveness is what unites them.

As the soothing call to stand for prayer from the towering minarets flows through the streets and between the buildings, I walk to the mosque in preparation with Suhail, the new deputy head of our school. It is the beginning of the academic year and we are both new recruits. ‘I don’t think some of our teachers understand just
how lucky we are, Suhail. Many of our boys are the children of some very affluent and influential people in our communities! This isn’t just some romantic dream that we are trying to attach to an everyday job; we’re genuinely cultivating the ground and planting the seeds for our future leaders!’ Since moving out of London, this is one of my first opportunities to have a real conversation like this with members of our new team. I’m keen to start developing a culture of higher level thinking and understanding amongst us and also to set the tone for myself, even if I am a new comer. I want to get an idea of how Suhail (and others) think; very much like the process in the interview I suppose. Is he one of us or is he just another number? Does he have a real purpose or is he still trying to find one? Is he in it just for the ‘experience’?

I can see how my accounts may come across as nothing more than the ramblings of someone suffering from their own delusions of grandeur (‘planting the seeds of future leaders’; ‘having a true purpose’). However, almost all of the successful people whose lives I have read about; whose accomplishments I have learned from, and whose truly astonishing achievements I have benefitted from demonstrated signs of delusional grandeur. That is, of course, until they realised their ambitions and thus, in retrospect, their delusions were actually the foundations of their self-fulfilling prophecies. In my mind, there is no doubt that we are laying the foundations of our future leaders, and there will come a day when we will be able to look back and realise that we were simply fulfilling our own prophecies.

Suhail turns to me, smiles and raises his eyebrows. I can see it in his eyes; he gave me that look! We can spot each other a mile off. We just sense it. I’m not alone; he’s another community leader. I seize the opportunity and continue. ‘Did you know…’ Suhail asks, ‘that we’re one of very few schools supported by the state that provides a Western education with an Islamic ethos?’ ‘Seriously?’ I ask in amazement. Initially, I find it hard to believe. Suhail goes on, ‘There aren’t many of these
academies that exist. It’s the two elements rolled into one that makes the school unique: having an Islamic ethos work alongside the British curriculum in a well-funded and well-equipped school is rare. Sure there are lots of Islamic faith schools out here, but the vast majority are poorly funded and, as a result, the level of education and the provisions are unacceptably below par.’ I feel a great sense of pride and responsibility overcome me as the deputy goes on talking.

We continue the discussion as we make our way to the mosque. A beautifully designed building towering over all others surrounding it. The soft, elegant voice of the mu’athin (caller to prayer) bellows out from the speakers mounted inside the walls of the mosque. His voice gently bouncing back off the buildings surrounding us whilst worshipers trickle in from all directions responding to the call to stand for prayer. It was perfect! For that moment, I had found it; dare I say a feeling of euphoria came over me. A unique school and a project that I could potentially dedicate my life to with like-minded individuals … had I discovered the Muslim utopia?

My conversation with Suhail was the first of many similar conversations that I was to have over the duration of the year with different members of the team within the school. These are the conversations that I had become accustomed to whilst developing as a community leader in London.

Many a time I would initiate the conversations. I wanted to encourage teachers and leaders to start thinking on such a level by going beyond the nine-to-five mentality. As I was maturing professionally, my confidence in my leadership identity was also maturing. I wanted to be an agent for change within the school from the bottom up. At other times, I would instigate these discussions with more senior members of management. The intention was to dig a little deeper into their mind-sets; to understand how they perceived things; to reassure myself that I was in good hands.
and that the team (not the cause) was deserving of my efforts. As the year progressed, the responses from the team developed my passion for the school and its mission. I grew close to many.

Edge et al. (2017) believe that the success of groups depends on two crucial factors: shared group norms, which define in-groups and are believed to be more influential on the actions of the team than external factors, and the ability of the leader to affirm the distinctive identity of the in-group in relation to how they are different from outgroups (2017: 7). It sounds rather like being part of an exclusive club! However, it is this shared social identity that makes leadership possible. Without it, on what basis do leaders and followers unite? Edge et al. (2017) examine school leader experiences related to racial/ethnic in-group experiences and some of their evidence suggests that mismatches between leaders and followers in these areas compounded leadership challenges. Although this may be the case, I feel a little caution needs to be exercised here. 'Categories' linked to social identity theory are without doubt important: however, they are not necessarily entrenched within individuals by choice. This is where self-categorization theory takes the concept of in-group prototypicality to a deeper level. Self-categorisation theory takes into consideration aspects of our identities that go beyond race, gender and origin.

Leaders cannot easily craft, mould and shape leader-follower relationships if they are primarily based on categories decided by many natural factors that cannot be changed, such as where a person comes from or the language a person speaks. This is why I agree with Hernandez, Long and Sitkin’s (2014) suggestion that this process of crafting relationships between leaders and followers to enhance a mission and vision lends itself more to social categorization theory.

It is the ability to create a collective identity based on meaning and purpose; the ability to motivate an in-group to proudly distinguish itself from noticeable out-
groups based on beliefs and the ability to implement structures, processes and habits that work to actively reaffirm or even redefine a group’s identity established on values that makes leaders successful. In my conversations with Suhail and others at the school, there is evidence of my drive to reaffirm our mission as a group; to reassert our vision as a community. Aspects of my developing leadership identity impel me to frequently remind team members of our distinctiveness and how we need to strive to establish ourselves.

Changing how leaders perceive themselves is key.

Developing leadership identity and securing one’s place as a leader requires one to experience situations in the physical sense, and, more importantly, to develop an acute self-awareness during the journey (Day, Harrison and Halpin, 2009). Leaders must learn to fulfil their roles whilst simultaneously performing tasks that encourage personal growth at deeper levels and not just go through the motions (Ashford and DeRue, 2012).

Being seen by others as a leader does not necessarily mean that one sees or defines her/himself as a leader; ‘Identity work is critical for this self-definition to happen’ (Epitropaki et al., 2017: 108). The significance of developing an acute self-awareness raises the importance of the individual and the responsibility it bears toward its own leadership development (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Komives et al., 2009; Miscenko, 2017; and Epitropaki et al., 2017). This may seem quite an obvious point to make: however, it can at times seem neglected as much of the recent research tends to focus on organisations, structures and systems.

Our actions, thoughts and feelings are profoundly affected by the way we perceive ourselves (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Therefore, if we can affect the way people perceive themselves, we can begin to appreciate the power of leadership. When
leadership becomes a state of mind as opposed to a set of skills, it has the potential to become something that permeates throughout whole groups and organisations. When individuals develop this state of mind, they become more proactive when it comes to developing themselves (Lord and Hall, 2005; Day, Harrison and Halpin, 2009).

My personal journey illustrates how my sense of self-awareness has developed over the years in establishing my leadership identity. Whilst growing up in Manchester, the environment provoked questions within me as the political climate toward Muslims gained momentum. Moving to London, exploring the different groups and trying to navigate my way through to ‘my’ group steered me to firmly establishing with whom I desired to associate. It was at this point that I was exposed to voluntary Muslim community work and that my understanding of my responsibility to our community and viewing myself as a leader within our community began to take shape. Without doubt, there are other factors that have influenced my decisions over the years in relation to why I decided to pursue higher degrees and why I felt the desire to take on more senior roles at work and why I have become so fixated on leadership as a concept. However, I feel that the main factor that influenced how I perceive myself as a ‘leader’ was my exposure to voluntary community work in London.

This is a critical element to understand in my story as the process of ‘mindful engagement’ encourages individuals to actively become architects of their own development. The first step of this process is envisioning possible futures, roles or positions we may occupy in our societies which directly affect our self-concepts, which then become the reference point for our motivation, attitudes and behaviour as we strive to embody these identities (Ashford and DeRue, 2012; Priest and Middleton, 2016; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004; and Maxwell, 2000, 2005, 2011).
This concept also applies to seeing oneself as a leader as it encourages one to take on roles and positions in the quest to embody the vision of becoming a leader (Ashford and DeRue, 2010). It is at this point that ‘a virtuous cycle begins to emerge’ as leaders become more focused and secure in their identities which then encourages them to engage in additional activities that support their roles and development. This further establishes their leader identity which again allows them to recognise even more opportunities for development and so forth (Lord and Hall, 2005; Ashford and DeRue, 2012; Day et al., 2009; Priest and Middleton, 2016; and Day and Harrison, 2007). In an account below, I recall my experiences of being appointed as head of department (HOD). At our academy, although the requirement to lead as HOD was driven by my feelings of responsibility, I also know that I had reached the point in my career where I wanted to venture out of the classroom: to progress. Did I take on the position of department head because I genuinely felt there was a need, or am I poorly attempting to mask my feelings of guilt for taking on the post from another good man?

As leaders, we play a significant role in moulding and portraying our own identities, continuously engaging in a process of scripting our identities and using them as a foundation to live up to our ideals (Day et al., 2009). Armstrong and Mitchell’s study (2007) looked into how leaders negotiate their identities. Their findings revealed that leaders do indeed author their own identities through consistent pre-emptive messaging to their communities within their schools vis a vis their values, beliefs and ethics. This was sometimes done through actions and at other times through stories they would relate in conversations or gatherings. This empowered the leaders in creating and authoring their own identities. Similar findings were noted in Notman’s study of head teachers (2016). This is something I too, engaged in regularly as the account below illustrates.
The importance of reminding one another of our purpose

I have no recollection of ever experiencing a seismic shift in how I viewed life. I had no epiphany, no single turning point, no moment of ‘seeing the light’. I never swore my allegiance to our cause. If I am honest, I have not always been acutely aware of the struggle that I so passionately believe in now. As I grew, matured and discovered my identity, my eyes gradually opened to the realities of life that I was facing, the struggles our people are facing. That is how my commitment to our Muslim projects gradually took root over the years. This is when I started to challenge the status quo: to question the unquestioned; to be a part of the greater effort. I never started becoming involved in our work, I simply found myself doing it.

The account below is another example that supports Armstrong and Mitchell’s study (2017) demonstrating the repetitive back and forth nature of how we script our own identities as we are influenced by those around us and our ever-changing contexts.

Khalid is a maths teacher in our secondary department and one of the more established teachers within the academy. He played a crucial role in strengthening my sense of purpose toward the school.

It is 3:30pm and most members of staff left the school an hour earlier as usual. However, as my managerial roles and responsibilities increase, so too does the time I spend at school after most people have already left. I continue trying to catch up on all of the items on my to-do list that I never manage to get through during the day. My phone suddenly starts vibrating on the table behind my desk. I rush off my chair to grab the phone before I miss the call. I knew it would be Khalid telling me that he was ready to go. If I missed him, I would have no other way of getting home apart from resorting to a dreaded taxi service that was both unreliable and expensive: hardly the way one wants to end one’s day after a gruelling 8 hours of...
non-stop action inside the school walls. I answer the call, ‘Hello…?’ ‘Let’s go. I’m ready,’ Khalid responds. This was one of the worst parts of relying upon others to get home. I had to be ready when they were. I could never suggest that they wait for me whilst I finish what I was doing out of fear that I would become viewed as a burden. I would instantly stop whatever it was that I was doing, grab my bag and head for the door. It was a race to get to the school entrance before him. ‘I’ll see you upstairs!’ I respond already getting up and off from my chair.

We both walk to the car dragging our feet and lugging our laptop bags as if they were stuffed with rocks. The heat of the summer sun that has subsided somewhat from the intensity of midday is still enough to sap whatever energy we have left. The car, however, has been left out in the parking lot exposed to the relentless rays of the sun. We drop our bags in the boot and prepare to sit in the car knowing that it is ready to unforgivingly take its revenge on anyone who dares to enter. We follow the usual drill as we lower ourselves into the seats. First, we make sure any exposed metal in the car does not touch our bare skin for fear of being burnt. Then we try to avoid placing our backs flat against the leather seats as they slowly pump out heat that has been absorbed throughout the day. The heat from the interior begins to engulf us. This summer is exceptionally hot. Attempts to regulate the temperature with the air con are futile as it blows hot air into our faces like a hair dryer itself trying to recover from the sweltering heat. Opening the windows is not an option. Polluted city air makes it difficult to breathe, so we talk in attempt to divert our attention.

Our conversations usually gravitate around work and our purpose in the school. As was the case with Suhail, I soon came to learn that Khalid was also involved in voluntary Muslim community work during his youth in London.
As Khalid begins to off-load the stresses of the day and the stresses of the job, the air conditioner finally kicks in. I adjust the fans so that I have cool air blasting on my face and legs. I slouch back into my seat and let him talk. I just listen and take it all in. It’s important for me to learn from him, to gauge how seriously he takes his work and how much this project means to him. I’m recharging my emotional batteries. I need to know that I’m not alone.

Thinking about it now, I mentally categorised the staff members within our secondary department into two groups. The first being those who are in it with a nine-to-five mentality. They are the ones that I attacked more aggressively in our conversations, and they tended to be the more junior members of staff. Then there was the more ‘elite’ group, who understood our purpose beyond the school gates. These were the people, with whom I would more often than not simply initiate conversations and let them talk. This worked two-fold as I felt that I was not only learning from them but it also provided us with an opportunity to remind each other of why we were doing what we were doing. Sometimes the conversations would turn into venting sessions where teachers, even senior leadership team (SLT) members would let everything out. However, we would always come back to the same point: purpose. This is what made everything worth it. The stresses and difficulties of the school were manageable, if we all knew we had a clear purpose and the right people around us.

On other occasions when driving to and from the campus with other colleagues, I would hear things like ‘the school is practically a second home for me’ or ‘the school is a means of me gaining reward both in this life and the next’. Inviting the more senior members of staff to impart their knowledge, wisdom and advice gave them that opportunity to feel special; granted them the prestigious ‘mentor’ role; and awarded them the position of being the ‘wise father’. I, of course, was happy to be the mentee learning from my elders hoping that I was contributing to the
development and consolidation of the culture of having a true purpose within the school.

Whether or not these staff members knew what I was consciously doing at the time is unimportant. I do not think I myself had such a heightened level of awareness as I would like to think I had. The main point for me, however, was that these discussions were taking place. This meant that the purpose and values that underpin our work were being reinforced throughout. As leaders, we play a significant role in moulding and portraying our own identities: continuously engaged in a process of scripting our identities and using them as a foundation to live up to our ideals (Day et al., 2009). Armstrong and Mitchell’s study (2007) looked into how leaders negotiate their identities. Their findings revealed that leaders do indeed author their own identities through consistent pre-emptive messaging to their communities within their schools vis a vis their values, beliefs and ethics. This was sometimes done through actions and at other times through stories they would relate in conversations or gatherings. This empowers the leaders to create and author their own identities. Similar findings were noted in Notman’s study of head teachers (2016).

Moulding the collective identity of groups

It has been only a matter of hours since I arrived back in London to visit family and friends, and I am already standing on my driveway speaking to an old friend basking in the summer sun. Khan has been involved in Muslim community projects in London for as long as I can remember and was one of the main people who helped ‘bring me in’ during the early years.

‘So how are the projects going?’ I ask. ‘It’s good’, He answers. Khan is always positive and one of the most fervent volunteers I know when it comes to Muslim
community projects. It’s his life. Khan continues, ‘Lots of things are happening. We’re making progress. Wider family members are now starting to get more involved and we’re giving them more control. They’re moving into more senior positions and making more decisions.’

Memories start to flood back as I take in a deep breath and reminisce. ‘How about you? How’s everything on your side?’ Khan is keen to know what I’m doing with myself since leaving the safety of our cocoon in London. So, I answer with the usual: work’s fine; family are all well. As concerned as Khan may be about my family, however, I know that is not what he truly intended by his question. Muslim community leaders are expected to understand what their purpose is in life. We are expected to show a higher level of thinking and understanding when it comes to our outlook on life: an awareness of how our actions are working towards a greater goal; our ability to identify where we fit in the grander scheme of things. What Khan really wanted to know was whether or not I could justify leaving our community projects in which I played a critical role whilst living in London. My answer is almost rehearsed. I know exactly what to say. I begin to tell him all about the work that I am involved in at my new school. I know this not because I have prepared myself to be accountable to Khan but because I have been trained to answer this question to myself. As mentioned, one of the core values a Muslim community leader has instilled within him or her is the understanding of purpose. Since leaving, I have stopped many a time and questioned myself, ‘What is the point? Why am I here? Can I justify my stay here, my absence from the work that is going on in London, where, in the opinion of many, my skills, experiences and background would be more suited and beneficial to our cause?’

This is something that I struggled with for a long time. Malcolm X was especially scathing relative to the educated African Americans who were perceived to be among the privileged few as he believed they were not using their positions,
influence and potential authority to support the African Americans in their plight. Would Malcolm X consider me to be any different? I often felt that my skills and background were indeed required in London to support the efforts of the Muslims, especially as the pressure from the media and politics mounts with no signs of subsidence in the near future. There is now a need for more sophisticated responses from the Muslims through politics, policy and research. The opportunities, experiences and education I have been blessed with in life mean that, whether I like it or not, I am of the few who are burdened with the responsibility of taking on such roles. It is not the poor Afghani farmers in the mountains of Afghanistan who will be questioned about the state of our people; nor will the defenceless sons and daughters of Yemen who face the onslaught of Western drone attacks almost daily be held to question. It is myself and others like me who will have to justify how we utilised our blessings of education to support those in need!

Reicher et al. (2005) explain that boundaries of acceptance, category definitions, prototypical fits/misfits (whatever label we choose) are ‘quite literally, world making things’, and those who set or control these boundaries are ‘in a position to make and remake the world’ (2005, 556). Leadership is a social property of the system. However, although this approach appears to give more agency to the followers, it also paradoxically brings leaders to the fore in their influence in shaping the identities of groups, organisations and movements. This is because their elevation to such positions as leaders enables them to act as ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ (Haslam, Steffens, Peters, Boyce, Mallet and Fransen, 2017: 2) creating a shared sense of ‘we’ (Reicher et al., 2005; Carroll & Levy, 2010; Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Vanbeselaeere, De Cuyper, Boen and Filip, 2015). Leaders do not simply look the part as prototypes, they mould the collective identity of the group in addition to their own (Steffens et al., 2014b; and Epitropaki et al., 2017). The short narrative above is typical of conversations that I have with volunteer Muslim community leaders in
London, especially after leaving the city for extended periods. Khan was testing me. He wanted to see where I was in my thinking.

People’s beliefs and values can and do change, which can sometimes cause a shift in the groups that we associate ourselves with. If our values change as individuals, it is also logical to assume that the values of groups are also subject to change. For Reicher et al. (2005) these changes in values and beliefs are the crux of leadership. How do leaders influence identity development within groups and how do they materialise this into practical realities?

Neither was he ‘one of us’, nor was he furthering our cause – A Relational Approach to Leadership.

Three months had passed since my interview with Hamed and upon joining my new school, I noticed teachers would begin the day girding their loins, reluctantly preparing to walk into battle. Teachers were simply doing what they were paid to do. I, however, hit the ground running. I had so much repressed energy: I needed a release. I would begin my days like a greyhound in the slips waiting for that first lesson. The students didn’t know what hit them when I walked in through that door.

I heard many existing teachers trying to give off the usual negative rant, but I had gone through too much in previous experiences to allow such comments to affect me. On the contrary, the more I heard their pessimism, the more I realised how petty their concerns were and the more I felt I was being charged to push myself even harder. When talking about the challenges of our students and the school, the famous, ‘just wait, you’ll see’ comment from other teachers within our English department never really came to fruition. I waited and waited and to this day I never once thought to myself, ‘Wow, they were right!’ I was eager to preserve the ties with my new head and not simply slip into my classroom and disappear into the
background. We would regularly converse via Whatsapp messages, in passing or in his office when I would drop in. My genuine feelings of positivity towards the school, the students and our whole team were always at the fore of our conversations.

As the months progressed, I began to realise that the current head of English was receiving complaints from members of staff at various levels within the school. ‘You just keep doing what you’re doing.’ I heard this comment more than once and from more than one person. I understood. I was being earmarked for his position. It was an awkward feeling. I knew that I was one of the most experienced teachers in the English department but I also knew of the issues that management had with the current English HOD, Paul. Although there were major issues in our department, I was at a stage of my career where I could police myself and found that I was able to make up for the shortcomings of the department within my own classroom, within the confines of my own fort.

The senior leadership team (SLT) were quite open with me, which I feel was largely down to the relations initially established with them. It wasn’t long before I was told I would be needed to take over the English department. Paul was seen to be failing to fulfil the requirements of his post. There was a lack of optimism in regards to the necessary measures that needed to be put into place to ensure the department was to be carried forward. It was a strange feeling. I genuinely felt uneasy as I really got on well with Paul, and I couldn’t have asked for a better line manager when starting at the school. However, it also didn’t take me long to realise that as nice as Paul was, there were serious deficiencies that were detrimental to the success of the students, the development of the teachers and the overall vision of our academy. It would be unfair to say that these deficiencies were as a result of Paul’s doing. I really do not believe this to be the case. The real sticking point, however, was the rate at which the progress was required. I just think Paul was unable to keep up. After having
several discussions with the head and the deputy, I felt as though I had a responsibility to fulfil, and I firmly believed that I could do the job.

Perhaps that’s the argument I used to convince myself; to suppress the feelings of guilt for ‘taking someone’s post’. Paul had an excellent level of cultural awareness. He understood Islam and was widely respected and accepted across the school for his exceptional character.

When first writing this account, I suggested that Paul, in reality, had no idea how strongly we felt about developing the school in line with our purpose in life. Rather arrogantly, I had myself believe that he could not possibly fully appreciate such a level of understanding. However, looking back, it is quite embarrassing to think that I held such a view: that only we, Muslims, in our situation could harbour such a burning desire to fulfil a greater purpose in life. However, the unwavering support that I have received from John Gilligan and Dr John Hynes (which I discuss further in my reflections below) whilst compiling this thesis opened my eyes to this reality. The hours they painstakingly poured into supporting my writing over the months to help me get my story ‘out there’ is proof that people really do understand how important this is to us. Antione is another who has changed much in how I view life, those involved in our school and their contribution to our vision. The efforts of Antione, a recent addition to our English department, clearly demonstrate his dedication as a professional in applying himself to our school and our vision. Moreover, Paul’s later transfer (by his decision) to our sister school and his continued professionalism in working with me and contributing to his new school has challenged my beliefs that one has to hold and believe in the values espoused by the school in order to make a sincere and positive impact.

As honourable as his qualities and characteristics may have been, perhaps in our hearts and minds this was not enough for us. We have a point to prove at this school
and, for many of us, part of proving that point is to do it alone, amongst ourselves. We could accept Paul as part of the team and value his contribution, but not in the driving seat as a leader. The fact that he was perceived to be failing to fulfil the responsibilities of his post only compounded the issue. In our school Paul, albeit a white, middle-aged man, was a minority group member. This led to his failure to satisfy our expected ‘mental representations’ of a leader (Showunmi et al., 2016: 920).

On reflection, I can now relate to the reasons why I wasn’t chosen as Head Boy at secondary school. The fact that I am Arab may have been palatable, but having a Muslim take on such a significant role at a Roman Catholic faith school does seem quite contradictory. I shouldn’t really blame them. I should respect them somewhat for holding on to their values without fear of appearing to present themselves as being politically incorrect. After all, is that not what we did to Paul at our school?

This is a good vantage point from which to discuss the more recent approach to viewing leadership as a relational process as opposed to the traditional individual approach (Showunmi et al., 2016: 918). Traditional trait-based theories of leadership look at elements of a leader’s personality. Situational theories analyse contexts. Contingency theories study personal characteristics and situations concomitantly with the assumption that changes can be made to either one in a mix-and-match style (Billsberry, 2009). However, these traditional approaches to studying leadership through ‘personality and situational perspectives’ have lost some ground among researchers who tend to focus on the more recent relational approach to understanding leadership (Hains et al., 2008: 384). Interest has now shifted over to more ‘extensive and holistic perspectives’ looking particularly at the relationship between leaders and followers (Hussein and da Costa, 2008: 19). Grint (1997) was one of the first researchers to build an argument that brings people’s perceptions to the fore with leadership being in the eye of the beholder. This
concept has gained significant momentum since (see, for example, Ashford and DeRue, 2010; Haslam et al., 2017; and Epitropaki et al., 2017).

Luhrmann and Eberl (2007) also understand leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon as they believe it can vary significantly depending on contexts and people. They explain that ‘identities are socially constructed through interaction’ (2007: 117), thus, identity theory is central to their understanding of leadership.

Similarly, Islam (2014) believes that the study of identities should be central to how we approach leadership research. His paper makes more direct links to processes of categorisation in social identity theories, explicitly questioning how leaders become accepted and granted influence by their followers. One significant factor discussed in this process is the notion of cognitive prototypes: how well does the prospective leader fit the in-group’s expectations? Social identity theory of leadership, a more recent theory (see Hogg, 2001), maintains that leader schemas are intrinsically related to ‘self-identities or follower’s schematized views of themselves’ (Islam, 2014: 346).

It is worth noting here that contrary to what the name may suggest, social identity theory of leadership is actually more closely related to self-categorisation theory than it is to social identity theory with the former emphasising deeper epistemic values and motives (value, beliefs, faith, etc.). Social identity theory purports more surface level self-esteem based categories such as race, origin and gender. With self-categorisation and social identity theories of leadership, the leader’s epistemic view of the self comes to the fore.

If leadership requires leaders and followers, that means a process of negotiation must take place in order for the participants to reach a mutual understanding of the roles to be played out in the relationship. All participants will be asking what role
each individual will be assuming in their relationship. A decision will then be made as to whether or not all parties are happy to proceed. This model gives much more agency to the followers. Once this agreement has been settled, then, and only then, can the leader actually influence the followers (Billsberry, 2009; Grint 1997; Islam, 2014; Luhrmann and Eberl, 2007; Reicher et al., 2005; and Epitropaki et al., 2017). This notion of the negotiation of identities against the backdrop of leadership further supports the concept of leadership being significantly influenced by social interaction.

Ashford and DeRue (2010) believe that the current literature downplays the importance of followers, which I agree with to a certain extent. However, I do still question the possibility of whether or not we use this concept as a means of making ourselves (as followers) feel better, more empowered and more in control than what we actually are in reality. Are we simply over-playing follower agency?

Why did Paul’s role as HOD end as it did? A possible explanation, based on the argument presented above, is that Paul, a middle-aged Christian of white European descent, was automatically side-lined in a predominantly Muslim populated school that officially held Islam as one of its core values (along with leadership and academic excellence). This is a crucial element in the story as research has shown that the level of a leader’s alignment to the in-group’s prototype has a direct impact on the followers’ receptiveness to their influence (Ellmers et al., 2004). Epitropaki et al. (2017) explain that one of the reasons for this is that prototypical leaders are more likely to be perceived as genuinely working for ‘our cause’, which increases levels of trust. ‘Looking the part’ then, could be just as important as possessing the ability to actually lead (Hains et al., 2008). Paul was certainly a far cry from ‘looking the part’.
Therefore, only Muslims can lead Muslims and the same applies for all other groups in society... easy! Well, it is not quite that simple. We know from our practical experiences in life that this is simply not true, especially living in the UK. A point to consider is that group salience is not something that is static, it depends on many factors: one being the level of threat or disadvantage a group perceives toward itself. Concepts such as threats, disadvantage, and unfairness can lead groups to increase their level of group salience or collectiveness. When high group salience occurs, due to the above factors, ingroup prototypicality becomes more of a central issue to those within the organisation. Findings have shown that if leaders are viewed as having high levels of prototypicality, they are more likely to be accepted, even if they fall short in delivering results on a practical level. If leaders possess low levels of prototypicality, they must exert more efforts to be seen as furthering the cause of the group to make up for prototypical deficit (Platow and van Knippenberg, 2001). This suggests that those with higher levels of prototypicality, such as myself in the situation above, would be granted more leeway simply based on the fact that I was from the in-group and Paul was always going to be scrutinised that little bit more (Platow and van Knippenberg, 2001; and Ellmers et al., 2004; Epitropaki et al., 2017). As briefly discussed in the account of my son’s birth, group salience among Muslims in general is quite high given the current political climate so it would be logical to assume that our need to perceive leaders who align closer to our prototypical ideals is also currently quite high. Current politics and the media hype generated by the West toward Muslims and Islam mean that Paul was always going to struggle in his post.

Hains et al.’s study (2008) produced findings supporting the notion that perceived leadership effectiveness was more related to group prototypicality than to the leader’s actual performance. Although an experimental study based in a laboratory setting, it was significant as it looked at the perceptions of the group towards potential leaders based on scenarios. Thus, the groups already had their minds made
up based upon how well the leaders did (or did not) fit the expectations of their ingroup before any leadership practices were even demonstrated by their potential leaders.

Ellmers et al., on the other hand, believe that whilst the acceptance of outgroup members in leadership positions depends on how ‘rewarding the relationship exchange’ will be for in the ingroup, ingroup leaders will almost automatically gain more unconditional loyalty (2004: 467). Although I agree with Ellmers et al. (2004) in the first aspect, I do not think that perceived ingroup prototypicality qualifies one to gain ‘unconditional loyalty’. Within Muslim communities, there are more and more calls for qualified leaders to be granted positions of leadership. We have too many prototypes in positions of influence within our schools. They certainly look the part and sound the part from an ‘Islamic’ perspective: however, the reality is many of them are secretly (and openly) rejected by the followers as we know they are unable to deliver the required results for our communities and schools. I believe there is more of a delicate balance that groups negotiate between ingroup prototypicality and leadership stereotypicality (positive leadership traits). Our needs as groups and the relevance of leaders’ actions will depend largely upon current contexts, which we know are fluid (Platow and van Knippenberg, 2001; and Ellmers et al., 2004). Stereotypical leadership attributes and prototypical ingroup attributes are two elements that sit on a balance. The two need to exist and one without the other will ultimately lead to frustration. If there is a perceived lack of stereotypical leadership attributes, the group will feel their social standing is not being established. Alternatively, if there is a perceived lack of group prototypicality, feelings of under representation and a lack of group identity will arise. The two go hand in hand. Perhaps it comes down to the greatest perceived need at any one time: representation or achievement. If the group has a fairly strong and stable group identity and isn’t felt to be under threat from external factors and seriously requires a leader with strong stereotypical leadership characteristics, then the group
will be willing to compromise on the required prototypicality of the leader. In contrast, if there is a common perception among the group of the need for a leader that clearly aligns with the prototypical expectations (in times of perceived group threats, for example), then stereotypical leadership attributes may be given less importance. In either case, both ingroup prototypicality and leader stereotypicality are expected by the group. How much is the group willing to compromise on any one of the two aspects? That is the question.

The elements were against Paul in our school. The failings within the running of the English department brought into question his credibility as a leader. The department was not seen to be moving forward, which led to feelings of frustration. As a unique academy, establishing our social standing within the community is of utmost importance: this need was not being met. His identity, I believe, compounded the issue rather than acted as the main catalyst. At the time, results were more urgent than group representation. That is not to say, however, that group representation was not given any importance.

Hains et al., (2008) note that group belongingness, created by in-groups, requires more attention in the literature. Understanding this mutual involvement in a social category necessitates leaders able to interpret the in-group’s unique identity in addition to representing it as a typical prototype (Riecher et al. 2005; and Haslam et al., 2017). For Fransen et al. (2015), this is the essence of influence in leadership. However, representing the group in and of itself is not merely enough as it is a ‘relatively passive process’: embodying a group’s attitudes and beliefs does not necessarily require any active form of leadership per se (Hains et al., 2008: 385). From a follower perspective, leaders must also be able to put actions, systems and procedures into place in order to realise social power and firmly establish the group in their wider context (Epitropaki et al., 2017; and Haslam et al., 2017). The team shifts from a psychological state to ‘an effective operational unit’ (Fransen et al.,
Therefore, leadership is ‘a vehicle for social identity-based collective agency in which leaders and followers are partners.’ (Reicher et al., 2005: 547)

If leaders are unable to 1) represent the group as a typical prototype, which is a result of a shared identity (Ellmers et al., 2004); and 2) establish the group’s social standing through tangible achievements, on what basis then should followers accept them? From a relational perspective, they would not be ‘leaders’. Both aspects are crucial (Steffens et al., 2014). However, leaders who can fulfil these prerequisites give their groups the opportunity to actually shape their history, rather than simply living in a world that is ruled, governed and influenced by others. These two points are what Ashford and DeRue (2012) and Van Knippenberg et al. (2004) believe to be the starting point of leadership being a socially constructed phenomenon with leadership mainly being a property of the social system (Day and Harrison, 2007). It is precisely this relationship between the leaders and followers that Reicher et al. (2005) claim is so obvious yet so easily overlooked.

I was officially informed of the decision to promote me to the position of HOD during the winter break. The awkwardness and discomfort of meeting Paul upon returning from the holidays were excruciating. I knew what was coming. Since we started the year, he had taken me under his wing and had sung my praises to the SLT. I tried to plead with them to give him another role in middle management, rather than sending him back to the classroom full time. I personally called and visited members of the school management team to see if a role could be created for him. However, neither the academic head nor the deputy head pastoral wanted to know. As far as they were concerned, he was a ‘nice guy’ but that was about it.

‘Listen Tariq, you will be given many promises and assurances, but the reality is you will be left alone for the most part and expected to deal with things.’ I liked seeking advice from colleagues in SLT. ‘If you’re doing it for the extra money, then, believe
me, it is not worth it. If, however, you genuinely feel you can make a difference to the department and the kids’ learning, and I think you can, then that’s something else.’

Fresh-faced, our first day back after the winter break, we sat in the canteen waiting for our whole-school weekly briefing that took place first thing in the morning. Teachers shook hands, hugged each other, enquired about how each and all spent their holidays. Many had fresh haircuts and new crisp suits. I sat quietly at the table waiting for the head to arrive to open the meeting. The suspense was killing me. I knew Paul was in the hall and he, too, would have been fully aware of the ‘official announcement’ that was going to be made of his return to the classroom and my new appointment as HOD. My attempts at convincing the SLT that there was no need for the ‘official announcement’ failed. They were adamant that this was something that all teachers needed to be aware of. I agreed, but didn’t understand why it had to be done publicly with us both present. I avoided making eye contact with Paul for the entire duration of the meeting.

‘We would like to thank Paul for his efforts in running the English department and bringing it up to its current standard. He has done a remarkable job in...’ as the Head continued his speech, I knew that most members of staff present were completely unaware. He waffled on and I thought to myself, just be quiet and get this over with. The poor guy knows what you think of his efforts, otherwise we wouldn’t be making this change. Please don’t make this any longer and more insufferable than it has to be. The tone of the Head was in stark contrast with our conversations when discussing Paul in his absence. Is this how he will speak of me before the masses if I fail, knowing full well what he thinks of my efforts? He certainly likes to sing my praises, but I have just seen another side, and I am not sure I like it. I appreciate a certain level of diplomacy and tact has to be employed when doing these things, but
it all just felt so dirty, so wrong. From this point onwards, I knew that the times of singing my praises as a teacher were long gone. I had entered the lion’s den.

This was my first professional opportunity in a clearly designated position of leadership within the organisational structure of a school. A position whereby I could begin to exercise deeper levels of my leadership identity. A position where I could begin putting systems and structures into place that would contribute to furthering our cause.

The final phase in Lord and Hall’s three stage process in the development of leadership identities is ‘collective identity’ or ‘collective endorsement’ (Lord and Hall, 2005: 596; and Ashford and DeRue, 2010: 629). At this level, leaders perceive their identities through the lens of specific groups or collectives such as movements, organisations or societies. All three levels (individual, relational and collective), which may be active at different times, form our self-identities (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Day’s earlier paper (2001), which focuses on highlighting this distinction between leadership development at individual and collective levels stresses the importance of understanding the difference between the two and the need to redress the balance of our focus. What is more, Day explains that individual leader development is rooted in the assumption that individuals improve organisations through ‘social and operational effectiveness’. Whereas collective leadership development is rooted in contemporary, relational models of leadership where leadership is granted and thus the importance of relationships and systems come to the fore. Therefore, it would be the ‘property of social systems’ as opposed to being something that is added to the system (2001: 605).

Komives et al. (2005) go into considerable depth on this topic. The central tenet of Komives et al.’s (2005) grounded theory study was how leadership identity developed over six stages, which is slightly more detailed than that of Day and
Harrison’s later study (2007): stage 1) ‘Awareness’ – a recognition that leaders actually exist within our groups and societies; stage 2) ‘Exploration/Engagement’ – associating oneself with a group and actively engaging in activities as part of the group. However, Komives et al. (2005) mention that the key transition phase in this six stage Leadership Identity Model (LID) was stage 3. From this stage onwards, the participants in the study began to develop an appreciation of their interdependence with others and this was the starting point for their understanding of leadership from deeper collective or systems level perspectives: stage 3) ‘Leader Identified’ – leadership is positional within groups i.e. leaders are explicitly named and designated; 4) Leadership Differentiated - leadership is viewed beyond the limited scope of it being position role to being a collective responsibility; 5) Generativity – beginning to see the bigger picture as purpose and passion now become more prominent with beliefs and values becoming the bedrock of one’s leadership identity. It is more about the cause rather than the group or organisation; 6) Integration/Synthesis – a recognition of the interdependence between group members. Leadership is now a relational process and any individual contributing to the promotion of the ‘cause’ or vision is essentially a leader.

Priest and Middleton (2016) point out that a central theme in understanding leadership identity development from a multi-levels perspective is the appreciation of how relationships change. They support Lord and Hall who posit that the switch from ‘I’ to ‘we’ is related to the development of leaders’ ‘expertise’ (2005: 592). Komives et al. (2009) view this shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ (individual to collective) as the crucial turning point in one’s development of their leadership identity (2016: 42). Furthermore, Lord and Hall (2005) believe that this shift in focus from the individual to the collective is applicable to the leaders themselves and also the followers as the leaders work to engineer collective identities. The highest level of identity, collective identity, will be influenced according to how salient group membership is, which is usually as a result of social contexts or the leader’s proclivity (Day and Harrison,
Lord and Hall also support this view as they maintain that leaders ‘prime specific identities in their followers’ as they espouse particular values through their own actions (2005: 610).

Much of Day and Harrison’s work (2007) also supports the earlier work of Komives et al. (2005) who appear to be among some of the earlier researchers who looked at how leadership identity is formed by focussing on the transitional phases leaders go through in their journeys of leadership maturity.

**When does a ‘good story’ become research?**

In the social sciences, stories are traditionally associated with fiction, whilst theories tend to be associated with fact (Ellis, 2004: 44, and Ellis and Bochner, 2006). Bochner (2013) succinctly highlights the difference between accuracy and truth. Facts (associated with accuracy) do not tell us what they mean or how we feel (associated with truth). This is why I feel there is a place for our stories in research. Concepts such as generalisability also exist in autoethnography; however, the definition differs. With story, the focus is on the readers. Can the readers enter the world of the author and say I recognise this; I feel this or I know of people who have been through this?

I know that there are many more people out there in similar situations and positions as myself. I know this because I live, work and interact with these people on a daily basis, and I hope that my accounts will resonate with them. Moreover, I intend for those in positions situated far from mine to gain a glimpse into our lives from a different perspective. Mine is just one of many stories that need to be presented so that the world can gain a more balanced understanding of important, relevant and current state of affairs. After reading through drafts of my accounts, Ali, a senior Muslim youth worker, noted the ‘level of depth and understanding’ of our
experiences that were captured within the accounts. He felt it was ‘crucial’ to understanding our situation. Damien, another friend, who is an academic with no background in Muslim youth work, found the reading ‘riveting’ with a clear message that needs to be put out there for others to see.

One of the reviewers who responded to Sparkes’ paper (2007) hailed the author’s bravery for giving existing academic structures, conventions and expectations of writing a ‘poke in the eye’ with his autoethnographic account. The story successfully discussed issues, real issues, with those who care. The story stirred the emotions of the readers and sparked a desire to bring about change. How much more significant can a piece of research be than this? In a telephone conversation with Ahmed, a legal advisor and volunteer Muslim community leader, he explained, ‘you can see this piece is clearly not intended to be just another thesis that will be shelved to gather dust with all of the others. I could sense from your writing the desire for this to be much more than that. This is what we need! We need more of this kind of stuff!’ Responses like this spurred me on in my writing.

Social scientists consciously adopt a method when approaching research (Lane, 1995). Some have been ‘trained’ to conform to certain forms and conventions. Others simply prefer to write in ‘interpretive literary styles’ (Denshire, 2014). The first response to a manuscript that I submitted to an educational journal by one of the peer-reviewers questioned whether or not my autoethnographic account was ‘appropriate’ for an academic journal. I felt it was clear from the reviewer’s comments that she/he had not quite grasped the concept of an autoethnographic account. I then had to go on to explain that the purpose of my writing aimed to open up a conversation about experiences and situations, rather than simply closing it down with neatly packaged statements of conclusions derived from data that had been analysed using more traditional methods. In autoethnography, the findings are
created between the readers and the text: not presented by the writer through the
text (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; and Ellis, 2004).

Points of Critique

Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) emphasise their aim of addressing the shortcomings
of other studies by ‘observing leadership in practice’ (2006: 204). This is an
important comment to highlight as I realised, whilst conducting the literature
review, that there was little in the way of empirical studies on the subject at hand,
particularly in the education context. Although the works of Ashford and DeRue are
important in the study of the social identity theory of leadership, their study (2010)
had little empirical basis as it was presented as a theoretical paper as was Ellmers et
al.’s study (2004): the research used to support their arguments were actually
experimental works that were set up in controlled environments. Hains et al.’s study
is an example of one of these ‘experimental studies’. Findings were ‘measured only
in anticipation of interaction’ (2008: 379), which in simple terms means that
although the study was not theoretical in nature, it was far from an observation of
the ‘real world’ scenarios that leaders and followers naturally operate in.
Furthermore, theoretical papers often lean heavily on literature from other
theoretical studies: Epitropaki et al.’s detailed literature review (2017) is an
example. In the following subsections, I critique the use of autoethnography in more
depth.

Issues of publications and breaking the mould.

The first thing I noticed about Holt’s paper (2003) was the ‘struggle’ that
autoethnographers write about when trying to publish their work. These struggles
are still documented in more recent publications (see, Douglas and Carless, 2013).
The same issues seemed to arise: for instance, the use of the self ‘I’ as both source and analyst of the data. I agree that this concern surrounding what many refer to as narcissism has a basis only, however, if reflexivity is not practised appropriately.

Holt (2003) also makes a very interesting point when he alludes to the fact that peer reviewers may not necessarily be sufficiently equipped to deal with autoethnographic research when such manuscripts are submitted, something I personally experienced. He emphasises that there needs to be more of a push to publish autoethnographic research in the journals that publish qualitative and quantitative research in order to get such writing out into ‘mainstream’ academia. I actually made a similar comment in response to one of my reviewers who questioned why so many of my citations in relation to autoethnography were from a relatively small number of journals. My response was ‘this is precisely why I want to publish in your particular journal; to widen the routes of dissemination for autoethnographic research!’ If we continue to publish in such a small number of niche journals, the potential to affect research, practice and policy will be stifled at its very source (Douglas and Carless, 2013: 102).

Although autoethnography encourages us to look at both the individual (ourselves) and our external environment, there is still a danger of placing an artificial ‘bubble’ around ourselves and neglecting the wider influences of society. As researchers and participants, we may not perceive certain elements within the society as being ‘relevant’ when, in reality, such aspects may have real influences on our lives. However, this concept of a ‘bubble’ is questionable relative to size. How big is big enough to ensure that all relevant aspects of a study and the society have been taken into consideration? This is a question equally applicable to many other approaches to research.
Freeman (1984) also points out that narrative studies (the umbrella that autoethnography falls under) in the social sciences share the same obstacle as narratives in the field of history in that the evidence, events and/or happenings much of the time are not things that can be directly observed by the researcher or by the audience. However, autoethnographies provide the opportunity to utilize our ‘memoried’ accounts. It is only myself, as the researcher and researched, who is able give a unique outlook on specific events in my life and make the connections from my vantage point. This is exactly what I want to bring to the fore and emphasize in this study.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, in the Western world the ‘sanctity’ of the individual in education is a commonly held perception. Yet there are voices that attempt to dismiss the significance of studying individuals through research. Is this not a fundamental contradiction? Surely, studying the individual is crucial to our journey in learning about the world we live in and the people who make up that world.

Carter (1993) discusses this point in her paper. She appreciates the concerns that there is the danger of an over-emphasis on the individual’s story as their meaning could be seen as having significance solely to the narrator of the story. However, she goes on to explain that stories do not exist in isolation. They are presented within a community of researchers and practitioners who will be exposed to these stories. These stories that we are exposed to will ultimately have an effect on us; they will at some level contribute to our own unique network of experiences and stories that we have stored regardless of how much we were able to relate to or agree with the story.

Autoethnography is also challenged from the viewpoint of striving to understand the intentions behind the actions of participants, which requires knowledge of the
participants’ understanding of reality. The issue here is that the participants’ perspectives of reality may in actual fact be inaccurate or even totally incorrect (Morrison, 2009). This may be true, but can this be measured? Yes. Such studies can be critiqued: however, who has the ultimate authority to say that another person’s interpretation of reality is correct or incorrect? At best we can only point out aspects of a situation that may have been missed by the participants but not necessarily make such a strong statement as to the ‘correctness’ of one’s perception of reality. Participants will interpret events according to their own experiences, knowledge of events and general contexts and there will always be elements of situations unknown to the participants and to the researchers and all those indirectly involved in the research process (even those critiquing the studies). Individuals will interpret reality according to their own framework of knowledge, beliefs and unique exposure to experiences. Therefore, the argument that questions the accuracy of the participants’ perceptions of reality, of my perception of reality (although worth discussing) can again just as easily be directed at many other approaches to research. The human element is unavoidable in any research approach, therefore such questions can endlessly and many a time pointlessly go back and forth (Bryman, 2006).

The value that autoethnographies give to experience and the individual’s perceptions of these experiences is crucial to my research topic. Being able to delve into the intricacies of life and allowing the study to continuously develop, expand and mature is something that is central to my paper. Much of the literature and empirical based research on reflection, although still relatively small, highlights this strong link (Beauchamp, 2015; and Hickson, 2011).
How do we judge/validate?

I feel that the evaluation of autoethnographic research is problematic only when looked at through the lens of our current understanding of how existing research approaches should be validated. An autoethnographic account is a story. The perceived difficulties of drawing a line between a good story and scholarship were already touched upon above. Some, such as Josselson (1993), even question whether or not there is even a difference between the two. A common trend that many peer reviewed journals appear to be following is one of judging autoethnographic writings against traditional qualitative criteria. This, however, is being questioned by several authors and academics (Tenni, Smyth and Boucher, 2003; Sparkes, 2002b; and Holt, 2003). I support this view as it is not logical to evaluate autoethnographic research using traditional interpretive criteria simply because it broadly falls within the field of qualitative research. Interpretive studies are now so vast that such an approach would not be rational. There needs to be a solution that deals more directly with the needs of each approach within the qualitative field.

Richardson’s five factors for judging the quality of autoethnography may be a step in the right direction. I unpack these factors toward the end of this section after presenting several existing thoughts and opinions of other academics on this topic:

“The criteria are: (a) Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (b) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? (c) Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? (d) Impactfullness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new
questions or move me to action? (e) Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshted out sense of lived experience?” (Richardson, 2000: 15-16)

Tenni, Smyth and Boucher (2003) look at how researchers can analyse data written about oneself. Much of what is written appears to be based on the authors’ personal experiences of using autobiographical data, such as researchers engaging in ‘cycles of data analysis, early and regularly’ and developing a process of internal dialogue for reflections (2003: 3). Furthermore, seeking external dialogue encourages researchers to move out of their comfort zones and away from their own assumptions.

Authors never can choose to vanish completely from their texts: they can only pick the guise in which they will appear. As researchers, we all ultimately choose the paths in which we decide to pursue our interests. Some view the world through test tubes noting observations using ticks and crosses on clipboards, whilst others, like myself, view the world through stories noting observations in journals and reflections. We are all researchers. If the research has shed light on a certain aspect of life that was unknown (or less known) before; if the research has successfully encouraged others to take action; if the research has triggered a change in policy, rhetoric or even the initial thought processes of people, then I would argue that it is as good as any other piece of research out there. What we choose to write and how we choose to write it is based on the way we understand the world, our practice and ourselves (Tenni et al., 2003: 5). Brooker and Macpherson explain that the intention behind their story was to provide “deliberation and critique that will generate guideposts for future practitioner research” (1999: 219); while Traher states that she “wanted [her] research to make a difference to [her], to [her] participants, to [her] practice, [and] to those who read it” (Traher, 2009: 15). Personally, I want my research to have true meaning, to initiate change and to affect readers at a
grassroots level. I discuss how I feel I achieved this in the contributions section below.

There is one particular claim against autoethnography which I feel I must refute. Dashper’s paper (2015) states that some refer to autoethnography as the ‘lazy’ approach to research as it does not require hours of field work. She argues that the term lazy is not applicable to the hours of *mental* work and *reflection* that one has to do in autoethnography. Often, we may not have the documents and evidence to illustrate the lengths to which we physically went out to obtain our data: however, this is because we believe the data is not necessarily held outside of ourselves, rather it is *within* us. The field we are studying may well be our ‘state of mind’ as we examine ourselves and strive to improve our understanding of life (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013: 67). Studying oneself to better understand oneself is a good enough rationale to adopt this approach, is it not? The days, weeks and months (and now years) I have spent searching within, questioning my actions and challenging myself have been very difficult: looking at how I can find a connection between my personal narrative, myself (‘auto’), with the wider society in which I live (‘ethno’) through my writings and reflections (‘graphy’): lazy research? In many respects, it would have been easier for me to have interviewed a select number of participants and analysed the data within existing frameworks.

I have found that the importance of the audience in awarding validity to a piece of research can become an obsession if one is not careful. Although some researchers such as Chang (2013) frame their autoethnographic research around more traditional social sciences in relation to data analysis and the questions of validity, more autoethnographers are beginning to avoid spending much time on the methodology section and, on principle, *avoid* these ‘traditional’ approaches to research (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). After reading through numerous academic journals and research handbooks, I can relate to Ellis (2004) who explains
that she has reached the stage where she no longer has much concern for people’s issues related to validity in autoethnography. However, I acknowledge that such a bold view is not a privilege that I, as an early career researcher, can openly enjoy. In fact, I have done the exact opposite in this thesis. I did this mainly for reasons that initially began as insecurities, which then developed into a genuine interest in building my understanding and appreciation of the approach.

I need to have full confidence in the approach and feel that I am able to express this to myself and my audience. It is ultimately our audiences who respond to how papers are received, classified and validated. I must understand my audience’s expectations for my account to be perceived as being ‘true’ or acceptable (Denzin, 2014: 58). I studied previously accepted work in the form of journals and doctoral theses and then moulded my work to fit in with what is currently in the mainstream. Can I now say that my thesis meets all of the expectations of a rigorous piece of autoethnographic research? I highly doubt it. However, examples of Adams’, Jones’ and Ellis’ own autoethnographic accounts (2015: 130) illustrate the difficulty for any piece to meet all of the goals currently set out due to the fluidity in this area of the research approach. I embrace this and accept it as forming a part of my learning curve to develop my further research efforts.

The reality is what may be viewed as ‘legitimate research’ today may not be the case tomorrow. Validity as a concept is interpretive; research is only as valid as it was at the time of writing in line with the criteria that were upheld and agreed upon at that time. I am not suggesting that validity should be done away with. What I am suggesting is we should judge each piece of research on its own merit. This issue is not unique to autoethnography. There is not a single research method or paradigm in existence that is unchallenged when it comes to having a complete list of criteria in relation to what is ‘right/wrong’, for want of a better word (Denzin, 2014).
If we fall into the trap of dropping existing criteria of qualitative approaches perceived as being the closest match, there are several issues that may arise. The first is that boxing researchers in forces us to make our research fit into a mould that it simply isn’t developed for (Ellis, 2004; and Denzin, 2014). Another point to consider is that by doing this, we are giving a voice to some and discouraging others (Adams et al., 2015). Finally, terms such as generalisability, validity and reliability all have different meanings to the autoethnographer: for example, reliability refers to ‘the narrator’s credibility as a writer-performer-observer... [whilst] validity means that a work has verisimilitude’ (Ellis et al., 2011, cited in Denzin, 2014: 69-70).

For this research, I have decided to adopt the four ‘goals’ suggested by Adams et al. (2015: 102): ‘1) [M]aking a contribution to knowledge’. The potential contributions to knowledge arising from this study are presented further on toward the end of this paper. ‘2) [V]alu ing the personal and experiential [emotions, vulnerability, even bodily experiences]’; the nature of my accounts and the evocative style adopted in my writing, with elements of self-exposure, demonstrate my appreciation of vulnerability and emotions in writing. ‘3) [D]emonstrating the power, craft and responsibilities of stories and story-telling [reflexivity is also just as much about our writing skills as it is about our analytical skills]’; The power of crafting stories has been one of the most challenging aspects of presenting this study. However, the constant editing process and feedback network I developed over the duration of the study have refined both my writing skills and my awareness of the power of story-telling. ‘4) [T]aking a relationally responsible approach to research practice representation [ethics; accessibility; ability to engage and improve lives of all participants, readers and society]’. Although I have dedicated an entire subsection to ethical considerations, I cannot confidently say that this study has the potential to improve the lives of all of those included. I consciously chose not to engage with the participants in my narratives (Paul, Suhail, Hamed and Khalid) when writing the paper, the limitations of which I discuss below.
Limitations of the study

In this section, I acknowledge the limitations of the study, discuss the weaknesses of my particular approach to the study in question and reflect on areas that could have been improved upon.

I intentionally decided not to involve Paul, Suhail, Khalid and Hamed whilst crafting my stories for my narratives. I do believe that had I interviewed these characters and involved them more in the construction of my stories, it will have developed my capacity to understand the situations from more than one perspective. By including participants in the creation of my narratives, however, I accept that the stories would have developed depth in their layering. Although this may not equate to verisimilitude, it would have admittedly increased the accuracy in relation to the facts and information.

However, accuracy and truth are complex issues in relation to how our memories preserve and relive experiences of the past through the lens of current perspectives. Ellis (2004) notes that current perspectives cloud our memories in relation to how we perceive past experiences. When we recall events, are we writing them as they happened or are we writing them as we understand them now? Are we even able to differentiate between the two? I would argue that this, by extension, raises the question of the importance of including the participants in the formation of past experiences. If some are reliving the past through lenses of the present and others through lenses of the past, then views and opinions could vary wildly. This is why I chose to present my accounts from my single perspective and thus allow readers to form their own opinions, including those who were actors in the script. I wanted the accounts to be preserved and untainted. How would I include their changes and versions of events if I did not feel they were correct, accurate or true? I do accept
that my refusal to include them in the writing process could be down to my own insecurities as an early career researcher and writer. Maybe I should not be too harsh on myself; I have some level of authority as the author, and I made that conscious decision. The fact that I did not pursue this avenue means that I will never really get any definitive answer to these questions for this particular study.

I did, however, establish a level of collaboration through a small support network of critical friends who were both academics and story writers. I feel this, without doubt, aided in sharpening the focus and effectiveness of my accounts. In addition to the regular comments, advice and points from my university supervisor, support mainly came from a close friend, John Gilligan, who mentored me through the process of story writing and Dr John Hynes, who painstakingly unpicked every word in my writing to help refine my literary style from an academic perspective. Their feedback, corrections and suggestions were an invaluable part of the formation of this paper. I also received feedback from my former youth work colleagues in London.

The second main limitation of this study was my lack of background knowledge and practical experience of using autoethnography. The difficulty in sourcing out specific training in this approach further compounded the problem. Although workshops at graduate schools and specialist training courses in autoethnography are spoken of in handbooks (Ellis, 2004; Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013; Denzin, 2014; and Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2015), I quickly learned that such provisions are quite rare due to the relatively small number of specialists currently in the field. I did, however, attempt to develop my skills through readings and the feedback process with my supervisor and wider support network.

A further limitation of my study is the unbalanced focus on one particular category in my social identity (Muslim) without any real exploration of my other social
identities, namely gender and social class. Showunmi et al., note that such an approach may not be a valid ‘conceptualisation of reality’ (Showunmi et al., 2016: 919) and by adopting this method, my research, to a certain degree, may have fallen into the same limited line of understanding leadership as much of the existing ‘white’ leadership research out there: neatly compartmentalising the differing aspects of social our social identities, which is what intersectionality aims to avoid.

**Reflexivity**

Whilst conducting my research, I have grown and matured as part of the process. Although the narratives that focus on my professional experiences in a position of leadership look at how I took on the role of English HOD, I do not feel there is a direct causal link that can be drawn between my research and my professional progression. However, I have personally developed much more than I could have ever imagined. I am now far more attuned to reflect upon events, issues and critical situations. I am now more able to appreciate the complexity of our stories and thus appreciate other people’s perspectives. Academically, I have also grown significantly. I now have much more respect for the depth and breadth of the topics that I have studied. I appreciate the wide range of research possibilities within any one given area. I also understand how it is possible to extend research within an area of study by looking for gaps of potential areas of interest to research. I already have ideas of where I would like to go with my research interests after this project: looking at the lives of Muslim leaders within the UK education system by creating, crafting and constructing our stories collaboratively.

Looking back at my experiences through early narratives is another way in which I have experienced a sense of growth and maturity. My narratives provided a snapshot of my way of thinking and my emotions at the time. When I read my narrative depicting my early years growing up in Manchester, I became more acutely
aware of my negative experiences and the feelings that I was harbouring. When storying those brief memories, there were times when I felt a lack of belonging. Whilst writing and reliving experiences one can feel extremely emotional: at times, I felt anger and even a sense of wanting to divorce myself from the country I’ve called home for my whole life. With the passing of time, however, I felt the urge to paradoxically revisit the area that I was raised in Manchester. When I did eventually visit, I noticed that in actual fact I did not harbour the same feelings that came through in my writing. Thus, I questioned whether my narratives were captions of the past or whether I was simply embodying my narratives? I do think that is what happened to a large degree when I was writing my stories – the more I pondered upon my past and the issues that I had growing up and the struggles that we faced, the more I realised that I was taking on that role once again. However, my exposure to people like Dr Damien Carberry and, in particular, John Gilligan and Dr John Hynes did much to positively influence me and redress the balance of emotions that I experienced through my writing. Friends who challenged my thinking and supported me throughout the process. Friends who reminded me that although it is of utmost importance that I do not forget my past, I must equally appreciate the importance of not allowing myself to get bogged down in the past so much so that it gains a disproportionate level of influence over the present. Had this advice come from another source, I doubt its effect would have been as profound. This varied feedback network supported and challenged me in every aspect of my writing and gave me the opportunity to consider some of the issues from more than one perspective. I have now experienced the significant impact that autoethnography can have on academia and one of my personal ‘missions’ is to further this approach to research by joining in efforts to disseminate more papers of this nature beyond my thesis.

This issue of our memories of the past influencing the present is also applicable to the ‘others’ that I included in my study. Looking back, several years after the events took place in my narratives, I can see how certain situations may not have appeared
to others as I had portrayed them: for instance, the interview with Hamed and how I believe I came across and how he viewed me. Maybe I was petting my ego a little too much! Was I genuinely eager to take on Paul’s role for the ‘good’ of the school: was I genuinely doing it for ‘our cause’? I cannot deny that I was conveniently at a stage in my life when I was actively seeking out more challenging leadership roles before I even joined that school at the time. I jumped on the justification of maintaining ‘writer’s authority’ for not involving others in my study: perhaps the reality is I did not want others to challenge my version of events. It is possible that, deep down, I was happy with how the story flowed and was not looking for that flow to be disrupted by other people’s perspectives. Everything made sense and worked well, especially when weaved into the literature to support my actions, to support our situation and to make myself feel better. I can see (and fear) how my writing may be incorrectly viewed as an attempt to mask my lack of loyalty to the country in which I was raised, perhaps to mask my resentment even. Very little of my ‘Britishness’ is overtly pointed out if compared and contrasted with how I talk about my identity as a Muslim and ‘our cause’. As I set off on the journey of writing my accounts and reflections, it never initially occurred to me how central my Muslim identity was in my life. I was unaware how certain happenings over the years that I thought were regarded as minor problems were actually unresolved issues left to ferment below the surface, which in turn had real effects on how I viewed the world.

At times, certain aspects of our experiences that we write about become so prominent that they begin to take on a more central role in our current lives (Ellis, 2004: 117). This is something that I can relate to as I was never really aware of how deeply rooted issues surrounding my religious identity were in my journey. It may seem quite obvious to the reader at this point and to myself in hindsight with a complete thesis in hand, however, initially I felt that the focus of my research would be on leadership and developing ‘capacities’ as a leader. The more I read, however,
and the more I wrote and discussed, the more I realised how central Islam and to a
certain degree my British’ness’ was to my leader identity development narrative.

Writing as inquiry is done so that we can achieve understanding through the actual
process of writing (McCormack, 2009). In the context of leadership development,
our identities are the project and the product (Carroll and Levy, 2010). That
understanding comes through writing and re-writing, editing and re-editing. Social
constructionism encourages us as researchers to be an integral part of the processes
of knowledge; to avoid separating oneself from the research and the process of
knowledge construction (Carroll and Levy, 2010). This allows us to look at our
experiences through different lenses and frames as we develop over time to achieve
a better level of understanding of events and happenings. The different lenses here
refer to reflecting upon events at different points in time in addition to examining
our personal experiences and views alongside the views of others (Anderson &
Glass-Coffin, 2013).

The iterative nature of autoethnographic writing has naturally compelled me to look
at situations from more than one point in time. I would complete a narrative account
and let it rest for several months whilst completing other sections of my thesis.
Then, after feedback, I would come back to my accounts, and I found it enlightening
to see how my views had changed over the duration of a few months in which I may
have read significant literature in leadership studies, methodological research
papers or maybe a single autobiography that had a significant impact on me. Then,
there is everything else that happens in between called life.

When discussing reflexivity, Bochner’s first criterion (2000) is that
autoethnographies must include concrete detail to allow the readers to relive the
experiences of the researcher as much as possible. This criterion is highly subjective,
and I suspect will vary significantly according to the readers’ expectations. Not all of
my accounts are written as stories (some are reflections), therefore, I do not feel that this criterion could be applied throughout. The narratives that are written as stories or have elements of stories embedded within do contain rich details (see, for example, the narrative that depicted the scene at Dan’s house when I witnessed his father enjoying the spectacle of ‘our boys going in’ during the Iraq invasion, or my experiences at Heathrow airport).

Bochner’s second criterion is that narratives must be complex by moving between the past and the present. I feel I achieve this when I move between the narratives that I wrote previously with interjections of comments from the present (see for example, the point at which I attempt to understand the circumstances that surrounded the decision to replace Paul as head of department, ‘Now that I reflect upon this, I suppose I can relate to why I wasn’t chosen as Head Boy at secondary school...’). I found this point especially difficult to integrate into my narratives as, although I wanted to maintain the authenticity of the accounts, the reality is we change with time and as I read back through my narratives, I regularly felt the urge to change aspects of my accounts, but I also felt compelled to maintain the original story to reflect my thinking at the time.

Exposing one’s vulnerability to the audience is Bochner’s third criterion for reflexivity. I fulfil this criterion as I felt extremely vulnerable after producing some of my accounts. However, I found it more difficult to measure this concept when looking for evidence in my writing: one example of my self-exposure is when I tried to openly reflect upon and understand why I took Paul’s position and admitted that maybe I did indeed try to make myself feel better for taking his position by playing on his failures and utilising the ‘literature’ as a justification for my reasoning. On the other hand, I accept that there are areas in which I failed to fully expose my vulnerability. The concerns that I mentioned Muslims have within their communities are very real and as a result, I was actually legally advised to rethink how I phrased
certain sections and even question the very necessity of others for fear of any mis-
interpretations (knowingly or unknowingly). However, I would not say that this is
necessarily a failing in relation to reflexivity as it brings the safety of the participants
into question and therefore ethical considerations would take priority here, which
leads onto Bochner’s fourth and final criterion: ethical considerations.

I can talk about my failure to include others in my stories (especially Paul and
possibly Hamed). The manner in which I painted Paul was such that I did not allow
him to respond or give his version of events. I also did not allow the other
participants such as SLT who were involved in the crucial decision making process to
fully explain their reasoning for making their decision to replace Paul. To balance
this out, however, I masked all names of participants and the location of the
narratives to protect their identities as much as possible. I have discussed ethical
considerations in more depth in a dedicated sub-section below.

When looking at Ellis’s criteria of authenticity and believability (2000) I used
responses received from friends who helped to proof read my writing and academics
who provided detailed feedback. Early responses such as, ‘keep writing’, ‘you’ve
clearly got a message to get out there’, ‘riveting reading’ are what spurred me on
and encouraged me to continue writing as I genuinely felt like I was opening up a
window onto an aspect of our society that many seemed unaware of. When I
received feedback from other Muslim community leaders, again I was urged to
continue writing and strive to get my work ‘out there’ as we needed ‘more of this
stuff’.

Ellis also asks whether or not accounts have the potential to trigger social change.
In regards to this point, the very fact that John Gilligan and Dr. John were pushing
me to continue writing had such a powerful effect and developed within me a sense
of responsibility. I would ask why is it that John Gilligan and Dr. John (who has never
even met me) are doing so much to help me in my journey? I could think of nothing more than the fact that they wanted me to get my story out there to be read and potentially make a change.

Since writing my autoethnography, my level of self-awareness has increased significantly. I find myself intentionally challenging my thoughts and actions, even if only internally. I am much more conscious about why I think and perceive things the way I do. This, I believe, is all evidence of the reflexive practice that I have developed over the duration of the study (Carroll and Levy, 2010).

Conclusion

Knowing when your writing is complete:

The lens through which we look at the world is ever-changing and therefore our perception of truth is forever changing. My story, as I have narrated it, will never be ‘complete’, the product never finished. Our lives have no real ending. Conclusions and final chapters are devices that we have invented for stories that will always be incomplete. Identity formation is not a search for an end goal; we are not ‘uncovering’ as such, rather we are crafting with no end product ever in mind, only a journey in pursuit of perfection, which we know paradoxically does not exist. At more than one stage, I thought I truly grasped autoethnography, but the more I read, explored, and learned, the more I realised how little I truly knew about the approach. However, there has to come an endpoint where one must finish, submit and move on. The constant need to switch on my laptop, tap away and edit my work never seems to end. Some say our work will never be complete; it is simply a case of feeling ready to let go (Ellis, 2004: 179). This is the stage where I now find myself. It may not be complete, but I am ready to move on.
How my writing evolved:

Thematising chapters and dealing with the actual process of writing can make writing autoethnographies tricky. I can relate to Chang’s reflections (2013) that, as an autoethnographer, one almost instinctively starts writing one’s accounts when starting the process of writing. This affected how I conducted my literature review. Initially, this was intentional as I did not want the literature to influence how I presented my accounts. However, what I overlooked at the beginning of the process was the iterative nature of writing personal narratives. This proved to be significant as the literature review inevitably affected my accounts as I moved back and forth between the two. Furthermore, as I read about autoethnography as a methodology, that too affected how I styled my accounts on both a macro and micro level. As I continued to mould my story, I found my searches for literature were being influenced by the themes that were becoming more pronounced in my accounts. The more I delved into either area of my readings and/or writing, the more I found each aspect of my thesis pulling the others off into its own direction. It eventually became a skill of trying to anchor each of my areas of interest in leadership studies, identity development and autoethnography whilst maintaining my story at the fore.

The development of my writing style was a journey in and of itself. I was initially concerned about my lack of previous background experience in writing with a ‘literary twist’. In the early stages, I tried so hard, maybe too hard, to adopt this style of writing under the naïve impression that it was needed to make my writing ‘evocative’ in full knowledge that I had little to no background in this style of writing. However, as I progressed through the process of shaping my thesis, I realised that writing powerful and effective accounts does not necessarily mean that I have to write like all of the budding novelists out there and once I began sharing my accounts with others and receiving feedback, my confidence developed in my current writing style. I gradually accepted that the aim of my piece was not to write
evocatively per se: rather, it was to allow people to see and experience what is going on in my world: this does not necessarily have to happen through the adoption of advanced literary techniques. Reading a range of autoethnographic accounts developed my sense of confidence and aided me in finding my ‘voice’ in my own writing. Witnessing the intentionally blurred lines that have been exploited by researchers in discussions in their methods books (Ellis, 2004; Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013; Denzin, 2014; and Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2015) and also evidenced in their published articles gave me the confidence to explore. Feedback from early research assignments for my doctorate studies, from the course coordinator and my supervisor, were major turning points in my current writing style, which has taken the form of traditional academic essay writing interwoven with personal narratives throughout.

Contributions to the field:

This thesis is one of the first of its kind to look at leadership identity development of Muslims Britons (specifically within the school leadership context) with a particular focus on the role that religion and faith plays in this process. My narratives open a unique and original educational door to readers. Through the lens of the social identity theory of leadership, my research offers insights into the importance of identities in educational leadership with a particular focus on Muslims Britons in positions of leadership. Although my individual context was based predominantly in a Muslim-faith school setting, I do not believe that the findings from this research should be applied any differently to those in Muslim-faith schools and non-denominational schools.

From an individual perspective, holding a position of leadership in education, my choice of autoethnography for this project has had a profound effect upon my life. I now feel better positioned to analyse situations, take a step back; to return to issues
long after they have passed and re-analyse them. I am now more able to have open
and frank discussions with people about difficult subjects that challenge my thinking
and make me feel uncomfortable. I have new confidence in opening up issues
previously unspoken for fear of being labelled when questioning the unquestioned
and challenging the unchallenged. These are all crucial contributions to the skill set
of any educational leader in modern day Britain.

Chang (2013) explains that the true reflection autoethnographic accounts give us
about our societies may be questioned as autoethnographies will naturally be
heavily influenced by the lives and experiences of academics. But what about the
‘others’ in our societies? My response is that autoethnography does not aim to take
over other approaches and become the approach to research: it adds to the already
diverse array of approaches to acquiring and producing knowledge.

As I move on from this project, I hope that it has contributed to raising awareness
of the approach (autoethnography). However, my main hope is that readers will
now have a better grasp of the challenges we face as Muslim leaders in the British
education system and in our developmental journey both within our professional
and personal lives.

Many scholars have done a very good job at articulating what they believe narrative
research should look like in practice and what it should achieve. Thus narrative
studies become a significant contributor to the fields of education and the social
sciences. There are concerns, however, that until alternative approaches, such as
autoethnography, are proposed and pushed within academia, they will remain
limited in their channels of dissemination; limited in the value associated with them
and subsequently limited in their effect on the field (Anderson, 2006a; Charmaz,
2006; Atkinson, 2006). Anderson (2006b) explains that as with all research,
autoethnography must be exemplified through compelling publications in order for
sociologists and researchers to see examples of just what autoethnography is and how it can contribute to a field. I hope my thesis will go some way to contributing to this area within education.

Research into social identity on the group level is mainly theoretical. As for the limited empirical studies over the last 10 years (Haslam et al., 2017), almost all are experimental (Epitropaki et al., 2017). My work is intended to widen the scope of such studies to real life experiences. I hope that my story has contributed to the limited research on leadership studies through the lens of identity development. I hope that my story has presented snippets of my life at various stages (from secondary school through to the present) with a unique focus on my lived experiences as a Muslim Briton working within the community as a teacher, educational leader and volunteer community leader.

I make no claim to represent all Muslims. However, I do believe that aspects of my narratives and experiences can be related to by some Muslims. This study, therefore, will also be of interest to those who work in or with Muslim schools or Muslim youth organisations in the UK from school leaders to policy makers.

This study supports efforts to fill the gap that Edge et al. (2017) highlighted in educational leadership studies: the concept of examining identities in leadership research within education and to further earlier studies like that of Shah (2006) by responding to the need for taking into consideration the religious attachments that Muslim BME leaders carry with them in schools when looking at self-categorisation theory and leadership. This study has responded directly to the initial research question: how does faith identity affect the development of leadership identity in Muslims? The study has emphasised the significance that religious beliefs can have in positioning leaders, Muslims in particular, and influencing the formation of leadership identities. More specifically, my work also brings to attention the
importance of taking into consideration how deeply rooted Muslim beliefs are (as a marginalised group) in relation to ‘contributing to their own’ as a central purpose in life. The manifestation of a situation in which groups within societies feel marginalised, threatened or targeted could be a possible explanation for this.

Owen Jones, in his book “The establishment and how they get away with it’, reminds us that change is not achieved through the ‘goodwill and generosity of those above’ (2015: 312-313). It is the sacrifices and efforts of the masses at the grassroots level that utilise common interests as a base for their power and influence. One of the main aspects that grounds my work is the aim to analyse my stories against the backdrop of our current society; not simply the exposure of my experiences for the sake of writing. The power of autoethnography lies in its ability to create social change at the grassroots level, not by putting sweeping systems and procedures into place. It is about triggering changes in individuals that may motivate them to then move on and become part of movements or efforts for a specific cause (Ellis, 2004: 254; Adams et al., 2015; and Denzin, 2014). I have already written about the changes that I experienced first-hand as a result of my research. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the responses that I received from my critical support network when writing this paper was one of my biggest motivating factors as I could sense potential change at a grassroots level taking place. For those who were less familiar with this aspect my life (like John G, Dr. John and Damien) conversations with them and their written responses demonstrated how enlightened they were to get a different perspective on life in the UK for Muslims working in positions of educational leadership. I took their continued support and encouragement as evidence of their desire to see more of what I was writing and ultimately to allow others to gain access. In addition to this, comments from volunteer Muslim community leaders who had read my work demonstrated their eagerness to see my writing published as they felt it would encourage other Muslims to get involved in voluntary
community work and encourage more existing Muslim community leaders to also write similar works.

I would recommend further research be conducted using some of the findings from this thesis. I would be particularly interested in exploring the potential of producing collaborative autoethnographic accounts of successful Muslims leaders across the UK within the field of education and perhaps even widen the scope to those involved in community work and social activism within Muslim communities.

References:


