

# What it is to be a Muslim family in Australia today?

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*Key words: complex, conflict, family, radical, roles, sociometry, spontaneity*

## Introduction

At a conference in Wellington in 2007, Zerka Moreno gave a message to us all in AANZPA via video encouraging us to work with families. I imagined Zerka was addressing me directly. I could see us in AANZPA as a loose network of family therapy practitioners. This article invites us all to be family therapists and expand our application of this wonderful method that J. L. Moreno devised and that we have learnt. You may find, like I have, that a wide range of people will come to a family therapy session. Each bringing complexity, depth and often longing.

Five years ago, and again recently, I worked with a family where the parents are from the Middle East. I focus on the use of J. L. Moreno's techniques to produce spontaneity. I apply sociometry, spontaneity theory, and role analysis to open new perspectives, repair relationships and to promote role expansion in each member of the family.

I apply Whittaker and Lieberman's (1965) Group Focal Conflict Model to assist the divided family to find their 'in common' purpose and enabling solutions. As a sociodramatist, I focus on intra- and inter-group relationships. I regard the family as the smallest cultural group forming our Australian culture today. I anticipate discussions with family members where we explore our wisdom in traversing complex transitions. The social concern explored is, what does it mean to be a good Muslim family in Australia today?

## The context

The wish of the father, Ahmed, is that his children freely choose to

adopt Islam. His religious faith is central to his identity, guiding him as a father, professional worker, husband, neighbour, and citizen. He and his wife Zarah, made their Islamic practices visible and explicit, hoping their children would find meaning in Islam and in the good Muslim life. At the same time, he wishes them to adopt the Australian way of living. As well, Ahmed is determined that all his children become financially independent.

As migrants, Ahmed and Zarah brought with them an experience and understanding of Islam where it was a central cultural force in all aspects of life. In Australia, however, he experiences Islam inspiring curiosity, being marginalised, misunderstood, feared, and even reviled. I remind myself that prior to 1975, non-European immigrants were restricted by the white Australia policy although this had started being eroded after the second world war. In 1975 The Racial Discrimination act came into effect. Thus, it was unlawful to discriminate, including with immigration, on the basis of race.

In 1969, when I was 18, and on a scholarship to America, I was asked at a school assembly by an African-American if we have classical music ensembles and would he be able to emigrate to Australia. I remember extreme embarrassment as I explained that we did have orchestras but likely he would not be accepted because of an explicitly racist policy that caused me great shame. I remember going bright red.

My guiding question is, how does a family stay coherent, maintain its unique identity and warmth, while navigating ongoing social change, conflicting values and intergenerational tensions, in a sometimes hostile culture?

## Session 1

The father comes with one daughter, Layla, who is 24, to our first session. His wife, Zarah, eldest daughter Amina 26, and younger son, Omar 15, were not present.

Family therapist asks: *What do you hope for from meeting with me?*

Silence.

Family therapist: *How about you start Ahmed? What are you hoping for from meeting with me?*

Ahmed: ... Yes, to be able to have good conversations together (referring to him and his daughter with his hand gestures).

Layla: *Yes, that would be good. We cannot do that (she wells up with tears).*

Family therapist to Layla: *I imagine you were press ganged into coming today and you have mixed feelings including being annoyed at being here.*

Layla: *Yes. I only knew of this meeting this morning and I was told (gesturing to her dad) that I had to come and try it out.*

Family therapist: *This is not the best start for you.*

Layla: *Yes, I wanted to meet with a Muslim psychologist.*

Family therapist: *Your faith is central to who you are and it's likely I won't understand.*

Layla: *Yes.*

The father, Ahmed, recounts a long-winded story alluding to past dilemmas the two have had dating back ten years ago to his daughter's teenage years.

Ahmed.: *When you were fourteen ....*

Ahmed continues in a mesmeric tone for some twenty minutes.

As he does this, I recall him in our prior family therapy sessions, organising a series of dilemmas from the least vital. My thoughts back then were that he has an over developed role of *beating around the bush* and being *the conductor* in a negotiation. I concluded then and again now that he is working as the head of his household or formal leader. Five years ago, we spoke about this and its inherent burden. We agreed then that me taking initiatives too may be of benefit and was central to my job with them. We became respectful co-leaders.

As they begin a conversation, I invite them to concretise, with cushions and toys, the dynamic between them. They create a physically high wall of about a meter between them and a scattering of twelve or so past conflicts concretised on the floor. Their chairs are parallel to one another with neither glancing at the other.

Ahmed: *Casurina (a suburb) is dangerous.*

Layla: *Casurina is a career stepping stone.*

Ahmed: *You're dumb.*

Layla: *You're wrong* (as she shrinks back into her chair).

Family therapist doubles Layla: *I do not want to say what I really think.*

Family therapist doubles Ahmed: *I'm deeply hurt.*

Family therapist doubles Layla: *I'm deeply hurt.*

Layla: *The wall is up.*

Layla: *Okay. We have come to the right person.*

Layla to Family therapist: *I did not think you would understand our Muslim family. You do. I am surprised.*

I nod.

## Sociometry, roles and spontaneity

The father, Ahmed, readily warms up to his overdeveloped role of being a *one-eyed prosecuting storyteller* as he makes his case for his daughter's immaturity and being easily influenced by those around her. Layla's response is as an *overdeveloped tortured respectful listener*. Their sociometry is one of mutual negativity. They are both pained. This is an old dance that has ossified and rusted between them. Spontaneity has left the building.

## Trenchant stories

I keep an eye out for embedded ideas about one another and predetermined perspectives in often retold stories that dominate the family, skewing memory, and dulling experience to this one-only perspective. A fresh perspective or new light is absent and defended against. Even so, I feel the longing in both for a good life, to protect one another and be respectful and respected.

## Applying the group focal conflict model

Ahmed's motivating force is to have a coherent, moderate Muslim family in Australia today that protects the family's image and cohesion. His reactive fear is that his youngest daughter will become radicalised through her contact with teammates who have more radical religious ideologies that may damage her spiritually and

socially. Consequently, Ahmed's fear is she will become unattractive to prospective suitors, that he will be seen by his migrant Muslim cohort in a lesser light, and his daughter will be his responsibility forever. His restrictive solutions are to revoke Layla's use of the car, rigidly define her as immature and engage in emotionally restrictive and trenchant conversations about past events. Expressed as a focal conflict for this family group this is:

*How do I protect our family's coherence and moderate Muslim life and reduce the fear that our daughter will be radicalised and so be damaged in her spirituality and social attractiveness?*

Layla's motivating force is to engage in meaningful teamwork and launch her professional career. Her reactive fear is that there is a risk of emotional and relational abandonment from her family. Her restrictive solutions are to take up the team-focussed work she craves, to distance herself emotionally taking a lot of her time on her own in her room, withholding full transparency of her already more radical beliefs and announcing that she is going to wear a scarf. She becomes rigidly persistent, trenchant and sad in her discussions with her father. Her focal conflict is:

*What can I do to be a valued family member and work in a team while launching my career with the blessing from both of my parents?*

The matter of transitioning is complex in this family. Moving from a relationship of parent-child to parent-adult is complex because of the economic and emotional dependency of the live-at-home young adult who is infantilised by the rationale that she is immature. This is further complicated with the father's responsibility for his daughter until she is married and has moved to her matrimonial home.

## The sociodramatist as family therapist

Both show some surprise and delight at the height and stoutness of the wall they have created between them. The wall is both metaphorically and literally experienced as co-created. Irony abounds! They purr when doubled. Their hunger to be companioned and accurately mirrored is palpable.

The concretisation allows the truth to be observed and felt from within the relationship and from outside the relationship as it is

mirrored in its concretisation. Also, the process of concretisation requires both to warm up to being collaborative co-creative organisers. They readily warm up to be objective observers of themselves, their relationship and each other. Thus, this simple enactment requires both to expand their role relationship and enables the beginning of a new perspective as they are doubled and mirrored. I remember from my earlier involvement with this family five years ago that role reversal with the other person present was disrespectful. I think privately that if I push role reversals they won't come back.

## Contract for the work

I think of this first session as a contracting session where their work is displayed, I show how I work, and importantly, we all have an experience of progress. I am conscious of my relationship with each of them, that we create an in-common purpose or realise there is no mutual purpose yet, that I attend to the roles enacted and their shifting sociometry and I pay attention to the rise and fall of their spontaneity. The techniques I rely on to produce their surplus reality in this instance, are that of double, and concretiser as I function as a producer and alternately, a doubling auxiliary in their drama.

## Session 2

The two sisters, Layla and Amina, come.

They warm up to one another as I produce a group-centred warmup focussed on their relationship.

The older sister, Amina says: *I am very sad because a close friend of mine attempted to take his life. A friend cut him down. There is nothing I can do to stop him suiciding. Ugh. I have a broken heart.*

She lays out the three different responses she has had using cushions on the stage. She says some of what she was thinking and feeling in each response: *Impotence.*

And, later on in the enactment she says: *Oh, I am angry that this takes over my life. He has had four suicide attempts in ten years and each time one of us (Amina or one of his other friends) saves his life.*

We play with enacting new ways to respond to and to see this dilemma.

The one that ignites Amina's spontaneity is when we are considering that this is one person dominating everyone's life as his pain is spread between them.

*He makes his problem our problem.*

I think to myself that this has parallels with her father and her sister, where his disturbance and lack of sleep becomes his daughter's problem to solve by not going to work in Casurina. I am not sure why I don't bring this forward directly as emotional blackmail as I likely would with another family! Have I become part of this family's dynamic?

## Sociometry, roles and spontaneity

This painful backdrop is at the forefront of Amina's life. The impact of her friend's pain, and her ambivalent, liked and unliked responses to him, is startling for her. Her value of facing herself and her 'real' responses is enlivening. Her spontaneity rises. She is free to experience her angry responses.

## Fixed ideas are out in the open

The three of us have a further discussion near the end of the session when Amina presents as a deputy for her father. She fleshes out her father's worries; that Layla will become radicalised in Casurina. My suspicion that the father's narratives dominate the family seems confirmed. I opine to myself that it is disrespectful or forbidden for others to contradict Ahmed with a different perspective and experience of the same events.

## Session 3

Ahmed, Amina and Layla come.

After a short group centred warm up,

Family therapist to Ahmed: *I don't have the same view as you do of your daughter. I would not call her immature. I see Layla as entering into her adult phase of life with clarity of what she values and wants from her life at this time. What do you mean when you describe her as immature?*



Ahmed to family therapist: *I know my daughter. You don't. She is immature and is not up to making her own decisions. Decisions made now will affect her for her whole life. We have already had one boyfriend who would have made her a perfectly good husband. He is not Muslim but had values very similar to our own.*

Layla says very quietly: *I have found out from that relationship that I want to marry a Muslim. It is very important to me.*

Ahmed: *Don't you start preaching to me about Islam. I know much much more than you do.*

This is expressed firmly and a little loudly while he flails his arms around a little.

Layla: *Yes, of course you do.*

She sits back in her seat and becomes quiet.

Family therapist to the father: *Could you stand it if Layla is more conservative in her beliefs than you already. It appears she has come to this herself and it is not the new colleagues she has had for only two weeks that have influenced her?*

Ahmed: *No.*

I remind Ahmed that he and Zarah had migrated to New Zealand and then Australia without his parents' blessing.

I reflect: *At times my daughter and grandchildren could have avoided a deep hurt if they had followed my advice. I do notice that the lessons they get from doing it their way are heart felt and not repeated.*

Ahmed: *She is too immature.*

Family therapist: *Are you also worried that she may be attracted to a more radical Muslim at the hospital she works in in Casurina?*

Ahmed: *She will not do that.*

Later, family therapist: *Why don't you bring your wife, Zarah to these sessions?*



All three laugh and say things like: *She would hate it. She has ADHD. She is very good at doing our shopping. She would not like this and would not be good at it.*

Family therapist: *I would like to meet her. I'm sure she has a lot of influence in the family. And, it is not a requirement that you bring her.*

## Roles

On other topics Ahmed and I have been able to express differing viewpoints on our wisdom applied to his family situation. Here, Ahmed fragments and becomes a *fearful and solemn pronouncer* rather than his progressive role of being a *wisdom sharer*.

## An enabling solution or a restrictive solution?

In his determination that Layla has a good Muslim life his fear that she will make disastrous immutable life-long decisions dominates. He enacts the restrictive solution by closing down any discussion and insisting he knows what is best for the future.

## Session 4

Role training; the 'difficult' daughter, Layla, comes alone. This is the final session with the family.

Family therapist: *You are determined to live your life your way and live with the consequences.*

Layla, as she tears up with feeling: *Yes. It would be good to have their (her mother and father's) blessing.*

Layla as Ahmed: *No. I do not give you my blessing...*

Layla in an aside: *He will give his blessing after a few weeks.*

Layla as Zarah: *You are placing a great burden on your father. He cannot sleep.*

We set out a scene with Layla leaving the house to walk to the station to catch the train to Casurina. She walks past her father's study and quickens her pace with her shoulders slightly rounded. The mirroring is painful for Layla to watch.

I model walking past her father's room with my head up, my shoulders well balanced and my spine firm. She has a go and likes this way to walk out from the house.

Layla as her mother Zarah: *I want you to pull your weight in the house. We are all studying or working.*

Layla: *Yes, I would like to do that. I could cook twice a week (at night). Will that work for you?*

Zarah: *That would be good.*

## Emerging roles, sociometry and spontaneity

Layla readily warms up to being a *wishful dreamer*. As we enter role training with mirroring and modelling she readily warms up to the social role of confident professional. And with her mother, she has already decided to come out from hiding in her room to take her place in the life of the family. In this instance as a family cook.

Her sociometry with her father is ambivalent, both negative and positive. He is similarly ambivalent towards her; negative to the decisions she was making and positive to her well-being.

Neither of us know if either her father or her mother will come around to her viewpoint. It is quite something for her to realise that she is an adult and that she will pave her own path in her life and that she will be responsible for the consequences.

We discuss whether her father will be able to become more flexible towards her. She is hopeful that given time both her parents will be able to bless her decisions and realise their worst fantasies have not come to fruition.

## The sharing phase

In my sharing, I tell of leaving Australia when I was naïve and 22 to travel the world. My mother immediately saw me as being traded in the white slave trade. She was inconsolable. Luckily for me my father quietly said that it was his job to look after my mother with her worries. I agreed to go to each Australian embassy or consulate and let them know that I was in that country and that I was alright. I also sent postcards every fortnight to my parents. My mother went to bed for two weeks immediately I left Australia. Neither my mother nor my father raised their concerns with me after this quiet exchange with my father.

## Reflections

I reflect on family life in Australia today. What it is to immigrate to the other side of the world? What it is to be first generation Australian? What prompted a couple moving away from their homeland and what hopes drew them to this new place?

I am cognisant of the complexity within the family of making several transitions concurrently; from student to professional worker, from young adult to independent adult, from blessed daughter to partially-rejected daughter. I reaffirm my delight in the potency of this method and am guided by the rise and fall in spontaneity of us all.

## Implications

Whatever your psychodrama specialty we are all trained in group work, cultural and social atom repair, in using our wisdom as therapeutic guides and in applying J. L. Moreno's methodology. My exhortation is to us all to present as family therapists whatever our specialty. Like me, you may find a new group of clients who are unlikely to seek out other forms of therapy but who will become involved in 'family therapy'.

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She now lives in a secondary house next to her granddaughter and her two boys. Being a great-grandmother is fun and rewarding. Elizabeth is the Director of Training at the Brisbane Campus of Psychodrama Australia and a visiting trainer in Adelaide and Perth.