Reflections on the psychological stressors and issues that children of believers from Muslim backgrounds face

Developing a framework for a better understanding of the relevant issues

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Abstract

This article reflects on legal, missiological, criminological and psychological documentation and experiences that believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) face. Conclusions drawn from these areas help develop a framework to understand some of the psychological stressors and issues that children of BMBs face within the state schooling system and their community. Practitioners such as human rights and advocacy specialists, missionaries and counsellors could benefit by reflecting on these issues. The main contribution of this article is the novel way in which it ties the various issues into a four-pronged, holistic framework surrounding a child's identity to augment clarity of discussion, research and intervention.

Keywords Stressors, religious registration and education, Muslim, identity, psychology, human rights, children.

1. Introduction

> …the issue to which many participants (BMBs) pointed as the single greatest challenge in living their lives as converts: the question of raising children as Christians, or perhaps more accurately considering the social limitations on religious conversion, second generation converts. Kraft (2007:168 parenthesis added)

Children of BMBs in Middle Eastern and North African countries face added challenges to their psychological well-being and identity as compared to children growing up in Western countries (cf. Kraft 2007:168). To help us understand their unique challenges, we must first be acquainted with Islamic and Muslim culture.

In Middle Eastern and North African cultures, the needs of the group, be it the family, extended family, community or nation, take precedence over the needs of the individual (Emetuche 2010). Moreover, Islam is viewed as a total system covering the whole life, affecting all aspects of life, both private and public. In sharp contrast, Western cultures generally place the needs of the individual before the needs of the group. Therefore, individual choice is respected subject to it not removing the rights of other individuals. Religion is generally viewed as a private matter (cf. MEC Legal Documents 2005 and Emetuche 2010.)

While many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have ratified or acceded to International UN Instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR 1948) and incorporated into the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR 1966) granting freedom to the individual and choice of religion, the actual situation in Islamic countries does not in most cases reflect this. Although there is variation in the ideology and practice of Islam in such countries, Middle East Concern (MEC) summarises the real life legal and practical issues that BMBs and their families face daily (MEC Legal Documents 2005: Ch. 2.8):

> In some countries, there is an official religious registration of each citizen, and access to some services, including recognition of marriage and state provided education, varies according to the registration. Further, conversion to Islam, and hence services for Muslims, is recognised but conversion from Islam to another faith is not.

> In other countries, there is the assumption that all citizens are Muslims and therefore Islamic religious practices are enforced on all citizens, notably concerning marriage ceremonies, the religious education of children and death rites.

In other words, for most countries in MENA, once you are born a Muslim, or have converted to Islam, it is not possible to change your religion officially. This inflexibility, which is a violation of fundamental human rights, has significant ramifications for children of BMBs. And children especially feel the brunt of this violation whilst attending public schooling (cf. MEC Legal Documents 2005 and Education Project 2006).

We will look at this issue in greater detail in the next section of the article, titled *First prong: Stressors of religious registration and education on children*. And in particular, how it can affect a child's psychological well-being and identity. The recommendations for continued human rights and advocacy work, and documentation of these stressors are suggested at the end of the section.

In the following section, *Second prong: The parental buffer,* we shall see that as primary care-givers, believing parents are able to play a significant role in ameliorating the impact of religious registration and education, as well as other family and community pressures on their children. The recommendations that arise from

this section are significant for missionaries, counsellors and life coaches working with BMBs.

In *Third prong: Individual differences,* psychological literature tells us that children react differently to parenting and cope differently to the stressors of attending state schools and living in their community. The recommendations for sustained prayer and social support from significant others, including missionaries, are suggested.

In *Fourth prong: Long-term psychological outcomes*, we shall explore some of the possible long-term observable cognitive (mental), affective (emotional) and behavioural reactions of these children growing up in the Islamic world. It is suggested that psychologists, counsellors and other child specialists who understand the cultural sensitivities and structural issues are able to contribute significantly to their overall well-being.

In *Summary and conclusion*, we will present the four prongs of our framework surrounding a child's identity in a pictorial diagram. Strengths and limitations of the article and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

2. First prong: Stressors of religious registration and education on children

To reiterate, in many countries across MENA, people have a religious registration assigned to them at birth, normally that of their parents. Their religion is recorded in legal documents such as birth certificates, identity cards, passports, marriage certificates and death certificates (e.g. Country Report on Egypt 2010). Conversion to Islam is recognised, but conversion from Islam to another faith is forbidden.

In other countries, there is an assumption that all citizens are Muslims and are therefore subject to Islamic regulation and practice without exception (cf. MEC Legal Documents 2005).

Many legal and practical problems consequently arise when Muslims and their families decide to follow Jesus. Four main problems that directly impact children of BMBs are listed below (cf. MEC Legal Documents 2005: Ch. 1). These form the backdrop issues as we look at the stressors that children of BMBs face as a result of religious registration and education within the state schooling system. These stressors can in turn affect a child's psychological well-being and identity.

2.1 Raising children

Children born to a Muslim are considered to be Muslims. This also applies in situations where only one of the parents is a Muslim, regardless of which partner is Muslim and the faith of the other partner.

In situations where both parents are converts to Christianity and have been unable to change their religious registration, their children will be legally regarded

Stressor 1: **Curriculum**	Stressor 4: **Collateral concerns**
• History is taught ranging from Islamic bias to clear intolerance of other faiths (e.g. Saudi Arabia). • Arabic used in instruction saturated with Islamic language. • Taught to segregate people based on religion rather than civic integration.	• Unable to go to private schools because of lack of money.
Stressor 2: **Religious education**	Stressor 5: **Religious registration**
• Compulsory Islamic education – forced memorisation of verses from the Qur'an, many from a young age. • Islamic bias against Christianity. • Muslim classmates totally ignorant of the Christian faith.	• Children are officially registered as Muslims in schools even though they might be children of BMBs.
	Stressor 6: **Community discrimination**
	• Public schools singling out children of BMBs. • Evicted from university hostel because of faith.
Stressor 3: **Education structure**	Stressor 7: **Physical confrontation**
• Unable to go to Christian schools – must go to state schools. • Not permitted to be excused from school during Christian feasts. • Some able to opt out of Islamic classes but have no alternative option (e.g. Turkey).	• Verbal and physical abuse experienced in school.

Table 1. Stressors children of BMBs experience in the state schooling system

as Muslims. This creates expectations over dress code and attendance at places of worship, and leads to harassment and discrimination in schools.

2.2 Divorce and custody

Islamic law allows a person to divorce should their spouse convert from Islam to another faith. Indeed, some interpret the law to mean that the marriage contract is automatically broken irrespective of the wishes of either partner. Moreover, Islamic law states that non-Muslims cannot act as protectors to Muslims. Therefore if the parties to a

mixed religion marriage are divorced, the children must be raised as Muslims and legal custody is granted to the Muslim partner irrespective of other considerations.

2.3 Inheritance

Islamic law does not allow a non-Muslim to inherit from a Muslim. Furthermore, a convert from Islam is deemed to lack the capacity to inherit from others and his or her property falls to the state.

2.4 Religious education

The school registers the religion of the child in accordance with the documents submitted at the time of enrolment. If one of the child's parents is legally regarded as a Muslim then the child is regarded as being a Muslim. Therefore, in many countries the children of Christians who have converted from Islam will be educated as Muslims because the religious registration of their parents cannot be changed.

The legal and practical issues that children of BMBs face as a result of the above problems are wide-ranging and complicated. In this section of the article, we will however concentrate on educational issues surrounding the state schooling system. As MEC (Annual Report 2010:29) informs us, "education issues are very significant to the long-term well-being of Christian communities…BMBs across the region tell MEC that education of their children is among the most significant issues they face."

Also, MEC (Education Project 2006:8 parenthesis added) points out that one of the fundamental freedoms to which all members of the UN, including countries in MENA, have agreed to be bound to is "the right to freedom of religion, and in the context of education in the Middle East (and North Africa), it is this right that is most frequently and systematically violated."

2.5 Stressors, psychological well-being and identity

A detailed examination of a range of documents and case files that MEC has produced has revealed seven clusters or groupings of stressors that children of BMBs possibly face in state schooling systems of the MENA region (Education Project 2006; Country Report on Egypt 2010; Annual Report 2010). It is important to note that not every child experiences all these stressors at any given time. These stressors are country, location, school and situation specific. Table 1 lists these seven stressors with examples to aid comprehension. Interestingly, within limits of analogy, one could say that the experiences of children of BMBs in many ways parallel the experiences of inmates serving prison sentences. Such people are seen and labelled by the state as deviant. They are incarcerated in an environment that they are unable to leave. The prison environment is often antagonistic and threatening to an individual's self-esteem, psychological well-being and identity.

ALIENATION	HOPELESSNESS
ANGER	HUMILIATION
ANXIETY	IRRITABILITY
BETRAYAL	LONELINESS
CONFUSION	LOSS OF CONTROL
DEPRESSION	LOSS OF SELF-ESTEEM
FRUSTRATION	STRESS

Table 2. Possible psychological effects of stressors on children of BMBs

In a very real sense, many children of BMBs are trapped or imprisoned in their environment. They are unable to escape their Islamic surrounding which is often antagonistic to their Christian beliefs and that of their parents. Children who choose to believe in any religion other than Islam are seen as deviant (cf. Kraft 2007 Ch. 7 and 8). And if discovered, are labelled accordingly. These seven stressors have the potential to negatively impact and assault a child's self-esteem, psychological well-being and identity.

To empirically verify the impact of these stressors, a series of studies will have to be conducted including a control study of the normal psychological development of school-aged children in MENA. Erikson's (1968) seminal work on identity of youth and crisis provides a good theoretical basis. Also, findings from prior research examining the association between ethnic identity and self-esteem and adjustment will prove invaluable to understanding the impact of these seven stressors on children of BMBs (e.g. Phinney & Alipuria 1990 and Harel-Fisch et al 2012).

Drawing and extrapolating research findings from psychological and criminological literature that examine the psychological effects of imprisonment on inmates, Table 2 lists some of the possible psychological effects that these stressors of religious registration and education can have on children of BMBs (cf. for example Biggam & Power 1997; Dingwall & Harding 2002; Rokach & Cripps 1999; Temin 2001 and Wooldredge 1999).

2.6 Recommendations

Every child in MENA regardless of sex, creed and religion has a fundamental right to grow and mature into adulthood without feeling discriminated, marginalised and coerced into any belief system and social structure. Moreover, Article 26 of the UDHR (1948) states that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."

MEC sees structural issues such as religious registration and compulsory religious education as root causes of human rights violation that continue to pose serious challenges to BMBs, the psychological well-being of their children, and the growth of the church.

It is imperative that human rights and advocacy work continues for the MENA region. Specifically, it is recommended that:

1. The wider church continues to educate their congregations about the structural and symptomatic issues that BMBs and their children face (Annual Report 2010);
2. Resources and finances be made available so that advocacy work can continue;
3. Psychologists and other trained clinicians document and verify the stressors and psychological impact that religious registration and religious education can have on children of BMBs.

3. Second prong: The parental buffer

Children of BMBs face unique and difficult challenges to their psychological well-being and identity as they grow up in the Islamic world, and particularly whilst attending school. The solution however is not to extract them out of their environment and relocate their families overseas, and especially to Western countries, unless of course there is an immediate physical threat to their lives. MEC sees this option as the last resort. Extraction is not helpful because it (1) removes Christian witness, (2) does not grow the local church, (3) avoids challenging underlying structural issues and (4) destroys the essential extended family and community bonds crucial to the identity and well-being of BMBs (cf. Emetuche 2010). Furthermore, relocation is a very stressful event for children, with the exception of the very young (i.e. infants and toddlers).

Regarding the fourth point, ironically, it is often these important relationships that are also a source of major stress to BMBs and their children. Kraft (2007:182) mentioned that the two main issues complicating child-rearing for converts in the Arab world are government religious identification, that is, religious registration and education; and family pressure. Most extended families and communities would be outraged to discover converts. Islamic law allows children to be forcibly removed from apostate parents and this has and continues to happen in practice up to the present day (cf. MEC Legal Documents 2005: Ch. 1 and Annual Report, 2010)!

There is no panacea for the challenges of BMBs and their children. However, if believing families are still to remain in their communities and we accept the assumption that extraction and relocation to a foreign country is the last resort, then we must as the wider church do what we can to assist our brothers and sisters and their children to be a viable witness and to live and ultimately be accepted by their communities.

It is the assumption of the article that despite the difficulties, as primary care-givers, believing parents, with God's enabling and the support of the wider church, are able to play a significant role in ameliorating the impact of religious registration and education, as well as other family and community pressures on their children. This article has identified four areas in which we can assist them.

Four areas of assistance to believing parents

3.1 Biblical foundation and application

Muslims who choose to follow Jesus enter their new life with the theological baggage they inherit from Islam. So, in our context, the more believing parents are assured of their faith and practice, the more they are able to support, encourage and teach their children to follow Jesus despite the contrary information, beliefs and practices their children observe in school and elsewhere (cf. Emetuche 2010 and Dutch 2000).

If missionaries are able to assist BMBs in developing a strong biblical foundation and application in an encouraging, open and consultative environment, rather than a top-down approach, this will assist BMBs not only with the necessary theological tools but also an open method of instruction that is conducive to help them raise their children as second-generation believers.

3.2 Contextualisation

Extraction in Muslim evangelism and discipleship contexts refers to the abandon-ment of Muslim tradition and culture after conversion to the Christian faith (cf. Emetuche 2010:7-8).

Thankfully, mission work is progressing beyond traditional colonialist, mission-station extraction-type approaches. In missionary circles, there is a general agree-ment for the need of contextualisation for BMBs and their children to remain within their culture and communities (cf. for example Cumming 2009 and other recent articles about the contextualisation of believers from Muslim backgrounds at the Lausanne.org website).

Indeed, missionaries have noted two "flash points" that galvanise community opposi-tion to BMBs (cf. Dutch 2000 and Cumming 2009). The first is the visible adoption of Western Christian practice. These include erecting a church building, adopting "Chris-tian" names, eating foods that defile, and disrespecting the Qur'an and Muhammad.

The second, especially for Muslim leaders, is whether BMBs continue to practice the moral and ritual requirements of the Muslim community with which they identify.

Missionaries need to acknowledge their influence and consequently their res-ponsibility in the lives of BMBs. Their instruction not only in biblical doctrine and application, but also their views about culture and contextualisation can significant-

ly and positively influence the way BMBs view their role and place in their societies. This in turn can have a profound impact on the way parents instruct their children and how these children cope with stressors in school and their community.

The goal is to assist families to remain in their culture and communities as far as possible without diluting the essence of the Gospel. BMBs ultimately need to work out for themselves where the limit of contextualisation is for the sake of their identity, the psychological well-being of their children and witness in their communities. At the same time, missionaries need to work out where their boundaries lie in suggesting and imposing limitations to contextualisation.

3.3 Life skills

A missionary with over a decade of experience working with BMBs in Central Asia recently told me that missionaries often make the assumption that when Muslims choose to follow Jesus, their previous life, struggles and issues are wiped clean. It is as if they start with a clean slate, *tabula rasa*. Yes, their sins are forgiven, and the Holy Spirit may miraculously deliver them from certain conditions, but for most, the rebuilding of their lives in Christ require BMBs to systematically address past emotional issues, addictions and even demonic bondages. This is over and above the theological baggage they bring from Islam. To use a house analogy, the person may have given the key of the main door to Jesus, but they have not cleaned out or yielded individual rooms over to Him.

It is in this area where trained Christian counsellors, practitioners and prayer-healing ministries can contribute significantly to either train missionaries to address such issues directly or run clinics and workshops where BMBs can attend. It is unlikely that past issues will be addressed over a few sessions. It is often an ongoing journey with the BMB (cf. Register 2009:52).

As the wider church, we are able to help not only BMBs deal with past issues, but we can also coach and assist them for current and future challenges by providing them with necessary life skills and sharpening their existing ones. The caveat is that as we intervene in the lives of BMBs, we need to make sure that the atmosphere is consultative, encouraging, open, and not coerced. Furthermore, we need to be culturally sensitive and mindful of the specific challenges they face in their situation and community.

Indeed, past research has shown a positive correlation between life skills coaching and building positive self-esteem and self-confidence (cf. Green 2011 and Oztas 2010). Psychologists, counsellors, child specialists, life and business coaches are once again able to equip missionaries or run clinics and workshops where needed.

Some possible areas of life skills coaching that might be useful include: Stress management; Conflict resolution; Marriage enrichment; Boundaries; Healthy living; Financial management; Business and work and Effective parenting.
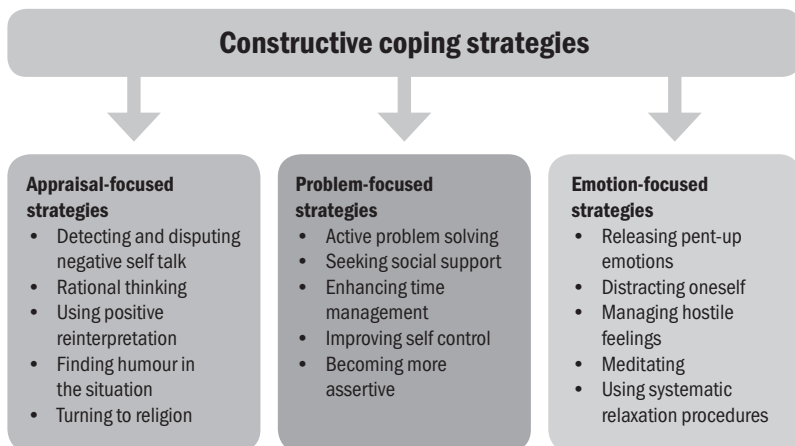
In regard to effective parenting, possible areas of coaching include: Delayed gratification; Sharing; Discipline; Conflict resolution and Creative thinking.

Dealing with past issues and assisting BMBs to acquire and sharpen their life skills in culturally appropriate ways should contribute significantly to them being able to handle the challenges and stressors of life. In turn, they will more likely be able to instruct their children not only to cope, but even thrive against the backdrop of stressors they face in school and their environment.

3.4 Role-modelling

With God's strength, missionaries must continue to strive in humility for authentic living amongst Muslim communities. We must practice what we preach. Also, as we help BMBs grapple with their cultural identity within their communities, we need to constantly examine our own assumptions and prejudices, and make the point to actively engage with the issues of contextualisation by reflecting on our own experiences, reading, attending seminars and discussing with others. We must be prepared to be flexible with our ideas and methodologies. The importance of the discipline of critical or self-reflection in either ministry or human services – as a reflection on how practitioners "help" people – cannot be overstated and is now a developing sub-field (cf. for example White, Fook & Gardner 2006).

Role-modelling does not mean that we require missionaries to be perfect. However, it demands that missionaries must strive to be open, real and even vulnerable to the people to whom they are ministering. Role-modelling works both ways. Missionaries should also be willing to learn from their BMB broth-

Constructive coping strategies

Appraisal-focused strategies
- Detecting and disputing negative self talk
- Rational thinking
- Using positive reinterpretation
- Finding humour in the situation
- Turning to religion

Problem-focused strategies
- Active problem solving
- Seeking social support
- Enhancing time management
- Improving self control
- Becoming more assertive

Emotion-focused strategies
- Releasing pent-up emotions
- Distracting oneself
- Managing hostile feelings
- Meditating
- Using systematic relaxation procedures

Figure 1. Constructive coping strategies

ers and sisters. In addition, they must be prepared to keep learning and growing in all areas of their lives. Then, they will be in a better position to assist BMBs and their children to face the various challenges and stressors of living in the Islamic world.

4. Third prong: Individual differences

4.1 Discussion

Children of BMBs face numerous stressors to their psychological well-being and identity as a result of religious registration and education, as well as other family and community pressures. This is over and above the normal developmental challenges that a child from the West would typically face.

It would however be simplistic to assume that every child will react negatively to these stressors and become maladjusted and damaged in some way. The ability to cope is also determined in part by the intrinsic coping mechanisms of each child.

Considerable effort has been made in regard to coping theory and research (cf. for example Lazarus 1993 and Carver & Connor-Smith 2010). Psychologists Weiten and Lloyd (2006: Ch. 4) in their book provide a useful summary of the findings. They define coping as "efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the demands created by stress". There are three general points for consideration:

1. There are many different ways of coping;
2. Individuals have unique styles of coping; and
3. Coping strategies vary in their effectiveness.

Less useful coping patterns include giving up, striking out at others, indulging or blaming oneself and using defensive mechanisms.

In contrast, constructive coping refers to "efforts to deal with stressful events that are judged to be relatively healthful." The authors list three broad categories of constructive coping strategies, based on past research, shown in Figure 1.

4.2 Recommendations

As we consider the stressors of religious registration and education, and community on children and the buffer that their believing parents are for them, we need to understand that children are not passive agents who only react to their environment. Children respond and cope differently to stressors and parenting because of individual differences (cf. Gleitman 1995; Shaffer & Kipp 2010; Sigelman & Rider 2009; and Weiten & Lloyd 2006).

In view of this, it is recommended that:

1. We pray regularly for children of BMBs, that the Lord will strengthen and give them healthy coping strategies as they go to school and live in their communities;

2. We pray for parents of BMBs, that they will develop good coping strategies and be aware of their less effective ones so that they may recognise the positive and less positive patterns in their children and help them accordingly;

3. We pray for BMB fellowships to meet regularly to provide support to each other;

4. Missionaries continue to emotionally support and encourage believing families. Missionaries and their families can become significant others and provide BMBs with a temporary emotional haven when they meet while bearing in mind potential issues of co-dependency (cf. Register 2009 and Hemfelt, Minirth & Meier 2003); and

5. Psychologists, child-specialists and life coaches are able to further equip missionaries and BMBs in working out culturally-sensitive constructive coping strategies. For instance, missionaries can receive training – such as Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills – SYIS – on how to emotionally and psychologically support BMB families.

5. Fourth prong: Long-term psychological outcomes

For children of BMBs, attending school in the Islamic world is stressful. In addition, they face other stressors at home and in the community they live in. Yet believing parents are able to provide some protection and buffer for them, especially if they are well supported. We have also seen that children react differently to these stressors because of individual differences.

The stressors, parental buffer and individual differences interact concurrently with the self-identity of children as they negotiate and renegotiate who they are, including their sense of worth (Gleitman 1995 and Weiten & Lloyd 2006). Only time will tell whether they will grow up to become well-adjusted adults, who have learnt to cope and even thrive in a challenging environment.

It is perhaps easier to define or at least consider what is not healthy. There are some long-term cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions that we can observe in children to get an indication of their overall psychological well-being in relation to the stressors they face. Unregulated and sustained maladaptive thinking, emotions and behaviours can lead to long-term mental, health and social problems (cf. Shaffer & Kipp 2010; Kraft 2007 and Gleitman 1995).

Cognitive adjustment – How well are children developing mentally? One area we can observe is their ability to handle ontological relativities. Simply put, can children come to terms with conflicting belief systems like Islam and Christianity? Are they able to cope with what is taught in schools as opposed to what they are taught by their believing parents? Are they stressed? Does information overwhelm them very easily? Are they able to deal with issues that have "grey areas" or clearly only those that are "black and white"?
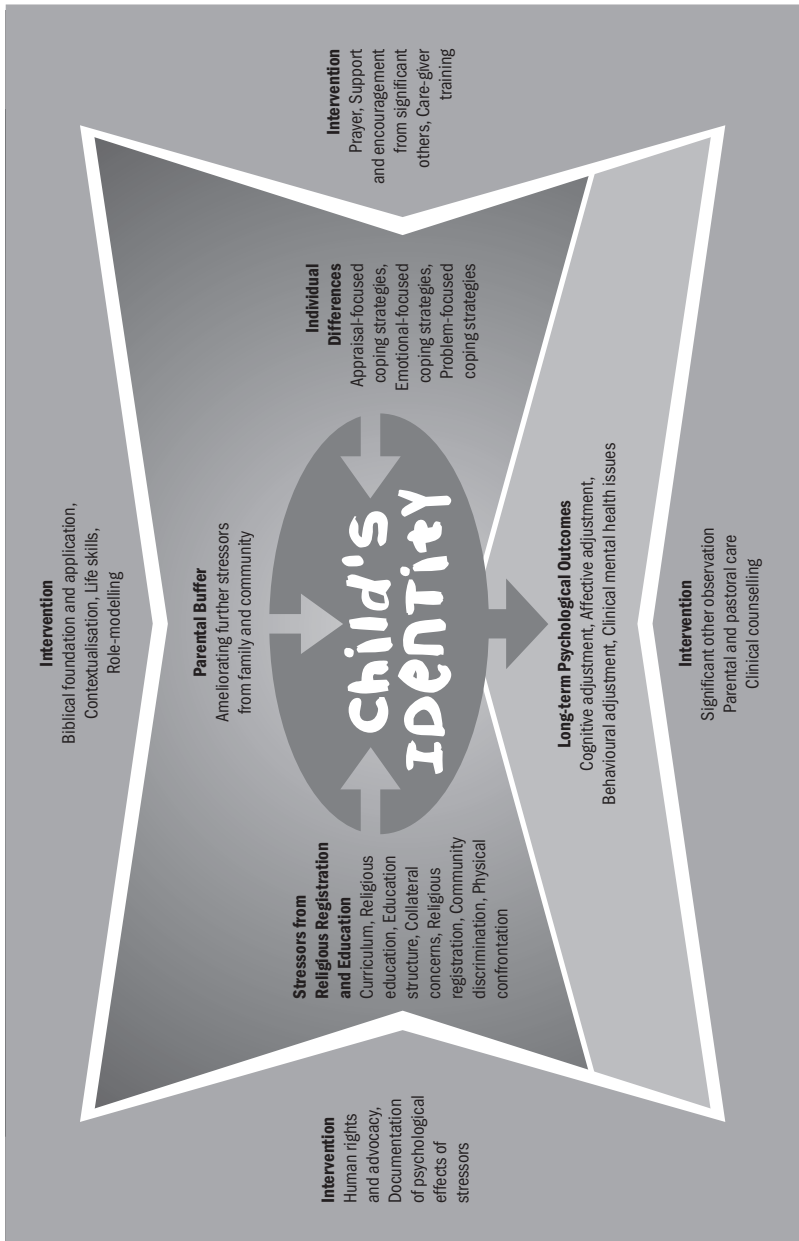
Figure 2: Framework of psychological stressors, issues and interventions in relation to identity of children of BMBs

Affective adjustment – How well are children developing emotionally? What are their reactions toward people who impose their belief systems or bully them? Do they have any compassion for them or only strong emotional reactions like anger or hatred? Can they forgive others? Do they have empathy for other people who are also marginalised?

Behavioural adjustment – How well are children exhibiting behaviours that are age appropriate? Are there any regressive behavioural patterns indicating extreme stress? For instance, do they regularly wet their bed or have sleeping difficulties? Another area to observe is their conflict resolution ability – do they always need to win arguments, withdraw or seek to have a workable compromise with others? In terms of relational connectedness, do they appear engaged or detached from their immediate and extended families or culture?

This is an area that can be very difficult for BMBs. Being an "honour and shame" society, their children experiencing clinical mental health issues may be labelled "crazy" if they receive professional intervention. This can bring a lot of embarrassment to the family. Specialist support with high discretion and cultural sensitivity is recommended (cf. Al-Krenawi and Graham 2000). Also, more research is required to examine and document the range of clinical issues impacting children of BMBs and what culturally sensitive interventions may be offered. With awareness and training, parents and significant others like missionaries are able to look out for signs of stress and lack of coping in children.

6. Summary and conclusion

One of the greatest issues facing BMBs is that their children are made subject to Islamic religious education and an education schooling system that is biased significantly by Islamic ideology and practice (cf. MEC Education Project 2006:6).

We need to continue to politically and legally challenge these affronts to the dignity and fundamental human rights of BMBs and their families. We can do this by tackling structural issues such as religious registration and education and by providing assistance to individuals.

Children also face pressures within their community and neighbourhood. They are assumed to be Muslims. They are expected to participate in Islamic religious activities. Apostasy is viewed very seriously and children and their believing parents can be severely penalised.

If parents who contextualise their faith, are seen by their community as still accepting of their Muslim culture and heritage, if they are not antagonistic or disrespectful to Islamic religion and tradition, it is possible for them to co-exist and be tolerated by their Muslim counterparts. Parents are also able to ameliorate some of the stressors that their children face in school and their community by gently in-

structing them about the differences between the two religions, how people practise Islam and react to their own beliefs in Jesus.

With continued prayer, encouragement and coaching from parents and significant others such as other BMBs and missionaries, children are able to develop healthy coping strategies and identities to address such challenges. For those who are not coping well, specialist support from psychologists and counsellors who are discerning about the stressors and cultural issues may be needed.

We have discussed these issues in detail in the different sections of the article. Recall that the discussions and corresponding recommendations were organised into four prongs of a framework surrounding a child's identity. Figure 2 provides us with a pictorial representation.

One of the strengths of this suggested framework is that it examines a child's identity at multiple levels. It looks at individual factors, the influence of the immediate family (i.e, parents), the impact of the extended family and community, as well as wider structural issues such as religious registration and education.

Furthermore, it brings together research and experience from multiple disciplines such as law, missiology, criminology and psychology that are needed to document, explain and address such complicated issues.

In practical terms, the framework provides psychologists, counsellors and child specialists with specific ways of both short and long-term contribution. It assists human rights and advocacy specialists to be aware of the possible psychological effects that structural inequalities and discrimination can have on the well-being and identity of BMBs and their children. The framework also challenges missionaries to refine their skills and have greater awareness of the wider structural and cultural issues involved in discipling BMBs beyond traditional theology and ecclesiology.

On the other hand, one of the limitations of the framework is that it simplifies the issues, for example, the influence of the immediate family. There was no discussion of the influence and support of siblings. The article focused only on the parent-child relationship. The influence and support of other BMBs was also only briefly addressed.

This was intentional, however, in order to keep the discussion manageable. The goal was to provide practitioners with a relatively simple and usable framework to observe and understand the general issues, and in turn, develop intervention plans. A balance was sought to keep the framework simple and yet incorporate enough detail. Feedback and discussion are welcome to discuss the validity of the issues raised within the four prongs. Do others also consider them key issues? Are there other important areas that have been left out?

Another limitation is that in discussing psychological interventions like life skills training and the development of healthy coping strategies, there is an implicit assumption that such interventions are somewhat universal to the human condition.

The difficulty is that we are using psychological terms and definitions based on Western research. We inevitably make value judgements about what is considered normal and abnormal, healthy or unhealthy.

In defence of the framework, although I was trained in a Western university, I nevertheless come from an Asian background. Hence, I have sought to include psychological analyses and recommendations that appear, in my opinion, to be more universal and not culturally limited to the West. Of course this is still subjective and debateable. More research and commentary are needed. In the brevity of non-Western psychological literature, at least this is a beginning. Clinicians and practitioners from a non-Western background, and especially Muslim background, are able to give further constructive comments.

Finally, the recent Arab spring uprisings tell us unequivocally that the need for human dignity and personal freedom are universal goals, including people living in the Islamic world. There is only so much injustice and abuse that people are able to tolerate. It is hoped that the same deep desire for respect, dignity and choice that followers of Islam insist upon will also be extended to BMBs and their families. God is sovereign and only He can cause people group movements toward our Lord Jesus Christ. The church nevertheless has a responsibility to look after people in need and respond to injustices and inequalities. Every child in the Muslim world regardless of religion should have the opportunity to grow in an environment that minimises unwarranted fears and oppression. In particular, we must continue to persevere to increase awareness, address the structural issues, and improve our interaction and assistance to BMBs and their children. May we intervene with compassion, respect and cultural sensitivity. It is hoped that this article has actively contributed to this.

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