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Building bridges or holy huddles? Student religious organizations in British universities

Abstract

Religion is increasingly being understood as an equality and diversity issue in universities, and religious students are central to debates in UK universities about freedom of speech and extremism. Yet there is little qualitative or UK-based research on the primary institutional expression of student religiosity, student religious organizations. This study fills the gap. It explores what these organizations do, whether they are public- or private-facing, and what role they play in students' lives. It uses theories of social capital and thematic analysis to analyse data from semi-structured interviews with 68 students in six UK universities. The article explores tensions between the organizations' focus on building community among members and on building bridges to people outside. It argues that student religious organizations are primarily sources of bonding (intra-community) social capital; they play important roles in helping students feel at home on campus, creating friendships and strengthening religious identity, especially for minoritized students. To a lesser extent, the societies are also sources of bridging social capital (creating relationships with people outside the group), through volunteering and interfaith work. We argue that faith-sharing can also be considered a form of bridging as much as bonding social capital, challenging previous interpretations which see proselytism primarily as strengthening relationships within the group. The findings highlight the contribution of these organizations and the need for universities to be concerned with their flourishing.

Keywords: higher education, religion, student organizations, student religious organizations

The religious identities of college students are of growing interest to scholars, higher education practitioners and policymakers. Landmark studies and initiatives in the USA include Astin et al.'s (2011) work on college and spiritual development, the work of Interfaith Youth Core (now Interfaith America) and the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (Patel & Correia-Harker, 2020). British universities expanded in the late twentieth century, and their student population has become larger and more diverse, better reflecting wider population demographics. Ethnic diversity is part of the picture. Patterns of migration since the 1950s have seen substantial numbers of people migrating and settling in the UK from the former British Empire, especially the Caribbean, South Asia, Africa and more recently, Europe and the Middle East. Record numbers of female, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (hereafter BAME) students and students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds attended university in the first decades of the twenty-first century.¹

The student population is also increasingly religiously diverse. Religion in UK universities became a hot topic in the twenty-first century, as the government's Equality Act 2010 positioned "religion and belief" as one of nine "protected characteristics" (others include race, disability and age), making it a legal duty for universities to promote equality and diversity and counter discrimination on the basis of any of these characteristics. Religious students are also central to debates about freedom of speech, "safe spaces" and extremism (Kidder & Binder, 2021; Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021). Debates between advocates of maximal free speech, including the freedom to criticize religion, and advocates of protecting minority groups from harassment, are particularly focused on universities. While the Equality Act's positioning of religion as a protected characteristic has served the needs of religious students, counter-terrorism legislation has been a countervailing force (Stevenson & Aune,

¹ The student population is 57% female, 24% are from BAME ethnicities (a rise of almost three-quarters compared to 15 years previously) and 44% come from households where no parent has an HE qualification (Advance HE, 2020 pp. 167, 127, 318).

2017). Many argue that government counter-terrorism policies (the “Prevent Duty”) have negatively affected Muslim students, some of whom feel unfairly scrutinized for signs of extremism (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). At the same time, some students are subject to harassment because of their religion. Six per cent of UK students surveyed by Weller et al. (2011) reported discrimination or harassment on the grounds of religion or belief; Muslim and Jewish students were worst affected. A survey of 925 UK Jewish students found one fifth had been subjected to anti-Semitism that year, and a further third had witnessed an anti-Semitic incident on campus (Graham & Boyd, 2011).

Religious student organizations are important spaces for religious students, yet in the UK they are under-studied despite their frequent mention in media debates on free speech and controversial speakers being invited to campus. Around half of UK students say they have a religion (Advance HE, 2020 p. 21),² and many join groups for religious students. These are known as “societies” in British universities, though in keeping with the literature we call these collectively *student religious organizations (SROs)*. Some are overseen by national organizations, including the Union of Jewish Students, Federation of Student Islamic Societies, Muslim Student Council (Ahlul Bayt societies), National Hindu Students’ Forum, British Organisation of Sikh Students, UCCF: The Christian Unions and the Catholic Student Network. Non-religious beliefs are part of this landscape: National Secular Society and Humanist Students also support student groups.

² In 2018-19, excluding the 14.3% of students who did not disclose their religion, 52.6% had no religion, 28.8% were Christian, 9.8% Muslim, 2.6% Hindu, 1.4% spiritual, 1.4% Buddhist, 0.9% Sikh, 0.5% Jewish and 1.9% held another religion or belief.

This article explores the roles SROs play on campus.³ It asks: what are their aims and activities (for example, social-focused or religious-focused)? What role do they play in students' lives? To what extent are they public-facing, oriented towards the wider university or community, or private-facing, oriented to their members? Our analysis shows that there is a tension between creating community among religious students (what we might call a "bubble" or "holy huddle"), and how religious students express their religion publicly or build bridges to those outside their group. Through interviews with 68 students in six universities, using the lens of social capital, we argue that SROs are sites for cultivating bonding social capital (forming strong bonds within the group), and, to a lesser extent, bridging social capital (building bridges to those who are different). These dynamics, we argue are reflective of a social context where some students from religiously minoritized backgrounds experience prejudice, discrimination or even harassment.

Previous Research on Student Religious Organizations

Most studies of SROs are USA-based and about Christian and Muslim groups (see Schmalzbauer & Mahoney, 2018). There is more literature on Christian SROs partly because Christians are the largest student group, and their historical and numerical dominance has meant they are better resourced than organizations for religious minorities. The USA National Study of Youth and Religion found a quarter of students had been involved with a campus religious group (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 131). Schmalzbauer (2013, p. 127) concludes that during the twentieth century, student participation in campus religious groups "remained remarkably stable" numerically, with the decline in mainline Protestant groups matched by an increase in evangelical, Mormon, Jewish and other religious groups. New analysis of a database of 1,953 four-year and not-for-profit U.S. universities and

³ We say 'religious organizations' instead of 'religion- and belief-based organizations' because 26 of the 27 student organizations we researched were religious (one was Humanist).

colleges shows that nearly two thirds have no minority religious organizations, and only one fifth have more than one. Minority religious organizations are more likely to be found on campuses which are large and wealthy, liberal and pluralistic, and not religiously affiliated (Coley et al., 2022). Coley et al. explain this using resource mobilization (and other) theories about social movements: religious organizations can emerge more easily when institutional conditions and student characteristics are conducive to them doing so, but the likelihood of there being a Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish or Muslim organization varies: just over 1 in 4 campuses has a Muslim and Jewish group, but only just over 1 in 20 has a Hindu or Buddhist one.

Student religious organizations provide a safe space for students to practice their religion and strengthen their religious identity; as Boucher and Kucinskas's (2016) study of an elite secular college contends, this is especially important when students perceive that their college marginalizes or privatizes religion. Bryant's (2005, p. 25) qualitative study found that evangelical Christian students create "close-knit communities" that "provide a buffer to the hostility and negative stereotypes found in the larger campus". SROs are often also political in that they mobilise students to achieve their aims. For example, the aims of the evangelical Christian organisation studied by Magolda and Ebben (2006) were to educate students to develop as Christians and to share the Christian message to non-believers. SROs are subcultures, argue Magolda and Ebben (2007), with forms of organization, resistance, style and inherent tensions that have things in common with other subcultures. But they are also distinctive: they resist not via protests or boycotts but with "a gentle, nonconfrontational, yet collective, political, ideological, and unyielding form of resistance" (Magolda & Ebben, 2007, p. 155). For evangelical Christian groups, their distinctiveness also manifests in conservative beliefs about gender, with those students who are religiously conservative and involved in religiously conservative groups particularly likely to hold non-egalitarian views of gender (Odahl-Ruan et al., 2017). The same holds for attitudes to same-sex marriage. Todd et al. (2017) show that greater participation in evangelical and Catholic

student groups was associated with opposing same-sex marriage, and students in those groups were more likely to be more religiously conservative than those involved in mainline Protestant groups.

Moran (2007) asks how student leaders of evangelical Christian organizations at two public universities understand their religious identity. They want to create a “public identity” (p. 418), not to keep faith private. Two processes are important in this public identity work: “identify revelation”, differentiating themselves from others’ preconceptions of Christians and “identity authentication” (p. 428) (demonstrating the authenticity of Christianity and striving to prove themselves as authentic Christians). These studies of student Christian organizations highlight the way these organizations function to support students’ religious identities, while at the same time encouraging them to focus outward, to share their Christian faith and identities with their peers.

Research on Muslim students has also grown. Peek’s (2005) USA study notes that the Muslim Student Association provided a supportive peer group, helping Muslim students develop their religious identity distinct from their parents’. Chowdhury’s (2006) study of how Australian MSA websites share the message of Islam (*da’wah*) concludes that dialogue with non-Muslims is “not a priority objective” (p. 216). Song’s (2012) study of Muslim students’ relationship to Islamic societies (ISOC) in three English universities found that ISOCs provided opportunities for Muslims to make friends, learn about their religion and do charity work; “to mobilize around their Muslim identity” and “assert public ethnicity as Muslims” (pp. 156-7). Like the literature on Christian students in the USA (above), British Muslim students come together to support their own religious identities but also seek to express these identities publicly. But there are tensions: in some of Song’s case study universities, some Muslim students avoided the ISOC, finding it “exclusive” (p. 152), and feared being judged insufficiently devout. Mir’s interviews with Muslim female students in two US universities reveals the “hybrid” (Mir, 2014, p. 101) identities they create between American and Muslim cultural norms, for example in relation to drinking, dress and dating. In contrast, other recent

studies point to “ethno-religious enclaves” (Shammas, 2015, p. 65) in Arab and Muslim students’ friendships in US colleges but note that such enclaves or friendships help rather than hinder them in navigating campus life. Reid’s (2017) study of students attending Jewish, Muslim and Christian societies at a UK university concludes that SROs have positive and negative effects. They create friendship and belonging, but also alienation due to in-group exclusion and marginalization, and tensions surrounding LGBTQI issues and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

These studies show the importance of SROs for creating friendships but note that students on the margins can feel excluded, and dialogue with those beyond the group is infrequent. Research on Jewish, Hindu and other students echoes this. UK Hindu student groups celebrate Hindu identity, Raj found, and seek “to distinguish themselves from other Asians, particularly the Muslim minority” (2000, p. 535). Hindu students’ websites are similarly assertive about their Hindu identity but show little attempt to engage in dialogue with non-Hindus (Narayan et al., 2011). Sheldon (2016) finds that Jewish societies in Britain can be places for strengthening minority religious and ethnic identities. The only work on Sikhs, Singh (2017) found that British Sikh societies provide community and friendship and transmit the Sikh religion effectively.

In summary, the existing literature (which is primarily USA-based) points to the importance of SROs as places of support for students’ religious identities. SROs create strong in-group bonds as they help other students develop religious identities. Some of that literature, especially on Christian and Muslim students, shows how Christian and Muslim SROs seek to express or share their religion with outsiders, especially other students. The literature reveals somewhat limited evidence of bridge-building to others beyond the SRO via dialogue, interfaith activity or volunteering.

Using Social Capital to Understand Student Religious Organizations

This article investigates whether the findings from previous literature hold for SROs in British universities, the study for the first time spanning a wide range of faith groups operating on six campuses. We use social capital theory to understand these dynamics.

Following Bourdieu (1986) and others, *social capital* is the idea that social relations and networks create resources for people. Putnam (2000, p. 19) defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”. As Coleman (1988) explains, social capital enables certain actions or outcomes, such as business success or children’s educational progress. All social networks create social capital, but some do it more effectively or create particular forms of social capital. “Closure of social networks” (Coleman, 1988, p. 105), tight-knit networks where social connections are intertwined, make it easier for behavioural norms, reciprocity and trust to be reinforced.

Social capital has been theorized and critiqued extensively. Critics pointed out, firstly, that the phenomenon of network closure is not as useful as Coleman claims – rather, social capital requires mechanisms to reach those beyond the closed network – and secondly, that social capital is not always positive. Exemplifying the first critique, Lin (1999) points out that closure or “network density” is not necessary. Building what Lin calls “bridges” beyond the local network will enable people to move from operating a successful local shop, to running a national brand.

In the best-known example of the second critique, Putnam contrasts “bonding” with “bridging” social capital. Bonding social capital establishes intra-group support networks based on similarity. But bridging capital is outward-looking, producing intergroup relationships with others who are different. “Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity”, Putnam (2000 p. 23) explains, “whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.” Those living in poverty may remain there because they lack networks that would help them to access employment.

Bonding and bridging capital are not mutually exclusive. A close-knit group with much bonding social capital may also be outward-looking (for example, charities or environmental groups). Moreover, “most groups blend bridging and bonding, but the blends differ” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 12).

Putnam and Goss summarize four main distinctions in academic analyses of social capital. These are *formal versus informal social capital* (organized groups versus strangers meeting by chance), *thick versus thin social capital* (groups where members' lives are interwoven versus fleeting encounters with strangers), *inward-looking versus outward-looking social capital* (promoting the interests of the group or the wider public), and “*the ‘bridging bonding’ axis*”: “Bonding social capital brings together people who are like one another in important respects (ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and so on), whereas bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another” (Putnam & Goss, 2022, p. 11).

This study explores and contrasts bonding and bridging social capital in SROs, following Putnam and others' two-dimensional definition. While we address the first three distinctions in the Discussion, this article foregrounds the fourth, the bonding-bridging axis.

Putnam considers the role of religion in social capital. Putnam observes religious groups declining and considers this a loss for the USA, as they are excellent sources of social capital, helping people become good citizens. Putnam and Campbell (2010) point to examples of bridging social capital via religion: religious intermarriage and interfaith friendships are improving understanding across ethnic and religious difference. Putnam argues, however, that some religious groups are good at bonding capital but poor at bridging to other groups: “Proselytizing religions are better at creating bonding social capital than bridging social capital, and tolerance of unbelievers is not a virtue notably associated with fundamentalism” (Putnam, 2000, p. 410).

Scholars studying religious contexts have investigated Putnam's notion of social capital, including the bonding-bridging axis. Greeley (1997, p. 591) takes up Coleman's idea

of “multiplex” social relations where “resources of one relationship” are “appropriated for use in others” (Coleman, 1988, p. 109). Greeley argues that religion has been underestimated as a source of social capital, since survey data shows that religious groups are a key place where people learn about volunteering: “Religion... generated social capital not only for its own projects, but for many other kinds of voluntary efforts” (Greeley, 1997, p. 591).

In light of this literature, this study takes up the challenge to explore how a particular type of religious group, student religious organizations, generates social capital. This article also explores the issue Putnam raises of whether proselytizing religions are better at creating bonding than bridging social capital. Do SROs exemplify bonding or bridging social capital; how does this differ (by religion or other issues), and why so?

A critique of social capital theories is that they need to account for complex local conditions in different contexts, and two studies provide insights into the complex dynamics of bonding-bridging social capital in religious contexts. In the first, Leonard (2004) studied the Catholic-majority community of West Belfast, Northern Ireland, where strong bonding social capital had developed during the political conflict. The 1990s peace process, culminating in the power-sharing Good Friday Agreement, exemplifies bridging social capital, as it attempted to build bridges between communities and heal distrust. Yet it did so without changing underlying inequalities, such as poor housing or poverty suffered by Catholics who previously benefitted from tightly-bonded social networks when in financial difficulty. Therefore, bridging social capital has benefitted some individuals, but not necessarily the local community, as inequalities persist and the intra-community trust born from “unit[ing] in opposition to the wider political system” (Leonard, 2004, p. 941) is eroded. Leonard concludes: “Building bridges necessitates removing the grounds that were conducive to creating linkages among those most disaffected by the wider political system” (p. 941). Leonard’s insights are related below to SROs.

The second study illustrating the dynamics of bonding-bridging capital in religious contexts is Mc Kenzie’s (2008) study of African-American civil society groups, some of them

religious. Although these organizations exemplify bonding social capital, the myriad ways they also build bridges for individuals and groups challenges Putnam's notion that bonding social capital is inferior to bridging social capital, reinforcing social differences and benefitting the in-group rather than outsiders. Bridging-bonding is not a dichotomy, McKenzie argues, and evidence from black civil society groups shows that while bonding with similar others in black Christian denominations and political organizations, black civil society group members are also involved in mainstream politics.

Some scholars have applied social capital theory to students and religion. Trolan and Barnhardt (2017) found that belonging to a religious group increased the likelihood that students saw political and social involvement as important. This shows the *potential* for religion to produce bridging capital. However, other literature suggests religion hinders bridging and is more conducive to bonding capital. Park (2012) found greater levels of cross-racial friendship were negatively correlated with US college students' religious participation, religious affiliation and involvement in SROs. Park and Bowman (2015) looked at students' "cross-racial interaction" – weaker social ties and interactions that act as a form of bridging social capital. They found that while being religious was associated with cross-racial interaction, belonging to an SRO was not significantly associated with it.

Interfaith relations can be considered a form of bridging social capital. Quantitative studies by Rockenbach, Mayhew and colleagues reveal that American students' formal and informal interfaith engagement helps foster positive attitudes to students of different worldviews (Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013; Rockenbach et al., 2017a; Shaheen et al., 2023). Having a Jewish student organization on campus is associated with non-Jewish students having more positive attitudes to Jewish students (Mayhew et al., 2018), and likewise for LDS/Mormon organizations. This suggests that it is not only what happens in SROs that is important, but what they symbolize to outsiders: "institutional commitment to religious pluralism—as reflected in the visibility of student organizations serving students with minority social identities—may help to challenge prejudice and privilege, reduce

stereotypes, and improve out-group attitudes” (Rockenbach et al., 2017b, p. 815). In Rockenbach and Mayhew’s wider Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) study, linked to Interfaith Youth Core (now Interfaith America), students score higher on measures of interfaith learning and development where they have “space for support and spiritual expression” (such as SROs or prayer spaces on campus) coupled with “provocative encounters with worldview diversity” (encounters where their worldviews are challenged) (Patel & Correia-Harker, 2020, pp. 44-45). Patel and Correia-Harker (2020) link this to Putnam’s bonding and bridging concept, calling it an “equilibrium that matters for engaging religious diversity in a pluralistic society” (p. 42).

In contrast to these quantitative studies, we offer a qualitative investigation of the dynamics of social relations in SROs. We ask: what are SROs’ aims and activities (for example, social-focused or religious-focused)? What role do they play in students’ lives? To what extent are they public-facing, oriented towards the wider university or community, or private-facing, oriented to their members? We aim to show how social capital can both bond similar students and bridge to outsiders, in diverse ways. It is the first qualitative study to explore SROs from multiple religious traditions and one of few studies of SROs in Britain. Our research develops themes from qualitative studies, showing that SROs provide a supportive environment for religious identity development while sometimes enabling a more public sharing of religious faith and identity.

Methods

Our findings are drawn from a broader project about student religion and belief-based organizations in UK universities – meaning any student group registered with a Students’ Union focusing specifically on religious or non-religious traditions (including Secularist or

Humanist societies), or on interfaith discussion.⁴ A mixed methods approach was used, with a quantitative phase to map the number and spread of SROs nationally. That exercise identified 888 religion and belief societies listed on Students' Union websites in summer 2018, with an average of 6.3 SROs per university. In contrast to Coley et al.'s (2022) research in the USA, our research indicates that minority religious organizations exist on more campuses in the UK: nearly three-quarters of universities have a Muslim group, around a third have Jewish, Hindu and Sikh groups, and around a quarter have a Humanist / Atheist / Secular, Buddhist or Krishna Consciousness group.

This article uses data from the qualitative phase, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews with students in six universities. The universities were chosen to reflect the higher education sector's diversity in terms of ethnic composition of the student body, and the historic establishment of universities. We used Guest et al.'s (2013) typology, which groups UK universities based on the period of and level of church involvement in their establishment. These are *traditional elite* universities (founded in or before the nineteenth century), *Red Brick* universities (founded in the early twentieth century in large cities), *1960s campus* universities (founded around the 1960s), *post-1992* universities (former colleges and polytechnics granted university status in 1992) and *Cathedrals Group* universities (universities with a Christian foundation, granted university status since 1992). The case studies included one university from each of these categories in England, plus a sixth at a Scottish traditional elite university.

After ethical approval, the six institutions were identified, and permissions secured from their Students' Unions. At each, we sought three representatives from four SROs. SRO

⁴ Groups focused on national or cultural identities were not categorized as religion and belief organizations, though there is sometimes overlap between their activities and membership (for example between Hindu and Indian societies). See Perfect et al., 2019 for the wider study's findings.

presidents were asked to disseminate the invitation to participate to members. We aimed to interview one committee member, one regular member, and one occasional member in each SRO. In small SROs there was little difference between the first two categories. Each interview was conducted by one of the three authors in person at the participant's university, for example in the university chaplaincy or a classroom. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

68 students were interviewed: 62 undergraduates and 6 postgraduates, 37 women and 31 men. Twenty-seven identified as Christian (of various denominations); 15 Muslim (mostly Sunni but a small number of Shi'a); 9 Jewish; 7 Sikh; 5 Hindu; 1 Buddhist; 3 non-religious; and 1 selected "other" from the options given. Participants are given pseudonyms and their institutions anonymized. These interviewees represented 27 SROs: 9 Christian (including Christian Unions, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and Pentecostal organizations); 5 Islamic (including 2 Ahlul Bayt (Shi'a) societies); 4 Jewish; 3 Sikh; 2 Hindu; 2 Interfaith; 1 Bhakti Yoga; and 1 Humanist.

The wider project asked 12 main questions, split into five sections: SRO activities and internal relations; participants' activities outside the society; relations with other student groups and individuals; controversial issues (such as free speech and extremism debates); and suggestions for improvements in how universities approach religion. These questions were informed by the existing literature on SROs and on religion in British universities, including a previous study by Aune (Guest et al., 2013) which had, among other theoretical frameworks, made use of social capital.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) via NVivo software. Thematic analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis that is about identifying themes, "patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). As Braun and Clarke (2019) point out, thematic analysis can be inductive (driven by the data) or deductive (driven by an existing theoretical framework) or a mix of the two. It can capture, and one can code for, "both manifest (explicit)

and latent (underlying) meaning” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 298), which we did. Our analysis was something between inductive and deductive because it was both data-driven and informed by previous literature.

There are several types of thematic analysis. The most structured is coding reliability, which assumes that themes exist within the data, ready to be discovered by objective researchers identifying them accurately using a coding frame, often involving several coders checking each other’s coding to ensure accuracy and reliability. At the other end of the spectrum is reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises the subjectivity of the researcher who develops (rather than uncovers) overarching themes from codes, seeing analysis as an organic process where codes can change as the researcher’s understanding and engagement with the data deepens, and what is important is not the discovery of a “correct” set of codes (because there is no such thing), but the work and trustworthiness of the researcher. As Morrow (2005, p. 256) argues, “immersion” helps provide the “adequacy of interpretation” crucial to ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative data analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis can be completed by a single researcher, with the eventual outcome one or more overarching themes. The codebook approach lies between the two, more flexible than coding reliability because codebook approaches understand that analysis evolves, codes can be changed and more than one coder reaching agreement is not required, but keeping the codebook as a record of analysis so that the analysis process can be charted and described (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

For the wider project and the first round of coding, we used a codebook approach. Perfect coded the interview transcripts thematically using NVivo, with the structure above (the 12 main questions in five sections) forming the skeleton of the initial codebook, with additional codes created based on the content of the transcripts. In relation to the focus of this article (what does the SRO do, is it public and/or private-facing, and what role does the SRO play in students’ lives?), round one’s coding initially identified two overarching categories, “external-focused” and “internal-focused”, to which the majority of data was

coded, and three smaller categories, “fundraising for charity”, “external speakers” and “future plans for society”, topics also mentioned in response to these interview questions. “External-focused” included seven codes (activism, direct proselytism, educating others about faith or belief, interfaith, service to others, social or wider community building, and sports). “Internal-focused” included five codes (pastoral, representing interests of members to university, social or internal community building, faith or belief related, non-faith or belief related), the latter two which comprised eight sub-codes for faith or belief related, and three for non-faith or belief related.

Following this, a decision was made to focus on this “external-focused” and “internal-focused” division, in tandem with reading literature on social capital that provided the lens we use in this article to analyse the data. A second round of coding, by Aune, took place. This round was informed by the first round but done afresh, focusing on students’ responses to questions in section 1, SRO activities and internal relations, and specifically to the questions:

What does [SRO] actually do? What are its aims? What activities do they provide?

Who attends and how many? In terms of activities is it primarily social, religious, public facing or private? Are there any faith-sharing activities on campus (for example da’wah for Muslims or evangelism for Christians)?

How often do you get involved in the activities of [SRO]? What do you do, and what do you choose not to do? What role does the society play in your life? What have been your best and worst experiences?

Reflexive thematic analysis was used for this round, to maximise the opportunity for “interpretative” (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 340) researcher engagement with the data on this specific topic. As Braun and Clarke (2021a) explain:

Coding is recognised as an inherently subjective process, one that requires a reflexive researcher—who strives to reflect on their assumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding. Our reflexive approach involves six—recursive—phases of:

familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up. (p. 39)

Using this approach, six themes were identified. In the first stage of the reflexive thematic analysis, there were nine, but we excluded three of these due to the small amount of data on those topics (international student work; liaison with staff in the university, for example to book rooms; and negative experiences, for example low member attendance). Of the six themes, three related to the organizations' public or outward-focused activities, which we interpret below as examples of bridging social capital; three focused on the private or member-focused activities, which we understand to exemplify bonding social capital.

Findings

Below we show how, in turn, bonding social capital and bridging social capital operate in the SROs.

Bonding Social capital in Student Religious Organizations

Three forms of bonding social capital were evident in the student interviews: 1) building a "home from home", family-like atmosphere linking to students' religious communities at home; 2) creating community and friendship through social activities; and 3) strengthening religious identity and faith via religious activities, education and pastoral support.

Building a "Home from Home"

Students from minority (non-Christian) faiths and two Catholic international students described SROs as providing continuity with their religious family background. Rose chose her university city because it was popular with Jewish students:

A lot of people have grown up their whole lives in the same Jewish community. When you branch out a bit it's like coming out of the Jewish bubble. And then you need somewhere that you can feel comfortable and at home and meet other Jews.

Feeling “comfortable and at home” is important to her. The society provides a chance to make Jewish friends, perhaps a new “Jewish bubble”. Sikh student Kawalpreet at the same university chose it because she had met others from the city at Sikh youth camps:

[W]hen I applied to university and I got in here I was like, “Ok, I already know a few people in (city)” and through those people and through the Sikh society I started going to events and got to know more people.

The Sikh society strengthened networks of young Sikhs that she had developed before university. The outcome, she said, is “best friends all around the country”.

Yusuf explained that Islamic societies are known about in his community, and young people can attend ISOC events before starting university:

[B]efore you go in, the name of ISOC is known... you don't have to be at uni to attend an ISOC event, there is a great kind of transition. Which is why I think ISOC is great, it's not just a faith-based society, it's pastoral care, spiritual care, it's your academic needs. Even before you come into uni you are hearing about the perks they offer, and you are immediately attracted to it.

This resonates with Magolda and Ebben's (2007) argument that SROs are subcultures, not just a social group. Jameel called the ISOC “my home out of home”. It provides continuity with home by bringing together people of the same religious background, something important for religious minority students. Jameel saw the ISOC as a refuge from drinking culture: “I got involved... because a lot of the activities in university, especially after moving out, involve partying and drinking. It is not really my kind of thing. So, ISOC was essentially my home out of home.”

Sharma and Guest's (2013) study of UK Christian students echoes this. Although not religious minorities, Christian students felt in a minority because of student culture's focus on drinking. Churches or Christian organizations “perform an important stabilizing function”, Sharma and Guest (p. 2) argue: “such spaces, representing a link with home... help to steer

this time of transition... [R] eligion... is carried with students as a portable resource... creating a sense of continuity between their home and university”.

Creating Community and Friendship through Social Activities

Social activities are important in SROs and are a means to form friendships. Social activities are hard to categorize as “religious” or “not religious”; football followed by pizza might involve discussion of faith. Food is often involved. Interviewees attended dinners, basketball games, walks, games nights, arts events, trips to places of worship and weekends away. University and religious calendars provide a rhythm. In the first week of the academic year (“fresher’s” or “welcome” week), SROs offer alternatives to alcohol-related socialising. At the societies’ fair, religious societies have stalls advertising themselves to new students. The Jewish Shabbat dinner is a weekly focal point for Jewish students, while the month of Ramadan brings Muslim students together to break fast.

Jasbir joined the Sikh society to meet other Sikhs. Her best experience was a “meet and greet” event where they learned to make chapatti:

It wasn’t religious per se, I think it was more on a cultural basis... It was like a little inter-table competition and it was who can eat a samosa the fastest... It’s not religious at all really, it’s just fun and it’s based around culture in a sense, different types of food.

Her emphasis on chapatti-making as “not religious” echoes her self-description: “I wouldn’t say I’m really religious, but I have become more aware of what I’ve been brought up in, learned more about it whilst going to the society... I came to this society to socialize and make friends that have the same culture and faith beliefs as me.” For her, the society provides a “little family” with a shared cultural identity that is more important than its religious elements. While Jasbir’s emphasis on culture rather than religion may not be typical of Sikh students, it may reflect a stage beyond what Singh (2017, p. 125) observed happening from the late 1980s, the “shift from an ethnic ‘Asian’ identity to a more religious identity” where

South Asian students now recast their identities primarily as Sikh, Hindu or Muslim and instead of or as well as joining an “Asian society” formed groups according to their religion.

Jewish students in particular emphasized socialising. Like Jasbir, some prioritized socialising with students of their cultural identity over the society’s religious aspects. Asked whether she thought the Jewish society (JSOC) was primarily social or religious, Leah said “Primarily social... The main aims are to connect Jewish students with other Jewish students and to give the Jewish students a community.” There are two to three events each week, including a Torah discussion group, a bagel lunch brought by the Jewish chaplain, and, often, a Shabbat dinner. The interweaving of social and religious was apparent as Leah discussed the discussion group:

[T]he focus of JSOC is really about building a community... the Torah aspect... is, it’s not number one or number two... When I go we usually have a chat, we have tea and, you know, often times when we read through the texts that we’re studying we, I’d say like fifty percent of the time we get completely side tracked on to different topics.

Red Brick Jewish society student Ruth’s words depict a mix of social and religious aims: the religious activity (the Shabbat dinner) paves the way for socialising that continues into the evening:

We have Friday night dinner every two weeks... It mostly revolves around food, I’m not going to lie.... It’s literally just a place for Jewish people to meet. You can go if you’re not Jewish but I don’t really know why you’d want to particularly. Mostly we just eat a lot. We go out together a lot as well, a lot of the time Friday night functions as a pre-drinks sort of thing.

“Pre-drinks” is a reference to student culture: drinking at a residence hall before going out to clubs, in order to get drunk more cheaply. That a religious meal functions as a “pre-drinks” event is an interesting mix of sacred and profane, one that more conservative religious students might eschew. There is an element of confession in Ruth’s response (“I’m not going to lie”), as if she feels she may be revealing too much about the society’s emphasis on food

over religion. In a context where Jewish students are a much smaller minority than Muslim students (unlike in the USA), Mir's (2014) discussion of the "hybrid" identities of similarly-minoritized Muslim students in the USA resonates; although some of Mir's interviewees completely avoided drinking culture, others did drink alcohol, navigating a way to engage in it and fit in with their peers while retaining their Muslim identity. Similarly, in the UK, these Jewish SROs appear to help students navigate British drinking culture by providing a way to engage in it safely, in the company of other Jews.

Antisemitism is part of the context Jewish students occupy (Graham & Boyd, 2011). Jewish students in three of the four Jewish organizations in our study discussed encountering it, including graffiti denying the Holocaust and verbal abuse. Saskia, who had been subjected to verbal abuse from another student, called her university "notoriously antisemitic", "an unsafe space for Jewish students". In a hostile context, JSOC becomes a vital support base. She said:

[W]hen there've been issues, you can feel very alone in it... I've really valued having a JSOC there that I can at least go [to], and people can be supportive and help and believe the same things as me and that kind of sense of familiarity, just knowing that I will have unquestionable support.

For Jewish students, and SROs generally, building friendship, social support and community is paramount.

Strengthening Religious Identity and Faith

SROs play an important role supporting their members' religious identity and spiritual development. Societies celebrated religious festivals and rituals. Aaisha and Fatima described their ISOC's observance of Ramadan:

Aaisha: when you break fast, we provide food for that time for thirty days and like so everybody can come down, take food, it's all free, come down, eat food, pray and then go back because that's a very community thing that we like to do, everyone likes to be together...

Fatima: It's nice to have family around during that time, so like since we're away from family it's good.

The ISOC provides the meal each day, paid for via fundraising, and this creates community and a sense of collective religious practice for students away from their families.

During our research, the start of the academic year coincided with the month of Muharram – when Shi'a Muslims mourn the killing of Imam Hussain, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson. The Cathedrals Group university Ahlul Bayt society university organized a "Who is Imam Hussain?" campaign, and their introductory social event was necessarily solemn. According to Henna, "we wouldn't do something very happy... It was difficult, but we don't have to cry, we can talk to each other and we did have an icebreaker." The society's introductory meeting was just before a religious event several members were attending, Kawther recounted:

We were attending an event straight after our Meet and Greet so we were dressed in black. We had a lot of questions with regard to that, from people who weren't Shi'a Muslim and it was actually fun to explain to them why we were mourning and why we were in black.

The society's attention to the university year and its affective states – the requirement for fun introductory activities for new students – and to the religious year's, with the mourning expected in Muharram – is clear. The religious mourning was toned down ("we don't have to cry, we can talk to each other"). The excitement of the new term was also muted, as the students attended the social event dressed in black, "believing and mourning" as Kawther put it, and used this as an opportunity to educate non-Shi'as.

The Hindu organization at the 1960s campus holds a weekly meeting, attended by around 30 students and the university's Hindu chaplain, which begins with prayers and videos produced by the National Hindu Student Forum. A debate often follows on political or religious issues. Festivals such as Diwali attract a crowd, including South Asian students who do not frequent religious societies. Govind explained that wanting to practice religion

together led to him making friends: “The society itself, it promotes Hindu Dharma, which is like right conduct and righteousness... My main intention was to... find other people who are practising Dharma and we got together and we became friends.”

Collective worship and prayer happens in most of the SROs. Islamic societies host Friday prayers, often attended by large numbers. Catholic societies hold a weekly Mass, said by a chaplain. Anglican societies attend Eucharist. The Bhakti Yoga society at the Scottish traditional elite university runs a weekly yoga and mantra meditation session. Prayer also happens in smaller groups.

Educational sessions to deepen religious knowledge happen often. Many societies invite external speakers, such as religious leaders. The Orthodox (Christian) society at the Red Brick university centre their meetings around talks by external speakers recommended by an Orthodox academic at the university. Haleema, Head Sister of the ISOC at the English traditional elite university, runs weekly Qur’an study circles for female students, accompanies them to talks on Islam, and advises members about personal religious dilemmas, consulting those with greater Islamic knowledge. She posts daily on social media to encourage others. It is “a very 24-hour thing”, she remarked. It has had a profound impact on her identity. She is an international student, but the role led her to identify with her Muslim identity above her nationality: “because I identify so much with my faith and through the ISOC and everyone I interact with, my country doesn’t come to mind as much as it would before. I just feel like a Muslim”. Ethnic and cultural divisions exist within SROs and these could disincline particular ethnic groups from attending a religious society, especially if they felt unwelcome; some students discussed these divisions. Yet unlike Sikh student Jasbir (above), for Haleema, religion trumped culture in determining her identity, with the ISOC the vehicle for this. This is understandable in the light of the hostile or Islamophobic climate some Muslim students perceive; as Scott-Baumann et al. (2020) argue, because Islam is politicized in British universities, and Muslim students “feel a heightened vulnerability” (p. 219) they are “much more likely than Christian peers to treat university as an experience that

engages their faith” (p. 220) or to say that they have become more religious during university.

Bridging Social Capital in Student Religious Organizations

Three key forms of bridging social capital emerged from the data: 1) volunteering for social justice causes; 2) interfaith engagement/work; and 3) faith-sharing. Faith-sharing is not often considered a form of bridging social capital, but we will argue that it can be seen as such.

Volunteering for Social Justice Causes

A third of interviewees described their society’s volunteering work to address social justice issues including homelessness, poverty, refugee welfare, and injustices affecting women. Students were motivated to volunteer as a practical expression of their religion, a form of faith-sharing, or to tackle social needs.

Christian, Muslim and Sikh groups volunteered most. Among Christians, two Protestant groups were most active: Just Love, a left-leaning social justice-focused evangelical group at the Scottish traditional elite university, and a group in the post-1992 university (name disguised to safeguard university anonymity) which worked with refugees. Formed in 2013, the Just Love network has expanded to 25 universities. “Our vision is to inspire and release every Christian student to pursue the biblical call to social justice”, its national body explains,⁵ a vision students articulated almost verbatim. According to Joanne:

Just Love exists to inspire and release every Christian student to pursue the biblical value of social justice. That’s the mission statement, but the idea is to help Christian students to see how social justice is an essential part of our faith and how it’s about following Jesus.

⁵ <https://justloveuk.com/about-us/vision>

The group consists mostly of women students. Close friendships are built, but the group's aim is outward-focused, Joanne explained, "to serve the poor and reach out to people in our communities." Just Love also have an evangelistic aim:

We don't want to just share the gospel with people but then forget that they also are a whole person who has social needs and physical needs and practical needs as well.

We want to love all people but we do really see that people's needs... they also need Jesus.

Despite this tension between evangelism and social justice, their activities appear to be social justice rather than evangelism focused. The students discussed practical activities, including helping at a homeless night shelter, campaigning on human trafficking, and fundraising for a Christian development charity, and group meetings where they learned about theological approaches to social justice.

The English traditional elite university's ISOC volunteered extensively. They work with aid agency Islamic Relief to run Charity Week, doing fundraising activities including mountain climbs and football tournaments. The year of the research, the society had raised tens of thousands of pounds. ISOC runs a regular "outreach project", visiting a care home and running a soup kitchen for the homeless. Yusuf described the project as about "finding ways we can be of service to the local community, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim, we don't discriminate between that, we just see where we can be of service." Students see these activities as a learning opportunity:

Charity week is the most strenuous role in ISOC purely because of how much you have to organize, an auction dinner, the entire logistics of booking a venue. Probably another great thing about it is how much you learn. Prior to this summer I knew nothing about how to organize an auction dinner... With the ISOC, all the time you devote to it you get back purely through how much you learn, your personal development. I always say this to the new freshers, that you will get more out of it than you can ever give.

Sikh organizations volunteered consistently for social justice projects. The post-1992 university Sikh society's flagship event was Langar on Campus a national initiative organized by the British Organisation of Sikh Students (BOSS) which began in 2004 and illustrates the growing strength of Sikh societies, who are now able not just to support their own members but to build bridges to non-Sikhs.⁶ Langar is a free kitchen, operating in gurdwaras, where meals are available free to anyone and all sit together to eat, regardless of social status. BOSS connects students to local gurdwaras who cook the food; students fundraise and plan the events. Kawalpreet described Langar as promoting the Sikh value of equality:

We feed the entire public free food and teach them about the concept of equality.

Everyone sits on the same ground, eats the same food, from the same plates, no matter what, caste, creed, gender or hierarchy, social status, it doesn't matter because we are trying to promote what we believe in our values, which is we are all equal.

These examples show differing motivations: the Sikh society to demonstrate equality, the ISOC to serve the community and Just Love to share the Christian message by caring for others. Each is a form of faith-inspired volunteering that the wider community benefits from. It should be noted, however, that whether student volunteering really builds bridges or lessens inequalities in local communities is questionable; as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) observe, while student volunteering is sometimes "deconstructive", challenging power inequalities between volunteers and communities, sometimes it is "reproductive", reproducing them.

Interfaith work

A quarter of SROs discussed their involvement in interfaith work; two of the six universities had interfaith organizations. At the Scottish traditional elite university, Sikh student Ranveer set up an Interfaith society to "create this place for education about different religious groups and so that we can get away from any misunderstandings that people have

⁶<https://www.boss-uk.org/langar>

about other belief systems.” “We hold lectures, the occasional social and there’s usually quite a lot of interest from theology students”, he summarized. Committee members were Ranveer’s Sikh friends. The Interfaith society had put on talks, attracting about twenty people, mostly Muslims and Catholics, but had only a handful of members. Organizations they reached out to had not shown much interest, but the experience was positive for Ranveer:

The best part, it honestly is just being able to speak with people about these things, very openly, because there’s not really another venue. There are religious societies but they are very focussed on their own faith usually, so this kind of tries to bridge that gap.

The Cathedrals Group university’s Interfaith society was new, started by several friends of different religions, almost all from minority faiths in the UK (Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs, with one or two Christians). Muslim founder Tasnim described its origins:

[T]he committee I have now... we were friends all last year and we started going to different faith societies... I would [say], even last year, “let’s get involved, let’s do this, let’s not just learn from books”... and they would always have a good time and when they would reflect after they would be, “Oh we’re so glad you dragged us along” and stuff so I realized there was something there and I just had to push.

The group used Whatsapp to arrange visits to each other’s societies and their city’s interfaith events. They wrote a charter committing religion and belief societies to work together, but only two societies signed it, and the challenge of competing agendas emerged: “They will only really want to make time for their own societies; for another society to come in and, ‘Hey why don’t you come to this too?’ it’s a bit more difficult”, Tasnim explained.

Fellow member Nok (Buddhist) admitted that although her role was to advertise the organization, she had not done much of this. What the society gave her seemed to be friendship; through it she accessed an all-night dance event run by the Hindu society that she had loved, and said “every time I think of this [Interfaith] society I’m like we’re always

having so much fun. I'm just, like, happy that I get to see my friends." While this society is outward-looking in wanting to create friendships across faiths, once formed, the challenge is how to remain so, as these friendships look similar to the bonding social capital of more inward-looking organizations. Yet it is important not to minimize the significance of the founders' inter-religious friendships. The students had built a friendship despite ethnic and religious differences that might divide them in wider British society, differences reflecting divisions in their parents' and grandparents' countries of birth.

The remaining organizations that did interfaith work mentioned it in passing, for example saying they welcomed students of other faiths to their meetings. Occasionally more intentional interfaith work happened, for example a Hindu society had co-run an event with a Sikh society.

Faith-sharing

Sharing faith to inspire others to join or convert was an aspect of bridging social capital that appeared in a third of interviews. In Christianity, this is "evangelism", in Islam, "da'wah". The (evangelical) CUs and the (Sunni) ISOCs are the most active faith-sharing groups and known across campuses for this. There is limited academic evidence of students succeeding in converting others (Guest et al., 2013, pp. 83-112), but one ISOC member and one CU member reported conversions occurring as a result of their faith-sharing weeks "Discover Islam Week" and "Mission Week".

CU members described their mission as "to know Jesus and make him known", quoting their national body UCCF. Their activities mixed strengthening members' religious identity and faith, a key form of bonding social capital, with evangelism. Poppy explained:

The official aim is knowing Jesus and making him known. So, it's doing evangelism on campus and being a presence on campus and putting on events to introduce people to Jesus and sharing his love on campus. It's not just an insular community of Christians, it's explicitly outreach.

Her CU's many evangelistic activities included a termly mission week, with apologetics talks. Their fortnightly event called "The Big Question" involved an evangelistic talk, with free food. Every night CU members went to the university bar, aiming to talk to students about Christianity. CU students referred to a "club outreach" event they used to run, giving water and sandwiches to students. Simon reflected:

Some of the things that we do are very strange to some people... When we give away sandwiches at the end of the club night, you regularly get people saying, "why are you doing this? This is so weird, but thanks".... I think a lot of people aren't fussed about what we do, but some people are. People go to Big Question just intrigued by what we have to say maybe, and not necessarily because they are seeking our faith, more just some people are interested in what the Christian faith is, or just for knowledge purposes.

The issue of how far evangelism can be considered bridging social capital was discussed by Ali, a CU student who is also in the Christians in Sport society, set up to support Christian students involved in sports. The latter "equips you to be able to share the gospel with your teammates and... how to conduct yourself as a Christian in your sports teams". Christians in Sport led her to think not simply about converting people, but also about building relationships. Her words reveal a tension between a polarized approach – students are either "Christian", or "non-Christian" – and a desire to meet on an equal level:

From the outside it might seem like... [we're] over here and that's their society and they're like all the way over there. Whereas actually... we're very much encouraged in CU to build relationships with people as well, to make friends... That's what I like, so not to think I'm a Christian, I'm over here and like you're there, but actually to understand that we're all like, we're all sinners as well and... we're all like cool to love each other and stuff like that. So just being able to do that and not kind of like building that separate kind of thing but making sure that Christian Unions...involve themselves like in the wider... university thing without obviously compromising their beliefs.

Ali appears torn between the society's focus to "spread the gospel" through friendship, and her desire to "just spend time with them ([non-Christians])". The equal basis the students meet on, however, is "we're all sinners", an evangelical basis, implying that non-Christian students should recognize that "sinner" identity. But she follows that with "we're all like cool to love each other", as if diluting the focus on sin. She calls for wider relationship-building by the CU and other organizations in the university. Ending "without obviously compromising their beliefs" returns to the more exclusivist focus – exclusivism conditions the inclusivity that can occur. Relationships can be built, but religious distinctiveness must be maintained. This tension is similar to the Christian-non-Christian binary Magolda and Ebben (2007, pp. 152-153) observed at the U.S. Christian group they studied. Despite Christianity being the religion with most student adherents, the group saw themselves as marginalised while simultaneously both perceiving non-Christians as sinners *and* preaching a message of reconciliation. Magolda and Ebben argued that such tensions are a feature of subcultures, and the Christian group's contradictory discourses "effectively focus and mobilize its membership and create a sense of solidarity that advances the organization's agenda to evangelize" (Magolda & Ebben, 2007, p. 153).

ISOCs' faith-sharing is focused principally on Discover Islam week. The emphasis, as explained by committee member Ershad, is "we invite lots of non-Muslims to come in. The idea essentially is unity and, you know, keeping everyone happy together, able to work out differences". As with the CU, the focus is on non-Muslims asking questions the ISOC answers, rather than dialogue about equally valid worldviews. Haleema was less optimistic about how much they shared their faith with non-Muslims. She said: "The majority of the people in the talks are actually Muslim, and that's not our target audience". Engaging with non-Muslims was one of the main challenges ISOC faced, she said. Yet there is also a tension in her response, as she wants non-Muslims to learn more about the faith but refutes the idea that they are trying to convert students: "people think that we're trying to convert others, which is not the case, because we believe that message comes from God." She

considers it up to the ISOC to share their faith, but up to Allah to make that lead to conversion.

As we discuss below, faith-sharing less straightforwardly exemplifies bridging social capital, as there is a desire for students to change their beliefs to match theirs. Yet the CU and ISOC actively seek to engage outsiders, especially the non-religious, in discussion and, sometimes, friendship. This is bridge-building, albeit of a conditional nature.

Discussion

This study illustrates that SROs in UK universities are important sources of social capital. SROs in UK universities are best categorized as sources of “formal” rather than “informal” social capital, to return to the first of Putnam and Goss’s (2002, p. 9) distinctions; they consist mostly of students who are committed members rather than students who drop in occasionally. They are also sites for “thick” more than “thin” social capital, frequented by students who do not just attend the society together, but become friends, sometimes living, and attending places of worship, together. The example of Jewish society students attending synagogue together, eating Shabbat dinner together and socialising together exemplifies thick social capital. The many other students quoted in the sections on bonding social capital provide further evidence. At the same time, there was evidence of them generating the “generalized reciprocity” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 7) between strangers typical of thin social capital. For example, at the Scottish traditional elite university the Jewish students lacked a meeting space, so the Catholic chaplaincy let them use theirs, generating mutual respect between both groups, even though they rarely spoke to each other. For the most part, the relations generated by SROs amongst their own members were thick, close and plentiful. Students made what they hoped would be “friends for life” (Kawther, Ahlul Bayt society; Ruth, Jewish society).

To an extent, Putnam and Goss’s (2002) point that most groups blend bonding and bridging social capital, but that the blends differ, rings true among British SROs. But things are more complex. Crucially, the social capital in SROs, we argue, is more inward-looking

than outward-looking: more concerned with what Putnam and Goss (2002, p. 11) call “the material, social, or political interests of their own members” than with “public goods”. SROs do more bonding than bridging. “Bonding social capital brings together people who are like one another”, Putnam and Goss (2002, p. 11) explain, and this is true for these societies, which consist of students who share a religious identity, and are of similar ages and class backgrounds (and sometimes ethnicity). The bonding social capital these organizations create has three main aspects. First, they create a “home from home” for religious students, a substitute family; this is most important for religious minority students. Second, they build friendship and community through social activities. Third, they strengthen student members’ religious identity and faith, through doing religious activities together and providing peer-to-peer pastoral support.

Bridging social capital, “social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 11), is present, but there is less of it. There are three main types of bridging social capital among SROs. First, there is volunteering for social justice causes, often charities, often done as an expression of faith. Greeley’s (1997) point that religious groups encourage social capital by facilitating volunteering activities holds true for SROs. Second, a minority of religious student groups are involved in interfaith work, through an Interfaith society, or via organising events for dialogue and debate between religions and worldviews. Interfaith work is a form of bridging social capital with great potential for building relations between students across differences of religions and other aspects or identity, but most SROs in the UK do not do it. Faith-sharing is a third type of bridging social capital that we have identified; through it students build bridges and create relations with those outside their faith.

Is there a difference between the SROs focused on bonding and those focused on bridging? The literature suggests that Christian, especially evangelical, organizations focus their bridging to others on asserting their Christian identity publicly, sometimes evangelizing (Magolda & Ebben, 2006; Moran, 2007); studies of Muslim student groups have also noted

this (Song, 2012). Just as Reid (2017) showed how close internal friendships within Christian, Muslim and Jewish SROs may lead to students on their margins feeling excluded, reinforcing Leonard's (2004) point that bonding social capital does not always challenge inequalities and Putnam's that it "bolsters our narrower selves (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), there is a risk that inequalities are reinforced within SROs; while we do not report this in this article, our wider study revealed some students in gender-conservative SROs were unhappy with women's exclusion from some SRO committees (Perfect et al., 2019, pp. 118-129). We found all societies generated bonding social capital, especially via social activities and strengthening faith; creating a "home from home" was done mostly by students who were part of a minority religious group, and thus who needed support. Conversely, we found that only certain groups generated bridging social capital, and when they did so they were mostly involved in only one form (social action, interfaith work or faith-sharing). Mc Kenzie (2008) is correct in asserting that bridging social capital often accompanies bonding social capital, but for SROs it does not always do so. Christians, Sikhs and Muslims were the groups most involved in volunteering for social justice causes. Interfaith societies, and occasionally single-faith religious minority groups, were the most involved in interfaith work. Muslims and Christians were almost exclusively the groups involved in faith-sharing. We suggest these differences stem partly from differences in theologies and practices in these religions.

Why is there more evidence of bonding than bridging social capital in SROs? SROs, we argue, perform a crucial role as a protective safe space in a context where, as previous studies show (Graham & Boyd, 2011; Weller et al., 2011; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020) religious minority students fear, and at times experience, prejudice, misunderstanding, harassment or unwelcome scrutiny, from peers, members of the public or even university staff. Echoing the literature (e.g., Shammass, 2015; Boucher & Kucinskis, 2016), some of the students we interviewed corroborate this: Saskia, who saw her university as "notoriously antisemitic" and "an unsafe space" and sought comfort in the Jewish society is one example. Jameel, who saw the ISOC as a refuge from "partying and drinking" enjoyed by other

students, is another. Case and Hunter's (2012) term "counterspaces" can be usefully applied to these SROs engaged in bonding social capital. Case and Hunter give a parallel example of African American fraternities and sororities in white-majority colleges: counterspaces are "settings, which promote positive self-concepts among marginalized individuals [...] through the challenging of deficit-oriented dominant cultural narratives and representations concerning these individuals" (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 261). Counterspaces exist because of enduring patterns of inequality and discrimination, and SROs remain important for religious minority students partly because they promote their identity and wellbeing.

In addition to volunteering for social justice causes, interfaith work and faith-sharing emerge in this study as key forms of bridging social capital, so how do these relate? We challenge Putnam's (2000) interpretation of faith-sharing as antithetical to bridging social capital. Putnam sees proselytism as linked to strong relations within the religious in-group and attempts to convert outsiders so that they become part of it, rather than appreciating their differences. It is true that conversion of others is one of the aims of student Christian Unions or Islamic Societies. However, their work inviting non-members to events is evidence of building bridges for communication that did not exist before. When Muslim and Christian students step away from their safe spaces to create conversations with students they do not know, this is evidence of building bridges, however temporary. That this is a bridge they wish other students to walk back over to enter the religious safe space, a drawbridge that they wish to draw up to bring them into the "holy huddle", does not negate the bridge's existence. The bridge also signifies movement towards greater appreciation of religious diversity. Yet if faith-sharing becomes coercive, this is a problem, as experiencing coercion is negatively associated with students' growth in what Mayhew and Rockenbach term "self-authored worldview commitment", as demonstrated in their pioneering quantitative IDEALS study into interfaith attitudes on US campuses (Mayhew et al., 2020). While quantitative research on this in the UK is forthcoming, based on our qualitative findings we would argue that faith-sharing should not be seen as necessarily antithetical to interfaith work; it can be considered

a form of dialogue with or bridging across religious differences. Faith-sharing also exhibits the tension or equilibrium that SROs in both the USA and UK navigate, between supporting religious identity and sharing that identity publicly.

Conclusion

These findings raise questions about the merits of how social capital is operating in SROs, questions resonant with dilemmas surrounding higher education, freedom of speech and student safety. Bridging social capital is often assumed to be better than bonding capital – more altruistic, with fewer “negative externalities” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 11). Bridging may produce more obvious public good, for instance charity work students do or interfaith skills they develop that will later be used in the workplace and to solve conflicts. But bonding social capital is not simply about cementing religious similarity in a “bubble” (a word several religious students used) or “holy huddle” isolated from the rest of the university or society. It is also about providing support and safety to students whose religious needs can be marginalized in universities, in classrooms where some fear discussing their faith will lead to ridicule, or in student spaces focused on getting drunk, which students often feel contravenes their religion. Religious students, especially those from minority religions, use SROs in a similar way to how others use family and friendship circles – to get support and provide a home or safe space, free from the pressures of work, study or politics. As Putnam and Goss (2002, p. 11) point out “indeed, evidence suggests that most of us get our social support from bonding rather than bridging social ties”. The need for a religious safe space, a counterspace (Case & Hunter, 2012), is crucial for some students who experience or regard universities as unsafe places to express their religion.

The limitations to the study are several. First, in a study of multiple religious traditions, it is difficult to provide depth about each religious group. Second, while qualitative work aims to achieve richness rather than representativeness, this study’s findings are undoubtedly shaped by the particular students who came forward to be interviewed. The SROs’ committed members were easier to recruit as participants than more marginal

members, and because we asked SRO leaders to make introductions to potential interviewees and advertise our study with their members, these leaders may have steered us away from interviewing students who would provide a more critical perspective on the organization. Related to this point, while we were able to secure some interviews with relatively small or less active groups, in some cases it proved more challenging to engage with these groups than with larger or more active ones. This means our findings were more likely to reflect the experiences of the latter kinds of SROs. Third, a significant ethnographic component would have enabled triangulation of findings.

Further research should examine the impact of SRO involvement for students' post-college lives. Is it the case, as Bowman et al. (2015) have demonstrated for students involved in ethnic student organizations in US higher education, that having been involved with such an organization was positively associated with later civic outcomes, such as volunteer work, donating money and cross-racial socializing? If this were to be the case it would demonstrate that activities that appear to be promoting bonding capital only while in college, actually facilitate longer-term bridging outcomes. Research should also address how to promote bridging across differences of religion and worldview at college and university: what aspects of university culture, climate and social relations encourage students to move beyond mere tolerance to build productive relationships with people who see the world differently? This work is ongoing via Rockenbach and Mayhew's IDEALS study in the USA (e.g., Mayhew et al., 2024), but has just begun in the UK.

There are some important implications for higher education practice. As Leonard's (2004) study notes, political leadership plays a key role in creating a context in which social capital can flourish, and likewise university leaders have a crucial role to play, and they should focus on promoting equity and inclusion for, and good relations between, religious students – something they are obliged to do under the UK Equality Act.

For those wishing to promote interfaith work, such as student affairs professionals and chaplains, these findings evidence the need for more bridge-building between SROs

representing different religions. The findings also provide evidence of the importance of facilitating safe spaces for religious students, especially those from religious minority groups such as Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists. As Patel and Correia-Harker argue, bonding and bridging work best together; bonding and bridging is an “equilibrium that matters for engaging religious diversity in a pluralistic society” (Patel & Correia-Harker, 2020, p. 42). Higher education practitioners should promote both bonding within SROs and bridging, to other SROs, the wider campus and the wider community. Facilitating safe space for religious students involves supporting SROs, for example with coordination, programming and the welfare needs of their members, and we recommend that universities have one or more chaplains, student affairs staff, or in the UK Students’ Union staff, with a remit to resource and support SROs.

Overall, this evidence from religion and belief-focused student organizations in the UK provides much to be hopeful about. It demonstrates that such organizations offer positive opportunities for students to bond with each other and bridge to others.

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