Reflective Practice of Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

This practitioner's note integrates reflections from a year of graduate coursework in the International Training and Education Program in the School of Education at American University (AU), and the role of intergroup dialogue facilitator at the Intergroup Dialogue Program on Islamophobia at the Center for Diversity and Inclusion during the fall, winter, and spring of 2019–2020. My graduate studies were undertaken while serving in the capacity of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and AU School of Education, International Training Education Program (ITEP) Partnership in Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS track).

Intergroup dialogues enable facilitators and dialoguers to bring a self-reflexive approach to Islamophobia, applying a dialogue education approach at a time of significant divisiveness in the national milieu. The methodology of intergroup dialoguing personifies the integration of theory

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and practice to reflect the rigor, respect for, and commitment to the overall mission of the School of Education, to coconstruct learning and prepare students to transform societies through education. In parallel to the journey of intergroup dialoguing at AU since 2004, training program design at AU has for the past two decades worked to enable facilitators with systems thinking for change agency.

Specifically, the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues process located in the Center of Diversity and Inclusion weaves together key ITEP course concepts into a provocative and illuminating experience using mastery of key design, facilitation, and critical/systems analysis skills. Intergroup dialogue utilizes the four-stage educational intergroup dialogue model that focuses on building relationships, exploring systemic group differences and similarities, examining controversial issues, and action planning and alliance building (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Specifically, the goals of the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues are to (a) unpack Islamophobia by engaging across difference of perspectives and identities; (b) foster intergroup community through a diversity of identities; (c) explore personal experiences and societal impacts of Islamophobia; (d) provide tools for navigating difference on and off campus. The three key intended outcomes of the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues are to (a) raise consciousness by helping participants explore their own and others' social identities/statuses, and the role of social structures in relationships of privilege and inequality; (b) build positive relationships across differences and conflicts; and (c) strengthen individual and collective capacities to foster intergroup collaboration for personal and social responsibility to promote social justice.

At a macro level, higher educational institutions in the United States are increasingly engaging in addressing Islamophobia needs underpinned by the increasing incidents of Islamophobic attacks toward Muslims. Hence, AU's initiatives of addressing religious bigotry through intergroup dialogues and mini grants for diversity and inclusion trainings is part of a larger tapestry of efforts to stem the tide against Islamophobia in internationalized higher education.

KEY REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this practitioner's note is to critically reflect on lessons learned from the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues in order to draw valuable conclusions that may improve future practice. Reflecting on action is important to reviewing, analyzing, and evaluating past practice

in order to gain insights that can shape future practice (Finlay, 2008). On a higher level, critical reflection provides the opportunity to reexamine "historically and socially sedimented values at work in the construction of knowledge, social relations, and material practices" in the context of social transformation (Giroux, 1983). Three key reflections are discussed below.

1. Theory of Change Model as a Collective Resource

At the outset of my capstone project, it was critical to develop a Theory of Change for the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues, starting with the end in mind, i.e., the intended impact of more inclusive, safe, and caring communities. The intent of the intergroup dialogues is to aid in the development of critical consciousness and consciousness-raising to increase the capacities for social justice among students, framed in the critical-dialogic model.

In hindsight, the benefits of the Theory of Change model extended beyond making the underlying rationale for the project explicit, but rather served as a strong motivator for me personally to drive the intergroup dialogue process forward. Given the tight deadlines and the unfolding public health crisis of COVID-19, there was a significant missed opportunity to coconstruct and share the Theory of Change model out with key actors. Specifically, there was a missed opportunity to elicit input into the Theory of Change model design from intergroup dialogue participants, which could have served as a powerful means to discuss and intentionally design the interplay between the dialogical and critical goals with associated psychological processes as dialoguers journeyed through exploring their lived experiences and complex identities. Figure 1 illustrates the Theory of Change model deployed and the discussion that follows outlines the key highlights of the model.

The dialogic goals focused on building effective self-other relationships through personal storytelling and sharing, empathic listening, and interpersonal inquiry (Kim & Kim, 2008). The critical goals centered on how power, privilege, and group-based inequities structured individual and group life, fostering individual and collective responsibilities for redressing inequalities and promoting social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Freire, 1970). Psychological processes fostered in intergroup dialogues, both cognitive and affective, are related to positive outcomes (Nagda, Kim, & Truelove, 2004; Stephan, 2008).

The building of sound relationships was critical to the success of intergroup dialogues. The intergroup dialogue space enabled experimenting

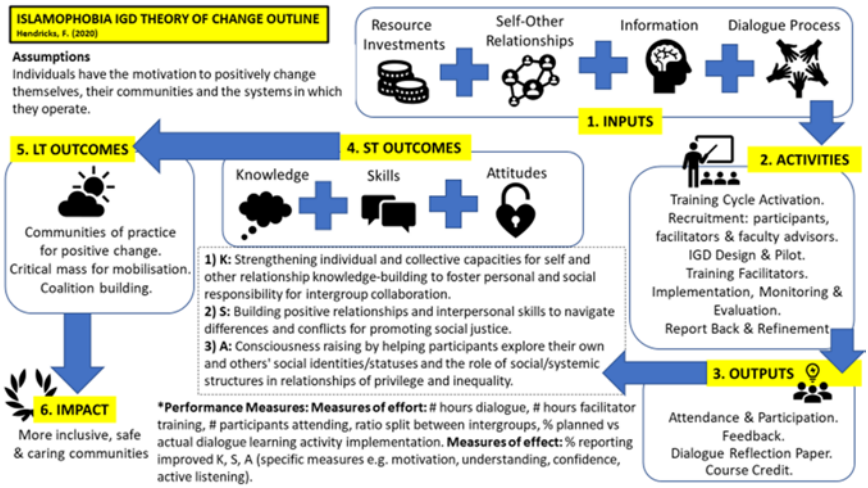

Figure 1. Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues Theory of Change.

with new ways of thinking and relating to each other through the development of enhanced knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Specifically, in terms of individual cognitive change, developing awareness, emotional and intellectual insight was a key focus to surface unconscious attitudes and behaviors enabling critical thinking and choice within the context of a safe and brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

In terms of individual emotional change and emotional literacy, the utilization of cognitive dissonance (the uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time (Festinger, 1957) assisted with (a) appreciating difference—listening to others' perspectives and stories, and trying to understand and learning from them; (b) engaging self—sharing one's own stories and perspectives, taking risks and admitting vulnerabilities; (c) critical self-reflection—appraising one's personal perspectives, biases and assumptions in the context of systems of privilege and disadvantage; and (d) alliance building and finding common ground—working with others to lessen inequalities and achieve greater social justice (Nagda & Zuniga; 2003Nagda, 2006). In terms of behavioral change, cognitive dissonance encouraged participants to shift attitudes so that they better align with intended behaviors. In terms of changing social relationships, intergroup contact and dialogue with personal story telling allowed for perspective-taking and drawing connections in terms of power, privilege, and group-based inequities.

Overall, the broader intended change or outcomes are anticipated to be achieved by the ripple effect or transfer effect where repeated iterations

of Islamophobia and other intergroup dialogues (Schiffer & Wagner, 2011) will have individual and relationship changes in terms of mental models that will have expanding circles of impact as participants take their new learning and/or coalition building for the creation of more inclusive, safe, and caring communities.

In hindsight, as alluded to there could have been significant benefits in sharing and discussing the Islamophobia Theory of Change model during the intergroup dialogues so as to elicit input and feedback. The benefits of introducing and engaging intergroup dialoguers with the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues Theory of Change model can be outlined as follows: (a) encouraging systems thinking in terms of observing the higher education system in terms of power, privilege, change management, networks both explicit and implicit, and identifying what system change levers will have to be leveraged in order to effect even the slightest of change; (b) identifying and talking about assumptions at the outset and testing these assumptions in terms of individual and collective perceptions; and (c) allowing for flexibility and coconstruction of the Theory of Change model as a collectively shared tool that is a living model in sync with the growth of the project and community needs. After all the Theory of Change model is intended to be a shared narrative of the collective understanding of the intended change or impact with regard to Islamophobia. As is often raised in Islamophobia discourse, Islamophobia is not a Muslim problem but rather a whole of society challenge that calls for collaboration and co-construction for shared outcomes—a missed opportunity in this case.

2. Recognizing Terminological Limitations

Although the intergroup dialogue was called the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues, it is important to recognize there are significant criticisms with the term. Hence, highlighting these terminological criticisms and arriving at working definitions during the intergroup dialoguing process is important.

Terminological criticisms that are common are that (a) Islamophobia is a form of racism, but Muslims are not a racial group (Bakali, 2016); (b) Islamophobia is not a phobia, like arachnophobia, for example, and by implication the term "phobia" could imply a type of mental illness (Rehman, 2011); (c) the term "Islamophobia" does not introduce anything new that has not been previously covered via racism—i.e., Muslims as immigrants, foreigners, outsiders (Lorente, 2010); (d) considering religious

prejudice toward Islam or Muslims as negative prejudice forbids any type of criticism toward Islam (Lorente, 2010); (e) Islamophobia suggests that the problem is a personal one, based in fear, and "obscures the structural and systemic production of anti-Muslim racism" (Mir & Sarroub, 2019) that is "reproduced at the intersection of imperial ideology, political expediency, and the exploitation of nationalist, racial, and religious insecurities" (Hammer, 2013); and (f) the term suggests a fear of Islam as a religion, not necessarily of Muslims (Halliday, 1999).

Responses to the criticisms include claims that (a) Muslims are racialized through religious and physical attributes, and therefore racism, racialization, and Islamophobia are critical for theorizing Islamophobia (Steve & Selod, 2015; Selod, 2015); and (b) Muslims are not a monolithic block and the manifestations and impacts of Islamophobia vary across a range of intersectionalities, particularly with poor and working-class Black Muslim communities (Beydoun, 2016) understandable as racism. Therefore, intersecting religion into the already existing hierarchy through racialization allows for "religious bigotry (to) sit(s) on the lap of racism instead of having its own seat at the table of intersecting hierarchies" (Dagli, 2020). Alternate terminology used to describe Islamophobia are "cultural racism" (Lopez, 2011), "anti-Muslimism" (Halliday, 1999), "anti-Muslim prejudice" (Hollander, 2010), "anti-Muslim bigotry" (Dagli, 2020), and "anti-Muslim racism" (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2018), to name a few.

Therefore, a key reflection for me is that while there is ongoing work toward arriving at a legal definition and framework (Beydoun, 2016) amid the need to fill the gap in robust theorizing of the field, intergroup dialoguers need to recognize the limitations of the term "Islamophobia" and arrive at a working definition for use during the process that is collectively agreed upon by the group. Hence, the importance of having intentional dialogue about the contested term, its meaning and usage.

3. Understanding Effects and the Use of Role Play to Practice Interventions

The effects of Islamophobia are many, and within the purview of many students are the lived experiences embedded in covert examples: (a) microaggressions such as endorsing religious stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists (Husain & Howard, 2017); (b) pathologizing of Islam; (c) assuming religious homogeneity of all Muslims; (d) exoticization of Muslims; (e) mocking language such as Muzzie; and (f) Calling Muslims aliens in their own land—e.g., "where do you come from?" and "go home" (Nadal et al., 2012), to name a few.

Although the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues discussed the effects of Islamophobia on students such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and depression and other psychological symptoms including fear, stress, worry, isolation, numbness, desensitization, and insecurity (Ali, 2017), on individual levels insufficient attention was dedicated to classroom manifestations and the actions that can be taken to mitigate classroom biases. There was a missed opportunity for role-playing of various scenarios that may play out in the classroom due to the limited time period and transition to remote learning due to the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Practical suggestions of role-plays are (a) Muslim students being in the hot seat, "the designated Muslim spokesperson who must consistently voice the prototypical Muslim standpoint" (Mir, 2014), forcing Muslims to renegotiate aspects of their Muslim American identity (Ali, 2017); (b) addressing women who may suffer from anxiety connected to hijab-related discriminatory experiences (Koura, 2016); (c) navigating classroom arguments such as that of a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1996) embedded in layers of Islamophobic content in the classroom and feeding into tropes of the Muslim as the "foreigner," "stranger," "exotic," and "other"; (d) considering interview or potential employer discrimination and religiosity (Ali, Yamada & Mahmood, 2015); and (e) demonizing any actions taken to remedy Islamophobic violations, e.g., lobbying, and political activism (Kundnani, 2014).

In hindsight, the use of role-plays in the latter parts of the Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues process would have been beneficial to introduce Muslim students and allies on coconstructed ways to effectively handle real-life scenarios in the classroom. Through role-play and subsequent reflections, dialoguers would have an opportunity to collaboratively work with peers, experiment with solutions and reflect on their learning as change makers.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The working Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues Theory of Change model arises out of practitioners' experiences in the field. There is an empirical research gap in terms of assessing and expanding this working model in current higher education contexts in the United States as well as new contexts, across locations and/or cultures, within the paradigm of praxis, or the iterative process of "reflection and action upon the world, in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970).

CONCLUSIONS

Islamophobia Intergroup Dialogues in higher education offer significant opportunities built on the assumptions that individuals are motivated to positively change themselves, their communities, and the systems in which they operate. In the alchemy of relationships, information, and the Intergoup Dialogue Process, significant change can be affected with tangible shifts in knowledge, skills, and attitudes in understanding, relationships, and action (learning, transfer, and impact). With each iteration that the intergroup dialogues run, and the cycle of action and reflection, we move closer toward the impact of more inclusive, safe, and caring communities.

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