6-24-2012

Interreligious Group Work: Stimulating Dialogue in America

James C. Van Hoven
Marquette University, james.vanhoven@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/gjcp

American Religious Diversity and Dialogue

The diversity of American religious belief is a complicated matter. About 78.4% of Americans are Christian, 16.1% are unaffiliated, and 4.7% belong to non-Christian faiths such as Judaism (1.7%), Islam (.6%) and Buddhism (.7%) (Pew Forum, 2008). At first glance, it would appear that the American religious landscape is remarkably homogenous. The Pew Forum cautions against assuming homogeneity within a religious group however. For instance, "Christians" are made up of Catholics and hundreds of denominations of Protestants. While an umbrella group such as "Christians" undeniably shares certain theological and ideological underpinnings, one should be careful in describing them as if they were unified. There is not only prejudice between groups but also within groups.

In any case, the distribution of religious adherence in America is not representative of the rest of the world, and this fact figures into the prevalence of prejudicial feelings. Currently, there are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims globally compared to around 2.18 billion Christians (Pew Forum, 2011a; Pew Forum, 2011b). This distribution is a far cry from the .6% of Americans who adhere to Islam (Pew Forum, 2008). Reflecting the lack of contact between a Muslim minority and a Christian majority, a recent Gallop poll demonstrated that 43% of Americans have at least "a little" prejudice against Muslims while 9% describe that they have a "great deal" of prejudice against Muslims (Gallop, 2010). In comparison, 18% of Americans feel they have at least "a little" prejudice against people of the Christian faith and 15% feel they have at least "a little" prejudice against Jews.

Due to prejudice against members of different faiths, the need for understanding between faiths in America is crucial. While there is ample research on group work in interfaith dialogue internationally, there is little that comes from the United States. Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux note that the vast majority of research on the Contact Hypothesis and racial integration comes from America (2005). This begs the question as to why there is not much of a focus on contact between religious groups in the US. The purpose of this literature review is to examine barriers to interreligious contact in America, survey available research into intergroup contact and its application to religious groups, critique the research, and to suggest areas for future study.

Barriers to Religious Dialogue

One possible explanation for the lack of emphasis on religious dialogue in the field of counseling and psychotherapy, particularly in America, is that Psychology as a discipline has traditionally been cautions of investigating religious issues. Speaking from the discipline of Social Work with an eye on the

psychotherapy, Sahlein notes that there is a "paucity of articles in the literature which instruct clinicians about how to deal with [religious issues] in practice" (2002). Reflecting that the values of Psychology are not always in line with the values of those served, Toporek and Vaughn state that the values of Psychology "may conflict, inhibit, or neglect social justice needs" (2010, p. 179). While prejudicial feelings towards religiousness—a relic of Freud—may not persist in the field overtly, Goldberg notes that practitioners may still find it difficult to address religious issues because of their personal beliefs or because of "general cultural messages about faith's untouchability" (Goldberg as cited in Sahlein, 2002).

Another challenge to dialogue may lay with the popular approach of modern Psychology. Social Psychology has almost exclusively led the way in developing intergroup dialogue through Contact Theory. Contact Theory, which asserts at its simplest that contact between isolated groups under the right conditions ought to reduce prejudice, has proven to be very effective from a research standpoint (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew, 2006). Yablon criticizes Contact Theory, however, saying "from a more theoretical perspective, current study of contact between groups is somehow limited, essentially closed and self-referential" (Yablon, 2009). The question is whether or not the research is really measuring what it claims to be measuring or if the present framework is adjusting the world to fit theoretical conceptualizations (Dixon et al., 2005).

Connolly brings up this issue in his critique of Contact Theory. While applauding the ability for Contact Theory to facilitate discussion between groups, he notes that this approach precludes consideration of factors external to participants such as negative social forces and institutionalized discrimination (Connolly, 2000). The future of Contact Theory may reside in understanding not only how prejudice may be reduced through intergroup contact but also what political and social forces perpetuate discrimination in the midst of this model.

Group Work in Interfaith Dialogue

In understanding group dialogue, Contact Theory has been first concerned with discovering the conditions necessary for effective intergroup relations. In his seminal work on Contact Theory, Allport describes that groups must hold equal status, share common goals, have the opportunity for intergroup cooperation, and their dialogue must receive some form of social sanction (Allport cited in Pettigrew, 1998). Nesbitt-Larking, suggesting the Habermasian principles as a starting point, calls for genuineness, an openness to change, a socially inclusive environment that is open to all where new ideas may be introduced freely and old

ideas may be questioned, and for participants to be free to adapt the group to their needs and feel that they are without coercion (2008).

Individuals decide to take part in dialogue for a variety of reasons. In a study on a voluntary contact group between religious and secular Jews in Israel, Yablon discovered that motivations tended towards the benefit of society and to meet the individual's social needs (2009). Charaniya and Walsh identify four reasons for participant involvement from their research on dialogue between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the US; the desire to satisfy intellectual curiosity, moving toward a multidimensional sense of the outgroup, satisfaction at coming to intimately know individuals of a different background, and feeling that one has discovered a positive generativity that engenders hope for peaceful interaction (2001).

Whatever participants' reasons are for involvement, the literature refers to a plethora of ways to structure interfaith dialogue groups. Although a wide range of strategies are individually evaluated for effectiveness, there is little research on how group structure in and of itself might affect outcomes. Effective groups seem to range from the very unstructured to the very structured. In the aforementioned study, Yablon describes a voluntary encounter group that coalesced between secular and religious Jews that was informally organized and focused on a discussion of current events in Israel (2009). Charaniya and Walsh on the other hand describe encounter groups in America aimed at analyzing sacred texts common to participants' religious traditions (2011). In either case, it is thought that intergroup contact is most effective when it takes place across a range of social settings and is ongoing in nature (Nesbitt-Larking, 2008). Structures and targeted populations may vary from programs that engage societal elites, contact and training groups for educators and practitioners, encounter groups for religious leaders and grassroots programs that engage civilians (Garfinkel, 2004).

More research is known about the process of interfaith dialogue groups, however. Abu-Nimer suggests the development of a training model toward interreligious peacebuilding where he describes four phases in the group process:

1) Participants come together while experiencing a mixture of tense emotions along with joy and excitement. The group focuses on similarities between faiths and individuals likely idealize their own religion.

2) Participants begin to explore their differences while working carefully not to offend one another. Stereotypes of other religions are explored while the situation becomes a little more relaxed and individuals begin to use a "secondary religious language" where they speak in terms and about concepts shared by their belief systems (peace, sacrifice, etc.).

3) Different beliefs and values from each other's religions are explored. Tension rises, as does frustration. At the end of this phase, participants tend to affirm the need for tolerance of other's beliefs and differences.

4) Participants recognize that there are limits to interfaith dialogue groups but they also feel empowered through having connected with individuals from other faith communities. As Abu-Nimer states "they emphasize the agreements, reinstate similarities, and define the sensitive issues." Finally participants think of ways to continue engagement with individuals of other faiths (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

These phases which Abu-Nimer proposes for interfaith groups are relatively consistent with what processes of change Pettigrew describes for Contact Theory as it is typically used with racial and ethnic groups. First, individuals must learn about the outgroup and this contact begins to reduce prejudice. The second process is behavioral change. Pettigrew describes a "benign form of behavior modification" where repetition of contact makes members more comfortable with one another. Next participants must generate affective ties and empathy must develop. Lastly, there is the stage of ingroup reappraisal where a participant reexamines the meaning of the group to which she or he belongs (Pettigrew, 1998).

Because religion differs from ethnicity in social engagement, the goal of interreligious dialogue groups is likely to be a little different from what is generally expected of Contact Theory (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Unlike the social boundaries of ethnocentrism which ought to be dissolved, Charaniya and Walsh suggest that religious boundaries ought to be crossed but not demolished (2011). While dissolving absolutes in dialogue between ethnic groups may be difficult but necessary, dissolving moral and ethical absolutes in dialogue between religious groups may be damaging. Moral messages are much more central to religious meaning than they are to cultural meaning (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Abu-Nimer suggests, that acceptance in interfaith dialogue is represented by respecting differences of belief, though not necessarily changing a participant's belief personally (2001).

Abu-Nimer goes so far as to suggest that minimizing the differences between religions is itself a defense mechanism that participants may put up in the course of dialogue (2001). When encountered with the belief of the other, individuals may try to minimize the differences between religions so as to remain comfortable. Abu-Nimer writes "religious minimization is *religiocentric* because the person is ignoring the different religious meanings represented by the ritual acts" (2001). Common *religiocentric* statements include suggestions like "we all really believe the same thing." Abu-Nimer contends that some participants minimize purposefully to avoid or else to belittle the differences between groups

while others are genuinely unaware of the differences between religions (2001). For very religious individuals, statements that all faiths are the same can be offensive; representing "a type of aggressive conversion" to the beliefs of the invoker (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Common values ("peace," "love," etc.) should be explored, but it may obstruct dialogue to suggest that the faiths themselves do not differ.

Critique of the Literature

The most important question to ask when evaluating the effectiveness of interfaith contact groups is whether or not the reduction in prejudice experienced between group members generalizes to the outgroup. The goal of interfaith dialogue of course is not only to improve feelings between group members but for those accepting feelings to be extended beyond the dialogue group. In evaluating generalization, Pettigrew suggest three forms. The least powerful form of generalization is across situations (Pettigrew, 1998). For instance, individuals may become comfortable with persons of another religion within the religious dialogue but still prefer to be separated from them in other contexts. Secondly, there is the generalization of feelings from the individual of another group to the other group itself. Feelings towards a Muslim friend for example may be generalized by a Christian towards other Muslims. Lastly, there is the generalization from the outgroup to other outgroups. In this case, someone may extend a similar openness and empathy towards groups not encountered as was gained with the specific outgroup from the original dialogue (Pettigrew, 1998).

In a meta-analytic test of 515 studies concerning Contact Theory, Pettigrew and Tropp confirmed that the reduction of prejudice experienced between members of the group does generalize across situations ($r = -.244$), to the outgroup at large ($r = -.213$) and to other outgroups ($r = -.190$) (2006). Not only is intergroup contact effective within the group but it is also effective at improving perceptions of other groups in society. These results underscore the assertion by Dovido et al. that interventions from the Contact Hypothesis represent "one of psychology's most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations" (as cited in Dixon et al., 2005).

The effectiveness of Contact Theory, of course, has long been predicated on a series of conditions which researchers are beginning to more critically examine. Many have noted that Allport's "necessary" conditions for effective prejudice reduction in intergroup contact have been added to exhaustively (Pettigrew, 1998; Dixon et al., 2005). Pettigrew goes so far as to say that the "necessary" conditions have become a laundry list so long that it is almost impossible for them to not describe any group which functions well (Pettigrew, 1998). Nonetheless, while Pettigrew downgrades Allport's conditions to

"facilitative" he does note that groups which use the conditions set down by Allport do tend to do better than those that do not (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Because, it is clear that there are many conditions that benefit dialogue, and that many groups have beneficial dialogue without these conditions, Pettigrew and Tropp call for more research into what conditions may hinder intergroup dialogue instead (2006).

A larger critique of the Contact Hypothesis asks whether or not societal conditions assumed in Contact Theory correspond to reality or else some theoretical utopianism. A rather stirring critique comes from Dixon, Durreheim and Tredoux who ask whether or not researchers have really grasped how participants understand their cultural and religious context and make meaning from their experiences. While recognizing that researchers do explore how feelings and perceptions towards the other are changed through dialogue, the method of this exploration has come into question. They describe that a disadvantage to utilizing rating scales designed by researchers is that "participants' own concepts of contact are quietly subsumed by concepts grounded in the academic literature on the contact hypothesis" (Dixon et al., 2005). In addition to qualitative methods, for instance, Yablon describes using several pre-test and post-test quantitative measures in his research such as a feelings checklist, a rating scale to discover what individuals felt were common traits to "the other," and a social distance scale to assess how willing members are to interact with members from the outgroup (2009). Researchers like Connolly (2000) and Dixon et al. (2005) suggest that data derived from surveys and questionnaires ought to be handled with care.

Being that we are concerned with interfaith dialogue in America, it is prudent to wonder whether or not interfaith research abroad is applicable to the particular cultural and religious atmosphere of the United States. This question can only be truly understood through addressing the lack of research on interfaith dialogue present in this country. Given that interfaith dialogue abroad is mostly based on Contact Theory, a reasonable measure may be taken from Pettigrew's research into the effectiveness of Contact Theory across geographical contexts. Pettigrew and Tropp state that "a focused test shows that there is virtually no difference in effect sizes between U.S. (mean r = -.215) and non-U.S. samples (mean r = -.217)" (2006). It is hypothesized that interfaith dialogue groups conducted in America which preserve the conditions of the Contact Hypothesis would yield similar results to dialogue groups conducted abroad.

Conclusion

The preponderance of research on intergroup contact has focused on racial and ethnic groups (Dixon et al., 2005). This research has show contact

interventions to be very effective in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Emerging studies on the application of Contact Theory with religious groups likewise yields promising results. A great deal of research is still warranted in the area of interreligious contact work particularly in the United States however. Given prejudicial feelings experienced between religious groups in America, this research is needed to address a growing social justice and multicultural concern.

Several directions for future research bay be uncovering what conditions negatively affect group work, how group structure affects outcomes, and methods that more faithfully reveal participant's own perspectives on intergroup dialogue beyond quantitative methods which may subsume participants' conceptions under the research framework. Possible avenues for addressing the research bias may lie in exploring other ways to understand participants' experiences such as through ethnography or cultural mediums like storytelling.

In addition to addressing the methodological concerns involved in group work, more research into dialogue between various religious and secular communities in America is also needed. Future research should identify how dialogue is best fostered between particular groups. For example, each system of thought contains particular assumptions and attitudes towards community and the idea of processing experience in groups. It would benefit practitioners who plan to lead dialogue groups to have a resource for understanding cultural and religious or secular perspectives as they might affect group formation, norming and process. It would behoove group facilitators not only to look for what factors might inhibit intergroup cohesion but also those that may augment such contact.

Lastly, research needs to address how an advocacy mindset can contribute to Contact Theory such that the influence of social forces is considered in conjunction with the agency of group participants. For instance, is the reduction of prejudice in a dialogue group diminished if current events in the news suggest that certain groups are discriminated against by governmental bodies? Would the reduction in prejudice between Christians and Muslims gained in dialogue be affected by the announcement of new laws promoting racial profiling in law enforcement? An advocacy focus in the research would help to alleviate the injustice noted by Connolly (2000)—that Contact Theory can put too much of an emphasis on dialogue between civilians when social pressures also powerfully influence prejudice in society for better and for worse. Researchers ought to consider how Contact Theory can be used to give people the tools they need to effect positive social change at the level of government and policy as well as at the grassroots.

References

Abu-Nimer, M. (2001). Conflict resolution, culture, and religion: Toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38 (6), pp. 685-704. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/425559

Charaniya, N. K., and Walsh, J. W. (2001). Interpreting the experiences of Christians, Muslims, and Jews engaged in interreligious dialogue: a collaborative research study. *Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association*, 96:3, pp. 351-368.

Connolly, P. (2000). What now for the contact hypothesis? Towards a new research agenda. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 3 (2) doi:10.1080/13613320050074023

Dixon, J., Durrheim, K., and Tredoux, C. (2005). Beyond the optimal contact strategy; A reality check for the contact hypothesis. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60 (7), pp. 697-711. Retrieved from http://0-psycnet.apa.org.libus.csd.mu.edu/journals/amp/60/7/697/

Gallop Center for Muslim Studies. (2010). *In U.S., Religious Prejudice Stronger Against Muslims* [Data file]. Retrieved from http://www.gallup.com/poll/125312/religious-prejudice-stronger-against-muslims.aspx

Garfinkel, R. (2004). What works? Evaluating interfaith dialogue programs. *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, Vol. 123. Retrieved from http://www.usip.org/publications/what-works-evaluating-interfaith-dialogue-programs

Nesbitt-Larking, P. (2008). Dissolving the diaspora: Dialogical practice in the development of deep multiculturalism. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*. Vol. 18. pp. 351-362. doi:10.1002/casp.956

Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology, 49*(00664308), 65-85. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/docview/205827484?accountid=100

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*(5), 751-751. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/docview/209809947?accountid=100

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. (2008). *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* [Data file]. Retrieved from http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. (2011a). *New Pew Forum Study Estimates Global Christian Population at 2.18 Billion* [Data file]. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/New-Pew-Forum-Study-Estimates-Global-Christian-Population-at-2-18-Billion.aspx

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. (2011b). *The future of the global Muslim population* [Data file]. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx

Pieterse, A. L., Evans, S. A., Risner-Butner, A., Collins, N. M., and Mason, L. B. (2008). Multicultural competence and social justice training in counseling psychology and counselor education: A review and analysis of a sample of multicultural course syllabi. *The Counseling Psychologist*. 2009, Vol. 37 (93) (originally published online 16 september 2008). doi:10.1177/0011000008319986

Sahlein, J. (2002). When religion enters the dialogue: A guide for practitioners. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, Vol. 30 (4), pp. 381-381. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/docview/227774292?accountid=100

Toporek, R. L., and Vaughn, S. R. (2010). Social Justice in the Training of Professional Psychologists: Moving Forward. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, Vol. 4 (3), pp. 177-182. doi:10.1037/a0019874

Yablon, Y. B. (2009). Promoting peace education via voluntary encounters. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(4), 505. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/docview/206076447?accountid=100

Yablon, Y. B. (2010). Religion as a basis for dialogue in peace education programs. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 40*(4), 341. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/docview/858659388?accountid=100