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Recommended Citation

Hamdon, Evelyn (2007). "Identity, Difference and Solidarity: The Challenges and Promises of Articulating Multiple Subjectivities in a Muslim Coalition," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/roundtables/8>

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Identity, Difference and Solidarity: The Challenges and Promises of Articulating Multiple Subjectivities in a Muslim Coalition

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Abstract: Current theorizing about coalitions suggests that the capacity of their members to negotiate multiple and contested identity differences will be important for their survival and efficacy. This qualitative study explored how a Muslim coalition is thinking about and performing identity in the aftermath of September 11th and under the shadow of Islamophobia.

The Relevance of this Study

According to Julia Sudbury (2001) "... far from fostering divisive fragmentation, explicit explorations of identity may be a prerequisite for the mass mobilization of diverse groups into a sustainable movement." (p. 44). The findings of my own research suggest that this is not only important at a movement level but also at the micro level, within the coalitions and solidarity groups that make up movements. This coalition's negotiations with identity differences are reflective of the challenges and possibilities of describing, deconstructing, and discussing the complexities of identity, identity differences, and their meaning for equitable working relationships within coalitional contexts.

Background

This study evolved out of my own experiences with, and observations of tensions within racialized solidarity groups. It uses as its analytical framework important critiques of Eurocentric feminisms (Anzaldúa 2002; Bannerji, 1995 & 2000; hooks 2000; Mohanty, 2003), the work of identity theorists such as Bhabha (1994), Butler (1999), Hall (1997) and the coalitional theorizing of Burack (2001), Bystydzienski and Schacht (2001), Lugones (2003), and Reagon (2000). The site of the research was a coalition (referred to as The Coalition) whose genesis was September 11, 2001. The Coalition was formed to resist and respond to racism against Muslims in Edmonton. I used interviews, observation and document analysis in this qualitative study in order to answer the questions, '*How do subjectivities become identified as difference? How are these differences understood and expressed?*'

Key Findings

There are three dimensions to the studies findings. This first dimension takes up the constructed nature of community and draws upon Bannerji's (2000) understanding of community "as a formation, ...cultural and political practice" (p. 154). It appears the impulse to circumscribe an identity boundary arises in part out of the fear of repression and oppression. Participant references to the issue of *hijab* and prayer suggest that reified identity categories are viewed as both a haven and a threat to individual and collective expressions of identity. The second dimension deals with the types of differentiation described by the participants and the strategies that the Coalition has developed for negotiating these differences. These findings are read through the work of Bystydzienski and Schacht (2001), Hall (1996, 1997), and Mohanty (2003). The findings suggest that to some extent coalitions are improvisational constructions and their multiple identity differences are the raw material of this improvisational work. The third dimension of the study's findings relates to the presence and value of ambivalence. Ambivalence

within the Coalition gestures towards the presence of leakages in identity categories (Trinh, 1987), the “something which comes between well-established identities and breaks them up” (Arber, 2000, p. 60). Into this ambivalence about the nature and performance of identities I read the presence and promise of the liminal. It appears that it is within the liminal that coalitional agency and non-essentialist expressions of identity merge to give rise to the Coalition whose very presence evidences the possibility for contestation, ambivalence and activism to co-exist within the same space.

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