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A QUALITATIVE META-SYNTHESIS FOR A THEORY OF INTERFAITH/INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING THROUGH DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Interfaith/interreligious (IF/IR) dialogue offers a context through which individuals within various religious communities can learn from and with each other. There are unique aspects to this learning environment. First, learning through conversation. Second, learning through conversation about a difficult topic. And third, learning from and with a religious other. To best understand what learning through IF/IR dialogue is, researchers would benefit from a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the learning environment and the participants within it. In this qualitative meta-synthesis, we examine current research on IF/IR dialogue to outline a theory of dialogical IF/IR learning.

Keywords: Interfaith dialogue, interreligious dialogue, adult learning, qualitative meta-synthesis, communicative learning.

The modern world is one in which diversity abounds. While some embrace this diversity, just as many reject diversity in its various forms. Religious and cultural diversity often overlap, and they determine many key aspects about individual lives. Religious diversity, specifically, is a complex phenomenon that impacts individuals everywhere. Encounters between adherents of various religious communities are increasing, both in person and virtually. Interfaith encounters can certainly be a source of conflict and violence. However, they are also an opportunity for learning and conflict resolution. Given the direction in which our world is moving, it has become increasingly important to understand how adults learn through interfaith communication. An exploration of current research of interfaith/interreligious (IF/IR) dialogue specifically through a qualitative meta-synthesis would contribute this knowledge and thus benefit the field of adult education. As such, the purpose of this study is to present a coherent overview of research published to date about how adults learn through IF/IR dialogue and propose a theory of dialogical interfaith/interreligious learning to guide future research in adult education.

The use of the terms interfaith and interreligious vary from scholar to scholar. At times the terms are even used interchangeably. Some scholars provide similar definitions. For example, Swidler (2014) defined interreligious dialogue as occurring between "religious insiders" or "members of two or more religions, come together primarily to learn from each other what the Other thinks/does and why" (p. 381). Similarly, Agrawal and Barratt (2014) defined interfaith dialogue as "an *intentional* encounter between individuals who adhere to differing religious beliefs and practices in an effort to foster respect and cooperation among these groups through organized dialogue" (pp. 571-572; emphasis in the original).

Swidler (2014) explained that the term interfaith is relatively new and was first adopted by Protestant Christians engaging in dialogue with non-Christians. Others prefer to use interfaith because it better illustrates "encounters were either more action-oriented and/or "emotional" than cerebral (sic)" (Swidler, 2014, p. 380). Swidler (2014) cautions the

use of interfaith for dialogue involving Asian religions such as Taoism, Hinduism, or Buddhism as the concept of faith is likely not a central tenet of the religion. Similarly, Longhurst (2020) chronicles the difference in the two terms. His examples include a use of interfaith when including followers of belief systems outside of organized religions or when not considered an academic pursuit. He cites the World Council of Churches indicating that interfaith is more expansive than interreligious. In contrast to the differences in use of these two terms, what dialogue is seems to have specific expectations. A variety of scholars following differing philosophical approaches, such as Gordon (2011), Properzi (2011), and Swidler (2014), are clear to specify what is and what is not "real" dialogue.

We recognize the nuances and complexities in the different uses of the terms interfaith and interreligious. To honor this, we use both written as "interfaith/interreligious" (abbreviated as IF/IR) to capture the broader conception. We follow Longhurst's (2020) explanation of dialogue, in which he identified dialogue as intentional, a "meaningful encounter, a respectful person-centered exchange of ideas to learn about the other's religion and religious experience. There are ground rules and expectations for dialogue" (p. 118). With this in mind, we follow the definition of interfaith provided by Agrawal and Barratt (2014) above to guide our investigations of interfaith/interreligious dialogue.

Interfaith/Interreligious Dialogue in Scholarship

Two decades ago, Charaniya and Walsh (2001, 2004) called for a more intentional study of adult learning through interfaith and interreligious encounters. Currently in the field of adult education, very little empirical research examines such interactions as intentional learning experiences (Pope, 2020). Outside of adult education, in disciplines such as religious studies, communication studies, and conflict resolution, empirical examinations of interfaith and interreligious encounters are growing. Scholars study these encounters in order to understand the process and outcomes of such experiences (Boys & Lee, 1996; Huag, 2014; Krebs, 2015; Williams, 2019). Within these empirical investigations, some have examined dialogue specifically (Bender & Cadge, 2006; Garber, 2015; Helskog, 2014). IF/IR dialogue is championed as a method of great promise for both learning and conflict resolution. As the inclusion of diverse worldviews becomes more important within and outside the academy, understanding how adults learn by engaging with members of other religions is becoming imperative. With the variety of scholarly approaches to understanding IF/IR dialogue, research and scholarship would benefit greatly from a coherent presentation of this topic through a comprehensive review of current literature.

Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

To date, a comprehensive and systematic review of the literature across various disciplines seeking to synthesize scholarly knowledge on the topic of IF/IR dialogue has not been completed. The purpose of this study is to present a holistic understanding of how adults learn through IF/IR dialogue with the intent of presenting a theory of IF/IR learning gleaned from a synthesis of current literature. This paper offers a look into the current status of this research which is continually evolving. The research question guiding this analysis is: What are the characteristics of dialogical interfaith/interreligious learning?

A qualitative meta-synthesis is an analysis method that brings together existing qualitative findings on a topic in order to present a new interpretation of these findings to the research community. Also called qualitative evidence synthesis (Booth et al., 2016; Booth, 2019), this methodology differs from systematic literature reviews in that through the process of re-analyzing the qualitative findings presented in existing literature, the researcher is able to develop a new theoretical interpretation of findings from various research studies. While there are various approaches to systematic review of literature

(Sutton et al., 2019), we utilize qualitative meta-synthesis because of this specific focus and outcome.

We include empirical articles published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals on interfaith and interreligious dialogue for this meta-synthesis. We do not include articles on interfaith or interreligious encounters generally, but focus specifically on those which examined or included dialogue as an intentional conversation between members of different religions. We do not limit our search by looking at research on specific religions, those published within a particular time frame, or those within specific locations. We attempt to include articles published within a variety of academic disciplines including, but not limited to, religion, anthropology, communication, adult education, education, conflict resolution, and interfaith studies. We synthesize the content of these articles to develop our findings.

Findings: Characteristics of Dialogical Interfaith/Interreligious Learning

In this summary of findings, we provide a brief progress report of our analysis based on 15 empirical articles on interfaith/interreligious dialogue. It seems that in order for participants to learn through IF/IR dialogue, there are several prerequisite characteristics. Whether occurring virtually or in person, dialogue must be in an appropriate venue (Acar, 2013; Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004) participants must trust one another (Boys & Lee, 1996; Pope, 2020; Pope & Nicolaidis, 2021), and participants must be in a mindset for learning (Agrawal & Barratt, 2014; Bender & Cadge, 2006; Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004; Fernandez & Coyle, 2019).

While an important component, IF/IR learning is more than just learning about similarities between religious traditions. Dialogical IF/IR learning also involves learning about differences within religions and practitioners. Participants of IF/IR dialogue learn that religions are nuanced rather than monolithic entities (Pope, 2020). Dialogical IF/IR learning has six major characteristics. We do not present these characteristics in any particular order.

First, dialogical IF/IR learning is collaborative (Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004). In collaborative learning, participants work together to create meaning of their dialogical experiences with and from one another. Second, it is communicative (Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004; O'Keefe, 2009; Pope, 2020). Participants must learn how to communicate with others to learn through dialogue. Third, dialogical IF/IR learning is emancipatory (Everett, 2018). In this way, it involves overcoming structures of oppression with transformative potential. Fourth, it is informational (Acar, 2013; Bender & Cadge, 2006; Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004; Williams, 2019). Informational learning occurs when individuals learn the facts of each religion they are exposed to through IF/IR dialogue. Fifth, it is relational (Acar, 2013; Bender & Cadge, 2006; Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004; O'Keefe, 2010; Pope, 2020; Pope & Nicolaidis, 2021).

In relational learning, participants learn directly from another individual. It happens through connection. Participants are able to learn about the personal nuances within a religious community and see a religion from another person's point of view. Finally, dialogical IF/IR learning is transformative (Boys & Lee, 1996; Charaniya & Walsh, 2001, 2004; Krebs, 2015; O'Keefe, 2010; Pope, 2020; Pope & Nicolaidis, 2021). With these concepts in mind, it seems that dialogical interfaith/interreligious learning is a rational and extra-rational learning experience in which an individual listens to understand the religious other often with the outcomes of intersubjectivity, deep relationships, and transformed perspectives. Such a theory of dialogical interfaith/interreligious learning offers a comprehensive view of the phenomenon to uniquely contribute to the field of adult education.

Conclusions

This brief paper presents our current findings based on a synthesis of literature on interfaith/interreligious dialogue. We have identified six major characteristics of dialogical

IF/IR learning. As we continue this research, we will attempt to create a coherent theory of dialogical IF/IR learning informed by these characteristics. Examinations of how adults learn across diverse ideologies is an increasingly important area of study. As religion and faith are important facets of many individual's worldviews, understanding adult learning across barriers of faith is integral to the field of adult education. Learning during IF/IR encounters is complex and knowledge about how IF/IR learning occurs through dialogue sheds light on the intricacy of learning within any sort of dialogue across ideological boundaries. Learning and engaging with others of various religious communities are necessary skills for successful pluralistic communities. Thus, deep knowledge of IF/IR learning has much to offer both practitioners and scholars in adult education.

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