Intergroup Dialogue & Religious Identity

Attempting to Raise Awareness of Christian Privilege & Religious Oppression

Sachi Edwards

Introduction

Intergroup Dialogue (IGD)—a pedagogical model that purposefully advances a critical social justice agenda—is used on college campuses (and in other school- or community-based spaces) around the country to facilitate student learning about issues of identity and structural power dynamics. Since its initial development at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s, it has received a great deal of positive attention as an effective form of critical engagement.

Empirical literature (e.g., Gurin, Nagda, & Sorensen, 2011; Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Osuna, & Nagda, 2012) shows that IGD produces positive student outcomes consistent with its stated goals: (1) to raise awareness of identity oppression and social inequities, (2) to build cross-group communication skills and relationships, and (3) to increase intergroup cooperation for addressing identity based social justice issues.

However, the vast majority of this research has analyzed data from race (primarily) and gender (secondarily) IGD courses alone. In practice, IGD is used in courses about a wide variety of identities, including sexuality, ability, religion, socio-economic status, and national origin, among others. Yet, identities other than race and gender have been largely overlooked in research.

One of the identities missing from current IGD discourse is religious identity. To date, no empirical publications focus exclusively on the experiences and outcomes of students in religion-themed IGD courses, making it difficult to know how or if existing IGD theory applies to teaching and learning about religious identity. In an attempt to fill that gap in the literature, this

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research examined three religion-themed IGD courses at a university with a well established and respected IGD program.

In the end, however, none of the three cases fully adhered to the social justice focus that IGD prescribes. Thus, much of this article is dedicated to discussing how and why that happened, even in a reputable program whose courses have been featured in many existing IGD publications.

In doing so, this article also seeks to expand the theoretical and practical discussions related to IGD, points to the need for a more developed theoretical framework for analyzing religious identity from a social justice standpoint, and offers some foundational suggestions for a broader discussion about increasing inclusiveness in higher education diversity and social justice oriented initiatives.

The Critical-Dialogic Model of Intergroup Dialogue

IGD pedagogy is based on a four-stage process whereby students engage in sustained and facilitated dialogue with peers from different social identity groups "to understand their commonalities and differences, examine the nature and impact of societal inequalities, and explore ways of working together toward greater equality and justice" (Zúñiga et al., 2007).

Courses using this pedagogy single out one social identity to focus on, and then use two facilitators (one from the dominant identity group and the other from a non-dominant group) to: (1) create a safe space for sharing and vulnerability among the group, which is comprised of an equal number of dominant and non-dominant identity students; (2) explore students' differences and commonalities of experience, and analyze those experiences within a socio-historical context; (3) use 'hot topics' related to the identity theme of the course in order to dialogue about conflict and multiple perspectives; and (4) build alliances and plan for action.

The critical-dialogic model of IGD combines the pedagogical features of this four-stage process with dialogue that explicitly addresses social (in)justice and incorporates psychological processes such as identity engagement and self-reflection (Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, 2009). In contrast to other forms of dialogue that embrace a democratic model (in which students have complete control over dialogue topics, and facilitators do not attempt to change the direction of the conversation), the critical-dialogic model is designed such that facilitators purposefully and unapologetically raise issues of privilege and oppression pertaining to the relevant identity category, even if students are uncomfortable doing so.

Literature on social justice and critical identity studies has shown that privilege and oppression are often unseen and difficult to talk about (McIntosh, 1998). Thus, in a democratic dialogue, it is possible that students either will not recognize or will not want to deal with controversial topics like power and domination. For that reason, IGD's approach attempts to ensure that these important issues are not ignored.

Student outcomes, according to this theoretical framework, include intergroup understanding, relationships, and collaboration—or, in more descriptive terms: (1) heightened awareness of identity oppression and social inequities, (2) stronger cross-group communication skills and relationships, and (3) increased intergroup cooperation for addressing identity based social justice issues.

Numerous empirical studies—including a large-scale, multi-institution, longitudinal study (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013)—have demonstrated positive student outcomes consistent with this framework. While the findings from these studies are certainly exciting and encourage support for IGD, the vast majority of this research discusses race and gender alone.

Of 27 empirical studies reviewed for this

article,[1] only six analyzed student outcomes in IGDs about topics other than race or gender—one that combines findings from race, gender, and sexuality IGDs (Kivlighan & Arseneau, 2009), two that analyze sexuality IGDs (Dessel, Woodford & Warren, 2011; Dessel, Woodford, Routenberg & Breijak, 2013), two that focus on Arab-Jewish IGDs in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Khuri, 2004; Dessel & Ali, 2012), and one that compares outcomes from IGDs on sexuality, religion, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Dessel, Masse & Walker, 2013).

As such, expanding on the current body of literature to include research on other identity themes would surely increase our understanding of the way this model works, and of the potential differences that may exist when implementing IGD in courses about a wider range of identities.

Religious Identity on College Campuses

Despite the advances that have been made in the last several decades with regard to issues of identity and social justice on college campuses—a movement which IGD programs have certainly been a part of—there has been relatively little headway in the effort to understand and address religious identity and oppression (Blumenfeld, 2006; Patel, 2012). Recently, however, a small but growing group of scholars have begun to pursue a deeper understanding of how religion and religious identity impact college students' experiences.

For instance, a recent survey of college students in the United States showed that 83% of college students identify as religious or spiritual, and that 80% are interested in spirituality, yet faculty and administrators continue to shy away from discussing this side of their students' identities (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Moreover, as findings from the Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey indicate, non-Christian college students report more negative interactions with peers from different worldviews and experience more coercion on campus than Christian college students do (Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013). For these reasons, exploring pedagogical efforts with the potential to build inter-religious understanding and justice for religious minorities, such as IGD, is essential.

The concepts of religious identity and religious oppression themselves must also be interpreted through a critical lens in order to ensure a discourse that recognizes the socio-cultural nature of religion and acknowledges the Christian hegemony (historic and current) within the United States that shapes our experiences with religion on a daily basis. As is the case with discussions about race, gender, sexuality, and any other social identity, social justice oriented dialogue about religion must inspire critical reflection about the way we are socialized to understand this aspect of our identities, and must be situated within the larger institutionalized power dynamic between religious groups in this country.

Thus, when talking about religious identity, I refer to the religious culture and worldview that one has been socialized into from birth, rather than the specific set of religious or spiritual beliefs one holds. In this way, someone who does not believe in the existence of a higher power, yet maintains a cultural practice and worldview aligned with the religious tradition of their upbringing, may still have a Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or other religious identity.

Moreover, not all religious traditions necessitate a belief in a higher power (e.g., some forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and others). As Adams and Joshi (2010) explain, critical dialogue about religious identity and religious oppression should not focus squarely on, "Individual dimensions of faith and belief, but on the societal role of religion in justifying and helping to maintain a social system characterized by religious domination and subordination" (p. 228).

Further, McIntosh's (1998) writings on race and White privilege help us to understand that our various identities are socially constructed (not personally defined), and that oppression is most dangerous in the invisible systems bestowing social dominance on one social identity group over others. Accordingly, throughout this article, I describe my participants using a label that blends both their personally defined beliefs and their religious identity (e.g., Atheist, Muslim, or Evangelical Christian).

Similarly, when I talk about religious oppression, I refer not only to individual acts of discrimination religious minorities face, but to the systematic subordination of religious minorities that is deeply imbedded in the social, political, and historical fabric of this country. In this article I highlight some of the ways that misunderstanding religious identity and Christian privilege can hinder interfaith dialogue and programming in higher education.

Thus far, in campus-based efforts to embrace diversity and promote inclusion across the range of identity differences, religious diversity (i.e., religious minorities) has been largely ignored. In fact, in some cases, campus spaces specifically designed as a safe place for minority students can represent precisely the opposite for religious minority students. As Accapadi (2009) explains, university multicultural centers often still operate according to Christian norms—for instance, holding Christmas celebrations—serving to further marginalize non-Christian students of color who expect safety and understanding from them.

Even initiatives rhetorically designed for interfaith understanding often fail to address issues of power and privilege as they pertain to religious identity. A common model for interfaith programming on college campuses can be exemplified by the interfaith service projects promoted by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a Chicago based organization with partnerships in higher education institutions around the country. Such programs are centered on facilitating positive interactions between students from different religious identities (see Patel & Brodeur, 2006).

However, emphasizing only positive interactions, as Seifert (2007) contends, without adequately acknowledging and managing the drastic power imbalance between different religious groups can be damaging to religious minority students who may perceive the initiatives as hollow attempts to assuage them, while not actually addressing their marginalization.

In light of the tension that exists on college campuses between students from different religious identities, coupled with the lack of attention religious oppression currently receives in various campus spaces and diversity initiatives, IGD provides a strong model for a critical social justice oriented form of interfaith dialogue that has the potential to address religious diversity in higher education in a way that is inclusive of, and sensitive to, minority religious groups.

This article examines the use of IGD in this way—as a means of facilitating interfaith dialogue—using a qualitative analysis of three such courses at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region. Findings from the study indicate that there are a number of potential challenges when adopting IGD to religious identity dialogue (as opposed to dialogues about race or gender), and that outcomes may not always be as positive as existing IGD research indicates. However, I am still quite positive about IGD's potential, and I offer a number of suggestions for how to overcome the challenges observed in my research.

Research Approach

The study described in this article is a qualitative multiple case study (Merriam, 1998) of three religion-themed IGD courses at large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region—which I will refer to as East Coast University (ECU) for the purposes of confidentiality. The questions that guided my research process centered around my goal of understanding: (1) what my participants experienced by participating in religion-themed IGD, and what meaning they made from those experiences; and (2) how my participants' descriptions of their experience of the course align with the theoretical goals and outcomes of IGD pedagogy.

Methodologically, I adopt an exploratory and constructivist approach to this research. Due to the lack of published research on the religion theme of IGD, an exploratory approach was best suited to investigate student experiences in this case. As a researcher I approach learning and empirical investigation from a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm posits that reality is socially constructed and that individuals interpret meaning from a given experience or object based on their situation and circumstances (Mertens, 2005).

Researchers and research participants, then, interactively construct knowledge based on the research participants' interpretation of their experiences and the researcher's interpretation of the rendered experiences. Aligned with this approach are mostly qualitative methods of inquiry such as interviews and observations as they are the most appropriate for achieving in-depth understandings of why and how realities are constructed within a given context. As such, the research I present here is entirely qualitative in nature.

To start, I gained approval for this study from the institution's IRB office, the IGD program coordinators, the facilitators of the three IGD courses I observed, and all 39 students enrolled in the courses. For each class meeting, I participated minimally—so as not to be a complete mystery to the students, yet also making a strong effort not to influence the direction of the dialogues. I did not record the course sessions, but spent several hours after each session describing the events of the class and reflecting on my own thoughts and reactions as they developed. At the end of the course, I invited the students to share their weekly reflections with me (a required part of the course) and to participate in a one-on-one interview with me—29 students accepted. In the end, I amassed: (a) 40 hours of participant-observation; (b) 226 pages of researcher field notes and memos; (c) 542 pages of participant reflection journals; (d) 29 in-depth, semi-structured, post-dialogue interviews, totaling over 30 hours of audio recording and 510 pages of transcriptions; (e) 6 informal interviews with IGD facilitators and program coordinators; and (f) 431 pages of course and program documents. To help me manage this data, I used the qualitative data analysis program HyperRESEARCH to file, sort, code, and analyze.

Below, I present a brief summary of each case, the similarities I noticed across the three cases, and a comparison of the outcomes to existing IGD theory. I also discuss the implications of this research for future IGD theory and practice, and offer some practical suggestions for IGD coordinators and facilitators.

Case Summaries

At the outset, this research intended to explore what happens when IGD pedagogy is used to facilitate dialogues between students from differing religious identities. However, in all three cases included in this study, adherence to the social justice aspect of the pedagogy (which is heavily emphasized in IGD literature) was limited at best. None of the courses I observed explicitly raised the issue of Christian privilege, which, in theory, should have been the primary focus of the dialogues.

This outcome, in itself, raises some important questions about the practical application of IGD to religious identity dialogues. While it may seem unreasonable to label these courses as IGD when they do not actually follow IGD pedagogy in full, it may be important to note that ECU maintains a nationally well-regarded IGD program, and has been featured in much of the existing empirical literature about IGD.

In this way, the religious identity themed IGD courses offered by ECU's program do offer some insight into the challenges that IGD programs at other institutions may also be experiencing. In this section, I will describe each class and how it failed to adhere to IGD pedagogy. Later, I will discuss the way the misunderstanding of religious identity and religious oppression led to many of the departures from IGD's critical social justice model.

Case One

In the first class, there were 14 students: eight were Christian, four were Jewish, one was Muslim, and one was Hindu. I have included one student in the Christian group who defined himself as Atheist because of his cultural and familial upbringing. Both facilitators of this course also had Christian identities, although one described herself as Agnostic.

Throughout the course, the facilitators made a few subtle attempts to raise the issue of privilege, but they was never explicitly introduced the concept of Christian privilege. Thus, whenever privilege became a part of the group's dialogue, students deferred to discussions about White privilege and male privilege—concepts that many of them were already familiar with. The readings for the class, after all, described the concepts of privilege and oppression mostly in terms of race and gender, only naming religious identity in passing. Moreover, there were three extremely vocal Christian students in the class who consistently voiced their perspective that they, as Christians, were stereotyped and marginalized more than other religious groups or non-believers.

The facilitators—one of whom was extremely experienced and had received several years of IGD training—did not interject. At the end of the course, many of the students, especially the Muslim and the Hindu student, very much felt that the class was a Christian-Jewish dialogue, simply because of the demographic breakdown of the class and the way that topics related only to the Christians and Jews dominated their conversations (i.e., the tension between Christmas and Hanukkah during the winter holiday season).

Case Two

In the second class, there were 13 students: six were Christian, four were Jewish, two were Muslim, and one was Jain/Hindu. One of the facilitators was Christian, the other Buddhist. The Christian facilitator in this case was very knowledgeable about IGD (she had worked for the IGD program office in the past) and had previously facilitated many IGD courses, including one that was a part of the large-scale, multi-institutional IGD study I mentioned above. The Buddhist facilitator, on the other hand, was new to IGD, and had a much more passive personality than the assertive Christian facilitator—a dynamic which gave the students the impression that the Christian facilitator was the "lead" facilitator. On the very first day of the class, the Christian facilitator explained the purpose of IGD, but then stated that this class was "different" and that when discussing religious identity, the students would simply be asked to share their own religious traditions with the rest of the group.

As promised, much of the class time

was dedicated to students explaining their respective religions, mostly describing the history, tenets, and rituals of their tradition rather than how they experience it for themselves. The Jain/Hindu student was forced to do this on her own, as she was the only student who was alone in her religious identity within the group—an experience she struggled with given that most of her classmates were completely unfamiliar with her religion.

During the one conversation about privilege/oppression (mandated by the course syllabus) the discussion (as in case one) became primarily about White and male privilege. Both facilitators participated by offering their own experiences with oppression as women of color, but did not bring up their respective religious identities at all. Ultimately, the course became something akin to what one might expect from a "Religion 101" class: surface level descriptions of a few different religions, without any deeper analysis of the power dynamics between religious groups (as IGD requires).

Case Three

In the final class, there were 12 students: six were Christian, three were Jewish, one was Muslim, one was Hindu, and one was Buddhist. Interestingly, out of the 12 students, seven students (two Christian, two Jewish, one Muslim, and both the Hindu and the Buddhist) described themselves as either Atheist or Agnostic. All but one of the Atheist/Agnostic students (the Buddhist) also described themselves according to their religious identity. The two facilitators in this course had Christian religious identities (although one was also Agnostic)—both had several years of experience and training in IGD and both had facilitated religion-themed IGDs in the past.

From the start, several of the Atheist/Agnostic students made it clear that they wanted to engage in a philosophical discussion about the existence of a higher power, and began questioning the "believers" about their faith. In response, the believers became defensive and, over time, eventually withdrew, admitting that they had no interest in hearing what the non-believers had to say. The facilitators took a bit of a back seat role, and allowed the students to continue their philosophical debate throughout the course.

By the last day of the class, the group, with the help of the facilitators, came to the conclusion that they had common ground in the unknown—for the believers, the unknown fueled their faith; for the non-believers, the unknown fueled their skepticism. In the end, most of the students were happy with the way the class turned out. However, there was no mention of Christian privilege, no engagement of the students' religious identities, and no analysis of power imbalances between religious groups.

Thematic Analysis

The three courses included in this study were all very different at face value, but also had quite a bit in common. Similarities among the courses include: (1) students and facilitators understood religious identity as an individual's belief system, rather than a socio-cultural identity; (2) the concept of Christian privilege was not discussed, despite the expectation to do so according to IGD pedagogy; and (3) course dynamics and dialogue topics were largely dependent on the two groups with the most representation in the course, leaving students from lesser-represented groups overlooked.

Misunderstanding Religious Identity

The theoretical foundations of IGD are grounded in critical identity literature, which is very clear about how social identities, including religion, are not actually selected by choice.

> Our socialization begins before we are born, with no choice on our part. No one brings us a survey, in the womb, inquiring into which gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, cultural group, ability status, or age we might want to be born. These identities are ascribed to us at birth through no effort or decision or choice of our own. (Harro, 2010, p. 46)

Yet, in all three cases in this study, most of the students and facilitators understood religion as a prescribed set of beliefs, and failed to recognize the ways in which people are socialized into their religious identities, just as they are with their other identities. Many of them expressed that one's religious identity changes as soon as one changes their beliefs, demonstrating a lack of recognition of the cultural aspects of religion. For instance, in a post-dialogue interview, one of my participants said:

> If some religion has low privilege, I really don't care; I'm not a part of that religion. It's not like they're in need of my help, whereas, like, poor people or something, it's going to help them live. Like, you made that choice to be that religion. I guess that's why it's different. People do get judged pretty hard on their race, so there's a lot of research done on both race and gender discrimination. Religion is a choice, but you can't change your race. (Agnostic Catholic Student)

Certainly, there are ways in which a person can convert from one religion to another, and can become absorbed into a new religious culture, making religious identity more fluid than, for instance, racial identity. However, that does not negate the complex social, familial, and historical factors that contribute to one's overall identity development.

Beverly Tatum (2010) describes how an individual's identity is largely dependent upon the invisible social and cultural messages they receive throughout their lives about who they are. These influences cannot be deleted. Individuals can choose to forge a new spiritual path for themselves later in life, but their upbringing, and the religious socialization they received, remains a part of them. As Tatum (2010) puts it, a person's identity is developed by, "Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self" (p. 6).

The dialogue facilitators had the potential to impact the students' thinking on this issue—through readings, activities, or even sharing personal experiences—which is precisely what IGD pedagogy suggests they do. However, because they, too, seemed to interpret religious identity according to personal beliefs, no such efforts were made.

Moreover, because the readings assigned in the syllabus template given to facilitators of all IGD themes did not explicitly cover religious identity in detail, there was nothing for students or facilitators to rely on for a deeper, more critical theoretical understanding of religious identity. Program coordinators at ECU's IGD program train facilitators to supplement their syllabi by adding readings or videos that are more relevant to their specific identity topic (lists of which are provided on the program's website), but for the most part, that did not happen here.

Failing to Discuss Christian Privilege

Analyzing systems of privilege and oppression is one of the hallmarks of IGD pedagogy, so it was surprising to me that it did not happen in any of the three classes I observed for this study. While the concepts of privilege and oppression more generally were raised, students and facilitators alike were more inclined to discuss White privilege and male privilege—topics they all seemed more comfortable and familiar with than Christian privilege.

As a result, many students came away from the course with an inaccurate understanding of how the privilege/oppression dynamic applies to religious identity. For

instance, when I asked one student if she learned anything about privilege in the class, she said:

> When it comes to religion, I do not think the privilege/underprivileged system applies because all religions face some form of oppression. The general non-religious, let's say Atheists, are more privileged, because they get to decide, 'We don't want God or anything religious in the schools,' and then, check, it's done for them. And, like, the Bible definitely talks about the rod and the child … we're not abusing them or anything, it's just what God instructs us to do, but we're not allowed to hit children because it's considered child abuse. So, in that sense I think that Atheists are more privileged. (Evangelical Christian Student)

Even some of the minority religious students lacked an understanding of Christian privilege and religious oppression at the end of the class. As a comment from one of my Muslim participants shows, religious oppression (as in the systematic marginalization of religious minorities within our institutional structures in the United States) was often conflated with individual acts of prejudice:

> I mean, how is someone not privileged? I don't see how that's possible. It's not like there's oppression of religion … I mean, maybe Muslims are a little less privileged just because of the whole stereotype of Muslims and terrorism, but it doesn't really affect me at all, so I don't see how I'm less privileged than anyone else. (Muslim Student)

Often, my participants referenced the First Amendment when trying to explain how religious oppression is not an issue in the United States—although interestingly, they never mentioned the existence of legal protections from other kinds of discrimination.

> In America, we have religious freedom codified in the law, so people of different religions, yes, they're in the minority, but they weren't treated as poorly as racial minorities or as women were in our history, so there's not a lot of difference in terms of social status. So, religion isn't as correlated with discrimination as gender or race. (Methodist Student)

A few students, however, were upset by the lack of attention to Christian privilege, and (for the religious minority students) were offended that the group seemed to ignore the oppression they face. One of my participants, who had taken two other IGD courses previously and was aware that discussing privilege and oppression was an expectation, attempted to share with the group an example of how she feels marginalized on campus. In response, one of her classmates made a joke about it, and the entire group (including the facilitators) laughed.

> I saw the facilitators laughing too when that happened. Like, I'm not trying to be an uptight person, but when I'm explaining a time when I feel under-privileged I don't think it's appropriate for someone to say a joke and then everyone laughs. Things like that made me feel like the atmosphere was, you know … not comfortable enough for me to open up. (Jain/Hindu Student)

Again, the facilitators had the opportunity to impact the students' understanding of Christian privilege and religious oppression—in fact, the critical social justice model of IGD requires that they do—but they did not. None of the facilitators even demonstrated a critical self-awareness of their religious identity—even though these same individuals were extremely aware of the ways in which their other identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) held either privileged or oppressed positions in society.

While IGD literature does emphasize the need for facilitators to understand and communicate privilege and oppression with regard to the relevant identity category, and the program coordinators at ECU further emphasize this in their facilitator training sessions, somehow all six facilitators across the three classes I observed failed to raise the issue of Christian privilege.

Overlooking Underrepresented Minorities

All three cases in this study had extremely different foci and covered very different topics—and in each case, the direction of the dialogue was strongly influenced by the breakdown of the religious identities and beliefs of students in each course. In consistency with IGD's model, ECU program coordinators attempted to enroll an equal number of Christian and non-Christian students. Theoretically, this maintains a balance of power between students. While the goal is to create a dialogue "with each of the social identity groups participating in the dialogue ideally represented equally" (Zúñiga et al., 2003, p. 9), in practice this typically gets translated as an equal number of dominant and non-dominant identity students. Thus, it is possible, as was true for all three cases in this study, that some students in the IGD are actually the only one of their identity group in the class.

In cases one and two of this study, the non-dominant identity group consisted of four Jewish students and only two and three other religious minority students respectively. Resultantly, many of the students felt like the courses were primarily Christian-Jewish dialogues, and the other minority students—three Muslims, one Hindu, and one Jain/Hindu—expressed feeling irrelevant to most of the dialogue topics. In case three, there was a bit of a different dynamic because many of the religious minority students (the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist students) presented themselves as non-believers in the class (along with two Jewish and two Christian students), making non-believers the largest group in the class with seven total, followed by four Christian believers and one Jewish believer.

Throughout case three's philosophical debate between the believers and the non-believers, the beliefs that were the primary target of discussion were Christian beliefs; thus, leaving the one Jewish student in a situation where her beliefs, practices, and experiences as a Jew did not play a role in the conversation. Similar to the Muslim, Hindu, and Jain/Hindu students in cases one and two, this Jewish student felt disconnected from, and ignored by, the dialogue topics.

According to Chesler, Wilson, and Malani (1993) individuals who are the only members of their identity in a dialogue situation are made to feel like a spokesperson for their entire identity group—something that IGD explicitly seeks to prevent (Zúñiga et al., 2007). This is precisely what happened to several of the participants in my study, and many of them remained quiet throughout the dialogue as a result, further preventing their perspective from being heard within the group.

> Having more Hindu students would have helped me to explain better, because I noticed in dialogue a lot of the conversation revolved around certain religions and sometimes I couldn't really say much because there was a good chunk of Jewish students. I mean, what if there was only one Jewish student and four Hindu or five Hindu kids? The Jewish kid would probably feel the same way that I was feeling. (Hindu Student)

Clearly, the demographics of the group impact the IGD process. Especially, it seems, that of those in the non-dominant identity category.

Discussion

Current theory around IGD student outcomes suggest that after participation in an IGD course, students gain: (1) heightened awareness of identity oppression and social inequities, (2) stronger cross-group

communication skills and relationships, and (3) increased intergroup cooperation for addressing identity based social justice issues. However, in this study, my participants explained that only one out of the three theoretical outcomes of IGD applied to their experience—communication skills.

Instead, my participants described their own perceived learning outcomes as: (a) an increased exposure to personal opinions and belief systems they were not previously aware of, (b) more knowledge about other religious traditions, and (c) greater clarity on their own spiritual beliefs. While sharing personal opinions and perspectives is certainly an ascribed element of IGD, the cases analyzed here lacked the process of sharing how individuals' experiences as a member of their religious identity relates to larger normative social, historical, and political patterns.

Moreover, IGD pedagogy explicitly rejects the notion that IGD should be used as a place for students to teach their peers about their identity group (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Lastly, some may see a benefit in achieving greater clarity on one's spiritual beliefs, but according to IGD theory, students are expected to gain an increased understanding of their relevant social identity, and one's personal beliefs certainly do not constitute their religious identity.

Given the lack of attention to religious identity and Christian privilege in all three of my cases, it may come as no surprise that my participants did not increase their awareness of religious identity oppression or their ability to address religious identity based social justice issues. Nevertheless, the classes I observed were offered under the IGD name, by an IGD program, at an institution with a well-established history of IGD research and training. In that way, this study raises the question of how and why such departures from IGD's critical social justice model were made here, and whether or not other IGD courses/programs are experiencing similar difficulties.

To this point, IGD research has been heavily weighted towards race (with a secondary emphasis on gender), race relations, racial oppression, and White privilege. Accordingly, theoretical outcomes of IGD have been developed using data primarily from race and gender dialogues. Yet, IGD scholars continue to suggest that such outcomes apply to IGD about all social identity categories. As this study shows, taking a model and a theory that has been developed primarily from race and gender dialogues, and applying it to another identity theme (in this case, religion) can be difficult. In practice, IGD is used for dialogues about religion, sexuality, socio-economic status, ability, national origin, size, and a number of other identities. Empirical study and theoretical literature, therefore, should also examine this wider range of identity themes.

Beyond theory related specifically to IGD pedagogy, the outcomes of this research highlight the need for a larger, more sophisticated body of conceptual and theoretical literature looking at religious identity from the same critical perspective that exists for other identities (e.g., Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, Queer Theory). My findings here indicate that both students and facilitators seem to have difficulty applying broader conversations about identity, privilege, and oppression to religious identity.

Thus, we cannot assume that discussions about these important issues will make sense for all social identities if/when they are only presented using the language of a select few identity categories. Clearly, the differentiation between religious identity and personal belief needs to be explained in more certain and explicit terms, and the current and historical state of religious identity oppression needs to be more widely critiqued.

Likewise, this study demonstrates the importance of including religious identity in scholarly discourse (and practice) on social justice education and diversity initiatives in the higher education context. Thus far, campus-based diversity initiatives have largely overlooked religious diversity as a component of their work. Those that do (such as, Patel & Brodeur, 2006; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2007) fail to take on a critical lens in order to address issues like Christian privilege or proselytism that serve to marginalize members of smaller religious groups. Just like the participants in my study who felt ignored and irrelevant in their IGD because they were the only student of their religious identity in the group, students from underrepresented minority religious groups may also feel overlooked by supposed diversity initiatives that do not reflect their experiences or concerns.

Implications for Intergroup Dialogue Theory and Practice

Despite the courses I observed not adhering to IGD pedagogy in full, the findings I present here do complicate current IGD theory in a couple of important ways. First, it questions whether or not IGD facilitators need to be selected and trained according to specific identity themes. At present, literature on IGD training discusses general approaches to teaching facilitators about understanding the critical social justice element of IGD and how to carry out the pedagogical model with a group. However, what this research highlights is the potential for implementation of religion-themed IGD to manifest in ways that vary greatly from the pedagogy as it is intended to be, even by facilitators who are considered extremely knowledgeable about IGD, who have been trained extensively, and who have even contributed to existing IGD research.

Some of the facilitators I observed in this study have been strong social justice advocates and highly effective IGD facilitators in dialogues about other identity themes. Yet, their facilitation styles, their critical self-awareness, and their articulation of social justice issues in a religious identity IGD were very different. Could it be that some people are ready/able to facilitate certain IGD themes and not others? How does that impact the way IGD facilitator training should be both discussed in scholarly literature and carried out in practice?

How might IGD program coordinators assess potential facilitators' ability to be critically self-aware with regard to all their identities? What should their role be in helping them achieve that critical self-awareness if they are lacking it for some of their identities more than others? How should IGD program coordinators evaluate facilitators to determine their level of adherence to the pedagogy? Moving forward, scholars and practitioners of IGD should consider these questions.

Secondly, findings from this research point to the problem of lesser-represented students feeling overlooked, even in a group specifically designed to make them feel empowered. IGD theory suggests that an equal balance between dominant and non-dominant identity students assures that non-dominant identity students do not feel outnumbered. However, that was not the case in this study, as there were several students who admitted feeling left out of the loop because no one else in the room shared their religious identity, even if there was an equal number of Christians and non-Christians.

So, this should make us question whether students in race and gender IGDs feel similarly marginalized if they are the only person of their identity? Are the experiences of a Native American IGD participant overlooked if the rest of the group is comprised of only White and Black participants? Are the experiences

of a gender queer or transgender IGD participant overlooked if the rest of the group is comprised of only cis gendered participants? What is the fair and just way to proceed if in fact these participants are being overlooked? Would it be better to select only two identities when defining an IGD theme?

Some of my participants in case one said that their class felt like a Christian-Jewish dialogue. Would it have been better if it were limited to those two identity groups alone in order to prevent the experience that the Muslim and the Hindu students had in that class? Is it better to more evenly balance the identity breakdown to make sure all possible identities are equally represented? Is that even possible?

A couple of my Christian participants in case three used the believer to non-believer ratio (5:7) to argue that religious people's perspectives are oppressed. How might a facilitator effectively make a point about privilege and oppression if dominant identity students are actually outnumbered by the various groups of non-dominant identity students? It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt an answer to any of those questions. Nevertheless, they are important to consider.

Conclusion

As colleges and universities around the country become increasingly aware of the need to actively involve students in diversity and social justice related initiatives, pedagogies like IGD offer promising ways to do so in a way that is both engaging and critically oriented. However, as initiatives like these expand, it is imperative that we also expand our empirical and theoretical exploration so as to make these pedagogies more inclusive of the range of social identities we all carry.

The study presented in this article shows how a well-intentioned and highly successful model for critical dialogue can actually marginalize certain students. It also shows how individuals' understanding of concepts like identity, privilege, and oppression are not always consistent across identity categories. This should push us to further explore the use of these pedagogies in order that the full potential of a model such as IGD can be realized.

Note

[1] For the purposes of this literature review, only primary empirical publications reporting on higher education student outcomes were included.

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