

Workplace Inclusion in an Era of Islamophobia: Fostering Moral Competency in Organizational Settings

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Managers have a duty to create an organizational climate that encourages inclusivity and respect. While this approach offers benefits to all employees (McKay & Avery, 2015), performance demands, public discourse, and the broader social narrative tend to exaggerate self-interest and exclusion. As a result, a thoughtful regard for others can be denigrated or extinguished in organizational settings. The marginalization of certain groups with perceived cultural differences, like Muslims, can foster anxiety, fear, anger, and hubris, which can cultivate exclusivity and incivility amongst coworkers. While democratic legal protections are intended to promote fairness, legal mandates cannot ensure that the ethical climate of an organization proactively attends to the formation of discriminatory thoughts and actions. To address this critical concern, a theoretical process and practical tool are presented. The goal is to use the tool as a workplace educational intervention, helping employees collectively achieve a more balanced sense of self and mindful awareness and respect toward others. By way of introduction, the ethical issue of discriminatory Islamophobia is explained and justified as an emerging global workplace concern, one that requires proactive consideration, attention, and organizational development intervention.

Design: To advance adult moral development in the workplace, an educational tool is presented: *Balanced Experiential Inquiry* (BEI). The process is specifically designed to provide employees with a means to experientially reveal and address their embedded biases through personal reflection and collective inquiry (Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2012). The activity's theoretical unpinning and its application are explicated.

Implications: If managers intend to role-model inclusion and act in the best interest of their stakeholders, they need to foster learning that tackles emerging forms of discrimination like Islamophobia (Zárate & Quezada, 2012). In so doing, the concept of moral competency becomes an imperative toward the development of an ethical organizational climate that fosters inclusion and respect. The moral competencies are described, offering a way to build ethical strength into everyday workplace routines. Because organizations are at the intersection of business and society, it is incumbent upon managers to create an environment that rejects hostilities toward those who may be perceived as different and to mitigate the notion of self-righteousness identity.

Originality: Given the current sociopolitical climate, specifically referring to developments in the United States (U.S.) and other countries around the world, this work highlights the concern of discrimination toward Muslims and identifies Islamophobia as an emerging organizational ethical issue.

INTRODUCTION

Managers have a duty to create an organizational climate that encourages inclusivity and respect. Organizational climate refers to the nature of the perception of values, beliefs, and behaviors of its members. More specifically, an ethical climate refers to the collective perception of what is ethically acceptable within the context of the organization. Ethical climate represents the informal and often unstated ontology of what is deemed to be acceptable or unacceptable behavior in the workplace. McKay and Avery (2015) outline how organizations that are characterized by climates that embrace diversity and inclusion offer benefits to those who work there. However, when performance demands, public discourse, and the broader social narrative exaggerate self-interest and exclusion, one's thoughtful regard for others can be denigrated or extinguished. The marginalization of certain groups based on cultural differences often fosters anxiety, fear, anger, and hubris, which can cultivate exclusivity and incivility among coworkers. While democratic legal protections work to endorse fairness, this does not ensure that an organization's climate endorses ethical actions that support inclusion.

To address this concern we present a theoretical process and practical tool to help employees achieve a balanced sense of self and to encourage a sustained and mindful awareness and respect toward others. If managers intend to role-model inclusion and act in the best interest of their stakeholders, they need to proactively address the potential for discrimination. Because organizations are at the intersection of business and society, it is incumbent upon managers to create an environment that rejects hostilities toward those who may be perceived as different and to mitigate self-righteousness. Given the current sociopolitical climate, specifically referring to developments in the United States (U.S.), this work highlights the concern of discrimination toward Muslims and identifies Islamophobia as an emerging organizational ethical issue.¹ To advance adult moral development in the workplace, we present Balanced Experiential Inquiry (BEI), offering employees a means to experientially reveal and address their embedded biases through personal reflection and collective inquiry. The theoretical unpinning of the process, its application, and the need for additional research are discussed. By way of introduction, the ethical issue of discriminatory Islamophobia is explained and justified as an emerging workplace concern.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AS DISCRIMINATION

The flow of migration from the Middle East to the West is a global reality. When multiculturalism is cast as a threat to in-country national values, anti-immigrant discourse can aggressively endorse stereotypes of Islam (Fekete, 2006). In the U.S., a crucible of events, reactions, and misinformation have prompted misunderstanding and uncertainty, while exacerbating immigration anxiety and xenophobia. Researchers have begun to identify new forms of prejudice towards Muslim immigrants, with emerging social norms that endorse blatant and concealed negative biases (Zárate & Quezada, 2012). Media saturation of a distorted Islam fueled by extremism has impacted, and, in many ways, shaped global markets, foreign policies, and sociopolitical agendas (Nacos, 2016). The saturation of inflated anti-Muslim sentiment can influence feelings and attitudes that shape the organizational climate. Negatively framed messages inundate and inevitably shape ill-informed vantage points that reaffirm and even

¹ For example, <https://hub.wsu.edu/law-justice-realtime/2015/12/17/islamophobia-the-stereotyping-and-prejudice-towards-muslims-since-911/>.

bolster unwarranted fears and anxiety (Ogan, Willnat, Pennington, & Bashir, 2013; Panagopoulos, 2006). Moreover, unattended ambivalence toward discriminatory behaviors can covertly fuel a tacit Islamophobic mindset. This combination of negative emotions, distorted information, resentments and/or apathy can erode civility, fairness, and respect among coworkers, which can potentially damage employee and stakeholder relationships. Moreover, unaddressed hyper-stereotyping and sensitivity toward Muslims (or those perceived to be) can become institutionalized vis-à-vis recruiting, hiring, pay/promotion, and retention practices and by subtle or overt harassment in everyday routines.

With the rise of global Islamophobia (Geddes, 2013; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Poynting & Mason, 2007), responsible managers need to address this ethical issue before problems become deleterious to the organization. Given the harsh realities of recent ideological shifts in the U.S. government administration, management needs to actively endorse tolerance, serving as a beacon for openness, transparency, and mindful regard for others, irrespective of a person's faith or cultural preference. Islamophobia is a palpable concern, one that warrants management attention, before interpersonal tensions become costly incidents. To support such efforts, academics and practitioners must offer informed paths that provide an effective means for inclusive engagement and moral discourse. This research is designed to bring employees together to better understand and address their phobic biases and prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims, and then to deliberately learn how to role-model responsible organizational membership.

Workplace Discrimination

Employers in the U.S. are subject to laws that ban discrimination in places of employment (EEOC, 2016).² American liberties to express beliefs from a variety of religious faiths can present ethical issues for people who work together. Freedom of religion is governed by federal and state civil rights laws, with protections supported by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII prohibits employers from discriminating based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, further endorsed (in varying degrees) by legislation imposed at the state level. Courts generally recognize discriminatory situations that reflect disparate treatment, disparate impact, and hostile work environments. Disparate treatment is overt discrimination, involving unequal treatment on the basis of religion. Disparate impact may emerge when an organization has policies that inadvertently treat members unequally—for example, subtle biases toward certain groups inadvertently targeted by a policy (e.g., forbidding employees to wear any form of head garb). Discrimination related to a hostile work environment addresses oppressive working conditions. While a disagreement over religious principles does not constitute unlawful harassment, lobbing insults or threats, words and/or actions that harass or intimidate (on the basis of religion) crosses the line. Title VII, however, is limited, and fails to take into account nuanced forms of discrimination, thereby limiting its statutory protections.

In the West, there are increasing tensions around immigration, with a notable concern around those emigrating from the Middle East. This can certainly enhance the probability for discrimination and heightened workplace stress, known to mitigate performance capacity (Ali, Yamada, & Mahmood, 2015). Practices, standards, or norms can explicitly or implicitly support racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes that underwrite prejudicial treatment, thereby benefiting some at the expense of others. Organizational settings also become platforms where targeted intolerance has an opportunity to thrive. The inclusion of those perceived to be outsiders, people

² For more information see: https://www.eeoc.gov/federal/digest/vol1_fy2016.cfm.

who engage in practices that seem unusual or appear different, is difficult to ensure. Even with the best of intentions, efforts to achieve diversity and to address discrimination can be problematic. Efforts can also become hypocritical and controversial, working in the opposite direction of their original intent. Without inculcating diversity at every level, including corporate leadership (CEOs, corporate boards, and executive leaders), the system is likely to perpetuate existing ideologies (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998, 2006, 2014). Over time, organizational structures and institutionalized processes may inadvertently affirm and reinforce stereotypes and biases that maintain the status quo. Without explicit attention to specific types of discrimination, false narratives can emerge that can subtly reaffirm that Muslims pose a threat to what is known and valued.

Islam and Muslim are interrelated terms used to represent the message and religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The etymology of these words is derived from the same Arabic root *s-l-m*, which means to submit, accept, or surrender. Islam is the act of submitting to the will of God, whereas Muslim is the person who engages in this act. Islam or Islamic describe the religion and its subsequent cultural concepts, while being Muslim refers to the followers of the religion of Islam (Pew Research Center, 2012).³ Inasmuch as a Buddhist practices Buddhism, a Christian practices Christianity, or a Jew practices Judaism, so it goes that a Muslim practices Islam and abides by Islamic beliefs and practices. The term *Islamophobia* appeared in literature in the early nineteen-hundreds; however historical accounts of phobic reactions toward multiculturalism and immigrant populations have been a part of the geopolitical dialogue for centuries (cf. Oldenburg, 2009).

More recently, Islamophobia was highlighted in 1997, defined as an unfounded hostility toward Muslims (Runnymede Trust, 2000). The term was used in a normative sense, suggesting explicit disapproval of negative judgments for those who adopt any range of discriminatory values and practices toward Muslims, Islamic discourse, and associated cultural practices (Allen, 2007). When the social policy agency of Britain established a Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, they further defined the term. Specifically, when there is a stigmatization of Muslims, Islam, or Islamophobia, people may view the Islamic faith and associated beliefs as:

- 1) monolithic and static;
- 2) separate, not sharing the values of other cultures;
- 3) irrational, primitive and inferior to the West;
- 4) aggressive, violent, and implicated in a clash of civilizations;
- 5) an ideology used to promote political and military interests;
- 6) intolerant of Western critiques;
- 7) deserving of discriminatory practices towards and exclusion of Muslims; and
- 8) making anti-Muslim hostility natural and normal (see also Taras, 2012).

Organizations in the U.S. are culpable of wrongdoing if they knew or should have known about incidents of discrimination or harassment. While managers have a duty to accommodate the religious beliefs of their staff, efforts to do so often present challenges (Findley, Hinote, Hunter, & Ingram, 2014). The “reasonableness” of an organization’s policies depends upon the circumstances and how the law is interpreted and applied in that particular case. Aziz

³ For more information see <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/16/nearly-half-of-refugees-entering-the-u-s-this-year-are-muslim/>.

(2014) observes that at the heart of this issue is whether or not employees have a legal right to “be themselves” at work. This becomes an ethical concern when organizational members’ behaviors, mannerisms, or values linked to gender, race, or religion are viewed as being problematic. For example, when a person of any race, color, creed, or national origin explicitly or implicitly demonstrates a negative bias toward a Muslim individual in the workplace, they are engaged in Islamophobic behavior.

Some Westerners consider Islamic practices as antithetical to their culture and way of life. To avoid cognitive dissonance, people may unconsciously dehumanize Muslims, casting the entire group as being represented by violence (Johnston, 2016). Ciftci (2012) found that both perceived and real symbolic threat is a significant source of Islamophobia. Individuals may differentiate between their general feelings toward Muslims and the specific characteristics that they ascribe to them. But many people use motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to support a generalized belief that Muslims are destructive individuals, assuming or worrying that they support terrorist organizations. Westerners are more likely to associate Muslims with terrorism when they feel threatened by their physical and cultural existence (Ciftci, 2012).

Such anti-Muslim sentiment is reproduced through a racialism manifest in rehearsed stereotypes of Islam. This is typically accompanied by perceptions of threat and inferiority, as well as perceptions that Muslims are outsiders, framing them as others, people who do not belong in one’s own environment (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). While these beliefs are not race-based, they often present similar characteristics of biases that enable and perpetuate racial discrimination against Muslims—i.e., casting a people as a religious group possessing similar traits. Studies of workplace discrimination have largely focused on race and gender, with few examining whether or not a Muslim religious identity cultivates discrimination. Public opinion reflects that Islamophobia is represented by linking a perception of threat with an outsider, an alien other (e.g., “those people”). Negative media treatment is sometimes linked to government dispositions, which can endorse and fuel this stance. Regardless of inaccuracies, negativity has a demonstrative impact, sponsoring widespread Islamophobia, revealed in a variety of actions (e.g., opposition to mosque development, restrictive asylum-seeking policies, and serving as a portal for blame when attacks and/or other forms of violence occur). Ultimately, the stigmatization of Islam corrodes a sense of belongingness and citizenship for members of this faith-based tradition, wherever they work or live.

Many in the U.S. have sustained their generalization of the Muslim community posing a national threat, an outgrowth of the 9/11 tragedy. In 2015, for example, the San Bernardino, California mass shooting became a showcase for Islamic stereotyping. Islamophobia emerged from media and public discourse, given the event’s association with radicalized Muslim terrorism. The same year, there were 332 mass shootings in the U.S. that took the lives of 475 and injured 1,870 people (www.shootingtracker.com). While only two of them were actually linked to radicalized Islamic forces, the sociopolitical narrative continuously emphasized the potential threat emanating from the entire Muslim community. Rarely are other faith-based traditions associated with violent events in the U.S. Broad, sweeping generalizations are seldom applied to other religious groups when accounting for violent crime. Since 9/11, Powell (2011) studied terrorist events in the U.S., including actual and thwarted activities. News of these events revealed a pattern of coverage in which fear of international terrorism is dominant, particularly as Muslims/Arabs framed as organized terrorist cells working against a so-called Christian America. Domestic terrorism was rarely mentioned, only used to explain isolated incidents caused by troubled individuals. This volatile combination of negativity, complexity, and a lack of

depth and accuracy in reporting has created a multilayered burden for the Muslim community. When acts of violence occur, Muslims, like most U.S. citizens, share in the grief stemming from such tragedies. But for Muslims, a palpable fear is also present; there is constant worry of retribution in the form of Islamophobia that may be exerted by people around them. There is also a sense that one must apologize on behalf of the entire Muslim community with the obligation of defending it to a potentially angry, fearful, and/or resentful public. Experiences of being repeatedly shunned can become internalized, ultimately fostering strong negative sentiments, including anger, fear, resentment, and self-loathing, which can contribute to emotional debilitation.

A Changing Face

The U.S. has a well-documented history of welcoming, yet persecuting, those viewed as different, people considered to be outsiders or those external to perceived existing norms. The assimilation of immigrant groups in post-World War II America was slow, as ethnic groups became woven into the fabric of mainstream identity (Brubaker, 2001). In many ways the process was one of submission: an acceptance of multiculturalism and heterogeneity as the formation of a trans-ethnic population emerged and as national identity was overtly claimed by individuals after having served in armed forces. The rise of the working class manifested its strength by expressing their values through spatial dispersion (suburbanization) (Alba & Nee, 1997). With increasing rates of ethnic and racial intermarriage, there has been a dynamic shift among ethnic and racial categories, contributing to a blurring of identity boundaries (Zolberg & Long, 1999). Despite the changing face of the population, coupled with a lack of clarity of what the national identity actually means, being an American is still viewed as a source of pride (McLaren & Johnson, 2004). This identity expansion continues as millions of immigrants are granted citizenship annually and refugees are provided with asylum. Without education and empathetic forethought, there are bound to be macro- and micro-aggressions toward members of the Muslim community as they emerge as part of American society.⁴

Islam is currently the world's second largest religion (after Christianity) and fastest growing faith-based tradition (Lipka, 2016). If demographic trends continue, the number of Muslims around the world will exceed the number of Christians by the end of the century. At present, Muslims make up about 1% of the U.S. population, roughly 2.75 million people. In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center (2012), about half (49%) reported that "some" Muslims are anti-American. More than half of the respondents (59%) said that there is discrimination against Muslims, and even more (76%) said that discrimination against Muslims is on the rise. The report explained that Americans tend to believe Muslims are more likely to encourage violence than any other group, supporting the notion that Westerners (Europeans and Americans) tend to perceive Muslims as "fanatical." Deeply impacting these negative perceptions is the formation of radicalized groups like DAEESH (or ISIL) since the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the border crisis of Syrian refugees. Aside from the heartbreaking photos of children caught in the turmoil of war, media tends to present gross distortions of negativity through simplistic grandiose sound bites.

Impacts to Organizational Climate

⁴ For more information see: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#history>.

Because many non-Muslim Americans lack familiarity with Muslim practices, ignorance and/or apathy may be a crucible for discrimination. The EEOC underscores the need for both employers and employees to better understand the laws surrounding religious-based discrimination and compliance. The most frequent claims against Muslims post-9/11 were unwarranted discharge, followed by harassment, and terms and conditions of employment (Gosseen, 2017; Greenwald, 2010). In New York, the number of complaints involving Muslims nearly doubled the year after the Twin Towers were attacked (Potkewitz, 2011). In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the ACLU reports a 67% increase in Islamophobia, as anti-Muslim sentiment has gone mainstream.⁵ Experts in the realm of bias and stereotyping show how these types of behaviors are manifest in organizational settings (Bielby, 2000). Marginalization can impact many different groups, evidenced by inequity and limited upward mobility and access to resources, which includes the opportunity to build social capital (Zhou, 1997). While structural and systemic attempts have been made via legislation to protect minority groups (e.g., Civil Rights Act, Equal Pay Act, Affirmative Action), dominant ideologies tend to reinforce the status quo (Domhoff, 2013), rather than seek systemic change to foster broader conceptualizations of social identity.

While organizations often stand by their mission statements, extolling the firm's integrity, inclusion, and diversity, these values may be espoused rather than actualized. Corporate regulations, rules, and policies that supposedly provide the basis for an organization's identity do not necessarily create an ethical organizational climate. Education and development is needed to elevate self-bias awareness and to affirm the value of respect for others, while also confirming that Islamophobic discrimination is unethical and potentially illegal. The reality is that compliance programs do very little to promote social norms that are necessary for deep and lasting adult moral awareness (Sekerka, 2012). Ethnic studies reflect how dominant ideologies can be perpetuated by disenfranchising those perceived to be outsiders. Systematic oppression and its institutionalization often operate tacitly within the status quo. This makes it difficult to identify where and when Islamophobia exists within the organization. Moreover, if those presenting discriminatory complaints are viewed negatively, Islamophobic behaviors are unlikely to surface. The absence or limited number of Muslims in an organization may imply some form of anti-Muslim sentiment. But it may simply be apathy or ambivalence that inclusivity is a responsible component of ethical hiring. This may be discounted by rhetoric surrounding the absence of disenfranchised or underrepresented populations within a work environment by pointing to a lack of qualifications or talent pool.

Park, Malachi, Sternin, and Tevet (2009) describe how employees tend to judge Muslim names less favorably than others, particularly as it relates to hiring and salary assignments. When women veil themselves, they are quite literally wearing their Muslim-ness (Ali, Yamada, & Mahmood, 2015). One study showed that women who wear a hijab to work, but also performed citizenship behaviors and demonstrated organizational commitment, viewed the workplace as being interactionally just, but not necessarily distributively or procedurally just (Reeves, McKinney, & Azam, 2012). Ironically, when employees consider their work environment as being diverse, this perception may actually inhibit or reduce the ability for Muslims to obtain and secure employment there (Ghumman & Jackson, 2010; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Management tends to frame diversity as a "check-in-the-box" effort (e.g., once a certain level has been achieved, the task is deemed complete).

⁵ For additional information see: <https://www.aclu.org/search/Islamophobia>.

A host of discriminatory forms are widespread and certainly not limited to Muslims. The subtler the discrimination is, the harder it is to prevent, report, rehabilitate, and correct on an institutional level. When racism, faithism and other oppressions hide behind the guise of political correctness, they may be very difficult to identify. Solieman (2009) asserts that due to the delicate nature of unearthing and proving discrimination, it is difficult to enforce laws designed to prohibit it. Vickers (2008) highlights that restricting religious freedom in the workplace is likely to harm the economic and social interests of individuals, organizations, and society at large. As a result, management needs a better understanding of the religious and attendant needs of their staff, continually modeling actions that promote motivated inclusion. Such efforts can ultimately enrich the company's reputation and overall profitability (Findley, Hinote, Hunter, & Ingram, 2014). Rice (2015) argues that diversity—issues around race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and religion—may be *the* most important organizational moral challenge of the 21st century. To assume this duty, employees need to be intentional in framing discrimination as an ethical issue and learn to respond to it with moral competency.

ESTABLISHING BALANCE

Ethical issues that emerge because of discrimination cannot be ignored or sublimated. But the reality is that most employees do not know how to talk about ethical issues like Islamophobia, nor how to effectively deal with them when they emerge. There is a tendency to focus on multicultural differences as being problematic, rather than looking at the behavioral patterns and conditions for what creates the circumstances. Therefore, a collective effort, one that looks at how moral action is promoted or curtailed when discriminatory behaviors occur, is a useful starting point for organizational learning. When the focus is not on individual differences, but instead on what supports or blocks the organization's ability to support moral action as a whole, inclusion forms the basis of the inquiry. This sort of process can then elevate commonalities amongst employee participants by discerning similar aspects of their individual experiences. In so doing, employees learn to work together to unearth what supports an effective response to Islamophobia as an ethical action, while also seeing what disables one's desire to engage. A specific activity designed to foster this type of collaborative effort is referred to as *Balanced Experiential Inquiry*, (BEI). To understand the tool's effectiveness for adult moral development, its theoretical basis is now described.

Experiential Learning

Insights from learning theory suggest that adult education is often derived from traditional *pedagogy*; meaning the “art and science of helping children learn” (Knowles, 1973, p. 42). The pedagogy of adult education is therefore a contradiction in terms. Most adults are taught as though they were children. Educators wanting to correct this disjuncture have advanced the subject of *andragogy*, which is defined as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). While the premise of adult learning theory has since been advanced, Merriam's (2001) core assumptions shed light on how to create a more effective organizational ethics education program, by defining the adult learner as a person who has:

- (1) an independent concept of self and can self-direct personal learning,
- (2) a reservoir of life experiences, providing a rich resource for learning,

- (3) learning needs closely related to changing social roles,
- (4) an interest in immediate application of knowledge, and
- (5) the motivation to learn by internal rather than external factors.

Brookfield (1996) argued that adult teaching should be grounded in adult experience, because this represents a valuable resource. Kolb's work on experiential learning theory has become the dominant framework guiding many of the educational practices for today's adult learners. His theory proposes that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Experiential learning is a process through which people construct meaning together from their personal encounters. Laditka and Houck (2006) show how experiential approaches in teaching ethics are particularly effective, stimulating interest and understanding. When group discourse is fostered through conversational learning, participants engage in shared sense-making (Weick, 1995). Other studies that examine best practices in ethics education in organizational settings support the importance of collective learning spaces, revealing that employees benefit from face-to-face learning groups (Sekerka, 2009). As people explore their ethical issues together, they are in a better position to examine what contributes to their thinking and behavior. Tacit assumptions are exposed, which can lead to greater interpersonal awareness and discovery.

Balanced Experiential Inquiry

Unlike traditional ethics education and training programs using generic or third-party cases for discussion, *Balanced Experiential Inquiry* (BEI) is a teaching tool that utilizes personal stories and strikes a balance between individual reflection and collective dialogue. As the process unfolds, it allows for both internal and external meaning-making, important elements in the learning cycle. The BEI process provides adults with an opportunity to actively practice their moral competency as they pursue cross-cultural ethical discovery. Moreover, BEI features the notion of "balance," a concept promoted throughout the entire exercise. As an ethics training tool, this activity meets the learning needs of employees at every level, as people come together to establish equilibrium between tensions. Tensions often stem from prior experiences that present conflicting positive and negative memories, felt versus anticipated emotions, personal (familial, cultural) or organizational strengths versus weakness, individual conscience versus group norms or peer pressure, and individual versus collective moral identity.

The activity is a balance of two interwoven core change management techniques: diagnostic (deficit-based) and appreciative inquiry (strength-based). The process invites participants to share their stories, honoring both positive and negative aspects of their ethical issues, and to think about factors that support and impede their ability to proceed with ethical action. The idea for a hybrid process stems from empirical research reflecting how uniquely useful outcomes emerge from the initial phases of both strength- and deficit-based approaches (Sekerka, Brumbaugh, Rosa, & Cooperrider, 2006). Traditional gap analysis targets weaknesses, problems, or deficits. While this approach helps to unify employees around a common problem to resolve important issues (Sekerka, Zolin, & Goosby Smith, 2009), it also puts the spotlight on the negative. Without a countervailing force to encourage moral action, such negativity may thwart a desire to bring forward discriminatory behaviors.

Moral action necessitates the ability to overcome barriers, dealing with a perception of threat and managing negative emotions, whilst simultaneously leveraging what supports a personal

desire to do the right thing. Studies show that a focus on strengths can be particularly useful in broadening and building organizational capacity and to help prepare employees for learning, growth, and change (Sekerka & Fredrickson, 2007). Use of a hybrid approach to adult moral development, one that leverages both positive and negative experiential knowledge, can help employees explore what they and their organizations do best, and also identify where issues reside that require corrective action (Sekerka, Godwin & Charnigo, 2012). A balanced type of discovery encourages organizational members to build strength, both from weaknesses as well as from existing strengths (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Using a hybrid strength- and deficit-based process, *Balanced Experiential Inquiry* (BEI) unites employees around ethical issues, drawing from employees' successes and challenges as they work together to embrace the concern of discrimination. Facilitators can choose to elevate Middle Eastern and Western perspectives, thereby helping employees to identify cross-cultural conflicts and then to elevate cooperative engagement around shared values (Yacobian & Sekerka, 2014). This establishes a platform for participation and reciprocity in discourse, prompting collaborative reflection and discovery into what builds an ethical organizational climate.

The process of BEI invites employees to seek balance between their individual conscience (what they think is right and their preconceived notions of "other") and collective peer feedback from group reaction and dialogue. Employees can also work together to unearth some of their (un)intentional biases concerning those from different cultures and explore how these biases may work to support or impede effectively responding to Islamophobic behaviors and other forms of discriminatory judgment. These tensions elevate the need to establish equilibrium, motivating participants to explore the nature of their identity as compared to the collective identity of the group and the organization itself. It also enables participants to hold one another accountable for ethnocentric beliefs and assumptions. Like many experiential learning tools, BEI can be used to show the need for specific skills to support future action. When focusing on ethical issues, BEI can be used to endorse moral competencies, teaching employees how to recognize their level of willingness to face the issue of Islamophobia and to respond to it with ethical strength.

Moral Competency

The BEI approach has been used in a variety of organizations, including government employees and military service personnel (at a variety of management levels) (Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2012), as well as with students in undergraduate business school programs. It is typically a dedicated workshop session wherein individuals apply their moral competencies toward understanding the ethical issues they bring forward and unpacking their behavioral response-actions from experiences. Specific skills that support moral action can be honed, helping employees prepare for future challenges. Prior empirical research (Sekerka, McCarthy, & Bagozzi, 2011) shows how specific competencies support the ethical decision-making path, underwriting a desire and decision to act ethically. They include:

1. **Emotional signaling** helps people attend to important affective signals that influence the cerebral process of ethical decision-making. Employees who proceed with moral action do not ignore, repress, or sublimate negative feelings. They use this affective information as a signal to proceed with caution and care.

2. **Reflective pause** becomes a part of one's strategy in decision-making to purposely self-impose a time-out for deliberation and insight. During this break employees examine possible avenues for moral action, often weighing pros and cons of the circumstances, while considering the potential implications of their acting (or not acting).

3. **Self-regulation** is about managing one's feelings and desires, demonstrating restraint coupled with an ability to move forward—despite perceptions that may impose distress to self or others.

4. **Moral preparation** stems from understanding oneself and establishing that one is a moral agent. That is, the employee commits to themselves that they plan to engage in moral action in the future, before a specific ethical challenge occurs.

Employees can learn to apply these moral competencies in making decisions as they engage in their everyday workplace routines. To encourage a climate that supports inclusion and respect, employees need to proactively address ethical issues, rather than adopting the typical reactionary approach. While some people can be set in their ways, adult learning can continue through experiential education, encouraging self-awareness, setting expectations for ethicality, and prompting interest in ongoing growth and development. When ethical issues like discrimination are discussed openly, challenges can be framed as cornerstones for organizational learning.

Table 1: Balanced Experiential Inquiry and Its Association with Moral Competency, Adult Learning Principles, and the Experiential Learning Cycle

BEI Step	Moral Competency Exercised	Adult Learning Principle Addressed	Experiential Learning Phase
1. Identify an ethical scenario	Moral Preparation, Reflective Pause, Emotional Signaling	Building on personal life experience; Allowing for self-directed learning	Concrete experience
2. Examine strengths and barriers	Reflective Pause, Emotional Signaling, Self-regulation	Allowing for a problem solving focus; Allowing for a strength-based focus	Reflection and abstract conceptualization about experience
3. Report-outs and Group Discussion	Emotional Signaling, Reflective pause, Self-regulation, Moral Preparation	Allowing for immediate application of knowledge	Conceptualization about experiences and beginning to experiment with new behaviors

There are several core steps in the BEI process, which align with the moral competencies, adult learning principles, and the phases of experiential learning (see Table 1). When employees engage in this process, they are guided to better understand moral action and to practice using the

moral competencies that facilitate their effective response effort. Inquiry, reflection, and dialogue are used to help employees discover how they can build moral competency and how their efforts can shape the ethical climate of their organization (Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2012). Although a trainer facilitates the activity, it is learner-centered. Facilitation must remain nimble, using situations relevant to participants and their own circumstances. The process focuses on identifying and using salient examples from employees' own ethical dilemmas as the content material. The activity is not prepackaged or lecture-driven. Each session is tailored to the unique experiences and cultural backgrounds of the employee participants. Inquiry, reflection, and dialogue are used to help employees discover how they can shape the ethical climate of their organization. Employees are guided through specific steps to better understand what supports or blocks their ability to proceed, which can facilitate the willingness, desire, and decision to address Islamophobic discrimination in the future.

Step 1

Identify an ethical scenario. At the outset, participants are asked to write down a brief description of an ethical challenge they faced in the workplace and what they were thinking and feeling at the time. Using BEI to target Islamophobic discrimination in the workplace, employees can be guided to consider specific situations that may have been difficult (hard to act), problematic (uncertain), or presented a dilemma (no clear right path for action). Initially, the following instructions are read aloud, in this case tailored to ethical issues that relate to cross-cultural discrimination:

Think back to a time when you experienced, faced, or observed an ethical issue of discrimination in your organization. The situation may have involved you or another person experiencing exclusion, unfair treatment, a lack of respect, bullying, or the use of words and/or actions that seemed to harass or intimidate an employee. Regardless of whether the discrimination was covert or overt (tacit/explicit), the situation may have presented a conflict between your personal values and those being demonstrated in the circumstance. Perhaps the situation was your observance of a conflict between others, based upon perceived differences in personal beliefs, traditions, or cultural values. Perhaps the values of other employees or the organization itself ran counter to your own beliefs, traditions, or cultural values. Regardless of who was being discriminated against, it was likely difficult for you to act, to know what to do, or to determine how to resolve the issue. As you think back on your organizational experiences, this is a time when you may have been unsure how to act or did not initially know what to do. The situation was likely undesirable, based upon the risks involved in taking action. The experience seemed to present an ethical or moral issue and, at the time, none of your options seemed particularly favorable.

Employees are given time to reflect, consider their ideas, and take notes about their experiences with their ethical challenges at work. Participants are then asked to address the following questions:

- What was the ethical issue of discrimination and what did you do? What informed your actions?
- What role did your cultural background play in forming a response to the ethical issue?
- What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Where do those thoughts and feelings stem from the circumstances?
- What specific emotions did you experience? What prompted these particular sentiments?

This step is used to launch moral preparation and a reflective pause. Every BEI session begins with the solicitation of personal circumstances that participants have encountered, prompting self-directed learning based upon life experience, a core tenet of adult learning theory. Participants are asked to consider their past feelings, decisions, and actions (or inaction). In so doing, adult learners begin to use their emotions as cues of insight and to begin to discern their own moral agency (e.g., willingness to act, when faced with an ethical challenge). Further, they are able to unearth patterns of behavior that may be informed by their own cultural background. For example, an employee might be asked to consider the role of their own cultural perspective in understanding why they chose to act, wait, or do nothing. Facilitators can also point out how individualism or tribal collectivism influence starting assumptions and direct decision-making in varying ways. Prior work describes how BEI can be used to explicate tribal collectivist- and individualistic-driven thought processes in ethical decision-making (Yacobian & Sekerka, 2014). The situations often present conflicting or competing values, and participants work together to establish what alternatives might have been available, given the situation.

While the facilitator works to validate and affirm participants' experiences, they remain nonjudgmental about what is (or is not) unethical or what is (or is not) a "right" decision or response. The activity is not about finding a problem and assigning blame. Rather, the process brings difficult issues out into the open, so that people can learn how to deal with the tensions they can foster in a respectful and productive manner. Scenarios vary, but often involve a variety of forms of discrimination, including bullying and harassment (cf. Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2014). Regardless of whether or not the scenario resulted in a moral action, every case presents a learning opportunity to exercise moral competence.

Step 2

Examining strengths and barriers with a partner. Participants are asked to form pairs to share their situation with a partner. This starts an ethics dialogue and encourages conversational learning among employees, which, according to Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2005), is a fundamental element of "meaning-making that in turn guides and informs behavior that creates new concrete experiences for reflection" (p. 423). As employees work in their dyads, the facilitator visits each pair to see how they are doing, helping them to determine what about their organization supported or blocked their desire to respond to the discrimination they observed or experienced. Supportive probes are provided to pairs less comfortable with this initial engagement, affirming their efforts to engage and helping them engage in dialogue.

After the exchange of scenarios the pair is asked to determine what supports or curtails an ability to proceed with moral action in their circumstances. Participants are reminded that this may be an internal or external characteristic of their process or perhaps nuances of the situation

itself. This step is designed to emphasize an action orientation, considering specifically what promotes or blocks engagement in moral action. Time is provided to address the following questions:

- What supported (or curtailed) your ability to respond with moral action?
- What about the organization supported (or curtailed) your ability to address this situation effectively?
- What about the organization supported (or curtailed) cultural awareness?

This step helps participants exercise their moral competencies of reflective pause, emotional signaling, and self-regulation. Additionally, it takes into consideration the adult learning principle of focusing on real-life issues with a problem-solving approach.

Step 3

Report-outs and group discussion. The final step continues to elevate the experiential focus and conversational learning nature of the activity, helping employees use collective storytelling to discuss difficult issues. Facilitators ask for volunteers to present situations in community (to the larger group). In describing their stories, employees connect with others, establishing shared value around the desire to “do the right thing.” While everyone has an instinct to avoid public scrutiny, the desire to remain silent is superseded by the opportunity to discover and learn. This serves as practice for bringing forward ethical issues and working through negative behaviors, before they become full-blown problems (e.g., cases bound for legal adjudication).

Participants also learn to empathize with others, as they share their issues, ask questions, and ascertain insights by sharing personal challenges with others. Participants often begin to presuppose what they might do differently in the future, or even how they might change organizational policies and practices to support enhanced ethical performance and the ethical climate of their workplace environment. Barriers to moral action emerge over the course of the session, typically revealing how myopic self-focused concern is a deterrent for ethical strength. The use of BEI has the potential to unearth ethnocentric viewpoints that impede personal and adult moral development. People are often quick to blame others, or look to practices that seem to be beyond their control (i.e., nothing I say or do will matter). This can become a pivotal teaching moment, where the facilitator can work to affirm the need for personal responsibility and moral preparation as a part of one’s organizational duty to ensure inclusion and respect for coworkers. If none of the participants’ stories represent Islamophobic behavior, the facilitator can overtly associate the learning drawn from other issues of discrimination to this emerging form. The next step invites participants to drill down into the circumstance and to honestly look at their willingness by examining what supports and blocks their desire to proceed with ethical action.

As employees work together to deconstruct each situation and identify what promotes/curtails their willingness to address discrimination in their organization, the facilitator tracks and diagrams this information at the front of the room, noting situations, emotions experienced, outcomes, and where moral competency was exercised (or could have been exercised) in the various encounters. Depending on the length of time allotted for the workshop (typically between 2–3 hours), several scenarios are examined at the group level with additional inquiry probes:

- How will you overcome these challenges, more specifically, working to address workplace discrimination and Islamophobia?
- How will you sustain your moral competency and serve as a role model to others?
- How will you maintain awareness, inclusion, and respect for other cultural values and perspectives different from your own?
- How does multiculturalism and diversity add strength to the organization?
- What can be done at the organizational level to support the ability to address discrimination in daily work life?

In addition to helping participants exercise moral competency, this step honors the adult learning principles to allow immediate cross-cultural application of knowledge to work-related issues that employees are likely to encounter in the future. Throughout the entire process, the facilitator encourages the use of emotional signaling and self-regulation in the group context, key for ongoing moral preparation. Anonymous stories from other BEI session can also be presented to: a) highlight missing points (e.g., ensuring emphasis on self-regulation), b) alleviate tension by generating humor, and c) emphasize how workshop take-aways can be used for personal and organizational learning. The notion of personal responsibility is underscored throughout the process, and employees leave with an experience that affirms how moral competencies need to be practiced and strengthened.

Through use of activities that encourage reflective discourse and consideration of others' views, employees can bring ethical issues forward in a safe environment to cooperatively sort through what supports and curtails a desire to respond to discriminatory behaviors like Islamophobia. Other techniques should be considered, such as those developed by scholars in the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (e.g., best self exercises). Roberts and her colleagues describe how modest virtuous acts are remembered by those around us. When people hear that their actions were especially meaningful, positive waves of emotion ensue (e.g., gratitude, appreciation, pride) (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). Affirming experiences support a virtuous view of self and others, potentially elevating the saliency of character strengths that fuel a desire to act with ethical strength as a daily effort (Sekerka, 2016). Considering ethical decision-making and behavior as a continuous cycle can foster self-renewal and ongoing moral development. Once a decision has been made and action taken, embracing moral preparation as an ongoing endeavor can reaffirm the endorsement of ethical action as part of the organization's climate.

IMPLICATIONS

Management cannot simply wait for Islamophobia to present itself before addressing this issue, as reactionary approaches have a dramatic negative impact on many people, while also being costly. Proactive ethical organizational development means building and sustaining a platform that assumes respect and regard for others, adopting use of moral competencies as a workplace norm. This entails embracing ethics as a sustained organizational goal, motivated by a desire to create a safe, inclusive, and considerate workplace. Employees who demonstrate moral competencies in their daily actions inevitably bear influence on shaping their organization's

ethical climate. While acts of discrimination must be swiftly addressed, understanding what contributes to their manifestation is the cornerstone of meaningful adult moral development.

Organizations are crucibles that can thwart or enable the formation and festering of discriminatory activities. Managers must look at how organizational processes, incentives, and social norms can serve to block inclusion, and they must work to encourage moral action when employees observe or experience discrimination. Exercising moral competency means exiting a reactionary cycle and creating an explicit and integrated approach toward understanding the potential for Islamophobia (along with other discriminatory behaviors) to emerge. Applying systems thinking to ethics in organizational settings (Werhane, 2008), a holistic picture can be garnered by examining patterns of behavior based on engrained mental models. This requires taking time to examine how motives and actions contribute to the very issues management is trying to resolve. This work demands continuous exploration toward unearthing what contributes to ethical weakness and what supports and builds an ethical climate in the organization. A willingness to do so assumes responsibility to challenge personal tacit assumptions and biases, and the perceptions and habits that support them.

Framing moral competency as an integrated practice reflects the idea that every employee can develop skills that support moral decision-making and moral action through regular use. Prompted by experiential learning activities that cultivate self-awareness, employees can work together to set meaningful and realizable expectations for ethical performance. That said, regardless of self-knowledge, everyone, including management, can fall prey to human vulnerabilities. Good intentions can be blindsided, prompting a lack of clarity and selfishness that clouds discernment and prudential judgment. A lack of attention and deliberateness toward establishing workplace environments that promote civility may become myopic, narrow-mindedness that blocks visibility. Given the propensity for discrimination, seeing how social norms unfold, spread, and influence processes, individuals can be deterred from sustaining a commitment to their intentions. Ethical conflagrations are reported in both public and private sectors (e.g., Veterans Health Administration, Volkswagen, Wells Fargo Bank, and United Airlines), often reflecting a lack of responsibility toward how employees achieve their organizational goals. Without intentional discourse and education in support of ethical performance with the use of moral competency, marginalized others may be a lightning rod for misplaced and dysfunctional aggression (Halliday, 1999).

Rigid and/or rapidly evolving practices may actually reduce employees' commitment to nondiscrimination norms or even subtly affirm norms that endorse apathy toward discrimination. Attention must be directed toward measuring what motivates adherence to nondiscrimination norms (Bartlett, 2009). If managers want to create an ethical climate, it is necessary to aim higher than achieving a compliance-driven baseline. Managers need to overtly exercise respect and inclusivity, ensuring that behaviors that support inclusion are a part of measured performance expectations. Managers and employees at every level of the organization need to learn how to work across racial/ethnic/cultural and religious identities to bridge divisiveness. Because discrimination is often subtle, (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011), assuming quick-fix solutions to cure systemic concerns trivializes the issue, minimizing the sociopolitical context of employees' experiences. Islamophobia, like any other form of discrimination, is linked to societal structures and discourse that is reproduced in day-to-day encounters. For real and lasting development to occur, managers will need to role-model character strength and openly discuss the value of inclusion (Rice, 2015; Jensen & Katz, 1996). Scholars contend that to be genuinely representative, organizational settings must be inclusive and diverse (Long, 1952). Mosher

(1968) reaffirmed this perspective, advocating for inclusivity and arguing that diversity is not only good for public policy, but also necessary for effective management decision-making, leading to more democratic results (Kranz, 1976).

Because the questions we ask shape reality (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006), it is imperative that we co-create inquiry that helps us better understand how to prevent discriminatory behaviors like Islamophobia from occurring in the first place. If discrimination does emerge, managers need to be prepared to refute its endorsement and become agents for positive change. While the sociopolitical context is complex and riddled with tension and mixed messages, those who live in a democracy have the power to establish systemic transformation through scholarship, practice, and teaching. Academics and practitioners must work together to fortify efforts to support adult moral development in organizational settings. This work offered an experiential learning process to address the complexities of changing populations, suggesting that every organizational member can be influential in shaping a new narrative, one that encourages inclusivity and promotes understanding.

Future research must explicitly pursue the short- and long-term implications of Islamophobia, both in the context of workplace environments, as well as in shaping the broader community. Studies deconstructing the complexities of what it means to be Muslim in the U.S. will promote awareness and empathy for cross-religious struggles. Research is a tool to prompt the development of frameworks that honor multiple ways of knowing from different vantage points. Critical ethnographies on the realities of Islamophobia for Muslims are integral to human evolutionary progression. Transnational studies and collective discourse are necessary if we hope to prevent the escalation of Islamophobia and to effectively deal with the implications of those being discriminated against. A lack of scholarship in this realm makes it difficult to manage heterogeneous populations with competing values, beliefs that may drive alternative norms that remain unspoken or tacit.

As warring factions continue to drive devastating effects, like the Syrian border crisis and Palestinian conflict, there is every reason to believe that global migration will continue. Choosing to ignore the changing face of any nation is unrealistic. A sense of urgency exists, calling for attention to emerging forms of discrimination. Organizational members must work together to prevent behaviors that demean personal beliefs, traditions, and cultural values in the workplace. Everyone has a right to achieve their goals in an environment that fosters respect and inclusion.

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