



ACTION RESEARCH, DIALOGUE, AND THE AMERICAN MOSQUE

A journey of heuristic inquiry into community-based action research – A prelude to intra-Muslim community dialogue: The case of the American mosque in which collectivism meets individualism and in which tradition meets conviction

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Abstract

At the core of *community-based action research* is the understanding that social research is neither neutral nor subjective. The researcher acts as a facilitator to invite community members to participate as co-researchers motivated to create positive change in their community. The terminology, rationale, and methodology of participative action research and community-based action research are discussed.

After “9-11” my core research question was to understand how to increase unity and support positive growth in the complexity of American Muslim communities. When a community is in transition, higher levels of uncertainty and chaos are perceived as threats or conflicts by some and as new opportunities by others. My focus is to study how American Muslims organize and associate, and introducing dialogic methods that may improve the ways these Muslims communicate and relate to one another. The study is guided by two basic principles: 1) To cause no harm to the community, and 2) to adhere to Muslim principles which the whole community accepts.

This action research is a dynamic process in that not only does it affect the community but, also, the researchers are continually changed by the process. The “primary heuristic researcher” as well as the participating “co-researchers” are exposed to new understandings as they progress together in cycles of learning. This paper discusses the elements, the rationale, and the methodology of heuristic research. Through a series of on-going in-depth cycles of interviews and analysis, deeper understandings emerge as more community members are invited to dialogue. Stakeholders enter the dialogue with their particular cultural perspectives and worldviews which represent particular political and social agendas either for change or for retaining the status quo.



Examples and insights from participative action research with the Muslim community in Albuquerque as it builds a new mosque are discussed. Topics for dialogue identified: How do cultural differences, power differences, and differences of opinion affect human relationships and modes of interaction in times of change? How can the atmosphere in the mosque be made more inclusive and more welcoming to groups and individuals who perceive themselves as marginalized and silenced by the dominant culture(s)? What are the relationships – their benefits and challenges – when immigrant Muslims meet American converts in the mosque; and how can they be improved? To summarize, this action research engages with the meeting of worldviews in the American mosque: when collectivism meets individualism and when tradition meets conviction.



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Introduction

Consider this analogy taken from holistic medicine: In living complex organizations, the creative process of change is continuous and unpredictable. This change is what can promote the transformative process of healing. In homeopathy¹, there are two primary principles: The first is that healing can be promoted by introducing into a sick person a remedy which carries a signature or an energetic pattern that would cause the same illness in a healthy person. The second homeopathic principle is that the remedy is particularly effective when used in extremely small dosages that are “prepared” in a particular way (Vithoulkas 1980). The present article suggests various approaches to community dialogue and applications of dialogic methods that function like remedies to strengthen the vitality of communities and further develop better Muslim communities in America. As you read this article, please reflect on the analogy of the two homeopathic principles mentioned above.

Theoretical approach: The theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning

The theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Cronen, Chen et al. 1988) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for the study of culture² and communication. The problematic aspect in theorizing the link between human communication and culture and in conducting intercultural communication research is the bias due to cultural orientation inherent in the existing theories, which, in our case, is always the Western U.S. orientation. The strength of CMM lies in its attempt to critically address this problem. It

¹ Homeopathy is branch of alternative medicine.

² Culture in the present context is understood in its very broad meaning. Here, culture can include a variety of human communities, organizations, and corporation, and each culture can contain sub-cultures within it.



allows politics of public recognition that respect both the unique individual identities of people as well as respecting disadvantaged groups and cultures (Taylor, Appiah et al. 1994). The CMM approach supports democracy of multiculturalism that opens equal public discourse to disadvantaged groups who are able to articulate and defend their own positions. It gives access and permission to narrate and articulate cultural and national discourses different from the dominant discourses of the West (e.g. Orientalism) (Said 1978; Said 1994; Loomba 1998).

CMM defines cultures by the total actions of their members and therefore cultures are dynamic and always in a flux. Both internal and external influences are always at work. Cultures are constructed by their diverse and multiple elements which must operate in harmonic unison. Cultural elements are not only the visible elements of the social construct but also the more hidden aspects of culture represented by multiple individual and group identities. The culture also includes the totality of the critical positions that are generated, not only by scholars and philosophers, but also by diverse groups and individuals within that culture. CMM attempts to critically address the problem of a (Western) cultural bias inherent in any theoretical approach.

CMM postulates a holistic system approach to cultures, to communities, and to the act of intercultural communication itself. When members of diverse cultures collaborate together they have the possibility of becoming more intercultural. The intercultural communication research activity itself is a social practice that impacts the entire system as it becomes an integral part of the cultural process. The researcher must enter the cultural system and become an actor therein, participating with members of that culture. Thus, not only does the action of the researcher affect and change the culture, that culture also transforms the researcher (Cronen, Chen et al. 1988).

As a result understanding that the act of research itself affects and changes the holistic system under investigation, researchers now have an added ethical obligation. The change caused must be deemed beneficial to the research participants or at least cause them no harm. In line with such responsibility, “utilization focused” research and evaluation (Patton 1997) advocates a process of educating and supporting the participating culture or community as part



of the inquiry. Similarly, in community-based action research³ (Stringer 1999), intervention in the community is done in collaboration with community members who function as co-researchers and share decision privileges as to what directions the research must take. Again, the assumption here is that since research activity is going to affect the community system, the researcher has the responsibility to actively and purposefully cause a positive impact on the community by means of the research process.

Heuristic research (Moustakas 1990), also a theoretical approach that resonates with the CMM perspective, is used in the present research. The theoretical assumption here is that since the researcher can never be objective or impartial, the researcher consciously initiate the research from subjective position. Then, other participants who come with their own subjective perspectives and who act as co-researchers help to arrive at results that are more balanced.

Heuristic research

According to Bakhtin, an individual is engaged in two separate categories of on-going conversation. An inner dialogue or an "inner speech" takes place within the individual and dialogue with others is a social act in the world (Anderson 1994; Baxter 2004). The inner speech is basically a subjective reality that can be tested, readjusted, and refined in the reality of social dialogue with others. The two types of conversation are interrelated. Inner speech can affect change in social discourse while dialogue with others can change and transform the inner dialogue. Heuristic research (Moustakas 1990) negotiates between the two realms of conversation. The research begins as an intense relationship that the researcher has with the subject of inquiry or the burning question. The research is focused through "self-dialogue" and "self reflection" as key research questions emerge and become pertinent.

Next, the heuristic researcher must enter the holistic system in which the social research takes place. There, the researcher must find a participating ally that can act as a co-

³ More detailed discussion about Stringer's community-based action research is forthcoming.



researcher and shed new light on the topic of the research. The co-researcher will also come from a subjective perspective, and through mutual dialogue the researchers will arrive at new and deeper understandings. Now the researcher can go back to self-dialogue and inner speech to assess what have changed, and how perspectives have shifted. When the period of inner reflection and analysis is complete, and the new understandings are part of the researcher's inner world, it is time for new dialogues with others in the target system of research. New participants can join and act as co-researcher. Understandings become deeper and more meaningful. These cycles of heuristic research consist of periods of dialogue with co-researchers in the "world" followed by periods of inner reflection and reassessment of subjective positions. The researchers must go through inner transformations as they reassess their positions in order for the research to expand and transform.

A Journey into Action Research

We can no longer view the world as Descartes and Laplace would have us do, as 'rational onlookers,' from the outside. Our place is within the same world that we are studying, and whatever scientific understanding we achieve must be a kind of understanding that is available to participants within the process of nature, i.e., from inside. (Toulmin 1982)

In post-modernity, scientific research is considered neither neutral nor subjective. The understanding inherent in Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty (1927) was extended to science in general and demonstrated that the mere act of investigating a phenomenon changes the phenomenon itself. Furthermore, the nature of the research and the actual research questions that are put forth affect the phenomenon that is investigated in a particular way and therefore all research is, overtly or covertly, politically motivated. This discussion is not unique only to scientific research of the natural world but to social research as well. In fact, the postmodern approach is to move away from being limited by traditional scientific disciplinary boundaries and toward addressing research from a transdisciplinary perspective (Bellah, Madsen et al. 1985).



As a stepping stone to the “journey into action research” I present you with three interlinking basic arguments: First, as a researcher one must understand, and not forget, that the nature of all research and the act of asking the research question is political. The researcher always brings along excess baggage of moral perspectives, cultural habits, personal interests, etc. The more one knows himself or herself, the safer they are. Secondly, the act of research affects and changes that which is researched. By entering a system and by acting in it, that system itself is altered. And here comes number three. by entering the field of research, that system also affects and alters the researcher. The researcher enters and is influenced by an unknown reality with new understandings, new perspectives, and new power structures. This is the heuristic component of the research process. And, as I mentioned earlier, these three characteristics of research are interlinked in complex ways. The act of research in the real world is as dynamic as life itself. Just as the action of the researcher affects the world, that world transforms the researcher who again affects the world in a new way, and on it goes.

Historically, in the United States of the 1950s, the concept action research (AR) first emerged in the field of social psychology. Kurt Lewin, founder of The Research Center for Group Dynamics, struggled to gain recognition for applied psychology. Lewin ventured to make a distinction between the traditional laboratory-based research that promoted "pure science" and between a "basic social research". For him basic social research was a type of scientific research that incorporated a motive – solving real problems in the "real world". Lewin talked about useful knowledge and used the term "action" to imply that one can learn about social systems by introducing or enacting change in them – a change for the better. This required the researcher to leave the hallowed space of the laboratory and to investigate real situations with real people who acted in the real world and in real time. He took his practical research work into industry.

Lewin's AR methodology included a series of sequential spiraling three-step feedback loops that consisted of (1) planning, (2) action, and (3) fact-finding. Once theory was put into action, the new findings would be used to rethink the theory, and so on. He argued that in no way was AR less scientific than any other research. Since AR depended on the cooperation and interaction between the people who were investigated and between the social scientists,



Lewin referred to them as "participants" rather than subjects. The participants are the ones who "practice" in the world, and whose practice AR sets out to change. Social scientists entered industry and the workplace in an attempt to solve problems that workers faced and that management could not solve, since that in many cases management was part of the problem. AR established the notion that all the different levels of participants, or stakeholders, must be considered in order to understand the problem. AR employed the favored American approach, pragmatism, assuming that good problem solving was good for everyone involved. But the participants didn't always agree and that brought about the notion of "participative research" (PR).

Participatory research

What came to be known as participatory action research, or participatory research for short, emerged from the South, from the developing countries of the Americas (Brown and Tandon 1983). High rate of poverty, great economic polarities between rich and poor, oppressive dictatorships, and people without political voice were the backdrop for yet another type of application for practical social research. PR was a new format of action research in which the basic assumption, that problem solving is good and beneficial for everyone involved was received with suspicion. The assumption associated with PR was that, in a system of oppression and inequality, what is good for the dominant management and for the powerful is most likely not good or fair for the oppressed and the disadvantaged. Paulo Freire (1996), a major voice for PR, advocated action research in the form of delivering a specialized type of adult education that emphasized dialogue and equality to those who are silenced and oppressed. He theorized that giving a voice and a discourse to silenced oppressed people would transform patterns of oppression in the society.

AR and PR

Although both action researchers and participatory researchers valued similar inquiry practices and preferences, a background of ideological rifts and political differences caused them to be divided into isolated camps with very little scholarly exchange between the two (Brown and Tandon 1983; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). While AR was a process in which



participants took on roles that traditionally were executed by scientists, PR was a process reactive to traditional science. PR proponents, mostly from “developing” countries south of the United States, claimed that traditional science supports the political and economical interests of the dominant colonial powers. Just like their northern colleagues, PR scholars valued useful knowledge, but for them usefulness was understood from a different ideological perspective than the pragmatic AR stance. Like AR, PR advocated inquiry that would effect social change, but they also regarded the traditional social sciences as upholding the political status quo. Participatory researchers wanted their work to empower and emancipate oppressed groups and support a more equal distribution of power by promoting of adult education and by rebuilding social structures. Their basic assumption was the existence of political oppositions and conflict of interests between a dominant oppressor and those oppressed. In contrast, the basic assumption in AR, which was developed in the affluent democratic Western world, was that benefits and wealth are shared by the whole society. Therefore, action researchers had to produce social theories based on collaboration and the reaching of consensus among all stakeholders: managers as well as labor, rich and poor. In reality, action researchers often had to appease management’s interests since management usually sponsored the research initiatives. The emphasis was on solving problems aimed at industrial growth, production efficiency, and improving the bottom line. Naturally, the divide between the two scientific traditions, AR and PR, was substantial and real. However, in today's global reality diffusion is the rule, geographical borders are fluid, and the principles of both AR and PR have become universalized. As industry increased in the "developing" world, AR tagged along. At the same time, a pattern of oppression, power struggle, and inequality are not solely third world phenomena, and applications for PR are universal.

A more recent trend in the literature was to renegotiate and reconsolidate the definitions of AR and PR into a more unified and inclusive approach to the field. The concept of participatory action research (PAR) conveyed this unifying process. Stringer's (1999) *Action Research is practical* book aimed at researchers working in community-based applications. Here, Stringer coined the term *Community-based action research* in which he connected the concept of AR to participation.



Theory and Practice

How one explains the relationship between theory and development of practice is at the root of understanding action as a tool of research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Gustavsen 2001). The Lewinian position was that theory and practice were directly related, and therefore theory could be tested by development of practice, which in turn would provide fresh findings to reconstruct theory. Habermas disagreed with this position and argued that theory and development of practice are different dimensional discourses. He said that while theory tries to represent truth, developing practice has to do with people's practical interests, and therefore, AR was not a valid scientific methodology. A third position, that of "praxis" (Freire 1996), mediates between the two positions to theory and action. Praxis occurs when development of practice for the benefit of its practitioners is the goal of research, and theory is needed to guide this process of action.

Participation, and the problem of participation in science and research

For traditional social scientists who were expected to be neutral and objective observers, it was a major shift to have to collaborate with the non-scientific public. Instead of being the subjects of observations, participants became co-partners in research, replacing the traditional role of the researcher. Not only were these new partners in research not familiar with scientific approaches, methods, and analysis, but they were also individuals with their own interests, with their own cultures, and with their own different types of knowledge. The idea that science is objective must be, and mostly has been, discarded. It is assumed not only that the researcher's culture and worldview affect, whether consciously or unconsciously, the way data are analyzed and interpreted, but also that the entire research process (including what to investigate, where to collect data, and who to collect it from) is affected by personal and other biases. With the introduction of participation into the research equation, researchers were not only confronted with the reality of their own biases, but they also had to consider and to negotiate with the interests, the politics, and the cultures of the participants. The voice of the participants, and how loud it is, has become a research issue. How much participation, or how much loss of control, was the researcher willing to accept? Who were acceptable participants and how much voice and power were they allowed? Was the researcher willing to become one



of the participants? What methods of communication were used to facilitate collaboration in the research? The ways such questions were answered dictated the nature of the research and the role of the participants in it.

Power and levels of participation

Participation has to do with power sharing and therefore has political implications. Power sharing means mutual responsiveness of all participants in regards to their respective positions of power and how this power is shared. To understand participation one must also identify the nature of communication that best facilitates participation. Participatory democracy, for example, implies that the public actively participates in the decision making process of governing through communication, and that there is a level of mutual responsiveness between those who govern and the public. Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action describes participatory democracy in ideal terms in which people engage in "ideal speech situation" within the "public sphere" in order to effect social change (Jacobson and Storey 2004). In reality participation is not ideal. One must consider cultural differences, differing interests and power structures, and imperfect democratic standards among participants. Also, in relationship to research, the level of participation that is allowed to different stakeholders may have to be compromised. For example, participants may be allowed involvement in only one or only a few stages of the research (such as implementation, design, data collection, analysis, and reporting). Finally, funding sources are also considered research participants. Funding providers can have considerable influence on the distribution of power in research.

The Participatory Worldview and AR

Reason and Bradbury (2001) introduced a unified model to better define AR within its diversity. Their model demonstrates the "participatory worldview" (or paradigm) that is based in a reflexive "subjective-objective" ontological perspective (also see Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). The participatory worldview does not accept the dichotomy of having to either take a modernist positivist perspective or to side with postmodernists by negating any non-relative reality. Rather, the participatory worldview claims a "third possibility" perspective which balances the two and synthesizes them. The central theme of the participatory worldview is



that of individuals in on-going holistic relationships of participation with one another. This relationship is based in a mutual and flowing pragmatic action between the participants, which continuously generates knowledge and new ways of knowing. This action, coupled with knowledge, yields power that manifests as a political statement. Through participation and collaboration, power is being shared in a more equal and democratic fashion, not only in research, but also as an emancipatory action of praxis. Finally, the participatory worldview is about the spirit and making it whole, and about arriving at the meaning and purpose of action in the world.

(Diagram here)

Reason and Bradbury's (2001) unified AR model is a circular model that represents the five basic characteristic elements of AR. The image of the circle gives the model a sense of wholeness and fluidity. At the center of the AR model is a real world experience in which individuals are practicing and developing together. Development of practice is the central theme. The other four elements of AR are on the circumference of the circle, each one associated with the central theme in a reflexive relationship. These four elements are: (1) AR deals with practical issues (2) to create practical and useful knowledge, (3) through participation based in equality and power sharing by people who practice in the world, and (4) that the new knowledge that is shared is emancipatory and optimistic, that is, it can free the human spirit toward a better and flourishing future.

Conclusion

Action research was a bridge to bring social science to participate in the world that created it in the first place and at a time when positivism is not the accepted paradigm any more. This essay demonstrated how, through a historical process of synthesis and through human development, scientists and researchers attempted to claim their humanity and to take an active role in the world. The action researcher, usually a trained social scientist and perhaps also a practitioner, must not necessarily be a representative for "science". First and foremost, she is a participant in life and a human being. As a trained researcher, she will most likely be guided by the three questions of inquiry concerning the nature of truth: ontology,



epistemology, and methodology. As a human participant, she must also ask questions of a fourth category – axiological questions concerning value. For example: What should be valued in the human life? What is the value and purpose of life? And what is the value of knowledge itself (Heron and Reason 1997)? Although classical inquiry does not include the axiological question, from an AR perspective and within the participatory worldview, axiology cannot be left out. Instead, axiology must be the guiding question for any research. Within the on-going participatory conversation that is aimed at emancipating the human spirit and helping it to flourish, science must be just another language, another voice in the conversation. Only if theory and research are useful and helpful voices that could further the flourishing of the human spirit, should they be welcome participants.

The American Muslims

Community Dialogue and Empowerment-Participation Within American Muslim Communities: A Community-Based Action Research

The American Muslim community⁴ functions as a living complex organization which develops, grows, and matures. Part of the complexity of the American Muslim community (AMC) is its dual nature. It is an integral part of the American public sphere but at the same time it is also a part of the Muslim World. The American Muslims are an extremely diverse group that mirror the great diversity of the global Muslim world itself (Esposito 1998; Haddad 1998; Nyang 1999; Nyang 2004). This is a unique American phenomenon because there is nowhere in the Muslim World that such a diversity has existed except once a year, for one week, on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. There, the same kaleidoscope of cultures, races, ethnicities, and ideologies converges in the millions to manifest the unity of Islam. However, there is a great difference between the two. During the week of Hajj, Muslims maintain harmony and religious unity as they focus on their common faith and common spiritual goals.

⁴ The term American Muslim community is used in different contexts. In some instances it refers to the whole Muslim community in America while in other instances it refers to a specific local Muslim community in America.



In America, containing and maintaining this living jigsaw puzzle of a community – a diverse minority group in flux within the American experience – presents these Muslims with great challenges and with many unanswered questions.

The community's mosques, local markets and schools function as spaces where both immigrants and native-born Americans meet. The native-born group consists of both converts to Islam and those who are born Muslim. Presently, American Muslims are challenged both by how the dominant American culture perceives the Muslim community and by how Muslims perceive themselves. Much of the challenge experienced in the Muslim American community is intensified by the group's cultural and historical diversity. Various levels of interculturally-based conflicts as well as moral conflicts are identified within many of the Muslim communities in America and present a threat to communities' well being. At the same time, the desire of Muslims for religious communal support binds communities together. Despite their great diversity, still they claim distinct identity.

More than any other institution, the local mosque is at the center of the Muslim community, and the way each mosque is organized reflects the nature of that community. Nyang (1999) identified four typical categories of leaderships in mosques and in other Islamic institutions: (1) A charismatic leader or "*amir*" who directs all affairs. (2) A corporate-type board of trustees that directs the affairs of the mosque. (3) A satellite mosque whose director or directors are identified with a national or international group (such as the NOI). And (4) an independent community mosque governed by its members who practice the Islamic group consensus process of "*shura*".

American Muslims: a Rainbow Community that Cannot Assimilate.

Only a small portion of American Muslims actually attends the mosques, which reflects the avowed identity of the Muslims and their patterns of adaptation to the American culture. Accordingly, Nyang (Nyang 2004) identified three types of Muslims to which he gave the animal names Grasshoppers, Oysters, and Owls. The *grasshoppers* are those who seek full assimilation in the American melting pot until they are not recognized as Muslims any more. In contrast, the *oysters* create their own cocoon-like, make-believe world of going "back



home" soon or at some point. The oysters work hard for material gain, they attend the local mosque and are involved in its internal politics, and they try to protect their children from external influences. At the same time the oysters shy away from participation in the greater society and in American politics. Somewhat different, the African-American Muslim oysters will have a negative view of the unjust American society from which they want to get away. The *owl* is the bird of wisdom that is able to fly in the dark (the darkness of modernity). The owls are engaged in the society and affect it as Muslims, and are affected by it. They are usually professionals who belong to community organizations and are leaders in their own communities. The African-American owls are Sunni Muslims who do not change their wardrobe and who exercise flexibility. They are interested in interfaith dialogue and work to construct Islamic institutional infrastructure within a pluralistic American society.

Immigrants and Indigenous African-Americans

Although united by common religious principles and items of faith, the relations between the immigrants and the African-American Muslims are divergent, complex, and affected by the great cultural distance between the two (Esposito 1998; Haddad 1998). While the general interests of the immigrants are politics, Islamic religiosity and economic freedom, the African-Americans are more concerned with social justice, confronting oppression, community building and spiritual yearning. As a result of racist biases against black people in many of the cultures of the immigrant Muslims, and their strong desire for power and status that is also culturally based, many immigrants look down on African-American Muslims, shunning them as fringe elements. Ironically, many of the same immigrants feel themselves marginalized, stereotyped, threatened, and powerless in their new environment. Since they came from countries that allowed little political freedom for their citizens, they are socially passive and politically silent. The African-Americans, however, are socially active and visible in their communities and neighborhoods. For them, their Islam is a source of spiritual and political identity that gives them strength to confront issues of race, social injustice, and crime. Although African-American Muslims had turned to immigrants for knowledge of the religion and for instruction in it, they also started to question many of the immigrants local-cultural biases of Islam. They began to seek the pure Islam elsewhere and within themselves.



In contrast, non-African-American converts are generally not organized into groups, although many of them joined Sufi schools or are influenced by them. These converts integrate into local mosques and communities, but they also tend to be more individualistic in their approach to Islam, and they may experience reverse segregation by not belonging to any of the immigrant groups or to the African-Americans.

The Relationships Between American Muslims and the Greater Society

The results are marginalization and stereotyping of the Muslims in the American society, which has left the Muslims confused and frustrated. The three prototypical relational approaches have been discussed above. The majority of grasshoppers tried to assimilate and disappear by marrying into the mainstream and by changing their names while the mainstream reciprocated with a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude. Islamist⁵ leaders appeal to the oysters with two narratives: One is to leave the lands of the non-Muslims and to struggle to achieve a Muslim state back home. The other narrative is to stay but not to assimilate, and to build segregated Muslim communities. The owls, however, are fully engaged in the "public square". For them, the way to live as American Muslims is to adopt what is beneficial and, at the same time, to hold onto what is also beneficial and to what is essentially Muslim. The owl attitude is to transform and to change the greater society by exemplifying their morality and humanity and the universal Muslim codes of life. They are busy constructing American Muslim institutions while participating in the public square politically and socially.

More recently, 9-11 and its aftermath of war, fear of terror, and media distortion of public opinion, have had the catastrophic effect of waking up the Muslims (not unlike the effects on the Bosnian Muslims of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, on the Jews after the Holocaust, and on the American Germans after the two World Wars). The grasshoppers have been made to remember that they are Muslims no matter how assimilated they are. The oysters have had to rethink their isolation and the ramification of these events on their identity. In a way, 9-11

⁵ They have a nationalistic political view of Islam



burst their balloon of the myth of going back home. Those who stayed, which were the great majority, must have realized that in spite of all the great hardships that were added to their lives, America was their home and that there was no other place for them to go. The owls had to reconstruct newer and better bridges and to educate Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Dialogue and American Muslim Communities

Various forms of community dialogue have been used successfully to address conflict, concerns, and other issues in various communities in the United States and elsewhere (Wilcox 1994; PDC 2001; Spano 2001; Barge 2003; HP 2003; PCP 2003; Lowry and Littlejohn 2004). Participatory action research projects that centered around public and community dialogues yielded interesting lessons and useful results⁶. However, in the case of American Muslim communities more research and further systematic experimentation with these methods of community dialogue and other forms of dialogic conversations are needed. As a communication scholar who is an American Muslim, I'm of the inclination that methods of community dialogue can be employed by Muslim communities in support for dealing with the challenges that they face today. These communication methods must be specifically fitted to the needs of specific communities and their specific situations as we further study the AMC. At the same time, due to the unique characteristics of American Muslim communities, conducting participative action research about dialogue in these settings can add to our knowledge about using dialogue in other human communities.

A communication perspective approach

From a "communication perspective" (Littlejohn and Domenici 2001; Pearce and Pearce 2004), dialogue is not primarily aimed at resolving conflict or as a means of erasing differences, but rather, it creates a type of public space in which people can engage in a special kind of positive conversation with each other. It is a communication space that is

⁶ Two dialogue projects in particular guided my work: they are the Cupertino Community Dialogue Project (Spano 2001), and the Hope model that was used in the Imagine Chicago Project (Barge 2003).



characterized by mutual confirmation and mutual respect. Littlejohn (2003) differentiated between first-order and second-order changes, in which the former involves a change of opinion and the latter depicts transformation in the nature of human relationships, which is the primary aim of dialogue. Dialogue is about creating new relationships between people who usually do not communicate with each other – and who, when they do, communicate in an adversarial or in an I-it (Buber 1958) manner. In many American Muslim communities one can find such adversarial relationships between culturally and ethnically diverse groups and between ideologically opposing factions. As a result, Muslims from marginalized groups could stay away from the community’s public sphere altogether, while others will engage in various levels of moral and intercultural conflicts. These relationships are mostly habitual and take the form of specific cultural behaviors. For communities to better support their membership, these historical, mostly unconscious, relationships must be transformed. At the same time, American Muslims are increasingly calling for more unity among their ranks, and for a coming together through better understanding of their diversity (Hamza Yusef, Imam Zaid Shakir, and others). Dialogue may provide the public context needed for this coming together, but it has to be approached skillfully, gently, and with great patience. To engage a whole community in a general public dialogue meeting too early may be a mistake (Wilcox 1994). In fact, an open community public dialogue meeting of Muslims may not be the best approach when less formal, smaller dialogues, could be more effective. Furthermore, dialogue must be considered as an educational process for those who are willing to engage in it. It can also be considered as a healing process that must be introduced gradually and in a collaborative manner.

Dialogue as education

Dialogue as a vehicle for community building and healing and dialogue as an educational tool go hand in hand. A public dialogue that is an open meeting for all to participate may be problematic. A portion of the community may not be ready to participate in dialogue and that could disrupt the success of the gathering. Successful and positive experiences with dialogic events are essential for Muslims to be willing to adopt new ways (Marcella). In preparation, dialogue must be utilized as an educational tool for community



growth and development. Those who wish to participate must agree together to abide by basic dialogical ground-rules and must be willing to be instructed and trained about how to engage in dialogue. According to Freire (Freire 1996), dialogue, as an educational tool, can only succeed when participants share feelings of hope, faith, humility, and love for others and are able to think critically and analytically. These precious human characteristics must somehow be nurtured and allowed to develop. In the case of the American Muslims, their common love for their Islamic heritage and faith must also be added to this list. Through patiently introducing dialogue to those who wish to participate, and through careful design of the process, the community as a whole can benefit. Initial dialogue groups must include members who have common agendas such as common interests, similar social status, similar education, age, gender, ethnicity, religious convictions, already-established friendships, etc. (Walker 2004). Dialogue facilitators and community organizers can agree on the level of homogeneity that is required for a particular stage in the dialogic process. Personalized study and reference material must be provided to participants in advance in order to support the critical analysis process. In addition, dialogue facilitators and directors must be able to elicit the trust and respect of the participants and to provide a safe and neutral environment. Educational dialogue design can be quite a complex process that requires contextual insights, intuition, and out-of-the-box thinking. At the same time, one must not consider the educational dialogue process just outlined as divorced from the on-going community dialogue. Rather, education is an integral part of preparation for dialogue as well as the outcome of dialogue.

Hidden roots of conflict

In many cases, the apparent causes of conflict are not the whole story. There may be other hidden causes that are beneath the surface – causes that people do not talk about or perhaps are not even conscious of their existence. This is especially so when issues of contention have been around in a community for a long period, after stories shift and change and common memories are lost. Through dialogic conversations and group discussions, these deeper issues can surface and be considered and/or reconsidered. Taboo topics that are not discussed at all may be at the roots of other issues. In the Cupertino public dialogue, the subject of race came out very late in the dialogue although it was the central issue (Spano



2001). Likewise, among the American Muslims there are key issues such as: racism, spousal abuse, and education that are rarely discussed or not discussed at all, but may be central to the understanding of issues in the community. Here, I do not advocate that all hidden issues must be discussed or even mentioned, but facilitators must prepare themselves for these eventualities.

The way issues are framed is also key to the type of obstacles to dialogue that may exist and to the range of possible dialogic solutions to these obstacles. In Barge's (2003) report from the Imagine Chicago project, new framing for old problems were constructed through the introduction of a new vocabulary of hope, affirmative discourse, and the use of creative imagination. Such examples are of import if one is to understanding the transformative potential of dialogue.

Participation and power

To effectively invite a community to dialogue and to start and maintain a community dialogue, such a project must be a participative endeavor. The nature of dialogue is participative and collaborative as it empowers the individuals that are involved. Case studies and project evaluations indicated that higher "levels of participation"⁷ were indeed positively related to the success level of community dialogues. Through a higher level of participation, community members felt more empowered, participated more, sustained the dialogue longer, and owned the dialogic process. Of course, the level of participation is not something that can be assigned, but rather, it has to be negotiated with the community and its members who must agree to actively participate. As more decision-making power and control over the process is relinquished to the community and its members, in return they must share more of the work load, take on more responsibility, and be increasingly involved in the process. Due to the participatory nature of the dialogic process, the role of the action researcher or the initiator of a dialogue project must be that of facilitator, advisor, and support person, acting behind the

⁷ The level of control and power that participants have over the process

scenes. At the same time, effort must be made not to allow those already in power to dominate the process but, rather, one must encourage an increase in power sharing among participants and work towards a more egalitarian process.

Dialogue and community issues are contextual - how to begin

In the context of American Muslim communities it must be emphasized that each community is locally autonomous and unique, with its own particular issues, concerns, and conflicts. Consequently, the approach to dialogue in various AMCs must be uniquely tailored to particular needs and to existing situations. As mentioned elsewhere, the activities of AMCs are typically organized around a local mosque. Nyang (Nyang 1999) identified four types of American mosques according to the types of organizational leaderships that they employ. In general, community mosques are organized and operated in a hierarchical manner. Therefore, in order to initiate a community dialogue, the first stage of contacts and planning must be made with the leadership; whether it is a board of directors, an individual leader, a national organization, or another form of political structure. The first step must be formal and informal meetings with the leadership to enlist their active support for dialogue in the community. Informal meetings with key individuals in the community must be conducted to initiate personal relationships, to introduce the benefits of dialogue, and to collect initial information about what may be the important issues and concerns in the community. Consequently, a small workshop can be conducted to demonstrate to community leaders what dialogue is and how it could be used. It is best if the idea to conduct such a demonstration would come from the leadership itself. The workshop would not only be a forum to educate the leadership about dialogue, but also an opportunity for them to engage in a mini-dialogue about what they see as the benefits and barriers to community dialogue and/or, if appropriate, they could even engage in an initial dialogue about issues and conflicts that are of concern to them and to the community as a whole.

How to approach dialogue and participatory democracy from an Islamic perspective

Like most people, the majority of Muslims are not familiar with dialogic conversational practices. Generally, Muslims tend to communicate using persuasive communication, debate,



and argumentation. Many Muslims tend to accept authority uncritically and may also question whether Western democratic practices are in harmony with Islamic teachings. Therefore, it is important to establish early that, from a Muslim's perspective, dialogue is indeed positively linked with Islamic principles and that, in most cases, democracy, especially as a participative practice, can be practiced by Muslims without abandoning their religious values and beliefs. One way to establish a Muslim perspective on dialogue would be to convene, possibly on a national level, Muslim scholars and leaders with different viewpoints and to conduct a dialogue about these topics – a dialogue about Muslim dialogue. And on the local level, it is important to include as part of any trainings and workshop activities a presentation that will outline the benefits as well as the permissibility of both dialogue and participative democracy. In the same vein, it is important to train Muslims who are respected members of the community as dialogue facilitators. This must be done as soon as possible. The idea of employing an external team of non-Muslim facilitators or even consultants in an all-Muslim dialogue may be disliked by many Muslims.

How to proceed with dialogue in a Muslim community

Once there is sufficient active support for dialogue among community leaders, a next step toward dialogue can be bringing community members together in small groups to define the issues and concerns in the community. It might be helpful, but not necessary, to address an on-going conflict that is not too extreme. In the Cupertino dialogue project (Spano 2001), the Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC) began their activities by conducting a series of small group interviews to identify community issues of concern. In a diverse Muslim community, it will be advisable to convene a number of informal small groups that have a homogeneous make-up as to ideology and cultural background. These groups would meet separately in non-threatening and informal environments where facilitators would introduce the basic principles of dialogue and members would discuss their concerns. The findings from these group interviews could be the foundation for initiating a community-based action research (Stringer 1999). From there, the dialogue can become as complex and as beneficial as the community allows it to be. The Cupertino dialogue project (Spano 2001) is an example of a community-based action research that unfolded over several years, based on the original Lewinian three-step action research



cyclic principle of "look", "think", and "act" (Stringer 1999). Of course, in reality, the unfolding of a complex community-based action research dialogue can never be as simple and as linear as the model suggests.

The AMC where collectivism meets individualism and tradition meets conviction

The mosque and the other public spaces defined by the AMC are meeting places where diversity finds expression and where differences are negotiated, hopefully towards a more united whole. One perspective of this meeting of cultures and world views is “West meets East” as immigrants and American-born Muslims are exposed to each other and impact one another.

"O people, We created you from male and female and We made you into races and tribes for you to recognize (collaborate with) each other.

(Qur'an, 49; 13)

According to the Qur'anic worldview, the differences within and between human societies, be they on the basis of gender, race, tribe, nationality, religion, or social status, were created intentionally and with a purpose. This purpose can be viewed as a journey of spiritual transformation by attaining self-knowledge through communication with others who are different. Qur'anic guidance for understanding God's work in His creation is to travel among other peoples and understand their histories, their cultural perspectives and outcomes. Here, travel expenses are minimal!

The Qur'an teaches that all human beings are born in a natural spiritual state and that through the influence of our particular parents and due to our particular social and cultural orientations and biases, people lose this original state as they become members of a particular



social group. Similarly, contemporary thinkers and psychologists speak of a conditioned self or ego (Taylor 1989). The conditioning of the ego can be viewed as a barrier to communication while a greater degree of freedom from conditioning can lead to better communication. The socially conditioned ego is reinforced continuously and unconsciously by our social construct, by the media, and by mass communication. Intercultural communication and being exposed to cultural diversity and international intercultural experiences are all useful tools to de-condition the ego by pushing the personal social envelope of the self-bubble to new limits. An important aspect of Occidental cultural cognitive conditioning which permeates every aspect of our science, our politics and worldview and which creates a cultural communication gap with the majority of the population of the world is the equating of logic with absolute truth (Hall, 1976b). Hall (1976b) explains that "the natural act of thinking is greatly modified by culture". Different cultures use different, equally legitimate, ways of thinking. "Western man uses only a fraction of his mental capabilities." This is because "we in the West value one of these ways above all others — the one we call logic, a linear system that has been with us since Socrates." In the dominant Western voice of science and technology logic is "synonymous with the truth...the only road to reality" (p. 9). Hall goes on to describe the cultural paradox of East and West and how "both systems have strengths as well as weaknesses" (p. 20). By seeking out cultural systems that are different and by carefully measuring one's reactions to the cultures of others, we will begin to recognize our own cultural limits.

In order for a person to become increasingly intercultural, they need to participate in a more inclusive cultural system than their own. The process of intercultural transformation always entails a certain level of stress-adaptation growth dynamics which is part and parcel of



the intercultural adaptation experience (Kim, 1988). Intercultural communication can be used as a tool for growth and transformation of individuals and communities. Awareness of one's cultural boundaries and of the systemic cultural matrix that limits a fuller realization of human potential can be developed through the intercultural communication experience with members of cultures that are different.

The individualistic collectivistic cultural dimension is frequently used to describe cultural differences between East and West. When applied to the real cultural makeup of AMC, these categories can seem somewhat superficial yet they are useful. In general, Muslim immigrants value their family ties and ethnic affiliations much more than Muslims who were raised in Western cultures. This is especially true for Western converts to Islam who were raised by non-Muslim families in the West. While immigrant Muslims tend to establish and put great emphasis on their own racial co-cultures within the AMC, Western-born converts tend to be more isolated from both their non-Muslim cultural roots and from Muslims of other ethnicities. In many cases, Muslim converts who are seeking more collectivistic relationships and closer ties with others in their faith-based community will feel unfulfilled.

Another cultural difference between Muslim immigrants and converts that needs to be studied more is what I call: where tradition meets conviction. Converts, by and large, are rebels that severed traditional relations for religious conviction. From an American traditional perspective, this act of rebellion is not unusual. American culture is known to support people leaving their parents' church in search of religious conviction. Islam from its inception has always supported conversion, and the Renegades (European converts to Islam) were a well-known phenomenon in the Ottoman period. However, I argue that for many immigrant



Muslims, relationships with converts are complex and possibly difficult. While immigrants are holding onto their traditional roots in the face of wild American cultural influences, rebellion and conversion by conviction can be commendable on one hand but also threatening on the other.

Dr. Sulayman Nyang who recently visited the Muslim community in Albuquerque suggested that American Muslims must apply the immigration model of the time of the Prophet in the Medinan period. The immigrants who came from Mecca had a very complex, yet beneficial, relationship with the new Muslims of Medina, also known as the “helpers”. The immigrants needed the support of the helpers in the new culture but were protective of their more extensive relationship with the Prophet and their already-established religious roots. The new Muslims of Medina, who were comfortable in their own territory, helped the immigrants to settle in Medina while they learned their Islam from the newcomers. However, at times relationships between the two groups were abrasive, as the Meccans felt the strangeness of exile while the people of Medina were put off by the newcomers’ cliquishness. The challenge of the Muslims in America, according to Nyang, is to become united through the diversity and by mutual help. Like the Medinan model that birthed a great and united nation, by combining our diverse gifts transformation is at hand.

What are the relationships – their benefits and challenges – when immigrant Muslims meet American converts in the mosque; and how can they be improved?

The Envision Islam in America and the Albuquerque Case

The Envision Islam in America project (EIIA) is a participative action research focused on using communication methods to support intra-Muslim community dialogue that will



advance peacebuilding. A positive dialogic communication approach within Muslim communities can increase harmony, unity, and mutual understanding when intercultural conflicts and diversity of opinions are present. Thus, the community practice of intra-Muslim dialogue supports and further develops healthier and stronger Muslim communities. As to interfaith dialogue, for it to be successful it must be grounded in healthy and united faith-based communities.

The EIIA project will invite Muslim communities to adopt alternative methods for enhancing positive communication among members within their diversity. It aims to provide a safe and welcoming environment for dialogue among community members, an environment in which they can share concerns and ideas that are of importance to the community as a whole and to members individually. The initial objective of the project is to identify a meeting forum and communication format that is acceptable to the participating community members and that accommodates diversity within the community. An accommodating environment for dialogue provides a power-balanced atmosphere that encourages a variety of community dialogic conversations to take place and allows people to both express their views and to be listened to. Rather than engaging in polarized debate, community members are encouraged to explore together their differences and their shared concerns in an environment of mutual trust and respect. Within the participating community (or communities), community dialogue format(s) will be developed and implemented in collaboration with community leaders and in harmony with Islamic principles.

Each participating community will be invited to function as co-researchers in this present "community-based action research" (Stringer 1999) project in collaboration with a researcher from the University of New Mexico. The project will permit the researchers to 1) study how community-based action research methods used by other communities apply to Muslim communities in the United States, and 2) how these communication tools can be modified to accommodate the specific needs of the collaborating community(s). Can communication methods associated with community-based action research produce greater positive human understanding among Muslims in America? Answering this question can enhance understanding human communication in general as well as understanding Muslim



communities in America in the present political atmosphere of fear and confusion. Hopefully, within the present chaos and imbalance are the seeds of transformation to greater harmony.

The Muslim community in Albuquerque was chosen for the EIIA pilot project not only for convenience but also because it is a small yet growing community that is going through structural change.

The setting for the Albuquerque EIIA pilot project is a small Muslim community whose members have outgrown their fifteen year old first mosque and are in the process of building a new, much bigger structure on the same property. The Albuquerque community, known as the Islamic Center of New Mexico (ICNM), has also had a difficult time retaining any of the *imams* they hired. Three imams were hired and fired within four years. The last imam left just before the old mosque was dismantled. Now this community congregates in a large temporary tent-structure where sermons and teachings are conducted by various community members while the new mosque is being built.

At a time when a community is in transition, the higher levels of uncertainty and chaos are perceived as threats or conflicts by some and as new opportunities by others. The focus of our present community-based action research (Stringer 1999) is to study how American Muslims organize and associate, and then to introduce methods that have the potential to improve the ways these Muslims communicate and relate to one another. Two “guiding principles” must be followed: 1) the action research must cause no harm to the community and 2) it must adhere to Muslim principles that the whole community accepts. As a heuristic researcher (Moustakas 1990), I am collaborating with key leaders in this community who act as co-researchers. Through a series of on-going in-depth interviews and analysis, deeper understandings emerge as more community members are invited to participate in the Albuquerque EIIA project. With the support, direction, and advice of key community members, we gather, interview, participate in, and observe small groups in conversation. The groups can be organized according to ethnicity, gender, generational status, moral agendas, etc.. These gatherings, as they provide us with new data, also give a voice and provide a safe environment to these various sub-groups within the community. The hope is that these small



group meetings will educate and prepare the ground for future, more exclusive, community dialogues.



Appendix A

Research Questions

- ❖ How are public conversations conducted and what communication protocols are used when Muslims meet? Can changes be introduced and are they desirable?
- ❖ How is the mosque and the community governed and what modes of power distribution exist in the Muslim community?
- ❖ What leadership role does the imam have in the community, what are his powers, and how is the imam selected? What constitutes religious and spiritual teachings?
- ❖ What is the status of Muslim women and what roles do they play in the mosque and in the community? Should the gender issue be raised: why or why not?
- ❖ What are the intercultural communication patterns and challenges particularly regarding differences between immigrant Muslims and American converts to Islam?
- ❖ What are the intercultural communication patterns and challenges for inter-generational relationships among Muslims, whether they are immigrants or American-born, within families and in the community?
- ❖ What are some hidden issues, taboos, and topics that Muslims will not discuss freely? What are the merits and challenges in approaching conflict as a negative '*fitna*' that must be avoided and ignored?

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