

Middle East Dialogue 2015...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

INTERGROUP DIALOGUE AS A JUST DIALOGUE: HOW TO AVOID NORMALIZATION IN CAMPUS DIALOGUES

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The tensions that emanate from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict reach around the globe and heated debates over the struggles of these two peoples are evident on U.S. college campuses (Gross & Williams, 2009; Lopez, 2003; Schworm, 2009; Shibley, 2014). Arab students engage in activism surrounding this conflict through boycott, divestment, and sanction movements (BDS) on campuses (<http://www.bdsmovement.net/>), and student organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine (<http://calsjp.org/about/>). Jewish organizations on campuses often respond to activities and events that criticize the Israeli government, and many debate whether these events are anti-Semitic (Nelson, 2012).

Teaching about this conflict presents particular challenges for faculty or staff that negotiate this highly contested issue in classrooms or campus communities (Buie & Wright, 2010; Gravois, 2004). Intergroup dialogue is one method to address these tensions (Dessel & Ali, 2012a; Dessel & Ali, 2012b; Dessel, Ali, & Mishkin, in press). This social justice pedagogy engages students from two social identity groups with historical conflict in a credit bearing semester-long course that is highly structured and facilitated by trained student peers representing the two identities (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Dessel & Ali, 2012b; Halabi, 2000; Khuri, 2004; Mollov & Lavie, 2001). The curriculum promotes examination of connections between personal and structural power and oppression, and reflection is linked to social action (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007).

Arab students are highly discouraged from engaging in dialogue with Jewish students on many campuses for fear of “normalizing” the occupation (Abu Sarah, 2011). Many Arab student organizations perceive dialogue as a discourse used between two equal sides who are on “the same playing field”, and they deem dialogue between Pro-Israelis and Pro-Palestinians as inappropriate given the immense power disparity between the two sides (Founas & Haydar, 2011). The Palestinian Solidarity Movement discourages college students from engaging in dialogue, specifically when discussing the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, for reasons such as normalization, further targeting of Palestinians, and lack of action. Dialogue spaces are

often either seen as interfaith dialogues, or places where power imbalances are not recognized.

The Arab/Jewish intergroup dialogue course model offered by the Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan that we will present has taken into account these criticisms and directly addresses them. This is done in a number of ways, including but not limited to analyzing power imbalances between the two groups, focusing on the issue of normalization, and dialogue facilitator coaching around identity intersectionality. We will present results of qualitative data analysis that examines normalization in these dialogues. Examples of normalization and quotes from past students illuminate this issue. Specific concepts such as friendship development and empathy are critically examined. We will discuss recent revisions to the curriculum that include increased use of caucus groups, attention to Jewish history of oppression, Jewish privilege and power, and analysis of power held by both Arab and Jewish students. Barriers to Jewish students learning about Palestinian narratives will also be discussed (Dessel et al., in press). We conclude with recommendations for how to create just campus dialogues on this difficult topic.

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