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Narratives and counter-narratives as ways of creating religious tolerance

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This article explored the utilisation of counter-narratives in tertiary education settings with regard to pseudo-events connected to big world events. The occurrence that this article focused on was the pseudo-events connected to the Israel–Hamas war that started in October 2023. These pseudo-events refer to a surge in Islamophobic and anti-Semitic hate crimes in countries outside the warzone. Two narrative examples are given that can be utilised within education settings; however, educators can look beyond the given examples and utilise other counter-narratives. Creating awareness of surges in discriminatory occurrences with the use of counter-narratives may increase humanisation and intersectional awareness in students.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article was written from a religious studies perspective, with the aim of increasing religious tolerance within societies. This article is based on a quantitative literature review and narrative theories.

Keywords: religion; education; tolerance; narrative; counter-narrative; Israel-Hamas War; Islamophobia; antisemitism.

Introduction

There is an observable increase in intolerant behaviours during significant global occurrences. These intolerant behaviours often occur outside the original context and towards groups seen as thematically connected to the occurrence. Examples include but are not limited to anti-Russian and anti-Ukrainian actions because of the Russian–Ukrainian war (Gosling 2023; Teslova 2023) and the anti-Asian movements during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic because of the connection of the virus to China (Human Rights Watch 2020). These intolerant behaviours form the overall background of this article.

Through the digital world, users are linked to a myriad of narratives, including significant global occurrences like war (Plate 2021). While the Israel–Hamas war rages, pseudo-events of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism have surged outside the context of the war (Dumas 2023). These surges are seen online and in person. These pseudo-events constitute the main focal point of this article.

This article aims to showcase how narratives can humanise and de-thematise groups through para-social interaction in counter-narratives. With this aim in mind, narratives are not seen as a 'quick fix' (Gottesman 2017:13–14); instead, they are seen as one of many tools that can be utilised in education settings to promote religious tolerance in societies. The article utilises a quantitative literature review (Efron & Ravid 2018:11) and narrative theories as the methodology. The objective is to promote religious tolerance through counter-narratives within tertiary education settings. As this study utilises a quantitative methodology, it has limitations because it was not tested qualitatively. Educators should always analyse narratives before utilising them in a specific context.

Societies around the world are becoming more pluralistic, and this includes multiple religions within one community (Beyers 2017:1). If pluralistic societies are to co-exist successfully, there needs to be a recognition of equality and a sense of empathy between religions (Beyers 2017:11–13). Religious tolerance can refer to legal paradigms or skill sets used by individuals and society. The debate on what religious tolerance entails is beyond the scope of the article, but the following basic definition applies:

- Tolerance is the building of individual and group soft skills to create better-functioning multi-religious societies. Tolerance skills include humanisation, recognition, empathy and respect towards various people and groups.

Narrative theories

Narratives can be helpful in educational settings. Narrative theories need to be considered to understand why this is the case. This section gives a basic understanding of the applicable theories. It is necessary to understand that narratives in their different mediums can contain harmful information (Gottschall 2021:20). Harmful narratives can include conspiracy theories (Popper 2011:307) and propaganda (Samuel 2021:170), which can lead to concepts such as scapegoating (Robertson 2015:8). These harmful narratives and their effects often play a role within anti-Semitic (Kogan 2017:384; Tarant 2020:123–124, 143) and Islamophobic (Ghani & Awang 2017:76; Ahmad et al. 2021:65) thought patterns and hate crimes. Counter-narratives can promote tolerance towards others, including people who ascribe to various religions (Murrar & Brauer 2017:4).

Simulation theory works on the premise that humans can learn social concepts from narratives just as physical simulations may be learned from simulators, for example, flight or driving simulators (Oatley 2016:619). Barrett (2018:27) expressed that 'Scientific evidence shows that what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell are largely simulations of the world, not reactions to it'. Similarly, indirect simulations in the form of narratives are also a way in which humans experience the world and learn (Oatley 2016:619, 622); this can include learning about and humanising others (Consoli 2018:88). Simulation theory adds value to this article as one can learn and expand one's tolerance skills through narrative.

One of the ways that narratives work as a simulator is through para-social interaction. Humans react to narrative simulations in much the same manner (MRI imaging) as to events happening in the physical world (Consoli 2018:88; Oatley 2016:625, 626). People also react to narrative characters in much the same way as they would to people in the physical world (Murrar & Brauer 2017:3; Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes 2005:92). Increased interaction with others in the physical world can increase tolerance, and similar results can be obtained through interaction with narrative characters (Murrar & Brauer 2017:3–4; Schiappa et al. 2005:96). Counter-narratives with positive para-social interaction involving protagonist characters can have a significant effect on people who view the narrative (Murrar & Brauer 2017:3–4). Identification and cultivation theory works on the premise that if a character is relatable, they may have a more substantial effect on the narrative consumer (Murrar & Brauer 2017:4; Sestir & Green 2010).

The terms 'synthetic', 'memetic' and 'thematic' are used by Phelan and Frow (2022:255–260) mainly to describe theoretical concepts of characters (and information) found in narratives. Synthetic refers to something that is not accurate and to what is experienced by the audience as not real (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256). The memetic refers to the factual or what is experienced as accurate or authentic by the audience (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256). The thematic element is where a character is seen as representing a group (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256), which can have positive or negative implications (Schiappa et al. 2005:94). These theories are essential as the intolerant pseudo-events are often driven by a thematic understanding of all people of a specific group as part of the significant global occurrence. This thematic view does not lean towards humanisation or a memetic understanding of individuals; instead, it creates a synthetic view that can lead to intolerant actions. In a post-secular age, concepts such as religion are more individualised (Beyers 2014:9); valuing individuals outside the collective should also be considered necessary to encourage greater religious tolerance in societies.

The Israel–Hamas war

If educators want to address the pseudo-events that are connected to the Israel–Hamas war, it would be beneficial to have some basic information about this conflict. It is beyond the scope of this article to dissect the conflict, and educators are urged to be well versed in this phenomenon when discussing the pseudo-events. Educators need to consider that some students may be well informed on the matter, and others may be less informed, which will impact class discussions. Many narratives are available through the digital world, primarily through internet narratives. Narratives that are classified as news can be found by utilising search engines with terms such as Israel, Hamas, Gaza and Palestine. Similar search terms can be used in social media by utilising hashtags and including terms such as #terrorism, #war and #apartheid. These narratives connect people who are not part of the war with the phenomena. Websites such as The Encyclopædia Britannica[1] (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2023) can help educators understand the phenomena. The information that educators need to consider includes maps, a historical understanding of the region and knowledge of current affairs. Information should be gathered from various sources, including websites, news and social media, to understand the war and its accompanying narratives.

The pseudo-events

The focus of this article is on the pseudo-events; this should not be seen as indifference to the suffering experienced by people in the war zone. Instead, this article highlights the suffering of people, predominantly minority groups outside of the war zone, who are affected by pseudo-events connected to the significant global occurrence. If educators address the pseudo-events, it would be critical not to get sidetracked by the war narrative but to take the student's attention back to the topic of the pseudo-events. The pseudo-events refer to anti-Semitic and Islamophobic occurrences outside of the warzone. This specific war has a strong religious undertone where Israel is seen as Jewish, and Hamas is seen as an Islamic extremist group (Friedman 2023). These strong religious undertones lead to a thematic understanding of all Jewish people as being connected to the state of Israel and all Muslims as represented by Hamas, Gaza or Palestine. These thematic perpetuations create a dehumanising understanding of people. Therefore, people's

1. https://www.britannica.com/event/Israel-Hamas-War-of-2023.

identities are seen as limited by their possible connection with the larger global occurrence.

Religion should not be utilised as a scapegoat in conflict situations, which are increasingly complex phenomena (Moyaert 2018:12) and may contribute to such a thematic understanding. Not everyone will have this thematic understanding, but the increase in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic phenomena because the start of the war points to this possibility. People who have grave prejudices against these groups may use the war narrative as an excuse to perpetuate their ideologies. The point of utilising narratives in religious education is not necessarily to stop people who are already considered extreme in their ideologies. The point is to counter the narratives that are set out by the extremists who want to perpetuate Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

The hope is to counteract intolerant ideologies from taking root within the general population. Educators are urged to evaluate their context before introducing this subject matter. The goal is never to contribute to societal tension but to help counter the narratives that encourage intolerant behaviours. This may not be favourable in all contexts, especially where tensions are high and propaganda has taken root. Other interventions beyond the article's scope may be needed in such a case. Many people face enormous amounts of narratives daily, which can have complex negative implications (Gottschall 2021:22). These counter-narratives can be one way to help students see the individuals in their communities rather than the theme that narratives may perpetuate.

This paragraph includes information on the pseudo-events. Similar information should be given to students when working with pseudo-events in an educational environment. There has been a rise in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic occurrences; examples of countries where this is the case include but are not limited to China (Kelter 2023), Australia (Dumas 2023), European countries (Benakis 2023), the UK (Rufo 2023), USA (Jung 2023) and South Africa (Klawansky 2023). These anti-Semitic and Islamophobic occurrences include but are not limited to boycotting businesses, hate speech (online or in person), threats of violence (towards people and places), harassment, defacing property, assault and murder (Kelter 2023; Dumas 2023; Benakis 2023; Rufo 2023; Jung 2023; Klawansky 2023). Country leaders have condemned the rise in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate crimes (Benakis 2023; EJC 2023; Fabricius 2023; O'Carroll 2023; Samuels 2023). Political leaders must address these problems and remind the country's people of their civic responsibility towards building tolerant societies (including tolerance towards different religions). The question must be asked if this is enough to stop these pseudo-events, considering that these leaders are contending with a myriad of digital narratives with conflicting messages, leading to overwhelmed audiences (Bazelon 2020).

Counter-narratives

Utilising counter-narratives alongside fact-based learning can be very beneficial, as opposed to only using fact-based learning (Murrar & Brauer 2017:4; Zeiger & Gyte 2021). One of the reasons this may be effective is the 'show don't tell' theory as set out by Gottschall (2021:62, 63); in this, narrative is a more subtle way of getting one's point across. As mentioned previously, the war has strong religious connections, and these affiliations are perpetuated outside of the war zone. The thematic understanding is especially harmful when dehumanisation takes place, and the groups are seen as no more than that one potential intersection. It should be observed that even if people are affiliated with the affected countries or have an opinion on the war, they still have the right to freedom of association (contextually bound). Therefore, it does not allow anyone to discriminate or perpetuate hate against such a person. Counter-narratives can be utilised to increase humanisation and intersectional sensitivity for those who consume the narratives.

This article briefly explores two narratives for their potential use as counter-narratives. The two narratives contain lived experiences of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, respectively. Both narratives are non-fiction social media narratives and are available on YouTube. The narratives would be ideal to use in class as they are compact. This is only if the digital divide allows for the use of digital narratives (see Ünver [2017] and Rahman [2014]) for an explanation of the term digital divide). The narrative events correlate with pseudo-events related to the Israel–Hamas war. The narratives were both created after the start of the war. The narratives are not overtly political but instead focus on the problem of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism outside of the warzone. The main characters in both narratives are strong protagonists; they showcase emotion but not in a manner that provokes pity but instead promotes empathy. Counter-narratives that utilise emotion can be more effective than those that do not (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:375).

Counter-narrative on anti-Semitism

The first narrative showcased the lived experience of an undergraduate student named Eyal Yakoby (The Economic Times 2023).[2] The fact that he is an undergraduate student may increase identification and have a more significant para-social effect if showcased to undergraduate students. He stated that he is an American (The Economic Times 2023), which may also showcase another intersection of his identity. This may lead to a less thematic understanding through para-social interaction. The narrative showcased his experience of anti-Semitic incidents on the USA university campuses and the lack of action from campus leadership concerning the incidents (The Economic Times 2023). As seen under the heading *The pseudo-events*, the rise in anti-Semitic occurrences is not just prevalent in the USA and should not be reduced to phenomena in this region. It should be noted that Jewish people are a one per cent (1%) minority in the US (PRRI 2021), and this may showcase some minority–majority relationships in educational settings.

2. Link to the narrative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvV89KWwujU.

The quality of the video makes it difficult to see whether he is wearing clothing that identifies him as Jewish (e.g. a Kippa). However, he conveyed that the university advised students against wearing clothing that could identify them as Jewish (The Economic Times 2023). Eyal described in detail the violent incidents on his university campus that ranged from vandalism to hate speech (The Economic Times 2023). He used emotive language to describe his own experience and that of his fellow Jewish students (e.g. feeling fearful and unsafe) (The Economic Times 2023); this emotive language may increase humanisation. He described the lack of action from the university to counter the hateful actions (The Economic Times 2023). Thereby, multiple layers of impact and reaction (or lack thereof) towards the incidents are showcased in the narrative. Eyal emphasised the direct correlation between the war, especially Hamas propaganda, and the anti-Semitic events happening on campus (The Economic Times 2023).

Counter-narratives on Islamophobia

The second narrative showcased the lived experience of two women; one is a mother named Shanaz Syeda, and the second is a head teacher named Meherun Hamid (TRT World 2023).[3] Identification may be increased as the women were showcased as mothers and educators, displaying different intersections of their identities (TRT World 2023). It should be observed that this should not limit the humanisation of women only to these roles in society. In the narrative, the women showed care and concern for the children (TRT World 2023); this may also increase identification and humanisation. The narrative takes place in the UK (TRT World 2023), while Islamophobia should not be seen as limited to the geographical region as seen under the heading *The pseudo-events*. In the UK, Muslims are a six per cent (6.5%) minority (Office for National Statistics 2022) and may demonstrate minority–majority relationships in education settings. The narrative revolves around a bomb threat received by a private Islamic preschool (TRT World 2023). This being said, Shanaz conveyed surprise that this happened in the UK (TRT World 2023); that may indicate a sense of safety outside the current situation.

Both women wore Hijabs in the narrative (TRT World 2023); this may also increase tolerance towards women who choose to wear them. They used emotive language (e.g. feeling terrified) to describe their experience (TRT World 2023), which may increase humanisation and improve para-social interaction. The narrative showcased the hateful and dehumanising thought patterns of the person who wrote the letter, as parts of the letter were shown through the clip (TRT World 2023). The narrative showcased the women's reactions, their interaction with police and the support they received from the greater community (TRT World 2023). Meherun related the correlation between the incident and the war (which is also evident in the letter) (TRT World 2023).

3.Link to the narrative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6cJlLDCytk.

Reflections

Ideally, focus groups can be utilised after students have been given the needed information and the narratives have been showcased. Students can be asked to discuss how the narratives impact their understanding of the pseudo-events. Educators can ask questions regarding narrative composition (e.g. character, dialogue and plot) to stimulate class discussion. Students can be asked to reflect on the characters' emotional states and how this impacts their understanding of the phenomena. In the first narrative, it was mentioned that the hate crimes were perpetrated by faculty and students (The Economic Times 2023); students can be asked if this makes a difference to their understanding of the incident. Similarly, students can be asked to reflect on whether the age of the students, who are 7 years and younger, in the second narrative (TRT World 2023) makes a difference to their understanding of the incident. Students can also be asked to reflect on religious clothing within the current phenomena for both groups.

After students have reflected in smaller groups, they can discuss their findings with the class. It should be taken into consideration that educators need to moderate the conversation. In other words, everyone should have equal space to talk, and one person should not dominate the conversation. These narratives are emotive, and strong emotive responses may arise from students. Educators should be sensitive to emotive responses and make sure the conversation stays on track. Possible unfamiliar words can be explained when utilising narratives in education settings (contextually bound). This may teach students to examine unfamiliar terms found in future narratives. Educators can ask the students if they know the terms, and explanations may be offered for clarification. Two possible unfamiliar terms are found in the second narrative, which includes the *qadr of Allah* and *shahadah* (TRT World 2023). The first term refers to the Islamic concept of predestination, and the second refers to the profession of faith in Islam (Bagasra et al. 2022; The Metropolitan Museum of Art [MET] n.d.).

Conclusion

Narratives are one of many tools that can be utilised to create religious tolerance, and it is not a 'quick fix' (Gottesman 2017:13–14). Other tools that should be utilised are fact-based learning and making students aware of their responsibility to live tolerantly towards others. Significant world occurrences such as war can evoke much emotion, and students may feel overwhelmed by the situation, especially if they follow narratives of the occurrences online. One way to mitigate these emotions is by reminding students how they can practically aid the situation (Merizalde, Colautti & Forest 2021). An example may include creating fundraisers for non-profit organisations currently aiding the warzone. Students should also be made aware of the myriad of misinformed narratives that circulate and their responsibility not to forward such information.

When educators utilise counter-narratives in education settings, students may become more aware of social issues and increase their global intersectional awareness. These narratives can make students more aware of local communities' suffering because of occurrences abroad. This may lead to better intersectional and empathetic sensitivity from students towards affected groups (in the current case, religious groups) when encountered. These patterns are not only uniquely situated to the Israel–Hamas war and can, therefore, make students more aware of such discriminatory patterns in future situations.

Acknowledgements

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