Diversity Dialogue Day

The Australian National University Canberra

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Report prepared by the Diversity Dialogue Project Team:

Dr Ken Mavor
Dr Bora Kanra
Dr Emma Thomas
Caroline Blink
Kerry O'Brien

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Diversity Dialogue Day

The first Diversity Dialogue Day was held at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra on 30 May 2009. The event was coordinated by a team of researchers from ANU as part of a cross-disciplinary research collaboration between Political Science, the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS), and the Psychology Department.

The Dialogue Day is part of a community-based research program aiming to foster harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, and to understand how best this might be achieved.

Process

The Dialogue Day brought together 32 people of Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds from around Canberra. The Canberra dialogue was designed to test the suitability of the process for wider application in other parts of Australia.

- Attitude surveys

As well as engaging in a small group un-facilitated dialogue process, participants completed short questionnaires at four points throughout the day: during the introductory session, after each of the small-group discussions, and again at the end of the large group discussion. The questionnaires asked about attitudes towards Christians and Muslims, towards relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians, reaction to the various aspects of the Dialogue Day and attitudes towards further actions to promote harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians.

- Conceptual maps

After an initial introduction, participants were asked to think about their own community and to represent it as a conceptual map. These maps demonstrated the variety of ways people can conceptualise their community. Maps were based on various religious groups at the broad level, various denominations within both the Muslim and Christian faiths, friends and family groups, national and ethnic groups, sporting groups, professional and university groups.

- Small group dialogue

In the morning session, participants split into small groups of approximately six people. Some of the groups were asked to discuss their interest in relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, to share and describe the conceptual maps they had drawn, and to consider different perspectives on religious expressions.

The other groups were asked to brainstorm ideas for ways to promote greater harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. In the second half of this session, participants were asked to distil their ideas into three core strategies for practical things people could do to achieve social harmony.

After morning tea, the activities were reversed so those groups who had initially discussed their conceptual maps were asked to devise strategies to promote social harmony, and vice versa.

- Large group dialogue

The final session brought the whole group back together to share the ideas and insights generated in the small groups. Drs Mavor and Thomas facilitated the session where

participants detailed various strategies for promoting social harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. These were collated in real time into a large group mind map which was visible to all participants.

The ideas put forward sparked wide-ranging discussion that was passionate and robust, but always respectful. Indeed, participants commented that a general atmosphere of warmth and goodwill was evident throughout the day. This was reflected in participants' willingness to share their ideas and engage with those of others.

Outcomes of the dialogue

The group's recommendations for promoting social harmony centred around three themes:

- Education
- Community engagement
- Media

The recommendations are described in more detail in the longer report prepared by the authors which is available here.

However, this project was not merely about using dialogue to develop recommendations. It was also about gaining a better understanding of how people respond to a dialogic process and how dialogue may affect attitude and emotion. Preliminary results from the questionnaires completed during the dialogue of attitude and emotion are provided at Appendix A.

Those who self-selected to participate in this dialogue expressed a high level of sadness and a low level of guilt, but were in the middle of the scale on outrage and apathy at the start of the day. However, taken together an important trend in the direction of emotional reactions to the current state of relations occurred. Although the shifts were small in some cases, they are all in a consistent direction. Compared to the start of the day, participants expressed less sadness, outrage, guilt and apathy at the end of the day. These downward shifts occurred whether the starting point of the emotion was high or low. The main shifts occurred as a result of the two small-group sessions in the morning. These shifts are important because changes in emotion have been shown to be both precursors and consequents of changes in attitude and action.

A second dialogue event is planned for 2010 to be held in Auburn, Sydney.