The Influence of Local Ecologies on Interfaith Work

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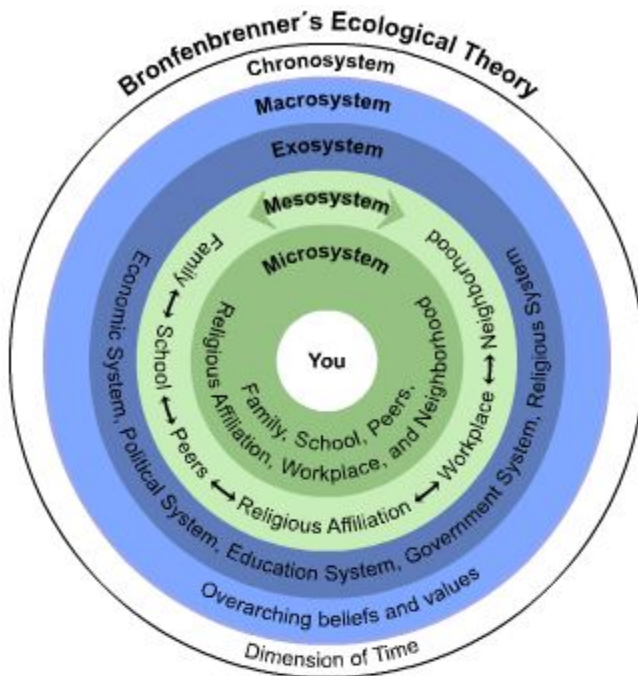
Feminist theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2005) has noted the "identity logic" by which interfaith work is often structured; interfaith participants are efficiently organized into, and engaged with, according to general religious identity markers (e.g. Christian, Muslim, Jewish). Meanwhile, other important facets of these persons' identities – gender, race and ethnicity, their social and institutional networks of support – are overlooked and insufficiently engaged with in the structuring of that interfaith work. More recently, Yukich and Braunstein (2014) have examined the effects of other institutions external to interfaith organizations on the outcomes of those interfaith organizations. Specifically, they examined local congregations and other faith-based organizations as representing commitments and resourcing for the interfaith participant external to their immediate interfaith contact setting. Of interest in both of these works is the potential for interfaith settings to be influenced by much more than just the religious identities represented by the participants. Indeed, these participants embody a multitude of intersecting (and non-religious) identities and are situated within complex social and institutional ecologies. In this study, we aim to build on the extant literature by using case study data to examine more closely the ways in which local ecologies can influence individuals' participation in and experiences of interfaith work.

Our analysis of the case study data is informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. With this theory, illustrated in Figure 1 below, Bronfenbrenner proposes a model of multiple systems of psychological and social phenomena that directly or indirectly influence persons' behaviors in their immediate settings. Of particular interest to our analysis, the *mesosystemic* level represents other behavior settings (or *microsystems*) in which

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (Day, 2015).



the individual also takes an active part and which may influence their behaviors in their immediate settings. For the individuals participating in the immediate interfaith setting, the mesosystem would be comprised of their family, a peer network, their own faith community, and other behavior settings in which they are also involved. Understanding the nature of the individuals' involvement in these other settings, Bronfenbrenner proposed, is critical for understanding their behaviors and experiences in their immediate setting.

In particular, we explore the differential impact of local faith communities on immigrant and minority group participation in interfaith organizations. Although a majority of participants in the study report strong ties with their own faith communities, not all faith communities were reported to support interfaith work. As participants negotiate their personal identities with their interfaith work, we consider ways in which these differences in mesosystemic factors shape interfaith participation. Before proceeding further, several assumptions and conditions are worth noting. First, our interest in faith communities in this analysis is less in these communities as religious resources and more in these communities as congruent and/or competing social groups that also demand member time and commitment. In this way, we construe faith communities as "non-religious" factors that exist outside the religious individual interfaith participant. Second, the below analysis is based on a limited sample of interfaith participants (and their related faith communities) and does not therefore lend itself to broader generalizations. Indeed, there are many majority and minority faith communities that, for a variety of reasons, stand in contrast to the below findings, and these contrasting cases warrant further investigation beyond what we are able to attempt here.

Methods and Analysis

As part of the larger "Understanding Community Interfaith Initiatives" project, which included a survey sent to interfaith organizations across the US, our research team participated in and examined five case study interfaith organizations in the Southeastern US. Our work with these case study organizations included 33 in-depth interviews (among 28 organization participants, analyzed below), field observations, and a collection of organization communications and documentation. The five organizations selected for our case study research represented a variety of interfaith organizational models and contexts, including: (1) a campus-based student interfaith group; (2) an all-female dialogue and service group; (3) a community service-oriented, congregation-based group; (4) a youth-focused dialogue and service group; and (5) a parent-focused, school-based group. Interview participants from each of these organizations were recruited to represent a diversity of organizational roles and perspectives, as well as to represent a diversity of religious traditions. Interviewee demographics are show in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Interviewees, demographics

Variable	**No.**	**%**
Religious affiliation		
Christian	11	39.3%
Muslim	8	28.6%
Hindu	3	10.7%
Unitarian Universalist	2	7.1%
Pagan	1	3.6%
Seeker	1	3.6%
Atheist	1	3.6%
Christian Scientist	1	3.6%
Total	28	100.0%
Sex		
Female	19	67.9%
Male	9	32.1%
Total	28	100.0%
Organizational role		
Leader	6	21.4%
Regular member	22	78.6%

Total	28	100.0%
Race/ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	17	60.7%
Arab/Arab American	5	17.9%
Asian/Asian American	4	14.3%
Black/African American	2	7.1%
Total	28	100.0%

Template analysis (King, 2012) was used to analyze case study data. Initial codes were pre-determined using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, with the intent of identifying mesosystemic supports and barriers to interfaith participation. These initial codes were modified and added to as analysis proceeded and additional codes were identified.

Results

For some interviewees, the support from their faith community was illustrated in the willingness of other faith community members to be involved in the interfaith organization's special events and other activities. One woman, a deacon at an Episcopal church, detailed the impressive involvement of her own congregation in interfaith work, as that work has appeared to have caught on within the congregation itself outside the formal operations of the interfaith organization:

> At [my church] ... because of my role there as a deacon I am able to talk a little bit more about [my interfaith organization], our outreach funds go to help IMS with all of our programs basically. And so, as a member, [my church] contributes $500 a year to [my interfaith organization] ... actually $750 a year I think ... and is a big sponsor of the annual dinner, um, and that's one of our fundraising events. But I also have people who even now come up to me and say, "I'd like to help," and so I'm working right now to get some more volunteers ... there's several people who are very interested in interfaith matters and have been part of the teams, the Islamophobia, Encountering Islamophobia program and that sort of thing. So, gradually I think the congregation is coming around ... and we've had Sunday school classes, two of them, two different series on interfaith. One was [my interfaith organization's] series, but one the folks put together themselves that a group wanted to hear a Bible study group, wanted to know more about women in Islam, so I pulled together a group of women and had a series of several weeks of conversation about that. So my own congregation I think is pretty engaged.

For other interviewees, their faith community demonstrated support for their interfaith work less through actions and direct involvement in interfaith work themselves, and more through enthusiastic approval and encouragement. A founder of one of the interfaith groups relayed the story of the moment when she made the announcement to her congregation that she was planning to start an interfaith group, a moment that solidified for her the support of her congregation:

> And so on Sunday morning we have announcement time. So I just stood up and I said, you know, this is my idea and this is what I'd like to do and I am hoping that this congregation will be supportive. And so people just broke into just applause. So I knew that I had that piece.

Illustrative of a number of interviewees who discussed faith communities that were "proud" of them or that otherwise demonstrated approval of their interfaith involvement, another member of the Women of Faith group, a member of a Unitarian Universalist church, discussed the moment in which another member of her church expressed her approval for her interfaith involvement. Here, the person's own faith community is helping to give legitimacy to the interfaith work in which the person is involved:

> One of the women at church who doesn't come to this group said, and I hadn't really thought about it this way, but she said, "you are doing great social justice work," and I'm like, "I belong to an organization and this is not social justice," and she said, "yes it is because you're taking a stand in the community for religious freedom," and I hadn't really thought about it that way. So ... it made me feel good. It made me feel like I was doing something important when I really hadn't thought about this, it made me think about this group in a different way, it really is something important.

Still for other interviewees, the faith community was discussed as the impetus behind their decision to join their interfaith organization. In some cases the person saw another church member was involved and decided to become involved as well, or in several other cases a faith community leader or member directly approached the person about joining.

Thus the person's own faith community outside the interfaith organization emerges as an influential factor for the person's involvement in that organization and, in some ways, for the ultimate success of that organization. Whether providing resources for organization operations and special events (finances, volunteers, or otherwise), expressing approval for the legitimacy of interfaith work, or serving as a conduit for recruiting new interfaith participants, faith communities warrant attention as important microsystems in the ecology of the interfaith organization. Here we find further support for the conclusions of Yukich and Braunstein (2014), namely that other institutions in the interfaith organization's immediate ecology may serve to enhance the positive outcomes of that organization. A critical finding in this study, however, is that while the above points appear to be true for *some* interfaith participants, they are far from true for all participants. Indeed, some faith communities appear to be far less supportive of interfaith work and,

importantly, this appears to be true especially of faith communities comprised of immigrant and/or ethnic minority populations.

These immigrant/ethnic minority faith communities were often described by interfaith participants as a source of tension – an instance when the interfaith organization microsystem did not align with or was in conflict with the aims or purposes of the faith community microsystem. One interviewee was a long-time member of her local Hindu community, in addition to being a member of her local interfaith organization. She described the local Hindu community as heavily comprised of recent immigrant families, a fact which she points to as an explanation for why she is currently the only member of that community interested and active in interfaith activities:

> They started a temple here, but I have some issue, let's put it that way, because they're not as open-minded as I am … I don't see them being proactive about engaging themselves as community members ... We have not had a place of worship in this community for the longest time, so they're still taking baby steps and we cannot compare them to a church that has been there for 150 years. You see what I mean? They're still trying to get themselves established. So their focus is on raising funds, building the temple, making sure people come and attend ... I'm not saying that's the wrong thing, because their focus is on, "Okay, we need to put all our energy and focus into this." I cannot find fault with that, but I happen to think a little more of the big picture thing.

A Muslim member of one of the interfaith groups, a Christian convert to Islam who was born and raised in America, expressed similar frustrations in getting her smaller Muslim community actively involved in interfaith work:

> As an American it's very important for people to understand, and I don't know if it's because I was raised of a different faith, but I see the need for people to understand and know who we are and reach out to them, and I've found so many people that, you know, it's not really that important. "We do what we do, they do what they do, there's really no need to."... It's a smaller community and people do tend to focus on their smaller community rather than the larger community. I'm not sure why, because I don't think I would be that way if I went to my husband's family's in Jordan, and I think if I were there I don't think that I would be that way, so I'm not really sure if that is just our community or if that's something that is seen across the country.

In contrast to the earlier comments by the Episcopalian woman who was overwhelmed by offers from faith community members to help out with various interfaith initiatives, these individuals describe feelings of frustration in getting other members involved, a responsibility that to them sometimes feels like "a full-time job" and makes them feel that, if they want their particular tradition represented in an interfaith gathering, the burden will fall exclusively to them.

These representatives of minority religions in particular, and perhaps especially members of Muslim faith communities, despite difficulties sometimes in getting others to participate, feel a special obligation to represent their tradition to others as a way of dispelling harmful myths about their tradition and clarifying for others exactly what it is their tradition stands for. One Muslim interfaith participant explained – "You feel like you are representing your religion. You are the ambassador of Islam. You try to do your best during these meetings." Another Muslim participant in a college interfaith group explained that the Muslim students are often the first to speak out during dialogues on topics especially sensitive to Muslims, like the role of women or religious violence, because they may feel more of a need to defend their religion against public perceptions. One Muslim participant expressed a sense of duty in representing Islam in this way:

> For people to know, especially after 9/11, for people to know, um, I've been Muslim for so long and I don't know any people who do what happened on 9/11. And I guess that was the biggest thing, the question for our community was why do you do that, why do Muslims do that, and that was always my message, my message was that's not what we do.

The reticence of some minority faith communities generally to become involved in interfaith work, then, may lead to situations in which those communities are underrepresented in interfaith work. Further, the representation of these faith communities may fall onto certain individuals who take up as their special responsibility to ensure that their tradition is sufficiently and accurately understood among others in the larger community.

But what more can we understand about why these faith communities refuse or give limited support to the interfaith organizations of which certain of their members are a part? Certainly the above comments help shed some light on this phenomenon – that smaller minority faith communities may be more concerned about and focused on establishing their own communities rather than reaching out to their larger surrounding community. Additionally, however, some interviewees indicated that minority faith communities may generally harbor some suspicion about or concern over interfaith encounters as threatening to take away members or sully the traditions they are seeking to pass down to their children. One group leader discussed concerns from Muslim parents over their children's involvement in interfaith work:

> A lot of time when you do adult interfaith, yeah, everyone gets together ... the rabbis and imams, usually people who know the religion and they discuss, but the kids it's not about you know, knowing everything, but asking the question and being asked so that now you're thinking about your own religion. So ... there's, you know, always some underlying fear like they're going to go and the Christian's going to tell them how great Christianity is.

The leader of the college interfaith group expressed similar concerns from his family during his initial months doing interfaith work:

> Family back home likes [interfaith], think it's a good push. The very first time, they said, "Make sure you keep to your beliefs. You're going to hear about a lot of different things, try to hang on to what you believe." My mosque doesn't know about the interfaith … Some people there, when I was going to [college], were saying stuff like "Make sure when you're in college you stick with Muslims and only Muslims." I was like no. This guy was talking about how if you stick with non-Muslims they'll lead you astray and lead you to the hell fire.

For minority faith communities, then, direct involvement in interfaith work and indirect support of members' involvement in interfaith work raises certain concerns over preserving cultural and religious identities and traditions with which non-minority faith communities necessarily do not need to contend.

A recent study by Min (2010) may further help shed light on this phenomenon. Through his comparative study on Korean evangelicals and Indian Hindus, Min sought to uncover whether and in what ways immigrants to the US maintain their homeland cultural and ethnic traditions through the vehicle of their faith communities. In the case of Indian Hindus in particular, their religious tradition is considered the indigenous religion in their homeland and as such is infused with much of the local culture of that homeland (what Calvillo and Bailey, 2015, have likened to processes of inculturation, or the comingling of religious practice with local culture). Continued practice of that religion in the US, then, becomes a way of preserving their cultural practices and ethnic identity and of passing that identity down through subsequent generations. Hinduism, for Indian Hindus immigrated to the US, becomes a bridge to their homeland culture and may contribute to their hesitation to participate in interfaith work and (they may worry, whether reasonably or not) risk losing or "burning" that bridge to their homeland. While these faith communities do not restrict members from participating and do not actively oppose interfaith work, the perceived lack of involvement and lack of resourcing of some of these communities certainly stands in stark contrast to other faith communities that appear to be much more supportive of interfaith work, potentially leaving individual representatives of their faith community to bear much of the burden of interfaith involvement and "public relations" for their community.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above analysis uncovers several important features of the interfaith organization mesosystem which warrant brief discussion. First, the individual interfaith participant's faith community emerges as a meaningful source of support in many cases, backing these participants with finances, volunteers, and other concrete resources useful in the implementation of interfaith work. Interfaith practitioners would do well – and many in the interfaith movement have done so already – to leverage local faith communities as strategically important partners in initiating and carrying out local interfaith initiatives. Second, however, the above analysis also suggests that interfaith practitioners would do well to pay attention to the ways in which different faith communities within their local ecology respond differently to the invitation to the interfaith encounter. In particular,

minority faith communities comprised largely of immigrant families and individuals may not enjoy the requisite stability and power to comfortably participate in exchanges of religious ideas, for example, that to them may represent a greater risk of loss of community identity and permanence. The result may be that these faith communities are more prone to avoid becoming involved in interfaith work altogether or, as experienced by some of the interviewees above, that the one or few members within these communities who do choose to participate in interfaith work may feel a much greater burden to represent their community within those spaces. The perceived lack of resourcing for these individuals may further limit those who are willing to participate in interfaith work to a select few who are more educated or trained within their tradition.

Interfaith practitioners may respond to these challenges in a number of ways. Some may offer to host interfaith events at the minority faith communities' own places of worship or gathering, to help ensure a level of comfort or safety for minority faith community members. Others, as with one of our case studies in this project, may put into place organizational decision-making processes that give greater weight to the needs and perspectives of minority faith community members as the organization attempts to discern its missional goals and priorities. Finally, there may be merit in considering whether and when common interfaith activities such as theological dialogue, often involving the open and public exchange (and even debate) of religious ideas, are simply inherently unwelcoming or "risky" as perceived by faith communities and individuals in positions of relative vulnerability and powerlessness. Such instances may warrant discussion on appropriate alternative approaches to interfaith relationship-building that represent less risk on the part of certain participants and are more responsive to the particular needs of those participants. In these and other ways, interfaith practitioners may effectively develop interfaith initiatives structured less by "identity logics" that oversimplify individual differences and lead to oversimplified approaches to navigating those differences, and structured more by an ecological view of participants that more fully captures the complexities within and surrounding those participants.

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