Confronting Islamophobia through Social Work Education: A Cohort Study

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ABSTRACT: As part of an ongoing curriculum assessment project, faculty associated with the Bachelor’s level social work program of the University of Houston-Downtown identified a significant gap in the enrollment of Muslim students as compared to the community at large. In addressing concerns related both to implicit and explicit curricula, the social work faculty developed several action items to address this gap, including the creation of a project to assess student knowledge regarding issues affecting the Muslim community. As part of this effort, a classroom-based intervention was developed, specifically addressing issues of Islamophobia. The intervention was administered to both BSW and MSW students at affiliated universities in the same city. Using a one group, quasi-experimental design, 88 students (70 BSW students and 18 MSW students) participated in a 60-minute classroom intervention session with pre- and post-test surveys administered to assess student knowledge and attitude change. Findings suggest a significant increase in knowledge and a positive change in certain attitudes post-intervention. Implications include the addition of a teaching component on Islamophobia to support the social justice-specific competency, and activities to address larger campus-wide climate issues to support a culturally appropriate and inclusive welcoming environment for Muslim students.

Keywords: Islamophobia, social work education, social work competencies

INTRODUCTION

All social work programs are tasked with the duty of providing curriculum content as well as a learning environment that is free from oppressive practices, prejudices and discrimination. In short, all students should be free to learn at the highest levels (EPAS, 2015). All accredited social work programs work intentionally and largely successfully to create an inclusive and safe implicit and explicit curriculum for students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. However, for students of religious minority groups, this is not so clearly the case. The goal of this study therefore is to develop vigilance with respect to ensuring that social work education is welcoming to all, and ensuring that the social work learning environment is free of barriers for all students. Specifically, this study was designed to explore knowledge, attitudes, and
awareness of emerging social workers with respect to Islam, Muslims, and Islamophobia, along with next steps and recommendations for social work educators.

This research grew out of an on-going program and curriculum assessment in the undergraduate social work program at the University of Houston-Downtown. The campus is located in the heart of Houston, a large metropolitan city that has recently been ranked as the most diverse in the nation. That initial assessment identified significant gaps in both enrollment of and support services for Muslim students. In comparison to the proportion of Muslim residents in the community at large, the number of self-identified Muslim students in the social work program was particularly striking, with only two Muslim students identified over a three-year period, in a program that enrolls 180 majors.

The city of Houston, as a multicultural and important destination for new immigrants, has a significant Muslim population, with representatives from all parts of the world. In particular, the metro area is home to 60,000 Muslims, making up about 1.2% of the city’s population (Jaber, 2018). Additionally, Muslims encompass a wide range of ethnicities and speak a variety of languages including Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Pashto, English and even Spanish (Pew Research Center, 2007). The student population at the University of Houston-Downtown is racially and economically diverse, with 83% of the total student population being nonwhite (UHD Quick Facts, 2019).

In assessing the undergraduate student climate it was discovered that there was no designated prayer space; nor was there an active Muslim student organization. In addition, despite recent upgrades to food services, there were no options for vegetarian or Halal meals or snacks. These conditions prompted concerns regarding the climate for Muslim students across campus as well as in the social work program.

The term Islamophobia describes a range of negative attitudes and behaviors that are directed toward Islam and Muslims on the basis of religion (Bickett, 2012). More specifically defined, Islamophobia is a deep, illogical and intensified fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims (Ali, 2017). Islamophobia can be seen in negative attitudes like prejudice and intolerance, and in specific actions such as discrimination, harassment, social and economic exclusion, and verbal and physical abuse. Islamophobia creates conditions that may lead to hate crimes against Muslims and their places of worship (Thomas, 2015). Islamophobia is manifested as both political and economic: it is propagated by the state to justify and reinforce foreign policy in the Middle East and it is perpetuated by mainstream media and culture (Kumar, 2012). Islamophobia is also referred to as “anti-Muslim racism” (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

The advancement of social justice is a central tenet of social work education (CSHE, 2015). Issues of race, ethnicity and gender diversity are covered extensively in curriculum design and development; however there is less attention paid to issues of religious diversity and difference (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). This missing content has become more relevant and even urgent in the current social-political climate as anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly anti-Muslim rhetoric, has become commonplace (Cohen, 2017). As evidenced at the highest levels, the anti-Muslim narrative of the Trump administration gave way to the first executive order one week after the 2017 inauguration calling for a “Muslim ban” to limit travel and migration efforts of people from nations identified as Muslim. In part, the continued efforts toward and even success in implementing such a ban has provided social work faculty both the opportunity and the professional imperative to address this issue head on in curriculum planning and development.

As the final impetus for this study, in a comprehensive online search, no social work program could be located in the United States that provides a standardized curriculum
component that addresses the impact of Islamophobia. Social work programs cover many other threats to justice and equality; however, Islamophobia does not appear to be explicitly addressed at a programmatic level. Not surprisingly then, one of the findings of this study (to be discussed in full later) is that the sample participants lack even basic knowledge about Islam and Muslims in the United States, inferring a lack of educational focus in primary and secondary education as well as at the university level.

Therefore, within this institutional framework, while simultaneously addressing campus wide-related deficiencies, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) faculty made the decision to respond to these concerns by implementing a specific educational module to introduce social work students to the concept of Islamophobia and to assess the impact that intentional instruction, if any, would have on the knowledge, attitudes and awareness of social work students regarding this important social justice issue. The Principal Investigator (PI) for this research, an experienced member of the social work faculty, who is Muslim, was tasked with developing the educational module. In consultation and collaboration with the two co-PIs, a one-hour classroom presentation/workshop was developed to provide direct instruction to social work students regarding Islamophobia and its impact on students, colleagues and future clients. The relevance and critical nature of this project for the profession of social work can also be found in the larger review of the literature about Muslims in America.

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND RELEVANCE**

Despite a shared religion, Muslim populations are among the most ethnically and culturally diverse in the world. The Pew Research Center estimates that there were about 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States in 2017 (Pew, 2017), which is about 1.1% of the US population, estimating further that the majority of Muslims in the US (58%) are immigrants coming to the US from different parts of the world. The US Muslim population is estimated to grow to 8.1 million by the year 2050 (Pew, 2017). Despite the relatively small number of Muslims in the US, according to a survey conducted by Gallup in 2015, four out of every ten Americans (43%) self-report not only having some degree of prejudice towards Muslims but also that they rank the prejudice against Muslims Americans higher than any other religious group. According to recent data provided by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 62% of Muslims report religious, gender and sectarian discrimination (Mogahed & Mahmood, 2019). The connection between racial or religious discrimination, as reported here, has serious implications in terms of victimization by hate crimes (Younis, 2015). Lichtblau (2016) reports that hate crimes against Muslims are at the highest level since 2001. As a result, Muslims are uniquely vulnerable to physical attacks, harassment, victimization, and employment and housing discrimination.

The term “Islamophobia,” originally coined in the 1990s, has gained popularity in use by politicians and media, and has now become a complicated social construct in a predominately Christian nation. Islamophobia, like the related homophobia, xenophobia, etc., is known to be based on misinformation, propaganda and ignorance (Ekman, 2015). As part of a multimillion-dollar industry, funded by more than US$40 million over the last 10 years, scholars have made a compelling argument for the spreading of deliberate untruths and hatred about Islam and Muslims in an intentional effort to demonize the population as a whole (Ali et al., 2011).

Anti-Muslim rhetoric, however, is not just physically harmful to Muslim individuals and communities, it also isolates members of the faith, creates barriers to inclusion and has a negative impact on the overall well-being of all communities. Recent national policies,
including the January 27, 2017 Executive Order, commonly called the “Muslim ban” (Executive Order, 2017), directly and indirectly reinforce Islamophobia in the US, and also jeopardize social workers’ access and ability to work with Muslim individuals, families, groups and communities. In terms of policy and practice, Muslims in the United States have been further rendered to the margins of our society during the past few years. Continued prejudice, fear and misinformation about this group dominate our political environment. Among the 12 Grand Challenges championed by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (Dominelli & Loakimidis, 2016), achieving equal opportunity and justice for all speaks to the compelling reason for confronting Islamophobia through social work education, and for doing it now.

To that end, an educational module aiming to provide an understanding of the phenomenon of Islamophobia and its impact on individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations was developed by a Muslim faculty member at the University of Houston-Downtown. The researchers then collaborated to create an interactive multi-media workshop, lasting approximately 60 minutes, that could be incorporated into either bachelor’s level or master’s level social work curricula. The concept was that this workshop could be offered as a stand-alone program, incorporated into a policy or practice skills class, or used as an adjunct to a social or global justice class. Rather than focusing on Islam itself, teaching the fundamental tenets and beliefs of the religion, the researchers chose instead to focus the workshop on the social justice competency, by enhancing awareness of discrimination based on the Muslim faith or Islamophobia. Specifically, this module provides discussion points on the common myths about Islam and Muslims, as well as information about the different cultural and ethnic groups who subscribe to the Muslim faith. Additionally, it presents a case study for discussion and provides an opportunity for participants to apply skills in challenging Islamophobia through education, instructional materials and classroom strategies. Also, sample lesson plans, classroom resources, instructional materials and activities designed for social work educators were developed to address this phenomenon in their classrooms from a social justice perspective.

**METHODS**

The goal of this study was to identify existing levels of student knowledge regarding Islam generally, as well as to assess the attitudes of social work students about several different topics related to Islam, Islamophobia and practice with Muslim clients and colleagues. Ultimately, the purpose of this research was to determine the need for and the appropriateness of developing future course work and content in this area.

As this study was largely exploratory, no specific hypotheses were generated in advance, although, based on the prior program and curriculum review, it was anticipated that gaps in knowledge would be seen, and that some students were likely to express acceptance of or agreement with certain common stereotypes about Islam or Muslims in general.

**Research Design and Sample**

Over a total two-year period from 2016 until 2018, the investigators developed and conducted a quasi-experimental, pre- and post-test design study on the effectiveness of a one-hour workshop on increasing knowledge about Islam, Muslims and Islamophobia. Pre- and post-test evaluations were given to the students to assess initial knowledge, attitudes and
awareness regarding Islam, Muslims and Islamophobia, and whether any changes were observed post-intervention. Demographic analyses were performed, and paired sample t-tests were used to analyze pre- and post-intervention responses.

**Sample Selection**

The total population of students at the University of Houston-Downtown is 14,265. The ethnic composition of the campus is diverse, with the statistical breakdown provided in Table 1. A majority of the students identify as female (60%), with 40% of students identifying as male. Most students (56%) are enrolled full-time, with the remainder (44%) taking classes on a part-time basis. During the time period in which this research took place, the University demographics as presented in Table 1 represented a diverse population that included students from countries with traditionally large Muslim populations, such as India, Nigeria and Pakistan. The study sample was drawn from the social work program.

Current demographics of the University of Houston-Downtown social work program not only represent closely the racial and ethnic diversity of Houston, but also mirror the larger University of Houston-Downtown student population.

Master’s level students who participated in this study were enrolled in a larger yet similarly diverse urban institution in the same city. Students in the social work master’s program specifically are 56% ethnic minorities, with 42% of all students bilingual or multilingual. The graduate social work program offers three enrollment models: face-to-face, hybrid and online. The students who participated in this research were drawn from the hybrid program only. The hybrid program typically enrolls working professionals, with classes delivered 50% online and 50% in person.

Faculty from both programs agreed to assist with recruitment of participants, giving up class time for the presentation of the workshop. With the permission of individual instructors, as well as the informed consent of each student participant, the workshop was presented during regularly scheduled class time. Over the course of an academic year (2017–2018), the workshop was presented to five selected classes of social work students. Four of these classes were at the bachelor’s level (n = 70); one was a master’s level class (n = 18).

As the workshop took place as part of a regularly scheduled class, the PI was the instructor for one of the four bachelor level classes, while a co-PI was the instructor for two additional bachelor level class. The remaining two classes were taught by colleagues not involved in this research, but who expressed an interest in having this workshop presented as part of their existing curriculum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. University Ethnic Makeup
The Intervention

The primary investigator prepared a 60-minute interactive workshop focused on educating social work students about Islam and Muslims. The workshop also addressed strategies to combat Islamophobia in policy, practice and research. Prior to the first presentation, the co-investigators reviewed and critiqued the presentation, and appropriate edits were made to increase opportunities for reflection and interactive dialogue with students.

Measures

Initial research was conducted to assess the availability of existing instruments to capture the concepts that were to be tested, specifically relating to knowledge or awareness regarding Islam and Islamophobia. No published tool precisely measured or addressed these concepts in an educational setting. The survey ultimately used in this study therefore incorporated concepts from two publicly available instruments: the Islamophobia Scale, which is a cognitive and behavioral social distance scale (Kret & de Gelder, 2012), and the Attitudes toward Islam Questionnaire, a tool that addresses primarily attitudes towards women and traditional Muslim clothing (Lee et al., 2009). Neither of these scales has published validity or reliability data. In constructing the final survey, questions and concepts were selected that covered the classic myths about Islam and Muslims including statements like, “Islam promotes violence,” “Muslims are terrorists,” “Islam is irreconcilable with Western values” and “Muslim women are oppressed.” As the purpose of this project was to assess the effect of an intervention involving social work students, two key questions that measured knowledge of Islam and seriousness of Islamophobia as a social work issue were added.

As modified, the survey consisted of 12 questions, with responses based on a Likert scale that ranged from: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The first two questions formed the basis for the current manuscript: “I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims” and “Islamophobia is a serious problem in the United States.” The next five questions explored student perceptions of commonly held beliefs about Islam and Muslims. These questions included: “Most terrorists in the world are Muslims;” “Islam promotes violence;” “Muslim women are more oppressed than other women;” “Islam is inherently incapable of reconciling with the West;” and “Muslim women who wear headscarves are forced to do so.”

The final five questions asked students to put themselves in the role of a future social worker, and explored perceptions related to engagement in that role with Muslim peers and clients, as well as related to the role they will play in combating discrimination related to Islamophobia. These questions included: “In my role as a future social worker, I am comfortable interacting with Muslim colleagues and peers;” “In my role as a future social worker, I would be uncomfortable with the thought of having a Muslim client;” “In my role as a future social worker, I think it is important to combat Islamophobia;” and “In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is as serious a problem as discrimination based on race.”

In addition, the survey was pilot tested with a convenience sample of four individuals, two of whom were currently enrolled in non-social work college classes. These individuals provided feedback regarding the time needed to complete the survey, as well as comments regarding the clarity of the language used. Minor edits to the survey were made as a result of this feedback.
Data Collection Procedures

As data collection was originally designed to assess solely the effectiveness of the educational intervention, institutional review board approval was not required. However, subsequently, permission was given by the institutional review board to use secondary data in conjunction with the publication of this research. At the beginning of each class, a co-PI introduced the workshop and explained that faculty were collecting data before and after the presentation to assess its effectiveness. Students were offered the opportunity to opt out of the data collection, but were required to attend the class subject to the standard attendance policies of the instructor. Using traditional pen and paper survey forms, the co-PI administered and collected the pre-test survey before the presentation began. Following the presentation, the same co-PI administered and collected the post-test data. Pre- and post-tests were coded to allow paired sample analysis, but no identifying data were collected from participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

Initially, because there were no psychometric data available for the administered survey, the first step in the analysis was to assess reliability and validity of the scale. Those results are reported below.

Responses to the surveys were initially entered into an Excel spread sheet, and then uploaded to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Demographics were reported. As the reliability analysis indicated it would not be appropriate to sum and compare scores, paired sample t-tests were conducted on all individual questions.

RESULTS

Ultimately, this research project is an effort to determine whether or not future social workers viewed Islamophobia as a serious concern in the United States, and to determine whether or not a specific intervention (a 60-minute academic presentation) would significantly change that view. Although the workshop presentation was specifically related to Islamophobia, the survey also sought to measure participants' self-described knowledge of Islam and Muslims, including the extent to which participants subscribed to certain common misconceptions about Muslims ("all Muslims are terrorists" and "Islam promotes violence," among others).

Traditional demographic information was collected in the survey, including gender, age, religious background (Muslim/non-Muslim) and immigration experience (immigrant/non-immigrant). A total of 88 students participated in the survey; of these, 70 (79.5%) were in a bachelor's level social work program, while 18 (20.5%) were enrolled in a master's level social work program. The majority of the participants (77 or 87.5%) identified as female, with nine (10.2%) individuals identifying as male. Two (2.3%) did not provide gender information. Thirty-seven individuals (42%) were under age 24, while 40 (43.5%) individuals were between 25 and 50. Nine (10.2%) individuals were over 50, and two (2.3%) did not answer. The majority (86 individuals or 97.7%) identified as non-Muslim, with two (2.3%) non-responders. Seventy-four (84.1%) individuals described themselves as non-immigrants, while 12 individuals (13.6%) identified as immigrants.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (2018), data was entered, screened for errors and then analyzed. Paired sample t-tests were run with respect to all questions.
Paired Samples Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>1.033</td>
<td>.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td>.086</td>
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Paired Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
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<td>1.155</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-0.597</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.861</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Question 1

Means, standard deviations and t-test results are reported in Tables 2–5. Additionally, internal reliability for the total survey was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha.

Reliability

As an initial matter, reliability was tested for the scale as a whole and for two distinct component sections (knowledge and future professional engagement). Cronbach’s alpha was used to estimate the reliability of summing the individual components of each scale to obtain a composite score. For preliminary research, such as that involved in this study, Nunnally (1978) suggests a Cronbach’s alpha of .7 or higher (see also Peterson, 1994). The entire survey, consisting of 12 items, had a Cronbach’s alpha of .366, demonstrating poor internal reliability. As a result, it was not possible to assess differences based on composite scores.

Cronbach’s alpha was then used to assess the internal reliability of the separate component sections (knowledge and future professional engagement). For both sections, internal reliability was again low (knowledge, Cronbach’s alpha of .402; future professional engagement, Cronbach’s alpha of .361). As a result, the remaining analysis was limited to evaluating paired sample t-tests,
Paired Samples Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims</th>
<th>2.90</th>
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<th>1.447</th>
<th>.154</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>.868</td>
<td>.093</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paired Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims—I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims</td>
<td>-1.170</td>
<td>1.341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Question 2

determining whether there were significant differences pre- and post- intervention for each of the individual questions.

**Paired Sample T-Tests**

Looking at the broad issues of knowledge and awareness, two specific statements were analyzed: 1) “Islamophobia is a serious problem in the United States”, and 2) "I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims.”

With respect to both statements, a significant change was noted. For question 1 (“Islamophobia is a serious problem in the United States”), there was a .35 mean difference between pre-test and post-test, t (87) = 2.86, p = .005. For question 2 (“I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims”), a mean difference of 1.17 was noted between pre-test and post-test, t (1,88) = 8.19, p = .000. A larger change, however, was seen with respect to student perceptions of their own knowledge about Islam than was seen with student perceptions regarding the seriousness of Islamophobia as a problem in the United States.

In analyzing the more specific questions relating to knowledge, significant differences were also seen pre- and post-intervention with respect to two additional questions: “Islam promotes violence” (t (1,87) = 2.04, p = .044) and “Muslim women are more oppressed than other women” (t (1,87) = 2.79, p = .007).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims—I am knowledgeable about Islam and Muslims</td>
<td>-1.170</td>
<td>1.341</td>
<td>.143</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>Islamaphobia is a serious problem in the United States—Islamaphobia is a serious problem in the United States</td>
<td>-.352</td>
<td>1.155</td>
<td>.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>Most terrorists in the world are Muslims—Most terrorists in the world are Muslims</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>.917</td>
<td>.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
<td>Islam promotes violence—Islam promotes violence</td>
<td>.352</td>
<td>1.619</td>
<td>.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 5</td>
<td>Muslim women are more oppressed than other women—Muslim women are more oppressed than other women</td>
<td>.511</td>
<td>1.722</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Mean Differences

When analyzing the responses to questions related to future profession engagement, significant differences were again noted with respect to two questions: “In my role as a future social worker, I am comfortable interacting with Muslim colleagues and peers” ($t (1,87) = -2.08, p = .040$) and “In my role as a future social worker, I think it is important to combat Islamophobia” ($t (1,87) = -1.4, p = .004$). No other significant differences were noted pre- and post-test with the other questions asked in the survey.
Paired Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>In my role as a future social worker, I am comfortable interacting with Muslim colleagues and peers</td>
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<td>.060</td>
<td>-.244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>In my role as a future social worker, I would be uncomfortable with the thought of having a Muslim client—In my role as a future social worker, I would be uncomfortable with the thought of having a Muslim client</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>1.026</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td>-.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>In my role as a future social worker, I think it is important to combat Islamophobia—In my role as a future social worker, I think it is important to combat Islamophobia</td>
<td>-.284</td>
<td>.909</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>-.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
<td>In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is a serious problem as discrimination based on race—In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is a serious problem as discrimination based on race</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>-.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 5</td>
<td>In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is as serious a problem as discrimination based on gender—In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is as serious a problem as discrimination based on gender</td>
<td>-.148</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>-.322</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Future "Role" Questions
DISCUSSION

Strong Need for Direct Instruction

Social work students, while representing diverse viewpoints as well as communities, are generally considered to be well informed with respect to issues of social justice. Curriculum standards for all accredited social work programs require education on issues related to social justice (CSHE, 2015) and a large portion of the curriculum in undergraduate and graduate social work programs is dedicated to advancing social justice as this is one of the six core values of the social work profession.

When asked to self-report knowledge about Islam and Muslims, however, students initially reported a mean score of 2.9 (sd = 1.45), just barely above the middle range on a five-point Likert scale. For a population generally considered to be well informed, this result was eye-opening. Post-intervention, student scores improved significantly, to a mean score of 4.07 (sd = 4.070, $t (1,87) = -8.19$, $p = .000$). Although no testing was done to assess actual knowledge, this result suggests that a relatively simple, hour-long intervention, was enough to raise student confidence in their understanding of an underserved population that is frequently on the opposite side of social justice.

Possibly more consistently with the idea that social work students are exposed both early and often to issues surrounding social justice, participants agreed that Islamophobia is a serious problem in the United States even before the intervention ($M = 4.39$, $sd = 1.03$). Nonetheless, post-test surveys following the intervention showed a significant increase in student ratings regarding their agreement with the statement ($M = 4.74$, $t (1,87) = -2.86$, $p = .005$).

Common Misperceptions

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale with three common misperceptions about Islam and Muslims: “Most terrorists in the world are Muslims,” “Islam promotes violence,” and “Muslim women are more oppressed than other women.” In general, students expressed low levels of agreement with statements regarding terrorism and violence both before and after the intervention. However, with respect to statements regarding the oppression of women, students expressed higher levels of agreement, slightly above the midpoint at which they neither agreed nor disagreed, that Muslim women are more oppressed than other women. See Table 6.

Although the students did not strongly agree with any of the common misperception statements, following the intervention, student agreement with the statement about violence and the statement about women’s oppression both dropped significantly (violence: $t (1,87) = 2.04$, $p = .044$; oppression of women: $t (1,87) = 2.79$, $p = .007$). There was no significant change with respect to student agreement with the statement regarding terrorism following the intervention.

The second section of the survey asked students to visualize themselves in their future roles as professional social workers, and asked them to rate their level of agreement with five statements:

“In my role as a future social worker, I am comfortable interacting with Muslim colleagues and peers.”

“In my role as a future social worker, I would be uncomfortable with the thought of having a Muslim client.”
"In my role as a future social worker, I think that it is important to combat Islamophobia."

"In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is as serious a problem as discrimination based on race."

"In my role as a future social worker, I think discrimination based on Islam is as serious a problem as discrimination based on gender."

With respect to all of these statements, students generally expressed a high level agreement with the standard coded statements both pre- and post-test, and expressed a high level of disagreement with the reverse coded question regarding comfort with having a Muslim client. This was to be expected, given the emphasis that is placed in the social work curriculum on the importance of diversity and advocacy for social justice. Although opinions were generally positive (or negative for the reverse-coded question) before the intervention, significant changes were noted following the intervention with respect to two of the five questions: “In my role as a future social worker, I am comfortable interacting with Muslim colleagues and peers” (t (1,87) = -2.08, p = .040) and “In my role as a future social worker, I think that it is important to combat Islamophobia” (t (1,87) = -2.93, p = .004). No significant changes were noted with respect to the other statements.

As noted, even before the intervention, the participants generally responded in ways that would seem to be positive, in terms of acceptance of Muslim clients and colleagues, and with respect to the importance of the role of social work in combating discrimination based on Islam. Nonetheless, a relatively short, focused intervention resulted in significant positive changes with respect to a number of the concepts being assessed. Going forward, it would be useful to determine the impact of additional direct education in these areas.

**Program Implications**

Prior to the development of this specific research study, social work faculty affiliated with the bachelor’s of social work program at the University of Houston-Downtown began looking
campus-wide at the environment for Muslim students in particular. Muslim students had been observed praying in an open area where student lockers are available, a space that was neither private nor quiet. When directly addressed, these students reported that they were not happy or satisfied with this arrangement. Upon examination, we found that no designated place for daily prayer was located anywhere on campus. No support groups or other potential advocates, for example, an active Muslim student organization, were represented on the undergraduate campus.

At the time this initial program assessment took place, in the bachelor’s level social work program, one Muslim student was enrolled, with only one other Muslim student that had graduated in the past three years. As these two students self-identified as Muslim, it is possible that other Muslim students were or had been enrolled in the program, but did not provide that demographic data to university officials. In any event, this level of Muslim student enrollment was far short of the numbers of Muslims present in the larger community. As the target city has the largest Muslim population in the state, as well as in the entire southern region, the lack of self-identified knowledge demonstrated by the data, coupled with the lack of Muslim representation on campus, required the initiation of an active recruitment and retention strategy. Once it was clear that social work students lacked basic educational knowledge of Islam and of Muslims, and that the campus climate did not seem welcoming for Muslim students, we started planning the following three interventions.

First, based on student interest and success of the one-hour lecture/training session, we initiated the development of an expanded, semester-long elective course on combating Islamophobia that will be open to all majors on campus. As we found a significant change in terms of seeing Islamophobia as a major social problem in just one hour, this semester-long course will be an opportunity to build both knowledge and capacity (including student leadership) on our campus for future social justice initiatives and community collaborations.

A second goal was to activate the Muslim student organization on campus. In addition to the course, active student organizations can greatly support a welcoming campus climate where students feel included and valued for retention purposes. As the majority of students across our campus are first-generation students, all efforts that support retention are critical. This was actually an easy sell as students were eager to pick up this task. The student organization, representing students from multiple majors, was energized in one semester.

The third part of the recruitment and retention plan was somewhat unique. While the course development and the facilitation of the Muslim student organization are long-term strategies designed to create a more welcoming campus climate for Muslim students, a more direct approach for recruitment purposes was determined to be needed. Using College funds, a Muslim student was hired to conduct direct recruiting at the junior college level, and to be a visible ambassador for the bachelor of social work program.

**LIMITATIONS**

Nationally, the social work curriculum contains a broad emphasis on issues of social justice, resulting in social work students being generally well informed regarding these issues. Students were asked to self-report their own perceptions regarding knowledge of Islam and Muslims, but did not significantly or in detail assess the accuracy of those individual perceptions. As a result, there is a very real concern regarding the possibility of response bias, in which participants answered survey questions based on how they believed social work students should respond, rather than based on their own personal beliefs.
A second limitation arises from the lack of a verified and reliable survey instrument. The published surveys specifically address bias toward Islam or another religious group. Our research was directed toward assessing student understanding of the social problem of Islamophobia rather than determining inherent or explicit bias towards Islam. The lack of internal reliability further suggests that the instrument as a whole is not useful for assessing attitudes and perceptions. However, the individual questions still provide helpful information regarding attitudes pre- and post-test.

The goal of the intervention was to enhance understanding relating to the issues experienced by Muslim colleagues, peers and future clients. As teaching has enhanced knowledge as its end goal, it is expected that students would leave the workshop with more knowledge than when they entered. However, without a different intervention or a control group, it is not possible to conclude that this intervention caused the changes noted by the analysis. This design, lacking a control group, is in general open to these types of threats to internal validity.

One final possible limitation is that the PI for this project is a Muslim woman who does not wear a head scarf. It is unknown what compounding effect may have resulted simply from the presence of a Muslim woman in a teaching position in general, and more specifically one who does not wear a head scarf. Although a possible limitation, this could also have worked in favor of teaching effectiveness. As the PI and lecturer was a Muslim woman, this in itself may have helped to break down stereotypes and reduce social distance-related fears and suspicions simply by engaging together on this topic.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was designed to assess attitudes of social work students at the undergraduate and master’s level both before and after an educational intervention that provided direct instruction on issues related to Muslims, Islam and Islamophobia. Programmatically, the project aim was to assess the effectiveness of this intervention to enhance knowledge and to improve application of social justice competency issues relating to the Muslim community. We assess these efforts to be successful.

In this preliminary project, the focus of the intervention was on issues related to social justice, rather than towards providing direct instruction on the beliefs or specific practices of the Muslim faith. Incorporating additional factual instruction regarding, for example, the similarities between Islam and the other Abrahamic faiths, would provide additional data points to explore.

The lack of a reliable and validated instrument to measure actual knowledge of Islam, understanding of Islamophobia and levels of Islamophobia in this student population was a frustrating aspect of the current research. Given the prevalence of hate crimes directed against the Muslim community, the development of a reliable instrument to examine these concepts would be very useful.

ENDNOTES

1 Reverse coded.

2 Reverse coded.
REFERENCES


