Chapter 9
Islamaphobic Discourse and Interethnic Conflict: The Influence of News Media Coverage of the ISIS Beheadings on Identity Processes and Intergroup Attitudes

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the Islamaphobic discourse that is perpetuated by the news media coverage of the ISIS beheadings to explain the potential influence of news media on viewers’ dissociative behaviors, and the justifications made by social actors for such behaviors. Specifically, this chapter seeks to explore the ways in which intragroup identities are strengthened (ingroup bias) through outgroup derogation. The authors conducted a thematic analysis of news coverage from five major news sources. Findings revealed four themes of problematic discourse: (1) naming the enemy, (2) establishing intergroup threat, (3) homogenizing Islamic peoples, and (4) accentuating the negative. The authors then describe several ways in which media can function as a buffer to alleviate intergroup hostilities through the creation of positive contact situations.

INTRODUCTION
In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, we have witnessed a significant growth in outgroup derogation and discrimination aimed at the Muslim community (Abdo, 2005). Further, in light of the recent conflicts erupting in the Middle East, and after the beheadings of two American journalists, a similar pattern of prejudice and discrimination has begun to resurface in the United States and abroad. Islamaphobia, defined here as the fear of Islam or Muslims (Abbas, 2004), has permeated recent cultural and political

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9728-7.ch009
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discourses, particularly those discourses advanced by the media coverage of ISIS, which has, in turn, fostered intergroup prejudices and interethnic conflict in the United States and abroad.

In the United States, a consensus exists that individuals should not be penalized for their differences (e.g., religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Further, freedom of religion is a central feature of American democracy and is one of the most basic human rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution. However, some Americans continue to derogate members of the Muslim community for not fitting into the mainstream. Despite the guarantee of religious freedom, many continue to classify the United States as a Christian nation thus condemning those who do not identify as Christian. This tension between tolerance and intolerance prompts several questions. First, why are dissociative (i.e., negative/unfriendly) behaviors enacted against the Muslim community? Second, how do social actors justify such behaviors? Finally, what role does mass media play, particularly news media, in this process?

By integrating the contact hypothesis, social identity theory, integrative threat theory and the contextual theory of interethnic communication, we seek to describe and explain the role of identity in interethnic conflict and examine the ways in which mass media influences these identity processes. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the media coverage of the ISIS beheadings to understand the ways in which intragroup identities are strengthened (i.e., ingroup bias) through outgroup derogation. Of course, media has the capacity to potentially reshape and refine consumers’ understandings of particular social groups, such as Muslims or Muslim Americans. Thus, this essay also seeks to identify several ways in which media can function as a buffer to alleviate intergroup hostilities through the creation of positive contact situations.

BACKGROUND: IDENTITY PROCESSES AND INTERETHNIC CONFLICT

As explained by Kim’s (2005) contextual theory of interethnic communication, ethnic identification becomes especially salient in instances of environmental stress. Kim (2005) conceptualizes ethnicity as “a social category defined by membership that is differentiated from other groups by a set of objective characteristics, qualities, or conditions such as national origin, language, religion, race, and culture” (p. 327). Environmental stress includes any factor that places strain on a social system. Such factors include economic hard times, war, or acts of terrorism. Relevant to the present chapter, the recent acts of ISIS have undoubtedly created environmental stress in the United States. As Kim (2005) explains, interethnic tension “is likely to increase at the individual level when the environment is under duress due to events that are linked to a particular group” (p. 339). As such, we define the current tensions in the United States, specifically the prejudice and discrimination targeting Muslim Americans, as interethnic conflict stemming from environmental duress.

In the post-911 era, interethnic conflicts related to environmental stress can be evidenced by the violent acts directed against Middle-Easterners, by the growth of anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim hate groups (Rubenstein, 2003), and by the derogatory language used by politicians, media personalities, and social elites to justify such discrimination (Allen, 2004). To further exacerbate the anti-Muslim sentiment, and add to an already tense social environment, the terrorist group ISIS executed two American journalists on camera in 2014. The public execution of these journalists was reported extensively by news media sources. To better understand the myriad of identity processes at the intersection of ethnicity, conflict, and media, we outline several relevant theories in the proceeding paragraphs.