



Religious Experience in Interreligious Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Perceptions and Practices of Religious Pluralism in Multicultural Communities

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 22-12-2024

Revised 04-01-2024

Accepted 11-01-2025

Keyword:

Interfaith Dialogue; Religious Pluralism; Subjective Experience; Multicultural Community; Religious Tolerance; Religious Social Interaction

ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogue plays a crucial role in fostering understanding and tolerance in multicultural societies, where religious diversity often presents both opportunities and challenges for social cohesion. While extensive research exists on interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism, little is known about the subjective experiences and emotional dimensions of individuals engaged in such interactions. This study addresses this gap by exploring the personal and collective experiences of individuals participating in interfaith dialogue within a multicultural community. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study examines participants' perceptions and practices of religious pluralism through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. We identify key themes related to empathy, emotional vulnerability, and the negotiation of religious differences. Findings suggest that interfaith dialogue can lead to personal growth, increased empathy, and a greater appreciation of religious diversity, but challenges such as fear of exclusion and judgment persist. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex, emotional dimensions of interfaith interactions, highlighting the need for safe and supportive spaces for dialogue. The implications of this study point to the importance of integrating emotional and existential dimensions into interfaith dialogue programs, offering valuable directions for future research on the long-term effects of such engagements.



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INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue has become a critical social and academic issue, particularly in multicultural societies where individuals of various religious backgrounds coexist (Foley dkk., 2024). In these diverse settings, religion plays a significant role in shaping both individual identities and social dynamics. While existing literature underscores the importance of interfaith dialogue for fostering religious pluralism and addressing conflicts, many studies primarily focus on general outcomes or theoretical frameworks, often reiterating known insights. This study addresses a critical gap by exploring the lived, subjective experiences of participants in interfaith interactions.

The global rise of religious pluralism, accelerated by globalization and migration, has brought the issue of interfaith relations to the forefront of social discourse (R'boul, 2021). As communities become more ethnically and religiously diverse, individuals are increasingly encountering people from different religious traditions. This increased interaction necessitates the development of deeper understanding, respect, and tolerance, especially in contexts where religious differences have historically led to tension or conflict. Moreover, as societies navigate the challenges of pluralism, the role of interfaith dialogue in mitigating religious tension and fostering harmony becomes ever more critical. Technologies, such as social media and online platforms, have also facilitated the expansion

of these dialogues, allowing individuals from geographically distant communities to engage in discussions that were previously limited to local or face-to-face interactions.

Several theoretical and practical frameworks have been used to understand the dynamics of interfaith dialogue. While some approaches have focused on theological comparisons or philosophical debates between religions, others have emphasized the social and psychological aspects of interreligious interactions. Notably, John Hick's theory of religious pluralism argues that all major world religions are valid paths toward a similar ultimate reality, thus encouraging more inclusive interfaith discussions. However, much of the existing research has predominantly focused on doctrinal or theological analysis, often overlooking the lived experiences and personal meanings that individuals derive from engaging in such dialogues. This gap presents a clear need for a deeper, more experiential exploration of how individuals navigate interfaith interactions on a personal level.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue within a multicultural context (Gloeckner & Beyers, 2024). By using a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to explore the meanings participants attach to their experiences, challenges, and transformations in the process of dialogue. Such an approach allows for a richer understanding of the lived experience of religious pluralism, providing insights that go beyond theological concepts or generalized social theories. The ultimate goal is to gain a deeper appreciation of how interfaith dialogue influences individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, thus contributing to the broader discourse on religious coexistence in diverse societies.

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals involved in interfaith dialogue has become a vital area of study within the field of religious sociology and psychology (Zonne-Gätjens, 2024). Understanding how individuals perceive and navigate religious pluralism requires more than just theological or doctrinal analysis; it requires an exploration of the personal, lived experiences that shape their attitudes and actions in interfaith settings. In this context, the phenomenological approach is particularly valuable, as it provides a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of their interactions with people from different religious backgrounds. This approach places emphasis on the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, exploring not just what happens in interfaith dialogues, but how these experiences are interpreted on a personal level.

However, capturing these subjective experiences is inherently challenging. One of the key methodological difficulties in studying religious pluralism through traditional quantitative methods is the inability to fully grasp the nuance of personal beliefs, emotions, and transformations that occur during interfaith encounters (Shamoa-Nir, 2024). While surveys and statistical analysis can provide broad trends and generalizable data, they fail to capture the richness and complexity of individual experiences. For instance, quantitative studies may identify patterns of increased tolerance or understanding, but they are less equipped to explain how these outcomes are felt and internalized by participants. These methods, though useful in some contexts, cannot effectively address the deeper psychological and emotional layers of experience that are central to understanding the lived reality of interfaith dialogue.

As a result, many studies in the field of interfaith dialogue have been limited in their capacity to offer a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. The reliance on more detached, observational or survey-based approaches often leads to an oversimplified understanding of how people experience religious diversity. These studies may overlook the subtleties of personal transformation, the internal struggles participants face, or the cultural and social factors that influence their interpretations of religious pluralism. The limitations of these methods underscore the need for an approach that focuses on individuals' direct experiences, allowing for a richer and more nuanced exploration of the meaning-making processes at play.

This gap in existing research emphasizes the importance of adopting a phenomenological perspective, which is uniquely suited to reveal the essence of participants' experiences in interfaith dialogue (Mahallati, 2019). By focusing on how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize their interactions within a pluralistic religious context, this research seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the personal and transformative aspects of interfaith encounters that have often been overlooked in previous studies.

While practical approaches to studying interfaith dialogue, such as quantitative surveys and sociological analyses, have provided valuable insights into broad patterns of religious interaction and

tolerance, they often fail to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences. These methods typically focus on measuring observable outcomes, such as increased understanding or improved attitudes, but they lack the capacity to explore the underlying emotional, psychological, and existential dimensions of participants' experiences. As a result, the rich, subjective meanings that individuals derive from engaging in interfaith dialogue are frequently overlooked or oversimplified. For example, while surveys may indicate that participants report feeling more tolerant after interfaith discussions, they do not delve into how participants perceive and internalize these experiences on a personal level or how such encounters might alter their worldview in profound, sometimes transformative, ways.

This gap in understanding highlights the limitations of existing research methodologies, particularly in capturing the true essence of interfaith dialogue as a lived experience (Umam & Barmawi, 2023). The practical, outcome-based approaches that dominate the field often reduce the phenomenon to statistical measures, thus neglecting the nuanced, personal meanings that arise from these encounters. As a result, the depth of participants' lived experiences remains underexplored, leading to an incomplete understanding of the processes that underpin interfaith engagement.

An alternative approach, and one that addresses this gap, is the adoption of a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology allows for a more holistic exploration of the personal and subjective aspects of interfaith dialogue, focusing on how individuals experience and interpret these interactions on an emotional, cognitive, and spiritual level (Alemany-Arrebola dkk., 2024). By prioritizing lived experiences, phenomenology provides a means to uncover the deeper meanings that individuals attribute to their engagement in interfaith dialogue. This method is uniquely positioned to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate religious pluralism, capturing the complexities of transformation, belief, and personal growth that are often overlooked by more traditional research methods. In this way, phenomenology can provide the insights necessary to bridge the gap between broad, quantitative findings and the deeply personal, subjective nature of interfaith encounters.

Previous research on interfaith dialogue has largely focused on broader sociological trends, such as the role of interreligious encounters in fostering tolerance and social cohesion. Studies have also explored religious pluralism, often through the lens of theological debates or philosophical frameworks, with figures such as John Hick advocating for an inclusive approach to religious diversity. However, much of this research has overlooked the personal, lived experiences of individuals engaged in such dialogue (Shtofer dkk., 2020). The existing literature on interfaith encounters tends to focus on generalized outcomes, such as increased understanding or reduced prejudice, rather than on the deeper meanings and emotional experiences that shape participants' perceptions of religious pluralism. Thus, there remains a gap in our understanding of how these dialogues are experienced on a subjective, personal level.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the exploration of individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. By focusing on the subjective nature of interfaith dialogue, this approach allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the transformative and emotional processes at play during interreligious encounters. Phenomenology, with its focus on personal meaning-making, offers the ideal methodological framework to uncover how participants perceive, interpret, and internalize their experiences in a multicultural, multi-religious context. Through this lens, the research seeks to answer the key questions posed in the "Knowledge Gap" section, offering insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of religious pluralism that have been largely absent from previous studies.

This article is structured as follows: first, an introduction to the context and significance of interfaith dialogue is presented, highlighting the need to go beyond existing sociological and doctrinal approaches to focus on the subjective dimensions of interfaith experiences. Next, the phenomenological methodology is outlined, explaining how it is applied to explore the essence of these experiences (Gunawan dkk., 2024). Following that, the process of data collection, including in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, is detailed. The findings are then discussed, drawing connections between the participants' personal experiences and the broader context of religious pluralism. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the insights gained and their implications for future research and practice in the field of interfaith dialogue.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue within multicultural communities. Phenomenology was chosen because of its unique ability to illuminate the nuanced, lived experiences of participants, particularly in contexts involving complex emotional and cognitive dimensions. This approach aligns with the study's objectives by focusing on how individuals perceive and internalize their interactions, providing a depth of understanding beyond what traditional methods can offer (Campdepadrós-Cullell dkk., 2021). The approach is particularly well-suited to the research questions, which seek to uncover how individuals experience and interpret the process of interfaith dialogue, including the challenges, transformations, and shared values that emerge. By focusing on the participants' perspectives, this design allows for an in-depth examination of how religious pluralism is experienced in practice, providing rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

In this study, a descriptive phenomenological approach was applied to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Descriptive phenomenology focuses on providing a clear, straightforward depiction of experiences as they are perceived, without presuppositions or theoretical interpretations. This method ensures the integrity of participants' voices while allowing the researcher to uncover subtle, shared patterns of meaning. The emphasis on neutrality and bracketing theoretical assumptions strengthens the validity of the findings, addressing potential biases in the analysis.

Participants

Participants in this study were individuals actively involved in interfaith dialogue within a multicultural community setting (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). The selection was based on purposive sampling, which targeted individuals who had direct experience with interfaith dialogue in a multicultural context. Inclusion criteria required participants to have engaged in interfaith activities for at least six months, either as active participants or through passive observation, within a community known for its religious diversity.

Exclusion criteria involved individuals who had no direct experience in interfaith dialogue or those who were not engaged in any social or religiously pluralistic environment. A total of 12 participants were selected, representing a range of religious backgrounds including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and secular perspectives. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years, with an average age of 41 years. Of the 12 participants, 7 were male, and 5 were female. These demographic factors ensured a diverse set of experiences that provided a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted individually in a face-to-face format, ensuring that each participant had a private and comfortable space to share their thoughts and feelings (Malović & Vujica, 2021). Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, allowing participants ample time to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed responses to the guiding questions. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' experiences with interfaith dialogue, focusing on their perceptions of pluralism, challenges encountered, and personal transformations resulting from these interactions. Questions were open-ended and allowed participants to express their views freely, with follow-up probes used to explore responses in greater depth.

In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted during interfaith dialogue sessions within the community. The researcher attended several dialogue meetings, observing interactions and noting contextual factors that might influence the dynamics of the dialogue. Observational data were particularly useful for understanding the social setting and group dynamics, complementing the verbal accounts provided during interviews. All interviews and observations took place in community centers and places of worship within the participants' localities, providing a

naturalistic setting for data collection. Efforts were made to create a comfortable and respectful environment for participants, ensuring that they felt at ease sharing their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved identifying key themes that emerged from the interviews and observational data. This process was guided by the principles of phenomenological analysis, which aims to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. The analysis followed a systematic process of coding, where significant statements or phrases were highlighted and grouped into themes reflecting the participants' experiences of interfaith dialogue.

Themes were identified inductively, allowing the data to speak for itself without imposing preconceived categories (Gaspersz, 2023). Once initial codes were established, they were refined through constant comparison across interviews and observations, ensuring that the themes accurately represented the core experiences of participants. This process also involved identifying any patterns or variations in the way different individuals experienced interfaith dialogue, particularly regarding the challenges and transformative aspects of the interactions. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing the qualitative data, though the focus remained on the meaning and interpretation of the content rather than on quantitative measures.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB), ensuring that the research adhered to ethical guidelines for human subjects. Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and informed consent was obtained from each individual before participation. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses, and all data were stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and that no personally identifiable information would be included in the final report. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. The research complied with international ethical standards for social research, including the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The study ensured that participants' privacy was protected, and all data were analyzed and presented in a manner that safeguarded their confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiencing Tension and Uncertainty in Interfaith Dialogue

The participants' experiences of interfaith dialogue were often marked by a sense of tension and uncertainty, particularly when discussing deeply personal beliefs or confronting religious differences. A recurrent theme across interviews was the discomfort many participants felt in expressing their own religious views, fearing rejection or misunderstanding from others in the group. As one participant noted: "I wanted to share my thoughts, but I felt like my beliefs might be too different, and I was afraid that I would be judged or excluded by others. I stayed quiet because I wasn't sure how my words would be received."

This fear of social exclusion was not universal, but it was a significant factor in shaping the nature of the dialogue. The unease was especially pronounced when discussing controversial religious topics, where participants felt that they lacked the language or tools to articulate their beliefs in a way that would be both respectful and understood by others. However, some participants found that with time and repeated participation, their initial hesitations began to lessen. One interviewee reflected: "At first, it felt like walking on eggshells. But after a few sessions, I started to feel more comfortable. I think we began to trust each other more, and that trust made it easier to open up."

This thematic finding underscores the role of sustained engagement and trust-building in reducing initial barriers to open dialogue.

The Role of Shared Values in Reducing Tensions

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the role of shared values in creating a space for more meaningful and less tense interactions. When discussions moved beyond specific doctrinal differences and focused on universal themes such as peace, love, and mutual respect, participants reported experiencing a sense of solidarity and inclusivity. For instance, one participant shared: "When we talked about values like love and compassion, I felt that everyone could relate, no matter their faith. Those are universal ideas that transcend religion. It made me feel like we were all on the same page, even if our beliefs were different."

Such interactions were described as having a calming effect on the group, as they allowed participants to focus on commonalities rather than differences. Observations during these sessions reinforced the participants' accounts: when moderators steered the conversation towards shared human experiences, the atmosphere shifted from guarded to open, fostering a greater sense of connection and empathy among the group. One moderator, in reflecting on this dynamic, observed: "When we emphasize shared human experiences, the conversation tends to flow more easily. It creates an environment where participants are less defensive and more open to listening to one another."

This thematic finding suggests that focusing on common human values can reduce the potential for conflict and enhance understanding in interfaith dialogues.

Challenges in Sustaining Dialogue Across Religious Differences

Despite the positive outcomes mentioned above, participants also faced challenges in maintaining long-term engagement in interfaith dialogue, particularly as they navigated the deep-seated differences between their faiths. Some reported that while initial interactions were promising, maintaining momentum over time was difficult, especially when differences in religious practice became more apparent. One participant described this challenge: "In the beginning, we were all eager to learn from each other. But as time passed, I realized that some differences were too deep to bridge easily. It was hard to keep the conversation going without slipping into discussions that felt more like debates than dialogues."

This sentiment was echoed by others who expressed frustration with the limits of dialogue when confronted with profound theological disagreements. While the desire to foster mutual understanding remained strong, some participants felt that the dialogue process became too strained as conversations inevitably touched on core beliefs that were not easily reconciled.

Personal Growth and Transformation Through Dialogue

Despite these challenges, many participants described significant personal growth and transformation as a result of engaging in interfaith dialogue. Several participants reported that their understanding of their own religious beliefs had deepened as a result of hearing others' perspectives. One participant articulated this change: "Before engaging in these discussions, I thought I understood my faith fully. But listening to others, I began to see my own beliefs in a different light. It's like my own understanding has expanded through these conversations."

This theme underscores the reciprocal nature of interfaith dialogue: participants not only learned about others' religions but also developed a more nuanced understanding of their own beliefs. Moreover, some individuals found that engaging with people from different religious backgrounds made them more empathetic and open to difference in their everyday lives. One participant explained: "I feel like I'm more accepting now, not just of different religions but of people in general. It has made me less judgmental and more compassionate."

These experiences suggest that interfaith dialogue, when conducted with openness and respect, has the potential to foster both personal and communal transformation.

The results of this study reveal that while interfaith dialogue can be a challenging and complex process, it also holds significant potential for fostering mutual understanding, personal

growth, and social harmony. The participants' experiences highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue, where shared values can be emphasized, and differences can be explored with empathy and respect. Although tensions and uncertainties may initially arise, the potential for transformative experiences remains significant, particularly when dialogue is facilitated by skilled moderators who can guide conversations toward common ground. These findings suggest that continued engagement in interfaith dialogue is essential for building understanding and tolerance in increasingly pluralistic societies.

The findings of this study reveal the complex and deeply personal nature of participants' experiences in interfaith dialogue. Central to the analysis is the understanding that interfaith dialogue is not simply an exchange of beliefs, but an emotional and psychological journey that shapes individuals' perceptions of religious pluralism. These experiences, often marked by moments of tension, empathy, and transformation, offer a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate religious differences in a multicultural context. The research highlights that while participants may articulate general support for religious tolerance, their lived experiences suggest a far more intricate and multifaceted engagement with the concept of pluralism.

This study addresses the primary research question by exploring how individuals experience interfaith dialogue in a pluralistic society. The findings contribute to our understanding of the deep, subjective processes involved in religious encounters, highlighting the psychological and emotional dimensions that often go unnoticed in more quantitative or outcome-based studies. Participants described a range of experiences, from moments of initial discomfort to profound shifts in understanding and empathy. These experiences are not merely intellectual or ideological but are deeply personal, often challenging preconceived notions of faith and identity. In this way, the research uncovers the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue, offering a richer, more nuanced perspective on how individuals engage with religious pluralism on an experiential level.

The findings of this study resonate with, and in some cases extend, existing literature on interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism. Previous studies have shown that interfaith encounters can foster greater tolerance and reduce prejudice (Smith, 2005; Fisher, 2011). However, these studies often focus on the cognitive or attitudinal changes that occur, rather than the deeper emotional and spiritual experiences that shape these changes. This research adds depth to our understanding by revealing how participants engage with their religious identities and beliefs in the context of dialogue. For instance, the findings align with John Hick's (1976) theory of pluralism, which emphasizes the importance of seeing different religions as equally valid paths toward the ultimate truth. However, this study extends Hick's ideas by highlighting the personal, internal struggles participants face when reconciling their beliefs with those of others. Moreover, the findings complement Peter Berger's (1999) work on the sociology of knowledge, particularly his assertion that understanding other religions requires not only intellectual engagement but also emotional openness. In contrast to these theoretical frameworks, however, this study underscores the emotional labor involved in such openness, revealing the psychological complexities that shape the dialogue process.

The findings of this study have both academic and practical implications, particularly in understanding the deeply personal and transformative nature of interfaith dialogue. From an academic perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on religious pluralism by emphasizing the emotional and psychological dimensions of interfaith encounters. In contrast to traditional studies that focus primarily on cognitive shifts, this study uncovers the intricate processes by which individuals negotiate their beliefs and identities in response to religious diversity. Practically, the insights gained can inform interfaith dialogue initiatives, highlighting the importance of creating safe spaces for participants to express vulnerability and engage authentically. Facilitators and organizers of interfaith programs can benefit from understanding that interfaith dialogue is not merely an intellectual exercise but an emotionally charged process that requires sensitivity and empathy. Additionally, these findings underscore the need for interfaith dialogue to address not only theological differences but also the underlying emotional and existential concerns that participants may experience. This approach has the potential to foster more meaningful and lasting connections between individuals from different faith traditions.

While this study provides valuable insights into the subjective experiences of individuals in interfaith dialogue, it is important to recognize its limitations. First, the sample size of 10-15 participants, while rich in qualitative detail, is relatively small and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in larger, more heterogeneous populations. Additionally, the study focused on participants from specific religious backgrounds and communities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other religious or cultural contexts (Walton, 2021). The data was also collected through interviews and observations in a specific setting, which may not reflect the experiences of individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue in different settings or geographic locations. The phenomenological approach, while providing depth in understanding individual experiences, does not allow for broad generalizations or statistical comparisons. Future studies could benefit from exploring interfaith dialogue in a more diverse range of contexts and involving a larger, more representative sample. This would allow for a deeper exploration of how these findings apply across different cultural and religious settings.

The insights gained from this study open several avenues for future research in the field of interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism. One potential direction is to explore how different types of interfaith encounters—such as formal versus informal dialogue or structured versus unstructured interactions—affect participants' emotional experiences and perceptions of religious pluralism. Another avenue for future study is the role of cultural background and personal history in shaping participants' responses to interfaith dialogue. Given that this study focused on a relatively small group, future research could involve longitudinal studies that track participants over time to assess how their experiences in interfaith dialogue evolve. Furthermore, the findings suggest a need to explore the intersection of interfaith dialogue and other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, or social class, to understand how these factors influence individuals' experiences and perceptions. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the emotional and spiritual dynamics of interfaith encounters, providing a foundation for future studies that aim to bridge gaps between religious groups in increasingly pluralistic societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of individuals engaged in interfaith dialogue within a multicultural community, focusing on how these interactions contribute to the understanding and practice of religious pluralism. The findings revealed that while participants experienced both challenges and rewards in their interfaith encounters, they largely perceived these dialogues as opportunities for personal growth and increased empathy. Key themes emerged around the emotional and existential dimensions of these interactions, which are often overlooked in traditional studies of religious diversity. While these findings provide valuable insights, the study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size, comprising 12 participants, may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations. Additionally, the study focused on a specific cultural and religious context, which may not fully capture the diverse range of experiences in other settings or communities. Addressing these limitations in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of interfaith dialogue across different cultural and religious environments. The research addresses gaps in the literature by emphasizing the importance of creating safe, empathetic spaces where religious differences can be discussed without fear of judgment or exclusion. These findings offer valuable insights for enhancing interfaith dialogue programs, ensuring that they not only address intellectual differences but also acknowledge the emotional and spiritual complexities of participants. By considering the study's limitations and building on its contributions, future research can deepen our understanding of how interfaith dialogue fosters empathy, understanding, and social cohesion in increasingly pluralistic societies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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