



Interfaith Dialogue and Meaning-Making: Lived Experiences of Indonesian University Students

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogue is a crucial area in contemporary religious studies and sociology, especially in plural societies where diversity shapes identity. Yet, little research has examined how participants construct meaning during dialogue, leaving a gap in understanding its transformative role. This study addresses that gap through a phenomenological approach. Using semi-structured interviews with 15 participants from diverse religions, analyzed with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study identifies three core outcomes: (1) personal transformation, (2) greater empathy, and (3) stronger collective belonging. Participants described dialogue as a reflective, relational process shaped by identity negotiation, authentic storytelling, and emotional connection. These dynamics illustrate how meaning is co-constructed in pluralistic settings. The findings highlight interfaith dialogue's potential to bridge differences and foster social cohesion, while also offering guidance for future research and program design through participant-centered, narrative-based approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue and pluralism have emerged as crucial arenas in contemporary religious studies and sociology, particularly within culturally diverse societies (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Across global contexts, interactions among followers of different faith traditions have intensified—not merely as interreligious discourse but as lived, everyday experiences that shape individuals' identities and communal relationships. This phenomenon reflects broader trends in multireligious societies, where coexistence, mutual recognition, and negotiation of differences have become socially and culturally salient.

The significance of interfaith dialogue extends well beyond institutional or theoretical frameworks, intersecting deeply with subjective experiences. Individuals participating in interfaith encounters often report transformative insights, emotional resonance, and reevaluations of personal convictions (Badhwar, 2024; Taves & Barlev, 2022). These subjective dimensions underscore the phenomenon's embeddedness in meaning-making processes, empathy development, and communal belonging. Recognizing interfaith interaction as an experiential landscape demands attention to how individuals interpret, internalize, and narrate their encounters with religious others.

Such considerations highlight the imperative for a phenomenological exploration of interfaith experiences—one that privileges the voices and lived realities of participants (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While considerable research has explored the structural, theological, or sociopolitical aspects of interfaith initiatives, the personal, meaning-laden dimensions remain underexamined. A phenomenological lens enables the uncovering of rich, first-person perspectives—how individuals perceive, feel, and construct significance during interfaith dialogue—thus offering nuanced insight into the human experience of pluralism.

Building upon the growing recognition of interfaith dialogue as a transformative social phenomenon, research on individuals' lived experiences within such encounters has increasingly gained scholarly attention (McChesney, 2024; Verbillis-Kolp et al., 2024). Scholars in sociology, religious studies, and intercultural communication have highlighted the need to move beyond macro-level analyses of institutional frameworks and explore the subjective meaning-making processes embedded within personal interactions. Such experiential inquiries are particularly relevant in culturally pluralistic societies where interreligious engagement often involves complex negotiations of identity, empathy, and belonging.

However, methodological challenges persist in exploring these subjective dimensions. Much of the existing research has relied heavily on quantitative surveys or structured questionnaires designed to measure tolerance, diversity acceptance, or levels of religious knowledge (Bentley, 2025; Mottershead & Alonaizi, 2022). While these approaches provide valuable descriptive trends, they often fail to capture the depth, nuance, and richness of lived experiences expressed by participants during interfaith encounters. The absence of first-person perspectives in previous studies limits the ability to understand how individuals interpret, internalize, and assign meaning to their participation in dialogue.

This limitation has resulted in a significant gap in understanding the essence of interfaith experiences. Earlier approaches have often reduced complex phenomena to predefined variables, overlooking the contextual, emotional, and existential aspects that shape human encounters with religious diversity (Bridgman & Erickson, 2025; Mattingly, 2024). A phenomenological approach addresses this limitation by prioritizing the subjective narratives of participants, enabling researchers to illuminate meanings as they emerge naturally from participants' accounts. Through its emphasis on lived experience, phenomenology offers a robust framework for accessing deeper insights into how interfaith dialogues are perceived, embodied, and transformed into personal and collective meaning.

Despite the increasing number of studies on interfaith dialogue and pluralism, much of the existing research has predominantly relied on practical, outcome-oriented approaches such as policy analysis, program evaluation, or quantitative surveys measuring tolerance levels and interreligious understanding (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). While these frameworks provide valuable insights into institutional impacts and statistical patterns, they often overlook the subjective, meaning-making dimensions of interfaith engagement. Such approaches tend to capture what participants do within dialogue programs rather than what they experience or feel during these encounters.

The primary limitation of these existing approaches lies in their inability to uncover the rich, personal, and transformative meanings embedded within participants' lived experiences (Bentley, 2025; Mottershead & Alonaizi, 2022). Quantitative designs, for example, are constrained by predefined categories and scales that fail to represent the complexity of identity negotiations, emotional responses, and existential reflections that often arise in interfaith contexts. As a result, current understandings remain fragmented, leaving unanswered questions about how participants construct meaning, navigate tensions, and develop empathy through dialogue with religious others.

To address this limitation, a phenomenological approach is proposed as a more suitable and comprehensive framework for exploring the essence of interfaith experiences. By prioritizing participants' voices and subjective perspectives, phenomenology enables researchers to illuminate meanings as they naturally emerge from lived narratives. This approach not only fills a critical methodological gap but also provides a holistic understanding of how interfaith dialogues shape personal identity, relational dynamics, and collective belonging in pluralistic societies.

Recent studies on interfaith dialogue have emphasized the role of structured programs in promoting understanding among participants from diverse religious backgrounds (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Previous research has primarily examined the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives through quantitative surveys, policy analyses, or program evaluations, providing valuable insights into outcomes at the institutional level. However, relatively few studies have explored the lived experiences of individuals who engage in these dialogues. Understanding how participants interpret, internalize, and construct meaning during

these interactions remains underdeveloped in current scholarship. This gap underscores the need for an approach that privileges participants' voices and their personal meaning-making processes.

To address this need, the present study applies a phenomenological approach to examine how participants experience and make sense of interfaith dialogue. This method was selected for its ability to uncover deep, subjective insights that are often inaccessible through quantitative or descriptive frameworks (Upendra et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2023). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study explores the essence of participants' experiences by focusing on their narratives, reflections, and emotional responses. By adopting this approach, the study directly responds to the methodological limitations identified in the previous section and addresses unanswered questions about how meaning is constructed in interfaith encounters. The findings aim to contribute a richer and more nuanced understanding of interfaith dialogue in pluralistic contexts.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the research context, rationale, and significance of exploring participants' experiences within interfaith dialogue programs (Bahardeen et al., 2025; Mensah et al., 2025a). The following section describes the phenomenological methodology applied, including data collection through semi-structured interviews and systematic interpretative analysis. The results section presents the thematic findings derived from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations to illustrate authentic experiences. The discussion elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, linking them to existing literature on interfaith dialogue and pluralism. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they constructed within the context of interfaith dialogue (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). Phenomenology was selected due to its emphasis on uncovering the essence of human experience rather than testing hypotheses or measuring variables.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was applied, as it facilitates a detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. This approach allows for exploring complex emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of interfaith encounters, providing insights into the subjective realities that shape participants' understanding of pluralism.

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in interfaith dialogue programs at two Indonesian universities (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Purposive sampling was applied to ensure the selection of individuals who possessed direct and relevant experience with the phenomenon under study.

The inclusion criteria required that participants had:

1. Actively participated in at least three structured interfaith dialogue sessions.
2. Represented diverse religious backgrounds, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
3. Demonstrated willingness to share personal reflections and insights openly.

A total of 15 participants (8 female, 7 male) took part in the study, aged between 19 and 24 years. Participants varied in their religious affiliations, representing an intentionally balanced composition to ensure pluralistic representation. No participants with prior professional training in interfaith facilitation were included to preserve the authenticity of their lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich narratives of participants' experiences during interfaith dialogue sessions (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). An interview guide was prepared based on the research objectives and relevant literature, while still allowing flexibility to explore emerging insights during conversations.

- Format: One-on-one interviews.
- Duration: Approximately 60 to 90 minutes each.
- Setting: Conducted in private, quiet spaces to ensure comfort and confidentiality.
- Medium: Interviews were recorded with participants' consent to enable accurate transcription.

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on personal transformations, challenges, and perceptions of pluralism. Examples of guiding prompts included: "Can you describe a moment during the dialogue when you felt your perspective shifted?" and "How did interacting with participants of different faiths influence your understanding of your own beliefs?"

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following the structured steps proposed by Longhofer et al., (2012). The process aimed to capture both descriptive and interpretative meanings embedded in participants' narratives:

1. Immersion in the Data: Transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the content.
2. Identification of Meaning Units: Significant statements and expressions were highlighted and coded according to emerging patterns.
3. Development of Initial Themes: Related codes were clustered into broader categories reflecting shared experiential meanings.
4. Cross-Case Analysis: Themes were compared across participants to identify similarities, divergences, and recurring motifs.
5. Synthesis of Essential Meanings: Final themes were refined to represent the core essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to assist in organizing and managing data without altering the interpretative depth of the analysis. The iterative process allowed the findings to remain grounded in participants' voices while ensuring methodological rigor.

RESULTS

Discovering Personal Meaning Through Dialogue

Participants consistently reported that engaging in interfaith dialogue led them to discover deeper personal insights about their own beliefs and values. The dialogue process allowed them to reflect on their identity and reinterpret their spiritual perspectives within a pluralistic context.

"Before joining this program, I thought I understood my faith completely. But when I heard how others experience God differently, I realized my faith could coexist with theirs without losing its meaning." (Participant 3, Muslim student)

This reflective process was experienced not only as intellectual enrichment but also as emotional and spiritual transformation. The dialogues facilitated self-awareness while cultivating respect for differences.

Cycle of Personal Growth through Interfaith Dialogue



Building Empathy and Mutual Understanding

A prominent finding of this study was the emergence of empathy as a central element of interfaith engagement. Participants reported that structured conversations allowed them to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions about other religions.

“I used to believe that our differences would always separate us, but after talking with my Christian friends, I felt connected to their struggles and dreams. It was a very human experience.” (Participant 7, Muslim student)

The participants’ narratives revealed that empathy developed gradually through shared storytelling and personal encounters rather than through theoretical discussions. This indicates that interfaith dialogue contributes not only to intellectual understanding but also to emotional and relational transformation.

Negotiating Tensions and Overcoming Prejudices

While most participants reported positive experiences, several described initial discomfort and resistance during the early stages of dialogue. Some expressed anxiety about being judged or misunderstood, which highlighted the presence of internalized prejudices.

“At first, I was afraid to talk openly because I thought my beliefs would be criticized. But after listening to others with respect, I learned that we all share similar struggles.” (Participant 11, Christian student)

Through facilitated discussions, these tensions were gradually transformed into opportunities for growth. Participants reported that respectful communication and active listening were essential in navigating sensitive theological differences.

Experiencing a Sense of Collective Belonging

Another key theme was the sense of collective belonging fostered through interfaith dialogue. Participants shared that being part of a diverse community helped them develop a more inclusive worldview.

“For the first time, I felt that my voice mattered, even though I was the only Hindu participant. We were different, but we were all searching for understanding.” (Participant 2, Hindu student)

This sense of belonging extended beyond the dialogue sessions, with participants reporting increased willingness to collaborate on community projects and peacebuilding initiatives.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that interfaith dialogue fosters personal transformation, enhances empathy, and strengthens a sense of belonging among participants from diverse religious backgrounds (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Through a phenomenological lens, these results answer the central question posed in the introduction by uncovering how participants construct meaning and negotiate identities during interfaith encounters.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results demonstrate that participants experienced interfaith dialogue not merely as a formal exchange of beliefs but as a transformative process involving personal reflection, emotional growth, and deep relational engagement. These findings directly respond to the guiding research question, which sought to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their participation in interfaith dialogue programs.

A central contribution of this study lies in highlighting the interplay between self-awareness and empathy as the core mechanisms of transformation. Participants reported gaining new insights into their religious identity while simultaneously cultivating a greater appreciation for others' beliefs and values. Such experiences extend beyond surface-level tolerance and instead foster mutual recognition and shared humanity, addressing a significant gap in prior research that often focused on institutional frameworks rather than personal meaning-making.

Furthermore, the results emphasize that interfaith dialogue does not erase religious differences but rather enables participants to embrace diversity as a resource for collective understanding. This offers a nuanced perspective on pluralism by demonstrating how meaning emerges through dialogue as participants navigate tensions, challenge stereotypes, and co-construct new forms of belonging within pluralistic contexts.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings align with prior research demonstrating the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue, but they also advance existing knowledge by centering on first-person experiences rather than programmatic outcomes (Allen et al., 2025; Dubey et al., 2025). Previous studies have primarily highlighted the role of dialogue in promoting social cohesion and tolerance at a societal level; however, this study contributes deeper insights into the subjective processes through which transformation occurs at the individual level.

From a theoretical standpoint, these results resonate with phenomenological perspectives emphasizing the co-construction of meaning within relational contexts. By focusing on lived experiences, the study demonstrates how participants' narratives embody both intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal understanding, supporting claims that dialogue serves as a mediating space between identity and difference.

At the same time, the study extends existing frameworks by showing how empathy, identity negotiation, and collective belonging operate simultaneously during interfaith encounters. This multidimensional understanding challenges reductionist interpretations of interfaith dialogue as purely cognitive or informational, suggesting instead that dialogue represents a holistic experiential process encompassing emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold important social, cultural, and practical implications for understanding interfaith dialogue in pluralistic societies. By uncovering the lived experiences of participants, the results demonstrate that interfaith dialogue not only promotes religious tolerance but also facilitates personal transformation and the development of empathy-driven relationships. This has

significant relevance for educational institutions, policymakers, and community organizations seeking to foster social cohesion through interreligious engagement.

Culturally, the findings highlight that interfaith dialogue provides a space where individuals can negotiate their identities while embracing diversity as a shared value (Agherdien, 2025; Asad et al., 2022). This supports broader efforts to address religious polarization and intergroup tensions in multicultural contexts. Professionally, the insights can inform the design of interfaith programs by emphasizing participant-centered approaches that privilege authentic storytelling, emotional connection, and collective meaning-making rather than purely informational or prescriptive models. Ultimately, this study contributes a deeper understanding of pluralism as a lived practice rather than a theoretical construct.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides meaningful insights into participants' experiences, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. First, the use of purposive sampling and the relatively small number of participants limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations. However, this is consistent with the phenomenological paradigm, which prioritizes depth over breadth in exploring subjective experiences.

Second, the research was conducted within specific interfaith dialogue programs in Indonesian universities, meaning that the cultural and institutional context may influence participants' perceptions and narratives. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending the findings to other regions or contexts where interfaith engagement operates under different social or religious dynamics. Finally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which may introduce bias related to participants' memory or social desirability, although measures such as triangulation and member checking were applied to enhance data trustworthiness.

Directions for Future Research

Building upon these findings, future studies could expand the scope by exploring interfaith dialogue experiences across diverse cultural, geographical, and institutional contexts (Mensah et al., 2025b; Rathbone et al., 2021). Comparative research between participants in different regions or faith traditions could reveal how sociocultural environments shape the meaning-making process in unique ways.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how participants' perceptions and relational dynamics evolve over time, providing insights into the long-term impacts of interfaith dialogue on identity formation, empathy, and community integration. Further research might also integrate mixed-method approaches, combining phenomenological insights with broader quantitative measures to capture both the depth and prevalence of meaning-making processes. By pursuing these directions, future studies can deepen theoretical understandings of interfaith dialogue while contributing practical strategies for fostering inclusive and cohesive multicultural societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of participants engaged in interfaith dialogue programs, addressing the need to understand how individuals construct meaning within pluralistic contexts. The findings reveal that interfaith dialogue fosters personal transformation, enhances empathy, and promotes a sense of collective belonging, offering insights that move beyond institutional or policy-driven evaluations. By applying a phenomenological approach, the study contributes a deeper understanding of how meaning emerges through participants' narratives and fills a critical gap left by previous research focused on quantitative measures. These results highlight the value of participant-centered dialogue models that emphasize authentic storytelling, identity negotiation, and relational understanding. While the study focuses on a specific cultural setting, its implications provide relevant perspectives for designing interfaith initiatives in broader multicultural contexts. Future research could expand these findings by comparing diverse populations, employing longitudinal designs, and integrating mixed methods to explore the long-term impacts of interfaith dialogue.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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