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Disrupting Islamophobia: Teaching the Social Construction of Terrorism in the Mass Media

Krista McQueeney
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This article presents a critical media literacy technique for teaching about the social construction of terrorism. In a post-9/11 context where the human rights of Arabs and Muslims in the United States and overseas are threatened by drone attacks, profiling, detentions, and hate crimes, educators must not shy away from this issue. I use visual media to engage students with three questions: (1) How do everyday Americans define “terrorism” and perceive “terrorists”? (2) Where do these images come from? (3) What are the consequences for domestic and foreign policy? Using students’ own socialization as a starting point, I challenge them to consider how media representations can have real-life consequences.

The recent hate crime against Sunando Sen—a 46 year old Indian-American man who was pushed to his death from the subway tracks in Queens, NY because he was perceived to be Muslim—is an ugly example of Islamophobia in the United States (Santora, 2012). Unfortunately, it is not an isolated case. Leading up to and following the 9/11 attacks, the human rights of Arabs and Muslims in the US have been increasingly threatened by anti-Muslim rhetoric, airport screenings, traffic stops, detentions, deportations, and hate crimes (Kaplan, 2006; Gottshalk & Greenberg, 2007). Recent reports estimate that the post-9/11 wars have directly caused the deaths of between 174,000 and 220,000 civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Watson Institute for International Studies, 2014). Additionally, the beginning of 2013 was marked by Congressional reauthorization of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which expanded the U.S. government’s right to detain terror suspects indefinitely and justified secret drone attacks overseas. Under President Obama alone, drone attacks—a controversial weapon of the “war on terror”—are estimated to have killed at least 2,400 people in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2014a).

Within such a context, it is crucial for educators to encourage students to develop a critical analysis of Islamophobia and the social construction of terrorism. Yet, facilitating productive discussions of these issues can be a challenge. Many undergraduates—like Americans of all ages—are uninformed about US foreign policy and events in the Arab World (Cassino, Woolley, & Jenkins, 2012). In class discussions, many of my students have stated the belief that women wearing a hijab or veil and airline passengers with Arab-sounding last names must be suicide bombers. Very few of the students I teach followed the events of the Arab Spring, nor were they aware of the United States’ role in supporting dictators like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. In addition, practical techniques for teaching about ethnic and religious minorities—especially Arabs

and Muslims—are lacking in the teaching literature (Kaviani, 2007). Taken together, these conditions can make it difficult for instructors to facilitate open and respectful dialogue about Islamophobia and its social and political consequences in our society.

With this in mind, I share a pedagogical technique designed to generate productive, temporally bounded (75-minute) discussions of terrorism in the undergraduate classroom. This approach draws on three distinct streams in the sociological literature: the construction of social problems, racial “Othering,” and critical media literacy. First, I use a social constructionist framework (Best, 2012; Loseke, 2003; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), which holds that the issues that are defined as social problems (e.g., terrorism) are not objectively given, but are instead a matter of people constructing meanings and interpretations of what *counts* as a social problem. Thus, definitions of social problems change over time and place (Best, 2012). Second, I foreground a critical analysis of racism and the corporate control of mass media. As Said (1997), Shaheen (2001), and Jackson (2010) have argued, the Western media routinely stereotypes Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and racial “Others.” Third, because structured images of Arab and Muslim Others (I intentionally conflate these ethnic and religious categories to reflect popular representations) saturate the corporate-controlled mass media, I employ a media literacy to help students critically interrogate these stereotypes (Steinbrink & Cook, 2003). Critical media literacy is especially useful for cultivating equity and justice among today’s students, who have been immersed in information-communication technology their whole lives but often lack the ability to evaluate information and debunk stereotypes in the media (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009).

The Social Construction of Terrorism

From a social constructionist perspective (Best, 2012; Gergen, 2009; Loseke, 2003; Spector & Kitsuse,

1977), social problems should not be taken for granted as objective conditions that afflict society. Instead, they are analyzed as a process. Social constructionists ask, how and why do people come to perceive that some condition should be viewed as a social problem? From this perspective, terrorism is not a real threat embodied by individuals and groups who can be hunted down and killed. Instead, *terrorism* is constructed through the interpretation of events, the use of claims made up of language and symbols, and the work of claims-makers to attract the public's attention and sway public opinion in support of some interests over others (Ben-Yehuda, 1993; Schmid & Jongman, 1988; Turk, 2004, 2008). Basic to this process is that claims-makers deploy dominant language and symbols that circulate in the culture to construct social problems. Moreover, the issues that are defined as social problems in the real world are products of ideological power struggles (Gergen, 2009).

Today, the mass media plays a leading role in defining terrorism (Jenkins, 2003). For example, reporters and politicians are far more likely to apply the label "terrorist" to foreign-based individuals or groups such as al-Qaeda than to domestic hate groups who murder in the name of political goals such as the anti-choice Operation Rescue or the anti-government Patriot movement (Turk, 2004). Moreover, when enemies of the United States—whether political groups or nation-states—wage politically-motivated violence against U.S. civilians it is often called a terrorist act. Yet, when the U.S. government or its allies inflict similar acts of violence on civilians abroad, it is dubbed an act of retaliation or counter-terrorism (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, it is vital for students to critically assess who is making claims of terrorism and to understand the broader political contexts and ideological struggles in which these claims are being played out in the news and entertainment media.

Although social problems like terrorism are constructed by people, they are not mere figments of our imagination. Once people perceive a problem as real, we may take action in ways that are anything but make-believe. In the words of W. I. Thomas, "It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct—if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). The events of September 11, 2001 led to an elevated risk perception that terrorists will target the United States (Huddy, Feldman, Capelos, & Provost, 2002). For example, public opinion polls indicate that since the 9/11 attacks, Americans have consistently ranked terrorism as one of the most serious social problems facing the United States. A USA Today/Gallup Poll from May 24-25, 2010 revealed that almost a decade after 9/11, Americans still perceived terrorism as the most serious threat to the well-being of the US (Saad,

2010). A poll conducted on the evening of the September 11, 2001 attacks found that 58% of Americans were "somewhat" or "very" worried that a member of their immediate family might become a terrorist attack victim (Gallup, 2013). By March 2012, the level of worry had declined but remained substantial at 35% (Gallup, 2013).

These fears are grossly exaggerated. Statistically, Americans are highly unlikely to be harmed by a terrorist attack. In 2001, car accidents killed over 12.5 times more Americans than did the September 11th attacks (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2002). Yet, insofar as social problems are as much (or more) a matter of subjective perception as they are of objective harm, educators can help students unpack where these subjective perceptions come from as well as their validity.

So where do these subjective perceptions come from? The mass media, with its narrow focus on the exceptional over the ordinary and its lack of international coverage, is the primary source of Americans' knowledge about Islam and Muslims (Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR], 2006). In turn, politicians make use of public opinion polls in deciding what problems should take center stage, what policies to support, and what actions to take in addressing social problems. Perceptions have consequences. Thus, a more informed perspective is urgently needed—especially among young people, whose critical thinking skills and cultural awareness will be pivotal in navigating a global society in which the world's 1.6 billion Muslims play an important role.

Controlling Images: The Arab and Muslim "Other"

In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) identified several stereotypical images of African American women that circulated in the dominant culture, particularly in the mass media. She argues that portrayals of African American women as "mammies," matriarchs, welfare recipients, and "hot mommas" have been used to justify Black women's oppression. Controlling images like these not only reduce marginalized groups to negative caricatures, but they also serve to mark difference and to "stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order" (Hall, 1997, p. 237). Since their first encounter with the Arab world, Westerners have cast Arabs and/or Muslims as uncivilized and violent (Said, 1978). These controlling images of Arab and Muslim Others have become further imprinted in the American imagination since 9/11 (Earp, Jhally, Shaheen, 2006). By painting the Middle East as a land of barbarism and tyranny, and

by routinely casting Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, the mass media bolsters oppositions between the civilized and the uncivilized and fosters fear of the Arab Other (Hirchi, 2007). As such, media misrepresentations can be an instrument for advancing political agendas, including war and the restriction of civil liberties.

It is important to note that media effects are never simple or direct (Hall, 1980). Exposure to images of Arab and Muslim Others—even if it is recurring — does not *cause* individuals to commit hate crimes, nor does it compel governments to declare war on Arab nations. Moreover, Arabs and Muslims themselves may appropriate controlling images in order to gain safety, financial resources, and recognition, or to resist inequality (Collins, 2004). Yet, following Jackson (2010), I argue that controlling images of Arab and Muslim Others—while not directly causing individual attitudes or behaviors—reinforce mainstream assumptions of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. This creates a context in which human rights violations of ordinary Arabs and Muslims within and outside the United States may be seen as acceptable (Jackson, 2010). Thus, even if journalists, politicians, or film producers do not intend to promote Islamophobia, the ubiquitous association of Arabs and Muslims with terrorists in mainstream Western media contributes to negative and stereotypical attitudes toward Islam (CAIR, 2006). In addition, foreign policy decisions such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq have undoubtedly been made easier by a century of images of the Arab and Muslim Other (Shaheen, 2001). Thus, controlling images mask the global political and economic inequalities that produce terrorism (Smelser & Mitchell, 2002) and shift the blame onto so-called innately violent Arab and Muslim individuals.

Critical Media Literacy

According to Considine and Haley (1999), media literacy can be defined as the ability to access, analyze, and evaluate the quality of the media we consume, as well as to create media of our own. Insofar as media images are shaped by social ideologies and have social consequences, critical media literacy can help students interrogate the content of media texts and situate them within the broader contexts in which they are created, distributed, and consumed. One of the most important contexts is the corporate ownership of the Western media (Horn, 2003; Steinbrick & Cook, 2003; Yates, 2004). To understand media effects, students can ask questions like: What are the implications of the media consolidation that has led five corporations to control 90% of the U.S. media (Bagdikian, 2004)? What images of Arabs and Muslims are we exposed to in the

media? What is left out? What individuals, industries or institutions created these images? Who is the target audience? By encouraging our students to be critical consumers and creators of media, critical media literacy can help empower them to become more informed, socially engaged, and politically aware citizens.

With respect to Islamophobia and terrorism, media literacy has been found to reduce students' anxiety about the portrayal of terrorism on television news (Comer, Furr, Beidas, Weiner, & Kendall, 2008). Evidence also suggests that it inhibits the activation of racial/ethnic stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2007). The critical media literacy approach discussed here challenges students to consider the sources of their knowledge about terrorism, whose interests these media sources promote, and the evidence upon which these knowledge-claims are based. Moreover, because the corporate-controlled mass media routinely associates Arabs and Muslims with terrorism, it is important for students to consider independent and international media sources in order to develop a more balanced and critically distant point of view. Finally, I provide openings in the lecture for students to create new representations of the Arab world by rewriting lyrics to familiar songs such as the theme song in the movie *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992), "A Whole New World" (Rice, 1992).

Setting the Stage

I have taught this activity in Social Problems and Introductory Sociology courses at private, liberal arts colleges on the East coast in the US. In my courses, we analyze a cross-section of social problems including school shootings, racism in the media, child abuse, the war on drugs, teenage pregnancy, same-sex marriage, and terrorism. Using critical and social constructionist perspectives, students are encouraged to examine each problem independently as well as the interconnections among social problems (Best, 2012). Throughout my courses, I urge students to be mindful of how we as individuals and communities can change our ways of being "so that we can live more peacefully and productively with others, without exploitation, disrespect, and inequality" (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 207). While this activity was designed for a course in Social Problems, it can be easily adapted for use in any social science or humanities discipline.

I use a multimedia slideshow to organize the lesson on the social construction of terrorism. I ask students to sit in groups of three to five students based on the social constructionist view that students come to deeper understandings by considering multiple viewpoints. This is best achieved through group dialogue (Considine et al., 2009). Guided by principles of critical pedagogy (hooks,

1994; Nieto, 1992) and active learning (Kolb, 1984), I urge students to reach their own conclusions through the analysis of primary and secondary sources including Hollywood films, case studies, news, infographics, editorial cartoons, and music. Insofar as the vast majority of my students are US-born Christians and identify as White, Black, and/or Latino, this activity was primarily designed to challenge the worldviews of non-Arab and non-Muslim students. Yet, I believe it can also be used effectively with Arab and Muslim students. Instructors may wish to remind students that 2010 U.S. Census data indicated that more than 1.5 million Arab-Americans and 2.6 million Muslim-Americans live in the United States (Asi & Beaulieu, 2013; Grammich et al., 2012). Thus, the social construction of terrorism has real implications for people in our classrooms and communities. Most Arab and Muslim Americans are already aware of these harmful images; it is the rest of us who often need to be enlightened.

I designed the exercise with three learning objectives in mind. I want students to be more sociologically mindful of: (1) how Americans, including us, define “terrorism” and perceive “terrorists”; (2) where these images and definitions come from; and (3) what the consequences of these images and definitions are for U.S. domestic and foreign policies, especially racial profiling and the “war on terror.” Next, I discuss the techniques I use to accomplish each learning objective.

How Do We Define Terrorism and Perceive Terrorists?

My first goal is to promote reflection of the definition of terrorism and students’ own perceptions of terrorists. I begin the class by projecting the word **TERRORIST** on the slideshow and asking students: What words and images come to mind when you see this word? Students usually volunteer words and phrases like suicide bomber, Osama bin Laden, 9/11, murder, World Trade Center, and al-Qaeda, and I write them on the board. From the get-go, it is clear that most students associate terrorists with Arabs and/or Muslims.

Second, I ask if anyone knows the etymology of the word terrorist. Most students are unaware of its roots, so I explain that the term originated in the French Revolution’s Jacobin Reign of Terror. It is believed that the label “le terroriste” was first applied to Robespierre and other Jacobin heads of state who imprisoned suspected enemies of the French government without trial and sent thousands to the guillotine. Thus, the term *terrorist* originated in state-sponsored (not civilian) terrorism. It also derived from a European (not a Middle Eastern) context. As with all social problems, terrorism is socially constructed: its definition changes across time and place.

Third, I ask: how do we define terrorism? I give each group a case study from “Defining Terrorism” on the PBS (2002) website. Following standards of the international community, each group is to decide if their case represents terrorism or some other form of political violence. The cases include brief scenarios of the violence in Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Chiapas, South Africa, and the US-based Weathermen Underground. Groups answer the following questions about their case: Do you believe that the use of force was acceptable and justified? What is your view of the response of the state to the group’s use of force? Were they terrorists or revolutionaries? Often students are perplexed by the task of defining terrorism; it is not uncommon for every group to label their scenario “terrorism.” I conclude the segment by reminding students that terrorism is socially constructed, so we should not expect to identify a universally agreed-upon or objective definition. I cite a study conducted by the U.S. Army, which found that over 100 definitions of terrorism have been used by the U.S. government (Record, 2003). The only characteristic that can be agreed upon, according to expert Walter Laqueur (1999), is that “terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence” (Record, 2003, p. 6). This definition leaves enormous room for interpretation. In addition, while war and violence have existed throughout most of human history, terrorism gained public attention as a social problem only recently. Thus, what is defined as terrorism is a matter of *claims-making*: a person or group must convince the general public and public officials that there is a problem worthy of our attention (Best, 2012).

I challenge students to further clarify the definition of terrorism by projecting an Andy Singer cartoon on the slideshow (see Figure 1). I ask the students what is happening in the cartoon and what they think the cartoonist is trying to get at. At first, students shift uncomfortably in their seats. A student may note that it is trying to illuminate the double standard that military bombings are defined as *legal*, while bombings by “shady” individuals are defined as *illegal*, even though both are killing for political reasons. One student said it reminded her of a saying she had heard that “war is the rich man’s terrorism.”

I remind students of the definition that Walter Laqueur offered based on historical research: “Terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence” (Record 2003, p. 6). I ask, “So why isn’t military combat considered terrorism?” Several students have made the connection that whether an act gets labeled terrorism or not has to do with the privilege and power of those involved and those doing the labeling. The cartoon implies that because the military is a powerful institution that mobilizes high-tech aircraft to attack its targets, military acts of violence are

Figure 1
Andy Singer Cartoon Displayed on the Slideshow



Note. ©1995 Andy Singer (<http://www.andysinger.com>).

defined as legal. On the other hand, because terrorists (i.e., individuals wielding remote-control bombs) have less power, their acts of violence are likely to be defined as illegal. I make the case that in the United States, the two social institutions that have the most power to shape what is defined and labeled as terrorism are the government and the media.

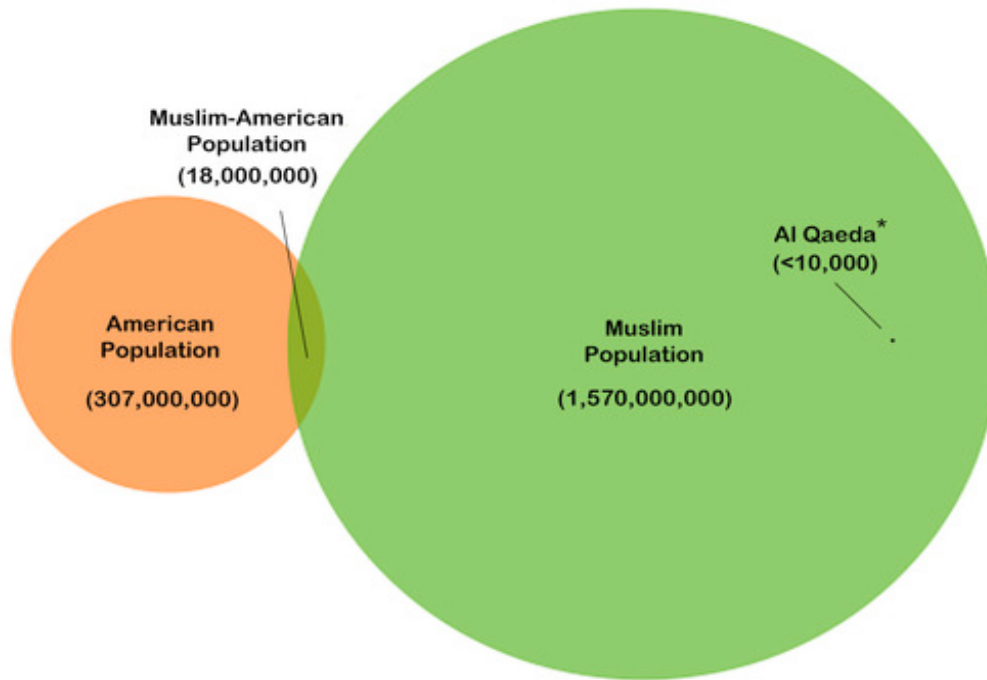
So how do politicians and the media shape potentially life-or-death definitions of what constitutes terrorism and who is a terrorist? Before introducing the next slide (see Figure 2), I remind students that claims-makers—in their efforts to convince people that an issue should be defined as a social problem—not only appeal to our subjective perceptions, but they utilize objective facts as well. I ask, “What objectively-based claims do you think the designer of this infographic is making about terrorism?”

Students may note that in sheer numbers, al-Qaeda represents an infinitesimal percentage of Muslims in the world. In fact, the designer had to represent al-Qaeda at 10 times its actual size even to get it to show up. Students have also made the point that many people in the US stereotype all 1.5 billion Muslims in the world as terrorists, even though al-Qaeda represents less than 1% of the Muslim population. I conclude discussion of this slide by noting that in 2008, terrorist attacks

claimed the lives of 15,765 civilians, including 33 Americans (National Counterterrorism Center, 2009). Although these deaths are tragic, neither the numbers of suspected al-Qaeda operatives nor the number of U.S. civilian deaths seem to justify the intense fear that many Americans harbor about terrorism. Objectively speaking, people in the US are far more likely to be killed by a police officer than a terrorist (Johnson, 2008). So if the threat is not supported by objective data, then what explains public opinion polls indicating that over 50% of Americans believe that terrorism is a very serious or extremely serious threat to our personal and/or national safety (Saad, 2010)? I pose this as a rhetorical question for students to ponder.

Next, I bring up a slide to acknowledge that I have been conflating two distinct social groups: Arabs and Muslims. I note that Arab is a geographical identity, referring to people of Middle Eastern and Northern African descent. Arabs make up only about 20% of the world’s Muslim population. Muslim, on the other hand, is a religious identity: a Muslim is a follower of the religion Islam. Muslims are the world’s largest religion, and they represent about 1/5 of the world’s population. I stress the importance of knowing the difference between these social groups. However, I tell students that because my goal is to encourage them to critically

Figure 2
Matt Osborne Image Displayed on the Slideshow



* To even get Al Qaeda to show up, I had to show it at 10X its actual size

Note. ©2010 Matt Osborne (www.osborne.ink).

analyze media images that paint an entire nation, region, or religion as an “enemy-Other,” I am using the terms Arabs and Muslims interchangeably. I underscore this point by directing students’ attention back to the list of words and phrases on the board, which they themselves generated about terrorists at the beginning of class.

Where Do These Images of Terrorists Come From?

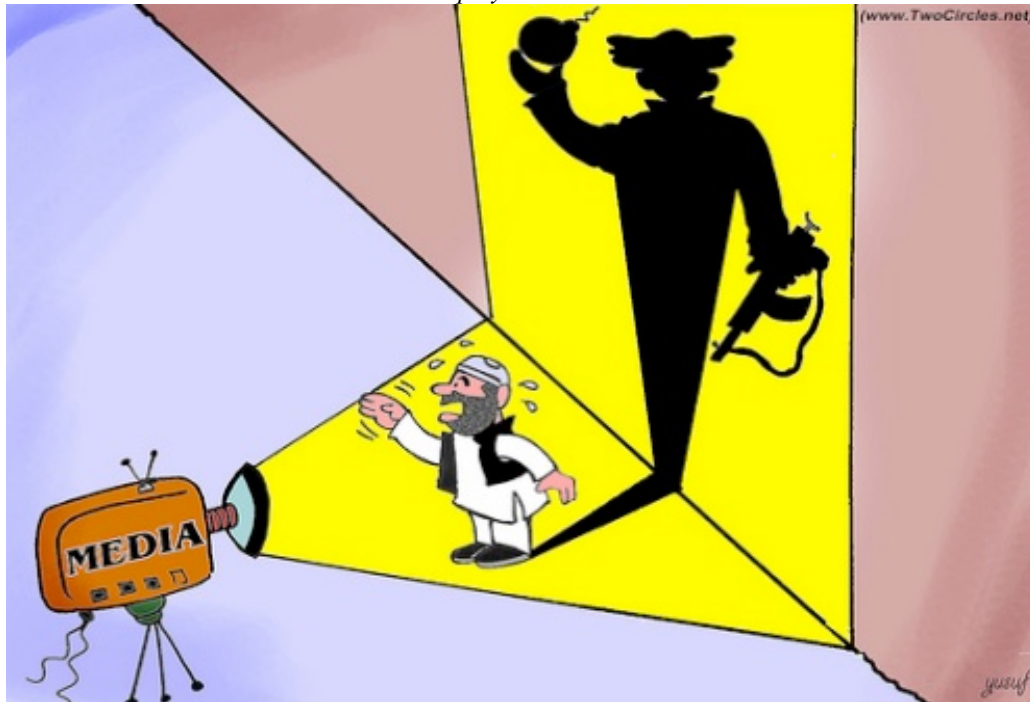
The second learning objective is to consider where these images of Arab and Muslim terrorists come from. I remind students not to feel guilty about having stereotypes: in a media-saturated culture, it is impossible *not* to have stereotypes. Instead, I urge them to be sociologically mindful (i.e., not to uncritically accept stereotypes). To shift the focus to the media, I show another editorial cartoon (see Figure 3). I ask: “What is going on in this cartoon? What is the cartoonist trying to get at?” Students discuss the cartoon in their small groups. Typically students recognize that the cartoonist is criticizing how media portrays the majority of Muslims as terrorists and exaggerates the threat of terrorism. Someone will often make a point like the student who said: “Sometimes the media makes harmless little Muslims look like big bad terrorists.”

These comments provide a segue into Earp et al.’s (2006) documentary, *Reel Bad Arabs*, available through the Media Education Foundation. I begin with Part 1, “Myths of Arabland,” which explores the stereotypes of Arabs as Oriental Others and dangerous villains. Earp et al. (2006) argued that these images of Arab men have dominated cinema from the days of silent films to today’s biggest Hollywood blockbusters. For example, many students grew up watching Disney’s *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992), which begins with the song “Arabian Nights” (Ashman & Rice, 1992):

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place
 Where the caravan camels roam
 Where they cut off your ear
 If they don’t like your face
 It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.

I ask students if they remember this song and how they feel about the lyrics now. Some students hold on to individualistic views and fond memories of the film; they say things like “you can’t blame the media for everything” or “I’m not prejudiced, and that was my favorite movie growing up!” However, other students may draw on previous class discussions of media effects theories, which hold that the effects of media are

Figure 3
Cartoon Displayed on the Slideshow



Note. ©2009 Yusuf, Two Circles.net (http://twocircles.net/2009sep24/tcn_cartoon_muslims_media.html).

largely unconscious. Such comments can change the whole course of discussion; in one class, a student expressed an earnest concern that children's impressionable minds are being cultivated by racial stereotypes at such a young age. This prompted another student to make the connection to an earlier class reading by Feagin and Van Ausdale (1996), which found that children as young as 3-years-old use racial and ethnic concepts to include or exclude other children. She wondered how much these children had been affected by the media. In a context of multi-million dollar monopoly media institutions targeting children, the media plays a powerful—albeit largely unconscious—role in children's cognitive development and overall socialization.

I then point out that the Disney Corp. agreed to change two lines after a public outcry about the racist lyrics. The last part of the song now goes:

Where it's flat and immense
 And the heat is intense
 It's barbaric, but hey, it's home. (Ashman & Rice, 2001)

I ask students if they think the new lyrics paint a less stereotypical portrait of Arabs. Student almost always say “no.” Following Kellner and Share's (2007) call to

help students move beyond simply blaming the media to actively transform and create texts, I challenge them to rewrite the song lyrics in their small groups. Even with only 5 minutes to rewrite the lyrics, students have generated some very creative ideas. One group wrote:

Where the mosques are immense
 And the food is intense
 Their 'peace' is Salam, Shalom.

Next, I remind the class that our goal is to explore how terrorism is socially constructed by claims-makers and image-makers. Importantly, while images of angry, violent Arabs are stereotypes, some Middle Easterners are angry with the United States. In fact, public opinion polls show that there is widespread anger at America throughout the Arab and Muslim world (Kull, 2011).

To explore this, I show a short MSNBC video of Palestinians dancing in the streets in celebration of the 9/11 attacks (MSNBC, 2001). I then show a series of quotes from news reporters who attempted to explain why people in the Middle East would “hate” us. For example, Sean Hannity from *Fox News* said, “The difference, my friends, between Israel and the Arab world is the difference between civilization and barbarism. It's the difference between good and evil . . . the Arab world . . . [has] no soul, they are dead set on

killing and destruction” (Baragona, 2014, para. 7). George Will of the *Washington Post* said, Americans “are targets because of their virtues—principally democracy” (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [FAIR], 2001, para. 3). In an appearance on Late Night with David Letterman, Dan Rather explained matter-of-factly, “They [Middle Easterners] see themselves as the world’s losers and it drives them batty. There’s no rationality to it. These are crazy people, they are haters” (FAIR, 2001, para. 6).

In small groups, I ask students to analyze these statements as examples of social problems claims-making. How do these claims-makers explain why Arabs and Muslims are angry at the US? What do they leave out? Students typically see that they blame individuals. One student said,

By saying ‘They are losers, they are haters,’ Dan Rather implies that America is the victim. If they are the haters and we are the victims, the US doesn’t have to take responsibility for what we do to other countries.

After each group shares their analysis, I stress that in a media landscape in which Arabs and Muslims are painted as Other, it is not only that the reporters are labeling individual Arabs and Muslims as “haters” and “losers.” It is also that they are painting all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. At the same time, these claims absolve the U.S. government from responsibility for the very policy decisions—especially the decision to go to war—that give rise to anti-American sentiment in the first place. I tell students we will return to the question of “Why do they hate us?” (Steinbrink & Cook, 2003) at the end of class. Next, we examine the consequences of the media’s Othering of Arabs and Muslims for U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

What are the Social and Political Consequences of These Images?

The third learning objective is to examine the consequences of these constructed images of Arab and Muslim terrorists. According to Schwalbe (2008), being sociologically mindful requires an awareness of unintended consequences. We must consider the latent functions of our actions, and the ideas we use to justify them, not just those that are manifest or intended. Even well-intentioned words and actions can reinforce larger inequalities and harm others—especially those in disadvantaged social groups. Being sociologically mindful, we must examine which social groups benefit and how, and which social groups are harmed and how (Kleinman & Copp, 2009). Additionally, Schwalbe (2008) argued that by seeing connections between individual actions and larger social systems—systems

based on power and privilege—we can attack the *roots* of social problems rather than merely applying band-aids. Using this lens, students are asked to consider how the media’s portrayal of Arab and Muslim Others can lead to unintended consequences for U.S. domestic and foreign policy decisions. Media images are not mere rhetoric; they can set the stage for Islamophobic violence and war.

To explore this, I show another clip from *Reel Bad Arabs* (“Islamophobia”; Earp et al., 2001). In it, scholar Jack Shaheen argued that Western stereotypes of the Arab world prime viewers to feel indifferent to Arab and Muslim suffering, and even to support harmful policies like racial profiling and the War in Iraq out of fear and distrust. Because the stereotypes that pervade Hollywood movies affect viewers on an unconscious level, we are often unaware that they shape our attitudes and/or actions.

In the clip, Shaheen pointed out that the media promotes a racial double standard with regard to terrorism (Earp et al., 2001). For example, when Timothy McVeigh bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, the mass media did not urge the public to look suspiciously on all young, Catholic white men as terrorists. There were no calls by politicians or law enforcement officials to racially profile whites. In fact, the media immediately blamed Middle Eastern terrorists before any credible information about the Oklahoma City bombing was available.

After playing the video, I ask students for their thoughts on racial profiling. In one class a student said, “Well, Oklahoma City looked like a suicide bombing, so it made sense to point the finger at Middle Easterners. It was a panic situation.” Another student said,

But that’s the point—you have to check the facts instead of jumping to the conclusion that Middle Easterners did it. And you can’t just round up all people in a whole group for the actions of a few individuals.

Another student said, “It has to do with white privilege. White people don’t have to deal with stereotypes and racial profiling because they are the privileged group in our society.” I added that as soon as the media found out it was Timothy McVeigh—a white man—many in the corporate media stopped referring to the Oklahoma City bombing as terrorism altogether. The choices that news reporters make about language may seem trivial, but they can have powerful effects on viewers’ perceptions of who is—and who is not—a terrorist.

In Islamophobia, Shaheen also asked viewers to consider whether the invasion of Iraq was made easier by a century of images that paint Arabs as evildoers. I ask students to respond to this. One student disagreed,

noting that the U.S. public was led to believe that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, even though they did not. Another student said, “Well if you grow up learning these stereotypes, wouldn’t you be more likely to believe that Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis were the 9/11 terrorists? Many Americans still believe that, to this day.” I emphasize that there is no direct correlation between media images and a nation’s decision to go to war. Yet, systematic images of racial Others can create a context in which violence against Others becomes more likely.

If time allows, I show a video clip from al-Jazeera TV about a family who was killed by a U.S. drone attack in Pakistan. Armed drone attacks, a leading tactic in the war on terror, aim to root out al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives. Despite their technical precision, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2014b) estimated that between 571-1,224 civilians (“collateral damage”) were killed in the covert drone war in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia between 2004 and 2014. The United Nations Human Rights Council (2010) criticized the US as “the most prolific user of targeted killings” (para. 1) in the world. I want to leave the students thinking about the human rights implications of war and terrorism. As such, we return to the question of “Why do they hate us?” One student said, “A lot of times we try to impose our values on other cultures. If you impose your values on me, then yeah—I’m not going to like you.” Another agreed: “If Americans were portrayed like that in their media, I’d be mad as hell too!” Someone else offered, “Maybe they hate us for a very good reason. We are the most powerful country in the world, and we’re killing innocent people in the Middle East every day.” Thus, students can see the unintended consequences that go beyond the U.S. government’s stated intention to protect its citizens at home and abroad. When bombers armed with high tech weapon systems kill civilians, even inadvertently, anger at the United States is an unintended, but predictable, consequence (Steinbrink & Cook, 2003).

The Benefits of Teaching About Islamophobia and the Social Construction of Terrorism

Every time I use this activity in my classes I ask students to provide feedback. The comments I receive are always positive, with students calling it “eye-opening” and “a very interesting way to learn.” Many students have said it challenged them to think more critically about media effects. One student noted: “The visuals made it very clear that Americans have bias (*sic*) attitudes toward things like terrorism because of media influences.” Another student appreciated the chance “to try for one moment to visualize being another race and being stereotyped.” Another said, “It really opened up my eyes to my own stereotypes. I need

to check myself when I get scared by someone wearing a veil at the airport or at the mall.” In general, students report that the activity helps them to apply sociological concepts, feel more empathy, and analyze terrorism through different eyes. I have been especially encouraged by how engaged students are with a topic that can be riddled by “culture of fear” and “us vs. them” discourses.

The pedagogical model discussed here holds some important insights for facilitating productive discussions of controversial issues. The first is that from the first day of class, I provide students with multiple lenses for analyzing social problems. Unlike a debate approach, where students often stay rooted in their own values and beliefs, a social constructionist approach requires them to step out of their preexisting worldviews to consider social problems from different angles. I pair Joel Best’s (2012) text *Social Problems* with theoretical readings and case studies addressing real-world problems such as racism in the media, bullying, the war on drugs, child abuse, and terrorism (several of the readings are from Loseke & Best, 2003). As it is unrealistic to expect students to learn how to discuss emotionally-charged topics like terrorism in a single class period, the readings and class structure give them practice in discussing controversial issues well before the topic of terrorism is introduced (Pace, 2003). One especially pertinent reading makes the point that the media creates panics and hysterias from a few isolated incidents and christens entire categories of people as “innately dangerous” (Glassner, 1999). The use of multiple perspectives helps to promote respectful discussion, as the emotions that can provoke personal attacks (student-to-student or student-to-professor) are muted when students maintain critical distance from an issue (Pace, 2003).

Second, playing the role of a facilitator rather than an expert or authority figure can go a long way in promoting open and relaxed dialogue on uncomfortable topics (Jakubowski, 2001; Lusk & Weinberg 1994). One reason is that many students assume that teachers do not want to be challenged by students; they want to be treated like “experts.” By taking on a more facilitative role, teachers can empower students to speak critically, which can generate new understandings about the social world (Jakubowski, 2001). More concretely, in my class students sit in small groups starting in the first week of class. They quickly become accustomed to looking at me to begin the day’s lesson, and for physical and verbal cues about when to direct their attention from the slideshow to small group discussion to individual activities (e.g., freewrites) and up front again for whole-class discussion. The small groups create a more intimate, relaxed environment for shy students to come to voice, while my facilitation of the whole

class helps to coordinate sharing, to smooth awkward silences, and to temper any unruliness that might arise in the small groups. Additionally, while the students are engaged in small group discussions, I move around the room to check in with each group about their answers to the prompts. Structuring class discussion in this way offers multiple benefits, not the least of which is that it lessens the tendency of one individual or group to monopolize discussion. Not surprisingly, this is considered essential in facilitating productive discussions of controversial topics (Payne & Gainey, 2000; Payne & Reidel, 2002). These pedagogical and conceptual approaches may have helped me to avoid the kind of student resistance to topics like race that has been reported in the literature (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Cohen, 1995; McCammon, 1999).

This activity offers students an opportunity to disrupt what Edward Said (1997) called “the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West” (p. xii). Yet, it barely scratches the surface when it comes to helping students understand the root causes of terrorism and envision solutions grounded in social justice. Perhaps the biggest strength of this approach lies in its potential to be adapted in length and across disciplines. Critical educators may wish to emphasize a more intersectional analysis by analyzing gendered representations of Arab and Muslim Others. Jack Shaheen (2001) noted that while historically the Western media has portrayed Arab and Muslim women as sexual seductresses, in recent years a new image of Arab and Muslim women as terrorists has emerged. As well, controversies over the hijab and other cultural symbols of Muslim womanhood provide engaging texts for critical analysis and inter-cultural education (Watt, 2012).

Furthermore, educators may wish to incorporate comparisons between corporate media vs. independent media, and/or US vs. international media. By asking students to compare the images and discourses that different media sources deploy when reporting the same event, instructors can help students unpack claim-makers’ ideological and profit motives. For example, instructors can ask students to compare and contrast the language, imagery and symbols, audience, and emphasis of texts produced by corporate and independent media sources. In addition, their consequences can be probed. Who benefits from the corporate media’s version of events, and who loses? Who benefits from the independent media’s version of events, and who loses? Such questions can help students understand how the media frames terrorism through its own ideological filters and commercial interests, while also analyzing the manifest and latent functions of these claims. Finally, educators can engage students in discussion about non-military responses to

terrorism. Students can be assigned reports from independent organizations such as Oxford Research Group (www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk) and asked to envision alternatives to the war on terror that are based on peace and justice.

Today’s college students are savvy users of information technology and social media; many turn to the Internet as their only source of news and political awareness. Thus, today’s students represent a fertile audience for alternative and independent media. Yet, most of the students I teach have never heard of international news networks such as Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya; nor are they familiar with independent media such as Democracy Now, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, Common Dreams, or the BBC. I encourage them to bookmark these sites on their computers so they can continue to educate themselves about social issues through multiple perspectives and solid evidence-based reporting. Critical media literacy is an excellent starting-point for helping today’s young people deconstruct dominant paradigms, practice participatory democracy, and mobilize technology in pursuit of social justice.

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