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ORIGINAL PAPER

Discrimination Against Muslims in the USA and Couple Interactions: An Actor–Partner Interdependence Model

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Abstract

Muslims in the USA experience unfair treatment and direct exposure to discriminatory acts because of their religion. Trauma stemming from discrimination can strengthen couples' relationships as they find solace in each other, or strain relationships if couples struggle to cope with the stress. This study examined the relationship between experiencing anti-Muslim hate and couples' interactional quality. Further, the role of open communication between partners in moderating the impact of anti-Muslim hate on couple interactions was examined. The study included a sample of 129 Muslim couples. The results indicated gender disparity whereby anti-Muslim hate was linked to negative interactions in relationships for Muslim women, but this was not true for their male partners. In addition, open communication had contracting gender effects on the relationship between anti-Muslim hate and couple interactions. Increased self-disclosure buffered the adverse effects of anti-Muslim hate by reducing the likelihood of negative interactions. Among women, increased self-disclosure exacerbated the detrimental effects of anti-Muslim hate on the couples' relationship such that couples engaged in more negative interactions. Clinical implications are discussed.

Keywords Anti-Muslim hate · Muslim couples · Negative interactions · Openness

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Introduction

The reports of discriminatory acts against Muslims in the USA have seen a concerning rise since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which noticeably changed the public's perception of Muslims (Ahmed et al., 2011). Following the 9/11 attacks, hostile attitudes, including hate crimes, toward American Muslims have increased. These hostilities have intensified since the call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the U.S." in the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign (Sullivan & Zezima, 2016). Now, even 20 years after the 9/11 attacks, anti-Muslim hate has shown no signs of abating. In 2017, about half of Muslims report having experienced hatred over the past year, an increase from 43% in 2011 and 40% in 2007. This rate increased to 64% for those who visibly displayed Muslim appearances (Pew Research Center, 2017). In 2021, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) from Muslims in the USA received a record number of civil rights complaints, exceeding 6700 (CAIR, 2022, April 25). This trend was further evidenced by the 28% increase in hate crimes from 2020 to 2012, which included the forcible removal of hijabs and physical assault.

The impact of anti-Muslim hate has been documented as a source of stress (Kathawalla & Syed, 2021; Abu-Ras et al., 2018; Haslem & Awad, 2021) and negatively affects physical and mental health (Güler & Yıldırım, 2022; Haque, 2004; Schmitt et al., 2014). While the effects of anti-Muslim hate in non-Muslim countries are well established, its impact on couple relationships is a topic that has received minimal attention. The negative effects of discrimination on couple outcomes have, however, been shown in other groups of minority couples, such as same-sex and interracial couples (Baptist et al., 2018; Feinstein et al., 2018; LeBlanc et al., 2015). These studies have suggested that couples can employ various protective factors, such as positivity, openness, and collaborative coping skills to buffer the adverse effects of discrimination (e.g., Baptist et al., 2018; Genc & Baptist, 2020). In line with these findings, it is expected that Muslim couples may have similar protective factors that can shield their relationship from the potential harm inflicted by anti-Muslim hate. This study examined the connection between anti-Muslim hate and the quality of relationship interactions within couples, and how open communication between partners may serve to mitigate the effects of such hatred on the relationship dynamics of Muslim couples.

Theoretical Framework: Race-Based Trauma Stress Theory

The Race-Based Trauma Stress Theory (RBTST; Carter, 2007) provides valuable insights into the impact of discrimination. The RBTST suggests that experiencing discrimination can lead to psychological harm due to stress on minority populations. Carter (2007) distinguishes discriminatory acts into three different forms: discrimination (e.g., treating less favorably, unjustified deception or withholding information), harassment (e.g., verbal, physical, or sexual assault, negative

stereotyping, and prejudicial attitudes), and discriminatory harassment (e.g., creating an intimidating or hostile work or education environment, denial of qualifications, and exclusion or isolation by colleagues). While Carter (2007) developed his theory for racial minorities, the forms of discrimination he described are relevant to religious-based discrimination. Stress from discrimination, whether race or religion, can threaten the sense of integrity and safety. These reactions are often seen in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Bird et al., 2021; Mekawi et al., 2021), and may depression, aggression, avoidance, isolation, and vigilance that in turn can adversely affect well-being and strain relationships.

Discrimination-induced stress was found to be a significant factor linked to social isolation among minority couples (e.g., Baptist et al., 2018; Genc & Su, 2021). This isolation can escalate the tension between partners, giving rise to negative interactions that can escalate into conflict, hostility, anger, demand–withdrawal patterns of communication, avoidance, or invalidation of partners' feelings and concerns (e.g., Fekete et al., 2007; Genc & Baptist, 2020). Such detrimental forms of communication can reduce relationship satisfaction, quality, and commitment, and increase the level of marital stress, leading to divorce, or relationship dissolution (Baptist et al., 2018; Genc & Baptist, 2020; Markman et al., 2010). Given Muslims' experiences of discrimination-related stressors among Muslims, it is likely for Muslim partners to engage in actions that may strain on their relationships. Consequently, it is anticipated that discriminated Muslim couples may experience lower relationship satisfaction. However, for some couples, discriminatory experiences can paradoxically create opportunities for strengthening their relationship through the fostering of mutual support or joint effort that improves relationship functioning (e.g., Kamen et al., 2011). Improvements in relationships may include heightened commitment, trust, and happiness.

Research examining the effects of anti-Muslim hate on couple relationships remain limited. A recent study found that anti-Muslim hate indirectly affects relationship satisfaction through negative couple interactions. More importantly, the study uncovered that these negative interactions were buffered by the couple's coping stances (Genc & Baptist, 2020). However, further examination is needed regarding relationship processes that shed light on how Muslim couples cope with anti-Muslim hate. Understanding these processes can enable more targeted interventions for the therapists working with Muslim couples. This study examined the significance of openness as a relationship maintenance strategy that buffers against the negative impact of anti-Muslim hate. Understanding the function of openness for Muslim couples facing discrimination can help foster resilience and promote satisfying relationships.

Openness as a Buffer of Anti-Muslim Hate

Openness, as a form of relationship maintenance strategy, involves receptive communication and the willingness to share feelings, thoughts, and knowledge about one's relationship with their partner (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Imai et al., 2021). The concept of openness within intimate relationships is emphasized in

Islam. In Islamic teachings, partners are encouraged to cultivate an atmosphere of safety and comfort within the relationship, which fosters open conversations and mutual advice. The importance of this mutual support is described in the holy Quran as, "*They are your garments and you are their garments,"* (Surah 1: 187), whereby 'they/their' refers to one's partner. This expression highlights the idea that spouses should provide protection, intimacy, and support to each other, just as garments offer protection. Further, Muslim couples are urged to not shy away from discussing complex issues and to engage in open dialog (Genc, 2022). The call for mutual support aligns with Canary and Stafford's (1992) concept of openness.

Openness within a relationship is related to relationship longevity (Canary & Stafford, 1992), and increased satisfaction and quality (Zhou et al., 2017). This feature in relationships serves as a protective shield for couples, particularly against the adverse effects of discrimination, resulting in more positive relationship outcomes (Baptist et al., 2018). The ability to share experiences, confide in each other, and create a safe space for expressing feelings while respecting individual viewpoints can strengthen the bond between couples. Openness can have a vital role during stressful times when couples seek out each other for comfort, understanding, and support. This study hypothesized that openness will serve as a buffer the effects of anti-Muslim hate on couple interactions. This suggests that couples who engage in open communication may be better equipped to manage the challenges of anti-Muslim hate and safeguard their relationships.

The Actor–Partner Interdependence Model

Two partners in a close relationship are not simply two independent individuals; they shares common factors making them nonindependent. This concept of nonindependence is fundamental to dyadic effects in close relationships. The greater the interdependence, the greater the dyadic effect. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) was employed in this study to examine the interdependence within couples, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The following hypotheses were tested using a sample of Muslim couples:

H1 The more one partner reports experiencing anti-Muslim hate, the more likely they are to engage negatively with their partner. Increased negative interactions from one partner will be reciprocated with a corresponding increase in negative interaction from their partner.

H2 The more one partner is encouraged to or encouraged their partner to openly share in their relationship, the weaker the effect of anti-Muslim hate on their own and their partner. In other words, the presence of openness in the relationship is expected to mitigate the impact of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions.

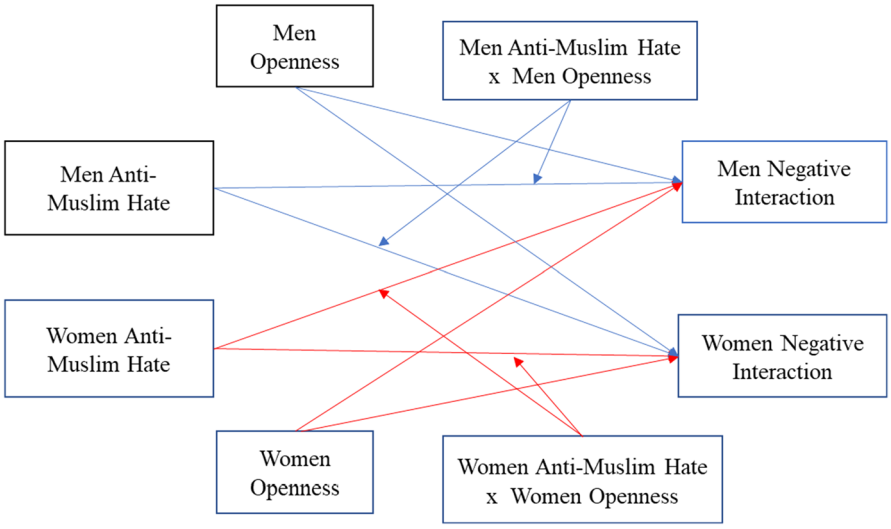

Fig. 1 Structural equation model of anti-Muslim hate on negative interaction moderated by openness

Method

Participants

A sample of 129 Muslim couples residing in the USA was recruited from Qualtrics Panel. To test APIM through SEM, a sample size of between 80 and 100 couples is needed (Kenny & Lederman, 2010). This study exceeds the recommended range for its analytical approach. The criteria for inclusion were 18 years or older, currently in a romantic relationship with a Muslim partner, and residing in the USA. The average age was 39.10 years ($SD = 9.65$) for men and 35.50 ($SD = 8.14$) years for women. Most were married (95%), with a mean partnership of 11.81 years ($SD = 8.95$). The majority of couples shared the same Muslim faith except 6 who identified as interfaith, where one partner identified as Muslim and the other as non-Muslim. Participants were mainly born in the USA (42% for men, 45% for women), the Middle East (20% for men, 16% for women), and Asia (21% for men, 22% for women). More men than women had a bachelor's degree or higher (71% of men vs. 61% of women) and were employed outside the home (78% of men vs. 58% of women). Most participants had between 1 and 3 children (70.5%), while 12.5% had more than 3 children and 17.1% had no children. Refer to Table 1 for detailed demographics.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants ($N = 129$)

Variables		Men		Women	
		M or %	SD	M or %	SD
Age [$R = 18–71$ (men) and 18–61(women)]		39.35	9.65	34.5	8.14
Education	Less than high school	1.6	–	3.1	–
	High School Diploma	7.8	–	7.1	–
	Some College	8.5	–	17.1	–
	2-year degree	10.9	–	11.6	–
	4-year degree	38.8	–	41.1	–
	Graduate Degree	32.5	–	21.2	–
Employment status	Full-time	79.8	–	37.2	–
	Part-time	10.1	–	20.2	–
	Unemployed	3.9	–	33.3	–
	Retired	3.1	–	1.6	–
	Student	3.1	–	7.0	–
Income level	Less than 19,999	6.2	–	8.0	–
	$20,000–$39,999	21.8	–	23.3	–
	$40,000–$59,999	12.4	–	17.1	–
	$60,000–$79,999	25.6	–	22.5	–
	$80,000–$99,999	7.0	–	8.6	–
	$100,000 or Above	27.1	–	21.8	–
Race/ethnicity	Arab	7.8	–	7.8	–
	White European	40.3	–	41.9	–
	African American	19.4	–	17.1	–
	Asian	24.0	–	26.4	–
	Other	8.5	–	7.0	–
Birth country	North America	41.9	–	45	–
	Central/South America	2.3	–	3.1	–
	Asia	20.9	–	21.7	–
	Middle East	20.2	–	16.3	–
	Africa	7.0	–	7.8	–
	Europe	7.8	–	5.5	–

Data Collection

This study utilized secondary cross-sectional dyadic data. Approval from the university's institutional ethics committee was obtained before the data collection commenced. Qualtrics Panel that guaranteed complete data eliminating problems that can arise with missing data. Qualtrics charged for each couple they recruited from their panels. Participants were recruited only from the USA based on the following criteria: heterosexual couples who identified as Muslim, aged 18 and older, proficiency in English, and the ability to complete an online survey. Prior to beginning the survey, a consent form was presented to participants to volunteer

for the study. Both partners within each couple completed identical surveys online. After one partner (P1) completed the survey, the computer was handed over to the other partner (P2) to complete the second half of the survey. Neither partner had access to the other's responses. To prevent data duplication, each person could complete the survey only once.

Measures

Anti-Muslim Hate The Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) was originally developed by Williams et al. (1997). For this study, the adapted version of the six-item EDS (Trail et al., 2012) was used to assess anti-Muslim hate directed toward the individual. EDS measures racial discrimination and was adapted to measure anti-Muslim hate. Using a scale ranging from 1 (*never)* to 4 (*often*), participants were asked the frequency they experienced anti-Muslim hate (e.g., "*being treated as inferior, insulted, received name-calling, or threatened or harassed*"). Higher scores indicated a higher frequency of anti-Muslim hate. The Cronbach's alpha for this study was 0.94 for men and 0.95 for women.

Negative Interactions Couples' negative interactions were measured with the Communication Danger Signs Scale (Markman et al., 2010). This scale measured how partners viewed the extent of negative interactions in their relationships. The scale consisted of 4 items, such as "*Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts.*" Responses ranged between 1 (*never*) and 6 (*all the time)*, with higher scores indicating more frequent negative interactions. The current study's Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 for men and 0.87 for women.

Openness An environment of openness within the relationship was assessed with the six-item openness subscale from the Relationship Maintenance Strategies Measure (RMSM, Canary & Stafford, 1992). Sample item includes, "*My partner has liked to have periodic talks about our relationship."* Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree,*) with higher scores reflecting more openness in the relationship. For the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for both men and women.

Nonindependence of Observations

Correlation coefficients were computed to test for nonindependence of observation in anti-Muslim hate, negative interactions, and openness. The results, as presented in Table 2, indicate significant relationships between both partners for anti-Muslim hate ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), negative interactions ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$), and openness ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm the presence of nonindependence within the variables and align with the prerequisites for APIM.

Table 2 Summary of intercorrelations of study variables ($N = 129$)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. M. Anti-Muslim hate	–	0.40***	0.02	0.66***	0.32***	0.20*
2. M. negative interaction		–	0.02	0.36***	0.82***	0.01
3. M. openness			–	0.11	−0.08	0.46***
4. W. Anti-Muslim hate				–	0.35***	0.15
5. W. negative interaction					–	−0.05
6. W. openness						–
M	2.11	2.52	4.06	2.02	2.50	3.85
SD	2.08	1.41	0.91	0.92	1.38	0.94

*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p \leq 0.001$. (two-tailed). M, Men; W, Women

Data Analysis

The Mplus 8.4 software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2019) was used to estimate the APIM in Fig. 1. The analysis permitted simultaneous estimation of actor and partner effects (Kashy & Kenny, 1999). First, an APIM between anti-Muslim hate and negative interactions was estimated to test H1. Next, to test H2, four interaction terms were added to the model, one interaction term for each actor and each partner effect of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions. To determine the most parsimonious model, two models were estimated. First, an unrestricted model where all parameter estimates were free to vary was estimated. This model included actor and partner effects of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions and four actor and partner interactions involving the moderating variable, openness. The Chi-square test of model fit was significant ($x^2(5) = 161.94$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a lack of fit.

The second model had the same parameter and interactions terms as the first model, but all parameter estimates were constrained to be equal across men and women. Constraining the parameters allowed for the assessment of differences across groups. To evaluate the equality constraint in the model, the change in model fit was examined. The Bayesian information criterion (BIC) was used to select the final model, with smaller values indicate better model fit. All dependent and independent variables were mean-centered to avoid the probability of high multicollinearity with the interactions variable (Aiken et al., 1991). Evidence of acceptable fit for the constrained model was determined by a non-significant Chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) values of above 0.95, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of below 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

The examination of mean scores suggested that the men reported higher levels of anti-Muslim hate ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 2.08$) compared to women ($M = 2.02$,

SD = 0.92; Range = 1–4). Both partners appeared to engage in below-average negative interactions (Men = 2.52, *SD* = 1.41; Women = 2.5, *SD* = 1.38; Range 1–6) and reported above average openness (Men = 4.06, *SD* = 0.91; Women = 3.85, *SD* = 0.94; Range 1–5) with men being more encouraging with openness than women.

Bivariate correlations (Table 2) indicated that as women report higher levels of anti-Muslim hate, there is a corresponding increase in negative interactions ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) with their partner, and their partner reciprocated in a similar manner ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). However, for men, reporting higher level of anti-Muslim hate was linked to an increased tendency to encourage their partner to share openly ($r = 0.20$, $p = 0.02$). Further, when one partner either reported anti-Muslim hate, engaged in negative interactions, and encouraged openness, the other partner reciprocated with similar behaviors.

Gender differences were examined using paired sample *t* tests. Results demonstrated that there were no significant gender differences for anti-Muslim hate ($t(128) = 0.56$, $p = 0.57$ 95%CI [−0.12, 0.22]) and negative interactions ($t(128) = 0.33$, $p = 0.74$ 95%CI [−0.14, 0.20]). However, men reported higher levels of openness compared to women ($t(128) = 2.48$, $p = 0.01$, 95%CI [0.04, 0.39]).

Table 3 Results of moderated model of anti-Muslim hate on negative interaction ($N = 129$)

	Model 1				Model 2			
	B	SE	β	95% CI	b	SE	β	95% CI
Paths to M. Negative Interaction	$R^2 = 0.13$, $p = 0.019$				$R^2 = 0.16$, $p = 0.007$			
M. Anti-Muslim hate	−0.03	0.09	−0.03	−0.18,0.12	0.27	0.06	0.27***	0.16, 0.37
W. Anti-Muslim hate	0.37	0.09	0.37***	0.24, 0.54	0.24	0.06	0.24***	0.14, 0.34
M. Openness					−0.02	0.09	−0.02	−0.17, 0.13
W. Openness					−0.02	0.09	−0.02	−0.16, 0.13
M. Anti-Muslim hate × M. Openness					−0.33	0.10	−0.35***	−0.52, −0.17
W. Anti-Muslim hate × W. Openness					0.20	0.09	0.21*	0.06, 0.35
Paths to W. Negative Interaction	$R^2 = 0.13$, $p = 0.019$				$R^2 = 0.20$, $p = 0.001$			
M. Anti-Muslim hate	−0.10	0.09	−0.10	−0.25,0.05	0.24	0.06	0.24***	0.13, 0.34
W. Anti-Muslim hate	0.39	0.09	0.39***	0.22, 0.52	0.27	0.06	0.27***	06, 0.36
M. Openness					−0.13	0.09	−0.13	−0.27, 0.02
W. Openness					−0.01	0.09	−0.01	−0.15, 0.14
M. Anti-Muslim hate × M. Openness					−0.36	0.10	−0.38***	−0.54, −0.21
W. Anti-Muslim hate × W. Openness					0.27	0.09	0.27***	0.12, 0.41

*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$. M, men; W, women

Relationship Between Anti-Muslim Hate and Negative Interactions

H1. The more one partner reports experiencing anti-Muslim hate, the more likely they are to interact negatively with their partner, and the more their partner will interact negatively with them. Based on the results in Table 3 (Model 1), H1 was partially supported. The data indicated a positive relationship between women's reports of anti-Muslim hate and their own ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.54]) and their partner ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.22, 0.52) engagement in negative interactions. However, men's report of anti-Muslim hate was not significantly related to their own (β = -0.03, p = ns, 95% CI [− 0.18, 0.12]) or their partner's ($\beta = -0.10$, p = ns, 95% CI = − 0.25, 0.05) engagement in negative interactions. Women's reports of anti-Muslim hate appeared to have a more impact on the relationship than men's reports of anti-Muslim hate.

Moderating Effects of Openness

The model fit comparison revealed that the constrained model (Model 2) was a better fit to the data (BIC = 2735.62) compared to the unconstrained model (BIC = 2727.03). Model 2 met several criteria for a good model fit: CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, Chi-square ($df = 2$) = 1.13, $p = ns$, RMSEA = 0.000. Model 2 accounted for 16% ($p = 0.007$) of the variance in negative interactions for men, and 20% ($p = 0.001$) of the variance in negative interactions for women. The results are presented in Table 3 (Model 2).

*H2: The more one partner is encouraged to or encouraged their partner to openly share in their relationship, the weaker the effect of anti-Muslim hate on their own and their partner's negative interactions.*H2 was partially supported. The impact of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions was influenced by the level of openness for both men ($\beta = -0.35$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI = − 0.52, − 0.17; Fig. 2) and women ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = − 0.54, − 0.21; Fig. 3). When

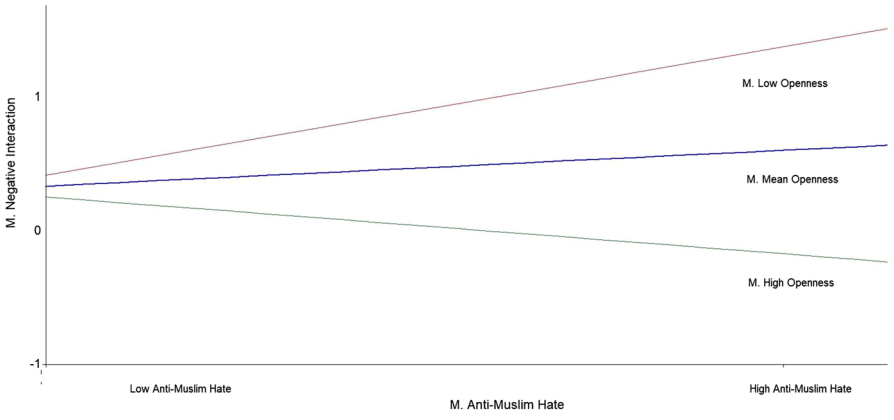

Fig. 2 M. openness moderating M. anti-Muslim hate and M. negative interaction. W, women; M, men

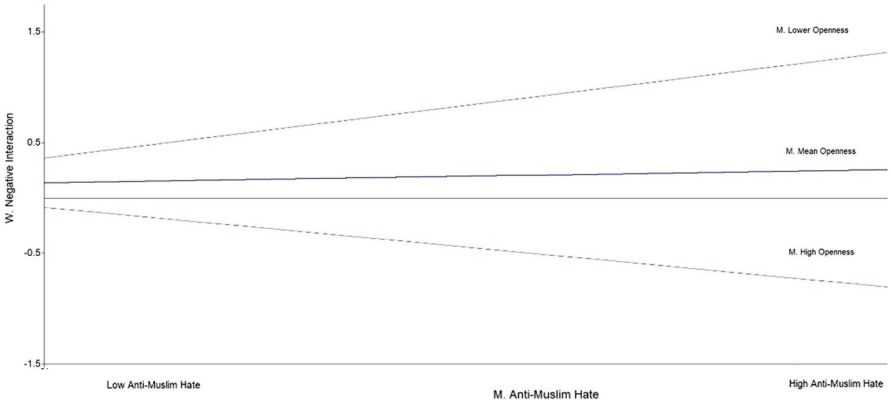

Fig. 3 M. openness moderating M. anti-Muslim hate and W. negative interaction. W, women; M, men

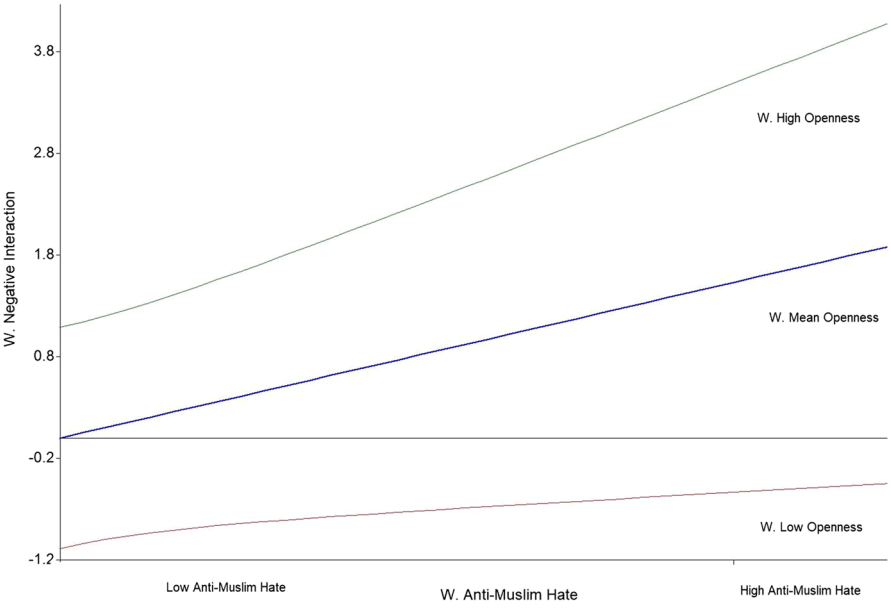

Fig. 4 W. openness moderating W. anti-Muslim hate and W. negative interaction. W, women; M, men

men reported high levels of openness, higher levels of anti-Muslim hate reported by both men and women were related to decreased negative interactions.

On the contrary, women's report of openness increased the adverse effect of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions for both women ($\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.002$, 95% CI = 0.12, 0.41; Fig. 4) and men ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.02$, 95% CI = 0.06, 0.35; Fig. 5). When both women and men experienced high levels of anti-Muslim hate reported increased negative interactions.

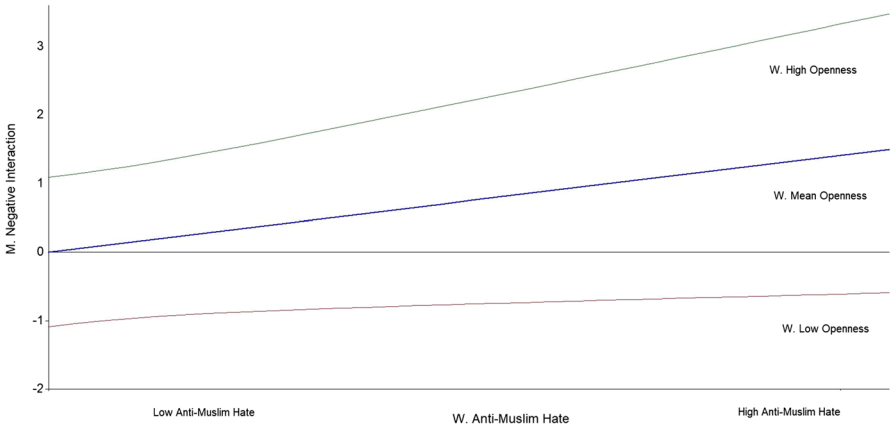

Fig. 5 W. openness moderating W. anti-Muslim hate and M. negative interaction. W, women; M, men

In essence, when men reported more openness, higher levels of anti-Muslim hate reported by both men and women had a positive effect on the couple's relationship (i.e., lower negative interactions). The opposite was true when women reported more openness. Higher openness reported by women meant higher couple negative interactions when either men or women reported higher levels of anti-Muslim hate. Men's report of openness appeared to have the potential of buffering the negative influence of anti-Muslim hate on couple relationships, while women's report of openness had the opposite effect.

Discussion

This study examined the link between anti-Muslim hate and negative interactions in couples and how openness may moderate this relationship. The results from 129 Muslim couples residing in the USA suggest a gender disparity. The more women reported anti-Muslim hate, the more likely the couple reported negative interactions. This was not true for the men in the study. According to Carter's (2007) race-based traumatic stress model, experiencing discrimination can trigger a cascade of negative symptoms, such as depression, deteriorating relationships, and social withdrawal that may increase one's vulnerability to strained relationships. The relationship between traumatic stress and strained relationships appears to be particularly relevant for women but not men.

The gender variance in this study may be explained by the differences in preparedness and expectations between genders when it relates to coping with the responding to acts of discrimination. Negative profiling of Muslim men by society (Britton, 2019) may prepare these men to anticipate and brace for anti-Muslim hate, potentially shielding their relationships from its detrimental effects. This preparation and expectation by Muslim men may not align with the views of their female partners. Muslim women may hold a more hopeful perspective,

perhaps even expecting the diverse US society to embrace them, given their increased presence in the workforce (Abdelhadi, 2017). However, the rise in the number of Muslim women's participation in the workforce and public offices may provide a false sense of acceptance of Muslims. Another factor to consider is that Muslim men may not be challenged in expressing emotions related to hate/discrimination, resulting in internalizing these feelings and possibly perceiving the discrimination or microaggressions as their own faults. The need to appear strong may deter Muslim men from sharing their experiences with their partners. Women, however, are socially primed to seek support when stressed (Genc, 2022). This disparity in seeking solace can contribute to tension within relationships, as men feel challenged in supporting their partners and women feel stranded.

Previous research suggests that Muslim women's distinctive dress code (e.g., hijab or veil) makes them visually identifiable and more prone to religion-related discrimination, including negative stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviors in Western countries (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Hashem et al., 2022; Syahrivar, 2021). Hence, while Muslim women may regard themselves as having more autonomy and status, society's perception of them as submissive, oppressed, and disadvantaged can be experienced as a violation of their rights to religious expression and identity (Hashem & Awad, 2021). Consequently, women may project the distress and frustration stemming from this perceived violation onto their partners, adversely affecting the quality of their interactions. Further, when women seek support from their partners who appear unfazed by anti-Muslim hate, they may perceive their partner as unsupportive, potentially intensified negative interactions. Men might mentally push the discrimination experience away by distracting themselves with other activities or turning to support outside of the home, such as friends or colleagues.

The results further suggest that the encouragement by one's partner to share openly can influence how anti-Muslim hate affects the quality of couple interactions. For men, being encouraged to express themselves openly appears to mitigate the adverse effects of anti-Muslim hate on the couples' quality of interactions. Such openness appears to help reduce the odds of negative interactions, especially when men experience heightened anti-Muslim hatred. This moderating effect of openness is consistent with previous research, which suggests the opportunity to talk about feelings and share thoughts directly can help maintain relationships (e.g., Baptist et al., 2018). However, for the women, the encouragement to share openly intensifies negative interactions when they perceive heightened anti-Muslim hatred. Women appear more astute in responding to their partners' expression of frustrations and struggles which in turn deescalates negative interactions. Women may view these moments of pain as opportunities to connect and strengthen their relationships (e.g., Kamen et al., 2011). The same may not be true for men who may struggle to seize these moments as opportunities to deepen their relationship. In fact, men may experience vicarious trauma as they listen to their partners' reports of discrimination, making it difficult for them to be supportive.

Clinical Implications

This study offers implications for clinical work with Muslim couples, especially in addressing the impact of anti-Muslim hate on their relationships. Given the adverse influence of anti-Muslim hate on relationships, preparing couples to cope with discrimination can help prevent relationship stress. The couple therapists can help Muslim couples develop relationship maintenance strategies such as building social networks, sharing tasks, positivity, and openness to cope with discrimination. Couples may benefit from understanding that experiencing anti-Muslim hate is a form of trauma and how such trauma can infiltrate and disrupt the quality of their relationships. Psychoeducation can be provided through various forms of mediums, such as podcasts, videos, flyers, or homework may encourage couples to learn more about discriminatory trauma.

Therapists should coach couples to express mutual empathy and support. Assisting partners in sharing their distress in a supportive manner can help them develop productive means of communication. Couples should be encouraged to express their expectations surrounding confiding and seeking support from each other. Therapists should assess for existing trauma from previous anti-Muslim hate incidents and provide trauma-informed treatment as needed. Treating past trauma could help prevent vicarious traumatization as couples attend and listen to their partners' experiences of anti-Muslim hate. Healing the effects of past trauma will allow partners to respond supportively rather than reactively when listening to their partners' current trauma. This preparation can help ensure a safe environment conducive for couples to confide in each other.

Recognizing that disclosure might be difficult, especially for men, therapist should conduct individual therapy sessions for each partner to assess the safety of the relationship and the openness and readiness of the couple to confide in each other. Both partners should be encouraged to examine and take responsibility for their role in escalating negative interactions. Developing strategies for improving couples' interactions during times of stress is also encouraged.

In order to do this work, therapists should be informed about Muslim culture and beliefs. In addition, therapists should be aware of their stereotypes and perceptions about Islam and Muslims and strive to provide a nonjudgmental and affirming space where clients feel safe to be vulnerable and forthcoming. Therapists are encouraged to collaborate with local community organizations to advocates for their Muslim community through outreach and education (Tanhan & Young, 2022). This may include working with Employee Assistance Programs, local religious centers, supervising therapist-in-training, and disseminate educational materials on online platforms.

Limitations and Future Directions

The first limitation of this study is that the measurement scale for discrimination solely relied on the frequency of discrimination. Further studies should use a scale that assesses both frequency and intensity of discrimination for a more accurate assessment. Second, the participants in this study were highly educated, which may

not be representative of the ethnic diversity of Muslims in the USA, limiting the generalizability of the study's findings. Future research should include a larger and a more diverse sample of Muslims. Third, the anti-Muslim hate measurement did not specify a time frame. To better understand the cumulative influences of discrimination, specific time frames should be included in the measurement. Fourth, the study measured Muslim couples' experiences and related variables without considering the influence of race, nationality, and ethnicity. Comparative analysis across these variables could reveal important group differences. Fifth, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal inferences. Longitudinal studies or experimental designs are needed to clarify the directionality of the relationships among the study variables.

Conclusion

This study employed the actor-partner interdependence model to investigate the relationship between anti-Muslim hate and negative interactions in couples, residing in the USA and how openness may moderate this relationship. The results revealed that anti-Muslim hate reported by Muslim women is directly linked to the couples' relationship. However, this direct relationship was not observed for the men. Further results showed that open communication had an opposite effect on the relationship between anti-Muslim hate and couple interactions for men and women. For men, increased self-disclosure mitigated the adverse effects of anti-Muslim hate on negative interactions. In contrast, for women, increased self-disclosure exacerbated the negative effect of anti-Muslim hate on the couples' relationship such that couples engaged in more negative interactions. The results highlight how gender influences the relationship between discrimination and relationships. Therapists should be mindful of the role of gender when working with couples who experience anti-Muslim hate.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to disclose.

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Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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