Cultural Immersion: Muslim Americans

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MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE MUSLIM AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The Muslim population is the group I chose to immerse myself. My interest in philosophy, ideology, and spiritual beliefs encouraged me to focus on this group. I believe a person's beliefs are shaped by the communities in which a person identifies. In hopes of learning more about a group I do not identify with, I attended the Islamic Center of San Diego and the Kurdish Community Islamic Center to learn more. In the end, I gleaned a better understanding of how my personal beliefs compare and contrast with the Islamic faith. Additionally, I anticipated how my personal beliefs and the Islamic faith may clash in the therapeutic setting, which is essentially the most important aspect of this experiential immersion.

The preconceived ideas I had were of a male-dominate culture where the women were silenced and segregated (Lipka, 2017; Sue & Sue, 2016). I did not know the depth of these concepts and their influence on the everyday lives of people following this religion. The concept of modesty is apparent in most religious practices, however when I think of Islam I think of women wearing hijabs and only being permitted to venture through the world as a group or while being accompanied by a male. These preconceived beliefs spawn from movies, pictures observed in textbooks, and an overwhelmingly negative perception (i.e., witnessing the 9/11 event on television and hearing the commentary of the American perception of Muslims). I was not rigid in my beliefs--sometimes feeling ambivalent about the negative connotation of a Muslim and Islamic practices.

When I chatted with a lady at the first event, she informed me that the women did not respond after the Imam (Muslim priest) spoke and were separated for a sense of modesty. Being a practicing Buddhist raised by a Christian family, I could understand why modesty is seen as a desirable trait (i.e., the goal being to be pious, undistracted by addictions and vulgar habits, as well as striving to connect with people from a place of the heart). In the American culture, a desire for freedom of speech and expression, individuality, and sexuality are fundamental human rights. These two concepts conflict because one side states I am to adhere to the Tao ("way") and not succumb to the "evils" of the world, while the other side states, I am to fully

find myself by experimenting and experiencing what the world has to offer. These conflicting ideals are my preconceived notions and I hoped to extrapolate a different meaning from the Muslim American community. In the end, I noticed a similar rhetoric among Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. The community matters and members are held accountable for their behaviors and contribution to the collective, also there is a discrepancy between the amount of respect, power, and acknowledgment of men and women. This factor is apparent in almost all societies and impacts the therapeutic relationship and space.

Reflections from the Experience

From this Cultural Immersion Experience I learned I am not much different than people who are Muslim. I do believe there is a higher power helping to guide the world and its inhabitants. While I do not believe this higher power is a god, I have entrusted my worries and fears to the process of life (i.e., trusting the universal energy of existence to make meaning of my thoughts, emotions, and experiences). What I learned about myself is I am more of a feminist than I originally believed. I found separating the sexes in the mosque to be a regression to historic views of males and females. I think by partitioning in the mosque, gender roles are made more rigid and apparent. I did notice the young children (i.e., toddlers) were with the women while school-aged males (e.g., elementary, tweens, and teens) were with the men. The component which impacted me most was the portion of prayer when the Imam, muslim priest, stated a verse and only the men responded. I looked at the women and none of the women stated anything. This action confused me because during the event, the Imam emphasized how the brothers and sisters of Islam were one (he was refering to the Muslims in the Middle East who were being bombed and harmed by foreign powers). If the Muslims are all the same why do only the men respond? Are the sexes that different?

With gender segregation, I began to realize how progressive my style of political thinking is. If a Muslim person identified as gay, lesbian, or transgender, where would this person pray in the mosque? Is this person welcome in the mosque? As these questions arose, I realized how complex people are and how simplified the practice of segregation seemed to me. I understand the idea of "oneness" however the application of this thought in the Mosque clashed with my own.

Lastly, I did feel welcomed at the two events I attended for this Cultural Immersion Experience. At the Islamic Center of San Diego and the Kurdish Community Islamic Center, I was greeted and welcomed, as if I was a member of the family. When I stated my reason for attending, the people helped me obtain more covering and directed me to the women's section. While this was not surprising, I did find comfort in the affirmation of peace, love, and oneness in these communities.

APPLICATIONS FOR THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

The main internal dialogues I would have for this group, when counseling as a therapist, is the concept of gender roles, freedom of expression, and the idea of oneness. I will most likely have moments of biased judgment when listening to a Muslim woman speak about her concerns. I am not sure if a Muslim man, considering their degree of religiosity, would want to see me as a therapist. If I were to see a Muslim man, my internal dialogue would consist of thinking about the client's perception of me as a American woman of color as well as how he perceives Allah playing a role in his life. While these internal dialogues will take place, I do not believe I would be apprehensive in counseling a person from the Muslim culture. I think there are apparent differences in how I live my life and how they chose to live their lives, however I *do* believe we are all connected. With our oneness considered I would do my best to support the client in their therapeutic process. I still do not completely understand the Islamic faith however my curiosity for understanding has increased. During the therapeutic process with a Muslim client, if any biases arise, I will practice present-moment techniques in an effort to stay in the moment with the client and attempt to understand how the person is feeling, thinking, and coping with life. If there is a point in the process where I am not sure about a situation, the client expresses, I hope I am able to inquire more about the topic from a place of seeking clarity rather than judgment.

Some likely counseling issues I might expect from this group are various forms of cultural clashes. Muslim Americans are still discriminated against and seen as threats to the American way of life (Lipka,

2017; Mohamed & Sciupac, 2018; Sue & Sue, 2016). I think Muslim Americans can be identified by their attire, depending on how the Muslims adhere to the Islamic faith. Discrimination is a counseling issue I foresee arising in the therapeutic setting most often. Other issues may be clashing of parent-rearing depending on how acculturated the family is to the dominant American culture. Another issue could be substance abuse as individuals cope with assimilation, prejudices, and overall stress from living in this capitalistic, individualistic society. I am not entirely sure how shame is seen, especially when thinking about substance abuse and personal problems, however thinking from a religious practice I would assume the community would want to keep these issues private. The secrecy of the community could exacerbate the symptomatology and isolation of the client. As a prospective therapist, these are factors, especially knowing about the culture beforehand, which can help me support my client.

Mohamed & Sciupac (2018) highlighted the transition of religion conversions. While people are leaving the Islamic faith, others are choosing to join the religion. At the Islamic Center of San Diego, a woman told me she was attending the event to learn more about the Muslim religion because she was a Johava's Witness and wanted to convert. I think this scenario is common and will be a factor in the therapeutic setting. My perception of a Muslim American will be inaccurate, especially if a person is deciding to convert to the religion from a Christian background. The counseling approaches I would use with a client from this population will depend on the client and their goals for treatment; the components of identity of the client will have to be evaluated as the therapeutic process progresses.

Knowing that Islam could be a central identity for a client, I would want to ensure I am focusing on how this aspect contributes to their sense of quality of life. Determining a client's support system, I can assess the influence of their Islamic community on the client's decision making. Another approach I could use is focusing on the client's physiological symptoms and lifestyle habits. Assuming Islam is an important factor in the client's life, I will focus on concrete components which are more subjective to obtain a more objective view of what is happening in the client's life.

A modern circumstance I foresee arising is the nuances of dating for an Muslim American woman. (I am considering the most extreme situation where a client is traditional in their religious beliefs *and* has adapted to the technological advanced American culture--i.e., using online dating applications.) In the article, "Online Dating and Courtship Among Muslim American Women: Negotiating technology, religious identity, and culture", Rochadiat, Tong, & Novack (2017), discuss how religion and culture may be viewed in our modern technological society. Thinking about traditional women in this community, there are some factors which are non-negotiable (e.g., religious attire and male selection). Using a dating application allots additional mate selection filters, privacy, and an efficient way to find potential suitors. Originally, suitors for the Muslim American women were found through parents and family, the platform of dating applications may provide a larger network (Sue & Sue, 2016). Depending on the strictness of the parents' beliefs and values, family, and community, this form of dating may be more permissible due to the distance involved in communicating. This is an example of a situation I can foresee interacting as a therapist for this community.

The ethical issues may be any remarks or suggestions regarding harm, abuse, or neglect. No matter the client's beliefs, I would have to inform the client of my obligation to report and break confidentiality when these situations occur. A legal issue I considered was a situation including immigration or citizenship status (Lipka, 2017; Sue & Sue, 2016). In preparation for encountering these issues, I want to learn as much as I can about this population and see how I would best address these issues using accessible phrases (i.e., phrases which consider the degree of individualism/collectivism of the client). Also, since genders are separated in most functions for Mulism practitioners, I would have to be prepared for a Muslim male to refuse seeing me for therapy. Lipka (2017) highlights the expansion of Islamic followers in the U.S. and the world. If this population is predicted to increase, this is a population I should become more informed about. Religious beliefs can be deeply embedded in a person's psyche as well as govern the manner in which a person perceives themselves and others, which can clash with therapeutic practices. While these challenges will exist, having the opportunity to counsel this population is welcomed. As a future therapist, I strive to support every person no matter background or beliefs.

CONCLUSION

I learned about myself while completing this experience. At the Islamic Center of San Diego, I felt like a foreigner but was still welcomed. At the Kurdish Community Islamic Center, I was the only female and was isolated in a prayer room separate from the rest of the group. I learned how it felt to be isolated, unaware of the culture, as well as among people with varying beliefs. I think these uncomfortable moments helped to show myself I am able to be around people I do not know much about while also staying secure in who I am. I think the idea of knowing who I am while being open to getting to know others is a notion which will help me as I begin counseling the diverse society of the United States.

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