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Interview Project:
Dialogue with a Muslim Man
xxxxxxxxxxxx
Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

The author will describe an interview with a Muslim individual and will include information about how the author decided to interview this person, what the author believed about this culture before the interview, how the author's beliefs changed as a result of the interview, and what the author noticed about the level of comfort during the interview. The author will also discuss similarities and differences in culture and faith discovered during the interview. Information about what the author might do differently, what the assignment meant to the author, and how the assignment will affect the author's work as a counselor is also described. The author's analysis of the experience concludes the article.

I interviewed Rasheed , a Muslim graduate student at EIU, early in March at the EIU library, where he suggested we meet. Rasheed is a South Pakistan Muslim who came to the United States and to EIU in August 2005 to earn a graduate degree. His parents came from India, and presently live in Pakistan, as does his younger, high school brother. He visited his two older sisters, who live in the United States, before he made the decision to come to school in the U.S.

How I Decided To Interview This Person

Because I want to be a culturally competent counselor and understand the worldviews of my clients (Sue & Sue, 18), and because I want to utilize spiritual practices in counseling, I asked Alfred, from Cross Cultural class, to suggest a Muslim friend that I might interview for this project. I have wanted to know more about the Muslim faith for over 20 years, since the time when a friend told me about her Muslim husband. I have also been interested in the Muslim faith since September 11, because of the uninformed way many in the United States reacted to persons of this faith. More recently, in seminary, I learned how Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all came from the same roots and share some similar yet different beliefs. I saw this interview as an opportunity to learn about the Muslim faith and my own ability to counsel person different from me.

What I Believed About This Culture Before The Interview/What Changed

What I knew about Islam was mostly from what I read as I prepared for the interview. I knew that the Muslim faith required a personal commitment to prayer, that the Holy Book was the Quran, that Jesus was not considered divine, that Muhammad was the messenger/prophet of the faith, and that the Muslim faith was centered in the Middle East. I expected that Rasheed would look physically different than me. Other than that, I knew very little. Though those things did not change, I learned many new things about the Muslim faith and culture, as well as my own ability to relate one-to-one, with a person of a very different faith and culture than my own.

What I noticed about My Own Comfort Level

I was somewhat nervous before Rasheed arrived. We met at Booth Library in one of the conference rooms. I went a bit early in order to not make him wait there for me. I wished, particularly, that I could have found information about whether I should offer my hand to shake or not, but I had found nothing. I decided to offer it and he shook my hand.

As we sat down, I felt as if all the questions I had prepared somehow were not enough. They seemed trivial, cursory, or too broad. I felt nervous about beginning, because there was so much to ask. However, I jumped in and he seemed ready to begin. I told him what kinds of questions I would be asking, explained the project a little, and began with my first question about his family. We both seemed to become more comfortable nearly right away.

Differences and Similarities Noted

Though my intent was to find out about the Muslim faith, I began by asking Rasheed about his upbringing, his family, and his decision to come to the U.S. in order to also find out about his culture. I also asked a few questions that would help me determine his level of acculturation. His suggestion that he was surprised how much people in the U.S. drink on a daily basis led me to believe that he was more aware of the college scene than general society.

I found that we had both similarities and differences in our faiths and cultures. As for differences, Rasheed shared the dedicated prayer life of Muslims who pray five specific times throughout each day. Christian prayer is not mandated. Muslims also fast from food, bad language, and sexual activity during Ramadan, a spiritual practice that helps Muslims practice control over basic needs. Many Christians fast, but few do so for an entire month or so ardently.

Another major difference was that Rasheed is very much a minority in the U. S. as well as on

campus. The 10 Muslim students at EIU have been given a room in the cultural center in which they may worship, though they sometimes pray together in their own apartments. Christians have an abundance of churches in nearly every town in the U.S.

In addition, Rasheed described the Muslim holy book, the Quran, as “straight, concise, and brief” and the Christian Bible as confusing, hard to understand, and mysterious. Muslims are required to read the Bible and know about the life of Jesus. Few Christians, I would venture, know much about the Quran. Even in seminary we read only a few phrases simply to compare them to our Scripture but did not study them in much depth.

As for his faith and its relationship to counseling, this too differed from the general Christian view. Rasheed believed that few Muslims would seek counseling because the Muslim prayer leaders serve as counselors for Muslims; counseling was directly related to faith.

Similarities between the faiths were obvious, as well. Both faiths believe in a supreme Being (God and Allah) who is the only God; both have holy writings (the Bible and the Quran) that are the inspired Word of God; both believe in the Day of Judgment for which humans will be held accountable for our deeds; and both look toward an eternal life (Heaven or Paradise).

Even more, the similarities were most apparent in the significance of each faith. Rasheed said Muslims would advise persons to search for truth, to avoid following what others follow because it might not be true, and to “think and reflect” on the world around them. He also emphasized the need for prayer in everything and at all times. Rasheed shared that he lost friends when he became fully committed to his faith. All of these are tenets generally held by Christians, as well. But one of the greatest similarities we found was that Rasheed believed that Muslims “are not doing what they should do” in their faith lives, which is true about people of many faiths.

It would be hard to place Rasheed at a stage of identity development according to the

Atkinson, Morton, and Sue Model (Leitschuh, handout), because the model is really a racial identity model, and my discussion with Rasheed revolved mostly around faith. In addition, the model is a “conceptual aid” and humans are “much more complex” (Sue & Sue, 232). However, I would describe Rasheed as having a strong inner sense of self, as able to see different levels of faith, as aware of other faiths but unsure of their validity, and as secure about who he is even if others are different. These are characteristics of the integrative awareness stage.

What I Might Do Differently

Though I did prepare for my interview by finding out more about the Muslim faith, I wish I had done even more. I used the internet as well as some of my notes from seminary but, I wish that I had sought out a basic book about the Muslim faith. My lack of knowledge did not hinder our communication, and in fact gave him an opportunity to share more. He was ready to talk about his faith, but knowing more about Islam might have helped me ask even deeper questions.

I also think I would have better explained what counseling is before the interview. I assumed he understood because he did not ask at the beginning. However, at the end of our time together, he asked me to explain what counseling is and what it is I hope to do with my degree. Perhaps he might have been more comfortable had he understood more about this aspect.

Finally, I did not ask much about women in the Muslim faith, and I wish now that I had. Should I ever counsel a Muslim woman, I anticipate that she might view some things differently than he did because she is a woman. This would have made my interview even richer.

What The Assignment Meant To Me

This was one of my favorite cultural assignments, if not one of my favorite counseling assignments. It was personally, culturally, spiritually, and professionally meaningful to me. Any time I meet someone and get to know them, I grow personally. Any time I get to know someone

from another culture and break down my biases, I grow culturally. Any time I learn from someone of a different faith about their faith, I grow spiritually. And any time I do any of those things, I grow professionally. Many of Rasheed's words will stay with me for a long time. He has helped me to understand the Muslim faith much better than I ever could from reading a book.

How the Assignment Will Affect My Work As A Counselor

This assignment will affect my work as a counselor. I not only better understand the Muslim faith, but I have also learned how to ask about a faith different from my own even when I only have limited information about it. I considered myself very open minded going into the interview, and I found that the similarities within our faiths made connections that we could build on in our conversation, and the differences did not stop us from connecting with one another. I was comfortable asking him about himself and his faith. He was comfortable describing his faith and asking me questions about the United States, Christianity, and counseling. Had he been a client, I think I would have said that we built a rapport and created a "nurturing and nutritious environment" (Sue & Sue, 143) that enabled him to be himself very quickly in spite of our cultural and religious differences. In turn, I gained confidence in working with clients who might be very different than clients I have worked with in the past.

Having said this, I realize that one of the most important ways this assignment should affect me is in knowing that this is just one Muslim's view, and one Muslim's way of relating. As we have heard so many times in class, there are differences amongst persons of any specific culture (Leitschuh, many lectures). What I have learned is a step toward learning more. I will continue to grow, and must seek to learn more should I counsel a client from this faith.

Analysis Of This Experience

I was amazed by the open and honest exchange we were able to have so readily. Rasheed

spoke straightforwardly about his faith without knowing much about where I stood except that I was curious about his faith. I tried to ask questions in a way I might ask a client: invitingly, respectfully, and openly. In turn, he felt comfortable asking me about my faith, as well. When he did, I recognized that he might need for me to “open up” (Sue & Sue, 147) in order to fully share with me, but I did not want to offend him or his faith in anything I said about mine. He wanted to understand who Jesus is to Christians, and to know just where, in the Bible, it said that Jesus is the Son of God. He wanted proof, and that helped me to realize the more concrete nature of his faith as opposed to the somewhat “mysterious” (his words) nature of my own. I shared some of my own faith with him, gave him Biblical Scripture in which to explore his questions, and described how not all Christians believe exactly the same things. He asked me many questions and gave me a copy of information about Muslim understanding of the Christian faith. Most of all, he expressed comfortably why he could not understand my faith’s belief that Jesus was divine, and told me, more than once that, “this (conversation) is the most important thing we could be doing right now.” After much discussion, I risked saying to him that I believe that we worship the same God. I was surprised and pleased when he told me that he believed that too. We agreed that we both came to God/Allah in different ways but also believed many of the same things about the God that was so important to both of us.

This amazing connection confirmed my desire to counsel persons of other faiths. I had not expected him to be interested in what I believed, but because he was, I recognized that a client of this or any other faith might just want to know where I stand before that client could trust me to counsel them. After this experience, I feel even more confident in my ability to respectfully, openly, and non-threateningly build rapport and establish working relationships (Sue & Sue) in counseling persons of cultures and faiths that are radically different than mine.

References

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