

Cultural Humility: It's Not Just about the Hijab

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Abstract: As the project director of a workforce development program for individuals receiving SNAP benefits, I encountered students from diverse backgrounds and cultures. We served largely Black/African American, Caucasian, Asian, and Latino individuals, but also attracted a small population of Middle Eastern students. The participants ranged from 18 to 59 years of age, and all were seeking free job training in order to enhance their earning potential. As a social worker, I have provided training on cultural competence and prided myself on my skills and knowledge of culturally competent interactions. Despite my perceived proficiency, one of my Middle Eastern female students provided an opportunity for me to examine my cultural competency skills and an opportunity to learn and experience something more—cultural humility.

Keywords: cultural humility, cultural competence, self-reflection and critique, mindfulness

My duties as the director of a job training program for lower income individuals included recruiting participants, assessing student needs, providing supportive or wraparound services, and enrolling students into vocational trainings. Each week, I conducted information sessions for potential participants and explained the enrollment process. In addition to free job training, my project was able to assist current students with past due rent, past due utility bills, minor car repairs, minor dental services, uniforms, work tools, and transportation. Participation in the program was voluntary.

During one of the information sessions, a young Middle Eastern female was assigned to my project. It was my responsibility to meet with everyone assigned to the treatment group, discuss next steps, and provide transportation assistance. I also scheduled program orientations and enrollment into the community college. As I met with this young woman, she indicated that she had young children, she was married, and her primary language was Arabic. Miriam (not her real name) spoke English and was dressed in the traditional burka. She asked a number of questions about the training opportunities and the dates and times of the classes for the particular training that she wanted to pursue. As I explained the training dates, Miriam relayed her concern about her inability to attend classes during evening hours. I advised her that the schedules were set by the college based on the availability of instructors and classroom space. Failing to understand her reason for needing something other than the evening training, I took a very firm position and advised her in the same way that I advised other students who had conflicts with training dates and time. I advised Miriam that she would need to make the decision on whether to participate in the project or obtain training elsewhere.

Miriam continued to push forward her need for afternoon classes, and I continued to restate the college's position for scheduling classes. Miriam's concern increased as she explained to me that she could only take the training in the afternoon because she needed to train while her husband was at work and her children were in school. She added that she desperately wanted to get away from her husband but had no income and no special skills that would allow her to support herself

and her children. While I understood Miriam's desire to train without her husband's knowledge, I continued to explain that the schedules were set and could not be individualized for one student. Her desperation increased as she continued to advise me that she really needed to get away from her husband and could only do this if she obtained a job paying a livable wage. Miriam confided that sometimes her husband would not allow her to drive the family vehicle, but she advised me that she was willing to walk to the college, if necessary, to obtain the training. Miriam was adamant that her husband be unaware of her plans. After 20 minutes of discussion, Miriam agreed to attend the job readiness component of the training during the afternoon hours. I advised Miriam that if the need for her desired training increased, more classes might be added in the future but there was no guarantee.

Over the next two months, Miriam completed the 6-week job readiness component of the program. We met several times during that time period, and she gradually shared her story about the various methods of control that her husband exercised over her. She explained that the union was an arranged marriage devoid of love. On one occasion, Miriam requested assistance with her mortgage, but the house was listed in her husband's name and, therefore, we could not assist her. Several weeks later, she requested assistance with a utility bill. The utility bill was registered in Miriam's name and I advised her that I could assist with the utility bill but only if the mortgage was in both names. Somehow, she was able to get the mortgage listed in both names, and I advised her that I would submit her request for processing. Miriam was relieved because if we had been unable to assist with the bill, she would need to seek assistance from her brother. Miriam's husband was a small business owner, but he required her to get credit cards and the various utilities in her name. He allowed her to have a cell phone but would take it away when he chose to do so. Since she had no job, she would frequently need to borrow money from her brother or family members to pay the bills in her name or risk damaging her credit. Miriam explained to me that this was her husband's way of preventing her from obtaining an apartment or buying a house on her own. As I think back on this discussion, this was my first real opportunity—and second clue—to her status as a domestic violence victim. It did not occur to me to ask Miriam if she was interested in going to a domestic violence shelter or if she was in danger. She did not express any concern for physical violence, just unhappiness in a loveless marriage. I expected that she was accustomed to this controlling behavior based on what I had read about Middle Eastern customs and the status of Muslim women. In retrospect, this was an opportunity to obtain more information about her relationship with her husband and determine if there was more at stake than controlling behavior and a loveless marriage.

Over the next few weeks, while we waited to see if an afternoon class would materialize, Miriam confided in me about her lifestyle and her plans to leave her husband. I began to understand her desperation to get away and then began to view her insistence on afternoon classes as a human rights issue rather than a demand to accommodate her particular schedule. Initially, I did not want to question Miriam about her husband's dominance over her as I did not want to seem judgmental about her customs and traditions. From a cultural humility perspective, I was so focused on not judging her cultural traditions that I was blind to her desire to depart from the norms to which I assumed she was accustomed. I did not ask the clarifying questions. Fortunately, there were many questions that Miriam answered despite my reluctance to ask.

As time progressed, Miriam began to educate me about her customs and traditions. Miriam advised me of the reason she covered her hair and body in the presence of unmarried males. During one of our sessions, Miriam taught me how to wrap the hijab around my head. As I acquired more knowledge about Miriam and her customs, I wanted more and more to help her get away from this man who was exercising a considerable amount of control over her. I began to see her as I would any other woman who was not of Middle Eastern ethnicity. I began to see her as a victim of domestic violence, not of a physical nature but emotional and financial. I began to see her as a woman who wanted to live her life without someone else controlling her every movement. This perspective was “normal” for me since I was single and very independent. Prior to each meeting with Miriam, I continually reminded myself of the need to be aware of my personal feelings about independence and not impose them on someone from a different culture. As I became more familiar with Miriam, I began to admire her determination to start on a path that could be scary and confusing. Her desire to leave her traditional path was both surprising and understandable to me as I attempted to place myself in her shoes. My desire to help her grew with each new piece of information.

As the number of students desiring the same training as Miriam increased, I was able to schedule an afternoon class. The staff made several attempts to contact Miriam to enroll her in the training, but her phone was no longer in service. Several weeks passed with no contact. Miriam eventually contacted staff to let us know that her husband had turned off her phone but she was still interested in the training. We enrolled her in the upcoming class, but she never presented for the training. Miriam’s career coach and I discussed the loss of contact and were somewhat concerned. We considered possible alternatives to reach her but did not want to jeopardize her status. We could not risk sending a letter to her home since she had previously requested that her enrollment be confidential. We considered that her phone may have been disconnected again. For several weeks, the career coach checked the obituaries, and we were thankful that her name was never listed. By the time the project ended four months later, Miriam had not re-established contact with the project staff.

I believe that I made several erroneous assumptions regarding Miriam and her needs. By attempting to be culturally competent, I did not ask certain questions for fear of offending or seeming judgmental. Asking questions is how we learn and adjust assumptions. Cultural competence is grounded in knowledge of other cultures and belief systems, but more was at stake (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). As I look back at my interactions with Miriam, she provided me with several opportunities to ask questions, clarify her needs and implement effective interventions. Miriam advised me from our first meeting that she wanted to get away from her husband and that it was important that he not be aware of her plans to leave. The control that her husband exercised over her was sufficient to assess her as a domestic violence victim. I did not offer shelter because I didn’t think that would be appropriate at the time. Miriam was a very proud person, and I did not want to offer something that might be perceived as offensive. Had I asked the question, she could have accepted or declined the option.

Had I exercised more opportunities for mindfulness, I would not have been distracted by the hijab (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). Operating from a cultural humility perspective would have positioned me to question my assumptions and actions while allowing Miriam to teach me more

about her life, customs, and needs (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Cultural humility is a life-long process of self-reflection and critique and should be distinguished from cultural competency by educators and practitioners if we are to engage successfully in multicultural interactions (Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, & Ousman, 2016). Knowledge of another person's customs and belief systems provides only a small portion of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for culturally-informed interventions. The concept of cultural humility is relatively new to me, unlike cultural competence. In a discussion with several colleagues, I found that many confuse cultural competency with cultural humility. I believe there is an opportunity to educate more helping professionals on the difference as well as the need to continually question what we think we know about the diverse groups we encounter.

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