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Intercultural Communication among Syrian Refugees

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic study on the lives of Syrian refugees in Memphis, TN. This study focuses on the influences of media on the process of acculturation in the lives of Syrian refugees as well as the role that religion has played in the process of forming relationships between Syrians and Americans. Participants were accessed through a local refugee resettlement organization and also through cold call. Interviews were conducted in the homes of participants and the audio recordings of these interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes. This study has yielded significant findings related to the process of acculturation in the lives of refugees and the factors which influence this process. The data gathered in this study directly contradicts Oommen's theory of a positive relationship between the strength of an individual's religious identity and heightened feelings of depression and anxiety within the sojourner.

Introduction

There are a growing number of Muslim people living in the United States today. In 2015 the Pew research group stated there are about 3.3million Muslims living in the US now (Mohammed, 2016). According to their data, that number is expected to double in the next 30 years. In recent years we have seen American media give a lot of attention to Muslim people, often painting them in a negative light. Even more recently the refugee situation in Syria became a very controversial topic for debate in the 2016 US presidential election.

In 2010, a civil war started in Syria that has spun out of control to the point where now more than half of the country's population has been displaced by the fighting. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 6.3 million Syrians have been displaced within their own country (Syria Emergency). World Vision states that 5 million Syrians have become refugees forced to flee from their home country due to the circumstances of the war (Syria Refugee Crisis). In areas of Syria that are controlled by opposing forces, the Syrian government has imposed sieges as a weapon of war that have led to the starvation of innocent civilians; in those same areas, civilians are often the victims of the Syrian government's artillery. In August 2016, the government dropped two barrel bombs on a children's funeral wake that was being held in the city of Aleppo (McKirdy, 2016). This is without a doubt the most devastating humanitarian crisis of our generation.

Politicians and government officials in the US have been fighting with each other over whether or not to let these refugees into our country, with many arguing that refugees from Syria should be denied entry because they are Muslim. Muslims are often labeled as dangerous and called "radicals," or "terrorists." Although there are those who disagree and say that Muslims are people just like anyone else, while debate goes on, real men, women, and children are suffering and dying because so many countries have refused to open their doors for these sojourners.

Most every problem can be viewed in some ways as a communication problem, and the lack of communication competence surrounding this particular subject is rendering grave consequences. There are fundamental misunderstandings in the American worldview of what it means for a person to be a Muslim, and the American media is capitalizing on these misunderstandings, making American citizens believe Muslims are

dangerous, heartless, or hateful. As of November 19, 2015, there have been 31 United States governors who have openly stated that they would not allow the resettlement of Syrian Refugees in their home states (Fantz & Brumfield, 2015). Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in an open letter to president Obama that, “Neither you nor any federal official can guarantee that Syrian refugees will not be part of any terroristic activity...” (Strickland, 2015). Critics would say that this move has been motivated by Islamophobia, meaning the fear of the unknown regarding the Islamic faith. As Strickland (2015) notes, Omar Hossino, the communications officer of the Washington DC-based Syrian American Council, made a statement in 2015 saying that “Syrians are the ones fleeing both ISIL and [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] because they will be slaughtered if they don’t....” and further argued that American people are mistakenly buying into a negative stereotype that Syrians are dangerous when in fact they are the real victims of terrorism.

In order for the American public to sympathize with the people of Syria, there has to be a door to understanding the true culture and the communicative needs of the Syrian community internationally. Although there has been such a political outcry against the resettlement of Syrian refugees, approximately 20 families have still managed to be resettled in Memphis, Tennessee.

Literature Review

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is the ability to encode and decode meanings in matches that correspond to the meanings held in the other communicator’s repository (Beamer, 1992). In the context of American society, there is an exceedingly low amount of competence concerning the communication between Syrians and Americans. This is evident from the many stereotypes in the media concerning Syrians that show them as potentially dangerous or radical because of their faith. Understanding how to communicate with someone from another culture requires adjusting to the context that the other-culture individual lives in. Beamer’s studies have determined 5 parts to learning competence:

- 1) Acknowledgement of diversity
- 2) Stereotypic organization of information
- 3) Posing questions to challenge stereotypes

4) Analysis of communication episodes

5) Other culture generation of messages

This framework can be applied to any person trying to understand how to communicate with Syrian people seeking refuge here in the United States.

Acculturation and Media

Acculturation is defined as the process through which an individual adjusts to a new culture; this is particularly important to refugees and immigrant populations. Some studies suggest there are many barriers as well as bridges to acculturation (Keshishian, 2000). While reflecting on his own experiences as an Iranian immigrant in the U.S., Keshishian found that mass media can either impede acculturation by propagating negative stereotypes, or it can assist the process by shedding light on the true aspects of a culture. It is highly likely that American media has been affecting communication between Syrians and Americans for years in a very negative way. The ways in which an entity like the U.S. communicates its understanding of a foreign people can heavily influence American citizens in their perceptions of Syrian refugees and result in either pathways, or barriers to effective communication. Effective communication is essential to the process of Syrian refugees adjusting to life in the United States.

Religious/Cultural Identities and Assimilation

In terms of religion, studies suggest a positive relationship between the strength of an individual's religious identity and heightened feelings of anxiety and depression when living in the context of a foreign culture (Oommen, 2013). When people have strong cultural identities, their desire to assimilate decreases, and in a foreign environment filled with pressures of assimilation and adaptation this could adversely affect mental well-being (Ghaffarian, 1987; Neto, 2002). People with strong cultural identities who are unwilling to assimilate often communicate with divergent messages that highlight the strong aspects of their own culture. Based on such studies, Syrian Muslims with a strong cultural and religious identity are expected to experience difficulty adapting to the culture of America and may be subject to adverse effects on mental well-being as a result of the pressures in place to assimilate into American society.

Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication breaks down into three categories: 1) paralinguistics, 2) kinesics, and 3) proxemics. Paralinguistics refers to the

elements such as tone of voice, volume of speech, speech rate, etc... (Crystal, 1971; La Barre, 1976), while kinesics focuses on a wide range of body-related cues, such as facial expressions, eye contact, head movement, gesture, and body ornaments (Birdwhistell, 1970). Proxemics refers to the study of how interpersonal distance and space is maintained between people from the same or different cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1963). The rules and social norms that have been established in Islam differ dramatically from what is commonly accepted in American culture. For example, many Islamic rules specifically related to women, like female head coverings, have the potential to send nonverbal cues to individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It is possible for an individual from a much more conservative Islamic society like Syria to experience tension while living in America based on differences in the norms of nonverbal communication.

Conceptual Network

The goal of this study is to begin understanding the world of Syrian refugees in the United States, and I have used these questions as a guide to begin a meaningful conversation with Syrians:

1. What kinds of barriers exist between Syrians and Americans?
2. What is it like to be Syrian while sojourning in the Southern United States?
3. What are the underlying communicative needs of the Syrian community in the United States?
4. What effect is American media having on the process of acculturation from the perspective of Syrian refugees?

Methods

To answer these questions, I used elements of Ethnography and the Grounded Theory research method to gather data from Syrian families residing in Memphis, TN. I conducted inductive interviews and observed my surroundings as I entered the homes of willing participant families for the purpose of recording the stories and responses in order to have a better understanding of the culture and the struggles of the Syrian community.

Study Design

Using volunteer participants, I gathered data consisting of inductive interviews, participant observation, and audio recordings of interactions

with Syrian families. After gathering the data in the field, I transcribed and analyzed the audio recordings looking for reoccurring themes across the responses to the interview questions.

Participants

Syrian families were sought out primarily through pre-existing personal connections to individuals associated with the Memphis Islamic community and a local refugee resettlement organization called Asha's Refuge. Potential participants had the opportunity to decide whether or not to include themselves after receiving information about the purpose of the study, the type of data and data collection methods. Participants were also informed that they had the freedom to exclude themselves from the research at any time during the study.

Procedure

To conduct this study, I conducted participant observation as well as inductive interviews in the participants' homes. I asked each participant to respond verbally to a list of open-ended questions about barriers and bridges to communication between Syrians and Americans. I took notes on their responses as well as recorded the audio from the interviews. Participants in group settings were given the opportunity to work together in responding to my questions.

Data Analysis

The first part of analyzing the data consisted of transcribing interviews and cataloging observational notes. After coding and reducing the field notes I analyzed reoccurring themes in communication barriers and bridges between Syrians and Americans. As I coded data I looked for potential topics of conversation that create fear, and especially paying close attention to cultural expressions that cause Syrian people to feel misunderstood while living in American society. Because my study is situated in ethnomethods, thematizing and coding were inductive processes.

Results

Two participant families were contacted through connections with the organization Asha's Refuge and a third participant was contacted through cold call. In total, 3 Syrian refugee families chose to participate in this study. I was accompanied by a translator to meet with the first 2 families; for the 3rd family I was alone. The first group consisted of three young

participants who were related to one another. They had the opportunity to work together to respond to the interview questions and were assisted by a translator when needed. During this interview the participants requested that I not record any audio or reveal identifying information, but they did allow me to take notes.

The second group of participants was a Syrian couple in their mid-60s with many children. The interview took place between the husband and wife of the family and myself; this interview again was facilitated via translator. The majority of our time together was spent in mourning for the hardships being faced by their loved ones who have sought refuge in other countries. No audio was recorded during this interview, however much was gained in understanding concerning the needs of the Syrian refugee community through the means of participant observation and researcher fieldnotes.

The third group of participants consisted of two middle-aged Syrian men, one of whom spoke sufficient English as to allow for a substantive open-ended interview which was audio-recorded. Every family that chose to participate immigrated within 6 months prior to the interview. The findings from these interviews are best represented in categories as follows.

Media and Acculturation

Each of the participants expressed that they had learned a lot about America from movies, TV shows, music, etc. One of the middle-aged men from the third group of participants talked about how he grew up listening to American artists like Tim McGraw. At one point during our time together he requested to stop the interview so that he could show me a video of a country singer on the TV show *The Voice* performing a rendition of Miley Cyrus's, "The Climb." He showed me this video and he said, "Man! This takes me back to my childhood!" He talked about how American movies made him feel hopeful that one day he could taste the American dream; he always made plans to travel to America and then the war came and he fled to Jordan with his wife and children.

In the Fall of 2015, American news outlets published a statement made by the White House that the United States would receive 10,000 refugees by the end of fiscal year 2016, and this made him begin to hope even more that he could make it here (Omri, 2016). A little while later he got the phone call from the International Organization for Migration that

said he and his family could begin the 3 year interview process to make it into the United States with refugee status. When he came to the U.S. he was told that his family was being resettled in Memphis, TN. In his interview, he stated that he had to Google Memphis because he didn't know anything about it. He said that he found a map on the internet of the U.S. which highlighted the states that said they would not be receiving refugees and Tennessee was one of the states. He was really nervous about this and said that he is thankful to be here now. Internet search engines like Google have played a vital role in shaping the perceptions of life in the United States for Syrian refugees by giving them broad access to countless American media outlets. This means that the articles being published by American news outlets are being analyzed and criticized by Syrians all over the globe, however the response of Syrian refugees to these articles is seldom recorded. For this particular man, his first media contact with Memphis, TN was a giant map that explicitly stated that he and his family were not welcome here. This has massive implications for his mental well-being as he goes through the arduous process of adjusting to a new culture.

One young Syrian woman that I spoke with said that American media had influenced her expectations of life in America in both positive and negative ways. She had learned about bad things like alcoholism and anger problems. She was under the impression that drugs were a huge problem with most people in America. She also said that she had learned a lot about the freedom that women have here in America: they can drive cars and dress however they want to, there is ample opportunity for education and they enjoy freedom of religion. All of this she learned through the media before her arrival to the U.S.

Religion

The theme of religion presented itself in each interview. During the interview with the third group of participants, the two middle-aged Syrian men, the conversation included a great deal of discussion about God. The participant who spoke the most English told me that once he learned that Memphis is a "Church City" many of his fears were relieved. He said that he felt much more comfortable coming to live here when he learned that many people in Memphis worship God. The strength of his religious identity coincides with the religious culture of the South and has worked in his favor to lessen anxiety and relieve depression. He told me that his closest American friend is his downstairs neighbor that just so happens to be a

minister in a local church. He said that they meet together to read from the Bible and talk about the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. In the audio recording of the interview I asked this participant what he would say if he could say anything to American people, and he responded, “If you like and love to do what Jesus tells you and what he teaches you, then do it. Because that is really loving people and it makes the space between them close and their hearts start to beat.”

In the first group of participants in which I spoke with the Syrian woman, she told me that one of the best things about America is the religious freedom. She said that she loves that there is no pressure to assimilate into a certain religious identity. A part of this religious freedom that she appreciates is the right to wear the kind of clothes that you want to.

Difficulties/Barriers

The needs of the Syrian community in Memphis are overwhelming. Each group of participants has been experiencing major difficulties since arrival. The most common and most obvious barrier has been language. Of the three groups of participants, only one individual spoke passable English. Of all the participants in this study the longest residents have only been in Memphis for 6 months. There are over 20 new Syrian refugee families in a similar situation who are trying to figure out basic things like how to enroll their children in school. While this task might seem simple, it is complicated by the fact that most of these children have been out of school for the past 3 to 5 years because of the war in Syria and are therefore difficult to place. Upon arriving, 2 of the 3 families had to be taught how to use central heating and didn't understand the financial cost of running the heat in their apartments. After arrival in the U.S. they have a grace period of 3 months before they have to begin paying for the plane tickets that brought them here. That gives the heads of the family a very limited amount of time to find a job, which can be exceedingly difficult when you can't speak English.

While I was with the second group of participants I observed the conversation that was taking place between them and a case worker with a local non-profit organization. The mother of the family burst into tears while she was talking about trying to see her two daughters, one of whom had fled to Turkey, and the other to Libya. We spent a long time brainstorming about the different ways to get her daughters a visa in the U.S. or how to find enough money for her to go and see her daughters.

During the interview with the third group of participants we talked about listening. The English speaking participant explained that people need someone to listen to them. He said that the experiences he is going through have been very emotional, and it's not healthy to bottle up these emotions, or in the end they will destroy you. I asked if he had anyone that listens to him like that and he told me about one friend who is in San Diego, CA. They talk on the phone from time to time, unpacking the experiences that they have been through. When asked if he has any American friends who listen to him like that, he lit up and started to tell me about his downstairs neighbor who is a minister and has in-depth conversations with him. His children are bullied at school sometimes since "some people don't accept the new arrivals..." and he is able to talk to her about these experiences. In addition to providing someone for him to talk to, she helps to take care of his children and tutor them after school.

Discussion

The effects of American media on the process of acculturation have been significant in the lives of these participants. In most cases the American media has positively influenced perceptions of the American lifestyle that these Syrians had before they got here. It was very surprising to discover the resolve of these participants in the face of opposition to the resettlement of refugees in the United States as portrayed by U.S. news outlets. Though they knew about the politicians who spoke directly against the inclusion of Syrian refugees into American society, the hopes of finding peace and refuge in this country have remained unharmed. This reinforces Keshishian's findings concerning the impact of media on the process of acculturation in the life of an immigrant, and even takes this concept a step further seeing that it applies to more than just immigrants, but even extends to a certain set of refugee populations.

Surprisingly, religion has been a pathway to communication between Syrians and Americans so far. The findings in this study directly contradict Oommen's theory on religious identity having a positive relationship with heightened feelings of anxiety and depression when an individual is placed into a foreign religious context. It appears as though the existence of a devout monotheistic culture has positively affected the process of acculturation and the mental well-being of Syrian refugees in the United States even though the religious culture is different from Islam. It is interesting to note that the participants in this study have all been

assisted and resettled by faith-based non-profit organizations here in the United States. Most of the early interaction that these refugees have with Americans is happening with devoted Christians. It appears as though so far, the participants have yet to encounter a significant population of Americans that are characterized by anti-immigration sentiments.

The biggest and most obvious barrier between Syrians and Americans has been language. I anticipate that this barrier will remain for a while due to the short amount of time which most Syrian refugees have lived here so far. The language barrier is, for most Syrians, the most difficult barrier to navigate. Aside from language, Syrians face a laundry list of logistical matters which must be taken care of. They are currently among the neediest communities in our society based on their lack of resources.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that more work should be done to understand the process of acculturation among Middle Eastern peoples, and more specifically how that process is different for refugees than it is for immigrants. Immigrants get to choose where they want to live, and how they want to start out pursuing life in America. Refugees have an entirely different experience as it relates to adjusting to a new culture and coping with the difficulties that this process presents. It will take some time for the Syrian refugees who have come to the United States to break the language barrier and carve out their place in society. The participants in this study were all located in the Southern region of the U.S. which is known for hospitality and a Christian worldview. Other refugee populations have most likely had very different experiences and more needs to be done in the world of academics to understand what is happening to these populations. For instance, the Somali refugees in St. Cloud, MN or the Iranian refugees in Los Angeles, CA have most likely had very different experiences than the Syrians who have come to Memphis, TN. These two cities have some of the largest refugee populations in the United States and there is much to learn from their experiences that can be applied to future work with refugees worldwide.

The influence of a strong religious identity has the potential to significantly impact a person's mental health and well-being when they are placed into a culture with a foreign religious identity. In the lives of Syrian refugees this strong religious identity has had a positive impact on mental

health and well-being since they have been placed into a predominantly Christian culture. Is this positive impact the result of a survival mentality that is specific to the conditions and experiences of a refugee? Or perhaps the positive relationship has something to do with the similarities between Abrahamic religions. More research should be conducted in this regard to yield a more grounded theoretical framework.

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