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Working With Muslims: Perspectives and Suggestions for Counseling

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A 16-year-old Muslim girl of South Asian descent reports to the school counselor's office with fears of being pregnant. She became sexually active in the past month and did not use any contraception or protection. Her fears are compounded by the possibility that her parents will find out and will be upset beyond forgiveness. The notion of dating and premarital sex is condemned by not only her cultural values but also her religious beliefs. The student's guilt and shame are so overwhelming that her academic performance is deteriorating. The student is afraid that her actions have tainted her soul, and she will be punished for her sins by never finding success and happiness in this life and in the next.

In this case, how would a counselor help the student from both the cultural and religious context? Counselors today have to be not only multiculturally competent but also open and aware of religious beliefs and differences.

The Muslim Population in the U.S.

In the United States, Muslims are made up of three groups: (1) immigrants, (2) American converts to Islam, and (3) those born to the first two groups as Muslims (Numan, 1992). The actual number of Muslims in the United States is unknown, but some widely varying estimates report the Muslim population to be between 3 and 7 million ("Islam in the United States," n.d.). It is estimated that by the year 2010, Islam could be the second largest religion in the United States after Christianity due to the increased immigration, relatively high birth rate, and new converts (Bagby, 1994).

Since the Muslim population is made of several cultural and ethnic groups, it is important to delineate the Islamic religious worldviews and the cultural worldviews dominant to the individual group. First, the Islamic beliefs and practices, which are almost universal to all Muslims, are explained. Then cultural norms and practices of the two biggest groups in the U.S., the South Asian and Arab group, are clarified.

The Religious Beliefs

Muslims in the U.S. like to introduce their religion by stating the connection that Islam has with the Judeo-Christian religions. The history of Islam started 1400 hundred years ago when an Arab by the name of Mohammad was chosen as the last messenger of God. The Angel Gabriel spoke to Mohammad, and the revelations were written down to form the Quran. The Quran includes the history of mankind from the creation of Adam and Eve to Abraham and his sons, to Moses and his historic journey out of Egypt, to the virgin Mary and the birth of Jesus. The Quran also addresses rules for everyday social life like marriage issues, personal rights, inheritance, charity to the poor, and importance of brotherhood and community. In addition to the Quran, there are the Sunnah and Hadith which are the practices and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad. Muslims emulate Mohammad as a perfect human being and are encouraged to turn to these texts for guidance on the personal issues that they face in life. Scholars and other learned leaders (imams) are consulted to help interpret the meanings associated with the Quran and Hadith.

There are five basic principles of belief that Muslims are taught. First is the belief in one God, who is called Allah in Arabic. Second is the belief in all the prophets and messengers of God, which include Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jesus, and Mohammad. Third is the belief in all the revealed books of God, which are the Torah (Moses), Psalms (David), Gospels (Jesus), and the Quran. Fourth is the belief in all the angels of God, which include Gabriel; and fifth is the belief in the day of judgment and resurrection.

Muslims express their beliefs through the practice of rituals that are called the Pillars of Islam. The first is the *shahadah*, which is the declaration of faith in one God and that Mohammad is His Messenger. The second expression of belief is the performance of the five obligatory prayers everyday. By performing a preset ritual of worship five times a day, Muslims believe that they stay connected with God at all times. The third is paying a percentage of your personal wealth as charity,

or *zakat*, at least once a year. The fourth is fasting, for healthy Muslims, between the hours of sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan. The fifth is the *hajj*, a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, made if one is financially and physically able.

The basic teaching of Islam, as with all other religions, is to remember God and do good things for others at all times. Life in this world is rewarded in the afterlife, which is eternal. These are the governing principles for every practicing Muslims as taught from birth. Unfortunately, religion provides not the only principles in life; culture plays a crucial role in every part of life and can sometimes blur the lines of expression of faith. Therefore, it is important to know the tenets of cultural worldviews as well as of religious worldviews when we work with Muslims.

The Cultural Beliefs

American Muslims come from several countries. According to statistics provided (Numan, 1992), the largest two groups are the South Asian (25%) and the Arab (23%). The South Asian Muslim group comes from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The Arab Muslim group comes from Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine (Arab American Institute, 2005). Each group has underlying cultural norms that intertwine with the religion. The Arab culture is more Islamic in nature than the South Asian one; therefore, knowing the Islamic values gives a good indication of the Arab culture. Some of the cultural norms are found in both groups.

The behavior of the South Asian Muslim people reflects Hindu traditions and values (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, 1997). For example, married women always wear bangles to signify their status. Regardless of religion, in South Asian culture women only marry once while the Islamic teachings support divorce for both men and women (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, 1997). Islam gives Muslim women several rights (that are not always practiced), including the right to divorce without providing a reason, and the right to remarry as often as she becomes single.

All South Asians hold some basic worldviews due to sociohistorical culture. Ibrahim and Ohnishi (1997) presented a number of worldviews that are critical to South Asians and all Muslims. These include the importance of the family and filial piety, respect and honor for parents, and a strong emphasis on duty to the family. An individual's responsibility and duty is to family before the self.

Sodowsky, Kwan, and Pannu (1995) elaborated on the importance of family to both South Asian and East Asian Americans. This also is true for Arab Muslims. They emphasized the following: structured

family roles and hierarchical relationships, self-control and dignity, respect for community, and cordiality. In this model, the importance is placed on the role of the male as the head of household while women may work outside the house but only to supplement the family income. Sons rarely take part in the daily chores and are valued more than daughters. Ibrahim and Ohnishi (1997) stressed that self-expression, self-control, and personal modesty are highly valued. It is very important not to draw attention to oneself as being better than others. This can be misunderstood as not having a high self-esteem.

Respect for community is emphasized in both South Asian and Arab Muslim groups. The community is an extended family and one has responsibilities to it (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, 1997). Individual desires and needs are sacrificed for the good of the group (Sodowsky et al., 1995). This social consciousness is related to a high regard for learning. Education leads to success. Success is measured by the ability to take care of the family and to give back to the community.

Another value of supreme importance to Arab Muslims and South Asian Muslims is modesty about sexuality. Virginity is treasured. Dating or unchaperoned interaction between males and females is highly discouraged. Arranged marriages are still the norm. Marrying within your own ethnic group is part of your duty to your family. One rationale is for continued stability in the family and the community. Religious preservation is also critical (Sodowsky et al., 1995).

Further, fatalism, which is the belief that no matter what one does or does not do, certain events in life are predetermined and must be dealt with appropriately, is the backbone to behavior in every setting. What is meant to be will be.

Synthesis of Tension

For South Asian and Arab Muslims, the tension that is commonly experienced is the continual balancing of cultural values and religious beliefs with assimilating and acculturating into the larger culture. Religion and culture are so highly interchangeable that the lines between the two are often blurred. The example given at the beginning of this article is indicative of how an action is interpreted both from the religious and cultural perspectives. The punishment for an inappropriate behavior is dealt from both these perspectives. Therefore, the burden of guilt, shame, and fear has double the intensity and weight.

As a result, the challenge for counselors is to help the client differentiate between religious beliefs and cultural worldviews and to arrive at clearer definitions of these two areas. This clarification will then help the

Muslim client work through the problems in each area, prioritizing and organizing what is most important in achieving a balance of the tensions.

Implications for Counseling American Muslims

Since September 11, all Muslims in the world have become more wary about how they are viewed by others in general. The media has given Muslims a new face of the hidden terrorist such that Muslims fear any expression of religious fervor may be considered a sign of possible terrorism. The average Muslim today deals with not just the everyday stressors of life but also the responsibility of defending basic religious rights and values as normal and acceptable.

Das and Kemp (1997) identified some of the mental health issues that are common in the South Asian group. For the immigrant Muslims, one of the main issues is the lack of family support that they were used to in their home country. The extended family provides childcare, house care, emotional support, and companionship. Another issue is the presence of tensions in the family when conflicting core ethnic values between parents and children emerge. For example, relations with the opposite sex, career decisions, and other social values are common problems that are presented for counseling, especially in the school counseling setting. For adults, real or perceived prejudice or discrimination in the workplace or in the society is a very difficult topic to present during counseling, especially to Caucasian counselors. Other issues include language barriers, speaking with an accent, style of dress, skin color, and physical appearance.

As with most other religions, there is much diversity in how Islam is practiced by individual Muslims. People interpret the religion differently and try to practice this interpretation within the American context. As a starting point, counselors can assess the religiosity and religious identity of Muslim clients as well as their cultural identity (Altareb, 1996). The degree of religiosity is also related to the cultural background of the client. Immigrant Muslims have different experiences than American-born Muslims. While the former may be dealing with issues of adjustment to the larger culture, the latter may be dealing with integrating their personal practice of Islam into their everyday life.

Muslims who identify strongly with Islamic values need to know that counselors are open and understanding of their perspective and will not try to change it (Kelly, Aridi, & Bakhtiar, 1996). These individuals also feel that all concerns are potentially religious issues; therefore, they may be less likely to

get counseling services in the first place because they want their concerns addressed from an Islamic viewpoint. Counselors could help their clients who are working on religious issues feel as though their religious values are an accepted part of the counseling process and therefore an important part of the solution to the problems as well. Counselors may need to consult with Islamic religious leaders, organizations, or individuals to gain a deeper understanding of a particular issue from an Islamic standpoint (Altareb, 1996).

Counselors should also be conscious of their own perceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs about Islam and Muslims. Muslim clients may see the non-Muslim counselor as representing the views of a biased society; therefore, the more the counselor is knowledgeable about the religious and cultural practices of Islam, the more the counselor is able to differentiate his or her own biases and to become more sensitive to the diversity of the needs that exist within the American Muslim community (Altareb, 1996).

Another suggestion is to allow the client to educate the counselor regarding his or her culture, religion, values and worldviews, identification, and connection to the larger society (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, 1997). Counselors cannot generalize every client based on book knowledge or personal knowledge of a few South Asians or Arabs. Another recommendation is to use a relational style that allows both counselor and client to explore both value systems at the same time. This also increases the trust level as the client realizes that the counselor is objective about his or her assumptions and knows the boundaries of his or her cultural identity. Finally, a multidimensional approach that includes using models of counseling that support both individualism and relational contexts can also be used to counsel Muslims. Cognitive, cognitive-behavioral, existential-humanistic, family therapy, and feminist models should be considered (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, 1997).

Conclusion

Religion is often an integral part of culture and needs to be addressed by the multiculturally aware counselor. Religious and spiritual issues are not new. What is new is that the counseling professions are starting to recognize the value of incorporating this aspect into counseling and healing. It is essential for counselors to gain knowledge, understanding, and competence of the various religious beliefs, values, and traditions as well as the cultural worldviews when counseling a diverse group such as the American Muslims.

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