

Battling the Anxiety and Taking the Plunge

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Out of all of the assignments that I have had thus far in the Ed.D in Educational Leadership program, partaking in a “cultural plunge” gave me the most anxiety. This anxiety was not the result of an unwilling to immerse myself in a new cultural experience, but rather because it felt on some level like a form of appropriation where I would be using the culture of another group for my own benefit. Even though I knew whatever experience I chose would enable me to learn more about another culture and provide perspective on what it means to be a minority among another group of people, I still felt that there was something disingenuous about the manner in which it would be done.

Most of the subject matter in the Ed.D. program so far has focused on race, socioeconomic status, and gender issues. Therefore, I wanted my cultural plunge to be connected to something that has not been addressed as much up until this point. Since I have discussed the influence that religion had on me when I was growing up in several of my autoethnography papers this semester, I thought it would be interesting to attend a religious event other than the Roman Catholic ones I am familiar with for my cultural plunge.

As I thought about which religious event to attend, I recalled a controversy that took place several years ago regarding the proposed opening of a mosque in the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia where I currently live. In 2015, a meeting to address plans for the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg to build a new mosque devolved into an event where protesters called Muslim residents terrorists; due to the anger and tension, a sheriff’s deputy had to eventually stop the meeting (Weiner, 2015). The proposed new mosque has still not been built in Fredericksburg. A similar situation took place in 2016 just about 35 miles west of

Fredericksburg in the city of Culpeper, with that county denying the Islamic Center of Culpeper's proposal to build a new mosque (Guterman, 2017).

Reflecting on the growing prejudice Muslims have experienced over the past several years, I decided it would be beneficial to attend a prayer service at the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg. Although Muslims make up only one percent of the U.S. population, they experienced 7.5 percent of all hate crimes in the country in 2008; by 2015, that figure had soared to nearly 22 percent (Guterman, 2017). This experience exposed me to religious rituals different than the ones I was normally accustomed to. It also exposed me to different ethnicities and different languages than I usually encounter in my everyday life. In this paper, I will discuss how it felt to be a minority amongst a large group of people. I will also provide the insights I developed before, during, and after the experience.

The very first insight into my cultural plunge took place when I made the decision to attend an Islamic prayer service. My experience with Catholic masses was that anyone could attend. As I went to the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg website to view the prayer service schedule, I realized that I should not assume that I would be able to simply show up and attend. This very well might have been perfectly fine, but since I am not Muslim and have no prior experience with the religion, I was not sure. I wanted to be respectful, so I decided to email the contact address on their website and ask if I could attend the Friday prayer service, known as a Jum'ah (Howcast, 2012).

The first response I received was that while the director was looking forward to seeing me "at my convenience," the Friday prayer service was not for non-Muslim (I. Ibrahim, personal communication, October 14, 2019). I responded by asking if there was any service that a non-Muslim individual would be allowed to attend; in turn, he offered to teach me about Islam one-

on-one (I. Ibrahim, personal communication, October 15, 2019). At that point, I explained to him that I was hoping to sit in and observe a prayer service because of the cultural plunge assignment where I could be the minority among a large group of people. Subsequently, he responded that I could attend the service. Considering my aforementioned concern on the appearance of appropriation, I felt a sense of relief when I was able to be honest and explain to the person in charge of the Islamic Center that I was attending the service as part of an assignment for the Ed.D. program.

The Islamic Center of Fredericksburg is located off a major highway that runs through Spotsylvania County. Housed in a small, unassuming brick building, the center could easily be mistaken for a VFW Hall or local insurance company office. I arrived approximately 15 minutes before the Jum'ah was set to begin. The room in which the prayer service took place was probably no more than 2000 square feet, and did not resemble anything that I was personally familiar with as a place of worship. Rather, it was a medium sized, carpeted room with a small alcove in the front where the Islamic leader would deliver his sermon. A few bookshelves were located in the corners of the room, and several calendars, pictures, and writings were posted on the walls. Considering they were in Arabic, my first feelings of being in the minority stemmed from the fact that I was unable to read any of this information. My inability to understand the meaning behind how these items related to Islam and the prayer service made me feel that I was at a disadvantage among everyone else that was in attendance.

To better prepare myself for attending the service, I had watched a short video several days prior on what to expect at a Jum'ah (Howcast, 2012). Therefore, I knew that once I entered the building I would need to take my shoes off. When I first entered the room, there were only about a half dozen men inside. Some sat in folding chairs, some were standing, and some were

kneeling. In the video I had watched prior to attending, it was noted that usually only Muslim kneel so I decided to sit in one of the folding chairs. A few more men slowly entered as it approached the listed start time of 12:45PM. Unlike Roman Catholic masses that I have attended in the past, no individual seemed to call the prayer service to order. The first 20 minutes or so consisted primarily of men entering, taking a seat on a chair or on the floor, and beginning to pray. Occasionally, some music would be piped into the room from the small speakers hung in the corners of the room.

Overall, about 150 men of mostly middle-eastern and African descent attended the service. Not only was it easy to notice that I was the only Caucasian in attendance, it was also very easy to notice that there were no women in attendance. Because middle-eastern individuals are a minority in Fredericksburg, I falsely assumed there would probably be only a few dozen people in attendance, so I was very surprised that there were so many individuals at the service. It was a good example of how individuals can underestimate the size of underrepresented groups.

Some men appeared to know and greet one another, but most kept to themselves once they entered the room. Only one person greeted me by shaking my hand and offering the traditional Muslim greeting of “Assalamu alaikum” (“peace be upon you”) (“Assalamu alaikum,” n.d.). I knew that there was a traditional response to this greeting, one that I recalled sounding phonetically similar. However, since I was not entirely sure of what the response was, I found myself replying with a mumbled version of “wa alaikum assalam” (“and upon you be peace”) (“Assalamu alaikum,” n.d.). This exchanged added to the experience of feeling out of place in the environment.

At around 1:00PM, the leader of the service arrived and began to address the attendees in Arabic. I was unsure if the entire service would be in Arabic, but eventually he began to speak

English. I felt an immediate sense of relief that some of the service would be in a language I understood. He did not announce his name, but as he spoke, it felt like he was maintaining near-constant eye contact with me. I began to think that this was the individual I had been corresponding with through email, Imam Ibrahim. Even though there were well over 100 men in the room and I was seated to the side mostly towards the back, it felt like most of the time he was speaking directly to me. As a white male who has not often been in large groups of people that look different than me, this may have been the first time I truly felt like I was being singled out for being in the minority. I looked different than everyone around me, I did not speak the language that others were speaking, and I did not understand most of the rituals that were being performed around me.

While the leader of the service continued to look at me while he spoke, I reflected on how minorities must feel when they are singled out amongst a large group of individuals. Even if there appeared to be no malicious intent behind the action, it felt slightly unnerving. I also began to think about the fact that perhaps being singled out by the prayer service leader was all in my mind. Since I was the only Caucasian there, was I just thinking that I was being singled out because I was the in the minority? It was an internal struggle wondering if what I felt I was experiencing was actually happening or was it in my mind. This was the moment of the cultural plunge where I felt like I took on what it must feel like for minorities in our society, albeit on a very small scale and for a relatively short amount of time.

While there were many differences between this situation and the situations I normally find myself in, there were also many similarities. Like Roman Catholicism and other religious services, the Jum'ah consisted of rituals including prayer, music, and respect for other attendees. Imam's sermon was also not dissimilar to the homilies I was accustomed to hearing when I

attended church as a child. He spoke of the importance of education, specifically how each individual should take responsibility to share their knowledge with others. While he pointed out the importance of teaching others about Islam, he also included teaching others about everyday things such as math, science, and architecture. Like prayer services I attended as a child, Imam also stressed the importance of sharing the teachings of Islam with children, and mentioned how a sense of community is important.

I got the sense that this sermon was fairly generic and served to provide an overall introduction to Islam. Combined with how I interpreted him to be speaking directly to me, it made me wonder if he had designed his sermon knowing that there would be a non-Muslim in the room. Yet, I still felt that this feeling may just have been in my mind since I felt like I was being singled out as the minority in the room. The longer I was at the Jum'ah, the more I was internalizing the different feelings of being at a disadvantage due to the fact that I was in the minority and unaware of the normal practices of the service. Unless I was to ask him, I would have no way of knowing. It seemed better in a way not to know whether or not this was true because it enabled me to feel how it might be like for a minority in a situation not knowing if they are the target of a specific action taken by someone in the majority.

Conclusion

After attending the Jum'ah, I took several days before I began this paper to reflect on the experience and how it compared to most other experiences in my life. What I came to realize was that this was one of the very few times that I could remember where I was the only Caucasian among a large group of people. There have been situations in the past where I have recognized a lack of diversity among those around me, but that is not the same as being the minority member among of a large group of individuals. This experience made me realize how

many minorities must feel on a daily basis in the United States. Even in a situation that was positive and accepting, I felt the feeling of being at a disadvantage as a minority where I was not aware of the same language, behaviors, and rituals being expressed by the majority.

As part of the cultural plunge assignment, I paid close attention to how being among a culture other than my own felt similar and different to my own experiences. While the language and actions of the Jum'ah may have been different from what I was used to during Catholic masses, the act of prayer, music, and rituals were very similar. Even the overall message of Imam Ibrahim's sermon was similar to the homilies of priests at the many Catholic masses I attended as a child. Reflecting on the prejudice feelings of some community members conveyed several years prior in Fredericksburg, it made me realize that those individuals had likely formed their own opinions on what it meant to be a Muslim without knowing much about the religion. Perhaps if they had spoken to someone at the center or even simply attended a prayer service like I had, they would have not expressed the same hateful opinions.

The values and beliefs expressed during the Jum'ah were very similar to my own. While there are also differences among Islam and Roman Catholicism, the fact that there are similarities reinforces the importance of human beings normally being more similar to one another than different. What started out as the assignment that gave me the most anxiety turned into the assignment that has thus far given me the greatest appreciation of how the Ed.D. program has allowed me to analyze cultural things in greater detail. Reading relevant literature, watching videos, and engaging in personal discussions with others is very valuable, but immersing yourself in different cultural situations may be the greatest way to gain insight into what it means to live in not only a multi-cultural society, but a multi-cultural world. While ultimately I used the cultural experience of another group of people to my own benefit for this

assignment, the work I do as a scholar-practitioner as a result will hopefully benefit others in the future.

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