

A personal narrative of a Muslim woman's journey in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

This is a work-in-progress paper that offers an autobiographical exploration of the journey of a Muslim woman in the UK hospitality industry. As the researcher is the primary source of data, autoethnography is used as the method of data collection.

Autoethnography is a first person account of an individual's experience, which is used to shed light on larger cultural patterns. Primary finding from this account implied the need for managers to extend more effort to integrate Muslim migrant workers in the UK hospitality industry. Further research is needed to explore Muslim migrants' experiences in the UK hospitality industry and the current managerial practices to integrate them.

Key words: migrant workers – Muslim hospitality workers – women hospitality workers- culture differences.

Introduction

There is limited research into the migrant experience of working in hospitality: rare examples include work on European migrants by Janta and Ladkin (2009) and issues of migrant labour and tourism imagery in Ireland by Baum and Hearn (2007). Also Wright (2005) looked at the experience of ethnic hospitality workers however, there has been no research into the experiences of Muslim migrant workers in hospitality, and this paper marks the start of dedicated research into this area. The

increasing presence of migrants in hospitality implies the need for management to take into account differing needs that arise from cultural differences from the host population. As this paper will show, the faith practised by migrants has a significant impact on their working life; its influence is not confined to the private sphere. By documenting the challenges posed by faith for the Muslim hospitality worker, it is hoped that implications for management can be drawn.

This paper aims to use my experience of working in the UK hospitality industry as a foreign-born Muslim woman to illuminate the challenges posed by the Muslim section of the hospitality industry for management. The relevance of this topic lies in the observation that migrants make up 40% of the hospitality workforce.

A cry for freedom

I was brought up in a Muslim culture which posed many restrictions on me as a little girl and later as a young woman. Only few opportunities were available to me in the way of developing my social skills or expressing myself. A girl is not expected to argue or express her frustration with having fewer opportunities in life. I grow up resenting the idea of being of an inferior status "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Qur'an 2:228).

However, this is by no means a criticism of Islam or Islamic cultures; it is only a description of my background that has greatly influenced my experience in the UK hospitality industry.

The Journey starts

As a distinct student, I was granted a scholarship to study for my PhD in the UK. This didn't only provide me with a higher degree in education but also with the freedom and growth that I desired. These observations find their echo in previous research into international student adjustment – the sojourn in a new country is portrayed as a therapeutic journey of self-discovery (Brown 2009; Hayes 2007; Madison 2006).

I sat down quietly in my hotel room in London reflecting on the hard life journey I took to get there. I knew deep down that my family would rather have me at home. If it wasn't for education, which they valued greatly, I wouldn't be here. After all and according to Hadith (Prophet Mohammed's teaching) a Muslim woman is not allowed to travel on her own for more than three nights. Abu Saeed 'reported the saying of Prophet Mohammed, (PBUH), 'it is not permitted for a woman who brings faith in Allah and the Last Day to make a journey of more than three days unless she is accompanied by either her father, brother, husband, son or a relative who is her Mahram'. Furthermore, a woman in Islam is only permitted to leave home for legitimate reasons such as visiting parents or family or fulfilling Islamic duties. I was there to stay alone for four years so was already committing a sin.

Every time I phoned my mother I heard sadness in her voice. She tried hard to hide her struggle with the idea of me living alone in a non Muslim country. My parents were burdened with the thought of me straying from our customs and religion. Islam holds a high regards for parents. They must be obeyed in everything except in God's disobedience. The holy Quran stated "Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or more attain old age in thy

life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour." (17: 23, 24). With this deeply rooted respect and regard I've held for my parents, I struggled with their struggles and fear over me. It was a heavy baggage I carried along with me on my long journey in the UK and affected my life experiences over there. It was my frame of reference that stood between me and the things I encountered while working in the UK hospitality industry. The conflict between cultural and familial expectations is echoed in research by Brown (2009) and is particularly intensified among those from a collectivist culture, where obedience is generally expected (Triandis et al. 1988).

I took the train to Glasgow, my new home for the following 4 years. It was snowing and I had never seen snow in my life. It was exciting but scary. I went to a bed and breakfast to spend the night. To my surprise, I couldn't understand the man in the hotel. People in Glasgow spoke with a dialect that was hard for me to understand. The role of contrasting weather and of foreign language use in the experience of culture shock is noted in research into sojourner adjustment by Brown and Holloway (2008).

I had trouble finding accommodation and found little help from the university's accommodation office. Being brought up as a Muslim woman, who has never been permitted to be alone in a foreign place, I expected to be looked after by the university as I was by my family at home. The shock I experienced finds explanation in the contrast between the individualist culture of independence and the collectivist culture of protection of group members (Ward et al. 2001): did I cherish more the sometimes claustrophobic care I received at home or the lonely freedom offered in the West?

My first experience in the UK hospitality industry

After I felt somewhat settled, I started seeking employment opportunities in the hospitality industry in order to gain work experience. I applied to a number of hotels but a UK work experience was required. I later spotted a restaurant round the corner from home where I applied for work. It was an Italian Bistro, a popular place for young professionals in the area. The manager whom I had the interview with was Italian from Sicily so was his assistant. During the interview I spoke about my education and practical experience abroad. The manager, however, expressed more interest in my appearance and paid little attention to my qualifications. He decided to give me the job as I passed his inspection.

Although happy to have found a job, I wasn't comfortable with the way I was hired. It was obvious from the interview that I may be subjected to some sort of harassment. I cringed at the prospect of being harassed by the manager. Except for highly legitimate reasons, the mere mixing of men and woman is in opposition to Islamic law. "And when you ask the ladies for anything, ask them from before a screen. That makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs" (Holy Quran, 33: 53). This is because working or mixing with men in private is believed to lead to consequences where women may find themselves in risky territories. Thus before I started work, I was caught in conflict between my need to work and attachment to my faith. For Muslims living in secular society, there is often tension between the need to operate successfully in the new culture and to maintain their faith (Esack 1993; Brown 2009).

Sexual harassment was a common practice in this restaurant carried out by the Sicilian Manager and his assistant. The manager's suggestive remarks made for a

stressful environment at work. One night he made a pass at me in his office after we closed cashier. I didn't know what to do. In Arab culture, work superiors are highly respected. This is embedded in our high-power-distance culture where we acknowledge and accept that power in organisations is not distributed equally. According to the cultural scale of Hofstede's analysis ((Hofstede, 1991), Arab cultures score 80 on the scale compared to the UK which scores 35. Therefore, to me a manager demands respect and blind obedience. Torn between my religion and work, I still resisted and managed to leave unharmed. I grew frightened, shocked, as well as scared for my job. I felt guilty for not adhering to the teachings of Islam which would have saved me from all that. Had I followed Islam closely and didn't allow myself to accept a job in such a doubtful environment, none of that would have happened. Islam advises us to steer away from any doubts "That which is lawful is clear and that which is unlawful is clear. Between the two are doubtful matters that only a few people have knowledge about. Whoever avoids these doubtful matters absolves himself of blame with respect to his religion and his honour." (al-Bukhari and Muslim).

Clearly, sexual harassment is a source of distress for all women of all religious and cultural backgrounds, and a problem that should be eradicated in the industry (Gilbert et al, 1998), however I would argue that the stress caused by incidences of harassment is increased among migrants who have limited social support networks and whose religious values have kept them shielded from contact with men in the origin culture.

Opportunities vs. taboos

I was assigned to work behind the bar on busy Saturday nights. I struggled with the idea of serving alcohol. I was aware when I joined the hotel school that serving alcohol was inevitable. I tried to avoid it but was willing to do it for the sake of my career. Alcohol is considered an intoxicant and is forbidden in Islam. People do not realise the severity of Islamic law on alcohol. It is not only the consumption of it that is prohibited; it is an array of situations that surrounds it. According to Hadith, "Truly, Allah has cursed *khamr* (alcohol) and has cursed the one who produces it, the one for whom it is produced, the one who drinks it, the one who serves it, the one who carries it, the one for whom it is carried, the one who sells it, the one who earns from the sale of it, the one who buys it, and the one for whom it is bought" (At-Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah). This Hadith albeit debatable; reflects many Muslims' view about alcohol. The conflict arises again for Muslims between religious values and the values of the host country, and one that is pointed to in Brown's (2009) study of international Muslim students, many of whom chose to live with Muslim students in a bid to avoid such tension.

With the previously explained gravity of forbidding Alcohol, it is understandable how one could feel guilty on a subconscious level serving it. There was also the thought of my family back home finding out about where I worked. The need to hide myself applied to both my family at home and colleagues in the UK: the myths and prejudices surrounding Islam in present times led to my wariness about disclosing my faith unnecessarily. As Omar (2006) states, life for a Muslim in the West is characterised by turmoil and tension.

As this commentary reveals, my time in the restaurant marked a period of guilt and discomfort, brought about by feelings that I was being disloyal to my faith. Bochner (1986) explains that it is common for sojourners to look for the reassurance of cultural points of similarity, which were hard for me to find. These feelings of alienation are typically associated with the early period of culture shock (Ward et al. 2001; Brown and Holloway 2008); feelings that management could work to offset.

Conclusion

Migrants make up over a third of the hospitality workforce, yet little research has looked at their experiences, and no research has been conducted into the Muslim migrant experience. This study is the first of its kind, offering an autoethnographic account of my time working in a UK restaurant. It provided an insight into the experiences and challenges I had encountered as a Muslim woman during my first year working in the UK hospitality industry. It was apparent that little or no effort was extended from managers to try to orientate or integrate me into my new work environment. Further research is needed to explore Muslim migrants' experiences in the hospitality industry in the UK and the current managerial attempts to learn about, understand, tolerate and accommodate their differences.

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Al Baqarah (The Cow), Verse: 228.

Al Imran (Family of Imran), Verse: 31.

Al Isra (The Night Journey), Verses: 23, 24.

Al Ahzab (The Combined Forces), Verse: 53.

Al Mai'dah (The Table Spread with Food), Verse: 3.

References from Holy Hadith (Prophet Mohammed's Teachings)

Al-Bukhari and Muslim

Abu Saeed

At-Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah