

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

Abstract

This is a work-in-progress paper that offers an autobiographical exploration of a Muslim woman in the UK hospitality industry. 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, used to shed light on larger cultural patterns. Preliminary findings, suggest that managers need to make greater efforts to integrate Muslim migrant workers into 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 worker experience 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. 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. This paper shows 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 recommendations for management can be drawn.

This paper aims to use my experience working, in the UK hospitality industry, as a foreign-born Muslim woman to illuminate the challenges faced by Muslim workers in the hospitality industry. The fact that migrants make up 40% of the hospitality workforce suggests the relevance of this topic and the need for further investigation.

A cry for freedom

Having been brought up in a Muslim culture, I lived in a world which posed many restrictions on girls and women. As a Muslim woman opportunities for free expression, and personal development were few. Muslim culture dictates that a girl does not argue or express her frustration at having few opportunities in life. I grew up resenting the idea of being considered inferior because of my gender. "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 position is by no means a criticism of Islamic culture. Conversely it is a characteristic of my background that influenced my experience in the UK hospitality industry.

The Journey starts

As a master student, I was awarded a full scholarship to study for a PhD in the UK. This privileged opportunity offered me the chance for the freedom and space for personal development that I so 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). My life changing odyssey started in London surrounded by apprehension of the unknown

In London, sitting in my hotel room, I reflected quietly on the hard life journey taken to get this far. Deep down inside I knew that my family were very uncomfortable with my decision to study abroad. 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 in the UK 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 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 parents in high regard. 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 for my parents, I struggled with their worries and fears for me. This cultural and emotional struggle influenced my life experiences, and became the frame of reference between me and the experiences encountered whilst 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). My cultural odyssey continued with the London to Glasgow train.

Glasgow was to be my new home for the next 4 years. It was snowing when I arrived. I had never seen snow before. It was exciting but scary. I went to a bed and breakfast for the night. To my surprise, I couldn't understand the man in the hotel due to his accent. 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). Personal challenges started upon arrival.

Finding housing was a problem, and got little help from the university's accommodation office. Being a Muslim woman, who was never permitted to be alone in a foreign place, I expected to be looked after by the university in the same way my family would have. 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 getting settled, I started seeking employment opportunities in the hospitality industry in order to gain work experience. All the hotels I applied to required UK work experience. Later, I spotted a restaurant round the corner from home. I applied and got hired. It was an Italian Bistro. The manager interviewed me. 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 a job, I was uncomfortable with the way I was hired. It was obvious from the interview that I might be subjected to harassment. I cringed at the prospect of being harassed by the manager. Except for legitimate reasons, the mixing of men and woman is contrary 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 unwanted or risky consequences. Thus before I started work, I was caught in conflict between my need to work and 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). As I was to discover, working became a prime source of culture shock.

Apparently, sexual harassment was a common practice in this restaurant. Harassing young girls was a hobby for both the Sicilian Manager and his assistant. The manager's suggestive remarks made for a stressful work environment. 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 resisted and managed to leave unharmed. I grew frightened for myself, and my job. I felt guilty for not adhering to the teachings of Islam. Had I followed Islam closely I would not have allowed myself to accept a job in an environment where the manager behaved in such a shocking manner. Islam advises us to steer clear from doubtful situations. "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). Harassment in the work place clearly falls into this gray area.

Clearly, sexual harassment is a source of distress for all women of all religious and cultural backgrounds. It's a problem that must be eradicated in the industry (Gilbert et al, 1998). However It can be argued that the stress caused by harassment increases 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

My job was to work behind the bar on busy Saturday nights. Although I struggled with the idea of serving alcohol, I knew when I joined the hotel school that serving alcohol was inevitable. I 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. Brown points out the conflict for Muslims between religious values and the values of the host country. In his (2009) study of international Muslim students, many of whom chose to live with Muslim students in a bid to avoid such tension.

With the gravity surrounding the Alcohol issue, 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. 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 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