



## **HONORS PROJECT**

### **Ethnography of The Effects of Terrorism Attacks on Muslim Students at Borough of Manhattan Community College**

**Student: Mehmet Sahin**

**Mentor: Rosario Torres**

**Course: CRT 100**

**Semester: Spring 2018**

## **I. PREFACE**

Before I start my ethnography of looking at how terrorist attacks affect Muslim students, I would like to share why I am doing this ethnography. Everyone shares different perspective and I think that this is important because showing my reasons why I am doing this research might help you to see issues related to terrorist attacks from my perspective. I have several reasons motivating this research. First of all, I have experienced feeling depressed, and a sense of otherness being a Muslim student in the United States. Furthermore, I believe these issues pertain to many Muslim students who are faced with issues relating to terrorist attacks, not noticing why they feel discriminated against and depressed. In identifying these matters, it is my hope to help them feel less depressed. Finally, I would like to rise more critical awareness around this topic for non-Muslim people so that they may understand how a glance or body language can lead to Muslims feeling discriminated against and depressed.

I have this bias that almost all Muslim students in the United States have some sort of experience by feeling that they bother or annoy people because of their appearance after terrorist attacks. We might not understand that or notice it but Muslim students feel depressed. I have this experience that I start changing my appearance and acting because, I felt that I am a source of suspicion and worry for people after a terrorist attack happens simply by my appearance. When I first came to the United States, I was enrolled in an English school to improve my English before started at BMCC. I was attending this English school called Kaplan. I would take the subway every day to go to home and come back to school, and that is when I first felt how those terrorist attacks could affect a Muslim student. I would travel with a big backpack, which is a common

tool that a terrorist would use for an attack. During these time, I had not shaved for weeks. I noticed many people staring at me, in addition to people changing their body language and attitude towards me. I have categorized these attributes as the “three depressing ones.” One day, in the subway, I start noticing that how three depressing ones are affecting me in a way that I could not express. I would feel that I am bothering and annoying people around me because I have the look. That was not all. I would feel depressed, discriminated against, and scared. I did not know these until I start taking a course, African American history where I learned how black people have gone through racism and different forms of discrimination. The being scared part was different for me because I could not speak English well. I remember this because I was having this scenario in my mind of someone starting to blame me that I have something in my backpack or start to laugh at my appearance. I felt this worry because I have seen videos where people bother Muslim women because of their appearance. I was really scared not just because I did not know well English but because it was wrong in my culture to make someone else feel bad. I started hiding my bag. The first thing I did when I arrived at the home, I start using my laptop bag to carry my textbooks. I shaved. You might ask, did that stopped the way I feel? No, it did not. But, I started feeling more comfortable. I have never shared this experience with anyone even with my family. I felt that I might be biased that I feel discriminated based on no reason. I thought that a look or body language cannot determine this. So, when did the idea of sharing this came? I felt a similar situation during a recent terrorist attack that happened near my school, BMCC. I was getting out of school with my friend. I saw and learned what has happened, a terrorist drove a truck on a bike path and killed people. The first thing I felt was that I felt unsafe. I remember telling my friend this when he asked me how I feel about this terrorist attack.

By interviewing some Muslim students at BMCC and learning about their individual experiences, I hope to address these issues from my perspective with the knowledge gained from the interviewed students, so that we can identify how Muslim students may experience the three depressing ones.

## **II. Introduction**

My main focus for this research is to explore how Muslim students at BMCC have been affected in the midst of the terrorist attacks. I looked at this on a personal and academic level and my further questions were based on personal and academic life, not only in present but also in the past. Because I already experienced feeling depressed by terrorist attacks, I have had many biases and I would like to share that I had hard times to hide my biases.

I would also like to address that I wrote my preface before I start doing my interviews and whenever I wrote were based on me, how I felt, and what I knew before my research. Now, I can tell that I was surprised and shocked many times during the interviews when BMCC students shared their experiences and feelings with me. I can also tell that even though the experiences vary between each of other, they were all ended in the same place where I observed that all of them in some ways have been discriminated, felt otherness, and were depressed.

### **II.1 People, Methodologies and Settings**

Before doing the research, I had times when I would stop to think about who I should interview. Should I be more specific and focus on BMCC or go out and observe more in other colleges, maybe in neighborhoods? I chose to stick with Muslim students at BMCC because of the recent terrorist attacks which awaken my passion to do this fieldwork. I thought that some

Muslim students might have similar experience and that would bring more to this fieldwork.

Another reason why sticking with BMCC is that it is more specific and because I have been at BMCC for three semesters now. I have observed and experienced the community and college culture which could eliminate my biases when I do the research.

I choose to do only interviews with students because I wanted to experience their feelings. The questions I created and asked were: (1) How has your experience been at BMCC as a Muslim student? (2) Have you felt differently when people look at you not in a comfortable way after terrorist attacks? (3) Do you think that terrorist attacks are mistakenly related to Islam and/or Muslim people? (4) How do you think that terrorist attacks affect Muslim students' academic and/or personal life? (5) Have you been asked questions related to your religion or your looking?

I interviewed 5 Muslim students who study at BMCC. I wanted to get information from a diverse and balanced group of people so I interviewed 2 females and 3 males who are coming from different parts of the world. One of the females who I will call Ayse is from Morocco. She has been at BMCC for only one semester and she does not cover her head. Another female, who I will call Berivan, is from Bangladesh. Berivan has a hijab and it was shocking to hear how her experience has been because she was covering her head. One of the males who I will call Hassan is from Yemen. He works in the SGA at BMCC. He told me about his experiences and it was shocking hearing them. Another male who I will call Nizar is from Bangladesh. Because he lives in a Muslim community here in Brooklyn, he told me that he did not experience as much discrimination. The last male student who I will call Abdoul is from Africa. It was interesting hearing his experience as a black person. He told me that he has never experienced

discrimination because he is a Muslim student however, once we start doing the interview we'd discover that was not true.

The place where I interviewed students were in a group study room in Fiterman building. These rooms are closed and for studying. It feels comfortable to ask and answer questions. I interviewed 4 of students in the group study rooms and only one in the student shared area. I observed that the interviews in the group study rooms were more comfortable for students. The interview that we did in the student shared area was different from the rest. The student that I interviewed would not talk as much and would lower his voice in emotional times and when he wanted to complain about something that he felt uncomfortable. This student did not let me do the voice recording as well because he felt uncomfortable.

## **II.2 Biases**

Even though I identified my biases before I started doing the interviews, I had hard times staying away from my biases. This is because I have already experienced discrimination after the terrorist attacks. The way I could stay away from my biases, I thought, would be to interview BMCC students since I have already been at BMCC for three semesters and have experienced the community and the culture of BMCC. As I was listening voice records, I understand that I did not fully stay away from my biases. One of my biases were all Muslim students at BMCC experience discrimination and feel otherness. I remember myself giving examples that how I have been discriminated and that might have manipulated students. I would like to see someone else doing this research without biases. I do not know if this is possible.

### **III. Analyzing the interviews**

I was really interested and curious when I first started thinking about this research and while doing the interviews. My interest did not end even when I finished the interviews because I found that there are more to learn in this research. Hearing all these experiences and feeling the emotions of students were something that cannot be explained.

Because I interviewed different backgrounded Muslim students at BMCC, I have collected information that shows how Muslim students are affected by terrorist attacks even though they have different looks and background culture of Islam.

One of the most interesting interviews was the one I did with Abdoul who is from Burkina Faso, Africa. Abdoul is a third semester student at BMCC. He is majoring in Computer Science and has been in the United States for about 5 years. He is one of my friends that I have gotten closer to. When I first asked him if I can interview him about this topic, he told me that he is okay doing it but I might not get a lot of information from him since he does not “look like an Arab or Muslim”. I also want to tell that many participants of the interviews talked about how appearance makes a difference in their experiences meaning if they were having a different look, that might have changed their experience a lot. Abdoul told me that he has not experienced discrimination or felt uncomfortable because he was a Muslim student. But, During the interview, things shifted. He started to remember his experiences and shared with me.

One of the other interviews that were emotional was with Berivan. Berivan is from Bangladesh and has been in the United States for 4 years. She is a third semester student at BMCC. Even before I start doing the research, I already had a talk with Berivan. When she shared with me one of her experience that how uncomfortable she felt, I asked her if she would

want me to interview her if I do a research about Muslim student. She accepted it and the interview we had was full of emotional experiences that she has had.

My other interview was with Ayse. Ayse has been in the United States for about 2 years and she is a first semester student at BMCC. The reason why I wanted to interview her is that Berivan covers her head and Ayse does not. I wanted to get their experiences so I could see how Muslim student is affected by the terrorist attacks from different perspectives who have different background culture of Islam.

Another interview was with Nizar who is from Bangladesh and a student of BMCC for three semesters. Nizar told me that he has not felt uncomfortable because he is a Muslim. It was totally different interview than others because Nizar's interview was opposite of all the other interviews.

Lastly, I interviewed Hassan who is from Yemen and a second semester student at BMCC. The interview I had with Hassan was also different from the rest because while all other participants agreed that they have had a good experience at BMCC and have not been discriminated, Hassan disagreed. He told me that he has felt uncomfortable and discriminated many times and could not get help from the president, vice president, Diversity Office and chairperson of English department at BMCC even he reached out to all of them.

### **III.1 At BMCC**

Only one participant of the interviews told me that he has had a bad experience with BMCC. And the rest told me that they feel the most comfortable at BMCC and at their home because "BMCC is really diverse and people are open-minded," Nizar said. Muslim students



have a prayer place on the first floor. BMCC supports Muslim students in many ways. I also have seen that in the cafeteria, you can find halal food for Muslim people.

Hassan was the one who wanted to reach out many departments of the BMCC because he and his religion was used in an English class. He told me that “Students were dropping hijab around and making fun of Islam and the professor did not say anything.” One of the questions he asked me and wanted me to put it on my paper is that “Since when discrimination is called education?” I cannot tell how much true is this since he did not go into detail to the situation when asked.

### **III.1.1 Outside of BMCC**

Even though 4 out of 5 students agreed that BMCC is a supportive place for Muslim students, all of them told me that they have experienced discrimination outside of BMCC, either in NY or in other states. Nizar said that “I have been some other states. Looking for a place to pray was hard. I feel like I am in a place where it is not for Muslim people.”

### **III.2 Every time a terrorist attack happens**

One of the most topics that came up during the interviews was that every time a terrorist attack happens, they start either remembering their old experiences, feeling uneasy or praying that it is not a Muslim who did the attack.

Abdoul told me that “When the terrorist attack happened (the recent terrorist attack that happened next to BMCC), I hoped that people would not say that it is a Muslim again. Sometimes you are afraid to identify yourself as a Muslim because people may talk about you.”

Abdoul also shared one of his experience that he felt uncomfortable identifying himself as a Muslim. He works in a small restaurant in uptown of Manhattan. After the terrorist attack in Tribeca, in a night when he was serving to a table where people were talking how Islam teaches Muslim people to be “evil”, Abdoul could not say anything and did not want to tell them that he is a Muslim. He told me that because he does not look like a Muslim, the people on the table did not stop and were talking while he was serving the table. He felt really bad not just because he could not say “Please, stop this” but also, he felt discriminated and depressed.

Hassan also shared one of his experiences after the recent terrorist attack near BMCC. He said “I got scared by the attack. People were praying (in the prayer room at BMCC) and saying ‘Allahu Akbar’ (when prayed, this has to be said). I felt uneasy and though there may be FBI or some other people coming in and harming us.” He told me that all other people who came to the room to pray felt uncomfortable and uneasy praying.

Even though there is nothing to do with Muslim students, they need to think about these terrorist attacks. And these, of course, affect Muslim students’ personal and academic life.

### **III.3 Because of My Look**

Another topic that participants talked about the most was how their look perceived by the people surrounding them. 4 out of 5 of them agreed that because of their look, they have been discriminated and felt that they annoy others. Because of my look, “people ignore me”, “people tell me that ‘do not worry, we will stand next to you’” and “people stare at me and I got scared”. These are what I observed during the interviews. While they were sharing their experiences, many of them felt emotional and angry about how appearance is perceived by people and how that affects the way people act.

Nizar was the only one who has not experienced being discriminated because of his look. He said that this is because he lives in a Muslim community in Brooklyn and there are many mosques and cultural things around there. He told me that he would wear his Muslim clothes many times in a day to go to pray and he has not felt uncomfortable about that. But, when asked if he was not living in a Muslim community or look like what people think “Muslim”, he answered that his experience probably would change.

Hasson’s experience was totally different and heartbreaking when heard. Hassan told me that in his first semester, just after he took a test, he met this old lady that interested in asking specific and uncomfortable questions to him. Hassan told a lady that he is from Yemen after the lady asked him where he is from. Hassan said that “The lady asked me what my major is and I told her that I am a Medical student. She told me that so ‘you planning to cut people (showing her angle and making the cutting thing)’” when Hassan was telling this to me, I felt uneasy and thought how would I feel if I was in his place at that time. I imagined how the lady is showing the angle of her. We froze for a while before I asked him what he felt at that time. He told me that “at that time, I just got out of the exam and I did not realize what she meant. But, when I did I felt so bad and I still remember that situation and I do not think I will forget it.”

### **III.3.1 Appearance changed**

It was not just getting discriminated that Muslim people feel but they need to find a way to feel comfortable or feel that they fit in the community. Because I changed my appearance when I felt discriminated, I was really absorbed to see if any of participants have changed their appearance. It turned out that 2 out of 5 have changed their look.

When we first started doing the interview with Abdoul, he told me that he has never experienced being discriminated because he was a Muslim student. But, throughout the interview, he started remembering some of his experiences. Abdoul told me that “When I was in my country, most of the time, I would wear Muslim clothes. But, since I came here (the United States), I wore that once. I feel really uncomfortable when I wear them. You go to store and people look at you. On the streets, people look at me and that identify me as a Muslim.” Abdoul also told me that it has been 5 years that he has not worn his clothes that he used to wear every day.

I absorbed Hassan when he told me “a Muslim person should never change his appearance. Because we are alhamdulillah Muslim (thank, God we are Muslim)”, he looked at his friend who was sitting next to us. I understand that he thinks because of being a Muslim, a person cannot change his appearance which is not the case. It was a mistake in reasoning.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As I hoped that I wanted to bring up issues related to how terrorist attacks can affect Muslim students, I think that I have achieved this. Throughout the interviews, we talked about how these terrorist attacks have affected many Muslim students, feeling depressed, otherness and being discriminated. Now I can say that I, with participants, felt uneasy with some of the experiences that they shared, but with some, it was like a normal talk. Ayse was happy and smiley while she was sharing how she felt intimidated when she got stares because of her hijab. I remember asking many of the students how they can know that those stares were intentional and many told me that “it is human nature to understand if someone is discriminating you or not”

said Abdoul. Berivan also said that “no! no!, it is not my feelings” Berivan shared her experience, giving a seat to an old lady who did not thank Berivan for the act of kindness. And the old lady was checking her from top to button and staring her in an uncomfortable way. Why this is important is because when I felt a similar situation in the subway, I did not want to say that I was being discriminated but I said that I felt discrimination. Maybe this is one of the reasons I have not shared this experience of mine with anyone. Once I got these answers from the students, I went back to my experience and remembered that I was discriminated since I felt uncomfortable, depressed and stressful to hide my backpack and try to fit in the society.

One of the most important parts of doing research is to help Muslim students to notice how they have been discriminated and felt uncomfortable. Why this is important is because even though we do not notice how these affect us, they do affect us in various ways. In conducting this research paper, I was able to help Abdoul realize how his previous encounters may have affected him in ways he could not understand prior to this field study. It is my hope that people will gain more awareness around these matters by spreading the word, which may aid in reducing depression and further discrimination.

Lastly, I have gained more knowledge and insight from the interviewed students, but I could not use all of them since they were not related to terrorist attacks. I would like to see someone else taking this from here or doing their own research. I think that with ethnography, you discover how much more there is to learn. One more piece of advice, I think doing this with another person would bring more onto table.