

Ethnography as a Method to Engage with Muslim Migrants Diagnosed with Substance Abuse Disorders

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Abstract

The issue of substance abuse disorders with Muslim migrants is an undercover problem that has been acknowledged by many scholars but has not yet received the attention it deserves. Doing such research with Muslim migrants is hard partly due to the stigma associated with substance abuse in Islam, which leads families to deny that the problem even exists and turn to prayer in order to cure their loved ones. Additionally, many of the treatment centers are run by organizations that communicate primarily in English and do not adhere to the Islamic faith, which pose additional barriers for Muslims. Attempts have been made to tailor substance abuse treatment programs to the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslims, but they have not yet been independently evaluated and formalized into the recovery infrastructure of substance abuse treatment centers. I hope to investigate this issue through ethnographic accounts of the Muslim migrant's experience through recovery, which, when combined with other epidemiological and quantitative analysis could help us determine if and how specific aspects of the recovery process can be tailored to the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslim migrants. At the workshop, I hope to further discuss issues around immersing myself in and gaining access to such marginalized and vulnerable communities, with the intention of coming up with possible approaches and best practices of engaging in such ethnographic fieldwork.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)~Empirical studies in HCI

Additional Keywords and Phrases: ethnography, Muslim migrants, substance abuse disorders, faith-based treatment

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ethnography has been used in conjunction with other more quantitative methods to better understand the context and social environment of substance abuse treatment programs [12], client/staff satisfaction [15], as well as attrition rates among patients [14]. Despite offering promising results, ethnographic access to substance abuse therapy patients and treatment centers continues to be a challenge due to issues with legality, privacy and the researcher's outsider status [9]. Legality is a concern because patients might not have the proper documentation to verify their legal status or may be engaged in illegal activities. Substance abuse treatment centers and residential treatment centers are private spaces where patient confidentiality is top priority. Even if those managing the treatment centers agree to give researchers access to their spaces, patients might not be comfortable sharing their stories of vulnerability and recovery with researchers who are outsiders and with whom they do not share a common background or identity.

Some researchers have overcome such obstacles by being immersed at these treatment centers as counselors [13], night attendants [4] and interns [3]. From the perspective of outsiders, Pagano et al. describe their attempts at building rapport while gaining and maintaining access with Latino migrants being treated at informal recovery centers called anexos [9]. While such ethnographic accounts exist, ones that document the experience of Muslim migrants in these substance abuse treatment centers are harder to come by. Finding reliable data about substance abuse in Muslim migrant populations is a challenge, partly because of the stigma associated with substance abuse in Islam [6]. Islam considers all forms of substance abuse haram, which means they are prohibited in the Quran and those who indulge in it are engaging in sin. The taboo associated with substance abuse is such that many families will deny the problem even exists and first turn to prayer in order to cure their loved ones [1]. They are reluctant to approach treatment centers because of the shame it might bring to their families. Additionally, many of these treatment centers are run by organizations that communicate primarily in English and do not adhere to the Islamic faith, which pose additional barriers for Muslims [1, 2].

The relationship between faith and recovery in substance abuse treatment programs has been well documented [5, 8, 10] and attempts have been made to tailor substance abuse treatment procedures to the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslims. Ali-Northcott (2012) has written about the importance of incorporating spiritual practices like *taqwa* (god consciousness), *iman* (faith), *ukhuwa* (brotherhood/sisterhood), and *muhassabba* (accountability), while also paying attention to the religio-cultural needs of Muslims like offering *halal* (permissible) meals, accessible areas for *salaah* (prayer) and family interventions in different languages. Millati Islami (which means 'Path to Peace') is an Islamic adaptation of the traditional Twelve Step program that has been used across the United States and United Kingdom [7]. SAFE Coalition¹ in Detroit offers weekly NA (Narcotic Anonymous) and AA (Alcohol Anonymous) meetings as well as faith-based interventions to assist its patrons in their recovery goals.

Although such programs exist, further research and independent evaluation is needed before they can be formalized into the recovery procedures of substance abuse treatment centers [2]. Successful implementation of such procedures would require paying attention to the norms, cultures, policies and values of the treatment centers serving Muslim migrant populations. Additionally, it would also require an understanding of the sociotechnical environment through which Muslim migrants access and act upon treatment information. As of this writing, we know very little about either of these phenomena.

Like many of the scholars referenced in this article (and hopefully at the workshop), I am optimistic that an ethnographic approach can offer a unique perspective on the sociotechnical infrastructure involved in treating Muslim migrants diagnosed with substance abuse disorders. Ethnographic accounts of the Muslim migrant's experience through recovery, when combined with other epidemiological and quantitative analysis could help us determine if and how specific aspects of the Islamic faith can be incorporated into the substance abuse recovery programs. In keeping with the theme of the workshop, I hope to initiate the discussion with my fellow participants by asking the following questions

1. How might those who are not already immersed in substance abuse treatment centers gain and maintain ethnographic access to such marginalized and vulnerable populations?
2. What are the issues with access that need to be negotiated beforehand, so we can avoid any unanticipated consequences [11] of our actions as designers and researchers?

¹ <http://www.safecoalitionmi.org>

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