Reaching the Other Side: Catering Health Education to Minority Populations

The room was hot with anger and filled with mistrust as the nurses walked in and told us, judgingly, about the dangers of genital mutilation and domestic violence, as if we didn’t already know. They threw large words at us and refused to speak English, even though they were presenting to students of an adult learning center for immigrants and refugees to Norway. They embarrassed us with picture presentations of broken and abused women and girls as if it were only our people’s problem. And then they ended their talk with a smile and with good bye’s of well wishes, as if coming to Norway was like reaching this pinnacle of human greatness, and our barbaric customs from our countries of origin would not cut it for the world’s happiest country. As immigrants, minorities, and refugees to Norway this wasn’t the first time we’ve experienced this type of judgment. These kinds of micro-aggressions never seem to get easier- you just get used to them.

In January 2014 I took a semester off from Brandeis and moved to Molde, Norway in order to fulfill my residency requirement for dual Norwegian citizenship. My mother is Norwegian while my father is Afro/Native-American and I have always struggled to find an identity that allows me to express all of my cultural influences equally. I came to the conclusion in October of 2013 that the only way to explore this struggle was to face it head on and move to Norway, a scary undertaking. My level of fluency in Norwegian was 5th grade at best, and I no longer had any friends still living in the city where I would reside, but nothing could deter me from this journey of personal
exploration. So in January, I journeyed to a place that I’ve truly come to believe was my destiny.

Shortly after moving into my 91 year-old grandmother’s apartment in Norway, I enrolled in a Norwegian language course so as to hopefully improve what little Norwegian fluency I had, making it possible to communicate with my grandmother who didn’t speak any English. Though a scary thought at first, my enrollment in the Norwegian course allowed me to not only pick up the language rather quickly, but also make many new friends from different countries along the way. Norway was quickly becoming my new home. By March, I began to realize the impact my new home was having on my identity as a Norwegian-American person of color living in Norway. I would consistently tell both my Norwegian and immigrant friends that I felt disjointed, as though I was living two lives. The life of a Norwegian with a passport and bankcard to prove it and the life of a minority immigrant with my skin color as proof. Those around me knew of my internal conflict to integrate these identities. Though constantly challenged to prove myself, I would not have it any other way as my identities have enabled me to relate to groups that often misunderstand each other.

In order to understand the life of an immigrant or refugee in Norway, the demographics of the country must first be understood. As one of the world’s most homogenous countries, Norway saw its first contemporary spike in immigration in the 1980’s with asylum seekers from Sri Lanka and Pakistan.¹ Since then immigration has steadily increased, with a record 633,100 immigrants from all over the world immigrating

¹ Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, 1 January 2014
https://ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/innvbeff
to Norway in 2014; with most coming from Poland, Sweden, Lithuania, Somalia, Thailand, and Pakistan. Many people immigrate to Norway because it has a very high standard of living or to seek asylum. All people come to Norway with hope for a better life.

My school, Molde Voksen Opplæring Senter, had over 500 students from over 30 countries. In my class alone there were students from Lithuania, The Philippines, Eritrea, Russia, Somalia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Iran. Most of the people, who would become some of my closest friends in Norway, had escaped war, as well as political and physical abuse to come to Norway. Although I had grown up in the United States, the world’s most heterogeneous country, I had never been this intimately acquainted with people who had faced such adversity. My struggle for identity seemed barely worthy of mention in comparison to their struggle for basic survival.

Although we all came from markedly different backgrounds and worldviews we were all united by the common desire to find our place in this new country. There were times when I struggled with my “Norwegian-ness”, having this “birth right” privilege of Norwegian citizenship. Ethnically I knew that I owned it, but at the same time I questioned whether I deserved it, as it felt like a precarious situation of visibly being an “immigrant”. How could I reconcile these emotions? Could anything beneficial come from these experiences? As my interactions with both Norwegian and immigrant communities continued, I learned of a Norwegian agency that dealt with immigrants and societal integration as a central part of their mission.

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Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, 1 January 2014

https://sab.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/innvbef
NAKMI is the Norwegian Center for Minority Health. It is a premier research institution that works exclusively with the minority, immigrant, and refugee populations in Norway. Much of their research and published studies relates to health service provision and better allocation of resources to ensure this demographic has access to crucial health services. Headquartered in Oslo, NAKMI’s work among these populations provides them with unique insight into the factors affecting access and consumption of health services by these dis-serviced groups. As an intern for NAKMI, I will be studying how the immigrant and minority populations in Norway utilize health services, interpreting the results to assist in the development of educational tools aimed at increasing health service usage by those groups. I am particularly interested in learning about underused health services, how targeted education initiatives can be used to bridge the gap between cultural differences and medicine for the immigrant and refugee minority communities in Oslo. I would also like to learn how to develop educational tools and presentations that are culturally sensitive to issues around domestic violence, female genital mutilations and abuse. As someone who has experienced the type of humiliation that immigrant, minority, and refugee women often feel when it comes to talking about their health, I am passionate about changing the negative light in which immigrant, minority, and refugee women are often seen. I believe that NAKMI will provide the guidance, resources, and contacts I need to accomplish this goal.

As a Health: Science, Society, and Policy, Biology and Business student at Brandeis, I feel that my coursework has prepared me to take on this goal. For instance, I feel that Sociology of Health, Community and Society, and Introduction to Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Population Health has prepared me for the Sorenson
Fellowship. In Dr. Peter Conrad’s Sociology of Health, Community and Society I learned in particular about how cultural differences can negatively affect health outcomes, an aspect that I hope to explore next summer. I am currently taking Introduction to Epidemiology and I feel that the course have given me a realistic perspective as to what analytical tools and skills are necessary to assess the need for better health education for immigrant, minority, and refugee children and how create a solution for the problem. I feel that my Brandeis education has developed my ability to think critically, independently, and quickly.

To prepare me for this experience I intend to take LGLS 123B, Immigration and Human Rights, a course that examines American immigration policy in the context of international human rights and global practices surrounding refugee status and asylum seeking individuals. I believe that this course will provide useful insights into the cultural controversies that surround immigration and could offer interesting parallels between the United States and Norway. It is valuable to understand the controversies and different opinions surrounding immigration in order to understand how to write policy to address the issues. This understanding is crucial to developing better policy solutions and this course will provide an excellent primer for my internship. As a Sorenson Fellow, I would gain the experience that I need to bring everything I have experienced and learned at Brandeis into a real world context. Being a Sorenson Fellow will provide a platform to see social justice “in action,” as well as open a network to other like-minded action-orientated, social justice seeking individuals.