

A TRANSCULTURAL INTERPRETATION: MEDICAL ETHICS AND MORAL ISSUES IN THE ARAB WORLD

UNE INTERPRETATION TRANSCULTURELLE: ETHIQUE MEDICALE ET PROBLEMES MORAUX DANS LE MONDE ARABE

O INTERPRETARE TRANSCULTURALĂ: ETICĂ MEDICALĂ ȘI PROBLEME MORALE ÎN LUMEA ARABĂ

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Abstract

The paper presents some aspects foreign students have to cope with when coming to study medicine in Romania. The most difficult challenges are faced by those with a completely different background, that is, the case of Arab students. In order to successfully progress through their academic programme they have to get over language and culture barriers first, secondly to accept the eating habits and the customs and traditions of the new country. Religion is another element that triggers controversy, especially if related to medical issues and medical ethics. Nevertheless, once students manage to overcome language barriers they stand a real chance of becoming successful doctors.

Résumé

L'ouvrage présente quelques aspects avec lesquels se confrontent les étudiants étrangers, quand ils viennent étudier la médecine en Roumanie. Ceux qui proviennent des milieux complètement différents du point de vue social et économique, comme les étudiants arabes, doivent faire face aux plus grands défis. Pour progresser et pour parcourir avec du succès le programme analytique, ils doivent dépasser des barrières linguistiques et culturelles; accepter les habitudes alimentaires et les traditions du pays où ils vivent pendant leurs études. La religion est un autre élément qui nait des controverses, surtout si c'est un sujet abordé dans le contexte de l'éthique médicale. Pourtant, une fois que les étudiants réussissent à dépasser les obstacles linguistiques, ils ont toutes les chances pour devenir des médecins renommés.

Rezumat

Lucrarea prezintă câteva aspecte cu care studenții străini se confruntă când vin să studieze medicina în România. Cei care provin din medii complet diferite, din punct de vedere social sau economic, cum ar fi studenții arabi, trebuie să facă față celor mai mari provocări. Pentru a progresa și a parcurge cu succes programa academică aceștia trebuie să depășească întâi barierele lingvistice și culturale; să accepte obiceiurile alimentare și tradițiile țării în care trăiesc pe durata studiilor. Religia este un alt element care stârnește controverse, mai ales dacă este un subiect abordat în contextul eticii medicale. Totuși, odată ce studenții reușesc să depășească obstacolele lingvistice, au toate șansele să devină medici de renume.

Key words: culture, communication, ethics, Arab world, medicine

Mots clé: culture, communication, éthique, le monde arabe, médecine

Cuvinte cheie: *cultură, comunicare, etică, lumea Arabă, medicină*

1. Introduction

In today's society three new concepts have started to shape the world we live in: interculturality, multiculturalism and transculturality. Ever since the 18th century scientists have begun to be preoccupied with these aspects but their importance exacerbated along the years and they became more and more present in our lives due to the increased possibilities of travelling, of living or studying abroad. This paper maps these concepts in an attempt to emphasize difference and diversity in both the academic and social context provided by the presence of the ever increasing number of foreign students in Romania. Taking the decision to study in another country involves a lot of courage, open-mindedness and willingness to adapt to change. Students get the chance to experience different emotions, they need to be patient and to understand that cultural difference might change their lives completely.

2. Culture shock and stereotypes – Arab attitudes

Research has shown that all these feelings and states of mind represent in fact, the so-called culture shock. This is associated with change and it occurs when leaving home in order to live in another cultural environment. Adjustment cannot take place overnight. The individual will go through different stages, depending on how big the cultural difference is. In the beginning he will feel happy, fascinated by everything that is new; he will love having fun, meeting new people. For a couple of weeks, maybe even months, the student will be overwhelmed and curious about doing new things. Once this first stage, called the Honeymoon ends, the foreign student will become more and more aware of the cultural difference and everything surrounding him will be a challenge almost impossible to surpass. The first problem they come across is the language barrier. Failure to understand the people around will lead to frustration and to a desire to go back home. Students start hating people's attitudes and tend to create stereotypes; they reject the local food and way of cooking and, generally speaking they find fault with every little thing they come into contact with. The feelings experienced are anxiety, sadness and anger. Academic problems may begin at this point, when the student lacks interest and motivation, feels discouraged and does not trust anybody. It represents the moment when the student either regains his sense of perspective and decides to move on and to laugh at misunderstandings, or he withdraws, is overwhelmed by negativity, pessimism and depression and fails to cope with the demands of the new life.

If overcoming this stage the individual manages to minimize his negative feelings and understand that he can feel comfortable enough in the new environment. He starts enjoying challenges and differences, accepts the new customs and basically he begins to adjust. The problem arises when he has to go back home. Once the student has become accustomed with the new lifestyle, he finds it hard to go back and to re-adapt to his previous life, especially if he discovers that the new country provides for him opportunities and chances to do things that in his homeland have not been possible or acceptable or allowed. Due to economic drawbacks, lack of enough skills or knowledge in a particular field, due to the political context or to financial reasons, more and more students from Arab countries like Morocco, Tunis, Israel, Egypt or Iraq come to study medicine in Romania. Even though they come from a completely different society with a very restrictive background they tend to adapt easily to the new environment and manage to learn the new language pretty fast. In the latest years this trend has become so ample that it turned Romanian campuses into cosmopolitan areas. From a social point of view the Arab students had no difficulty in adapting thanks to the open-minded attitude of the Romanian students who tend to be fascinated by the colour of their skin or by the different traditions they have – and therefore show a supportive attitude towards them. On the other hand, they sometimes have to deal with many rude and offensive stereotypes. A scientist has discovered, "stereotyping has three important components: a group of people is identified by a specific label, which can refer to any characteristic whatsoever,

such as nationality, religious belief, occupation, or color of hair; a set of additional characteristics is attributed to the group as a whole, such as fundamentalist Christians are intolerant, or red-heads are quick-tempered; on identifying a person as belonging to the group, we attribute to him/her the additional characteristics that we associate with the group as a whole. This can result in all kinds of problems, including prejudice and discrimination.” (SPENCER-OATEY, 2009, 47) Therefore, there are the other people who, due to a lack of information, have become negatively influenced by the political context of terrorism and regard all Arab people as a threat for their country and for their personal lives as well. They have created this stereotype that *all Arabs are terrorists* and therefore always suspect and accuse them of illegal activities. But most of them get over such attitudes because the rigid Muslim education made them see Romanian life from a different, better or more relaxed perspective. In the past, during the communist regime, the Arab students used to be very active on the black market. The lack of luxury products like clothes, perfumes or coffee and the fact that Romanian citizens would be forbidden to possess foreign currency allowed Arab students to become close friends with the Romanian ones and to develop real businesses on the black market.

Another issue that dates back to the 1977 is the relationship of Arab students with Romanian women. There used to be either financial interests (for the women) or a bewilderment caused by the exotic nature of the Arab people. Some women had long-term love affairs with these men, ending up in marriage while others experienced fear at the thought of moving to a Muslim country. Nevertheless, some Arab students adapted so well to the Romanian lifestyle, to the Romanian family life that they refused to leave our country and settled here for good. However, in what concerns this aspect of life, things have not changed very much along the years, especially in hard line Muslim families. Even nowadays love relationships between Arab man and Romanian women occur, but in the end, the fear stays the same: the religious differences and the rejection of a conservative way of life that favors men and disregards women.

3. Social and religious differences. Muslim-Christian marriages

“The culture of a religious sub-group can be manifested in a variety of ways, including in members’ values, beliefs and orientations to life, in their communicative conventions, in their policies and procedures, and in their buildings, rituals and behaviours. These cultural manifestations can have a major impact across a wide range of contexts and at different levels – personal, organizational and regional/national.” (SPENCER-OATEY, 2009, 41)

One of the most widely debated aspects of Islam is the marriage with a man/woman belonging to a different religion. If a Muslim man is allowed to marry a Christian woman, things are a bit more complicated for the Muslim woman, if she wants to marry a Christian man. The reasons for this date back in the seventeenth century namely in the teachings of the Quran. Muslims are raised to believe that God is part of the marriage between two people, guiding them when making decisions and managing the entire relationship between two spouses. In Islam, and not only, a marriage should be for life and it should be a reflection of harmony and well-being.

Due to the fact that Islam is a patriarchal religion, Muslim men must have control in the relationship. For example there is a verse in the Quran which says that a husband may hit his wife but there is no specification about the other way round. Islam does not give the same rights to men and women and it is extremely difficult for a woman to convert an Arab man to Christianity, especially if he comes from a very traditionalist family. In an attempt to popularize the Islamic religion, Muslim preachers claim that Islam elevates women even though the Quran claims that women are equal to men and have the same rights. But then again, it is widely considered that men have a higher status than women do and can be better managers and businessmen than them. By nature, women are meant to bear children while men have more physical strength to carry out certain house chores or even to command an army. Therefore, men and women were not created equal – and this is not a matter of superiority versus inferiority – it is about women’s need to be protected by men.

Muslims also consider that women are ungrateful towards their husbands and therefore they represent the majority of inhabitants of Hell. It has also been claimed that the evil has a representation in three elements: first of all, in women, then in horses and finally, in one's house. In what concerns justice and legal matters, the woman's role in Court is diminished because it has been wrongly assumed that women's minds are deficient and unable to remember certain things. In Islam, the punishment for adultery is death. But the only way to prove it, whether it has been committed by a man or a woman, is by means of testimony of four men.

Therefore, marriage between a Muslim and a Christian woman may prove to be extremely challenging because religion allows men to be in control and to raise their children according to Islam, even though there are Muslim men who disagree and do not comply entirely with the Quran teachings.

4. Medical ethics and morality issues in Islam

But the cross-cultural love affairs or even marriages or the culture shock experiences are not the only problems Arab students have to cope with when studying abroad. The international medical students face the challenge of successfully progressing through their academic programme. In order to become skilled and well-known doctors they must possess good communicational abilities and a high proficiency in Romanian that later on will provide them with the opportunity of understanding patients and deciding upon diagnosis and suitable treatments. Considering the ever increasing number of Muslim students and even Muslim physicians, the doctors belonging to other religions will have to deal with medical ethics related to Muslims. There have been identified two categories of Muslims: the modernized ones who accept the new medical technology or the organ transplants, without taking into consideration any religious aspects and, on the other hand, the traditionalist ones who strictly follow the teachings of the Quran and who reject the idea of updating their current knowledge. Muslims living for a longer period of time in a society with different beliefs and norms will be at a certain point so much influenced by the non-Muslim lifestyle that they will give in and accept the modern ideas and state-of-the-art technology. However, the question related to who controls life and death remains under debate.

Due to the more and more diverse medical practice, cultural competency began to be emphasized in doctors' training courses. The issues that trigger the highest controversy when it comes to Islam are abortion, euthanasia or the gender relations. There are many cases when both the physician and the patient have different backgrounds so the doctor must use all his or her cultural knowledge or skills in order to provide the best clinical care. Scientists have claimed that any discussion about Islamic medical ethics should be based on Shari'ah, or the moral code for Muslims. They often take it into consideration when having to accept a treatment plan, as patients, because Shari'ah's major purpose is to protect life, religion, property. Muslims strongly believe that God's will is omnipotent and it extends to all areas of life.

Another controversy in the Arab world is the problem of euthanasia. According to Islam, this is a great sin against humanity. Therefore, Islam is against mercy killing and the physicians who decide to stop the life supporting machines are regarded as murderers with cold blood. Nowadays, modern medical practices give people a new chance to life by means of organ transplants. Donating a heart, a kidney or liver from a living person to another is regarded in Islam as a gift. On the other hand, if the organ comes from a dead person it is considered an act of desecration of the dead body, even if there is permission of the relatives. Another question concerning medical ethics is the one related to abortion. In Islam, the abortion of a viable fetus is regarded as a murder except for the situation when the pregnancy has less than 16 weeks or when this medical act is performed in order to save the mother's life.

Muslims started to be more open-minded in the latest years, when questioned about their opinion regarding organ transplants. However, they are reluctant or they totally reject the idea of buying an organ or of accepting one from a pig, considering the fact that they do not eat pork; even though the Quran allows them to do this in case of absolute necessity. Therefore, a Muslim doctor

who follows the teachings of the holy book of Islam, shall possess all the necessary qualities that makes a good professional.

The origins of the word morality go back to Latin and the meaning is that of proper behavior of an individual in terms of right and wrong deeds. According to Islam, there are some universal standards which help the individual decide what is moral and immoral. There is one God, the creator of the universe and people must worship Him and follow His will as well as comply with the moral principles mentioned in the Quran. Therefore we should understand that from the Islamic point of view, in order to have a good and moral life, every person should avoid shameful actions, be very close to God, with an open heart because He sees and hears everything, even the unspoken words and thoughts. A Muslim must be humble and show mercy towards other people; he should avoid the ephemeral pleasures and desires and control the material things that can be so tempting. Muslims are expected to be patient, to have the power to always tell the truth and to be grateful to God for everything they have. One characteristic of Islam is to urge wealthy people to share their money and to donate to poor people once a year. Therefore, morality represents a landmark in Islam because it helps the individual and the society as a whole to lead a healthy life. A Muslim not only will avoid committing immoral deeds but he will also support other people in creating a healthy environment.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, I must say that the Arab world is fascinating but very difficult to understand and to accept. The specific rules and customs defined by the Quran are rejected by many Americans or Europeans and even by some Muslims, up to a certain point. The evolution of the world, the globalization process and the more and more advanced technologies opened gates and new perspectives for everyone, offering this traditionalistic society the opportunity to *think out of the box* and to learn new things, to regard them as a necessity in a constantly developing world. Many stereotypes about the Arab civilization have emerged along the years like: they regard Western women as easy prays, as objects of fun; they are charming, good with sweet words; on the other hand, Arab women do not feel oppressed by the world they are living in. The way their culture has been perceived has, after all, a subjective nature, because one cannot generalize, one cannot assume that they all come from the same standard families, with the same values and traditions.

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