

## **Crossing Cultures: The Lived Experience Of Jordanian Graduate Nursing Students In The United States**

By Ellen De Luca

This study emerged because encounters with Middle Eastern students called me to question what it is like for students from an Arab culture to be in a graduate program in nursing. In order to study lived experience, the researcher must have glimpses of the phenomenon before the study begins (van Manen, 1990). Personal experiences with students were my first glimpse of the phenomenon. As I explored further, my notion of the phenomenon expanded. There were some suggestions about the nature of the phenomenon of crossing cultures in the nursing and higher education literature. Abu-Saad and Kayser Jones (1982) and Bronner (1982), studying Middle Eastern graduate students in nursing, found that loneliness, financial problems and differences in social customs and values, were among those most frequently named by students. The work of these researchers reveals that the most challenging experience students face is adjusting to a new language (Abu-Saad & Kayser-Jones, 1982, Bronner, 1982). Other issues cited were language problems, lack of awareness of the foreign culture by faculty, a fast pace and a lack of program flexibility. Researchers in higher education and nursing indicate that crossing cultures is a complex experience fraught with serious threats to student's identity (Abu-Saad & Kayser-Jones, 1982, Bronner, 1982; Hull, 1978; Tien, 1982). These research findings confirmed my experiences with students, and validated my notion that understanding the experience of Middle Eastern students in graduate nursing programs was very important. As I witnessed the struggles of these students, I developed a passion for finding better ways of teaching that could reduce the fear and frustration students seemed to be experiencing.

I began to explore the phenomenon of "crossing cultures" by talking with two persons who had had the experience as nursing students. These conversations were with a Jordanian graduate student who was in the midst of crossing cultures and another nursing student, now a graduate nurse from India who had crossed cultures eight years before. Their narratives provided another lens through which I saw aspects of the phenomenon. Some initial themes that these two persons revealed were loneliness, missing family and friends, feeling in-between, anxiety, uncertainty and losing self.

#### Approaching the Question

What is it like to be a Jordanian graduate student in nursing? The glimpses I had received thus far propelled me to explore the meaning of students' lived experiences. Narratives of the two students prior to starting the study indicated that the experience of crossing cultures happened on several levels simultaneously, which for them made it very stressful. The areas they seemed to define were social, academic and clinical experiences with patients. Therefore, I explored the meaning of being a Jordanian graduate student in the contexts of the new culture, the university and clinical experiences in the realm of professional nursing.

The approach taken in this study involved four or five conversations with each of seven Jordanian graduate students, four males and three females. I taped and transcribed conversations. Each conversation built on previous ones in that themes or concepts revealed initially were explored in more depth in subsequent conversations. In the initial conversation with each student I asked that they come with a written reflection entitled, "What Are Some Memorable Experiences as a Jordanian Graduate Student in Nursing."

From this starting point, students kept a journal in which they wrote any memorable encounters for them in the settings in which they lived as students, nurses and persons. Conversations were completed within a period of five months in the fall of 1994 and early spring of 1995.

In the process of studying the text represented in the students' journals, and written transcriptions of audiotaped conversations, I employed a consultant with a specialty in Arabic languages to give his interpretation of certain aspects of the text. I found this useful because he was able to validate some of my interpretations and in some cases to expand my understanding of students' language patterns. His Arabic cultural background and linguistic expertise offered new meanings that I was able to explore further.

#### Events Leading to Metamorphosis

I analyzed the text using van Manen's approach (1990) of reflecting on the text to find significant themes, while also engaging in the process of writing and rewriting. In the analysis of text I learned that for these students, memory is the essential seed of self that gives meaning to the lived experience of crossing cultures. While deconstructing the text of the conversations and journals, I saw that for Jordanian students, Memory initiates and sustains the metamorphosis of self in the new culture.

Students have memories, families, religions, feelings,  
languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice.  
We can critically engage that experience and we can move  
beyond it, but we can't deny it. (Giroux, 1992, p. 17)

### Memory and Metamorphoses

The seven Jordanian students began their stories by recalling how their sojourn into American scholarship started in their own country of Jordan where they were chosen from a very large group of applicants to receive the honor of an education in the United States. One prominent theme is that of "being chosen." One student recalls "It was such a nice memory and stressful at the same time." As they shared their memories, all of the students recalled or wrote about the exhilarating moments of being chosen for this journey and traveling by plane with a group of 15 persons, most of whom were new acquaintances. The vivid nature of the memories as well as the mix of feelings became apparent. The consistent theme which students imparted was the excitement they experienced initially as they began their journey of crossing cultures. Yet this excitement and joy blends with sadness and anxiety. Some of the anxiety was about not knowing what to expect. The sadness that students mention was also about missing families.

As new arrivals to the campus, students described vivid memories of staying at a motel and searching the neighborhood in large groups, looking for places to stay. One student states, "It was nice, it was just three days full of memories." Aside from concerns about where to live, students became immediately faced with navigating in the English language as it is spoken by Americans. Here, a student recounts an initial impression:

I remember when we first arrived to the United States in New York City. When I talked with the airport guard, I noticed that Americans don't "speak" English. They speak something else that I have never known. I used to study English, to read books and to write notes. But I have not practiced the language with Americans.....When we first came here, we met the faculty. They were welcoming us. I understood less than twenty percent of their speech. I was happy only because no one asked me a direct question.

For one student, fears around language were associated with the attitudes of Americans the student might face. Many students, like this one had good language skills but were afraid to speak because of a fear of making a mistake.

Students' vivid recollections of coming to a new place, experiencing a new language and associating a mix of emotions created a very lucid portrait. As they faced the temporary ending of their lives in Jordan and they began a new life in this culture, that memory was very powerful. The first few weeks of this experience were etched powerfully in their memories. Memory that continually renews itself tells us who we are, because memory encapsulates the self with a view of past and present identities. These Jordanian students came to know themselves through their experience of time through memory, place, language, emotions and sensations. The stories of these early memories marked the beginning of their metamorphosis.

### Bombardment.

Descriptions of this period influenced me to name this experience "Bombardment." Unlike the initial period, which was colorful and captured easily with memory, this is a time of instability and uncertainty as students grapple with the challenges of a new language, mounting academic demands, and the social conflicts that a new American culture presents. Time seems to move with lightening speed.

Students described moments of uncertainty related to their academic requirements, such as writing papers, acquiring adequate computer skills, and meeting expectations of faculty. Students were unprepared for what they considered a fast pace and heavy reading load.

While facing a myriad of academic issues, this time period was clouded with personal concerns and difficulties trusting strangers. This student reflects on this time period:

We were like in a very big country, we knew nobody in this place, we trusted nobody...Even as a group we [the Jordanians] weren't trusting each other because I hardly know these people.....Maybe I didn't joke because I didn't know them.

This student echoes in the concerns that all of the students verbalized. In the midst of feeling social uneasiness, this student was spinning with a score of activities to complete before actually starting to concentrate on studying. In fact, the student admits that it was difficult to concentrate at all.

Another student remembers that while studying to pass the Test of English, as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) there was a real lack of confidence about English language skills. As the preparation continued to pass the test, this student's stress grew. In order to cope with passing the test, the student remembers focusing on almost nothing else but language. One strategy was sitting close to Americans in restaurants and buses in order to model their language style.

As students journey to find comfort with place and identity, there were many struggles along the way. All students yearned to feel socially comfortable; to laugh and enjoy themselves, but this was very difficult, especially at the outset. One student describes the frustration around establishing friendships and a comfortable living situation.

I have never felt like the strangeness, you call that being a stranger, or away, until this moment when I moved to the city....I wanted a place to live here and it was the hardest thing to find. It was hell....

Some students were realistic about the fact that the individuals who were their colleagues would not necessarily be close friends. One student talked about this.

Yeh, I felt comfortable with some people more than the others, but still I didn't have like real friendship. My friends in Jordan are completely different. Here, I felt like I'm not choosing my friends.

During this time, most of the students experienced a sense of discomfort with each other as well as unsettledness within themselves. This time of feeling like a stranger seems to be a time to look inward and come to terms with individual values and a recognition of some essential aspects of self.

The majority of students awaited official acceptance into the graduate program the following semester pending the passing of the TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language. Students faced considerable stress to "make the grade" first by passing the TOEFL test and later by succeeding in their classes. What began to surface as the students successfully completed the first semester was that they each found their unique identity by forming relationships with others. But this did not happen as they expected. The Jordanian group did not become a family, but, much like their American colleagues, seven very unique individuals emerged from this bombardment period. Their friendships were primarily with Americans or Middle Eastern students outside of their original group.

Breyten Breytenbach, the artist and poet who crossed many cultures as an exiled Afrikaner illuminates one's understanding of this phenomenon. He conceptualizes identity as a temporary awareness that for him was born through writing and painting. He sees himself as being

continually reinvented as time has moved forward and he has changed places. (Breytenbach, 1994).

What students experienced in the final months of their sojourn was just the kind of renewal Breytenbach talks about. As their professional identities crystallized, they were also able to slow the speed of their experience again, and in fact really enjoy themselves.

In the process of writing and conversation, students revealed the deeper meaning of crossing cultures as they had experienced it. Professional identity emerged clearly and powerfully. The ability to fully enjoy themselves returned.

#### Metamorphosis: The Professional Self

As the student's sojourn enters its last phase, they noticed that the "fitting in" which they struggled so hard to achieve, no longer seemed so difficult. They also observed that they were flowing more naturally into the new place, having uniquely negotiated differences in culture, language and place. At this point in the culmination of their experience, their social and intellectual worlds collided to create an experience that they called "enjoying life." One student described the experience of this identity change.

Now I enjoy it. I feel that it's part of me now, part of growing up to the level that whenever I go somewhere, if I have a point to make, I have to make it.....Before you just joined the group, but here [in graduate school] you have to create your own identity.

For another student, this professional identity was strengthened by developing writing and research skills. The student began to realize a potential in writing and

research. The student began picturing an academic career in the future. This talent was fueled by work with colleagues and an enthusiastic faculty mentor.

And here the thing is, I like the updated research. And this is great, you know, you can find research in many areas you are interested in.... For example, now I'm getting Oncology Nursing Forum and I'm getting the most updated research, yeah, it's wonderful, I love it. So I can't find these things in Jordan. ...I tellyou the truth, I like the academic part. Maybe it's the most important part in my life.....

For this student, it was as if a whole new world had opened up. This student became excited each time a new milestone was reached like completing a paper or submitting an article for publication. By improving abilities in writing and research, the student's image as one fascinated with science and research had newly materialized.

Aside from developing confidence in academic spheres, students seemed to develop an ethic of caring and concern with which they planned to return to Jordan. One fear for them was that they would be unable to force the changes necessary to improve prevention and cancer care to patients.

But all of us are excited now and we are looking to go and do something and I hope they will give us what we want to do; they will open the door for us and our plans. Because, as you say, as you saw it.....all of our success is not shameful...we have to work on that....

This student considers the tensions that could arise among colleagues and professionals home in Jordan. Perhaps in order to fit in the student must pretend that the work in graduate school was not successful. The student considers a way to show humility but at the same time fight for changes in the current level of health care and cancer care.

Another concern shared by all students, whose final projects dealt mostly with patient and community education about various cancers, was the notion of secrecy which pervades a diagnosis of cancer in Jordan. They explained that this secrecy is often supported by the health team and families in Jordan. One student argues that this secrecy, displayed by family members and the health team, prevents them from helping the patient to fight the disease.

The patients know. The patient knows that he has cancer. But they are just like, trying to avoid the idea. And they don't want to face the reality, the family are protecting him and say don't tell him. But he knows, so we have to be clear and give him some options, maybe we'll do something, we have a lot of things to think about, his bills, the bank, like, all this stuff, the bills, the bank, the body image thing, to want to have a wig or something, I mean there's a lot to talk with the patient about. But when we are not telling him he is taking chemotherapy, we are taking everything.

Because people are afraid to say the word cancer, they are not able to talk about it. Their not talking about it limits preventive interventions that could save the lives of millions.

When this student spoke about it, it was with a great deal of passion. Being able to make these changes upon return to their country was a topic all the students felt strongly about.

As the students realized the end of their education and contemplated what they had done here, a sense of purpose emerged for them. They began to visualize their roles as professional nurses in Jordan. They became motivated to confront the difficulties that they would face upon their return. Issues about which these seven students cared deeply were related to helping persons in their country understand how the maintenance of certain historical practices increases the incidence of cancer. All of these students focused their scholarship on the preventive aspects of cancer as well as acute

interventions. As students faced the uncertain world that they hoped to change, they tried to be realistic in considering the limitations as well as the possibilities that lie ahead.

There were a plethora of student quotes validating a personal and professional identity change occurring throughout the time of the graduate school experience but many are very self-revealing so they could not be used here.

### Summary

In summary, an analysis of the text using van Manen's (1990) approach reveals one overarching theme, "metamorphosis." Students all revealed that they perceived a dramatic change in their personal development while studying Oncology Nursing in a US Graduate Nursing Program. This metamorphosis seems to happen in stages. In the early phase students experienced a time of vivid memories. Further analysis and interpretation of the text revealed that memory plays an important role in student's metamorphosis. Therefore, the first essential theme for revealing the meaning of crossing cultures is recognizing "memory as the seed of self." Reflection on the whole of the text revealed that memory and metamorphosis were inextricably linked. After their initial colorful interval, students encountered a period of "bombardment", in which they experienced numerous cultural clashes as well as learning challenges. When this resolved and the metamorphosis was complete, students revealed that in fact, a "professional self" in which the notion of "looking to do something" had emerged.

### Implications

Seeing students through this phenomenologic lens revealed unique aspects of crossing cultures. Like other studies noted in the literature, this research revealed that students faced some "chaos" in the process of cultural adaptation. However, the

phenomenologic approach allowed the researcher to see the students' experiences of tremendous growth over time. Student participants disclosed that they experienced a transformation in identity: this became manifest in professional and social spheres.

It is clear from the experience of these students that some specific curricular and administrative interventions might have improved student success. These included allowing an extended time for orientation to the social and academic environment and planning a program of study with more flexibility. In addition, Schools of Nursing might consider broadening admission requirements to include other criteria besides a language test such as the TOEFL. This would be helpful in assessing communication abilities and other necessary competencies for a graduate student in nursing

This study shows that a major responsibility for administrators and faculty working with international students is to frame a relevant curriculum which includes course content and assignments which enrich students' own cultural and environmental perspectives around health. These students did complete scholarly projects which had implications for health issues in Jordan; this was a meaningful experience, as well as the ability to select clinical experiences which enhanced a students' chosen specialty in Jordan, such as home care, operating room, preventive health, and acute care. Faculty here committed themselves to spending individual time with students on their projects. Many students, assisted by faculty, completed publications on their topics.

Faculty and administrators at this university seemed to appreciate what they learned about working with these students. They often adopted time consuming strategies to help students succeed and in so doing seemed to derive great pleasure from it. Based on this, it seems clear that conducting workshops or regular dialogue sessions for faculty

and preceptors, who might be new to the experience of having an international student, is an excellent strategy for Schools of Nursing involved with international students.

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