

Domestic Violence

By Jim Enright



Personal Belief and Community Dynamics: Interpretations of Spirituality and Domestic Violence



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– Dena Hassouneh-Phillips,
Ph.D., R.N.



When she began to research how spirituality influenced the lives of American Muslim women who had been abused by their intimate partners, Dena Hassouneh-Phillips, herself an American Muslim, could not have imagined the impact that world events yet to come would have on her work and her community. That's because her study was completed before September 11, 2001.

Now, says Hassouneh-Phillips, Ph.D., R.N., nurse researcher and assistant professor, she doubts that it would even be possible to conduct such a study, so highly charged is the current climate and so guarded is the American Muslim community against anything that might create or reinforce negative stereotypes.

"Strength and Vulnerability: Spirituality in Abused American Muslim Women's Lives," was published in *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* in September 2003. The study goes to the core of both individual belief and community life.

"The trauma of intimate partner violence," Hassouneh-Phillips writes, "challenges survivors' fundamental assumptions about human nature, personal safety and the meaningfulness of life." Such trauma immediately calls into play spirituality, defined as "beliefs and practices through which people develop personal values and their own beliefs about meaning and purpose in life."

Moreover, the trauma occurs within an insular community that is central to a woman's social and spiritual life. The community itself churns with the socially diverse and culturally complex dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity and class. All these factors create a kinetic tension between spirituality and violence, a tension that has a profound impact on personal identity and social relationships.

In examining that tension and impact, Hassouneh-Phillips enhances an understanding of a large, growing and important community. Such background knowledge benefits both the general

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population and health care clinicians.

“My hope with this particular study,” she says, “was that clinicians who do come in contact with Muslim women who are experiencing abuse would have some context to apply, recognizing that it’s just a context and that each woman is an individual – so you can’t apply the study in a blanket fashion.”

Paradox becomes paradigm

The context she develops has at its core a finding that is part paradox, part paradigm: “Spirituality provided participants with an important means of coping with ongoing violence while, in many instances, also creating barriers to safety.”

Practices that helped some participants find comfort and healing included Koranic recitations, prayer and meditation. Recitations “reduced their feelings of isolation by providing them with a sense that they were part of a larger whole.” Prayer provided “a way of connecting with a higher power, when they felt completely alone.” Meditation helped them “protect themselves from the devastating psychological effects of violence.”

Conversely, for other participants, spirituality was a source of vulnerability that worked against their

leaving difficult circumstances. They tolerated abuse, believing this life does not matter because an after-life will reward their earthly patience and struggles.

Many women experienced spiritual changes after their abusive relationships ended. Hassouneh-Phillips charted their spiritual path along a continuum with two endpoints: “those who retained their original belief systems, and those who rejected them. In the middle of the continuum were those who chose to reinterpret some aspects of Islamic doctrine.”

Retainers remained traditionally connected to their strong system of faith and Muslim communities.

Rejecters found that spirituality empowered them to combat their abusers’ attempts to maintain power and control through manipulation. And

Re-interpreters attempted to find some balance between these two perspectives.

Applying qualitative research

Hassouneh-Phillips interviewed 17 women between the ages of 20 and 59, offering them the option of participating in individual or group interviews, or both. She invited participants to tell their life stories, to share details of their abuse experiences and to reflect on the meaning of those experiences. Follow-up interviews clarified gaps in meaning and refined themes that were emerging.

These are strategies of qualitative research, which is designed to discover ranges of behavior within a particular group and to reveal the perceptions that drive that behavior in the context of specific topics or issues. Personal stories told by participants who trust the integrity of the investigator give qualitative research much of its vigor and veracity.

Being an American Muslim woman helped her build trust, Hassouneh-Phillips says. “It made a huge difference. There is sort of an implicit trust that you’re not going to interpret things in a one-sided fashion or that you’re not going to publish things in ways that are promoting stereotypes.”

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She also maintained trust by setting and following parameters. “I think some general principles,” she says, “would be to recognize that there’s a wide diversity within the Muslim community – both ethnic diversity as well as interpretations of the faith.”

For example, even though “Muslims share a common religious culture, the influence of ethnicity and locale make American Muslims a very heterogeneous group. These factors, along with variations in interpretations of Islamic doctrine, have shaped the emergence of various subcultures. Thus, women’s experience of abuse may differ from one community to the next. It is important to note that Muslim cultures are not synonymous with Islam itself. Rather than representing Islamic ideals, these *lived cultures*, like other cultures, represent the actuality of Muslim community life in America.”

That’s why Hassouneh-Phillips encourages people to consider the personal transferability of her findings rather than draw general conclusions. “If you have an account that’s rich enough and detailed enough to allow readers to have some understanding of what this world is like, then they can take that understanding and look at their own situation in context and see what might apply. They can take those things that might apply and use them but not assume that everything applies in a blanket fashion.”

Certainly her account is rich and detailed. Stories range from the poignant to the transformative. They impart an authenticity and build a compelling narrative of experiences and behaviors that surely resonate with and may even reflect like experiences of mainstream populations. These stories make hers a study illustrating and illuminating lived experiences of spirituality.

Hassouneh-Phillips, D. (2003). Strength and vulnerability: spirituality in abused American Muslim Women’s lives. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 24(6), 681-694.

Dena Hassouneh-Phillips: Stopping Violence by Enhancing Understanding

By Jim Enright

There is a photo by the door that opens into the office where Dena Hassouneh-Phillips works. The photo is of graffiti on an unnamed structure. The graffiti is both powerful and painful: Stop the Violence. The power comes from the simple eloquence of the message, be it plea, command or pledge. The pain comes because we do not need to know where the structure is in order to feel the impact of the words, so universal is violence.

Stopping the violence is why Dena Hassouneh-Phillips, Ph.D., R.N., does the work she does: studying the abuse of women across marginalized groups. Her focus, she says, is in “looking at the impact of culture and also the larger societal impacts of oppression on women and their experience of violence, how they respond to it and what kind of help they can get.”

An assistant professor in the OHSU School of Nursing, Hassouneh-Phillips is an American Muslim whose research interest “comes from my own background of growing up in a fairly closed Muslim community and observing violence in our community, as well as my own family background of coming from a violent family.”

A desire to understand these family and cultural dynamics contributed to her interest “in getting a Ph.D. in nursing from the very beginning, before I even started my bachelor’s degree. I found throughout my undergraduate and graduate experiences that research was very compelling and enjoyable for me, so I’m glad I’ve been able to continue that at OHSU.”

The steady progression of her work at OHSU is now leading her to examine violence against women with physical disabilities. She is also co-investigator for a study of workplace violence against Latino women, a project being led by the School of Nursing’s Nancy Glass, Ph.D., R.N., assistant professor and co-director of the OHSU Center for Health Disparities Research. Emerging from all of this is “a stronger interest in the mental health consequences of violence” as she notes “the lack of availability of culturally competent mental health care for women who are victims of violence in particular groups.”

As she moves in the direction of that issue, Hassouneh-Phillips will continue infusing her work with a deep respect for the complex and often diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic forces that weave through particular communities. In illuminating the sources and impacts of those forces, she provides both mainstream clinicians and the general public a broader, more informed context for interacting with people from other cultures.