

2012/2013 Graduate Research Grant Report
Religion and Diversity Project

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November 12, 2012

Report on the Field Trip to Finland (September 3 – October 18, 2012)

Introduction

The Religion and Diversity Project accorded me a Graduate Research Grant in order to do a field study in Finland. The plan of my comparative doctoral dissertation project provisionally entitled *Identity Discourses facing Multiculturalism in Quebec and Finland – A case study of female Muslim immigrant students in Helsinki and Montreal* included observations and 10 interviews with Muslim female students in the capital region of Finland. The essential research questions for my field work focused on how Muslim immigrant female students define their religiosity and their experiences about immigration and multiculturalism. As such, my field trip to Finland had an essential role in successful development of my doctoral dissertation project.

Interviews

During my 1.5 month's stay, I had an opportunity to interview all together 15 Muslim female students in Helsinki and Turku, the first and the second largest immigrant cities in Finland. I had started the recruitment process two months before my trip by contacting Muslim associations and universities in Helsinki region in order to reach potentially interested persons for my study. However, this turned out to be a difficult task at distance. In the beginning of my stay I also faced some difficulties in the recruitment process in Helsinki city mainly due to a lack of Muslim student associations on campuses. Consequently, soon after my arrival I decided to enlarge my study to another city, Turku. All together I contacted approximately ten Muslim associations and twenty other persons/researchers/university staff members/well-known Muslims in Finland in order to find potentially interested participants for my study. As my study was carried out in two different cities (about 200 kilometres away from each other), it demanded a lot of travelling. However, I found that my frequent presence was very helpful in both cities because it gave me a much needed flexibility to deal with my own schedule and others. There were times I was asked to appear for an interview only with a couple of hours notice.

Nine of the interviews were carried out in Helsinki and six of them in Turku. All in all, I had participants from eight countries (Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Bosnia,

multinational, Brazil). In both cities, almost all interviews were conducted in campus areas and coffee houses according to the participants' wishes. The interviews lasted each approximately one hour. They were audio recorded to be transcribed later. Most of the interviews were held in English, except three in Finnish. I mainly used the snowball sampling technique to identify participants. In both cities I found 2-3 key contact persons that I interviewed and who helped me to find other participants for my research. One local Muslim association invited me also to participate in women's evening at their mosque in Helsinki. There I had a possibility to present my thesis project to 60-70 practicing Muslim women and observe this multiethnic religious event.

Other relevant possibilities

As I have a co-supervisor in Finland (University of Helsinki), the field work gave me also a wonderful possibility to meet him face to face and exchange thoughts and ideas on my thesis project. In addition, I participated in two of his monthly doctoral seminar sessions. That helped me to create new contacts as well as share and compare my academic experiences with students from the University of Helsinki. I had also a chance to take part in a one day conference on education for diversities organized by my co-supervisor and his doctoral students in Finland.

Yet, during my stay I took advantage of Turku university library resources and its great book collection in the area of religious studies. I also had an opportunity to create professional contacts by meeting three interesting, friendly and well-known researchers in Finland: The first is specialized on Somali Diasporas and transnational networks in Finland, Somalia/Somaliland, and Canada; the second one is one of the most well-known general specialist of Islam in Finland; the third one works in the field of Islamic law mainly within Somali Diasporas in Egypt. These opportunities allowed me to create important academic contacts within my study field. Finally, I assisted a PhD defence on sociology at the University of Helsinki. The thesis was about transnational networks within migrant youth in Helsinki. This event was very precious to me as it gave me a possibility to benefit of the very constructive and structured feedback the candidate received for her dissertation.

Relevance of the grant to my project

The given Graduate Study Grant was significant for my thesis project as it helped me to carry out necessary interviews and observations in the Finnish context. This trip helped me also to create many professional and personal contacts which, I hope, are also for the benefit of the Quebec's academic context in the future. The field work in Finland was evidently one of the most challenging but also one of the most motivating phase of my doctoral dissertation project. As such, receiving the study grant from the Religion and Diversity Project helped me to make possible this great academic research experience and made the expensive stay in Finland much easier.

Finally, this field trip proved me the pertinence of my comparative doctoral study project between Finland and Quebec as it helped me to better understand differences between these contexts. It also confirmed the importance of my study topic on Muslim female students' religious identities and perceptions on immigration and multiculturalism in both contexts, as it includes views of persons to whom multicultural politics are often addressed. In Finland, immigration has only increased recently and multicultural politics are still under development. When it comes to Quebec and its more rooted multicultural politics and philosophies, the political context is in constant mutation, especially recently due to the provincial elections held in September 2012. As such, new pathways of thinking can be created for both study contexts.

The interviews in Quebec will be made in the beginning of the year 2013 for my dissertation project. For the comparative aspect, I wish to find in the future new virtual ways of bringing my research participants from Finland and Quebec together in order to create a shared platform of discussion about local multicultural and immigration issues.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and deepest thanks to the *Religion and Diversity Project* for the financial assistance necessary for my field work in Finland.