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Personal Interview with a Native Citizen of the Country of Pakistan

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to uncover many of the unknown aspects related to living in the country of Pakistan. A student at my current university, who is originally from there, will be interviewed. We will discuss topics of great concern to her people. Among these are the plights of women and children, with the government not showing much support for either. The state of democracy will be discussed along with the right to freedom of religion. Most people in Pakistan are Muslim and there is discrimination against those who are not. Conversation will range from the epidemic that has been created by the HIV scare and the hopeful abolition of torture and violence by the government. She will describe her experiences with American people and how she has been negatively regarded since the tragic events of September 11th. Lastly, the author will evaluate her feelings on counseling in her country and the role that it plays. Any further implications will also be discussed.

### Personal Interview with a Native Citizen of the Country of Pakistan

I put a lot of thought into this project before I came up with the person whom I wanted to interview. I thought about all the aspects about various cultures did I didn't seem to quite understand and I narrowed it down to a person of Asian origins. I then asked myself what it was that I didn't feel comfortable about this culture. Many ideas came to mind, such as religion, views on woman, treatment of children, and questions over politics and human rights. Once I knew the region of the world I wanted to focus on, it then became a matter of figuring out exactly who I knew and where they might be from originally. I instantly thought of a partner of mine whom I had for a class the previous semester. Every time we discussed certain topics, we always came up with quite the differences in opinion.

From this rationale, I gave my former research partner a call and told her about the assignment. Surprisingly enough to me, she thought it was a great idea. I don't think it was so much due to her having to be involved as it was to provide enlightenment to me. I have the feeling that she considered me to be somewhat culturally sheltered, even though I have lived in southern Florida for some time. I told her the areas of discussion that I wished to cover and she agreed that those were important areas to be delved into. I also suggested that she may add whatever she felt would contribute to the overall quality of the assignment. With this, I told her that I would contact her in another week to let her mull it over in her mind.

As we had done work outside of class previous to this, I volunteered to drive over to her house; as this was my assignment. Plus, when I am over there I get a real vibe for the whole "southern Asia thing". Her parents are very traditional and they have stuck to that rather well for being in the United States. They live fairly well and have a couple small statues from Pakistan in the main foyer area. In the back den, her father has an authentic hookah that he somehow had smuggled into the country. They listen to Arabian music and have many traditional costumes in their closets. I tried to get her to dress up for me to take some pictures to be included, but for whatever reason she declined to do this. I think they are more reserved for

traditional ceremonies and aren't just worn for casual reasons. She never really did quite say why not.

During the time that I have known her, it has been most curious to me to watch her behavior in relation to her family. She tells me how women are taught to be highly obedient and ladylike. I know that she has a new boyfriend whom her parents would never let her date. She is Muslim and so she must date one as well. The new guy is one, but he is from Canada, of all places. So she says that she must keep him a secret and that she always goes over to his place, as he would never be allowed to stay overnight with her. If I forgot to add the fact, she does live with her parents while she is in college. Her family owns a small chain of restaurants in the area and she is obliged to work there when she is available from school. I asked her why she didn't take a different job if she doesn't like working for her dad and she told me that simply wasn't an option. When I was at her house before, I saw that she was very secretive about her habit of smoking cigarettes. She said that it was not allowed and she made sure to leave no evidence.

We sat down in her backyard next to the pool for our conversation. I make a joke about her parents coming home while I was there and she told me that there would be no problem as long as her parents didn't think that we were romantically involved. I found that to be rather humorous. I had recorded a previous discussion that we had for another class and found the process of transcribing the conversation to be rather arduous. So this time I told her that I would simply take pertinent notes and follow up with her using email if I needed any more details. She had no problem with this and I reminded her of the general topics I wished to cover. If the dialogue led to something that was unplanned, we agreed to just go with it so as to not to interrupt the flow. Since we had already known each other for over a year, this whole process was rather laid back and informal. I drank a Coke and she smoked a Marlboro Light.

#### Our Main Discussion

My partner felt the need to add a small disclaimer before we began. She informed me that she and her family have been living in the United States for the past eight years and that she is not really current on events that are shaping Pakistan's politics. I told her that I figured she'd

still know more about any of that than I would, but she did say that her parents follow events in her homeland quite closely. They have many family members still there and there is always a concern that is present for their well-being. My friend graduated from high school right here in Coral Springs, so she feels as though she has been heavily “Americanized” during this time.

Naturally flowing from this I felt the need to ask her about Pakistan’s capability to create nuclear weapons. She said that her country took a great deal of pride in this fact and there was a general consensus that they were equal to other super-powers of the world. It was noted that the current president, Pervez Musharraf, came from a military background. He was formerly a general who took over power of the country in a government coup. Due to this, he was never actually elected and many citizens of Pakistan would like to see him out of power. She couldn’t tell me much about him, other than he was thought of more as a dictator than a president.

I wanted to ask her about him due to the fact that the U.S. government has tried to keep him satisfied so that our military was able to invade Iraq from Pakistani air bases. I wasn’t able to get much information out of her as far as the war was concerned. She said most of that is unrelated to her life now and of little interest to her. I pointed out to her that many presidents in our country’s past history were formerly military generals as well. Among them I could think of George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Of course, none of them took over the office of power by overthrowing the government. She said that if he were rightfully elected that she would have no problem with his military background.

Once I had this little “hot topic” out of the way, I wanted to get to the main reason I chose her in the first place – religion. Specifically, I wanted to ask her about Islam and what it is like being a Muslim. She proceeded to tell me that she is active in her faith, but like most younger generations, she isn’t as strict a follower as her parents are. To me, the whole faith is controversial and I have many problems with how it operates, but I wanted to hear her take on it. I was told that she does go to Mosque and that she does make time in her day to pray. She does have religious garb she wears for particular ceremonies, including weddings and funerals. We both agreed that there are considered to be three main religions of the world: Christianity,

Judaism, and Islam. Her faith believes that Mohammed is the Last of the Prophets and the book that Muslims follow is called the Koran (which is equivalent to the Bible for Christians).

I wanted to make it clear to her that I didn't really respect a religion that persecutes others simply because they belong to another faith. To this, she didn't really have a defense, other than she personally had no problem with others practicing alternate religions. I pointed out to her that my research indicated that the country of Pakistan provided different rights to its citizens who were Muslims than to those who were not. She acknowledged that there were different factions of Muslims who not only discriminated against non-Muslims, but against other Muslims as well. She said that the Sunnis were the majority in her country and that they regarded the Shia sect to be inferior to them. For whatever reason, I didn't ask her which group she belongs to.

In 1974, the government of Prime Minister Bhutto declared all members of the Ahmadiyya community to be non-Muslims (Lau, n.d.). In this action, these people were no longer allowed to consider themselves Muslims and they would be punished for participating in any Islamic practice. The Pakistan Supreme Court had ruled five years prior that the legal system had no authority to determine who was Muslim. My partner was quite aware of what I was speaking and she considered it to be inappropriate action on the part of her government to forbid these people from calling themselves Muslims. In the political system of Pakistan, only Muslims are allowed to run for certain public offices and only Muslims can vote for them (Lau). So this decision had an even greater affect than just on that of religious freedom. She said that many people in the country would not bother to run for office when they were relegated to inferior positions in local government. From this, she said that the American system of democracy was much more equitable than what she was used to back home.

Since she had just made a positive comment about the USA, I wanted to slip another shot at her about the lack of freedom of expression in her country. In the article by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [BDHRL], it was clearly stated that the Penal Code of Pakistan mandates the death sentence for anyone defiling the name of Mohammed (n.d.). There is also a mandated life sentence for desecrating the Koran and 10 years in prison for insulting

another's religious beliefs (BDHRL). I told her that I didn't believe others should do these things, but they should be allowed to, if they so choose. My interviewee agreed that the punishments were much too severe however she felt a sense to protect the Koran nonetheless. I told that I don't want to see people burn bibles, but if they do I don't believe that they should go to prison for it. She tried to tell me that it is very different here when you have always grown up with freedom of speech and expression. It was conveyed that if I had lived in her country as I grew up that I might feel quite differently about protecting my faith. I acknowledged her comments and admitted that we both would never know how we otherwise would think.

One topic that there was little debate over was the Pakistani government's handling of the Northern Territories, which are considered as "occupied" by the people living there. India lays claim to the region, but Pakistan has used its power to annex the area. The area is very sparsely populated, unemployment is high, agriculture is the main way of life, and literacy is incredibly low at 14% for males and 3.5% for females (South Asian Voice, Views from South Asia [SAVVSA], August 2002). Reportedly, there is only one doctor for 6,000 people, piped water is virtually non-existent, and most of the population does not have electricity. She agreed that the Pakistani government was brutal when it came to dealing with these people. She said that she had family close to that area and that her parents would send them support from time to time.

This seemed like a perfect opportunity for me to segue the conversation to the dilemma of human rights in Pakistan. This, as I was to soon find out, was a very touchy subject for her. The injustices perpetrated upon the women of the land are well documented. Rape is an especially evil act that is constantly inflicted upon these women. Under Islamic law, a woman is not to have premarital or extramarital sex, and if she does, she can be put to death for committing adultery or fornication (SAVVSA, July 2002). Due to this, most cases are not even reported for fear of the woman being accused of committing a crime herself. My partner's feelings in regard to this subject were very strong. She felt that any man who raped a woman should be killed, castrated, or imprisoned for life – no exceptions. She knew personally of many instances where the law had been used to allow friends of hers to be raped without any consequences. In the

reading it stated that a woman could not even bring a suspect to court without having four male, Muslim witnesses who could verify her account (SAVVSA). Hence, conviction is almost zero.

My interviewee told me that the women of her country have heard of the rights that women possess in the United States. There is much talk among them about this and the dream of someday realizing the freedoms and privileges of other women in the world. From the bulletin that was published by the Pakistan Women Lawyers' Association (PAWLA), it was clearly stated that the constitution of Pakistan laid down the fundamental rights of equality for all citizens and forbid discrimination on the basis of sex alone (n.d.). My partner said that she was well aware of this, but that these policies have never been implemented or supported. She said that the Koran is so grossly misinterpreted against women, that there will never be any equality as long as the common law is subordinate to it. Another example given was that of women only having half the voting power of men, meaning that two women had to agree for every male.

I asked her if she knew of any groups that were working to protect the rights of people. She said that she wasn't aware of any organizations doing such. I told her about Struggle for Change (SACH) out of Islamabad, Pakistan. This group works to raise consciousness against torture, violence and cruel treatment against persecuted peoples. They provide counselors, lawyers, medical care and social support. She thought this was great, but figured that they were relatively new to the country. It was formed in 1994, after her family moved to the USA. The work of the agency has expanded greatly due to the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. When the US invaded Afghanistan thousands of refugees fled to Pakistan (International Capacity Building, n.d.). The authorities of the country have raised suspicions about the work of this group.

From this it felt natural to ask her if she had any feelings either way about the attacks on the Twin Towers. She was very quick to condemn the actions of these rogue terrorists and told me that there was nothing whatsoever in the Koran or practice of Islam that would direct followers to kill thousands of innocent American citizens. She said that these actions were due to the extremist views of the minority and not what anyone she knew would ever sanction. I asked her if she, or her family, had experienced any repercussions due to the attacks. My partner

said that the negative effect was almost immediate for her parents. She is Persian looking, but not nearly as much as her parents are. She also happens to be fairly attractive and tends to get favorable reactions from those she meets. However, she told me that she was not immune from racial slurs and hate remarks directed at people of Arabic descent. There were moments where she definitely felt threatened, both by words and actions. The effect took its toll on her family's business with fewer customers frequenting in the months immediately following the attacks.

I wanted to shift gears here and talk about the effect of HIV/AIDS on her country. We have all come to learn that this disease is quickly becoming a worldwide health problem. I asked her about any personal situations where the virus has affected her life or the lives of anyone she knows. I was not surprised to hear that she knew several people who had the disease. I have heard of people in the U.S. with it, but I have never heard of anyone I knew personally. She told me that education about health issues was rare to come by and that most didn't understand how to best protect themselves from contracting it. I informed her that according to The World Bank Group [TWBG] that only 0.1 % of the adult Pakistani population is infected with the HIV virus (n.d.). She was quite happy to hear this, but also felt that many people don't report infection due to social stigma and lack of knowledge among the population. My partner knew very well about the high prevalence of the commercial sex industry and the poor screening that is done with the national blood supply. I told her that the ratio of male-to-female infection rate was 7 to 1, which is what is expected in the early stages of an HIV epidemic (TWBG).

Since the two of us are going to school to become school counselors, I wanted to be sure to cover a couple areas related to children and education. I didn't feel it was my place to lecture her about the poor treatment of children in Pakistan, for she knew much better than I did. However, I wanted to shed some positive light on the situation and let her know that things might be getting better back home. She told me that she grew up with a nice childhood, but attributed that to her family and the relative financial security that they were able to provide. Others around her were not so fortunate and she says that she always had a hard time reconciling that fact in her mind. I shared with her that the government of Pakistan had launched a Child Help

Line called “Madadgaar” (Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid [LHRLA], 2001). The main purpose was to provide counseling and referral services to any child in need. Abuse cases were recorded and a missing child database was established. Legal aid is also available and children are educated about the Convention on Rights of the Child (LHRLA). She was ecstatic to hear this but had many reservations due to the amount of secrecy that would be required.

Another article that I had found was related to career counseling in Pakistan. As this is a component of a high school counselor I thought it fitting to include it in the discussion. She told me that almost no one has any idea what they will do out of high school. Most people just work for their families or they go into the city to find a job. There is no real planning or preparation provided. Her words echoed the sentiment of the author, who stated that Pakistan had inadequate career counseling services and that professional training was almost non-existent (Ahmed, 2004). My interviewee said that the public schools were far from the best and that teachers there did not develop close personal relationships with their students. Teaching was really treated more as just a job. It was conveyed by the article that career development practice has not updated its focus from asking for educational increments to maximizing the skills of the individual (Ahmed). My partner said that she had absolutely no idea whatsoever what she was going to do with her life before she came to the USA.

#### What I Learned and Implications for Practice

I came to understand that there are definite similarities between the two of us, but some differences really can't be reconciled. Her religion, Islam, is what it is and she will not change her mind about it. I am not a highly religious individual, but I don't agree with the concept of keeping to one's own. If I were to counsel anyone from the Middle East I would most definitely have to learn more about their faith and come to grips with the principle disagreements that I personally have with it. I ran into this once in my undergraduate program when I met someone I liked who told me she could only date other Mormons. Since this I have had a negative impression of such concepts. And in my own family, my aunt converted to Judaism to marry a Jewish man and things have never been the same among my relatives. However, we both agreed

that the injustices perpetrated upon women by the religion were unreasonable. I would think that it would be quite the challenge to improve the self-worth of a woman from this type of background after the many years of oppression at the hands of men and the government.

I always knew that not all people in the world were bad. I found it sad to think that her family has suffered due to the repercussions of 9/11. As a white male, I have had to endure very little discrimination in my life. I did have a college application in Los Angeles returned to me due to affirmative action, but that was repealed a year later. If I were to offer therapy to anyone from Persian descent, I would need to have a fuller understanding of how they are regarded by others and how this has affected their ability to interact socially in our country and to find a job and make a home. I know there are many angry Americans out there, but we have to realize that the actions taken were by extremists and not by the average law-abiding immigrant to our land.

Children in our country don't always have the best upbringing, but I've never known any of them to be performing slave labor. Working with young people who have suffered such treatment would require a stronger mental health background to deal with any lingering feelings of distrust and resentment. I believe many of these children would require extensive services that the normal school program would not be equipped to handle. I've come to understand that once the government or religion takes hold of the people, it is extremely difficult to break that vicious cycle. Related to women, I still can't believe that Pakistan does not prosecute so-called "honor killings" by family members. These are justified in the name of protecting the tribe's image from inappropriate behavior of their women, such as sharing a light moment with a male.

My partner told me that many of her family members and friends were actively seeking ways to leave Pakistan. However, government immigration laws are stringent and money and education are real barriers to completing this task. I have visited other countries and I even did a work exchange in New Zealand, but I couldn't imagine what it would be like to want to leave the United States permanently. What fear and anxiety must be felt and the uncertainty of the future?

I am so happy that our government does not have two sets of standards based on the religious practices of the population. I believe that therapy would need to address these concerns and it would be a challenge to convey the true meaning of equality as it stands in the United States.

My partner stressed to me that counseling services are very rare in her country. She had never received any such therapy and didn't know of anyone who had before she left. As with most things, people who are uneducated cannot provide such help and those who are even less educated don't even know that it exists. Factors that I would never have considered come into play, such as even having transportation to get to a counseling center. Along with that, if the man tells you that you are forbidden to go, then that pretty much puts an end to the discussion. She tried to convey to me that I really have no concept how controlled women are in Pakistan. They do have their own minds, but they are not allowed to use them or to exercise their own judgment. Even being in the US, there are many ways that her father influences her lifestyle.

We both chose counseling as a career for completely different reasons. I used to teach and found it a reasonable transition to an advanced position. She, on the other hand, saw herself how much help was truly needed and wanted to do what she could to fill the void. She admits that she doesn't have the grades to be a psychologist, but still feels as though she could do a lot of good working with underprivileged youth. I have to agree, as I can feel the compassion in her voice when she relates her feelings on the subject to me. She believes that counseling should be available to everyone; children, women, and men alike. I found it surprising for her to include men here, but she acknowledged that many have more modern views on the roles of women.

My partner admits that she is ahead of the game by completing high school in the United States. She had access to quality counseling services and feels as though it has made a positive difference in her decision to further her education. She just wondered how her mind would work if she had been in this type of school environment her entire life. As for this, I can't possibly relate, having been in supportive school districts since I can remember. I asked her if she would be willing to meet with a counselor who was not from an Asian background and she said that she would, unless she was seeking advice on issues related to her faith. That's where all the

differences started and that seems to be where they will remain. I don't agree that faith should affect one's life so drastically and she believes that there is no other way to live her life. We both agreed we might think differently if we had the other's background, but who's to know?

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