

Understanding the Veil: When Cross-Cultural Competence Matters!

The potential effects that cross-cultural competence has in improving the integration of immigrants in contexts that are not familiar to them.

What is the role of Cross Cultural Education in the perception of people from minority cultures in the community they chose to live in? A research project by 3CLab - Cross Cultural Competence Learning & Education (University of Salerno) aimed to understand this role. This main question was answered by a sample of 216 veiled women in a community in Southern Italy (Della Piana & Chakir, 2020).

Preliminary findings suggest two fundamental benefits derived from improving cross-cultural competence at the community level. The improved cultural competence of individuals belonging to minority cultures, i.e., immigrants, in an unfamiliar context (the host country) helps them to understand the core values of the community in which they have chosen to live, to communicate the meaning associated with their culturally-related behaviors, and build trust in daily interactions with residents, without losing their cultural identity. With regard to the individuals belonging to the dominant culture, it encourages them to learn from cultural diversity, searching for opportunities to live in a multicultural context.

Cross Cultural Education at the community level fosters the integration of immigrants. 97.7% declared that participating in a cross-cultural education program could be beneficial to understanding the importance of wearing the hijāb, and more in general, to becoming culturally aware. The same percentage declared that an improvement of their cross-cultural competence could be extremely helpful to integrate better in their communities, intended as their religious, local (ethnic), and professional communities. The main motivations explaining the high rate of responses related to the benefits of participating in cross-cultural education programs are: to live better, to be accepted, to search for a good job, to be understood, for my children, to integrate better, for my dignity, to improve myself and succeed in life, to feel free to express myself. Some statements include: *“The cultural awareness derived from intercultural experience and interaction helps people to integrate easier and quicker with the rules, customs, and habits of a community”*, and *“To be educated does not mean losing humility”*.

Cross Cultural Competence helps people working in public offices to increase the quality of interactions with immigrants. 99.5% stated that improving the cross-cultural competence of people working in public offices would be extremely helpful to integrate better. The critical reasons explaining the high rate of responses related to the benefits of developing the cross-cultural competence of public workers: to avoid difficulties in the interactions, to understand what it means to respect others and for my children, to not underestimate ourselves, to integrate and work, to live with dignity. Some statements include: *“They do not know us, they are afraid of our veil”*, *“They do not know our culture”*, *“We don’t always find people prepared to welcome different cultures”*, *“Greater competence and humility can foster better relationships”*.

The takeaways.

- Being a Muslim is an honor not a choice, so asking a woman if she does not feel comfortable wearing the veil is to question her religion.
- Wearing the veil represents an "unspoken" message and is crucial to being recognized by the Islamic community.
- They wear the veil as a sign of belonging to their own community as opposed to a community that does not welcome them because it does not understand its meaning.
- Cultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, and cultural humility are perceived as ongoing processes that require continuous learning and strong institutional support.

Literature

Della Piana, B. & Chakir, F., (2021) Wearing the Hijāb: Cultural Awareness and Interactions in an Unfamiliar Cultural Context. The Role of Cross-Cultural Competence, in Matwijkiw, A. & Oriolo, (Eds.) A. Law, cultural studies and the “burqa ban”: an interdisciplinary handbook (Forthcoming).

Bice Della Piana



Ph.D., Associate Professor,
University of Salerno

Scientific Director of 3CLab
www.3clabunisa.it

bdellapiana@unisa.it

