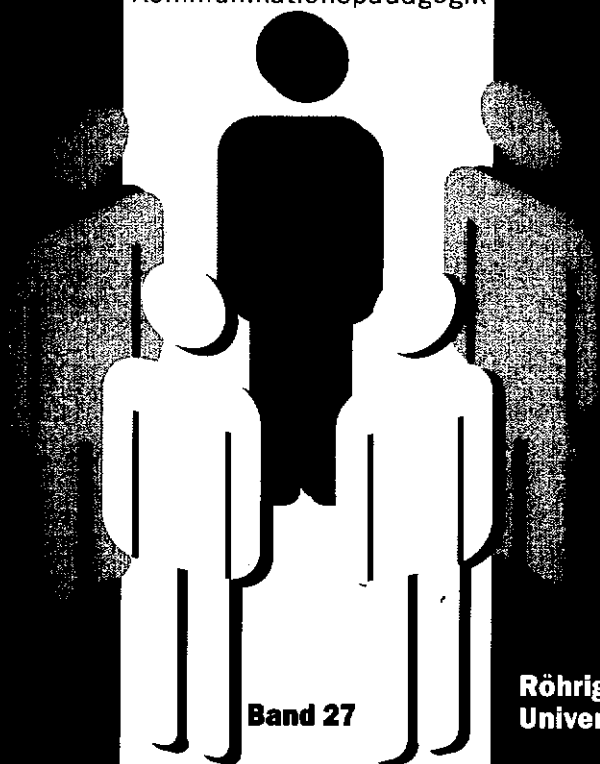


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Negotiating Somali Identity in Maine

The Somalis in Maine are distinct from other Somalis in the U.S. in that they are secondary migrants, having left their first cities of resettlement to choose Maine as their home. Muslim and Black, Somalis began relocating to Lewiston, a small city of 36,000 that is predominantly white, Franco American, and Roman Catholic, in early 2001. No other U.S. city has seen as big an influx of migrating Somalis, and this small city in a rural state was not prepared for the rapid change that resulted. When more than 1000 arrived within the next year and a half, the then-mayor Laurier T. Raymond wrote an open letter asking the Somali community leaders to discourage future arrivals to Lewiston because the in-migration was straining the city's social services and schools. The publication of the letter sparked a barrage of national media attention (Jones 2004). On January 11, 2003, the white supremacist, anti-immigration World Church of the Creator held a racist rally to "save" Lewiston, attracting about 40 people; while across town an estimated 4000 people held a counter-rally. The pro-diversity rally marked a turning point, although the memory of the letter lingers and shadows the ongoing intercultural climate and communication.

The Somali Narrative Project (SNP) is an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and applied communication effort to document the experiences of Somali immigrants in Lewiston, Maine, and to foster intercultural understanding. The collaborative includes University of Maine sociologist Kim Huisman, who studies immigration; historian Carol Toner who directs the program in Maine Studies; and women's studies scholar Mazie Hough; as well as myself, a scholar in narrative performance. Because the SNP is inspired by feminist community-based models, we are committed to conducting research that will benefit the community as well as address our own questions. Based on a series of meetings with Somali community members taking place over the last year, we have developed a narrative project to address our mutual interests. In these conversations, Somalis repeatedly identified a con-

cern with cultural preservation as they are “trapped between two cultures,” Somali and American, particularly as their immigrant children come of age in Maine and the new generation is born here. One participant expressed this as the need to create “a library of real stories” for themselves, their children, and grandchildren, stories told by Somalis who have experienced immigration and the struggle for material and cultural survival. This paper will identify and discuss challenges to carrying out an applied communication effort such as the SNP within a complex of global, state, and local tensions.

Negotiating Somali Identity

Somalis are fleeing civil war, famine, and the collapse, both political and ecological, of their East African homeland (Gardner & El Bushra 2004). The local tensions around Somali immigration to Maine are situated within two global conditions: conflicts between Islam and Christianity, fueled by the September 11, 2001 attacks and maintained through homeland security policies in the U.S. war on terrorism; and the flow of Africans refugees that is spurring calls for border closings and new immigration laws in the U.S. and Europe. Dispersed among several other nations (e.g., Italy, Sweden, Russia, United Kingdom, Canada), Somali refugees were also resettled in the United States in cities such as Atlanta, Memphis, Columbus, Kansas City, Minneapolis, in accordance with the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1981 (Farah 2000).

However, the Somalis of Lewiston left these primary resettlement cities to come to Maine from where they spread the word to family and friends throughout the U.S. and even to the refugee camps in Kenya. Why Maine, particularly given its enormous climate differences from Somalia, the state’s perennially weak economy, and its homogenous population as the “whitest” state in the U.S.? Somalis answer in a word: for the *children*, citing the crime and violence of other U.S. cities. In addition to safety for their children, Somalis cite Lewiston’s available and affordable housing, lower cost of living, good schools, state-supported ESL opportunities, potential entry-level jobs, small town atmosphere, and – the mayoral letter incident to the

contrary – supportive city government. But culture, religion, and identity also matter. Because of their Muslim faith, Somalis regard themselves as more akin to Middle Easterners than to African Americans with whom they share a racial heritage. Whereas their different skin color distinguishes them from white Mainers, the Black/African American presence (.5%) is small in Maine. Maine perhaps offers a social and landscape against which to negotiate Somali identity through difference.

Founded as a city of immigrants – English, Irish, French Canadian – Lewiston’s population is growing for the first time in a century because of migration. Following Irish immigrants to the textile mills, French Canadians flowed to Lewiston from 1840 to 1930 to earn this New England mill town the banner of the most Franco American city in the U.S. This ethnic history still lends French flavor to the city’s multigenerational families, Roman Catholic cathedral, churches, and schools, and community festivities and sociality. Since the 1960s, however, out-migration has characterized Lewiston until the Somalis’ arrival in 2001. Thus, as the newest immigrants, Lewiston Somalis narrate their identity within the history and stories of older immigrants, particularly Franco Americans. Having shifted from its historic textile and manufacturing bases to a more diversified service and light industrial economy, Lewiston appears to be in the midst of a modest rejuvenation that includes both economic and cultural dimensions (Nadeau 2003). Applied communication in Lewiston requires that we consider not only race and religion as social markers, but also class tensions and its ethnic, industrial, and working class history.

It is notable that the Lewiston’s Somali population, now over 3000, has diversified since 2003 when “Bantu” (Gosha) refugees, a denigrated, racial minority first brought as slaves to Somalia in the nineteenth-century to work Somali-owned plantations, began to arrive. Their numbers remain small (about 400), but social and educational services are being mobilized to address their needs. Indeed, a single “Somali community” does not exist in Lewiston, but rather a diverse group of people from different clans, regions, educational and social backgrounds, and families. Although orthodox Muslims have especially been attracted to Lewiston, one may distinguish this group who

controls the mosque from cultural Somalis who are somewhat less conservative Muslims, and from more secular Somalis who identify with other Africans in a pan-African alliance. Besteman (1999), who studies the Gosha in Somalia and in Lewiston, suggests that the ethnically homogenous but clan-based notion of Somalia perpetuated in U.S. journalism and, until recently, academic scholarship, needs to consider historic and contemporary stratifications of race and class within Somali cultural identities. In the U.S. context, an added dimension is length of time in the country, the longest residents in Lewiston having been here ten years. Maine may also be witnessing an emerging class division as more educated and English-proficient Somalis concentrate in nearby Portland in better jobs and a more assimilated environment, while other Somalis “get by” in Lewiston, where as many as 50% of able-bodied Somalis may be unemployed.

Refugee and immigrant experience is also profoundly gendered. Traditional Somali culture, converted en masse to Islam in 900 A.D., includes patrilineal heritage, patriarchal family structures with arranged marriages and polygamy, and the nearly universal, until recently, practice of female genital mutilation. Some Somalis of Lewiston conflate Islamic with Somali practices, whereas others distinguish culture from religion in their discussions, marking out differences in positions on, for example, female circumcision. Under the warlords in the years of civil war since 1991, gendered violence resulted in Somali girls as young as four and five years old being raped by gunmen and then marked permanently as castoffs in a traditional Islamic society that requires virginity at marriage. When Somali girls and women flee to refugee camps, rape and sexual violence may also await them. In patterns similar to other diasporic groups, Somali women have altered traditional gender roles to enter the job market and support their families, negotiating the daily challenges of getting housing, food, transport, health care, and schooling in an environment where their language, religion, and culture differ from the mainstream. Somali girls and women represent the largest number of Somalis in Maine, and they are responsible for care of the extended family. Girls may drop out of school due to the conflicting pressures of the Somali and American cultures, especially dating, and turn to marriage as a solu-

tion. Their hijabs (traditional Muslim clothing) make them highly visible in schools, on the streets, in stores, and in jobs, attracting attention and sometimes discrimination. Somali boys' dress, however, frequently mirrors current youth fashion – hip hop at this moment (or at least as it plays in Maine), dress that does not so readily distinguish them from their American peers, black and white. Because males in traditional Somali culture interact more in public spheres than do females, parental anxieties around boys highlight drugs and gangs as well as the allures of American popular culture.

It is against this backdrop – global tensions between Islam and Christian nations and peoples, volatile resettlement in a small Maine city, intracultural diversity and tensions in race, class, and gender, and family pressures to maintain religion, language, and culture within American acculturation and material survival – that the Somalis of Lewiston narrate their experiences, struggle for survival in their new home, and raise the next generation. As a project in applied communication, the SNP has to consider how these conditions inform and constrain the storytelling and negotiation of Somali identity. Obviously, we must also consider our own positionalities as four, white, middle class, academic, U.S. women raised in Christian families. Nor do any of us live in Lewiston. Outsiders indeed. To explore the challenges of applied communication, in the remainder of the paper I present some narratives about the Somali community discussion we held in December, 2005, as a series of “lessons in applied communication.”

Lessons in Applied Communication

Lesson One

Although each of us is an experienced scholar with a particular research agenda, we agreed from the onset that the work of the SNP would be guided by feminist models featuring collaboration and the development of projects mutually beneficial to researchers and community. Mindful of neo-colonialist impulses and sensitive to the Lewiston Somalis as already scrutinized by national and international media, we have proceeded with caution. For two years we have met with

three Somali students enrolled at the University of Maine to read texts on Somalia and the diaspora. During this time we also developed contacts in the Lewiston community, beginning with English-speaking social service providers in public offices. With the students we attended the Somali Independence Day, a Somali-organized celebration that invites the Lewiston public for an evening of speeches, traditional Somali food, and cultural music and dancing. We went to Somali restaurants and halal shops and visited Hillview, a public housing facility with 60 Somali households (Hammond, Ford, & Mahboub 2005). As the narrative project was being shaped through our readings, relationships with students, and conversations with Somalis in Lewiston, we set a meeting in City Hall with two Somali case workers for Catholic Charities of Maine Refugee and Immigration Services and with the director of the United Somali Women of Maine, the only refugee female-headed non-profit organization in New England. The purpose of this meeting was to collaboratively plan a community-wide discussion where the SNP could present our narrative project, solicit input on its design and implementation, and invite Somalis to tell their stories.

An early lesson was about language as we struggled to find a Somali word for “narrative.” Somalis say, first, that they are not telling stories as much as they did in Somalia, and their greatest fear is that their children are losing their culture, history, and identity. For Somalis, storytelling denotes their rich oral traditions of folktales, poetry, and sayings; indeed, Somalis only acquired a written language in 1972 under Siad Barre’s two-decade dictatorship. Although the “official language” of our meeting was English, the Somali participants engaged in several intense conversations in Somali, emerging finally with “dhaqan celin,” translated roughly as “preserving culture” as a Somali title for our project. They identified generational differences (i.e., the elderly who speak Somali and remember the stories; the youth who speak English and do not know the stories). Where to hold the community discussion was also debated, and a Lewiston community center, because of its relative neutrality, was agreed upon.

Then gender norms came into focus as one of the refugee case-workers, who is also head of the mosque, insisted that talk and storytelling would need to be sex-segregated. So we reserved two rooms,

one for women and one for men; and discussed inviting an elder Somali male to facilitate the men's group. It was only long into the discussion of the snacks (bananas and samosas from the local Somali restaurant) for the community meeting that I realized that orthodox Muslim practice required that men and women eat separately, too, necessitating two set ups for food and drinks. The discussion over place and rooms coded differences within the Somali community as well as between Islam and the west. A question we would encounter again and again asks: what is traditional Somali culture and what is Islamic law? Which Islam? Ironically, a good deal of storytelling in the form of personal narrative was taking place in the mixed sex meeting, suggesting not only situated differences in cultural practices but also that Somalis talk in stories which are not folktales. After the meeting we had lunch with two Somali women, where storytelling about their experiences with mothering, working, and living in Lewiston flourished.

The outcome of this small group meeting at city hall was a bilingual poster inviting Somalis to a community discussion on how to preserve its culture, history, and immigration experiences for future generations through storytelling. Our students translated the English version, and our contacts in public offices agreed to distribute the fliers throughout Lewiston. When we arrived at the appointed place in December, the meeting time approached and passed. No one came, except the students who had accompanied us and a Somali couple from Orono. I am reasonably sure that just one Somali came to the community meeting because of the posted flier. In any case, we were preparing for our next lesson in applied communication.

Lesson Two

And then the Somali students volunteered to go into action. They got out their cell phones, bundled up against the cold December wind, and went out walking to the halal store and other Somali downtown spots. In the meantime, one local Somali, the first member of the Lewiston community to receive his master's degree, had read the flier and came by the community center to talk. He was friendly, forthcoming, even frank. Trained in ethnographic methods and doing a

study on leadership in the Lewiston Somali community, he told us the story of his research project.

He thought that as a cultural insider, a Lewiston Somali, he was uniquely positioned to study leadership in the community. Like a good ethnographer, he hung out among the Somalis at the restaurants, in streetside conversations, and entering or emerging from the mosque, where he was privy to storytelling and gossip. These were public settings with small groups of men, and they were marked by sociability and friendliness. However, he was increasingly frustrated in getting serious information for his research; until after a time, he became convinced that his position as a cultural insider was itself the problem. He suggested that as a web of connections amid internal distinctions, Somalis will not make themselves vulnerable in front of other Somalis, whether from fear of personal embarrassment or confrontation of an other. Furthermore, he suspected that they saw him as some sort of “stooge” of the authorities (unnamed) on whose behalf he was gathering information. And so they closed their internally conflictual ranks to him. Subsequently, he reversed his posture, positioning himself as a cultural outsider with an explicit research agenda. Instead of hanging out at the restaurants and mosques, he made appointments for interviews and began to be taken with more seriousness and into more confidences. In his more formal, expert, and outsider capacity he could also enter homes and talk with women without violating community gender norms, which yielded the richest data he was able to access. His moral to the story: that our being cultural and community outsiders might prove an advantage by garnering more respect and disclosure than a local inside researcher is accorded.

Meanwhile, our resourceful students escorted about 15 Somalis to the community center, and at last we had the makings of a community discussion! Among these were the female refugee caseworker and director with whom we had met earlier, although the male caseworker/mosque leader did not attend. Both young people (college age) and middle-aged people (many parents) attended. As they arrived, we talked about the two rooms, one for women, one for men, but everyone preferred to stay in the larger room downstairs together, which we did. The Somalis in attendance spoke English, although

numerous side conversations in Somali accompanied all the “over the table” talk. Discussion emerged quite readily; indeed, the Somalis appeared less nervous than did we. Talk revolved around their concern for the children, sounding themes of how to promote their success while preserving their culture, religion, and language. Participants helped shape the narrative project to create a “library of real stories” for themselves and their children “trapped between two cultures.” They offered specific advice on how to engender storytelling. Among their suggestions were:

(1) to work within Somali oral culture and word-of-mouth to set up and do interviews. We had just witnessed how to invite Somali participation – via our students and their cell phones rather than bilingual fliers. Some Somalis are not literate in English or Somali. We were alerted that because of fears of the Immigration and Naturalization Services and Patriot Act measures, Somalis of the first generation are wary of writing, and some may want anonymity. The young people in attendance, however, had no concerns about signing their names or publicizing their names.

(2) to do interviews individually to encourage more diversity. Individual interviews might also diminish the face-saving interactions that inhibited disclosure to the Somali researcher.

(3) to conduct the interviews in Somali and in participants’ homes, although young Somalis and others with English may prefer to display their second language proficiency. We were also informed that talk in Somali homes will be interrupted and overheard by the continuous goings and comings of family and friends.

We have incorporated all of these lessons into the project design and implementation.

Next Lessons

Near the end of the December meeting, the door opened and a respectful hush fell over us as one of our students ushered in her elderly father. She briefly introduced him to the group as he sat silently with his 19-year-old daughter. He does not speak nor understand English, and she informed us that he would just listen. In that cross-

generational pair, we saw the site of our next lessons in applied communication with Somalis in Lewiston. We would continue, to paraphrase the poet Theodore Roethke, to “learn by going where [we] have to go.”

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