

THE CASE OF LILY: THE INTERSECTION OF ETHICS, FEMINISM, AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Academic communities are responsible for cultivating the students of today into the leaders of tomorrow. This entry into leadership often begins with the common experience of being a teaching assistant at some point during advanced studies. These individuals often find themselves thrust into a classroom only to face countless professional challenges. Not only are these beginning instructors trying to navigate their own developmental milestones, but many also find themselves trying to understand and manage a classroom full of energetic and diverse students. In the human services field, these challenges can be even more complex as the constant training emphasizing the "helping" relationship can create conflicts with the inherently hierarchical teaching relationship.

This case highlights a true experience navigating professional boundaries and personal ethics. The case describes one new instructor's journey and illustrates her struggle to remain true to both the academic community and her student, as well as uphold the principles of multiculturalism and feminism.

CHARACTERS

Suzanne is a 27 year-old Caucasian second year doctoral student in a counseling department in the Southeast. She is originally from the Southeast but has lived in almost every region of the country. She enjoys knowledge for the sake of learning and being at a university for the variety of experiences it brings. Her moral motivation for getting her PhD is to help people, particularly women, and she hopes that one day she will be able to teach or write on women's issues exclusively. While at times she finds it difficult to keep her focus on the future, she is greatly enjoying her entire doctoral experience, including being a teaching assistant.

Lily is a 19 year-old Muslim-American woman originally from Somalia. Her family fled the country due to extensive socio-political unrest in the late 1980's and Lily considers it fortunate that they were able to come to the United States. Lily (a nickname she gave herself that Americans could pronounce) greatly enjoys being

in the States and found the Southeast to be a very nice place to live. She misses the fantastic beauty of her home country and more recently misses her mother who is recently deceased. Currently, she lives at home with her father and four brothers and commutes to the university where she is a sophomore. She wears traditional Muslim dress, including a veil, but is happy to add jeans under her dress in a nod to her new American culture.

SETTING

Suzanne and Lily meet in the very first class that Suzanne has been assigned to teach. This course is a bi-weekly undergraduate course focusing on life planning and career discovery that many students believe to be a place to grab an easy A. Suzanne is eager to put her feminist teachings to use and empower her students, while Lily is eager to gain more direction in her life and learn about herself. Secretly, Suzanne is thrilled to have Lily in the class because of the diversity she brings. The class has recognized that Lily is different based on her appearance and traditional Muslim dress but it does not seem to interfere with her relationships in the class and Lily seems eager to educate other students about life in Africa, her religion, and her dress if they express an interest.

Lily quickly distinguishes herself in the class as someone who is extremely motivated. Suzanne can appreciate her drive to succeed and the quality of her work and recognizes that Lily is an extremely intelligent person. In addition, Lily has a very warm affect and quite pleasant personality that is speckled with exuberance. Suzanne finds her to be a very fascinating individual and grows to count on her in class to keep the discussions moving and focused.

INTERACTION 1

After about six weeks have progressed, Suzanne begins taking note that Lily has missed class multiple times. Borrowing from syllabi used in the past, Suzanne has allowed that only two absences will be permitted during the semester without penalty. She notices that Lily has already missed four and the semester is not even half over. Suzanne is bothered by this because, in her opinion, Lily is the smartest and best student she has in the class. Suzanne makes a mental note to address these absences with her.

The next time Suzanne sees Lily, she asks her to stay after class. Lily flashes her beautiful smile and then quickly looks down and takes her seat. Suzanne wonders to herself how best to address this issue with Lily since classroom administrative tasks are new to her. As the class ends and the students slowly filter out, Suzanne feels a small dread at having to initiate this discussion. Lily remains seated in her chair so

Suzanne decides to walk over to her.

Suzanne gently says, "Lily, I wanted to remind you about the attendance policy..."

Lily quickly interrupts, "I know. I'm sorry. Please just let me explain."

Suzanne was not really searching for explanation, rather wanted to be sure that Lily understood what she was doing to her grade so she continued with "...it is not necessary to explain, I just wanted to be sure that you understood..."

Again, Lily interrupted her. "I know, but I really want to explain."

Sensing that she had a real need to explain, Suzanne stopped talking and silently let Lily continue.

Lily began by asking, "Have you ever heard of Somalia?" She stated that this was her home country and that most of her extended family still lived there. She explained that many people in this country weren't even aware of Somalia and if they did know of it, they certainly did not understand the country or the customs. Lily continued by explaining that she was proud to be Somali and she really appreciates the customs of her culture.

Lily paused and looked away. She tentatively asked Suzanne, "Have you ever heard of female circumcision?"

Suzanne was dumbfounded at hearing these words. Her face remained the warm and reassuring face of a helping professional, but inside she struggled to process this information. Suzanne felt overwhelmed that someone sitting in her classroom had mentioned this practice in a personal context. She thought to herself, "Can it be possible that this has been done to Lily?"

Suzanne had read extensively about the practice of female genital mutilation and carefully responded that she was familiar with the term. Lily seemed surprised and reassured at Suzanne's answer and quickly moved her gaze from the floor to meet Suzanne's eyes. Very matter of factly, Lily continued. "This has been done to me and all other women of my family. It is our custom. Unfortunately, I have intense pain and discomfort every month. Sometimes it hurts so badly that I can not get out of bed. This is why I have missed your class." At this point, Lily paused and a moment of apprehension spread across her face. She tentatively smiled and indicated

that she would probably be missing more classes as the semester progressed but that this was not her desire, but a necessity of her medical condition. She concluded by casting her gaze back to the floor.

Suzanne stared at Lily trying to process the magnitude of what she had just shared. She thought back to her feminist classes and searched for the right response. She thought back to her helping skills classes and searched for the right response. She thought back to her teaching orientation and searched for the right response. She thought back to her readings on female circumcision and searched for the right response. Unfortunately, she found nothing. This scenario had definitely never been discussed.

Fearing the silence may be too great, Suzanne finally put a response together. “Okay”, she said with a smile. With that Lily smiled too and thanked Suzanne for listening as she exited the classroom.

Suzanne waited until she heard Lily’s footsteps fade down the hall and sat down at her desk. Never in a million years would she have predicted this interaction. She felt tremendous empathy towards Lily but was left confused by multiple questions.

1. What is Suzanne’s responsibility to Lily as her instructor?
 - Should she excuse the absences and future absences?
 - If she does excuse them, is that fair to the other students?
 - If she does not excuse them, is that fair to Lily?
2. What is Suzanne’s responsibility to Lily as a woman or person?
 - Should she advise her to seek medical attention that may help relieve her symptoms but would most likely be in direct opposition to her accepted customs?
 - Does Suzanne not have a moral responsibility to help this person that has reached out to her?
 - Should Suzanne research ways to help her or is this none of this Suzanne’s business?

INTERACTION 2

As Lily had predicted, her attendance remained about 80%. When she was in class, she was always talking about her desire to be a pharmacist. In fact, she was currently working as a pharmacy technician at CVS and this was a job that she really enjoyed. During the course of class, she requested information on an area pharmacy

program and became excited to discover that it would not take her much time to complete her degree.

Suzanne closely monitored Lily in the class out of concern and a desire to help. She began to notice that Lily's mood seemed to darken and that she was not as upbeat as she had been at the beginning of the semester. It seemed like the sparkle in her eye was lessening and she was definitely less talkative. Despite this, her work continued to be impeccable. One afternoon, Lily stayed after class to speak with Suzanne. Since it had been weeks since their last talk, Suzanne felt very prepared this time. She had brushed up on her history of Somalia as well as done extensive reading on female circumcision.

Lily remained seated in her desk as Suzanne walked over to her. Lily explained to Suzanne that she had been very tired lately because she had to find a second job to help make money for her family. This seemed reasonable to Suzanne because she knew that many cultures had a more collective versus individual sense about things such as money.

Lily continued, "In my family, it is my role as a woman to help provide for my brother. This means that I need to work to make money so that we can buy a car." Lily paused and expressed "I think this is a little unfair because I do much more work than my brother does."

Lily continued to explain that some people, including her family, interpreted her religion to say that she should serve the males in her family. She felt this was a misinterpretation of the Koran although her father and brothers disagreed. What this meant to her is that she was required to cook and serve food to her brothers and father and could not eat until they were finished. This also meant that she had to relinquish what she considered to be her car (since she paid for it) over to her brother whenever he needed it. If her brothers needed money then she would also need to turn this over to them.

Becoming fearful that Suzanne was not understanding her, she repeatedly stated that she loved her religion, but disagreed with how some people, including the men in her family, interpreted it. Lily continued to explain that she was in jeopardy of having to quit school because she had to work so frequently and often had no transportation because her brother usually took her car to go out with his friends. She concluded by saying, "I really don't want to quit school, but I just don't know how much longer I can continue."

Suzanne found her head swimming with thoughts of how unfair this whole scenario sounded. It seemed like Lily was trying her best to uphold her family's customs but she also seemed to understand that many American women lived very different lifestyles. Suzanne felt ashamed because she did not know more about Islam or how it was practiced. She also knew that her way of looking at this situation was very American. With pensiveness she thought, "How much more difficult can this student's situation become? Is empowering her the answer?"

1. What is Suzanne's responsibility to Lily as her instructor?
 - Should she try and talk her into staying in school?
 - Should she share with her how intelligent and gifted she finds her to be as a student?
 - Should she make special arrangements with Lily?
 - What is her role in helping Lily's academic career, if any?
2. What is Suzanne's responsibility to Lily as a woman or person?
 - Should she research Somalia and Islam so that she could better assist Lily with her dilemma?
 - Should she stay out of it because her role is strictly to be her instructor?
 - Should she tell Lily that what she just described sounds terribly unfair and sexist?
 - What other options does Suzanne have?

INTERACTION 3

Suzanne was very worried about Lily. Her attendance had continued to decline and she worried about her student caught between two cultures. One day during the last week of class, Lily came by Suzanne's office to talk with Suzanne. Of course, Suzanne always welcomed an opportunity to speak with her although she often left their encounters feeling troubled and confused. She wondered if she had opened Pandora's Box by talking with this student about her academic issues that were clearly quite personal in nature.

Lily stated, "I am just coming by today to say good-bye."

Suzanne was shocked and her face betrayed this.

She informed Suzanne that she had told her father of her plans to be a pharmacist and he had replied that this was not going to be her profession. He saw no need for her to choose this career path and wanted her to study teaching, which he saw as

an appropriate feminine profession. Lily was obviously very upset by this and she began to cry in front of Suzanne.

Suzanne was taken aback by Lily's crying and she sat next to her wondering what to do. She thought to herself, "How did we get to this point?"

Lily continued that she had been working on trying to get her father to understand how important this was to her but that he was firm. Because of his stance, she had decided that she would fail out of the university rather than be forced into doing something that she did not want. She explained that she had thought of everything and that this was her only option. Her plan was to leave school rather than be forced into a life that she did not want since defying her father was forbidden and out of the question. Her role as his daughter was to listen to him and follow his instructions. Lily lamented that they weren't in Somalia anymore and this was not how things in America worked. She stated that the situation was hopeless and that failing out was the only way she could escape without defying her father. She finished by reiterating, "I have thought about all of my options and this is the only thing I can do."

Suzanne internally froze as she thought about the student crisis that had just presented itself. She thought, "What had happened to her bright and beautiful student?"

1. What is Suzanne's responsibility to Lily as her instructor?
 - Should she recognize the difficult situation that Lily is in and help her transition out of school?
 - Should she try to intervene with Lily's family on her behalf?
 - Should she do nothing and let Lily fail the majority of her courses?
 - Should she explain the academic consequences of her actions?
2. What is Suzanne's responsibility to Lily as a woman or person?
 - Should she try to get Suzanne some professional help with a counselor?
 - Should she try and counsel Suzanne herself?
 - Should she tell Lily that she finds this entire scenario unacceptable and wrong?
 - Should she console Lily? Should she hug her?
 - Should she assess her for suicidality?

EPILOGUE

As every helping professional needs closure, this case had an ending as well. Suzanne was able to set Lily up with a counselor for a minimal fee. Lily kept only one appointment and then did drop out of the university after barely earning a C in Suzanne's class. Suzanne attempted to follow-up with Lily in the weeks after the class was over but was unable to connect with her via e-mail. She either did not receive the e-mail or chose not to respond to it. In the months following these encounters, Suzanne would always do a double-take whenever she saw an African-American woman wearing a veil. To her dismay, the woman was never Lily.

Suzanne went on with her studies but never forgot Lily. Three years later, when Suzanne was embroiled with a never-ending dissertation, she thought she caught a glimpse of Lily in the library. There was something so familiar about that manner of dressing and the way this young woman carried herself down the hall. Suzanne knew in her heart that Lily had returned to school but never could bring herself to chase the woman down and find out for sure.