

**CULTURE, GENDER, AND AGENCY: WHAT ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE ARAB WORLD
OFFERS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE CONFLICT WITHIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.....	4
UNIVERSALISM AND RELATIVISM.....	5
CULTURAL RELATIVISM.....	8
ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.....	14
WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS.....	20
III. GENDER AND ANTHROPOLOGY.....	25
HOW GENDER AND ISLAM BECAME THE FOCUS.....	25
GENDER AND ANTHROPOLOGY.....	28
OTHER THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	33
VI. GENDER AND FEMINISM IN A NON-WESTERN CONTEXT.....	37
VARIETY WITHIN FEMINISM.....	37
LEILA AHMED: SYMBOLISM AND THE VEIL.....	39
SABA MAHMOOD: POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE “DOCILE SUBJECT”.....	41
LILA ABU-LUGHOD: GENDER AND THE ARAB WORLD.....	46
CONCLUSION.....	50
REFERENCES.....	56

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INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in gender issues. From the time I was a little girl, running around on the playground, I felt painfully aware of how gender expectations influenced my peer group and me. As I grew older I became more interested in feminist writing and how to fight for gender equality within my community. There was a significant shift that occurred in the first two years of my undergrad as I began to realize that there are many women who are happy to not share my gender commitments. My participation in the church helped me to realize that there were many different ways that communities dealt with gender and perhaps, it should not be my fight to change them all to my way. What if those women were happy submitting to their husbands and never being ordained? What if they believed that this was God's will for their lives? Could I still respect them and learn meaningful lessons from my interactions with them? I was having an internal conflict regarding how to reconcile my own standards with those of others.

I became interested in the conflict between universalism and relativism through conversations started in conflict management classes and anthropology classes. In particular, universal human needs or culture (which is variable) as the starting point. Not all conflicts are the kind in which conflict management practitioners are likely to intervene. Internal conflicts within a single individual are an example. Nevertheless, the field of conflict management, I believe, could benefit from a rich understanding of culture. If values and interests (what people fight over) are shaped by culture, rather than biology, then culture, which is studied by anthropologists, plays an important role in

precipitating conflict and an understanding of culture and how it works would benefit those dedicated to conflict's resolution.

An internal desire to reconcile one's own standards with those of others is something many anthropologists deal with when working in the field. Feminist Anthropologists are dealing with conflict between their own standards and those of the women they study. This is particularly hard for those working in conservative Muslim communities where there is a strong push for scholars to identify how women practice resistance to the norms of gender inequality. The larger question is whether feminist anthropologists view their standards as somehow universal. If their standards are universal then this leads to a stronger internal conflict, as the anthropologists struggle with the desire to reconcile or change the communities they study. I have chosen to discuss Leila Ahmed, Saba Mahmood, and Lila Abu-Lughod's writings on Muslim women to see how they deal with their own internal conflicts as they look at gender in the Arab world.

An important shift to mention, which took place during the course of my research, was to not talk about the Arab world with the extremes as the focal point. This is a pervasive problem within the Western world: to look at the Arab world with an incomplete stereotype and build all discourse around it. There is a stereotypical way in which Westerners (not all) deal with Muslim communities which always frames Islam as violent and oppressive. The truth is that the Arab world is full of vastly different communities with men and women whose gender identities vary. In order to understand and interact with my chosen scholars, I must deal with the specific women's group with

which they have worked and about which they have written. The three scholars whom I feature in this thesis do not frame these communities as being the extreme stereotype. None of the writing on these three communities deals with violence against women in a Muslim context. Nor does it address communities of women who are forced or coerced into wearing head coverings (wearing a head covering is often considered a pious act for women in Muslim society). I have chosen not to draw my analysis back to the extremes, because, by doing so I believe I would be perpetuating a stereotype of the Arab world which does not fit with the three groups I present in this work. I believe it is important to draw attention to power structures that coerce women (and men). If I were studying a particular conservative campus ministry at Kent State University it would not make much sense to frame my observations and analysis with respect to the extreme stance of other conservative Christian groups, such as the Westboro Baptist Church. While they are both conservative Christian communities, it would distort my purpose to bring in violence and the extreme sentiments of the Westboro Baptist Church when they are not at play in the campus ministry.

My scholars studying Muslim women, on whom I have chosen to focus, have struggled to reconcile their interlocutors' worldviews with their own, and each has succeeded to her satisfaction, even though they have done so in different ways. Their conclusions can hopefully begin to inform questions of conflict resolution.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONFLICT WITHIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Within the field of conflict management there are contending ideas about the nature of conflict and how it can be managed. This is due in part to the interdisciplinary nature of the field. The two streams that I focus on in this section are universalism and relativism. The first is based on the idea that because the human brain is fairly standard, the human species should ultimately share the same basic thought patterns (Maslow 1943). Humankind should function within the same reality. “Culture,” then, is simply an exterior series of traditions, practices, language and other features that do not profoundly shape an individual’s or community’s reality. Human interaction is inherent, that is natural and foundational, and therefore universal. Using these assumptions, basic conflict management practices should be applicable to any community with minor adjustments for the exterior and non-profound cultural context. The second stream of thought emphasizes that conflict must be understood primarily in terms of the cultures of the primary actors. Culture in this case, is a concept that relates the reality of individuals and communities through the consideration of the many interconnected parts of social experience: language, politics, faith, kinship (Boas 1887; Feinberg 2007; Johnson 2007; Renteln 1998).

This thesis was born out of a desire to consolidate the action-oriented approach found in the conflict management with the well-developed and sophisticated theory of cultural anthropology. Throughout this work I will deal with understanding and analyzing

culture through the theoretical and ethnographic work of three anthropologists focused on Muslim women.

UNIVERSALISM AND RELATIVISM

Conflict management draws from such disciplines as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science. As a student with one foot in the world of conflict management and the other in the field of anthropology I found myself consistently looking to reconcile my two disciplines and consolidate my studies of both into one life direction. What follows is a brief overview of a few concepts that could be framed as universal and some that can be framed relatively.

I recall that in my conflict theory course there were many theories proposed with universal assumptions. We learned about different psychological theories and how one understands conflict using overarching psychological assumptions about people. Never, however, were any of the instructors dogmatic in how theories were used, with the exception of some basic techniques for dealing with the practice of managing conflict, such as never blame the victim, or mediators should be impartial (Fisher and Ury 2011; Harper 2004). Instead there was a sense that fully understanding the socially-constructed nature of conflict must also mean that the world itself is socially constructed and that there are some rules that can be applied in many, if not all, circumstances.

In conflict theory class we learned that humans identify themselves with an “in” group and separate themselves from the “out” group (Taylor and Moghaddam 1994). We learned that humans are, at the core, social beings. The example given was that infants

are able to see just well enough to make out the faces of their mothers during breastfeeding. Other examples of biological human formation were given to explain why humans act, feel, and believe the way they do (Burton 1990; Clark 1990).

Basic Human Needs theory has often been used in conflict management. It draws out of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and asserts that conflict occurs when the basic human needs of an individual or group are not being met. The question then becomes what are basic human needs? Are these needs just in the physical realm? Are they met by physical entities (water, shelter, viable mate)? Is there a psychological side to basic needs? John Burton, a conflict management scholar, asserts that social belonging is part of basic human needs. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy included social and introspective needs at the highest spot on the pyramid. Some have proposed that a feeling of belonging, or other aspects of mental health should also be understood as basic human needs and that as long as people live without both the physical and psychological needs being met conflict will result (Taylor and Moghaddam 1994: Chapter 4; Galtung 1969; Burton 1990; Clark 1990; Maslow 1943).

I agree that humans have a physical need for water, shelter, and food. The question is not whether humans need food to survive, but how do groups or individuals view food, its consumption, production, and spiritual and social significance? Conflict certainly is influenced by having or not having food, but it is understood, contested in terms of, and resolved by a context specific understanding of environment, self, and others, understandings of responsibility, inter-relatedness, and views of what constitutes "the good life." In other words these physical needs should be understood in relation to

culturally-specific contexts. In anthropology I have found that these kinds of questions are constantly being asked and re-asked in order to understand the kinds of assumptions of different communities. Lastly, I believe it is imperative that anyone interested in conflict resolution pursue this line of questioning and look at world-views with cultural context as the focal point.

Human nature can be understood as a universal which can be categorized and used to understand conflict. One can take the view that humans at a basic level think and desire some of the same things. As I have grown more familiar with anthropological theory, I have become increasingly convinced that looking at conflict and all that it entails through a universal lens is not the most helpful way to understand and practice conflict resolution. One of the major lessons I learned was that conflict management studies, like those in every other field, are constantly growing and changing.

In my assessment, anthropology is invaluable for conflict management in two important ways. First, part of conflict management is about interpersonal interaction as it relates to peace and conflict. Since interpersonal relations are shaped by one's cultural milieu, and since anthropology has long been involved in conversations about culture—what it is, how it can be studied, and what it means for human life—it has much to say to specialists in conflict management. Anthropology as a discipline has always been deeply invested in the question of how people as individuals and groups use culture to construct their worlds and act in them. Familiarity with this conversation can help conflict management practitioners to understand culture's significance. Owing in large part to participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists spend significant

portions of their scholarly lives in “the field,” living life with the communities among whom they pursue their research. They seek to understand the world-views, practices, and patterns in which people are embedded. Secondly, anthropology has a long, rich history of activism that has led to the vibrant and exciting sub-field of applied anthropology.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism is one of the foundational concepts of modern anthropology. It has helped to shape conflict management studies through the introduction of cross-cultural perspective (Avruch and Black 1991) as well as the resurrection of worldview analysis (Nudler 1990; Docherty 2001), both discussed later in this chapter. Culture has been rethought and influenced by other concepts and theoretical frames such as post modernism, symbolic and interpretive anthropology, and other perspectives that will be discussed in the next chapter. Culture is still the focal point and through these new conversations these concepts and influences on culture can be seen in theoretical and ethnographic case studies by Sabah Mahmood, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Leila Ahmed, to be presented in Chapter 3.

Anthropology has, for virtually all of its existence, revolved around the culture concept. This means that research often is shaped by anthropologists’ ideas about culture. Anthropological theory revolves around what culture is and how humans can know, interact with and present culture. Ethnographic research has undergone an extensive shift due to new perspectives on culture, and one of these earliest shifts was toward cultural

relativism. The concept has been used in anthropological discourse, as early as the late 1880s among prominent anthropologists like Franz Boas (1887) who wrote about cultural relativism—without using the term—and how it could be useful to the idea of culture. Numerous other fields including conflict management have drawn on ethnographic research and cultural relativism (Avruch and Black 1991; Avruch 2007).

The concept of culture has shifted in some anthropological circles into an embedded and fluid concept. One of postmodernism's most powerful influences on anthropology was to reshape how culture is approached. Postmodernism rose from a critique of the way the modernist scholarship dealt with systems of knowledge and truth, especially in the realm of absolutes and universals; Modernism enabled science to be seen as objective and universal principles applied to a variety of situations. Cultural relativism has been co-opted by popular discourse outside of anthropology and as a result has lost parts of what makes it a valuable for scholarship. It can be understood as a set of loosely-related propositions that serve as guides for analysis.

If cultural relativism is used uncritically in popular speech, what is meant by cultural relativism in anthropology? In 2007, Richard Feinberg wrote an introduction to a set of three articles discussing cultural relativism. The authors examine why this term has been taken from anthropology and used in other disciplines, often being transformed in the process. Cultural relativism is an important concept in anthropology and has shaped the field since its introduction over a hundred years ago.

Feinberg makes clear that the expression, cultural relativism, has been used so broadly inside and outside of anthropology that trying to find the “right” definition is

unattainable and unhelpful. It is important to identify the different streams of cultural relativism being used within the field before we can discuss how the term has been misrepresented elsewhere. In his introductory classes to cultural anthropology Feinberg, presents relativism as the idea that there are many ways to look at a problem and there are often many viable solutions. This is to say, when one takes the time to see different options it becomes clear that practices which are foreign and appear alien “are eminently sensible when viewed within their cultural framework” (Feinberg 2007:778). Feinberg reflects upon three types of cultural relativism commonly used in anthropology; contextual, ethical and epistemological (2007:779). What Feinberg calls contextual relativism deals with traits, beliefs, and practices as defined and distinguished by individuals in a community through the "manipulation of symbols and meanings." In this form of relativism traits that looks superficially similar can be entirely different in the context of different cultural environments. This means that these traits need to be seen in relation to all the other traits that make up the cultural whole. This variant is not very controversial and has been around since the 1800s (2007:779)

The second variant is often called ethical relativism. It does not assign moral value to particular cultural traits. In this view each culture should be dealt with on its own terms and value judgments should be withheld. Within this variant Feinberg identifies three types. One type asserts that anthropology is a science and that ethnographic research should be devoid of value judgments, which are philosophical and not scientific. Anthropologists should refrain in their professional capacity from making value judgments. However, they are human beings as well with cultural baggage and political

beliefs. Personal advocacy is no stranger to anthropologists who have subscribed to this kind of relativism. They are not expected to discard their values. Indeed, one of the fathers of anthropology Franz Boas, while strongly committed to cultural relativism as a professional anthropologist, was outspoken in his opposition to eugenics, racism, and fascism (2007:780).

The second posits that even private citizens do not have the prerogative of evaluating others by their own standards. This type of cultural relativism holds that there is no basis for choosing among alternate values which is right, better, or morally most justifiable (2007:780).

Last variant of ethical relativism can be characterized as a form of self-determination. Regardless of how one feels about another group's actions and ethics, it is no one's prerogative to force one's set of values on another. Instead, when focus is put on an outside community, value judgments should be suspended. The problem comes when normative assumptions compel an individual or community to change others. Some who subscribe to this type of relativism assert that our own society has its share of problems, inconsistencies, and injustices. Instead of meddling with others' problems, people should attend to their own countries' many issues (2007:780).

Epistemological relativism is the last variant that Feinberg identifies. This kind of relativism stems from the view that it is nearly impossible to compare cultures because it is so difficult to know another culture in a meaningful way (2007:780). Every individual is embedded within their own cultural reality which shapes their understanding of the world. Individuals raised in different cultural contexts cannot really understand a whole

new system of symbols because they already own their own assumptions about how the world is set up which has been deeply imbedded.

Thomas Johnson was so taken aback by how cultural relativism has been misunderstood that he wrote to try and illuminate what cultural relativism was meant to be within the field. He wrote about the difference between philosophy and anthropology in order to illustrate the contrast between seeking truth and seeking understanding. Anthropologists call themselves social scientists and pride themselves on empirical research that strives to understand patterns of behavior and the principles that guide social actions. It is the goal of anthropologists to seek understanding and, from that understanding, to engage cross culturally as opposed to seeking universal truths. Seeking truth means to assign universal principles where, he says, there is no way to be absolutely sure (Johnson 2007:791–792).

Feinberg is contending that cultural relativism does not actually exist as a set concept with one definition. It is a loosely related set of ideas used to talk about how people are imbedded within their cultural realities. While the ideas that the term covers are invaluable to the discipline, Feinberg concludes that “cultural relativism” sometimes is more problematic than it is helpful (2007). Allison Dundes Renteln writes, when talking about the role of cultural relativism in the conversation about human rights, that something significant has been missed about what relativism is. She contends that there is no problem with scholars owning their political and moral commitments. Instead it is important for scholars engaging in discussions around human rights to understand why they own such commitments as part of their enculturation as well as to identify how these

commitments play into the unequal power struggle of Westernization or cultural imperialism. There is a possibility that a variety of moral outlooks could be recognized and unified. "Whether expressed as rights or as something else, the requirement of relativism that diversity be recognized in no way destroys the possibility of an international moral community" (1985:540). Renteln's take on relativism is one which the three scholars presented in the third chapter use. Their political commitments are tempered by an awareness of the overwhelming power of the Western world and the ways that they may unintentionally be promoting cultural imperialism.

However the term is used, I believe that the line of questioning that revolves around the term cultural relativism is useful within this thesis, especially ethical and contextual relativism. These should be used as tools for analyzing one's interaction with other communities and with people whose reality we do not understand. They are also helpful in understanding and engaging the theoretical and ethnographic case studies used in the third chapter. The ideas presented both in the section above about cultural relativism and the second chapter tracing gender in anthropology can help illuminate the questions posed in chapter 3.

Culture is not defined in one clear and absolute way within anthropology, but in one way or another it is always at the center of the field in terms of theoretical engagement and fieldwork. This is because anthropology is built upon the understanding that culture enables humans to function in the world. Whether this means that culture is primarily the way in which humans have adapted to survive in their environment or the way in which they organize and assign meaning to the world, it is what drives us. "If we

hope to understand why people act the way they do, we must come to know how they believe the world is organized” (Feinberg 2007:782).

ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Culture has not always been taken to be a serious part of conflict resolution writing or practice for a number of reasons. In his book, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution*, Kevin Avruch spells out why he believes culture was not a serious matter in the field. First he states that most conflict management practitioners dealt with parties that came from similar backgrounds and would attribute cultural differences to personality or environment. For instance in labor relations there was a much greater emphasis on understanding how to bridge communication between different personalities or between employees and employers. Cultural factors did not often play into the picture and when they were obvious they may have been chalked up to personality. Secondly, conflict practitioners were not initially a very diverse group in the United States. This led to a kind of inward focus towards conflict resolution that did not take seriously cross-cultural contexts (2012:6). Avruch and Black deal with what they call the cross-cultural perspective as a way to engage culture in the dialogue around conflict. These are two of the most prominent anthropologists intimately engaged in conflict resolution studies and what follows is an overview of some of the work they have done within conflict management to come to terms with culture from an anthropological perspective.

Kevin Avruch in his article, “A Historical Overview of Anthropology and Conflict Resolution,” explores the development of anthropology within conflict

resolution studies, focusing on the issue of culture and how it has been seen over the decades (2007). Avruch contends that the field of conflict management has not taken culture seriously enough. He says that there was a point at which those who sought to assert the importance of culture and cross-cultural understanding when dealing with conflict resolution were written off. He lays out how political science and international relations often attribute autonomy to governing bodies. A fundamental difference between political science and anthropology would be that anthropologists believe that researchers should not begin their inquiries from the viewpoint of governing bodies or structures of political power. Avruch's main critique of this approach is that "when states are 'actors' that calculate their interests and behave rationally to achieve them, then culture all but disappears from view. If culture, then, is taken to matter at all, we understand it in its essentialized and totalized form of 'national character'" (2007:2). In other words, culture cannot be understood by the actions and statements of a national government any more than a public high school can be understood through the actions and statements of a student council. Communities and the individuals that make them up are vastly more complicated than any government they fall under.

Avruch's second focus is on an assumption that came out of social psychology; the "biogenetic unity of the brain" means that human beings must all think in the same way. This assumption underlies an approach to cross-cultural negotiation which says: "Everyone negotiates the same way; just speak louder and slower!" (2007:2). The literature and practice within the field often seeks a "one size fits all" strategy with a little bit of culture added in for context. This is a problem in a field intended to understand the

underlying causes of conflict because of a refusal to “[deal] with more than a superficial question of manners or etiquette” (1991:26). How can conflict management practitioners look beyond mere actions to the underlying construction of cultural reality?

Avruch and Peter W. Black (1991) focus on culture and how it might be used in conflict resolution. They ask "What role should culture be assigned in our explanations of conflict and our attempts to develop theory and method for its management or resolution?" (Avruch and Black 1991:24). Their response is to engage an anthropological perspective drawn from interpretive and constructionist understandings of culture. From this they propose a cross-cultural perspective that integrates the interpretivist view of culture with conflict resolution studies. They distinguish what they call cross-, inter-, and transcultural perspectives (1991:34).

The intercultural perspective focuses on two or more cultures and draws from work that indicates the cultural differences in conflict and its resolution. In this perspective, emphasis is put on the differences between two particular groups. Avruch and Black stress that while a lot attention is given to cultural context, the analytical insights as well as “empirical contributions” are disappointingly sparse.

The transcultural perspective focuses attention on “understanding of techniques and processes that appear to have efficacy either within a wide range of different cultures, or in situations of intercultural conflict” (Avruch and Black 1991:38). This means that emphasis is put on what techniques can be universally used when dealing with foreign ways of thinking. This perspective says that in regards to the “foreign,” we should use

“techniques or processes of conflict resolution that will invariantly and universally ‘work’ in all cultures” (Avruch and Black 1991:38).

Avruch and Black consider these two perspectives in conflict resolution to be unsatisfactory. They assert that what they call a “cross-cultural perspective” is likely to be the most productive. It does not make a priori assumptions about similarities or differences that occur between cultures. Intercultural and transcultural perspectives both tend to assume universal truths about human nature and basic human needs. Instead, Avruch and Black value ethnographic research that creates culture-specific "mapping" of conflict resolution modes (1991:34).

Lawrence Rosen's work in Morocco and Carol Greenhouse's work in the state of Georgia are ethnographies that Avruch and Black present as works in which "conflict has become the context" (1991:36). Conflict is framed differently depending on the dynamics of the culture. In Moroccan understanding, the world is constantly in a state of negotiation, whereas in Georgia conflict is a sign of the devil's hold on a person (1991:36). This does not mean that the Moroccans have more conflict than Georgians but rather that conflict is framed and expressed differently. Ethnographies can be used in the understanding of conflict that demonstrates the beginnings of a cross-cultural approach in the conflict management. This shift is one Avruch and Black have long been advocating (1991:37).

The intercultural and transcultural approaches are explained briefly above and are presented as lacking the tools to address culture successfully. The intercultural approach has not had much success in creating understanding between groups. It is Avruch and

Black's hope that the cross-cultural perspective will enrich the intercultural perspective because without cross-cultural understanding successful intercultural relationships cannot be established (1991:38). The transcultural perspective often runs the risk of assuming theories of human nature are always correct and seek to use a universal approach to conflict resolution that makes culture peripheral. "It is amazing how often the 'universal' mode of conflict resolution turns out to be one which most perfectly expresses the theorist's values!" (1991:39). Avruch's and Black's position on the transcultural perspective is skeptical, and they warn the reader to approach the perspective with "an almost agnostic caution!" (1991:40).

They argue that the cross-cultural perspective benefits conflict management by increasing awareness of buried assumptions about conflict and conflict resolution (1991:40). Avruch and Black propose that the first question that should be addressed within a conflict situation is: what is the "common sense" about the conflict in the eyes of the locals? This question helps the one(s) gathering information and analyzing the situation to understand their own common sense assumptions. Only after this first question is engaged should questions of interests, needs and values be addressed. All these questions can very rarely be engaged in an explicit manner, and it takes time and analytical savvy to engage properly (1991:33).

Any introductory class in conflict resolution teaches about interests, needs, and values and how these play a part in conflict. Conflict management students are taught to practice learning what kinds of underlying issues are at play in conflict in order to address the parties' needs and how they are not being met. Identifying the different

values of individuals or groups is crucial in breaking down and managing conflict because different values often lead to a breakdown in communication, anger, and resentment. Lastly, the interests of each party involved are simply what each party explicitly wants out of the situation which has led to the conflict. Interests, however, are just the surface level, and only after identifying values and needs does the conflict really become manageable (Harper 2004; Fisher and Ury 2011). Applying what Avruch and Black have asserted, common sense plays an important part in understanding what the underlying values and needs of a party are in conflict. The values of one party may seem like common sense to them but to the other party is confusing and illogical. Additionally the underlying values and needs of individuals or communities may not always be apparent and this is where cultural analysis plays an important role.

Dealing with the understanding that "humans use locally received or constructed common sense to perceive, interpret, evaluate, and act on and in both external and internal reality" is important in understanding the questions someone looking at conflict would ask (1991:31). One should ask questions about how parties conceptualize conflict: their understanding of what conflict is and how they recognize it. What assumptions do the parties make? What are the bystanders' expectations for the parties involved? Avruch and Black call this the local "common sense" of the conflict (1991:31). This is important because the "Common sense about conflict is the common sense that guides conflict" (1991:32). This is because the world (reality if you will) is culturally constructed, and so to ignore local common sense is to miss out on important components of conflict. The common sense about people in terms of what makes one human and what is important

about being human varies from group to group. Understanding these perspectives is invaluable when dealing with conflicts (1991:33). The problem occurs when outside mediators impose their own common sense on the actors rather than trying to understand the situation from the actors' viewpoint.

In this sense, it seems a better ethnographer will be a more effective conflict analyst. This is because suspending one's judgments gives the observer (ethnographer) the ability to view and understand the practices and frameworks at play in community. This suspension is part of the practice of good ethnography because it allows for research and observation to be done before judgment and comparisons are made. Judgment needs to be made eventually but should only be done once the ethnographer has seriously and honestly worked through and engaged with the frameworks at issue within the community that they are studying.

WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Within conflict management there has been much more attention given to culture in the last two decades, thanks to anthropologists like Avruch and Black and concepts like worldview. Worldview analysis is a way to analyze conflict that focuses attention on the varied realities of parties in a conflict scenario. Worldview is a concept that represents the "consequences of human activities that are individual as well as collective, psychological as well as social" (Docherty 2001). The concept has been resurrected by conflict management scholars and used to help inform conflict management practitioners working with parties coming from very different cultural contexts.

There are some interesting things happening among scholars using worldview analysis to frame conflict. Oscar Nudler (1990) and Jayne Docherty (2001) both propose new ways to deal with the reality created and maintained by language while still being able to translate enough to get the main concepts of another's worldview across. Nudler proposes the use of metaphor as a helpful tool in promoting good mutual forms of communication between parties and Docherty discusses how individual and group worldviews are created and maintained through narrative or story. Both propose lists of questions for worldview identification.

Both Nudler's and Docherty's lists consist of terms like epistemology and axiology which are philosophical and theoretical categories for understanding reality.

Nudler's List:

- An ontology— or a theory about the nature of what exists in the universe.
- A theory of world order — or beliefs about how what exists (elements in the universe) relate to each other.
- An axiology — or a value theory about which parts of the universe are more or less important than other parts.
- An epistemology — or beliefs about how and to what extent it is possible to know about what exists (1993: 4)

Docherty's List:

- What is real or true? (Ontology)
- How is the "real" organized? (Logic)
- What is valuable or important? (Axiology)

- How do we know about what is? (Epistemology)
- How should I or we act? (Ethics) (2001:50-51)

Docherty makes an important distinction in wording which lends itself to discussion in chapter 3 about agency. She asserts that it is more appropriate to talk about worldviewing as opposed to worldviews. Instead of someone “having” a worldview that individuals manage a worldview. This maintains a kind of freewill component, or agency for the individual. It does not assume that people involuntarily act out of a worldview as unaware subjects; instead, they manage worldviews through their own individual self-awareness. This does not mean, however, that one is expected to be aware of one’s own motives at all times, but instead that people act as agents within their worlds: they think within groups but always from their own particular way (Docherty 2001). The distinction between people managing worldviews and having worldviews is important for another reason. Beyond agency, Docherty is releasing a strict or rigid understanding of worldviews as something that individuals from a certain community own as part of themselves. Instead she recognizes that worldviews encompasses all the dynamic parts of the social and psychological realm and are constantly being influenced by many changing factors.

Docherty’s appropriation of worldviewing has a lot in common with anthropological discussions of culture as they are reviewed in chapter two. Her analysis of the Waco conflict between the Branch Davidians and the F.B.I. contends that all parties brought their “gods” to the negotiation table; that is, they brought their “ultimate concern” or “ultimate authority.” By choosing to frame each party as having functioned

with a different worldview, she shows that while they were communicating and negotiating they were doing so from the vantage point of irreconcilable realities, resulting in tragedy (2001:62-63). Nudler writes that bringing parties to a place of understanding does not necessarily going to be the case that finding common ground with parties means that traditional conflict management practices will work. “[T]raditional conflict strategies” are also traditional Western strategies and this means that if the parties find common ground that is not Western different conflict management strategies need to be used (1990:4). Docherty asserts that worldviews are not ever really irreconcilable. Instead she lays out what she calls negotiating reality as a way to help parties come to a place where they can negotiate. Narrative is a useful way to open up lines of communication in order for realities to be negotiated and for there to be resolution. She argues that through the use of narratives, bridges can be built between worldviews that might seem irreconcilable but are not really (2001:58-60).

While Docherty believes that all worldviews are reconcilable Saba Mahmood does not. Through her writings I have come to ask the question are there worlviews that are in fact irreconcilable no matter the amount of negotiation. What is there to do when worldviews are irreconcilable? What if the problem is not appropriate conflict management strategies but two or more realities that are inherently in conflict? Is there a state of conflict that one may manage but not resolve?

In regards to gender in the Middle East there is a possibility that this is the case in some respects. In the last chapter I will showcase Sabah Mahmood’s ethnographic work and theoretical conclusion that the reality that she has come to understand through her

time with the women of the “mosque movement” of Cairo is irreconcilable with liberal feminist ideals. I will also showcase Ahmed’s analysis of Muslim women whose worldviews, or cultural realities, are partly reconcilable with liberal feminist ideals such as freedom. In the next chapter I will discuss how the concept of culture has changed within anthropological thought in order for that to inform the theoretical and ethnographic case studies in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: GENDER AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The conflict between relative and absolute moral standards is a vital component of the debate surrounding gender and Islam as well as other religious communities like American Christianity or Orthodox Judaism. This is where cultural relativism comes into the picture, and where Western feminists are likely to have a problem with certain versions of Islam. Is the gender identity of women in Islam irreconcilable with feminism as conceived in the West? In the last chapter I will showcase Saba Mahmood's ethnographic work and theoretical conclusion that the reality that the women's mosque movement of Cairo is irreconcilable with liberal feminist ideals. I will also use Leila Ahmed's analysis of American Muslim women working out of the liberal feminist ideas for gender and the way her analysis contrasts with those of Mahmood's.

HOW GENDER AND ISLAM BECAME THE FOCUS

I started this project concentrating on how the Western world critiques Islam by way of feminism. Muslim groups are criticized quite openly and harshly as having anti-feminist sentiments. *Hijab* and *Niqab* are often seen as dirty words in the West, symbols of oppression, chauvinistic and outdated ideals.

I hoped that this project would allow me to understand and contribute to contemporary discourse on Islam as well as provide a theoretical framework with which to understand the dynamics of women in the Arab world. Moreover, it is one of my desires to work on women's issues and peace initiatives in the Arab world. I was

convinced, going into my honors thesis that I would be writing about how Muslim women do want the Western liberal ideals put forth in feminist discourse. Along the way, my questions and focus changed.

I started out asserting that I believed that Islam could participate in the modern world which I later realized meant feminism. From what I understood, the heart of feminist discourse, regardless of all the differences between different scholars, was a commitment to gender equality. It was my belief that if I studied and understood Muslim communities in the Arab world well enough I would be able to show how equality was being played out in a way which those from the West just could not detect. I explored a variety of publications on the Middle East, particularly ones addressing social structures that are put in place under Islamic authority. I tried narrowing further by reading about what feminist critiques, women's movements, and feminist presence looked like in Egypt. Sabah Mahmood's work on the women of the mosque movement in Cairo yielded a different analysis from what I expected from a feminist anthropologist. These women do not identify themselves with a Western liberal idea of gender and what makes for a liberated woman. Moreover, Mahmood contends that the reality in which these women live is not reconcilable with Western liberal ideals. Mahmood's work significantly altered the course of my thesis and challenge of my understanding of the value of feminism. It became clear that in order to understand non-Western Muslim women I couldn't assume the content or meaning of feminism as it developed in Western conversation. While my feminist commitments drove my interest in gender identity of Muslim women, I became curious about why some Muslim women do not share those commitments. Why are they

not feminists? What commitments lead these women to a non-feminist gender identity? In the third chapter I focus on three ethnographic accounts of Muslim women's different relationships with feminism.

Early on in the process of writing this thesis I read *Orientalism* by Edward Said. I was unaware that I was already being prepared for the change in my mindset and eventually my thesis. Said deals with the idea that "orient" and "occident" are both real and imagined spaces in history and geography and that they are culturally constructed to identify with a loose set of normative assumptions. Said asserts that the scholarship attached to these spheres flows one way, from Occident to Orient, the Orient being the exotic other. I slowly began to recognize certain hidden assumptions at play in my thesis and my understanding of the Arab world. It became clear that to ask can Islam assimilate into the "modern West" – or, as I would later come to recognize it, the liberal imaginary—was to make a hidden assumption about why the question even existed in popular discourse.

Said asserts in the last chapter of his book that the way that popular discourse frames cultures as distinct from each other is problematic. This critique is part of the shifting discourse revolving around the concept of "culture" and how it should be used. He writes "How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')?" (Said 2003:325).

In order to understand why the ethnographers in the last chapter discuss

worldviews as being either reconcilable or irreconcilable with Feminism, gender needs to be traced through anthropological thought. I use anthropological thought as the stream in which to trace gender for two reasons. First, for this project gender needs to be understood within culture, and secondly because I, as an anthropology student, am interested in understanding the term within the context of discourse coming out of my discipline.

GENDER AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The anthropological approach to gender has changed over the course of the twentieth century. These changes in anthropological thought can best be understood when historical context and philosophical influence are recounted. The late twentieth century brought many new and exciting efforts to the field of anthropology, among which have been new approaches to understanding gender in culture. I will be drawing primarily from McGee and Warms's *Anthropological Theory* (2008a) especially their final section dealing with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The two goals of the remainder of this chapter are to understand how gender has been engaged within anthropology and to see how postmodernism, symbolic anthropology, and globalization, power, and agency – five theoretical considerations presented in the latter half of the twentieth century, influence anthropologists dealing with gender.

Feminist anthropologists began to bring substantial influence into anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s. There were several social movements taking place in the 1960s that

influenced the thinking in feminist anthropologists in the U.S.: the civil rights movement, anti-war sentiment in response to the Vietnam conflict, the larger second wave of feminism, and other consciousness-raising experiments. Within anthropology, feminist writers began to ask challenging questions about the patriarchal nature of the discipline and the overarching male bias of publications (McGee and Warms 2008a:432).

This movement began to focus on three new trends in regards to gender. First was the separation of sex, biologically determined, from gender, culturally conditioned. Margaret Mead explored the variety of ways that gender and sexuality could be understood in human society as early as the 1930s with her groundbreaking work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1930) and later *Sex and Temperament* (Mead 1935) which helped shed light on American concepts of gender and sexuality by comparing our own system with those of others. Reflexive feminist work followed, looking at gender “at home,” owing largely to anthropological theory (McGee and Warms 2008a:433).

The second trend focused on the role of women in production as part of the sustenance of family life and looked at the ways in which social, economic, and political power were exercised. The third trend was concerned with the variety of backgrounds which influence gender identity. It came out of the realization that the feminist movement and its scholarship were overwhelmingly dominated by the white middle-class woman. Feminist anthropologists in the 1980s were becoming increasingly aware that women from different ethnic and class backgrounds did not have the same desires or gender experiences as white middle-class women. This created room within anthropological feminism for exploring the many ways that women experience their gender, based on

class, ethnic background, sexuality, age, and region. Instead of focusing in on the binary of "man" and "woman," attention shifted to an emphasis on the way that socially meaningful gender categories are structured by sexuality, race, and class (McGee and Warms 2008a:433).

Saba Mahmood (2005) borrows from this body of scholarship to argue that religious commitments influence gender experience. She asks the reader to consider the second wave of feminism in which the middle-class white American feminist was challenging the nuclear family and pushing for non-traditional family units, which would express the liberation of women from the expected and oppressive family structure. However, African-American feminists, who were striving to promote the nuclear family in order to pull women out of single-parent households, found that the non-traditional family structure was degrading and economically difficult. This reaction against the mainstream white middle class feminist agenda showed how liberation and beneficial family models vary depending on the context of the people and community involved (McGee and Warms 2008a:434).

Development in new experimental ways of doing ethnographic writing emerged. Feminist theorists challenged the anthropological canon which represented a male-dominated field and severely under-represented the female contributors. In *Writing Women's Culture* (1995) Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordan present what they call a matrilineal genealogy that traces the development of the culture concept through the work of important female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. It is important to note that the discipline of anthropology had more prominent female scholars

than most disciplines. Feminist anthropologists also began to challenge the assumption that ethnographers are objective outside observers and asserted that practices to ensure objectivity actually distanced the authors from their subjects. This challenge was part of a larger discourse coming from postmodern anthropologists, both male and female. In another sense there was a pull back from the assumption that anthropologists were somehow uniquely qualified to interpret culture. Instead, feminist, postmodernist, and critical anthropologists pushed for indigenous people, including women of color to write about their lives and experiences as a way to fight against what they saw as the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic tradition of wider anthropological writing. This experience was not unique to feminism, but was part of a larger postmodernist discourse that gave rise to marginal groups seeking to have their voices heard. Lastly some authors, feminists among them, began to experiment with different forms of anthropological writing, including poetry and fiction as new parts of ethnographic writing (McGee and Warms 2008a:434; Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Sally Slocum's work, *Woman the Gatherer* (2008b), targeting the way that "man the hunter" accounts of early economic organization in human society did not account for women's contributions to hunter-and-gatherer societies, was part of a push back against what she and others saw as a male bias in anthropology. Slocum's main point was that anthropologists have been satisfied with answering questions about human evolution, culture, and economic systems from a predominantly male perspective. As a physical anthropologist, her writing on this subject is a good example of how female anthropologists started asking simple questions which had never been properly addressed

before. While the males were out hunting what were the females doing? (2008b:435).

This simple question may seem like an obvious one when thinking about human beings as a species. Imagine a primatologist who specializes in orangutans being invited to a conference with colleagues doing similar research. After listening to the first few lectures she realizes most of the information gathered and analyzed about the species is on male orangutans. She begins to ask herself questions about the average gestation period, the frequency of births, the interactions between infant and mother. Is it not natural for the primatologist whose has spent years in the field studying this species to leave the conference disappointed by her fellow colleagues' lack of understanding? They may have an abundance of knowledge dealing with flanged males and bands of bachelor males but no matter the depth or amount of information on these things, there is a large part of the picture missing when female orangutans are largely excluded from the data. Culture—which shapes our reality—speaks to our epistemology and methodology in this scenario. The question Slocum asked was informed by her place in history, when women were beginning to think more about their voice. Social movements of the late 20th Century raised and reformed ways of understanding cultures, societies, and institutions that included women's perspectives and voices. What follows is how postmodernism, symbolic anthropology, and globalization, power, and agency have reshaped the dialogue centered around gender and influenced much of feminist anthropology.

OTHER THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Symbolic or interpretive anthropology came as part of the reevaluation of the role of science in the discipline. Ethno-scientists and cognitive anthropologists were asserting that culture, as a mental phenomenon, could be modeled like mathematics and logic. Leading symbolic anthropologists decided that instead of modeling after mathematics and logic to use a semiotic approach to culture – as a system of symbols with which communities create and recreate reality. They came to believe that people constructed our own reality through the symbolic process. Thus, “[i]n social action, that which is thought to be real is treated as real” (McGee and Warms 2008a:482). As applied to studies of gender, this means that anthropologists began to look for the symbolic worlds that made gender important in particular contexts. How is gender understood in communities as part of their formation of reality?

Symbolic anthropology has contributed to how ethnographers write about their subjects as well as to understanding what culture is and how humans function within their communities. The challenge for anthropologists to take seriously the symbolic worlds of others is an important contribution to the discussion of culture. Feminists interested in different ways of understanding gender can draw from the importance of symbolism within communities. Symbolic anthropology can be important to scholars studying gender by helping them to explore the symbolic significance gender plays within communities.

Postmodernism was another significant theoretical influence on the study of gender in anthropology. Much of postmodernism centers around a critique of modernist

knowledge production. Modernism at its roots is the proposition that the world is knowable and stretches, in the field of anthropology, over the earliest twentieth century to the 1970s. The notion that scientific, objective observations can lead to the full knowledge of something (or anything) is contested by postmodernists who say that this can only be situated within the historical narrative of those who subscribe to a narrow set of scientific modernist assumptions that are far from universally held by human beings (McGee and Warms 2008a:532).

Postmodernism brought a unique set of challenges to basic modernist assumptions about the objectivity of knowledge. This critique was part of a transformation of cultural relativism and ethnographic research that has dramatically altered the way that anthropologists theorize culture through research and writing. Ethnographies used to be represented as objective observations of the people from foreign countries in which the ethnographer acted as a data-gathering agent who was able to observe custom and language and then present through his ethnographic writings what the people of that land were like. Postmodernism changed this mindset by drawing attention to the ethnographer as embedded within culture and history as well. This kind of attention to the subjectivity of the observer serves as a way to ground ethnographers within a specific time and location from which they cannot escape by claims of objectivity (McGee and Warms 2008a:533).

Feminist anthropologists, interested in how gender is embedded within societies, have found globalization anthropology to be an important resource for understanding the continually changing nature of culture. The influences of colonialism, neocolonialism,

capitalism, and the global economic market have changed how people around the world interact with and influence each other. Attention to these aspects of culture shares similarities with feminist attention to power disparities and agency. Anthropological work being done from the 1990s to the present often focuses on issues of globalization, power, and agency; the expansion of the products, ideas, and institutions of the West's effect on people all over the world. McGee and Warms note that often when anthropologists thought that they were studying a culture untouched by other societies, these communities often actually "owed their origin to the policies of European governments" (2008a:580). Examples of this can be found all over the world. One such example would be in Rwanda the Tutsi and Hutu groups originated from colonial identification. Studies of power and agency draw from the work of authors like Gramsci and Foucault, who sought to "...understand the ways in which both the powerful and the powerless perceive and manipulate symbols and comprehend their position in the world; how they choose which objects and activities are desirable; and how they view the goals of society" (McGee and Warms 2008a:581).

Studies in globalization, power, and agency continue to command wide attention in anthropology, and they share important links to studies of gender. Feminist anthropologists and others interested in how gender is embedded within societies have found globalization anthropology helpful for understanding culture's continually changing nature and its impact on our experience of gender. Feminism in turn contributes to globalization anthropology. The influences of colonialism, neocolonialism, capitalism, and the world market have changed the ways in which people around the world interact

with and influence each other. There has also been more dialogue around the question of what agency is and an assertion that there are a variety of ways in which agency is realized in the lives of women. This is a thread that I will pick up in the following chapter addressing the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood, and Leila Ahmed about women, gender, and agency in the Middle East.

CHAPTER 4: GENDER AND FEMINISM IN A NON-WESTERN CONTEXT

VARIETY WITHIN FEMINISM

My first serious encounter with feminist writing was *Staying Alive* (2010) by Vandana Shiva and *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) by Chandra Mohanty. These writers helped me understand how vastly more complicated feminist scholarship is than just a vague commitment to gender equality. Shiva presents a narrative of Western philosophical ideals that paints nature as feminine and science (scientific revolution, industry) as masculine and proposes that gender roles were informed by these categories in the Western world. This was the first time during my studies that I began to understand the importance of underlying assumptions. Shiva asserted that gender assumptions in the West dramatically influenced the way gender roles were set up within society. While this thesis is not about ecological feminism, Shiva taught me to look beneath the words and actions and try to understand the foundations of why the world is set up the way it is in different contexts. This was an important lesson for me to learn; it is a lesson that has influenced the questions of this thesis.

In *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Chandra Mohanty demonstrates the different meanings and origins of the *hijab* and shows that, while from an outside perspectives this article of clothing means the same thing in different places, it has deeply rooted and context-specific meanings. She suggests that different meanings of the *hijab* should be taken into account when analyzing data (Mohanty 2003:33–34). This idea of the same basic object symbolizing a variety of meanings has been around since Franz

(1896) and his writings on Native American art. Too often normative assumptions are made because of superficial similarity, while the much more valuable underlying symbolism is ignored. Similarly, Mohanty encourages scholars not to use the term "Third World women" and, instead, to pay attention to context in a way that assumes cultural specificity to religious symbolism. This is how an ethnographer can begin to understand why the *hijab* is worn in a certain context by certain women not simply as a symbol of oppression but of a variety of other aspirations (modesty, resistance to consumerist Western culture, piety) that can only be understood by suspending one's own assumptions and taking account of those of others. There is often a tendency to translate similarities in dress or practice as carbon copies without taking into account that women live as embedded actors within culture. A poor woman living in Egypt does not share the same worldview, values, or desires as a poor woman living in the Philippines. There is not an inherent connection between these two women. In short the "Third World woman" does not exist. In fact, Mohanty discourages using the label because it assumes a grouping which does not help us understand women anymore than it does the so called "Third World" (see Mohanty 2003 chapter 2).

From this analysis I learned my second important lesson: the *hijab's* variety of symbolic meanings draws from the larger point. Just as the grouping of "Third World women" does not help us to understand women, so Muslim women cannot be understood as a homogeneous group. From this frame it is easier to understand how different Muslim women can be, based on context. Mahmood's conclusion after her time with the women of the mosque movement was that their worldview is irreconcilable with the Western

liberal feminist ideal. However, Ahmed asserts that the second resurgence of the veil has much to do with liberal feminist ideals of freedom as it has been realized by Muslim women in a primarily American context. Through these two works we can see that communities of Muslim women are working out of very different contexts (region, economic status, environments, colonialism) while still being self-identified Muslim.

LEILA AHMED: SYMBOLISM AND THE VEIL

Leila Ahmed's *A Quiet Revolution* (2012) reflects upon the Islamic revival as it spread through different parts of the world, particularly in the West. She relates her own experiences and gives her analysis of the ways that this revolution has crossed national borders and challenged the assumptions that some feminists including herself had about ideas of liberation and gender equality. Her view of the veil had everything to do with her childhood growing up in Cairo in the 1940s, which led her to understand this to be a sign of Islamism. She recalled the women of the Muslim Brotherhood and other very conservative communities wearing the veil in her youth. The resurgence of the veil, popularized in twenty first century America, looked to someone raised in Cairo in the 1940s "directly reminiscent of the hijab of the Muslim Brotherhood" (2012:3). This is an example of the changing symbolic nature of the veil.

Similarly, Ahmed saw something strange happening at different times with women wearing the veil in the American setting. She, and many of her American colleagues, had a negative initial reaction but through interviewing some of the women who wore the veil, an important shift in her understanding began to take place. Some of

those women interviewed understood the veil to be a source of liberation. Some women used the veil as a way for them to pass through the public eye without being exploited or objectified. One of the women stated that she wore the veil as a call for gender equality and a voice for minorities. This woman reasoned that the veil was a physical symbol of her faith identity (2012:8). It is important to recognize the Western liberal ideals of gender being enacted by these Muslim women. They believed that wearing the veil was a way for them to express both their devotion to Allah and as their commitment to gender equality. In another sense these women seem to be a reflection on the postmodernist movements, mentioned in the second chapter, which sought to engage and give voice to minorities.

Ahmed's conclusions from her study of the resurgence of veiling by American Muslims strengthened her own political commitment to liberal feminist ideals of gender identity and equality. Many of the Muslim women who were actively involved in the religious life were turning to Western ideals of social justice as a way to live out their faith. Individual autonomy, as it is championed in the liberal imaginary, is perpetuated through these Muslim women's engagement with their faith.

Mohanty's point that the *hijab* symbolizes different things in different contexts is apparent within Ahmed's work. As mentioned above it is helpful to draw from Boas's work with Native American art. He started collecting masks as a way to preserve the memory of Native American culture because he believed the culture was being destroyed by Euro-American contact. He found that the meaning of the masks changed. They used to represent very different ideas and sentiments depending on the community. However

by collecting them Boas and others then turned them into pieces of art. This process of collecting and buying masks transformed how the makers thought of themselves and changed what the masks symbolized. An object used in ritual made contact with another culture and was given an alternate identity. This new identity not only transformed the object but also those who made it. The mask makers then began to see themselves as artists through the transformation of Western contact. The *hijab* has gone through similar transformations. The stereotypical meaning given to the *hijab* in many Western contexts as female subordination is thus transformed into a symbol of autonomy, resistance to minority oppression, and resistance to the male objectifying gaze: feminist ideals. Contact with Western liberal ideals transformed the *hijab* through the actions of the women who wear them. Ahmed's desire is for Islam to concede to Western liberal ideals for gender. This is clear from her optimistic conclusion "that Islamists and Muslim Americans who are staunch believers in God-given gender hierarchy are now perhaps a vanishing species" (2012:303).

While I believe that Ahmed has developed sensitive, culturally relative, and theoretically nuanced cross-cultural writing it is not the only conclusion that we see within feminist anthropological discourse regarding gender in the Arab World.

SABA MAHMOOD: POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE "DOCILE SUBJECT"

The Politics of Piety, Mahmood's ethnography of the women's mosque movement in the late 1990s of Cairo, follows a community of Muslim women living in Cairo, called the "Mosque women." This women's movement is part of the Mosque

Movement, which was started in the 1970s as part of the larger Piety Movement. All of these movements were a way for Muslim communities to take their faith seriously, to practice their devotion to Allah, and to return to the Mosque. This was the push back against the secularization and westernization taking place in many parts of the Arab world, including Egypt. Her work contributes to the understanding of agency within a non-liberal framework. The veiling of women, docility as a virtue of pious Muslim women, and the patriarchal set-up of family structures often produce a visceral response of repulsion from feminist scholars working from within the liberal imaginary. This was Mahmood's response when she began her ethnographic research in Cairo among the women of the mosque movement. Mahmood recognized within her own response a push against subversion and her political and moral commitment to gender equality and agency as resistance.

Mahmood (2005) in her first chapter "The Subject of Freedom," challenges fellow feminists to pause and re-evaluate the way that agency is understood in the liberal imaginary to say that agency may very well be a submissive pious posture in a given context. She began to question the liberal assumption that all humans inherently and viscerally want to be "free" to make their own decisions, and that where people are in subservient positions they will naturally resist this control in order to find freedom. This assumption underlies common liberal and feminist critique of Islam. Mahmood asks the reader, why, if women viscerally respond against being subdued would so many of them stay committed to Islam—especially versions of Islam like the mosque movement, which have an explicit commitment to gender inequality and female subordination? How can

agency be understood in these examples of subordination and submission to tradition?

Mahmood asserts that freedom in the liberal imaginary is dependent on individual autonomy. In this topography of freedom, in order for an individual to be free she must act out of her “own will” and not because of custom, tradition, or any kind of direct coercion. And using this criterion, even actions that are not part of the liberal imaginary can be chosen freely (2001:203). Mahmood argues that one of the basic tenets of feminism has to do with freedom and liberty as political ideals. This is how feminism has fit into the liberal imaginary and speaks into the viscerally negative response to the “docile agent” that is the veiled Muslim woman. She speaks to this by saying:

It is quite clear that the idea of freedom and liberty as the political ideal is relatively new in modern history. Many societies, including Western ones, have flourished with aspirations other than this. Nor, for that matter, does narrative of individual and collective liberty exhaust the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms. This is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all time, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions. (2005:14)

The women of Mahmood’s study (2001:209) are good examples of how agency and resistance can be found in both patriarchal and liberal feminist imaginaries. In this case the women asserted their wills against both groups for different reasons. They fought for representation within the Mosque and resisted the Western liberal ideals of gender equality. She gives the example of a student studying piano performance. It is necessary for that student to submit to her instructors and to practice and accept the instructor’s critique. Others may attribute many positive characteristics to her because of her dedication to her piano studies. She and her community know that in order for her to continue to master the craft she must take on docility as a virtue. Does this student have

agency? In her community's and in her eyes, the answer is yes. This is because she made a conscious decision to submit herself to the program (2005:29). Mahmood asks whether the kind of docility seen in the Arab world could possibly be a form of agency within "the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment." She posits that agency is not just seen in how people resist norms but also in the different ways they inhabit them (2005:15). This example illustrates how docility and submission can be a form of agency, which runs counter to prevailing feminist norms.

As Talal Asad (2003), one of the founding figures of the anthropology of Islam, has said that the meaning of agency should emerge from "within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself" (2003:78). In other words, "agency" is created within specific cultural contexts and cannot be understood outside of them. In order to examine why so many feel viscerally opposed to these modes of life and practice Mahmood (2005:38) asks, "What does it mean when we say as feminists that gender equality is the central principle of our analysis and politics?"

Imaginations are often taken for granted and it is easy to assume that one's understanding of the world is universal. Mahmood's assertion is that the underlying liberal assumption at work in feminist scholarship and social activism comes from an epistemology that takes for granted that humans all share a basic set of tenets which make for fulfilled human experience. One of these basic tenets is the desire for freedom and the action that one takes to fulfill this desire, called agency, which is an individual's choice and action. (Mahmood 2005:17). Feminist scholarship has become interested in the idea

of agency as a way to understand why women make the choices they do and act in certain ways. Agency has, in much feminist scholarship, become synonymous with resistance to domination. This agency that has been demonstrated in different women's movements should not be considered the term's definition but, instead, just one variant. These are "historically specific relations of subordination" which are created and enabled" (Mahmood 2001:203). She points out that "agency" in feminist scholarship thus far is just one model, and even if several models of agency are found, there needs to be room for the "docile agent"—as she has seen in her ethnographic studies in Cairo. We limit our understanding of agency if we only understand it in terms of the model presented by feminist scholarship, a model that has grown out of its own particular historical, social, and intellectual context.

Mahmood asks her readers to consider some of the liberal assumptions that shape their understanding of Islam, particularly in the Middle East. These women practice their piety because it is the will of Allah, and this reality shapes their lives and practices at a fundamental level. They should be given legitimacy by acknowledging the reality in which they live. In other words, these women practice piety, modesty, and docility through a different form of agency than Western feminists have seen (Mahmood 2005). In *Women's Agency Within Feminist Historiography* Mahmood (2004) writes about Amy Hollywood's understanding of agency by her study of nuns and religious virgins. When Hollywood looked at the nuns and their understanding of their own choices, she found that they saw their actions as resulting not from their own wills but from the will of God. They give their agency to the divine, not themselves; it is "self authorizing"; "They

ascribe agency to the divine” (2004:576). What if she were to take these women seriously? This is exactly what Mahmood is striving for in the context of conservative Muslim women.

She does not want to stand separate from feminist critique but rather to engage and challenge the normative critique used within that world which assumes possession of truth and seeks to defeat the other. Instead Mahmood writes, “[c]ritique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we also may be remade in the process of engaging another’s worldview, that we might come to learn things that we didn’t already know before we undertook the engagement” (2007:36). Furthermore she goes on to say that the kind of ethical formation and inner moral work in the mosque movement (and perhaps the piety movement at large) are transformative of politics, and “their political project, therefore, can only be understood through an exploration of their ethical practices.” This, she says, is why we must rethink the politics as well as the “substance of ethics” (2005:34).

Unlike Ahmed, Mahmood’s political vision has been changed by her engagement with the women of the mosque movement. Her engagement with the concept of agency has been appropriated in relation to the “docile subject” by understanding how women may desire to live outside of her political vision for gender equality.

LILA ABU-LUGHOD: GENDER AND THE ARAB WORLD

Lila Abu-Lughod is one of anthropology’s most prominent scholars on women in the Arab world. Her work *Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World* (1989)

provides a template from which to understand some of the larger discourse of anthropology in the region which focus excessively on Islam, women, and kinship as the categories of importance for anthropologists of the Arab world. I draw on her work on Islam and women as it connects to that of Ahmed and Mahmood to help identify why these topics have been so focused on and how it relates to this thesis as a whole.

As we saw in the second chapter, feminist anthropologists have pulled some interesting ideas from the post-modern critique of knowledge, truth, and ethnographic research. According to Abu-Lughod two important shifts in women's studies happened in the 1980s. First, in the mid-1980s there arose the "indigenous response" or "the indigenous quest." The question driving indigenizing research is "who participates in the construction of knowledge about women in the Middle East and who controls the process" (C. Nelson quoted in Abu-Lughod 1989:289). Since this shift, there have been an increasing number of female scholars from the Arab world doing research within their own communities.

The second significant shift, Abu-Lughod notes, has been the insistence from anthropologists studying women in the Arab world that "women are actors in their social worlds. This debunking of the myth of their passive subordination is repeated in nearly every account that presented evidence of the way women strategize, manipulate, gain influence, and resist" (1989:291). Ahmed and Mahmood are two good examples because they both insist that the women they are writing about are actors in their social worlds. However, the underlying values driving the two groups of women are vastly different.

In *Writing Women's Worlds* (2008), Abu-Lughod discusses her research among a

Bedouin community in Egypt. She did not want to contribute to the kind of ethnography that claims objectivity and so, used reflexive ethnography. The claim to being objective implies an expertise that also implies power. This kind of language creates a chasm between researcher and researched; it sets the ethnographer apart and in so doing treats the object of anthropological inquiry as both different and inferior. She does not translate her experiences with her subjects into the typical ethnographic style of observation followed by analysis. Instead she writes a reflexive ethnography which inserts the anthropologist into the story as part of and not separate from the people with whom she undertakes research. By conducting her research in this way she tried to include herself as a player within the ethnography not as a researcher outside of or above it. Her choice for using reflexive ethnography was done to try and address issues of power she saw at play within typical ethnographic writing. Apart from reflexive ethnography, Abu-Lughod is interested in other ways that power comes into the picture.

She says she was “led to explore the interpenetration of power and ideology”
arguing for the

existence of multiple ideologies that structure subjective experiences and that individuals use to assert a variety of claims...for theory of ideology and power that respects, in this case, the way Aslad 'Ali women can simultaneously reproduce the structure of domination through their commitment to morality and resist them through among other things, their poetry. (1989:293)

Here Abu-Lughod identifies that agency cannot be understood as only resistance but also as participation in those “structure[s] of domination.” Mahmood does something similar in her analysis of the women of the mosque movement. Mahmood also shows these women resisting patriarchal norms as well as Western ideals for gender equality.

However, she shows how these women also reproduce those structures of domination through their docility and piety (Mahmood 2005; Mahmood 2006).

Abu-Lughod concludes her article lamenting the lack of breadth of anthropological literature on the Arab world. While there are zones in which anthropologists have written, including women's studies and the anthropology of Islam she asks why the lack of attention to so many other facets of anthropology in this region? Where are the anthropologists of economics, emotions, medical systems and agrarian life (1989:298)? She expresses her concern that there are so many aspects of Arab life lacking in recent scholarship in the Middle East. A self-critical reflection in ethnographic writing as well as fieldwork encounters, Abu-Lughod says, must be the starting point for breaking out of the zones as well as turning to other "dynamic areas within anthropology" (1989:299). She then proposes a couple approaches to aid self-critical reflection. First, Abu-Lughod suggests returning to Said's (2003[28 August]) analysis that as the "occident" flows to "orient" the West is gazing upon the East and objectifying the people. She then proposes to turn the gaze to the Western origins of anthropology. Anthropologists need to "turn back the gaze to which Arabs have been subjected by revealing the patterns and politics of the cultural productions of the West" (1989:300). They can turn back the gaze upon themselves and the place that they come from "by letting the worlds they come to know bring their assumptions and analytical categories, not to mention their whole enterprise, into question, something that has always to some extent been part of anthropology's project" (1989:300).

Abu-Lughod suggests that anthropologists can begin to recognize ways that the

"Western self and sense of identity" are continually reformed by the resistance to the liberal imaginary as well as to continue to theorize about how culture is "bound, historically specific, and politically charged" (1989:300). Lastly she concludes that anthropologists in the region must explore the historically produced complex situations in which Arabs live, and the transformations taking place within these communities (1989:301).

CONCLUSION

Muslims do not all share the same worldview. Muslim women are not a homogenous group; Muslims from varied economic and regional backgrounds formulate their worldviews in very different ways. As we saw from Mahmood and Ahmed's work, some Muslim women participate within the liberal imaginary and some do not.

The focus on gender and agency within the Arab world has much to do with popular critique coming out of the West as well as the hope that these critiques may change gender relations within the Arab world. The objective of changing the worldviews of those outside the Western liberal imaginary may also contribute to the lack of breadth of study going on in the region because of a fixation on gender relations. Abu-Lughod's suggestion to turn back the gaze upon ourselves is a serious one in this context. Turning the gaze back on ourselves can help us learn how to be better ethnographers and activists by increasing our awareness that we are always being pushed and molded. There are always new insights to learn about ourselves and how culture informs our political and social commitments. This sentiments can also be seen in Renteln's assessment of cultural

relativism, which asserts that we must always be aware of how our commitments have been formed and more importantly what role we play in the power disparity between what one might call the “occident” and “orient.” Scholars coming out of the liberal imaginary tend to assume some kind of objective, apolitical essence to their beliefs. If there is one thing that postmodernism has helped the scholars realize it is that everyone is embedded within a symbolic world, a world that is subjective and always changing.

In numerous class discussions in conflict management we would debate whether a universal or relative outlook on conflict was more useful. The common consensus, most times, was that there must be universal standards for conflict situations. The two most important places for this distinction, I believe, would be with transitional justice (Kritz 1995), which deals with countries recovering from nationwide conflict, and structural violence (Galtung 1969), which is the latent and manifest violence built into systems which perpetuate oppressive social and legal norms. It seems that those interested in aiding communities and governments in a post-conflict situation which has devastated the country should definitely be aware of the important role culture plays within the communities of the country as well as how cultural imperialism may be at hand. Further, a returning of the gaze could help conflict management practitioners in transitional justice situations to remember the lessons learned from those communities in order for the practitioners to better understand their own country’s needs. However, transitional justice is not my main concern as it is a process that negotiates primarily with governmental structures.

To see how structural violence can be informed by the scholars in this thesis is of

much more interest to me. If structural violence can be manifest and latent within a community or nation towards its own citizens how does that structure also perpetuate latent and manifest violence on an international (national policy and relations) and cross-cultural (between individuals and communities from different place) level. Can conflict management practitioners discuss and identify ways that cultural imperialism is perpetuated within the structures they live in and what is the role of conflict management in situations with such great power disparities?

Peace building in the Arab world is one place where conflict management practitioners can draw from Mahmood and Abu-Lughod's work. What universal assumptions have been smuggled into conflict management studies that are partisan and come out of certain political visions? How do Mahmood's challenges about the specificity of the liberal imaginary benefit conflict management? Mahmood's analysis of the women's mosque movement demands a willingness by feminist scholars to continue to understand gender within the Arab world without the expectation that their work will change the worldviews of those they study. The emphasis on understanding these women and the worldviews within which they are embedded can, one hopes, lead to a more comprehensive breadth of research done within the region on the many interconnected ways in which women and men live.

This brings us back to questions posed in the first chapter of the thesis: What does one do, as a conflict management practitioner or anthropologist, when worldviews are irreconcilable? What if cultural realities and values are in fundamental conflict? Is there a state of conflict that one may manage but not resolve? It seems to me that to make

resolution of conflict the number one objective is to miss something important in a cross-cultural context: namely why that conflict might exist at all. Is there something to be said about a management of conflict that does not resolve? I ask this because it seems within the Arab world there is a great deal at stake in a conflict between the liberal imaginary and the "docile subject." There is a power struggle between "occident" and "orient," and resolution, no matter the outcome, leads to dramatic alterations in one or both. Mahmood asserts in her work that women of the mosque movement have gender and religious commitments that are irreconcilable with feminist ideals, and in order to understand agency within the context of the "docile subject," we must allow it to transcend feminism as it is understood in the West.

She asks us to imagine what it would be like to take seriously the political implications of these women living outside the liberal imaginary. Gender equality, she says, is at the center of the political and analytical liberal feminist discourse. How then can communities that do not hold equality as a standard for good gender relations have to do with feminism? Maybe gender equality has missed the point in some respects. What does it mean for women to live out healthy happy lives? Women may decide that the way they understand their gender identity and the life within which they would like to participate does not lead them to seek equality with the men in their lives. In fact it may be that these women do not understand their agency as purely their own, but always situate within the will of Allah. By understanding these women one can see that they do not have much to do with feminism at all because at the heart of the feminist movement is gender equality. Is there still the possibility of supporting women's movements like the

Mosque women in Egypt as they live out lives which do not conform to the liberal feminist ideals found in Western and Islamic feminism?

Another question is whether it is detrimental for two parties with staunchly different worldviews to negotiate reality? What is the most important goal of conflict management studies—to promote peace or to resolve conflict? It seems that there may be a small distinction to be made between the two. If the goal of conflict management is to promote peace, it seems that negotiating one kind of conflict may well lead to another. If the conflict at hand is propped up by other deeper issues then depending on the resolution of that one conflict the other deeper issues may be disrupted and spur on other conflicts. What if the resolution of the conflict between the feminist ideal and the non-feminist ideal is resolved in a community, but this resolution leads to instability in the community as a result? As mentioned earlier, there are many different realms that make up the cultural reality of an individual and the individual's community, and I cannot help but think of the many ripple effects that tampering with gender relations within a community could create. The conflict between feminist and non-feminist ideals may be doing more harm than it is good in some communities. There is a thin line to walk for peace builders who are trying to find ways to promote peace, especially when underlying political assumptions drive the project.

I do not have definitive answers to the questions raised about conflict management and what it means to promote peace or resolve conflict. These questions are the result of the project of my thesis. They stem from an engagement with anthropological theory and how it can inform conflict management in regards to gender in the Arab world.

Thankfully that engagement does not end here. The work of Abu-Lughod and Mahmood have greatly shaped the outcome of this project and from their work I will pull the concluding remarks of the thesis: My hope as a student of conflict management and anthropology, located within the liberal imaginary, is to turn the gaze back on the West and to continually engage in theoretical work and practice that allows for a self-critical stance when looking at others.

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