The Discourse of the Veil:

The Motivations behind Opposing Views Concerning the Muslim Headscarf

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Introduction

The veil has found itself to be a topic of intense debate today all over the world. Whether it is a question of oppression or freedom, colonial influence or cultural purity, Western witch hunting or legitimate fear, the veil is being slowly but surely revealed. The veil is a covering of the body as designated by the modesty laws of the Qur'an governing the interactions of men and women, and it has become the center of raging political and religious discourse over the past decade. There are many reasons for this rise in awareness and opinion entrenched deep within the workings of the human mind and motivation concerning schema congruity and ingroup/ outgroup perception.

There are dozens of variations upon the veil, but three of the most common types are burqas, niqabs, and hijabs. Burqas are long coverings, traditionally black, that conceal the entire body from head to toe—including the eyes. There is a rectangular patch of mesh sewn into the face portion so that the woman can see but her eyes are not visible. Niqabs are similar to burqas in all ways except that there is a rectangular patch out of the face portion so that the woman can see out and her eyes are visible. Hijabs are the most commonly seen types of veils in the West. The hijab is a headscarf, essentially. It can be worn with robe-like clothes resembling the structure of a burqa or niqab, but can also be worn with everyday Western clothes as long as no part of the body but the hands and feet are revealed. The headscarf itself covers the hair, neck, and décolleté area but leaves the face completely uncovered. Additionally, turbans and igals (a

cloth over the head bound with a rope or twisted cloth) can be considered "veils" for men, as they are the male manifestations of the modesty laws.

The veil can represent a number of things depending on the personal motivations of the wearer as well as his or her location in the world. Most often, the veil is worn for modesty as commanded in the Qur'an. Therefore, the veil often represents religious affiliation to Islam. That being said, it can, while remaining religious, become political. In the Middle East, in reaction to Western pressure to remove the veil because of our perception of its oppression, many women are taking up more extreme versions of the veil like the burqa and niqab to firmly show their choice in the situation and support that feminisms means women making their own decisions, not just the version of feminism that the West produces.

There are a number of difficulties arising around the world concerning the veil. In France, a country with a large Muslim population, they are encountering the problem of the veil in the classroom as well as the veil and identification procedures. The full burqa or niqab being worn in the classroom would be prohibited because attendance would be unsure, and the teachers do not feel that they could connect with the students wearing these articles. Wearing the veil in the classroom would be supported as a religious freedom. A more critical issue is the problem of necessary identification measures that conflict with religious modesty. Identification cards with pictures are not useful in identifying women wearing full burqas or niqabs. Should there be a separate system for them, or should they be forced to remove the veils from their faces for identification purposes? Alternatively, should they accept opting out of certain privileges (like driving, which requires a picture license) because of their choices? Perhaps most largely, the West deals with the idea of the veil as oppressive. People here see a picture of women covered

from head to foot in Saudi Arabia where conditions are sometimes very poor for women, and they project that same schema onto a woman in London or even Palestine wearing a headscarf and conservative clothing when the two are not necessarily the same thing, and the women in Saudi Arabia are not necessarily oppressed.

There are the staunch opponents of the veil. They associate it with Islam and terrorism, or they call it an inconvenience that the West should not have to accommodate, or they just do not like it because it is different. There are also staunch proponents of the veil, those who feel that there can be no infringement upon the religious rights of these people. There are also those who take a more moderate stance. They believe that the religious rights of these people should be upheld to the best of the society's ability until it unduly interferes with other systems. For example, driving while wearing a full burqa is dangerous because a great deal of peripheral vision is eliminated in some hoods, but there is no reason burqas should not be worn in public.

Analysis

Schemas are the systems of thinking that keep individuals comfortable. They are the method by which individuals organize thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. **Schema incongruity**, the failure of an experience to fit into an established schema, is a powerful reaction. The observation of the veil is, for most of the Western world, a schema incongruity.

A change that does not fit into an established schema is nearly always considered a threat, and threats to schema create a distinct sense of disequilibrium in individuals (Heine & Proulx, 2008). When an individual encounters a schema incongruity, he can accommodate or assimilate (Heine & Proulx, 2008). Accommodation is to change one's own worldview so that a schema is

preserved (Heine & Proulx, 2008). For example, when exposed to the experience of the veil, an individual could open himself up to all opportunities, practices, and traditions of world religions including the veil. Assimilation is to change one's view of the threat so that the original schema is preserved (Heine & Proulx, 2008). Individuals from Europe and America often associate Islam with terrorism. Instead of experiencing the veil and learning to accept that the veil is a form of religious piety, it is sometimes easier to associate the disquieted feeling of a disrupted schema with the threat of terrorism. So, the veil becomes symbolic of Islam which was already associated with terrorism making the veil associated with terrorism and preserving the schema. A last option is fluid compensation. Fluid compensation is rare and means to affirm the alternative framework (Heine & Proulx, 2008). Fluid compensation here would mean to accept the veil as a normal part of Islam to see just as bare hair is typical of almost every religious and non-religious person in the Western world.

Not only does schema incongruity trigger these methods of schema preservation, but it also triggers a greater dedication to an individual's own world view (Heine & Proulx, 2008). When a person experiences a threat to a schema, he demonstrates an increased moral dedication to another schema that may or may not be related to the one threatened (Heine & Proulx, 2008). Additionally, emotional arousal is evoked by anomalous experiences that challenge established schemas (Heine & Proulx, 2008). It is for this reason that someone in the midwest could be more likely to have a negative reaction without consideration. This individual has such low exposure to Muslims, especially those who wear the veil, that he reacts more strongly and more negatively than someone in France where the exposure is much higher.

Another large factor in reaction to and opinion-forming of the veil is ingroup/outgroup behavior and assessment. The difference here lies primarily between individuals who focus on things in life with extrinsic value and those who focus on things with intrinsic value. Individuals who focus on things with **intrinsic value** find more meaning in things like relationships and experiences (Duriez, Meeus, & Vansteenkiste, 2012). These individuals also tend to have weaker reactions towards the outgroup (Duriez et al., 2012). This makes sense with a habit of pursuing things with intrinsic value. Someone who is very people-based is more likely to approach and befriend a veiled woman and experience her sameness instead of her differentness, softening the reaction to the outgroup.

People who focus on things in life with **extrinsic value** find meaning in status and possessions (Duriez et al., 2012). This pattern in closely linked to materialism—a "having" mindset instead of a "being" mindset—which is linked to depression, anxiety, and negative affect; furthermore, materialism is linked to racial and ethnic prejudices (Duriez et al., 2012). It is unsurprising that someone focused on extrinsic value and material possessions would react negatively to an other and perceive it as threat. It makes sense that negative affect, along with depression and anxiety, are likely to make a person less receptive to new ideas because he feels weak and unguarded with less of a sense of identity.

There is a comparison that takes place within an individual whenever an outgroup is perceived; in this comparison, which sets the ingroup against the outgroup, it is crucial to the **need for self-esteem** that the ingroup be revealed as superior (Duriez et al., 2012). If the ingroup is superior, then the schema and the individuals's self-esteem are preserved. For example, if an individual thinks of religion as a crutch for fools, then it is easy for him to become

superior to individuals who publicly display evidence of devoutness daily (like the veil) and often receive scorn for their actions—they are foolish for subjecting themselves to judgement. If the ingroup is found to be inferior, ingroup bias mechanisms like ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation activate to restore self-esteem (Duriez et al., 2012). This can be seen in the forms of political activism minimizing the space and rights of minorities like Muslims who wear the veil as well as in hate speech and hateful rhetoric that seems to function much like bullying— making the individual feel superior by pushing any one else down.

There are individuals who are very high in materialism and other traits indicating a preference for things of extrinsic value, and there are those who are lower on the scale (Duriez et al., 2012). This is a continuum, and therefore so is the behavior; this is why there are different sides to the issue. Individuals high in certain traits process the situation differently from other individuals and come to disparate conclusions regarding the veiled other. It is worth mentioning that in studies, even if the outgroup was presented as enriching, there was no change for the positive in acceptance of the outgroup (Duriez et al., 2012). So even if some groups endorse cultural variety or learning about new world cultures and religions, the integration and acceptance of Islam—especially those who publicly appear as other—will be slow.

There are a number of moderates on the practical issues of the veiled individual in a Western society. These individuals display not only an essential element of agreeableness and warmth that enables them to break down some of the barriers of ingroup/outgroup behavior, but most exhibit a strong degree of **need for cognition**, a strong need for organization in order to make sense of experiential life. It is the moderates who support full religious freedom insofar as

it does not negatively interfere with any necessary, functional aspects of society such as safety on the roads, major systems of identification, or the education system.

Conclusion

Individuals who have difficulty accepting the presence of the veiled Muslim are suffering the effects of schema incongruity. There is a new element in their environment, and they need time to process this and assimilate it into their existing schemas. Those who cannot achieve this level of fluid compensation will become the opponents of veiled individuals by calling them terrorists through a connection with Islamic extremists and trying to take away their freedoms. Those who can assimilate these new elements into their schemas will be more well-adjusted and able to continue in society as agreeable and unthreatened by the outgroup.

The view of the moderate is composed of a combination of psychological influences. He is able to be equivocal between the ingroup and the outgroup by using one of the three methods of dealing with schema incongruity in a positive way. He either accommodates for the new scheme, assimilates it to his own worldview, or experiences fluid compensation and affirms the alternative framework. Additionally, the moral belief that is amplified by the schema incongruity is most likely unrelated to the schema incongruity itself and does not negatively affect the view of the outgroup. For example, if a Jewish individual sees a veiled Muslim and has the immediate reaction of "that is new and wrong," the affirmed worldview was perhaps that vegetarianism is a morally responsible step, not that all Muslims are terrorists.

I have learned that motivation on a complex issue is equally complex. Many very normal reactions like *new is bad* and *we fear what we do not understand* were illuminated in a practical

way, and I see the underpinnings of such reactions. Now I can help people deal with their

difference issues by addressing the core problems of the difference issue, not just the effects.

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