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## **THE TENSION AND INTERSECTION BETWEEN MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES AS AN EGYPTIAN, MUSLIM WOMAN**

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## The Tension and Intersection between my Personal and Professional Identities as an Egyptian, Muslim Woman

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In this autoethnography I connect my personal experience as an Egyptian, Muslim Woman and my professional experience as an Educator to the complex intercultural context in which I found myself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Using one critical incident (please see “*we are not in America here*” vignette) as a point of reflection on the influence that my background has had on my personal and professional learning, career choices, and how my perceptions of marginalization as an Egyptian, Muslim, Woman impacted my attitudes and behaviors and led me to focus on the importance of cultural competence for educators. Now more than ever, because of the divisive and hate rhetoric which is dominating the public and political arenas, I find myself concerned with the encompassing question of how could educators understand the struggles of students who are members of venerable minority groups, so that they could better support their learning?

The United States demographics are rapidly changing (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011). As a result of increased migration to the U.S. in pursuit of education, economic opportunities, and refuge, society is becoming more multicultural and diverse (Goddard, 2010; Shrestha, 2006). These rapid demographic changes are mirrored in the composition of educational institutions; Goddard stated that “urban schools in early twenty-first century, in Western nations serve more ethnoculturally diverse populations than ever before” (2010, p. 37). The situation in higher education institutions is no exception, according to Kim,

Because of increases among students of color, white students made up a declining share of total enrollment, dropping from 67 percent in 1998 to 58 percent in 2008, while the minority share rose from 26 percent to 30 percent. In 2008, students of color represented 37 percent of the student body at two-year institutions, compared with 27 percent at four-year institutions. (2011, p. 3)

These changing demographics require educators to become culturally competent (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011) to efficiently serve and avoid conflict with culturally diverse students, conflicts which could occur because of educators' lack of cross-cultural knowledge and understanding (Ross, 2008; Sleeter, 1993, 2001). Cultural competence is defined as "the ability of professionals to function successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, age, and national origin" (Kohli, Huber, & Faul, 2010, p. 3).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography will be the fabric of this manuscript, which I will use to display the tapestry of my experience. The intersection of the threads of my multiple identities as Egyptian/Arab, Muslim, Woman and Educator will tell my story. I chose autoethnography as genera because it is suitable for examining women's lives and it could shed light on my unique experiences (Hamdan, 2012; Ostriker, 1983; Reinharz, 1992).

### **Autoethnography as Methodology**

Many scholars promote autoethnography as a source of privileged knowledge and as a methodology which holds great value, specifically for educational research (Freeman, 2004; Hamdan, 2012). Writing or reading an autoethnography instigates thought and reflection on self and other's lived experiences, which fosters a more profound understanding of other, as well as of own culture (Barakat, 2016; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goodall, 2012).

Autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze first, through an

ethnographic wide-angle lens focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self, that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 739).

Chang (2007) argues that “the individual is the most basic unit of culture, thus in autoethnography the researcher represents an ‘individual’ version of their group culture” (2007, p. 1). This account of autoethnography fits the purpose of this essay. I present my autoethnography reflecting on my experiences, rethinking the past, examining the present, and inferring about the future. I will embark on a journey of self- and cultural understanding, by repositioning myself between time and space, aiming to “confer new meaning on the past in light of the present” (Freeman, 1993, p.225) and on the present in light of the past (Barakat, 2016).

### **Autoethnography as *Currere***

Autoethnography as a genre challenges the existence of only one truth, and resists the claim of “objective research”, the notion of grand theories, and questions the necessity and importance of generalization (Bochner, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Goodall, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Goodall argues that--

A good autoethnography completely dissolves any idea of distance, doesn't produce 'findings,' isn't generalizable, and only has credibility when self-reflexive, and authority when richly vulnerable...When it is done well, we can learn previously unspoken, unknown things about culture and communication from it. (1998, p. 2)

Autoethnography values reflection on individuals' experiences; accordingly, in this essay, I will refer to Pinar's (2004) framework for the method of *currere* as I proceed with this autoethnography. Pinar (2004, p. 47) describes *currere* as “complicated conversation with oneself and others” . . . in the social reconstruction of the public sphere. Adopting Pinar's (1975, 2004, 2012) four benchmarks framework, I will follow

“(1) the regressive, where I will tell my story; (2) the progressive, where I will imagine future possibilities; (3) the analytical, where I will analyze the relationship between past, present, and future; and finally (4) the synthetical where I will use the knowledge gained from steps 1, 2, and 3 to frame the learned life lessons” (Barakat, 2016, p. 4).

### **Telling My Story**

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)  
(Whitman, 1892, para 51)*

As I tell my story, I situate myself in a post structural stance, recognizing that “(self)knowledge can only ever be tentative, contingent, and situated” (Gannon, 2006, p. 474), and that self is a collection of many fragmented identities that, at times, are at odds. These conflicting multiple identities allow for reflection and multiplicity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

I am an Egyptian woman who was born and raised as part of the Muslim majority in Cairo, Egypt. My mother (who was also my role model) together with a diverse group of strong impactful women influenced the development of my feminist identity. My dad, a mechanical engineer and a General in the Egyptian army, together with my brother and my husband supported me throughout my journey to self-discovery. I was born in the mid-1960s, and grew up in Heliopolis, which was an upper middle class neighborhood with relatively high rise ecstatically pleasing residential buildings and Indian Laurel and Royal Poinciana trees on both sides of the streets. The English school, where I received all my K-12 education, was an accurate reflection of the Heliopolis culture. A unique, secular, co-education, private language school uncommon among a myriad of Catholic or public single-sex schools. My schoolmates’ parents

looked and dressed the same way, all our homes were very similar, and our families' values matched: open mindedness, moderation, a healthy appreciation of responsible freedom and a respect for tradition and cultural morals and norms (Barakat, in press).

Sheltered by my school's magnificent campus with its majestic buildings, rumored to have been standing since the early years of the British occupation, I spent my formative years engaging in debates in classrooms, attending school gatherings in the assembly hall, singing in the school's choir, proudly displaying my art creations on classroom and corridor walls, and most of all playing basketball on the many outdoor courts. I was a good student, always a member of the highest achieving few and a permanent resident of the elite "class A" group. However, or maybe because of that, I did not stand out! I spent my years in the elementary, preparatory and secondary stages nicely blending with and camouflaged by the majority of peers, and only clearly visible to a selected few good friends (Barakat, in press).

In contrast to the homogeneous nature of my school and neighborhood, my parents' families background was somewhat different. My maternal grandparents resided in Zezina, Alexandria. My grandfather (a supreme court judge) held my grandmother in very high regard; he only referred to her as "El Hanem", a title reserved for women of high social stature. She was a well-educated and sophisticated woman who spoke French fluently, had an impeccable sense of fashion, and an exquisite taste in home decor. She was a charismatic community leader who contributed to multiple charities and organizations. Competing with her for the title of 'Alpha female' of the household was "Amma<sup>1</sup>" Zeinab, the house keeper and nanny who helped raise my

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<sup>1</sup> Amma: slang for "mother" in upper Egypt

mom and two uncles. Amma Zeinab never received formal schooling; she was a single woman who rejected the authority of a husband because she had to support her family and was the sole breadwinner for her many nieces and nephews. The matriarch of her family, she was also loved, respected and even feared by my mom and uncles. Amma never allowed herself to sit in my grandmother's presence, thus acknowledging the difference in stature; however, the power struggle between the two of them was very real, and all of us learned to hide whenever a face off loomed on the horizon. These two, very different yet similarly strong and outspoken women, were my first found evidence that there was no "one size fits all feminism," and that strong women came in all shapes and forms and from all walks of life. They were also in clear contrast to my timid and soft spoken paternal grandmother (Barakat, in press).

My paternal grandparents lived in Shamshira, a beautiful small village on the Rosetta branch of the Nile in Kafr El Sheikh governorate. I remember fondly our family gatherings during the holidays with my many uncles, aunts, and cousins. It was always fascinating to watch my dad and uncles change dialects whenever they got together; it was as if they were bilingual within the boundaries of the same language! As we grew older the patriarchal nature of Shamshira became more obvious to me, the subtle sexist comments and suggested gender roles became explicit and stated, but even in Shamshira, my grandpa supported my aunt until she became the first and only young woman in the family with a college degree back in the fifties (Barakat, in press).

During my early exposure to the variances between both my families, I had developed an awareness of cultural differences and an appreciation for diversity. I bragged about understanding life in the village to my city-bound friends who were

always fascinated by my stories. I used to imitate my dad and uncles' dialect and was very proud of my family's roots. My mom, encouraged my interest in diversity as she possessed a talent to reach out to people from all walks of life and form meaningful relationships within all Egyptian sub-cultures. She also transferred to me her powerful enchantment with Egyptian proverbs, which accurately reflected the intricate cultural norms and values.

***A Vignette: We are not in America Here! (May 1980, Cairo, Egypt)***

*I set my civics book aside with a sigh of relief; "Finally," I thought, "the school year is coming to an end and tomorrow is my last exam." I rushed to the balcony where I knew I would find my mom and dad peacefully enjoying the pleasant breath of a May night. Our apartment was on the seventh floor of a tall and beautiful building in Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt. You could see my entire life from our balcony! Two blocks away, sitting majestically was my school; and in the turnabout was the metro train which took me to the sports' club where I had played basketball for years. Excitedly, I asked my parents for permission to go out with my friends from school after the final exam. My parents exchanged one of their meaningful, subtle looks, which my brother and I knew very well, and then my dad casually asked, "Are any of your teachers going?" "No!" I protested; we were in tenth grade and really did not need any teachers to chaperone! My dad calmly stated that I could only go if one of my teachers would be present and he firmly ended the discussion by stating that "we were not in America." Little did my dad and I know that I would be spending most of my adult life in America, striving to bridge the two cultures. (Barakat, 2016, p. 6)*

My parents were well educated progressive people who encouraged my brother and me to play sports and provided us with endless *chaperoned* opportunities to socialize with young people our age. I was seldom denied anything that my brother was permitted to do; however, my dad used the "*we are not in America here*" whenever I requested something that was culturally unacceptable! A statement which echoed in my mind throughout my life. I remember thinking about it the first time I set foot in Washington, D.C. and contemplating, "well, I am in America, dad the land of the free, where girls reign" (well, that is a story for another time). And I remember thinking about

it when I held my beautiful American/Egyptian daughters in my arms for the first time, thinking that I needed to come up with a new “parental conclusive-phrase” to help me end lengthy arguments if/when I needed to.

### **My Identity as a Feminist**

Even though I, personally, have not been subjected to any injustice as a girl or a young woman, I was very aware of the patriarchal nature of the culture in Egypt. As a teenager I became aware that “gender is not an ‘innocent’ social category or an unimportant aspect of our identity. Instead, it may open or close doors in our lives, and limit or broaden our responsibilities to live our lives to the fullest” (Jarviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkö, 2003, p. 6). I was very angry at the discriminatory practices against women, some of which were subtle while others were very pronounced and institutional.

Even though the Egyptian constitution granted women equal rights of education, employment, equal pay, equal political rights, and so forth, women were not proportionately represented in top leadership positions. Also there was a limited symbolic representation of women in every government (an unspoken quota of appointed ministers), and very few members of the parliament were women (Barakat, 2016). In the social realm, men held honorary authority over women, so a woman’s father, brother, and husband had some control over her life. For example, until the year 2000, Egyptian women needed their husband’s written consent to travel outside the country. “Because of my perception of marginalization of women in my culture, my identity as a feminist was developed at a very early age, and was and remains to be my primary identity” (Barakat, 2016, p. 7).

Feminism means different things to different people; feminism can be defined as (1) the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities; (2) organized activity in support of women's rights and interests. Harding stated that the "definition of feminism does not come from books or a particular movement. It comes from a society; it comes from an ancestry and a bloodline of women who are not children of the Western-feminist movement" (2000, p.11). There is no "one size fits all feminism," where all women are expected to abide by the same rules and confirm to specific expectations (Chaudhry, 1997; Hamdan, 2012; Harding, 2000).

I perceive myself as a feminist who is aware of and who advocates for women's inherent rights. However, people in the United States assume that I was and continue to be oppressed; being an Egyptian/Arab/Muslim woman is perceived as a sure prescription for oppression. This is a prevalent stereotype, and "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2012, p. 5).

Even though women in Egypt face inequality, we are strong, tenacious, hard workers, fierce mothers, and are very outspoken. There are more women with college degrees than men, and in many families, women are the main breadwinners. In the political arena, more Egyptian women vote than men across ages. So we are pursuing our rights from a place of strength and resistance, not a place of compliance and victimization. Therefore, I, alongside the many strong Egyptian women who influenced the emergence of my feminist identity, might not fit the common criteria for feminism. But we are aware, resistant, and in pursuit of our equality. (Barakat, 2016, p. 8)

### **My Identity as a Muslim**

Since self-identity is developed through social processes, "Unlike my identity as a woman and a feminist, which emerged and developed in spurts and peaks, and was fueled by frustration and resistance, my Muslim identity developed peacefully, steadily,

and quietly” (Barakat, 2016, p. 9). Growing up in Egypt, where 85% of the population are Muslims, my identity as a Muslim was protected; I was never vulnerable because I was a Muslim, and Islam was never threatened in Egypt. Being a Muslim was easy and habitual to the extent that I never had to think or talk about it. So I was *Muslimah* . . . what did that mean? I was taught that good Muslims are “those who spend in ease as well as in adversity and those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men. And Allah loves the doers of good (to others)” (Holy Quran, 2011, 3:134).

### **My Identity as an Educator**

I received my bachelor’s degree in Architecture from the faculty of engineering at Ein Shams University in Cairo, but later on I made a career change to education. Architects and educators have much in common: both professions require critical thinking, problem solving skills, creativity, a focus on the big picture while managing details, and an emphasis on context and culture. I worked as a teacher in the U.S., which allowed me to combine my personal and professional experiences to educate my colleagues and my students about my culture. I also worked as a principal of an American school in Cairo, Egypt, where I had to navigate through many cultural bumps, cross-cultural conflicts, and administrative and educational challenges, experiences which helped me develop into a culturally competent educational leader. Now in my third career as a university professor at a large public university in the U.S., I continue to sail between places, spaces and times, and the personal and professional for me always merge into a general vision of understanding, acceptance, and toleration.

### **Imagining Future Possibilities**

The future of Muslim students in the U.S. will be affected by their social associations within their educational institutions. “This future could depict a broad spectrum of possibilities; from perfectly integrated productive citizens to totally alienated, angry, and destructive individuals, and every combination in between” (Barakat, 2016, p. 14). In fact, we are already witnessing some of these projections. Even though the exact number of Muslims in the U.S. is hard to predict, because efforts to track religion were abandoned in the mid 1950s (United States Census Bureau, 2001); however, population estimates of Muslims in the U.S. varies between 1.8 to 7 million (Pluralism Project, 2003; Fienberg & Murray, 2001), or approximately 1% of the total population (Mohamed, 2016). The number of Muslims among college students is proportionately higher than the numbers within the general population (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

Cole and Ahmadi stated that “being Muslim does have an impact on the kinds of experiences students have while in college” (2010, p. 134) and that Muslim students reported lower educational satisfaction but engaged in more diversity related activities than Christian or Jewish students (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Engaging in diversity related activities could suggest an effort to gain openness and understanding of others who are different. That being said, Muslim students report that their religious needs are seldom understood and often ignored (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). There is a positive relationship between religious identity (knowing oneself and having direction) and academic success (Bryant, 2007). Accordingly,

helping students develop a religious identity could have a positive effect on students’ educational outcomes, perhaps limited to those who desire such religious growth. This also assumes that institutional agents can facilitate or

provide opportunities for such growth to take place within a religiously diverse campus environment. (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010, p. 135)

When I felt that my Muslim identity was threatened, it became my primary and defining self. I had not thought much about being a Muslim until I moved to the U.S, where Islam was perceived as a marginal religion. Now that Islam has moved from just being marginalized to being demonized and attacked by many politicians and by the media, an additional responsibility is placed on educators and educational institutions to recognize and support Muslim students and to foster platforms for understanding and acceptance (Barakat, 2016).

### **Analyzing the Relationship between Past, Present, and Future**

After 9/11, Muslim students in the U.S. faced many challenges. Now that islamophobia had spread in an unprecedented fashion to the point where people call Falafel “Sharia food,” politicians call for surveillance of “Muslim neighborhoods” and advocate denying refuge to victims of war and displacement because of their faith, and where Islam is attacked and depicted as religion of violence and terror, would Muslim students be courageous enough to step up and try to reach out and educate others about their culture? Or would they try to keep a low-profile and try to be as invisible as possible? As a self-identified social justice educational leader, I find myself struggling with the same questions. I am very outspoken about women’s rights and about racial, social, and gender injustices. I strive to advocate for all marginalized populations; however, I have doubts about how to approach and handle issues of prejudice against Muslims. As a university professor, I hold some expert and referent power but as a Muslim I feel a vulnerability that restrains my actions, thus confirming what Hall suggested: “identity is composed of not a single, but of several, sometimes

contradictory or unresolved, identities” (1992, p. 277). As an educator, I want to forcefully, head on, challenge discrimination in all its shapes and forms including that against Muslims, but as a Muslim myself, I, sometimes, am reluctant and concerned about my own biases and vulnerability.

Is being a minority a sin? Is it a virtue to belong to the majority? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that culturally diverse students are afforded positive educational experiences? Is it the student’s responsibility to reach out to the majority, or is it the majority’s responsibility to embrace minorities? These are important questions for educators to reflect on as I share a quote by Cornel West: “Of course, the aim of a constitutional democracy is to safeguard the rights of the minority and avoid the tyranny of the majority.”

### **Framing the Learned Life Lessons**

Autoethnographers argue that researchers’ self-reflection on their positionality inspires others to reflect and critique their own life experience and interactions with others and to question their perceptions of self and identity (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goodall, 1998).

Reflecting on my journey from being part of the majority to becoming a minority overnight was a powerful experience. I found myself in unfamiliar territory...Being part of the majority comes with privilege, confidence, and a sense of comfort; it comes with power, and with power comes responsibility! (Barakat, 2016, p. 16)

Even though this autoethnography posed more questions than answers, I hope that it would help educators understand the important role which they can play in supporting the learning and development of Muslim students as well as all minority students. Now more than ever before, in a world where conflict, violence, mistrust, phobias and misunderstanding are widespread, humanity needs to promote understanding,

enlightenment and education—both formal and informal—in order to reject prejudice (Barakat, 2016). The world needs more people to take on the responsibility of bridging cultures, and who could be better suited for this important role than educators?

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