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Modesty, liberty, equality: Negotiations of gendered principles of piety among Muslim women who cover

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Abstract

This article draws on a qualitative research study with Muslim women who cover to investigate how they represent the Islamic virtue of modesty. The article details findings that Muslim women elaborate modesty as an autonomous labour of ethical self-regulation and a relational virtue that is concerned with devotion to family and the de-sexualisation of day-to-day social interactions. It argues from analysis of representational content and dynamics that these accounts of modesty involve processes of affirming as well as resisting aspects of the liberal norms of equality and agency that define Muslim veiling in the eyes of others.

Introduction

In *Politics of Piety* (2005), Saba Mahmood's groundbreaking ethnographic study of

women's involvement in a piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood recounted the

following verse from the Quran that was read out in the mosque her participants

attended:

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their
> chastity, and not to display their charms [in public] beyond what may be
> apparent thereof; hence let them draw their head-covering over their bosoms.
> (verse 31, Sūrat al-Nisā'). (p. 101)

Mahmood's purpose in *Politics of Piety* was not to evaluate gendered Islamic virtues

and practices as such. Rather, it was to elaborate a form of female religious

subjectivity that was disinterested in liberal norms of valuing and had its own

plentiful cultural grounding. Mahmood refused to analytically reduce her subjects'

'heterogeneity of life' to the 'flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of

domination' (p. 174). At the same time, Mahmood was not indifferent to the feminist

concerns about covering that this Quranic verse raises. Reflecting on the values that

her participants sought to accomplish, she wrote: 'While all of the Islamic virtues are

gendered (in that their measure and standards vary when applied to men versus

women), this is particularly true of shyness and modesty (al-hayā')' (p. 156).

For researchers interested in diverse cultural contexts of female Muslim

religiosity, *Politics of Piety* constitutes a fruitful starting-point. Empirical studies in

non-Muslim majority contexts have drawn on Mahmood's theorization of religious

subjectivity to address women's piety (and agency) through the phenomenon of

revivalist movements (Jacobsen, 2011; Jouili, 2011) – that is, movements

emphasizing a return to scripture and revival of a more pure or 'real' Islam against a

more 'traditional' cultural Islam (Fadil, 2017). However, few studies have directly

explored the meanings of gendered Islamic virtues or the contents of piety among Muslim women who have faith but not necessarily a revivalist commitment. Unless theorized as part of a fundamental 'agentic' submission to faith, it seems that gendered Islamic virtues pose dilemmas for researchers who are doubtless wary (and weary) of retreading debates about gender relations in Islam (see Bilge, 2010; Hemmings and Treacher-Kabesh, 2013).

In this article, I directly consider the content of the virtue of modesty among a diverse sample of second-generation Muslim women in the U.K. and Denmark. Applying the concept of dialogicality, as used in social representations theory, I show how, in talk about covering and modesty, participants engage, resist and blend systems of ideas, beliefs and values at the intersections of the heritage of their immigrant parents, their community and religious contexts, and the liberal-secular environments they have grown up within. Engaging with Mahmood (2005) and subsequent research on revivalist piety explicating that 'God-consciousness had to govern all subsequent positions, including those issued in the domain of gender relations' (Jouili, 2011: p. 61), I detail how, in contrast, my participants' everyday ideas of modesty and covering enfold liberal norms of gender equality and individual autonomy while not relinquishing their religious significance. Through this, I make an argument for the usefulness of the conceptual framework used here in bringing everyday religious reasoning to the attention of feminist psychology.

I begin by considering the contemporary context for Muslim covering in Europe and specifically the research contexts of Denmark and the U.K. before turning to how scholarship has grappled with the complex issues of gender, religion and agency that covering raises. I use the terms covering and veiling to refer inclusively to different

practices of covering and am guided throughout by the terms that my participants used.

Politics of covering

The 'veiled Muslim woman' is a heavily burdened figure in contemporary debates in Europe about multiculturalism and citizenship (Bilge, 2010). Deployed as a symbol of fundamental otherness, female covering is read as (self-evidently) a tool of oppression and an expression of the threat that Muslim minorities pose to gender equality and other liberal values (Bilge, 2010; Phillips & Saharso, 2008; Scott, 2007). Liberal feminist thought is critiqued for propagating this reading and sustaining a new form of Orientalism (Afshar, 2008) that has informed aggressive political interventions to 'save' the Muslim woman (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Brah & Phoenix, 2004), both internationally, as part of the 'war on terrorism' (Fernandez, 2009; Kapur, 2002), and nationally, in the form of legal regulation of covering, most prominently in France, the Netherlands and Belgium (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014; Phillips & Saharso, 2008) and, most recently, Denmark (Milne, 2018).

The empirical research for the current study took place in Copenhagen, Denmark, and London, U.K. These sites were chosen as belonging to socio-political contexts that are both similar and different in some key respects. Both Denmark and the U.K. are European liberal democracies that have over recent years experienced a public and policy 'backlash' against multiculturalism and immigration that has often targeted Islam and the place of Muslim minorities (Meer, Mouritsen, Faas, & de Witte, 2015). As in other European countries, the rights of women have played a role in this backlash and the practice of covering has been used to implicate the resistance

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of minority communities to liberal-secular values (Bilge, 2010; Joppke, 2009; Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014). At the same time, neither country has had debates as prominent and divisive as in France and elsewhere (see Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014; Scott, 2007).

The socio-political contexts of Denmark and the U.K. are also different in some interesting respects. The history of British concepts of citizenship and multiculturalism may be contrasted with the history of Danish civic nationalism, with Denmark characterized as having historically rejected more aspects of multiculturalism than the U.K. in favour of shared civic values and the protectionist principles of a small welfare state (Meer et al., 2015; Mouritsen & Olsen, 2011). The aftermath of the publication in 2005 of the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad was observed to have 'exploded' this issue and deepened a sense of the irreconcilability between Muslim identity and Danish values (Meer et al., 2015). The recent vote by the Danish parliament to ban the wearing in public of the niqab and other garments covering the face attests to this climate (Milne, 2018).

In a previous article from the current study (Chapman, 2016), I reported findings that, as participants claimed national belonging, the women in the U.K. foregrounded ideas of freedom of expression and multiculturalism, while the women in Denmark foregrounded ideas of equality of social protection and educational opportunity as well as freedom of expression. This revealed inflections of both similarity and difference. Participants in both countries elaborated available inclusive concepts of national belonging 'to dispute and reframe the exclusionary discourse of citizenship that underlays stigmatization of the veil' (2016, p. 363). (It may be conjectured that this would be a more burdened project for Muslim women in countries with more polarizing debates about national values, such as France: see

Bilge, 2010; Scott, 2007). At the same time, these processes were inflected by different emphases in national discourses on belonging and values, revealing the contextualized nature of resistance to forces of stigma and exclusion. In the current article, I report an analysis of participants' representations of modesty specifically, an analysis guided by the understanding that the development of ideas of modesty is likely not an insulated spiritual endeavor but also subject to diverse influences of context.

Scholarship on Muslim covering and the 'fraught territory' of piety

There is much scholarship and empirical study of Muslim covering in different contexts that resolutely dispute reductionist readings of the practice. Central texts in Muslim majority contexts have shown how the veil gathers new symbolism through changing political contexts (Ahmed, 1992; El Guindi, 1999) and highlighted its role in expressing an Islamic, national identity in resistance to 'imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture' (El-Guindi, 1999, p. 184). Studies in Western contexts have also challenged reductionist readings through illuminating the many, often co-existent functions and meanings of covering for identity and communication. They have detailed its role in resisting sexual objectification (Droogsma, 2007), communicating Muslim identity (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013), resisting exclusion (Koyuncu Lorasdaği, 2009), and expressing new cross-cultural identities (Tarlo, 2010; Williams & Vashi, 2007).

However, while the role of covering in communicating Muslim identity and expressing pride in religious identity is certainly recognized in the literature, few empirical studies in Western contexts have looked in-depth at the meanings of gendered religious virtues that attach to covering. The scholarly reticence towards

examining religious reasoning may be explained by a liberal conceptualization of agency in terms of pre-social autonomy and the free-willed individual (Bilge, 2010; Hemmings & Treacher-Kabesh, 2013). Hemmings and Treacher-Kabesh write:

> One key issue is the over-association of agency with *choice* even in work that seeks to critique the suturing of agency to Western ideals of autonomy. Thus it is common for women to be thought of as agentic if they veil as part of resistance to Western imperialism, but as anything from less agentic to pure victims of patriarchal culture if they veil for religious reasons. (Hemmings & Treacher-Kabesh, 2013, p. 31)

Bilge (2010) argues that many existing studies of Muslim covering reveal this conceptual partiality in their explanation of the practice in terms of resistance only – to Western consumerist culture, sexual objectification and stereotyping of Islam. Similarly, in her study of religiosity among orthodox Jewish Israeli women, Avishai (2008) observes that 'the frame of strategic compliance – the claim that women comply with religious prescriptions in pursuit of extra-religious ends – allows students of religion to discuss agency without entering the fraught territory of religious beliefs' (p. 420). While accounts of covering as strategic or variously functional may serve as an important corrective to the 'colonial feminism' that equates it with oppression (Phipps, 2014), they risk erasing women's religiosity (Bilge, 2010).

Mahmood (2005) provided an account of submission to faith that challenged the equation of agency with resistance and laid the theoretical ground for further studies of women's piety, both in the context of revivalist Islam (Jacobsen, 2011; Jouli, 2011) and other conservative faiths such as Orthodox Judaism (Avishai, 2008). Mahmood applied Butler's (1990, 1997) concept of performativity to explore the mosque participants' understanding that it is through 'repeated performance of virtuous practices (norms in Butler's terms) that the subject's will, desire, intellect, and body

come to acquire a particular form' (2005, p. 163). Mahmood described the labour involved in cultivating virtues through the practice of covering and thereby delineated a form of religious agency uncoupled from resistance and ideas of individual autonomy. Subsequent scholarship has built on this to move beyond the binary of 'subordination' versus 'emancipation' in order to appreciate 'different forms of self-fashionings' through piety (Jouili, 2011).

The present study is informed by Mahmood's (2005) rejection of a reading of gendered religious practices and virtues as necessarily marking passivity or 'a reluctance to act' (p. 174). However, this study not only deals with a different empirical context but holds that a different theoretical framework is required in order to explore this context. It recognizes that ethnographic immersion in dedicated practices of piety is not addressed to, and therefore does not necessarily shed light on, dynamics of minority identity and everyday religious reasoning outside a fundamental dedication to faith. Theoretically, it may also be observed that, in her commitment to elucidating practices of piety, Mahmood risks discounting the significance of inter-subjective dynamics of reasoning and practice, and 'does not consider sufficiently the implications of the dialogic nature of the processes of resignification' (Ismail, 2006, p. 603). This study seeks to address these dynamics. There is scholarship that helps orient the study here, such as accounts of how new religious identifications in European Islam engage 'liberal affects and sensibilities' (Jacobsen, 2011) and express individualism (Cesari, 2006; Peter, 2006), and studies of Muslim covering specifically that illuminate its negotiation between cultural contexts (Dwyer, 1999; Tarlo, 2010; Williams & Vashi, 2007). Okuyan and Curtin (in press) use the term 'in-betweenness' to describe the experiences of pious Muslim women in Turkey and their 'ambivalent positioning between conservatively religious and secular groups' (p.).

However, it is the conceptual framework of dialogicality, as used in social representations theory, that enables this study's analysis of the implications for covering and its meanings of the 'the dialogic nature of the processes of resignification' (Ismail, 2006, p. 603).

Theoretical and analytical framework

The study was guided by the framework of social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961/2008) and its account of how knowledge and identity are constructed in context through social relations and the negotiations of difference they entail (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Duveen, 2001). Much research in the field of social representations is concerned with the content and comparison of systems of social knowledge. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) write that 'we take it for granted that research on social representations will continue to foreground the comparative analysis of common sense' (p. 175). The aim of this study is to explore the content of 'common sense' representations of Muslim covering but also to elucidate representation or knowing as a socio-cognitive activity that develops through social interaction and is potentially transformed through 'knowledge encounters' (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

In her work on social representations, Marková (2003) describes dialogicality as 'the ontological characteristic of the human mind to conceive, create and communicate about social realities through mutual engagement of the *Ego* and the *Alter* in thinking and communication' (p. xvi). The concept of dialogicality is at the heart of this study's exploration of how covering and modesty are conceived, created and communicated in the social encounter – an encounter that takes place not only in conversation but also in everyday interactions and experiences in conditions of social hybridity (Howarth, 2002b). The study's analysis attends to the various ways that

participants negotiate the competing representations of covering that surround them, including those that threaten and stigmatize.

The study's epistemological commitment to the dialogical construction of meaning necessitated attention to how 'the researcher is, in one way or another, implicated in the research process' (Willig, 2013, p. 12). In this study, all interviews were conducted by the author, a white British, non-Muslim, female researcher. This difference of social identity demanded care in relation to how the research encounter could impact on participants already 'marginalised and "othered"' (Khawaja & Mørck, 2009, p. 28). At the same time, the analysis recognized that relations of difference in the research encounter can be illuminative of the co-construction of meaning. Howarth (2002b) observes that 'difference' is 'not simply a methodological problem' but 'the fabric of day-to-day life in today's hybrid societies' (p. 30). It is precisely theorization of the consequences of social hybridity and relations of difference that directed this study and informed the analytical perspective throughout.

Methods

Design and sample

The study's objective was to examine how, in dialogue, Muslim women construct ideas of modesty and, in doing so, negotiate different representations of covering and the norms of valuing they carry. The study focused on recruiting for interview Muslim women who were second generation and therefore likely managing a complex of social relationships and value systems.

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Data was gathered through individual and group interviews with a total of 38 Muslim women. A key reason for using group interviews was to gather together women who were friends in order to facilitate a safe space for free-flowing conversation and generate an alternative research encounter to the dyadic encounter. The women in the friendship groups were usually of a similar background, although they brought different experiences of covering. For example, one group comprised women with a South Asian family background (either Pakistani or Bangladeshi) who were studying together at a London university. They all wore the headscarf, but some gave an account of starting or being 'forced' to cover at a young age, while others told of choosing this for themselves later in life.

Both forms of interview were guided by an interview schedule encompassing four main topics: participants' first experiences of covering and the context in their families and communities; their experiences of covering in different contexts and other people's responses; the meanings that the practice held in their lives now; and their responses to public debates. While both forms of interview were guided to cover these topics, the individual interviews enabled more in-depth exploration of participants' constructions of self, while the group interviews provided a good resource for examining how, in the words of Howarth (2002a), 'representations are manipulated' as identities are 'negotiated and challenged at an inter-subjective level' (p. 159). Nonetheless, both forms of interview were understood to constitute 'a joint venture, a sharing and negotiation of realities' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 45) and were approached in this study as yielding insights through relations of similarity and difference – in the encounter both between friends and between participant and researcher (see Howarth, 2002b; Khawaja & Mørck, 2009). As discussed in the section on the theoretical and analytical framework, attention to these relations in the

interviews was part of the analysis, guided by the understanding of representation as a relational, socio-cognitive activity (Jovchelovitch, 2007). This is addressed further in procedures for analysis.

The aim for recruitment was to 'maximize the variety of representations' by achieving diversity of backgrounds, occupations and experiences (Bauer & Aarts, 2002, p. 33) with a view to assessing to what extent ideas of covering and modesty were shared or diversified. Participants were recruited through diverse routes, including employment networks, places of education, mosques and community projects. Snowball sampling was also used, in particular to recruit for group interviews. Participants' occupations were varied and included (in decreasing order of frequency) employment in various sectors, educational study at different levels, family work, and vocational training. Just over a third of the women were married and most lived with close family. The age range of participants was eighteen to forty-five years old, with the majority of participants aged in the range from mid-twenties to late-thirties. Most of the women in the study were raised in households where covering was practiced and a majority had started to cover before the age of sixteen.

Different histories of migration to the U.K. and Denmark (see Meer et al., 2015) are reflected in participants' profiles. Most of the Danish participants had ethnic roots in Turkey, North Africa, South Asia and the Middle East. Many were daughters of those who migrated to Denmark as part of guest-worker programmes and subsequent family reunification policies, while others had parents who came as refugees. The ethnic background of many of the U.K. participants was South Asian, reflecting the ethnicity of the largest Muslim population in the U.K. The second largest group was from countries in the Middle East, reflecting other significant Muslim communities in the U.K.

In terms of the practice of covering, the aim was also to achieve diversity in order to explore how ideas were shared or diversified across a range of practices. Most participants wore a headscarf but forms and style of dress varied. For example, some participants wore a black headscarf with a full-length black outer dress or jilbab, while others wore a more decorative scarf with fashionable clothes and accessories. A few participants wore full body covering with the niqab, which covers the face but leaves the eyes clear, while a few participants did not cover. The latter were included in the study for the reason that it was a significant issue to them, for example because they were considering covering.

Procedures for analysis

A thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) of transcribed data was conducted, aided by the qualitative analysis software NVivo 10. Thematic network analysis involves a cumulative process of coding and interpretation of data that yields first organizing themes and then global themes that are 'both a summary of the main themes and a revealing interpretation of the texts' (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389).

The coding process was directed by the theoretical framework described. Two levels of codes were developed to capture dialogical dynamics and the difference between 'using' and 'mentioning' a representation, which Howarth (2006) delineates by asking:

> [W]hen are we critically aware of significant social representations in our encounters and practices (and so possibly come to develop, transform or reject these), and when do we act within a representational field as our accepted construction of reality? (p. 68)

The first level of coding captured representations of covering that participants 'mentioned' as circulating in their lives but did not accept. These included stigmatizing representations and familial and community representations. In terms of

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the former, for example, participants narrated their experience of receiving 'pitying' looks and comments because of their covering, and told stories about people's assumptions of their lack of autonomy. In terms of the latter, participants described how covering was associated in their household with traditional regimes of gender and sexuality. For example, they told stories about how, once they started to cover, they were expected to behave more quietly, dress more modestly, and play separately from male friends and cousins. These accounts were coded to capture key representational content. For example, the codes developed for stigmatizing representations were: *Veil as oppression*, *Veil as threat*, and *Veil as racialized difference*. These codes were also applied to other content in the interviews, such as where the researcher's questions were about stigma or conveyed an assumption about covering and its meaning.

The second level of coding attended to the meanings that the participants 'used' or claimed for themselves. For example, the codes 'veil as choice' and 'veil as individually negotiated' captured ways in which participants claimed veiling as a chosen, self-determined practice; and the codes 'modesty as a personal ethical value' and 'veil as self-regulation' captured ways in which participants represented veiling and modesty in terms of a regime of ethical self-development.

The two levels of coding enabled an overview of dialogical dynamics of representation, such as the recurring dynamic whereby participants narrated how covering is represented as oppressive and then resisted by asserting individual choice and autonomy. It also highlighted how these dynamics occurred as participants responded to the researcher's questions (for example, when questions were directly about stigma or conveyed an assumption) or to the issue being raised in group discussion. The two levels of coding therefore facilitated an analysis that attended to

how relations in the research encounter illuminate the co-construction of meaning (Howarth, 2002b).

The process of coding and analysis yielded organizing and global themes that were both a summary of meaningful representational content and an account of the dialogical dynamics that produced them. The global theme described and discussed in this article is 'veil as piety reframed'. In brief, this theme captures how participants' constructions of veiling and specifically the virtue of modesty both resisted and drew on competing representations of covering, including those that stigmatize.

Findings

Introduction

The analysis revealed some differences between the research fields of Copenhagen and London. Of relevance here is the finding that accounts of wider community pressures and regulation related to covering were more prevalent in the interviews with the women in Copenhagen. For example, Sana (Copenhagen) told the following story about how a friend wearing a headscarf was approached at a music gig by some male Muslim acquaintances:

> [T]hey said, in a loving tone, but like, you shouldn't be, it's odd that you're standing here in front of me. And she was like, why? You're here as well. They link it to something, she is more religious than me, she's not supposed to be here, but they think it's fine that they're in the club themselves.

There were no equivalent stories in the London interviews. This finding may reflect social issues related to stratified forms of community settlement in Copenhagen. Researchers have, for example, drawn attention to polarized neighborhoods and

intragroup tensions within ethnic minority communities (Mørck, Hussain, & Møller-Andersen, 2013).

However, while this constituted a difference in narrative content, there was little difference between the research fields in terms of overall dynamics of representation and identity. That is, as with other narratives of unwelcome family or community regulation, participants went on to claim their individual autonomy, either through asserting their resistance to regulation or distancing themselves from direct experience of regulation. For example, after telling her story, Sana (Copenhagen) achieved the latter by emphasizing the values of freedom and gender equality that characterized her own upbringing in Denmark:

> It's like an indication of what kind of gender differences we are raised with here in Denmark and also from our home countries and the culture. There's a huge gender difference in society and that's the only reason I am stressing to you that I was not brought up unequal because the normal in my head is that girls are not allowed to do the same as boys are. And that's not what you see in the Danish culture and the Danish values.

Such ways of relating the self through overt claims to individual autonomy and gender equality were shared across the two research fields. This is meaningful in itself, suggesting common identity work that speaks to the tensions and negotiations of female Muslim belonging within European liberal democracies. The following sections address these shared processes as they present and discuss participants' representations of what covering and modesty mean to them. They are organized under the headings of the organizing themes from which the global theme was developed. Findings are discussed in relation to key analytical and theoretical issues.

Veil as piety

Nearly all the participants in this study emphasized that covering had religious significance for them. Ayesha (London) observed that 'the headscarf is something I wanted to do at a very simple level, it was something I wanted to do because it was a [religious] command.' She spoke about starting to wear the headscarf at the age of fifteen:

> But I started praying first, about a month beforehand, I woke up in the morning for dawn prayers and did all of that, and for a month I did that. In the beginning I didn't think about it. I didn't think, oh I am going to have to wear a headscarf. I just thought, I have to pray because that's the first obligation and then once I started doing that, I naturally, it just led down that path.

The theme of veil as piety is straightforward but significant. Bilge (2010) uses the term 'instrumentalist reductionism' to describe accounts of covering that reduce its function to cultural resistance and 'obliterate[s] religious reasons given by the majority of veiled women' (Bilge, 2010, p. 10). For most of the women in this study, covering was significant for a sense of (gendered) religious identity and had been for many years, often since childhood.

However, as Duveen (2001) observes, while identity is a 'way of making sense of the world' that provides a sense of stability, it is never static or uncontested (p. 264). Rather, it projects individuals into a 'social world marked by a complex set of relationships between social groups' (p. 267). This is particularly the case for the visible and burdened identity of covered Muslim women, as was evident in participants' accounts here. For example, Ayesha (London) recounted that when she went to university just after 9/11, dressed in 'the headscarf with the long dress, the jilbab', she experienced hostile responses and thereafter 'questioned the place of it in society and how you are perceived'. She reflected:

> I realised ok, people are going to be cutting off from me just because of the way I'm dressed. And so I started negotiating, that was the first time I guess I

started negotiating my dress. I started wearing skirts and tops to university with a headscarf just because I thought it has to be something they recognise.

The analysis showed that, just as style of covering was negotiated in response to others' representations, so too was its significance and meaning. Further, this negotiation engaged both outsiders' representations and family and community pressures and systems of values. These multiple aspects were particularly evident in the diverse exchanges of group interviews and are illustrated by the following extract from a London interview as the women, who all wore a form of headscarf, discussed public debates about veiling:

> Maryam: My mum, people might say that my mum was forced to wear the veil [niqab], but, no, it was her personal choice. After she went to hajj, she realised that she is much closer to Allah and that's why she wore it […] The Big Questions, the presenter, I don't know what his name is, but he is very sceptical. I watch the programme and I am always curious at the end of it because he's always sceptical whenever there's any question about Islam. He always says something negative. He never says anything positive. And he's always pushing the judgement onto other people. Everyone has a very negative image of women covering up, it's not that simple, they're not oppressed, they want to do it as part of their identity as well.
> Nadia: I mean, the whole idea of forcing, you don't enjoy it. For example, me, I decided to do it myself, my mum doesn't wear it, only me and some family members do it, and I enjoy it more, because I chose to do it. You feel yourself, like, you chose it, you made that decision, you respect it more. But when you get told to do it, you don't like, you don't respect it more. Especially when it happens at a young age, you're not culturally aware, you're not mature enough to understand the whole meaning behind it, the whole purity behind it.

Attention to the interplay of representations here reveals how the participants claimed a space of autonomous female religious identity as they engaged the implications of both stigmatizing representations ('it was her personal choice'; 'they're not oppressed': Maryam) and family and community pressures ('I chose to do it'; 'the whole idea forcing, you don't enjoy it': Nadia). It also shows how, in the quest to assert a positive identity, religious reasons for covering were not relinquished to a

functional account of the practice but rather anchored to claims of individual agency. For the participants in this study, religiosity was expressed in terms of an autonomous project, not in terms of a submission to faith that governs all domains, including gender relations. The next sections address how ideas of modesty specifically were elaborated both through and against liberal norms of valuing.

Modesty as ethical self-regulation

This theme captures how participants represented covering and modesty in terms of a labor for virtue. That is, modesty was represented as a struggled-for ethical principle (as opposed to a stable and prescribed regime of gendered norms of dress, behaviour and role). Covering was, in this view, an effortful practice that generated modesty as a virtue, as Sara (London) described:

> If I know I have this value, every time I look at myself in the mirror or walk in the street, I see that I wear a scarf and a long dress, I remind myself of my code of practice. When I see myself in a situation with a man, I remind myself, don't forget your modesty. It's for me. When I look at my hands, I see that I don't have long nails having sat for hours for a manicure. When I see my hands, I see plain hands and it reminds me in the workplace that I'm here to do a job and it's not a party.

This sense of ethical self-regulation through practice resounds with Mahmood's (2005) account of her participants' understandings that it is through 'repeated performance of virtuous practices (norms in Butler's terms) that the subject's will, desire, intellect, and body come to acquire a particular form' (p. 163). However, while Mahmood expounds this performativity in terms of dedicated submission to the demands of piety, the analysis here revealed a different aspect, which is that participants sought to communicate individual autonomy through showing that covering and ideas of modesty were not imposed on them (or pursued for others/men) but were chosen and practiced to fulfil their own sense of virtue.

Participants communicated this in a number of ways, including through repeated reiterations of covering as their 'choice'. For example, Sara (London) insisted that 'I don't follow people' and that it was a 'personal choice'. Participants often directly took on others' representations and insisted on the agency and gender equality they deny, as Farah (London) does here after volunteering to talk about the 'gender thing':

> There's always this thing that people see it as, why do women have to cover up and men get to do what they want? Surely, it's like a control thing. I think it's not about that and it's missing a key fact as well which is that men, Islamically, are encouraged to dress modestly and I feel very strongly that I do not wear the headscarf to protect myself from men at all. I don't see it like that at all (…) It's the same type of requirement, not that they cover their hair, but that they wear loose-fitting clothes, so they shouldn't be wearing skinny jeans or something really tight.

The emphasis on equivalent expectations of modesty for men was common in the interviews as women countered implications of inequality. Participants told comparable stories of others' assumptions of their lack of autonomy and subservience to men and then contested these assumptions. For example, Zahira (Copenhagen) recalled how her school principal called a meeting with her and her father to discuss her decision to not join a school trip. She described the moment she realized why this meeting had been arranged:

> Then I realised that, oh, he [the school principal] has this prejudice that it's my father telling me that I can't go. But actually my father didn't even know, I hadn't even told him about this trip because I had made my decision I didn't want to go. But I told my father, I told him that the principal wants to meet you and speak with you. Then we met with him and he asked him, why does she not want to go? And my dad said, I can't force her to go. If she wants to go, she can go. If she doesn't want to, she can, yeah. He asked me, why don't you want to go? And I told him exactly as I felt that I was convinced that this was not ok with my religion and I didn't want to do that. He told me, he asked me, what about the future? Is your religion always going to be in the way when you have to reach something and your religion is not ok with it? I said yes, because I am convinced about my religion.

Zahira described her 'shock' at realizing her school principal's 'prejudice' and went on to explain that covering and the values she held expressed her own religious journey and 'conscience'. Further, Zahira emphasized her (religious) autonomy in relation not only to her father and husband but also to religious groups in her community. She observed:

> [I]t's [my religious path] something personal because there are a lot of political groups and much more spiritual groups and I know a lot of people that are following these groups and are feeling much more obligated to the groups than to the religion. And I just found my own way, I think.

The analysis revealed many such points of resistance as women claimed religiosity and modesty in terms of a personal project that demanded both autonomy and equality in gender relations. Participants' accounts of this project disclose both a struggle and conversation that encompasses family and cultural traditions, new forms of piety and liberal values and norms.

The engagement of liberal values and norms can be seen in many participants' resistance to the idea that covering represses their sexuality, a stance that could seem contradictory to the embrace of modesty as a virtue. For example, as Amena (London) responded to a question about the niqab, she accentuated her own meaning-making in relation to the hijab and observed:

> I guess when I was trying to understand the definition of the hijab and making it my own, it was very much against the idea of the Muslim woman being modest, being preserved and reserved, and all those things […] I feel like my sexuality isn't something that needs to be locked away.

However, the sexual agency claimed was elaborated not as a liberal right to sexual freedom but as a (religiously grounded) right to sexual fulfilment and equality in relationships. Indeed, Amena referred to 'hadiths about the Prophet advocating foreplay' to convey the significance she accorded to equality in sexual relations. While Amena was dressed in a way that accorded with traditional ideas of modesty

(she was, in her words, 'covered head to toe' in black), she emphasized that she covered not to fulfil a code of sexual modesty but to pursue her own principles concerning humility and the importance of people being valued for personal qualities over appearance.

The representation of modesty in terms of a (non-gendered) value of humility was a common position as participants resisted associations of covering with passivity, sexual repression and submission to men. For example, Farah (London) observed:

> Lots of people think it's to do with men looking at you but it's not. That's part of the reason essentially but the issue is about having a sense of humility. It's assumed that you will make that connection within yourself. You will feel slightly more humble and you won't create jealousy amongst people.

Many participants constructed modesty in this way as a non-gendered virtue – and one that they had personally negotiated and laboured for. In detailing their negotiations of meaning and the day-to-day performative aspects of covering and modesty, they countered stigma and conveyed (and often overtly drew attention to) their agency in making the hijab 'my own' (Amena: London). The analysis sheds light in this way on how, as they struggled for a positive identity that sustained their religious belief, the women integrated into their ideas of covering and modesty values of individual autonomy and gender equality.

Modesty as a relational virtue

Many participants talked about the significance of covering and the virtue of modesty in maintaining devotion to family and protecting marital relations and family stability. This way of representing modesty was not an alternative to the representation of modesty in terms of an autonomous ethical practice and non-gendered virtue of

humility, as detailed in the previous section. These themes co-existed in the interviews and were similarly inflected by resistance to representations of gender inequality and Muslim women's lack of agency. This is illustrated by the following extract from a dialogue between the researcher and Noura (London), who wore a niqab, about public debates about veiling:

> Researcher: So this idea that people have, that somehow it's about protecting you and that somehow privileges men over women, how do you respond to that kind of debate?
> Noura: About the niqab specifically?
> Researcher: Well, generally, actually.
> Noura: I think the niqab, the hijab, yes, it has a role to play in going some way to de-sexualize a context. What Islam, what Allah is trying to do, I believe, is to make it as easy as possible for people to live in a way and to conduct their life in a way that is modest, that is not harmful, where there's maximum benefit for everybody. So obviously, maybe, out of some actions, obviously adultery can break up the family and this, that and the other. And I think yes, the niqab, the hijab, goes some way to create a barrier to some of those things. Likewise, there are some things that men have to do, for example, they have to lower their gaze, there are some parts of their body that they must cover and so on and so forth (…) Men have their part to play and women have their part to play.

This extract shows how, in response to a question that confronts her with negative representations of veiling, Noura represented modesty in terms of a relational virtue that protects family and demands equivalent performance by men and women. Noura went on to speak about how covering also functions to protect women from sexual objectification and foster intimate non-competitive bonds with other women. This is not to suggest that participants reduced the practice to extra-religious ends in order to reject stigma. Rather, it is to show how different norms of valuing were enveloped into participants' accounts of covering and modesty as they reflected on the practice and responded to how others saw them. This illustrates how resistance and representation are entwined processes in the construction of meaning and identity (Duveen, 2001).

These processes were also evident in participants' efforts to show that the virtue of modesty does not limit women but rather creates respectful relations that affords women different kinds of freedom. For example, in response to a question about how Islam is represented, Mona (Copenhagen) raised a media story about gender relations that had recently received a lot of attention in Denmark:

> Mona: Actually there was a discussion about a teacher, a Muslim teacher, who would not shake hands with female students and she was like, she got really mad at him and was like "why are you shaking hands with the male ones and so on?" (…) I don't think it's disrespectful. I think it is really, really respectful. Actually, I really like those men if I have to be honest with you.
> Researcher: Because it's drawing, it's making some boundaries clear?
> Mona: Yeah, because it is showing that I really respect your gender. I don't want to put you in any awkward positions. I don't want to, you know, hold your hand and, you know, the way men are, you know. I have had a lot of teachers who were like "hello, dear, and how are you and so on," and I did not really like it because I thought it was really disrespectful because he doesn't know if I feel comfortable with him doing this, maybe I don't feel that way. Why is he giving himself the right to do this? (…)
> Researcher: So it's about understanding the context in which that takes place and not assuming that it means something, that it's rude?
> Mona: Yeah exactly, it does not have to be anything sexual or that she is dangerous to him or anything, I don't think so.
> Researcher: Okay.
> Mona: Also, the imam that I told you about in Aarhus who taught me the Quran. I really, really respect him too (…) He respected me and he talked to me and he listened and all these things, actually without even looking at me. I didn't find it disrespectful because he was like, yes, I hear what you say sister (…) There was not this embarrassing awkwardness between us, you know, the sexual thing there is between a man and a woman.

In telling the story about the teacher and student, Mona raised and contested a social representation linking Islam and gender inequality. Through her subsequent story about studying with the imam, Mona conveyed how 'modest' relations between men and women can afford women respect and agency in ways that sexualized encounters between men and women may not. She resisted representations designating Muslim women as oppressed by confronting their emancipatory assumptions and positing an alternative vision of modest gender relations.

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This approach would not, perhaps, convince feminist thinkers who read ideas of modesty as irredeemably oppressive but it is nonetheless concerned with autonomy, equality and respect. At times when women are marching in their thousands to challenge sexual harassment and norms of sexual interaction (Slawson, 2018), such a construction may have increasing liberatory resonance. Indeed, participants often gave an account of covering as functional in resisting a sexualised culture and the objectification of women. For example, Ghada (London) spoke of the headscarf's role in the following way:

> Just because we wear the scarf and just because the West talks about Islam, you might think we are suppressed but I realise that there is more value in Islam for women. It says that when you go out into society, don't let men use you any way they want. Have value for yourself (…) So at the end of the day, if I want to have respect for myself, I have to change because they [men] are not going to change. You have to look after yourself.

Here, Ghada oriented to negative representations ('you might think we are suppressed') and contested them by describing the function of covering in defying men's 'use' of women. Such framing of covering in terms of sexual politics was one of the ways in which participants challenged the representation of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman in opposition to the supposedly emancipated Western woman. The analysis showed that this framing sat by side by side with other ways of talking about covering and modesty. Recognition of the co-existence and interrelationship of themes is important, as it does not wrongly reduce covering to resistance or the achievement of extra-religious goals.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings here detail how participants' ideas of covering and modesty integrated liberal norms of individual agency and gender equality – norms that inform how others judge them and confront traditional regimes of gender in their families and communities. The analysis shows, for example, that participants represented modesty as a non-gendered virtue of humility that they had personally negotiated and labored for. As they did so, they countered – often explicitly – representations of covering that associate it with submission to male authority and lack of agency. They also thereby positioned themselves as agents against the pressures and regulations of families, communities and religious groups. In detailing their autonomous journey of covering and meaning-making, participants conveyed (and often overtly drew attention to) their individual agency in making forms of Islamic dress 'my own' (Amena: London).

If identity is both 'a social location' and a 'struggle for the individual' that demands negotiation of difference (Duveen, 2001), this is particularly the case for those with a stigmatized identity (Howarth, 2002a). The analysis here draws attention to how participants' representations of modesty as a religious virtue variously resist *and* engage the liberal systems of knowledge that inhere in the stigma that confronts them. For example, to present modest covering as functional and political in terms of defying sexual objectification both contests assumptions of covering as oppression and posits an alternative inhabitation of norms of individual agency and liberation. As the analysis shows, accounts of such functions of covering do not jeopardize its religious significance nor reduce it to extra-religious ends. Rather, they are expressive of the plurality of meaning that arises through the encounter and intersections of different forms of knowledge (Jovchelovitch, 2007; 2008).

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Jovchelovitch (2008) writes that common sense knowledge 'is always plural, is deeply entangled in the lifeworld and lived experience of a community, demarcating its frameworks for thinking, doing and relating' (p. 441). This plurality may produce apparent tensions or contradictions in thinking, doing and relating. It may also result in their transformation through 'the use of different types of knowledge that bring to light different dimensions and perspectives' (Provencher, 2008, p. 268). The analysis here, grounded in two levels of coding, revealed a shared dialogical dynamic underpinning apparent tensions – which is that, as they took positions on covering and modesty, the women were concerned with both sustaining religious meaning and asserting individual agency and equality in gender relations. This resulted in distinctive visions of modest gender relations and sexuality. Participants insisted on sexual agency and equality but represented it in terms of exploring and forging sexuality in relationships of equality and mutual commitment rather than in terms of liberal sexual freedom. They also posited modesty as an alternative form of de-sexualized gender relations that affords women respect and freedom to act. Therefore, as they asserted agency and equality with men, principles of Islamic piety were not lost. Rather, agency, respect and equality in relationships with men were evaluated and represented as intrinsic to the lived virtue of modesty. This is religious reasoning that is not indifferent to liberal norms of gender equality, as Mahmood's (2005) subjects were. It does not take, as Jouili (2011) details, a 'critical stance towards modern notions of abstract individual rights' (p. 61). Rather, the findings here speak to dialogical processes of meaning-making and how '[n]ew forms of common sense are continuously being produced by the dialogues between knowledges' (Jovchelotvitch, 2008, p.142).

Avishai (2008) argues from her thesis on orthodox Jewish women's religiosity 'that the orthodox community is searching for healthier narratives of sexuality that do not compromise modesty' (p. 435). This could be paraphrased here to argue that Muslim women are searching for healthier narratives of sexuality and gender relations that do not compromise modesty. The difference is that, while Avishai's orthodox subjects sought their narratives within religious culture only and in opposition to an image of 'a secular Other', the women here both resisted and drew on the norms of valuing that define the secular Other. Attention to the context and content of representations in dialogue revealed processes of resistance and 're-presentation' that engaged and blended different modes of reasoning and valuing. The findings suggest that, as much as distinct forms of 'human flourishing' such as Muslim female piety should be respected as such (Mahmood, 2005), they should also be understood as always subject to social processes of consolidation and change that speak to women's negotiations of multiple relations of power.

The analysis here was informed by a theory of social knowledge that puts communication and change at the heart of a social psychological account of mind and representation. Presupposing 'the symbolic and communicative interdependence of the *Ego-Alter'* (Marková, 2003, p. xiii), social representations theory conceives our ways of representing the world and self as arising in dialogue with others, with all the possibilities of affirmation, threat and transformation this carries (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Its dialogical epistemology is well placed to address the plurality of knowledge and its diversification in increasingly globalised and multicultural societies. Indeed, the theory 'was forged precisely to tackle the relations between change and stability in such societies' (Castro & Batel, 2008 p. 478) and grounds research in the understanding that representations are rarely collective or static but

'dynamic structures' (Moscovici, 2000) that continually relate to other systems of beliefs, values and practices.

As described in procedures for analysis above, a social representations framework directs analytic attention to how people 'mention' or 'use' representations in dialogue and 'possibly come to develop, transform or reject these' (Howarth, 2006, p. 68). In the study here, this helped illuminate how, as participants discussed covering and modesty, they confronted stigma, reflected on a sexualized culture, and variously asserted and resisted liberal values of individual agency and gender equality. In this process, the Islamic virtue of modesty was represented in interesting ways that challenge assumptions that it has lost all value or is inherently counter-feminist.

A theoretical and analytical commitment to examining representational dynamics can therefore help further studies of women's religiosity more generally. It can redeem tendencies to separate out religious reasoning and extra-religious reasoning, as if the former threatens women's autonomy (Bilge, 2010; Hemmings and Treacher-Kabesh, 2013) or, indeed, as if the latter sullies women's piety. In short, attention to the outcomes of 'dialogues between knowledges' (Jovchelovitch, 2008) can help reclaim everyday heterogeneous religious reasoning and practice for the feminist researcher's attention.

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