Research Paradigm: Studies of Women and Gender in Commerce and Society of The Middle East

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Abstract

Addressing the nature of the research paradigms in the business sciences is a considerably more complex procedure than in the physical sciences; while there is considerable debate over the position of economics and development studies between these two polarities, most work in the field is reasonably amenable to categorisation. In the case of studies of women’s economic participation in the Middle East, however, issues of objectivity and authenticity are fore-grounded, as authors, particularly women, face massive and conflicting pressures: from the existing patriarchal hegemony, from women seeking representation and empathic presentation, and from the cultural and gender assumptions of their Western audience.

Keywords: women, development, middle east

Introduction

Feminist approaches to the study of development in the Muslim world, and the Middle East in particular, are inherently problematic. Exclusion from commerce and entrepreneurship are frequently corollaries of female exclusion from the space of academic discourse, and may reasonably be seen as stemming from the same cultural roots: the fact of this active displacement of women from a masculinised world raises immediate questions of authenticity and subjectivity on the part of the researcher, who – even if she is herself an Arab woman – cannot be said to occupy a normative position in the terms of either the hegemonic structures of her society, or of its women members. Such a perception of otherness is persistent among readers situated in a Western society which “basically states...that the Muslim woman is innately oppressed” (Khaf, 1999). As such any claim to an emic position on the part of a woman writing on this subject should be subject to scrutiny, even on such radical grounds as the writing of illiterate women in formal text. Explicit claims to such participatory authenticity – in a constructionist mode – are rare: the approaches which will be discussed in the three scholarly papers here confine themselves primarily to discussion of economic data in relation to the position of women and the role of gender performance in the economic discourse of the countries of the Arab region.

However, to greater or lesser extents, we hear a voice which is, generally implicitly, attributable to the women of the region, and frequently encounter a position which is ambiguously situated between the quantitative and objective, and which frequently constitutes a highly value-laden activist critique of economic discourse. A straightforward classification of material according to Guba and Lincoln’s schema may not be possible in all cases, and the reader should be alert for disunities in the construction of the author’s position and in the actual application of the paradigm.

Extensive discussion of the ethnic origins of researchers, particularly in a field like economics in which gender politics are usually far from the foreground, is a controversial and potentially divisive area. Risking as it does the entry of unconscious cultural or racial (never mind gender) essentialism, such a critique is, however, important to understanding the position of the author as subject embedded in the highly-gendered discourse of the region. An effective critique of the research paradigms
employed to study an area as heavily influenced by both ethnic and gender identities and divisions nevertheless should examine the implications of these variables of subjectivity in a comprehensive approach to the selection, and impact, of research paradigms. Once again, claims to occupy a value-free position need to be closely interrogated, as there is a real possibility of significant discontinuity between an author’s stated objectivity and the more subjective reality their text may portray.

Hayat Alvi: The human rights of women and social transformation in the Arab Middle East. Published in Middle East Review of International Affairs, 2005.

Hayat Alvi-Aziz is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Arcadia University, Pennsylvania, US. She holds three degrees from US universities, including a PhD from Howard University, Washington, DC. As such she should, of course, be considered as highly atypical for an Arab woman, in terms of her adult life experiences at least. She presents a strongly argued case for the “glaring deficiencies in the human rights of women in the Arab world” (Aziz, 2005) and takes a strong stand against the repression of women in the region (and, frequently, Islam in general). She is an advocate of modernisation, and frequently highlights the substantial role played by religious law and practice in the construction of societal roles and dynamics in the Middle East. Schuurman (1993) highlights the fact that “Development studies have been criticised by gender studies as having falsely universalised on the basis of limited perspectives;” Alvi’s critique of the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR, 2002) certainly cannot be accused of ignoring gender, but her tendency to universalise “Arab women” remains problematic.

The Arab Human Development Report was undoubtedly a significant document for the development of human rights and development discourse, and in particular women’s rights, in the Middle East. Alvi refers to the document extensively, and claims to derive “the empirical realities” (ibid) of her text principally from it. Containing as it does extensive statistical information on various indices of development from the countries of the region, the AHDR is typical, in its approach to economics, of the “received view” as expressed in the discipline: “context-stripped” statistics take the place of subjective narrative, and the subject – particularly the subject outside the numericised discourse of monetised trade – is marginalised in favour of aggregated data. Alvi does not problematise the construction of the AHDR, and uncritically states that “the empirical realities reflect the glaring deficiencies in the human rights of women in the Arab world” (ibid).

Oft repeated, this phrase comes close to implying a realist – in Plato’s sense – conception of a distinctive reality between and beyond subject and object. This implicit displacement of the power of writing “realities” from the female Arab subject to the patriarchal domain of economic science is troubling: Alvi makes constant reference to the AHDR almost as to a canonical text, to the exclusion, it could be argued, of the native subject. There is no question that she speaks – forcefully – for the Arab woman. However, she does not speak with the voice of her subjects, and (willingly, it seems) sacrifices her objective voice in favour of educative – if not tactical – authenticity.

Her text is in effect an extended critique of the AHDR, and is primarily aimed at highlighting the need for “Progressive social transformation” in order to improve the position of women in the societies of the Middle East. The AHDR itself is in essence a positivist endeavour, which seeks to provide a synchronic encapsulation of economic data for the region, and assumes “true figures” from which the data it presents vary within a delineated margin. It is worth noting that manifold critical responses are possible to a document of this kind, which could adopt any methodology. A post-positivist reaction might concentrate on the accuracy of the statistical data or the rigour or otherwise of the analytical techniques employed. The field of critical theory could produce numerous responses deconstructing the social, political or gender constructions underlying the research itself, and a constructivist approach might seek to re-locate in the discourse the marginalised subject. These possible responses considered, it becomes clear that Alvi’s position is ambiguous: she occupies the physical and discursive space of
the Western researcher, but foregrounds her otherness both in the metropolitan context and, more implicitly, the Arab/Muslim. Her methodology, then, lies closest to that of feminist critical theory, although she engages in little radical critique of her core source, the AHDR.

How appropriate, then, is Alvi’s approach to the problem of constructing a feminist response to the AHDR and its observations on the position of women in the Middle East? As an educative re-presentation of the data presented in the original report, it is highly effective in highlighting the major points of the report. However, it fails to critique the apparatus of measurement which underpins the figures, either technically or in terms of its gender politics, and does not attempt to seek out the authentic voice of the women under discussion. Nor does Alvi approach the discourse of colonisation: perhaps because such a critique would subvert her agenda of modernisation, external as it is to the normative constructs of the women she describes.


The authors of this study are, respectively, an American professor at Northeastern University, of Arab origin but working in a US university (St. Thomas), and a professor at King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. As such they occupy a range of cultural distances from the individuals their study concerns. With a broader emphasis on cultural difference rather than gender politics, this study takes a radically different approach from Alvi’s: it refers to a multiplicity of sources, and is centred on a quantitative investigation of individual cultural values and attitudes to work.

The main theoretical underpinning of this research comes from Hofstede’s influential book Culture’s consequences: International differences in work-related values (Hofstede, 1980). This work identified four “cultural dimensions:” individualism vs collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and power distance. These constructs form the empirical basis of Robertson et al’s approach work and culture in the Middle East; while problematic, there is considerable support for the potential value of these ideas in psychosocial approaches to economics and development studies. It should be noted at the outset that the dimension of “masculinity” as employed by Hofstede and adopted by the authors of this study is better conceived of as a performative characteristic, regardless of the reader’s critical position in relation to the sex/gender discourse as elaborated by Butler (1990). If, as Butler describes it, “gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (ibid), Hofstede’s dimension of masculinity could be read as a radical critique of gender in economic discourse (or, at least, the culture of work), which decouples notions of sex and gender roles – or rather, subjective attitudes. In the case both of Robertson et al, dealing as it does with the culture of the Middle East, this construct of masculinity needs to be approached critically: the post-positivist approach of this text at times sits uneasily with contemporary critical views of the female subject.

Robertson et al’s methodology is sited squarely in the post-positivist domain. They rely on quantitative analyses of responses to a survey instrument constructed from “established and validated scales” (Robertson et al, 2002) and place emphasis on the location of their work in a critical tradition. The strong emphasis placed on the randomisation process in selecting respondents implies that this strategy is adopted thanks, at least in part, to the enhancement which it should bring to the generalizability and repeatability of the study – although, perhaps importantly, there is no attempt to ensure that the age and gender profiles of the respondents are statistically representative either of the population or the labour force. As such generalisations regarding the attitudes of women, in particular, who make a somewhat lower proportion of the labour force in the region than they do of the sample group in this study, should be treated with caution. Presence in the labour force may imply a degree of self-selection among women participants insofar as they have made a culturally value-laden choice to seek employment, limiting the generalizability of this study’s conclusions.
This study places its emphasis on the identification of covariance between Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and attitudes to work as identified through respondents’ attitudes to work, characterised by their responses to a questionnaire designed to reveal their relation to Buchholz’s six work-related belief system (value) constructs (Buchholz, 1977). Thus their post-positivist approach is problematized by the entry of value constructs at a substructural level: there is an acceptance of the empirical validity of these constructs and their solidity as the foundations of further (quantitative, empirical) research, and the authors do not engage in any radical critique of these constructs as they relate to the subjective experience of their respondents. However, they do make reference to research supporting their underlying notions, and relate their findings – particularly in respect of the masculinity construct – to social research on the motivations of women in the labour force.

Overall, Robertson et al.’s study is a well-reasoned application of quantitative methods to a values-centric investigation. However, its post-positivist approach excludes radical critique of the societal constructs in which both subject and researcher are embedded; while in the case of the researchers’ presentation of gender issues this uncritical approach is noteworthy but not, in terms of internal validity, deeply problematic, there are other aspects of the study which are more questionable. The fact that 77% of the participants were college-educated to some degree is mentioned but not discussed as a serious issue in respect of the generalisability of the study to the wider society of the Middle East: while there is considerably less cultural distance between these authors and their subjects than between Alvi and women living in under-developed conditions in the Arab world, the findings of this study remain confined in their applicability to well-educated, affluent – and probably more “Westernised” – individuals in the region.


Hoda Elsadda is an Egyptian-born academic, who currently holds the Chair in the Study of the Contemporary Arab World at the University of Manchester, UK; she received degrees from Cairo University and the American University in Cairo. Elsadda is active both in academic research (focussing on the narratives and oral history of Arab women) and the political struggle for women’s rights in the region. As such, she can be seen as the most closely embedded in her native culture of all the authors considered here, and the most concerned – professionally at least – with the subjective experience of Arab women. The project of narrative/oral history is central to the constructivist endeavour; Elsadda also seems to take a more participatory (as well as more critical) position in her writing of gender in the Middle East, characterising her “experience of working on women’s issues in the Arab world [as] one of struggle, gains and defeats” (Elsadda, 2004). This phrase clearly reveals her depth of personal involvement in the discourse of which she writes, and this text speaks in the authentic voice of a deeply engaged female subject who, although once again hardly typical of the women of her nation, is actively engaged in the project of voicing women’s experience in the Arab world.

Like Alvi, Elsadda’s text centres on her response to the Arab Human Development Report. However, hers is a far more radical critique of the process and findings of the report than Alvi’s, and she deconstructs the dualism of an enlightened, woman-friendly West set in opposition to a repressive Muslim world with tactics such as the presentation of statistics on maternity leave in a range of countries (with the US portrayed as the least congenial), and claims that Egyptian universities have, in the case of language departments in universities, a higher proportion of women academics and students.

Her critique of the report addresses both issues of gender politics and practical issues (such as institutional bias against the valuing of informal work done by women) which problematise the findings of the AHDR; however, she does not set out to systematically disprove the implicit
hypotheses of the report, but rather to facilitate and stimulate a critical and historicised discourse surrounding it.

Elsadda’s text should clearly be located within the continuum of critical theory; as is frequently the case, it transcends the disciplinary boundaries of women’s studies, post-colonial theory and even queer theory (she cites Ingehart and Norris’ identification of homophobic repression as a signifier of how “Muslims and their western counterparts are still worlds apart...which does not bode well for democracy’s future in the Middle East” (Ingehart & Norris, 2003)). Elsadda goes on to criticise right-wing political scientist and author Samuel Huntington’s notorious Clash of Civilizations (1993, 2003) in explicitly post-colonial terms, making direct reference to Said’s Orientalism and critiquing Huntington’s “aim of constructing fault-lines and marking essentialist differences between the Muslim world and the West” (Elsadda, 2004).

The key to Elsadda’s analysis is her critique of “Generalizations that lead to essentialist conclusions.” Her approach to culturalism – the relativist tendency to depoliticise “foreign” social constructs as being justified, or at least immune to outside criticism, on account of their social and historical embeddedness – centres on the deconstruction of the Western/Arab dichotomy, particularly in terms of statistical signifiers of “development”. This deconstructive project is dependent on the construction of the Arab/Muslim woman subject as an individual (although she does not voice other women in this text) and on the revelatory juxtapositioning of data on the Middle East and the US: once again, she engages with quantitative data in a critical mode more conventionally associated with textual criticism.

Elsadda’s methodology is highly appropriate to the project she is engaged in. She positions the AHDR effectively within its social and political context, and while she is clearly an advocate of women’s rights (which are, in all real senses, better protected under law and in cultural practice in the West) she does not construct Westernisation as a panacea for the oppression of women in the Arab world. Her embodying of the statistical data of the AHDR in the lived experience of women is an effective counterpoint to the tendency to generalise both in the statistical mode of the UN report and in the essentializing cultural adversarialism of Huntington and the Islamophobic political Right: it succeeds in bringing depth to the very much ongoing discussion of gender and economic discourse in the Middle East.

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