

A Passionate Pursuit of Justice: Towards an Ethics of Islamic Feminist Research Practice

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Abstract

Feminist theorizations of care have been central to feminist research practices. Nevertheless, this article argues that feminist theorizations of care have not addressed how a feminist committed to breaking down hierarchies between research participants and herself can carefully study ambiguous activism. By illuminating the similarities, overlaps, and differences between feminist and Islamic theorizations and practices of care and justice, this article forges an ethic of Islamic feminist research practice that supports the author's investigation of a precarious movement—Iran's Hezbollah. The article places feminist thought in conversation with the study of gender and religion, which is an urgent interdisciplinary task.

Introduction

How can feminist researchers care for research participants and break down hierarchies in contexts that are both ambiguous and emotionally intense? The absence of discussion about how researchers can connect their commitments to care and justice during sensitive research has become an interdisciplinary concern.¹ This article advances the study of Islamic femi-

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nism from a new perspective by recounting the ways in which I was able to study Iran's Hezbollah movement as a feminist researcher. It suggests that we should study the spaces between Islam and feminism when thinking about ethics and research practice, especially during investigations of piety movements in states with both authoritarian elements and colonial histories. In this article, I rely on my ethnographic research to advance political theory, and in particular, the ethics of care.²

As I will show briefly, Iran's Hezbollah is a movement which occupies a precarious position in the Islamic Republic's power structures. Hezbollah is used by the state for its authoritarian projects, but the movement readily crosses the regime's boundaries in its goal of creating an ideal Islamic society. Studying a movement that (by conventional academic definitions) is both oppressive and suppressed creates an opportunity to reconsider feminist research practices through an unusual feminist project. I define the ethical approach to research practice that evolved from this project as *a passionate pursuit of justice*. I do so because of the ways in which I learned to break my silences and emotionally engage with an obscure movement to capture the different layers of their activism—much of which the state, and even some affiliates, sought to keep hidden. I learned how to engage with research participants through different arrangements of care and justice which were acceptable to them, but also to myself. In the process, I gained insight into Iran's Hezbollah that has rarely been accessible—especially to an American scholar. I identify a passionate pursuit of justice as an ethics for research practice, and because it evolves out of Islamic and feminist archival formations,³ I understand it to speak to ethics that emerge between Islam and feminism.

In what follows, I examine the utility of Islamic thought for the advancement of feminist ideals regarding non-repressive research practices. This article, then, reunites Islam and feminism to illustrate that Islamic thought and practices of care and justice enhance feminist research ideals during intense ethnographic encounters, and also during archival work.⁴ I argue that there are significant overlaps between feminist and Islamic thinking and practice with respect to the comingling of justice and care. Drawing on feminist methodologies, broader research on religion and contentious politics, as well as ethnographic data collected between 2012 to 2014 on Hezbollah cultural activism in post-2009 Iran, the article will examine how operationalizing Islamic conceptions of how care and justice interact enables feminist scholars to undermine the different forms of oppression that the research process may impose on them and research participants.

Central to this assertion is my claim that feminist care ethics, which influences feminist care politics during field research and qualitative analysis, does not offer adequate methods for working with populations that follow other traditions concerning the interplay between care and justice. In particular, I address some of the ethical dilemmas that exist when a feminist scholar researches subversive movements. In this project, Islamic practices and theorizations of care came to support my feminist commitment to prevent harm⁵ of research participants. The article creates space to explore how Islam, as well as other spiritual traditions, can aid researchers committed to ethical engagement with diverse social groups.

I begin with a discussion of the social and political context in which this study takes place. I highlight the specifics of the relationship between state, society, and Hezbollah organizations in contemporary Iran, drawing on my own fieldwork to do so. Next, I concentrate on feminist methodologies to think through the strengths and weaknesses of current theorizations of feminist care ethics. The section which follows illustrates the overlaps and differences between feminist and Islamic conceptions of justice and care. The section demonstrates that when working with unfamiliar contexts, feminists can rely on localized understandings of care to break down boundaries between themselves and research participants. The article concludes with a series of case studies to show how an ethic of Islamic feminist research practice guided my investigation of Iran's Hezbollah, revealing layers of the movement that destabilized the coherent narrative the state often gives about it.

Iran's Hezbollah and the Precariousness of Cultural Activism in Post-2009 Iran

Iran's Hezbollah is an unpredictable faction within the conservative front in the Islamic Republic.⁶ What distinguishes the Hezbollahi citizen from his or her conservative counterparts is their exceptional closeness to the Supreme Leader, their subversiveness, and their unpredictability. Within the state's formal narrative, the Hezbollahi citizen is identified as the force which sustained Iran's capacity to fight Iraq for eight long years (1980–88).⁷ At the end of the war, however, the state moved towards neoliberal cultural and economic approaches; and the Hezbollahi, who enforced Islamic values (*arzesh*), quickly lost his or her social status and space in the post-revolutionary state. During the reform period of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), there was an organic demand for curtailment of the Supreme Leader's power and a strong determination to legitimize the rights of the

people.⁸ The state's Republican quality came to the forefront, and NGO activists working towards democratic political reform and neoliberal economic change gained national and international attention.⁹ With the end of the first decade of the Islamic Republic's rule, state-guided religion lost its traction within society, and Iranians moved more towards "personalized" expressions of piety, which stemmed from belief instead of ritualistic practice.¹⁰ Many of my interlocutors shared that from this period onward, the Hezbollahi citizen felt unappreciated in the country.

At the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the Hezbollahi activist grew closer to the Supreme Leader, while firmly embedded in the post-war cultural context.¹¹ He began to believe that the conflict between reformists and the supreme leader was over the notion of Islamic government itself, and the absolute rule of the religious jurist.¹² Cultural activism gained significance for Hezbollahi activists, who decided that they had to find a new strategy for remaining politically relevant now that the war was over. They felt pushed out of the state's formal centers of power, and were bitter over this loss which they understood as a form of political betrayal. The Hezbollahi redirected their attention to three fields of study and activism that seemed unrelated at the time: participation in Shi'i congregations (*heyats*), economic justice, and Western philosophy.¹³ With the Ahmadinejad presidency, those who identified as Hezbollahi entered formal positions of power, and began to seek out the economic mobility, prestige, and independence that the rest of Iran's middle class aspired towards.¹⁴

The 2009 presidential conflict disrupted the state's balance of power, but was also an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to regenerate its social base.¹⁵ The conflict was initially based on the belief among segments of the population that Mir Hosseini Mousavi, not Mahmood Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), had won the election. However, as the protests continued over several months, they evolved into a movement demanding transparency, equality, rule of law, and citizenry rights.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, the state continued to carry out mass arrests, and many students, journalists, activists, and scholars were forced into exile.¹⁷ Additionally, the state invested greatly in Hezbollah cultural institutes after the 2009 presidential conflict. These are centers of power that create and propagate various Islamization projects, including Islamization of women's rights, the cinema, and the social sciences. They are funded by the state's non-governmental centers of power, and have extensive relations with Hezbollah fronts in other parts of the Middle East. The state hoped that these cultural institutes would support its effort to push back at demands for citizenship rights among its religious

social base in Iran, as Hezbollah activists reproduced the state through their cultural work.¹⁸

It is difficult to make general statements about the motivations of those affiliated with Iran's Hezbollah.¹⁹ Little research on this topic exists due to issues pertaining to access in Iran, but also because of Western scholars' greater interest in reform movements with liberal democratic leanings. Moreover, Hezbollah activists have reason to remain silent. Their activism is funded by non-governmental centers of power, but they also live in contemporary Iranian society where espousing the revolutionary discourses of the 1980-88 period often results in social isolation.²⁰ There are, nevertheless, some notable trends within the activism of the younger generation of Hezbollah affiliates which destabilizes the movement's general categorization as conservative. For instance, Hezbollah activists are often students in Tehran's elite universities and speak several languages, including Arabic and English.²¹ Most cultural activists I came to know only entered cultural institutes after 2009. These activists were not interested in political violence against the opposition, or intellectual debates within their own networks. Rather, they began to think of themselves as middlemen/women, occupying a space between the state and the people. Their intention is to resolve national problems as Islamic revolutionaries committed to Iran's supreme leader and the founding fathers and mothers of the Islamic Republic.²² Most senior leaders I met denounced the paramilitary organization Basij, which developed after 1979, for its violation of people's rights and indoctrination tactics—much of which they themselves had endured as former members.²³

During close conversations, I noted that both leaders and followers of the Hezbollah movement are suspicious of security personnel and, like the rest of society, fear them, despite working in non-government-funded cultural institutes.²⁴ Activists frequently argue that the modern Iranian state has strong authoritarian characteristics, but claim that revolutionary Islamist thought is the paradigm through which Iran's political problems can be solved.²⁵ They are critical of their own integration into the state's bureaucratic structures since 2005, and struggle to avoid a "materialistic" lifestyle and formal politics.²⁶ While they support the notion of Islamic government and collaborate with non-governmental agencies in Iran, activists tend to shun those among them who hold aspirations for careers in the formal structures of power.²⁷ They hold utopian visions of Islamic unity, and are equally interested in interfaith dialogue.²⁸ At the same time, most activists have never encountered foreigners, Western researchers, or journalists.²⁹ Most supporters of Iran's Hezbollah have rarely travelled abroad,

and are part of a small population in Iran that may not even have friends or relatives who are living in the West. In short, Iran's Hezbollah movement holds a precarious position within the Islamic Republic's power structures. While they are to promote the state's version of Islam and politics, they have their own understandings of God, politics, and religion, based on Hezbollah's transnationalism. Similarly, while they are expected to interact with society with the intention of creating the Islamic Republic's ideal citizen, it is hardly the case that Hezbollah affiliates have such a privileged one-way relation with society. The younger generation of Hezbollah activists are unwilling to be left behind from the cultural, political, and economic norms that govern the rest of society, and this contributes to their unpredictability and pragmatism during everyday life.³⁰

Feminist Methodologies: The Limits of Care during Sensitive Research

The precariousness of Hezbollah cultural activism discussed in the previous section raises the following question: How should care be applied by researchers in a context of ambiguity and within emotionally-charged spaces designated for grassroots activism connected to non-governmental centers of power? What revisions to feminist ethics for research practice does this require, to break down the hierarchies which exist between us and research participants? To engage with these questions, I contextualize feminist studies of care within the broader field of feminist methodologies. I argue that although feminist methodologies encourage care and a breakdown of hierarchies between the researcher and her interlocutors, feminist ethics of care do not currently speak to ambiguous contexts where interlocutors embody contradictory political agendas and a variety of affective dispositions. I illustrate that this is because care has yet to be theorized in different contexts, and the tendency to import a familiar and homogenous understanding between emotions and morality continues to shape feminist care ethics.³¹

Feminist scholars, and scholars in the humanities more broadly,³² often work with subjects with whom they stand in solidarity, even though they may not be insiders in their interlocutors' specific social group. For instance, Zion-Waldoks argues that her identification as an Israeli Orthodox feminist supported her research on Agunah activism in Israel. This is a group of professional Israeli women who are Rabbinic lawyers and who work towards making divorce easier for Jewish women. Through this study, Zion-Waldoks illustrates how the resistance/domination paradigm fails to

account for religious women's "loyal dissent",³³ which may not be directed against the state or religion. As this example shows, standing in solidarity with a movement or being somewhat an "insider" are typical feminist routes to transformative research which draws attention to women's defining role in social and political life.

When feminists enter "many-stranded relationships"³⁴ during fieldwork, questions which revolve around care often rest at the center of contentions with research participants. Taylor, for instance, has suggested that, for many scholars, concerns over losing access to the field or friendships they have developed in the field encourage them to share their analysis and ideas with interlocutors before publishing.³⁵ Social scientists have long argued that co-authorship is one approach for breaking down hierarchies in the research process and making academia more democratic.³⁶ It is, however, significant here that Taylor sheds light on how fear and anxiety about access come to determine the ways in which some scholars negotiate their analysis. Importantly, it is not necessarily academic integrity, collegiality, or democratic ideals that are central to the negotiation between researchers and the researched that Taylor addresses. In a more extreme example, believing that her marriage to a key informant was a sign of engagement with and commitment to the "setting", Irwin was surprised at how the decision disrupted all aspects of her life and her ex-husband's quality of life as well.³⁷ Reflecting on this experience, Irwin suggests that instead of categorizing behaviors during fieldwork as ethical or unethical, we should instead focus on how our engagement with larger structures of inequality, violence, and power affect our research participants. I would add to this that recognition of the advantages of different ethics of care can encourage researchers to pay closer attention to their engagement with the larger structures that shape the lives of interlocutors.

In my view, the ways in which feminists have performed³⁸ care and sought to break down hierarchies in their research stem from excessive devotion to groundbreaking, but waning, investigations of feminist ethics of care.³⁹ Classical studies on the ethics of care draw attention to the importance of intimate and dynamic relationships based on receptivity, reciprocity, altruism, kindness, and moral considerations.⁴⁰ From the viewpoint of an educator, for instance, Noddings argues that caring is not simply imagining yourself in someone else's place.⁴¹ Instead, to care is to "engross" oneself in the other, and to erase the boundaries that separate two individuals. Similarly, Ruddick has suggested that reapplying the maternal practices of "protection, nurturance, and training" can generate a politics of nonviolence by

countering “military thinking”.⁴² Other feminist scholars have been unsettled by this subordination of justice to care, and the potential subsequent ramifications for women and others.⁴³ Card, for instance, stresses that losing sight of justice in social relations places women at risk in both intimate relationships and everyday exchanges with strangers.⁴⁴ Held argues that a redistribution of wealth is needed so that the emotional labor of women as caregivers is properly valued.⁴⁵ Slote concludes that care ethicists must develop their own theorizations of justice, rights, and autonomy in order to conceive a fuller vision of moral values, and that an appeal to empathy may prove fruitful for advancing the ethics of care.⁴⁶ Engster has suggested that any theory of justice must have care at its core, because all humans are dependent on the support of others at different points in their lives.⁴⁷ As such, he claims that through caring for others, human beings also achieve the right to demand care, and other basic human needs, in return. Classic studies of care ethics separated care from justice,⁴⁸ while recent scholarship in care ethics tends to collapse the two in an effort to explore the multitude of possible meanings of both terms.⁴⁹

It is my contention that by collapsing care and justice, we narrow the political terrain. As such, current studies of care often eclipse the context of their articulation, and overlook how justice and care are mobilized within a particular nation-state and/or spiritual tradition.⁵⁰ A narrowing down of the political terrain prevents us from noting the diverse meanings that justice can assume, even within the economic redistribution of resources and/or the determination of institutional politics.⁵¹ Feminist scholars have, of course, discussed justice in broader terms. For example, Tronto retheorizes care to include liberal rights, through a disruption of the boundaries between public and private, morality and politics, and distant and near, so as to ultimately prevent the exclusion of women from political (and hence moral) participation.⁵² For Tronto, a recognition of liberal rights is one lens which makes new understandings of justice possible in studies of care. Similarly, Halwani has argued that conceptualizing care ethics within the broader framework of virtues allows us to account for justice in discussions of care.⁵³ Both Tronto and Halwani, then, understand care and justice to overlap without becoming identical. This is an approach that I will shortly show is also detectable in Islamic ethics of care. Expanding the notion of the political pushes us towards a reconsideration of how feminist ethics for research practice are put into play by different care frameworks. Yet this has been precisely the type of work that is lacking in feminist investigations of care ethics.

Additionally, the disentanglement of care from justice works to diversify and give depth to our conceptualization of care. Feminist scholars assert that because women are expected to sacrifice the self in order to meet the needs of others, there can be no justice. As such, this view, which responds to the writing of Noddings and others, suggests that when we take into account the political, feminist care ethics becomes nonexistent, because it does not leave room for the autonomy and integrity of the caregiver.⁵⁴ While I agree that the political still remains ambiguous in relation to care in much of the ethics scholarship,⁵⁵ I would add that we should keep trying to develop feminist ethics of care which account for care and justice in specific contexts. It is precisely at this moment that integration of other intellectual trajectories may become helpful.

As the above discussion illustrates, feminist care ethics makes different arrangements between care and justice possible. Indeed, a significant contribution of feminist ethics has been an invitation to develop approaches to morality through relationships.⁵⁶ According to Buker, feminist care ethics also places limits on individualism and locates the citizen in a relational exchange with others in the nation-state.⁵⁷ Similarly, Friedman argues that feminist ethics are grounded in a commitment to end oppression and that this is understood to be a relational endeavor.⁵⁸ More recently, an “inclined” disposition has been proposed by the Italian feminist philosopher Cavarero,⁵⁹ as a posture that not only supports constructive human relations, but is, in many instances, inescapable. Indeed, a readiness to revise, even improvise, one’s research approaches has long been a defining feature of feminist methodologies.⁶⁰ I contend that feminist researchers should utilize different ways of arranging care and justice, for we must recognize the limits that a narrow application of these terms poses for research.

Justice and Care in Islamic Thought and Practice

In this section, I examine justice and care in Islamic thought and practice to illustrate the expansive ways in which care has been posited in this tradition. This section shows that both in theory and in practice, Islamic ethics have engaged with care in a heterogeneous and eclectic way which lends support to investigations of Islamist revival movements in a post-revolutionary state with a hybrid regime. Like one strand of feminist care ethics discussed above, the Islamic approach too sheds light on how care and justice can overlap but not necessarily merge. There is a Quranic command which states: “And when you speak, you speak with justice, even if it be to a close relative.” The Quran places emphasis on being fair during disagree-

ments “even if it be against yourselves, your parents and relatives.”⁶¹ The separation and overlap of care and justice is emphasized through a familial example in both directives. Muslims are instructed to be speak “justly” even when dealing with family members, and as such, it appears that the two values are not conflated.

Additionally, and similar to feminist ethics,⁶² work that has looked at Islamic piety movements, Muslim subjectivities, morality, and emotions has also highlighted how Islamic ethics encourage a wide range of emotional engagements during everyday life. For instance, Jung and Petersen have suggested that Jordanian Muslim practices with charity work are influenced by international “social imaginaries” as much as by a commitment to Quranic teachings.⁶³ Mahmood’s seminal work on the mosque movement in contemporary Egypt, on the other hand, illustrates that the experience of some Egyptian Muslim women with embodied efforts to live a pious lifestyle is dependent on the stimulation of certain emotions during daily life. For example, weeping during prayers is believed to bring one closer to God, because of the imaginative connections the performative act of crying generates in the mind of a worshipper. Engaging with different emotions is believed to push one towards good moral judgment because of the “epistemic value” that emotions entail.⁶⁴ For the women that Mahmood encountered in her research, different affective performances connect the individual to “emotions associated with the divine.”⁶⁵ Theoretical and empirical investigations into Muslim subjectivities have illustrated that different configurations of the moral and the emotional can coexist during relationships.⁶⁶

The empirical and theoretical interplay between care and justice among Muslims is worthy of further consideration due to the ways in which this process diversifies the ethics of care. Indeed, it is precisely at this juncture that I find Islamic ethics relevant to my project on Iran’s Hezbollah. For instance, Asad⁶⁷ has recently argued that the Muslim tradition of *amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar*, or “to urge what is good and oppose what is reprehensible”, can be interpreted as an act of friendship which promotes self-care in the modern state. Indeed, Asad claims that friendships regulated by this notion may be an approach that underscores the contemporary struggle to disrupt the public order that state sovereignty imposes, through an “ethical” discourse. According to Asad,⁶⁸ the legislation of friendships during everyday life creates an opportunity to apply “a new form of ethics”. Cook addresses the different approaches this tradition can take and acknowledges that at times it may even become aggressive:

A wide variety of locutions are used for this besides ‘command’ (*amara*) and ‘forbid’ (*naha*). A man may speak to (*qala li-*) the offender, exhort him (*wa’aza*), counsel him (*nasaha*), censure him (*wabbakha*), shout at him (*saha*), and so forth. [...] Other things being equal, one should perform the duty in a civil fashion [...] But although in general one should speak politely, there are times when rudeness is in place.⁶⁹

As illustrated in this passage, within the Islamic tradition of commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong, care overlaps but remains distinct from the pursuit of justice, which is more a path than a well-defined or universal destination. Moreover, there are at times limits placed on harsh or radical behavior, with attention drawn to the wrong in escalating conflict and the pursuit of heroism. Nevertheless, what I find useful about Islamic ethics at this juncture is that a broad spectrum exists for how care can manifest itself in relationships, and this range intersects with the pursuit of justice without blending into it. In both theory and practice, then, Islam has elaborated on care in ways which advance feminist care ethics and become particularly useful in investigations of Islamist movements. Cook,⁷⁰ for instance, recounts that during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), an Iranian nurse asked Ayatollah Khomeini how she should care for wounded soldiers who were not performing their prayers. He responded that she should forbid that which is wrong. As such, Khomeini seems to suggest that as both a professional caregiver and national citizen, a nurse should not remain silent when she witnesses an unjust act committed by even an injured war veteran. I mention this anecdote because the Iran–Iraq war and the thinking of Khomeini hold special significance for Hezbollah activists. In another example, Agrama states the following about *hisba*, which is the principle that upholds the expression of commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong:

it is a practice that specifies the modes of its correct enactment in terms of proper dispositions and passions. Thus, depending on the circumstances, it ranges from gentle persuasion and friendly advice given in a discreet manner to the use of harsh (or angry) and threatening words, to physical intervention and even the use of force. More than that, *hisba* is a practice aimed at producing the right fears and desires, such as the fear of God’s punishments, and the desire for His rewards. In other words, *hisba* is a disciplined practice of moral criticism intended to produce proper Muslim selves, possessed of the correct desires and passions.⁷¹

A significant amount of ambiguity, flexibility, and, as in the case of *hisba*, austerity has been recognized in terms of how care can be manifested in relationships for Muslims.⁷² Moreover, through a discussion of fatwa councils and family law courts in contemporary Egypt, Agrama illustrates that the unification of Islamic traditions with state modernization tactics of European origin has expanded approaches to both care and justice. Agrama claims that when *hisba* was institutionalized by the contemporary state in Egypt, it was transformed from being a form of self-care among Muslims and care for others in the Muslim community, into the power for sustaining specific forms of public order by the state. In an effort to uphold the public order, for instance, a mufti in Egypt may give a variety of responses to the same question depending on his assessment of a specific context and the characters of the persons involved.

The “disquieting feature about religious practice”⁷³ which Agrama argues exists in the modern Egyptian state—because, in part, of flexibility in applications of care—parallels the peculiar place that Hezbollah followers inhabit within the Islamic Republic’s power structure. This is hardly surprising, since post-2009 Hezbollah activism can be understood as (at least partly) a form of “Islamic Revival” in the modern Iranian state.⁷⁴ As such, activists and leaders of the Hezbollah movement are invested in cultivating virtuous citizens. At the same time, Iran’s Hezbollah is a movement which the state uses for its post-2009 authoritarian renewal and enforcement of a specific public order.⁷⁵ However, the Hezbollahi also sees himself or herself as a member of the Party of God, for whom God’s Will rests above the state’s politics.⁷⁶ Moreover, the Hezbollahi is also embedded within society, and does not wish to become further isolated from the nation.⁷⁷ As such, the pursuit of justice and application of care within Iran’s Hezbollah may at times escape the state’s use of the movement for the enforcement of public order.⁷⁸ What remains significant is that the ethics of care for Hezbollah activists in the post-2009 Iranian state is practiced with a pragmatism and flexibility that resonates with the broad range of possibilities that Islamic ethics makes accessible.

Qualitative Methodologies and a Passionate Pursuit of Justice: Inside Iran’s Hezbollah

In what follows, I demonstrate that by remaining open to engagement with care in ways that were new to me, I was able to develop an Islamic feminist ethics of care. This ethical approach advanced my ability to conduct inter-

views, conversations, and textual analysis of the activism of Hezbollah cultural affiliates. As I began to view expressions of care that fell outside of my comfort zone, I also paid closer attention to my relationships in the field. In turn, I noted that the interplay between the moral and the emotional could take on a variety of forms. Indeed, there was more than one way to engage with care to break down hierarchies between research participants and myself. In other words, the crossover between feminist ethics for research practice and Islamic ethics of care and justice enabled me to conduct this project on an unfamiliar and ambiguous movement as a feminist. I was able to control my impulse to retreat from “questions of power and authority,”⁷⁹ which was due to an inability to connect with interlocutors through feminist ethics of care alone. It is my contention that while feminist theorists have argued that care and justice should be considered as separate yet interlinked values, rarely have theorizations or practices of care in non-Western contexts been incorporated into feminist care ethics. As such, I was forced to revise feminist care ethics in order to uphold feminist methodologies in my work more broadly. I learned that the more eclectic and contextualized interpretation of care practiced by some interlocutors (with roots in Islamic thought) was useful in establishing constructive relationships with my research participants. A more aggressive engagement with interlocutors was meaningful for my research and especially appreciated by some who only then opened up their lives to me.

When I began this project, my ethics of care in research was similar to the reciprocal framework that Okin⁸⁰ formulated long ago. In short, in exchange for my care of interlocutors, which was tantamount to my silent respect for their cultural boundaries, or at least what I imagined to be their boundaries, I hoped to gain access to the Hezbollah movement. In other words, I assumed that my interlocutors would see that I was committed to breaking down hierarchies to understand the Hezbollah movement from my ethics of care, or silent observance of their boundaries. More importantly, this approach seemed mutually beneficial to me and my interlocutors because they did not make me uncomfortable, and I did not intervene in their state-making project. This economic perspective of reciprocity is central to the discourse of both care and feminist ethics.⁸¹

As I collapsed care and justice in this project, I implemented what Shitrit has called “acting as if” during conversations with interlocutors who hold undemocratic views.⁸² According to Shitrit, “acting as if” means listening in a way that highlights your openness to revise your thinking and commitments when in conversation with members of conservative move-

ments. This approach becomes particularly useful when speaking with activists who are persistent in their nondemocratic views. Interestingly, Shitrit locates this approach within both Islamic and Jewish traditions of disciplining the body as a tactic for re-engaging the mind. As such, she rightly does not see “acting as if” during ethnographic research as insincere. Instead, she views this approach as a move towards opening the self to different perspectives during research and beyond.

Yet this tactic for conversing was not as productive in my research as it was for Shitrit. While the leaders of the Hezbollah movement are quite flexible and open, as one would imagine Hezbollah to be, the followers are not necessarily that way, and are perhaps even more alert to thought boundaries in their relations with an American. It is therefore not merely enough to be Muslim and Shi‘i for many Iranian Hezbollah followers: one has to speak like the non-governmental centers of power in the state. For women, this is an ideal female citizen who wears her *hejab* in the Lebanese style, but who also speaks and intervenes in politics like a Hezbollahi should. Women often “invite” one another to prayer, and point out thought crimes, such as feminist tendencies, aloud. For instance, when one young woman began to complain that she was tired of having sex several times a day with her husband, the other women quickly intervened to remind her that it was her duty to give him sex when he needed it.⁸³ I was silent for two main reasons. First, I was aware of the histories of colonialism, and feared that my opinion would be interpreted as a form of foreign intervention. Second, as a scholar taking notes of these conversations, I did not want to redirect them towards my own preferred analyses. As one interlocutor later informed me, however, my silence was interpreted as an indication of disloyalty to the movement’s gender ideology, and, worse still, a demonstration of my hidden feminist agenda. In other words, for some in the movement, my ideological disposition was more important than my willingness to hear their points of view with the intention of understanding. At the same time, it may have been my decision to withhold information that bothered some activists, and not necessarily an inability to accept difference. At any rate, the lesson I learned in this moment was that my silence was viewed as problematic by activists and not perceived as a sign of thoughtfulness or an anti-colonial practice.

As such, the distinction between thought and action, which seems to have been respected in Shitrit’s experience with Palestinian and Israeli conservative activists, does not work in the case of Iran’s Hezbollah because of the policing that takes place among activists. Therefore, my decision to act “as if” had a mixed reception. For some Hezbollah followers, it was simply

not enough. They sought to surveil my thought patterns during my sincere performances of openness, and, in the process, also disrupted my ethics of care. For others, for instance some senior leaders, there was a preference for more hands-on interventions on my behalf, which would push followers to revise their unreasonable or unfounded claims. For instance, leaders of the movement may have preferred that I intervened in the above conversation on marriage and sex with my opposing viewpoint to create an informed debate within the movement. In both scenarios, remaining silent was not appreciated.

While I viewed my decision to remain silent as a form of anti-colonial behavior and good scholarly practice, this was not how my approach was received by my Hezbollahi interlocutors. This methodological finding itself posed new questions for me. Surely, as state agents, more than anyone else in Iranian society, the Hezbollahi citizen would prefer the foreign researcher to mind her own business? Much to my surprise, it was oftentimes the case that I was encouraged to intervene in daily politics, and this methodological revision also introduced me to less visible layers of the Hezbollah movement. For instance, in the fall of 2012, one interlocutor informed me that she knew a Hezbollah female affiliate who was frustrated with the access that I was given.⁸⁴ This contact argued that her friend had tried for years to work in Hezbollah cultural institutes alongside men. They always refused her entry because, prior to 2012, women were not permitted to work in the cultural institutes due to the presence of men. Female supporters of Hezbollah often worked on projects from home. This young woman, a PhD student, had even applied for an open position by filling out the application forms under a male pseudonym. She was invited for an interview because of her outstanding resumé, but was quickly dismissed when it was discovered that she was not a man. This contact argued that, like her friend, she too was angered by my extensive relations with some of the institute's leaders and male elites. She insisted on knowing my views on this gender conflict, and requested that I defend women's rights within Hezbollah cultural institutes, since the male elites seemed to take me seriously. At about the same time, another Hezbollah affiliate informed a friend of mine that he was confused as to why I "acted stupid."⁸⁵ This Hezbollah activist understood my accommodation of religious norms as an act of complicity. This Hezbollah affiliate went on to argue that although he did not initially think so, he was wondering if I was a spy after he witnessed how easily I disregarded the movement's flaws. For instance, he mentioned my silence with regard to the inaccurate ways in which the 2009 presidential conflict was being discussed by the

movement's followers. Senior members of the movement began to see my silence as a sort of indifference to what was happening around me.

These conversations were a turning point in my thinking on care and justice, and also on the interaction between emotions and morality. I started to understand that promising to be fair in my assessments of Hezbollah affiliates at a later time was not sufficient for my interlocutors because of their heightened sensitivity about the legacies of colonialism, and colonial feminism in particular.⁸⁶ Naghibi argues that the history of feminism in Iran is entangled with the participation of Western women in Iranian society through a reinsertion of class and political oppression. Similarly, Narayan cautions us against a “colonialist care discourse,”⁸⁷ where our efforts at caring for a population become a form of imperial intrusion because we stop listening to the people we are relationally connected to. While I claimed to be invested in breaking down hierarchies between participants and myself, I was passive when activists and supporters, who often came from low-income backgrounds, were taken advantage of in cultural institutes. My formulation of justice and care showed itself in colonial ways that I had not intended, as I overlooked the discrimination which occurred in the places whose threshold I had transgressed as an Iranian American woman. In other words, I lost track of the reality that care is an embodied value which must at times part ways with silence. Caring can also be engagement with the notion of rights to address justice from the viewpoint of those we are interconnected with.

Once I understood that, against my best intentions, my research practice was deemed unethical by at least some of my interlocutors, I stopped being overly “nice” and religiously accommodating in exchange for access. Taking cues from those around me, I redefined care as a socially embodied notion that demanded different dispositions depending on the context. In other words, there was no need for me to remain silent or abide by that which I felt was wrong. It also meant that I retained the right to defend myself and others when I witnessed or experienced abuse. Interlocutors wanted me to ‘get real’ and delve into the conflicts that swirled around us all. This context-specific view of care became a permanent stance. I was no longer willing to exchange care, as an eclectic, embodied value, for other values out of fear—fear of retaliation or fear of breaking my commitment to feminist ethics, or fear of taking part in what I understood to be acts of transgression for a foreign researcher.

This transformation in social dynamics afforded my interlocutors and myself the time to build relationships and get to know each other in

real time. In turn, I started to move deeper into how Hezbollah affiliates justified their politics intellectually. I was my animated self again during conversations, and stopped self-censoring. In practice, this meant that in my pursuit of breaking down hierarchies, I gave myself the right to pose difficult questions that may have seemed offensive to how some Hezbollah activists understood their political movement. In other words, I too joined the fight against oppression with a discourse of rights, sometimes through my presence, but oftentimes through emotionally charged words. I was surprised to find that Hezbollah activists preferred this more hands-on approach to knowledge-making, one which I had initially thought was only possible for an “insider”. Many informed me that they felt my open criticism of the movement gave them an opportunity to defend their views and the space to rethink them. In fact, it was common for interlocutors to state that they enjoyed the conversations we had precisely because I spoke from angles they had not considered before. Ultimately, they could counter the power dynamics of fieldwork that worked to their disadvantage by at least trying to explain themselves. It was only when I distinguished the pursuit of justice from care, and redefined both terms in accordance with how justice and care were being engaged with by those around me, that interviewees began to address taboo topics in an uncertain environment.

During the second half of my fieldwork, I applied this newly-formulated Islamic feminist ethic to research practice. It meant that I began to take research participants seriously, and not as embodied symbols of slogans. I continued to recognize the power dynamics that existed between us, and in fact, I began to defend myself and fight for others. In the process, I saw that Iran’s Hezbollah activists are similar to other people who strive to be pious, and at the same time are uncertain about national myths due to the socio-political transformations they experience in political life.⁸⁸ For instance, in her research on Christians and rural churches in the United States, Neitz has argued that participation in religious activities is partially propelled by an ambivalence regarding life on the “borderlands” and migration.⁸⁹ New migration patterns among this population intersect with their self-understanding as representatives of America’s heartland, as well as the decline of this national myth. Moreover, I had been quick to assume that Hezbollah activists’ association with resistance politics was an expression of self, whereas it could also have been interpreted as a struggle to construct the self.⁹⁰ Saade has argued that it is common for researchers to assume that Hezbollah affiliates have static characteristics that surpass time and place.⁹¹ Through a feminist Islamic ethic for research practice that was passionate

and vocal, I could locate Hezbollah within Iranian society and capture the range of meanings their narratives carry. As I began to challenge interlocutors, but also accept being morally questioned and emotionally confronted, I granted myself the affective opportunity to study the movement comparatively, in real time, and as a multivalent construction effort.

Having consciously refused to conduct research with a universal understanding of care, during interviews I asked assertively for clarifications, and this method allowed the interviewees to self-represent. My assertions were not always subtle, but they were passionate, at times even aggressive, or disruptive. During one interview, an 18-year-old student studying in a seminary outside of Tehran gave me a response that signified the importance of conceptualizing care broadly.⁹² I interrupted her and asked why she placed her views in opposition to reformists, given that through her emphasis on rights, space and criticism of state domination she shared much in common with the reformist movement. She broke down, and exclaimed: "Miss Saeidi, what more do you want from us? We believe in the revolution, we believe in an Islamic state, but we are also young people who have no space for social and political life. They don't give young people any space."⁹³ Her response to my direct intervention showed me that in practice she did not think of her activism in relation to a dichotomy between reformist activists and Hezbollah activists, and that she had not escaped the disgruntled atmosphere that upheld activism in post-2009 Tehran more generally. This is precisely information that she had not originally offered, but which was vital to understanding the movement beyond the state's narrative.

That moment of tension lessened the distance between us, and we became close during my time in Tehran. Through ongoing encounters which covered the span of several years, I came to learn that what she valued most in her involvement with Hezbollah cultural institutes was the space she claimed for herself and others who shared a similar sensibility of Islam as a global political movement. She knew well that a public expression of solidarity with some aspects of the reformist agenda crossed the political boundaries that Hezbollah leaders had delineated. Additionally, this interviewee came from a strict family. Her parents did not allow her to take part in reformist politics. In effect, by explicitly going beyond the political boundaries of Hezbollah as defined by the state, she would risk losing her entire social life. Her lived realities were also rooted in an inner desire to become closer to God by creating an Islamic utopia on earth. For instance, during our conversations she, as well as her sister, recounted the various ways they are discriminated against in the marriage process because

of their family's lower-income status.⁹⁴ One of the reasons they decided to participate in Hezbollah cultural activism was in order to counter this negative social form. Turning towards God more resolutely because of gender and other socio-political realities has been noted in the lived experiences of African-American Christian women as well.⁹⁵ There are many reasons as to why women turn towards piety politics, and equally complicated and evolving theorizations of what membership in a resistance movement means to them. However, one can begin to notice such intricate details only through the embodiment of care that evolves in a specific context with its own guidelines on the moral and emotional.

I worked actively to remain a critical and passionate scholar in a murky context, and this approach to conducting interviews and participant observation also had positive consequences for my archival work. Archival engagement and ethnography are often assumed to be two different research methods. However, in a discussion on inter-religious dialogue through sacred texts, Frederiks has argued that inter-subjectivity as a "radical openness" to the "other" upholds faith and dialogue between religions as well as cultures.⁹⁶ Similarly, in this project I began to see the ways in which archival work and ethnography are interdependent and upheld by a "radical openness". I find "radical openness" to be a useful way to conceptualize passion as a model of care that is geared towards a disruption of boundaries. By entering into rigorous dialogue with Hezbollah activists, I not only broke down hierarchies by taking activists seriously, but also illustrated my commitment to the pursuit of justice as it related to my scholarship more broadly. They witnessed how I pushed myself to understand their viewpoint, and this embodied move towards them was appreciated as caring behavior. Instructive of the overlaps between the ethics of care and the pursuit of justice, my dedication to breaking down hierarchies motivated Hezbollah affiliates to follow up conversations with textual support to highlight the political thought which influenced them the most.

Gaining access to the specific political theories, sometimes narrowed down to a single word or sentence, that had influenced their intellectual development, was vital for understanding the full purpose of this cultural movement. I was not in Tehran to join Hezbollah and had no intention of enforcing the state's interpretations of Islam. But I was interested to understand why someone else would be motivated to take part in both of these activities. Therefore, the images and concepts I was encountering during archival research developed their "significance only for those who know how to interpret them in terms of that to which they refer."⁹⁷ As such, mean-

ingful relationships were pivotal to understanding how this specific group of Islamists read texts from long ago. When activists noticed that I was interested to read the material from their perspective they began to help me access “the secrets of the archives.”⁹⁸ By “secret”, I do not mean access to confidential material. Dirks has argued that archives’ secrets can be the “archival structure of the conditions of historical knowledge.”⁹⁹ In this case, the situated knowledge that I wished to engage was how activists piece together and contextualize textual material that I, and other academics, had analyzed in the past without finding rights to be central to the texts studied. This material included the post-revolutionary Iranian constitution, but also the political thought of leaders of the revolution such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Our conversations about key historical texts enlivened the archives for me, as I learned about the connections between the archives and the bodies engaged with them.¹⁰⁰ This visualization made conducting archival research as exciting as relying on “other social sources”, including interviews.¹⁰¹ The diverse interpretations of texts illustrated to me that I had taken some words, ideas, and feelings—within and outside of the archives—for granted in previous readings. Perhaps more importantly, however, these back-and-forth conversations, sometimes quite intense, about the ways in which Hezbollah activists interpret the political thought of individuals such as Ayatollah Khomeini, or documents like the constitution, taught me how this particular faction of Iranian society continues to theorize words written long ago and considers them relevant today. For instance, one activist argued that in his Will and Testament, Khomeini states that if national institutions fail to uphold Islamic values, the Hezbollahi has the right to take the struggle for Islamization into his or her own hands. Going back to this document guided my understanding of the inequality which upholds Khomeini’s theorization of citizenry rights, and the unpredictable ways in which this history reflects on contemporary Iranian politics. These moments of rethinking documents together through internet communication helped my interlocutors and myself undermine the spatial and social hierarchies that exist in the research process—an all-important feature of feminist ethics that I would not have otherwise been able to uphold. As a result of these tireless efforts on the part of the interlocutors via social media, I learned how to read post-revolutionary documents for the inconsistencies, ideals, and otherworldly connections that rest within and above the texts, long after I left the field.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show that when working in unfamiliar contexts, paying attention to how care and justice are situated for research participants can support feminist research ethics. Importantly, the analysis presented here is not a universal proposition. Instead, I suggested that conceptualizing care and justice as overlapping, instead of enmeshed, is an arrangement that worked in my investigation of Iran's Hezbollah. This formulation of care and justice, which also resonates with some feminist work on care ethics, permitted a wide range of interactions between the emotional and moral. In the process, this revised approach allowed me to theorize and practice care in a more expansive manner. Indeed, the research process for this project taught me that it is possible to change oneself radically, and explore social movements that are hostile to feminist politics, all without compromising one's integrity.¹⁰²

Moreover, it has not been my intent to place feminism and Islam at odds in this article. Instead, the article shows the overlaps, interplays, and differences between these two domains of thought and practice. This article draws attention to how the spaces between the Islamic and the feminist speak to care and justice for methodologists. Through the formation of an Islamic feminist ethical approach to research, I have broadened feminist care ethics by expanding the notion of care and justice. Indeed, had I succumbed to the temptation of blending justice and care, and defined them in accordance with my own preferences, my research practices would have eclipsed the activism that I was actually given access to analyze. Such possible outcomes through a blind application of feminist ethics underscore the urgency of re-engaging with feminist political theory. When we contextualize justice and care, we have a firmer basis on which to grasp how communities, loyalties, and worldviews develop for those whose lives are very different from our own. Given the time in which we live, this may be an urgent lesson to heed.

Endnotes

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24. Conversations, Tehran, September 2014.
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you truly believe in the effectiveness of your approach?” (Telegram, January 5, 2018). Moreover, they quickly came to the defense of protestors by sharing with me the economic struggles of their own families. One activist stated that he was working to support his father, mother, and younger sister while pursuing a PhD in politics.

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