Ways of Expressing Care for Interviewees: Reflections on Conducting Interviews with Algerian Women about the Practice of Wearing Hijab

Siham Akaka

Introduction: Because I Care

As a feminist doctoral researcher and Algerian woman, I am interested in collecting Algerian women's stories about hijab in order to explore their ideas of selfhood and identity. In other words, I explore the relationship between Algerian women's perceptions of hijab and their daily experiences of womanhood. Despite our different and sometimes conflicting perceptions of certain experiences, my participants' stories about hijab unveiled similar patterns and ideas that connected me to them; thus, we bonded through discussions about culture and daily experiences of Algerian women. My aim was to reach an understanding of my own hijab experience through the stories of other Algerian women who are familiar with the practice, and I wanted to explore how they self-identify through hijab. In this essay, I reflect on the process of conducting 25 semi-structured in-depth online interviews, during which I was able to explore ways to express care for my participants – Algerian women aged 20-30 who were university students either wearing or not wearing hijab. As a researcher, I developed ways to build rapport with my interviewees, and to extend care: firstly, by providing the possibility for participants to choose the language of communication and even shift between languages, if necessary, during each interview. Secondly, I used self-disclosure of my personal stories to foster care alongside our shared experiences.

I initially viewed my PhD thesis as a step toward self-care and self-definition. At a certain point, I made the decision to wear hijab and m y reason for wearing it was not religious. As a teenager, due to my acne, I struggled to embrace my skin and saw in hijab a refuge from the expressions of shock and surprise, as well as from the advice on how to deal with my skin problems, which I received from other women, especially the friends of my mother. My family welcomed my decision because it was a common practice and not the rebellious reaction of a teenage girl. Throughout the years, I gradually learned how to embrace my body while experiencing the surfacing of a myriad of feelings, mainly the regret of wearing hijab. Those regrets finally led to my journey as a Hijabista (fashionable hijab-wearer). I immersed myself in the world of Hijabistas and fashion until my perception of my hijab shifted. Meanwhile, my feminist consciousness was arising, and I began to view Hijabistas from a similar lens as Collins described the different ways in which African-American women reject external definitions of their womanhood:

> . . . then the individual women who in their consciousness choose to be
> self-defined and self-evaluating are, in fact, activists. They are retaining

the grip over their definition as subjects, as full humans, and rejecting definitions of themselves as the objectified other. (Collins, 1986, p. s24)

As a consequence, when Hijabistas post about their daily activities on Instagram, they are engaging in a form of activism. This was my experience, and perception too; thus, I responded to Hijabistas by imitating their style. However, I did not yet have the tools necessary to understand the complex layers of my actions and find the answers to my questions surrounding the practice of wearing hijab. I wondered whether or not this was the case for other Algerian women who practice wearing hijab in their daily lives. Did they view Hijabistas through a similar lens?

I began my inquiry using my (a woman's) experience and I built on my own knowledge. I desired to see the world through the perspectives of other women as Dorothy Smith (1973, cited in Harding, 1987, pp. 84–96) suggests. Initially, I wanted to hear stories about Algerian women's perceptions of wearing hijab in order to validate and legitimise my own experience. However, while conducting the interviews, I realised that I care just as much about understanding, analysing and explaining the experiences of Algerian women who wear hijab as I do about self-defining. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, I concluded that my choice of the topic is simply another form of care. It started as self-care as I had the strong need to understand myself. Nonetheless, my interest in understanding my experience became less crucial than understanding my participants' personal stories about (not) wearing hijab.

My Research Topic and Approach

Before I reflect on the interviews and ways to express care, I provide the context to my research, my own approach to researching this topic and my positionality. Conducting research about hijab always adds new layers of meaning to the wide corpus of knowledge on the way Muslim women dress. Wearing hijab is a sign of both religious and cultural affiliation; however, it was also chosen by Western European colonial forces as a site of political struggle for women (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 166–167). For instance, in Algeria, French colonisers saw hijab as a sign of women's oppression (Perego, 2015, p. 350), which was part of the coloniser's discourse of superiority and alleged progressiveness in comparison to the people they colonised. This discourse is still echoed today by, for example, various right-wing parties as well as liberal feminists across Europe and the United States. In resistance to the French colonisers, Algerian nationalists used hijab as a symbol in the fight for independence (Fanon, 1965, p. 58). Various researchers have discussed hijab when they studied different discourses about Algerian women, including the Islamist discourse (Lazreg, 2009, p. 13) and the discourse of the government-tolerated feminist movement in Algeria (Salhi, 2010, p. 117). However, how women who wear hijab feel about the garment in an Algerian context has seldom been studied. Perhaps, to certain women, it is a sign of oppression, and I would not judge or blame those who decide to remove it as one of my interviewees, Dalila[1], did when she travelled to a European country. Alternatively, it could be a way for some women to express their culture, or it could be a sign of religious belief and a form of worship. It could even be a preferred fashion style. Hijab should have never been

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[1] All the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

an 'either or' situation in which, 'on' means oppression and 'off' means a lack of religious conviction.

As a PhD researcher at a British university and as an Algerian woman, I took the space of an 'outsider within' (Collins, 1999, 1986) in my interviews. I shared fundamental emotions and the knowledge about certain experiences with my participants because we have a shared gender and culture. I am a woman, I am Muslim, and I am Algerian. Based on our commonalities, I presupposed that my participants and I had similar knowledge about, among other things, Algerian spoken languages, traditions and customs, dress, educational journey, idioms and proverbs, and traditional foods. Many of the participants mirrored feelings which I had personally experienced with my hijab journey, particularly the awareness of the fact that we - as Algerian women who wear hijab - are concealing the parts of our bodies that would enhance our sense of femininity and also embracing one's body and celebrating its flaws instead of feeling unattractive, invisible and insecure. However, I could not discount the likelihood that I might not share similar perceptions of other experiences, emotions they developed over time, or the knowledge constructed after having lived through those experiences, whether at the level of the self or the family or at school. Therefore, I believe one of the trickiest questions that participants asked was whether or not I understood them. Here, I found myself in an uncomfortable position: on the one hand, if I said 'yes', even though, I had never experienced or been exposed to the type of situation that the participant described, the participant would stop elaborating because she would expect me to know what feelings were associated with such an experience. Therefore, the interpretation process should be based on my speculations regarding how she must have felt. If I say 'no', on the other hand, I could risk my image as a well-equipped researcher, and my insider position would be threatened by my lack of awareness of the feelings associated with a given experience. After developing a wider understanding of feminist research, however, I was able to alternate between my insider and outsider identities.

Before I started my fieldwork, I created a set of preconceived ideas and expectations of the kind of information I would obtain and the nature of the responses the participants might provide. When the answer of a participant did not conform to my expectations, I used to be baffled. For example, I remember an answer that I received during one of the first interviews that disturbed me because I was not yet able to effectively deal with my positionality as well as the experiences that I did not share with the interviewees.

> **Siham**: Could you tell me more about yourself?

> **Yussra**: I am a mother. (She smiles, and I smile back). (laughing). Yeah. This is the only thing I can say about myself.

In another interview, a participant also replied to the same question, saying:

> **Nayla**: Okay, I got married last summer and now I have a child. A baby. So, I'm doing it on my own. (laughing). And it's the only thing I can talk about right now because I'm raising this baby alone. My husband is currently far away. And it's been really hard to do the PhD and the raising.

Initially, I strongly criticised how these young women 'only' self-defined themselves through marriage and motherhood at the expense of their academic success and careers. I considered their eagerness to share details about their civil status and children as their way to ask for a validation of their answers/or experiences. I was judging them based first on the way I was raised, and also my academic background. Other feminists' work with women as participants (Leavy and Harris, 2019; Smith, 2012; Lazreg, 2009; King, 1994; Webb, 1993; Reinharz, 1992; Harding, 1987; Collins, 1986) helped me to negotiate my 'outsider within' position. Through the interviews, I learned how to care for the interviewees to whom I was, at times, an insider and, at other times, an outsider. I developed a clearer understanding of the state of being an 'outsider within', which meant that I had to fulfil my position as a researcher and my position as a woman belonging to the same social group as my interviewees.

(My) Two Ways of Expressing Care for Interviewees

My first way of expressing care for the interviewees was to provide them the possibility to choose the language of communication they were most comfortable with. I gave them the option to speak in English, French, Arabic, Algerian dialects or a mix of any of those languages. In this context, choosing the language of the interview gives the participants space to express themselves without being confined within the borders that the interviewer sets, which is important when conducting research on understudied and marginalised groups specifically. Feminist researchers adopt goals such as "to stop the production of knowledge that continues to be complicit in the oppression of minority groups and to engage in the production of knowledge that carries the potential to do some social good" (Leavy and Harris, 2019, p. 102). In my research, I wanted to avoid my relationship to the participants mirroring that of the oppressor and the oppressed (Ladner, 1972, as cited in Harding, 1987, p. 77). It would have been easier for me to conduct the interviews in English; however, I explained to the participants in each interview that they could speak the way they would normally speak in informal situations. I considered the opposed selection of a language for the interviews to be a form of 'cultural oppression' (Fanon, 1965, p. 91). This is because the French imposed their language on the Algerians, physically abusing and torturing those who spoke Arabic. All my participants spoke a version of English, but I intended to make them feel comfortable and help them understand that the aim of the interview was to listen to them. Moreover, as human beings and members of a particular society, individuals tend to want to appear as socially acceptable or desirable as possible (Sherif, 1964, cited in Harding, 1987, p. 48), so one might feel embarrassed when making an error in front of an individual who belongs to their social group. Personally, when I speak English, I feel alienated from my real self; I feel uncomfortable because I become alert to and self-conscious of the movements of my tongue and lips, breathing and body language as well as the amount of time I take to translate the meaning of an idea, seek its equivalent in the target language, and then utter the words. Therefore, I hoped to avoid my participants struggling like this; through enabling them to choose the interview language. For example, during many of the interviews, I noticed that some of my participants tended to add 'al-', which translates to 'the' in English, before certain English nouns. Examples include but are not limited to 'al-dress', 'al-skirt', 'al-Facebook' and 'al-scarf'. Another way of speaking an Algerian dialect is to simply alternate between two languages: Arabic and French, or Arabic and English. That is, I would

have been unable to detect a similar observation or to learn when exactly the participants shift between languages had I asked them to select one language to communicate in each interview.

My second way to express care was to share my experiences. As an individual, I am capable of being emotionally open and expressing vulnerability. Therefore, I shared with my participants not only professional or academic facts related to conducting research or undertaking a PhD, but also personal details. Besides the fact that this enhanced the quality of the data, it provided comfort to the participants and assured them they are not alone. Thus, I found myself sympathising with my participants. For example, when interviewing Aya, I felt compelled to express my vulnerability because she struggled with issues regarding her self-image and self-esteem, especially after wearing hijab. Aya's parents ordered her to cover her body when she reached puberty, and after she narrated her story with wearing hijab, I shared my own experience.

> **Siham**: I understand. My story of wearing the hijab is not really that, you know, out of a religious conviction because I had issues with my skin. I was insecure. I had like acne, and I had hair like a lot of body hair actually. And I was receiving criticism from a lot of people. So, the only option for me at that time was to cover and wear hijab. What I mean is, I had this questioning; I can relate to what you were saying. And I had, I questioned wearing hijab, and I was like, I wish I didn't wear it, and actually when I say, when I say, I feel what you've been through, it's really the truth.

> **Aya**: That's actually reminds me of, if I can just add one thing after you talked about insecurities,

> **Siham**: Yeah!

> **Aya**: I remember I have a special hair type. My hair is naturally curly. And I used to have really, really thick hair. So, it took a lot of maintenance, like as a kid, like, it would be a lot of work to take care of my hair and . . .

Sharing my experience with wearing hijab created the opportunity to delve deeper into Aya's feelings and explore other memories related to her perception of her body image, but most importantly, it showed that I was as equally vulnerable as she was years ago when she first wore hijab.

To conclude, research conducted on hijab lacks conversations with the women who wear this garment or decide not to wear hijab. As a researcher, I felt responsible for my participants, and I decided to document the stories of Algerian women, a group that was otherwise silenced by the taken-for-grantedness of hijab. Doing so adds to the collection of Algerian lived experiences. To a great extent, my status as an 'outsider within' enabled me to express care for my participants in various ways and avoid limiting their freedom by asking them to choose a language to use during the interview, as this resembled oppression to me. Moreover, I decided to exchange personal details about my experiences with my participants, especially regarding wearing hijab, to express sympathy and

encourage them to open up about their feelings and viewpoints concerning their stories about hijab.

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