



Cultural Differences May Not Be Mentioned: Multiculturalism and Self Censorship in Norway

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In the last decades of the 20th century there developed in the West a new ideal, “multiculturalism,” which meant the living together within society, in tolerance and harmony, of a number of distinct and disparate cultures. Tolerance and respect became civic duty, and in some countries disparaging remarks about a culture became an offense in law. In these circumstances, describing cultural differences became fraught with worry; people were reluctant to open themselves to accusations of “racism,” “Islamophobia,” and the like. A popular view was that “people are really all alike,” a view which benefits from our tendency to feel that our way of thinking and feeling is “natural” and therefore universal.

Multiculturalism has thus militated against cultural explanations and even descriptive discriminations between cultures, on the grounds that discrimination, even descriptive, is inherently tendentious or pejorative. Describing differences among cultures has become politically incorrect, and, in some places, illegal.

How are honor killings explained?

The restraints dictated by multiculturalism appear not so much to enhance understanding, as to inhibit or preclude it. This is not very helpful to those of us living in the everyday world, facing problems with people and peoples whom we need to understand. It can be a matter of practical urgency, and—not to be sensationalist or alarmist—a matter of life and death, even of genocide, to know whom you are dealing with. Being able to answer the question: Why do these people act the way they do? can be critical in determining how we should act, what our policies should and should not be.

Let us illustrate this issue of explaining behavior on a matter of practical urgency, and the problems caused by current orientations in social commentary, by examining a contemporary study, *In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame*, by Unni Wikan, a distinguished Norwegian anthropologist. In this work, Wikan attempts to explain honor killings among immigrants in Scandinavia. I choose this example not because Wikan is a poor anthropologist, but because she is a fine anthropologist; and not because Wikan takes extreme theoretical positions, but because her theoretical concerns are typical of contemporary anthropology.

Wikan (2008:1) explains that

My motivating force [in this research] was the murder of Fadime Sahindal in

Uppsala, Sweden, on January 21, 2002. Fadime's fate left me no peace. Of Kurdish origin, she had lived in Sweden from the age of seven until her death at age twenty-five. A luminous example of courage and integrity, she had done more than anyone to warn against the failure of Sweden's integration policies in regard to persons like her parents. She had tried to make the nation understand that "honor"—as practiced in some communities—can be a deadly affair. She had warned that she might be killed for choosing her own love in life, Swedish-Iranian Patrik Lindesjö.

Fadime's family was part of a larger community of Kurds from southeast Turkey that resided in Sweden (2008:21). Many in the Kurdish and other Middle Eastern communities were not well integrated into Swedish society in that they did not share Swedish perspectives and values. Many had negative views of Swedish society. "Fadime's mother...told her children that all Swedish girls are whores" (2008:10; see also 2008:27), expressing an apparently widespread view in the immigrant community. Fadime's father, as "he shot Fadime in the face and the back of her head," shouted "You filthy whore!" (2008:22). Fadime had understood that her independence—going out with Swedish boys and marrying a Swedish-Iranian, living on her own, and going on to higher education—would hurt the reputation of her family. "I have ruined the life of my whole family," Fadime said

in 1998. ‘No one will marry the girls now. They are all branded as whores’” (2008:22). For being so labeled, Fadime paid with her life.

Wikan wishes not only to recount the tragedy of Fadime and her family, but to understand the reasons for this tragedy. She knows that in some Middle Eastern communities “killing for the sake of honor is a time-honored tradition” (2008:15). She sees that honor killings support customary norms, norms that put men in control of women, but above all the community in control of the individual. Honor killing “is about power and control. ...It has to do with the rights of the collective over the individual and the individual’s duty to submit” (2008:16).

Fadime’s father is a victim too—a victim of a “culture’ demanding that he must be in charge, rule, control, punish; that he must accept no challenge to his honor, which is not just his own. He is only a stakeholder, someone who manages a share in the tribal honor—as everyone one must, for the sake of the tribe.

An honor killing represents a failure: a failure to compel conformity to the norms of the community. But the honor killing of the deviant wipes out the shame of dishonor and restores honor and reputation to the group (2008:15).

An approving audience is a precondition. For shame to be “washed away” and honor to be restored, you need a community of people who will reward

you with acclaim—validate the killing and the code of honor that prescribes it. Fadime’s father was part of such a group. ...He felt buoyed up by friends and relatives who told him that he was right and also reinforced his feeling of shame and defeat. Afterward, some individuals still backed him, confirming that he had no choice: he had to kill.

“‘The final solution,’ the father called it in court. ‘The problem is over now’” (2008:2).

At the same time as Wikan is describing the human tragedy of Fadime’s disgrace and murder, and explaining the nature of the “time-honored tradition” of honor killings, she is reluctant to identify a group or category of people who hold this “time-honored tradition” and engage in honor killing. Wikan wishes to avoid criticizing any population. She says that she wants to advance “understanding what shame and dishonor mean in specific communities—without stigmatizing” (2008:3, emphasis added). She (2008:14, emphasis in original) continues,

I deliberately avoid using words like *cultures* or *societies*—words that easily create the impression that everyone belonging to this or that culture or society will react in a particular way. ... Even where honor killings are part of a local tradition, it is probably rare to kill your daughter, sister, or wife in order to cleanse the family of the shame she has brought on it.

Wikan follows three rhetorical strategies to block the identification of honor murders with particular groups. First, she (2008:3) repeats that this “time-honored tradition” is not universally held, but only “in specific communities,” always unnamed. Second, she (2008:3) identifies a number of different categories of people who she says have engaged in honor killings, so as to avoid the identification of honor killings with one group:

Honor killing is an act based on a set of ideas that occurs across the whole spectrum of religious belief, as well as among nonbelievers. Honor killings have been reported to take place among Christians as well as Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, and Confucians, but only in specific local communities.

Third, Wikan (2008:3) says that, while honor killings may take place in some communities, people really try to avoid them.

Alternative ways to avert dishonor have been developed to avoid acts of violence or loss of life. ...

Honour killing is contested, even in communities where it is part of time-honored tradition. Many are actively at work, openly or in secret, to save human lives and secure humane values.

She (2008:14) continues, “Compassion, pity, and love deter murder. People find

other, less brutal solutions.” More specifically about the murder of Fadime (2008:24), “Many among the Kurds had actually stated their condemnation of the killing of Fadime. Murder is, and remains, an exception.”

Wiken in these comments appears to be saying, “don’t name; don’t blame.” Because “naming and blaming” would “stigmatize,” and—she does not say this explicitly—would be a form of prejudice and bigotry. Wiken’s attitude is that we must be accepting, not rejecting of people. This is expressed through Fadime (2008:24):

Fadime broke through barriers; she wanted to build bridges. She stood for an inclusive view of humankind, universal in its emphasis on the individual’s irreducible value. She represented freedom and equality, regardless of gender, religion, and ethnicity. She was against narrowness of vision and wanted to reconcile warring factions among those who believe that they are the only guardians of truth, a truth that is theirs for ever.

Fadime embraced all and everyone.

Wikan (2008:19-20, emphasis added) goes even farther, arguing that, really, people are at heart all the same:

To gain insight into what honor killing is all about, we must look “beyond the words”—read between the lines—and try to engage with a very human

dilemma. This applies to cultural understanding in general: we mustn't become fixated on words but recognize that rhetoric sometimes obscures the fact that we lead comparable lives. From cradle to grave we struggle with similar existential problems, and we recognize this despite a sea of differences and discrepancies separating our core ideas, lifestyles, personalities, and material circumstances. And this is somehow comforting. The point that Wikan wishes to drive home is that, yes, people sometimes become desperate and do terrible things, but that does not prove that they are inhuman, it proves that they are human. And that other members of the same groups or categories must not be condemned, or "stigmatized," by the acts of the few.

Many of Wikan's assertions about honor killing are correct, to a point. It is true that honor killings have taken place in many groups and categories. It is true that it is likely to be more prevalent in some communities than in others. It is true that there are alternative strategies, such as exile of the "guilty" party, to deal with shame and dishonor. It is true that "Compassion, pity, and love deter murder," and that people are often reluctant to kill their sisters, wives, or daughters. But it is also true that these statements can be misleading, serving as a distraction to insure that groups are not "stigmatized."

Wikan's generalizations are qualitative, not quantitative. But the norm for

criminology is statistical description, as in the number of murders per 100,000.

From such statistics, it is clear, for example, that in 2010 Denmark had few murders (0.85), while Venezuela had comparatively many (48.0)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_intentional_homicide_rate.

This obviously does not mean that all Venezuelans were murderers, or that no Danes were murderers, but it does indicate which country was more dangerous for murders. So to say that honor murders take place in many different groups and categories, ignores the statistical variation, which might show honor killings comparatively common in some groups, while very rare in others. In other words—to make a point that Wikan wishes to avoid—all groups and categories are not the same.

Wikan has taken to heart, as have many contemporary anthropologists, Edward Said's rejection of cultural generalizations on the grounds that there is internal variation in each group. But this is an invalid argument. Every concept is a generalization that includes a wide range of variation: dog, cat, chair, table, house, car, etc. The fact that there are many different kinds of dogs and many different kinds of cats does not negate the differences between dogs and cats. There are many different kinds of chairs and tables, but chairs are not tables and tables are not chairs. To say that basketball players are tall and gymnasts are short is valid

even though there might be a few somewhat short basketball players and somewhat tall gymnasts. Similarly, rankings of universities consistently show that Israeli universities are better than universities in Arab countries, although some Israeli universities are better than others, and some Arab universities are better than others, and there are no rankings that show that any Arab universities are better than Israeli universities. So too with other phenomena difficult but important to measure: prosperity, literacy, health, democracy, freedom, and human rights; rankings show world regional and country differences of great significance, notwithstanding internal variations (e.g. U.N.D.P. *Arab Human Development Report 2002*). It is fair enough to say that generalizations are general, and do not necessarily apply to each individual or unit subsumed. It is also fair to say that a generalization is not an “essence” which characterizes all members of a group and which is unchangeable, for we must save our colleagues from the dread sin of “essentialism.” But unless we are able to generalize, it is impossible to speak usefully about any problem or any risk. The reality is that there are no honor killings among Swedes of Swedish ancestry; honor killings in Sweden are the actions of immigrants with Middle Eastern ancestry.

Furthermore, while people in communities where “killing for the sake of honor is a time-honored tradition” do wish to avoid honor killing, it is not only

because “Compassion, pity, and love deter murder,” but because an honor killing is a sign of failure, a “proof that the men had failed to stay in control” (Wikan 2008:16). “To get back in control you must show who holds the reins, who is lord and master” by killing the offender, whether beloved wife, sister, or daughter (Wikan 2008:16). And if not everyone in the community kills, perhaps they would if faced with the same situation. We cannot be sure. What is likely is that the honor killings that do take place serve as a deterrent to other members of the community, who restrict their behavior accordingly. While there may be only a limited number of honor killings, these do serve to successfully limit individual freedom, particularly for women, “for the sake of the tribe” (Wikan 2008:16).

In spite of these deflections, Wikan has acknowledged that the community involved in her account is the Kurds originating from Turkey. Most of the other cases of honor killings that she (2008 Chapters 2, 3, and passim) describes are also about people from Middle Eastern Muslim communities. The same is true in Canada, where most honor killings involve Middle Easterners, although some are seen among South Asians

<http://www.vancouversun.com/life/Honour+killings+rise+Canada+Expert/3165638/story.html>). Let us recall that Fadime had wanted to “warn against the failure of Sweden’s integration policies in the regard to persons like her parents” (Wikan

2008:1). How can any policy be designed to alleviate this problem if we refuse to identify “persons like her parents”? Wikan’s desire not to “name and blame” is in direct conflict with her concern to insure that there are no more honor killings.

Wikan’s ambivalence in dealing with honor killings reflects an ideological conflict in anthropology, wider academia, and the broader intellectual world: On the one side is cultural relativism, the necessary underpinning of multiculturalism which has become official or quasi-official policy in many Western countries (but not elsewhere). Cultural relativism, in its weak form, states that cultures can only be understood and evaluated in their own terms, and, in its strong form, states that cultures are all equally good, equally valuable, and that valuing one, even (or especially) your own, over another is ethnocentrism and bigotry. On the other side is human rights, seen as universal values that must be recognized and, ideally, implemented in all societies and cultures, notwithstanding local custom and practice. Wikan’s ambivalence reflects the desire to reconcile the unreconcilable. She (2008:7) speaks with horror of Fadime’s tragic death: Even after greater understanding of Fadime’s father’s plight, “I am still wholeheartedly on Fadime’s side.” She (2008:21) speaks in support of Fadime’s “leading her life on her own terms.” Seen from the point of view of Western individualism, Fadime had the right to determine her own life, to choose her residence, her husband, her

education, her occupation, and the right to live, not to be murdered. This is the human rights side. At the same time, although Wikan (2008:16) regards Fadime and her father as “victims” of “tribal honor,” she shies away from identifying the carriers of that culture. In fact, she calls Fadime’s father “a victim of a ‘culture’,” putting the term “culture” in quotes, as if it is not quite real, or as if it would be an offense to identify it as a real culture in space and time. To do so would violate cultural relativism, because she condemns “tribal honor,” so Wikan must leave “tribal honor” hanging in the air, not tied to any actual people or category of people.

But it will not do, for people who live in the real world, to pretend that all people are the same, that all cultures are equally valuable, and that there is not a differential distribution of attitudes, values, beliefs, customs, and practices in different groups and categories of people. As Clifford Geertz (1973: Ch. 3) pointed out, there is no general human culture; there are only particular cultures with specific characteristics. For carriers of a culture, which guides them in their lives, any other culture is different and therefore not equally good. It does not matter how “arbitrary” one’s culture is in its origin and development; it is how one addresses life, even reflectively, it is one’s reality. Other cultures are other, and largely irrelevant, and certainly not equivalent to our own. This is why immigration to

another country is so fraught with difficulty, and assimilation is a painful and usually only partially successful process.

References

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