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# The gender–culture double bind in Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations: A narrative approach

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## Abstract

This article investigates structural conditions for women's inclusion/exclusion in peace negotiations by focusing on the linkage between acts of gender stereotyping and cultural framing. Through a narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews with Israeli negotiators and administrators who participated in official negotiations during the Oslo peace process, I link two recent claims about how gender may affect negotiators' understandings of strategic exchange: the *gendered devaluation effect* and the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis. Building upon postcolonial feminist critique, I argue that narratives about women and cultural difference (a) demonstrate and engage with Israeli essentialist and Orientalist discourses about Arab culture and masculinity; (b) manifest how ideas about strategic dialogue and negotiations are gendered; and (c) convey how policymakers and negotiators may use cultural claims to rationalize women's exclusion from diplomatic and strategic dialogue. Furthermore, the study implies that dominant framings of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations as a binary East–West encounter need to be replaced by a more nuanced conceptualization of cultural identity that captures contextual aspects of difference, including the existence of military power and masculine dominance.

## Keywords

gender, Israeli–Arab conflict, narratives, peace negotiations, postcolonial feminism

## Introduction

> When it's within negotiations, when the other side doesn't know who you are and sees you just as a woman, then their attitude could be belittling. So, the inclination is to think that maybe it's not worth it for women to be there. (Irit, former Israeli intelligence officer)

In 2006 in Jerusalem, I sat with Irit, a former intelligence officer who, during the 1990s, was a member of a small group of Israeli military personnel that was in charge of developing strategic guidelines and proposals for official negotiators. While reflecting on the personal dynamics behind

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the scenes of official Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations, she tried to explain why so few Israeli women were appointed to serve as actual negotiators. At one point, she mentioned that 'it was not discussed, but sometimes when *they* would be thinking about whom to send, the tendency to send women was minimal, especially when it included negotiations with Arabs.' Irit suggested a hypothesis that I heard again and again in the narratives of Israeli women and men who participated in official negotiating teams during the Oslo peace process. She explained that 'there is a sense that women will have a harder time reaching them [Arab men], or that the men won't relate to what they are saying.' Her main point was that Palestinian men, being part of a culture that 'relates differently to women,' may not take Israeli women negotiators as seriously as their male counterparts.

This view, which this article examines as a manifestation of the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis for women's absence from peace negotiations, not only connects gender exclusion to internal hierarchies within Israel's political structures and security sector (Aharoni, 2011), but also sees this exclusion as related to a larger picture of unique cultural interactions between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. On a simple level, I wish to use personal narratives about the cultural hypothesis to raise a series of questions related to the role of gender in real-life dialogical exchanges within a context of strategic dialogue or peace negotiations. On a more complicated level, I will attempt to identify how essentialist discourses about culture and gender are mutually constructed, reproducing both gendered and cultural stereotypes about negotiation behavior, strategic choice, and concessions in cross-cultural peace negotiations. Keeping in mind that more women are being incorporated into official Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, this in-depth reading of negotiators' personal narratives is meant, above all, to provide a basis for further investigations into how female and male negotiators make sense of cultural and gender stereotyping within *mixed* cross-cultural strategic exchanges. One of the additional implications of this study is that the dominant view of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations as a reflection of a fixed and binary East–West encounter needs to be replaced by a more nuanced conceptualization of cultural identity that captures contextual aspects of difference, including the existence of military power and masculine dominance.

## Culture and gender: A mutual constitution of difference

This article discusses the origins and risks of cultural explanations for bargaining and negotiation behavior by adopting a postcolonial feminist perspective that connects 'womanhood' and 'manhood' with constructions and geographies of power that carry racial, ethnic, class, sexual, regional, and international dimensions (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2010). In particular, it seeks to re-examine 'culturally sensitive' discourses about Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations that are based upon local interpretations of 'strategic culture' – a vague and ambiguous formulation that was originally used as a comparative tool for identifying situations in which cultural analysis contributes to understanding the strategic choices of states within the international system (Johnston, 1996; Lantis, 2009).

My approach builds upon Meyda Yegenoglu's (1998) assumption that Orientalist representations of cultural and sexual differences are often mutually constitutive and cannot be categorically separated. According to this view, Western discourses of Otherness, developed within Orientalist traditions, are achieved *simultaneously* through sexual and cultural modes of differentiation, producing static images of dichotomous Western/non-Western ideals of masculinity and femininity. For example, recent critiques of gendered 'culture clash' discourses in the USA in the context of the Global War on Terror show how the rhetoric of salvation surrounding the status of Afghan women has both depended on and reinforced a sense of protective masculinity and Western superiority, while simultaneously silencing the historical and geopolitical roots of the particular injustices suffered by Afghan women (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Similarly, in her essay 'Essence of Culture and a Sense of History', Uma Narayan (1998) points out that when culture is reified it is not only cultural attributes that become essentialized, but also gendered roles and stereotypes. The similarities between culture essentialism and gender essentialism appear as the focal point of this criticism, with the sharp binaries between 'women' and 'men' serving as a precursor of the differentiation between 'non-Western cultures' and 'Western cultures.' In both cases, argues Narayan (1998: 88), discourses *about* difference 'often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such differences,' which are presented as given, natural, and well known. Hence, postcolonial feminist contributions join with realist criticism in arguing that 'culture' (or 'gender') is used to explain 'too much,' but with a twist – namely, suggesting that cultural codes such as 'honor'/'shame' serve as *markers* that simultaneously create and conceal cross-cultural power differences and hierarchies. In particular, these codes reinstate gender-essentialist and Orientalist images about masculinity as a primary cause for irrational behavior, while concealing the ways in which Western traditional strategic settings have been overwhelmingly dominated by and designed for men.

Next, I begin by explaining how the dominant framing of Israeli–Arab negotiations that emerged after the signing of the 1978 Israeli–Egyptian Peace Accords was constructed in cultural terms of East–West encounters. In this context, the conceptualization of 'honor'/'shame' in professional discourses about cross-cultural dialogic encounters is identified as a specific gendered construction of cultural attributes. After a short review of the literature on gender, culture, and peace negotiations in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and a methodological clarification of the narrative approach, I illustrate how cultural and gendered differences have been mutually constituted within personal stories about the failed Oslo peace process. Consequently, rather than adopting the oversimplified and empirically challenged 'women and peace hypothesis' which proposes that women are more peaceful than men (Tessler and Warriner, 1997; Golan, 2011), this article continues to investigate structural conditions for women's inclusion/exclusion in peace negotiations by focusing on the linkage between acts of gender stereotyping and cultural framing. In particular, this case study adds empirical evidence, gained through narrative analysis, that enable us to better understand the relevance of two recent claims about how gender may impact peace negotiators' understanding of strategic dialogue: the *gendered devaluation effect* and the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis.

## Israeli–Arab peace negotiations as a prototype of East–West strategic dialogue

The term 'culture' was applied to the investigation of Israeli–Arab direct negotiations in the late 1980s, associated with one of the major works in the field: Raymond Cohen's (1990) *Culture and Conflict in Egyptian–Israeli Relations: A Dialogue of the Deaf.* This in-depth analysis of Israeli–Egyptian military and diplomatic encounters during the 1978 peace talks was a seminal work that examined the failure to reach full regional cooperation as a manifestation of cultural misunderstandings and misguided techniques of negotiation. Amazed by 'the rivals' ignorance of each other, the misperceptions and inadvertent distortions that marked their mutual appraisals [and above all] their self-centeredness' (Cohen, 1990: 6), Cohen moved beyond the issue of interests and substance to question more substantial aspects of incomprehension and misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

The ambitious scope of this investigation yielded three widespread assumptions about culture, strategy, and Israeli–Arab encounters: first, that Israeli–Egyptian relations fall into the category of relationships between incompatible cultures that may be roughly labeled East–West encounters (a category that has also been used to analyze Japanese–American and Sino–American contacts); second, that Arab societies should be understood as 'collectivist cultures,' organized according to

tribal values and/or agricultural cycles symbolized in the image of the *fellah* ('peasant' in Arabic); and third, that 'like other collectivist cultures, Egyptian society is also preoccupied with questions of shame … the corollary of [which] is face or honor.' According to Cohen (1990: 24), 'honor embraces various forms and may be associated with personal dignity, hospitality, the fathering of sons, and the sexual virtue of one's women.'

Although some of these assumptions have been criticized on the grounds that they reflect hidden Western approaches and interests – particularly the notion that fighting and war are normatively good/natural in non-Western cultures (Salem, 1993) – a close reading of subsequent research about culture and negotiations in the Middle East suggests that they have been treated by later scholars as a fixed cluster of commonly accepted truths. In fact, most Israeli defense intellectuals, Arabists, and security studies scholars have generally followed Cohen's three assumptions about the role of culture in official encounters between Jews and Arabs (see e.g. Ben-Dor, 1998; Lavie and Fishman, 2010). They widely and uncritically accept the idea that these relations manifest a 'culture clash' that echoes an East versus West sense of difference (see e.g. Michael, 2003). They view Arab culture as essentially 'collectivist,' and emphasize the centrality of honor and shame as defining factors within Arab mentality and negotiating behavior. In particular, works concerning the dynamics of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations have tended to cite the issue of 'culture' as an explanation for the ultimate failure of such negotiations. An example of how defense intellectuals view Israelis and Palestinians as representing dichotomous societies is found in Kobi Michael's (2003) work on joint Israeli–Palestinian security cooperation from 1993 to 2000, in which he describes the patronizing and often condescending attitudes of Israeli security forces when facing corruption and incompetence on the part of their Palestinian counterparts. His narrative concludes that

> Palestinian society is characterized by: a code of shame, a tribal and clan-based society, a polychronic time dimension, a traditional agricultural society, etc. Israeli society in contrast is characterized by: a code of prestige, an individualistic society, a monochronic time dimension, a Western industrialized society. (Michael, 2003: 22)

This packaged notion about what Palestinian society *is* corresponds with a rigid understanding of strategic choices as products of cultural preferences. In the eyes of mainstream Israeli strategic analysts, some choices made by Palestinian representatives during the Oslo peace process were understood as a means of avoiding the humiliation and insult of signing a public agreement. According to Ephraim Lavie and Henry Fishman (2010: 330), 'an agreement sealed and signed at a public ceremony is likely to embarrass negotiators who come from *a collectivist culture*, because it publicly and tangibly exposes the concessions they were compelled to make' (emphasis added).[1]

It is noteworthy that analyses of *Israeli* strategic choices within cross-cultural dialogue have also developed a similar approach, arguing that Jewish identity and history have been instrumental in defining Israeli threat perception and strategic culture (see e.g. Avruch, 1998). In particular, Israel's strong emphasis on self-reliance and self-defense is usually linked to '2000 years of Jewish insecurity, culminating in the Holocaust' (Steinberg, 2005: 503).

## *Conceptualizing honor in strategic dialogue*

In spite of the cultural turn in strategic studies, the ways in which scholars and practitioners make sense of and use ideas about cultural differences in official security-related interactions have not gained much attention. As argued by Valerie Hudson (2007), it is necessary to ask which cultural 'stories' become legitimized through power politics and how their persuasiveness is constructed in

accordance with pre-existing strategic assumptions. Within Israeli–Arab encounters, the terms 'honor' and 'shame' are often used as codes through which specific cultural stories can be constructed and arranged.

Used to describe distinct characteristics of Arab culture, 'honor' and 'shame' are also symbols of manhood and manliness, which is why I relate to them as gendered constructions. A citation found in a scholarly work on culture and regional negotiations in the field of non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament in the 1990s could be used as a 'point of entry' for understanding how Israeli defense intellectuals make sense of the possible links between gender, culture, and power in official negotiation settings. In this example, the term 'honor' is used to imply that successful negotiations with 'Arabs' necessitate the development of culturally sensitive approaches that take into account the centrality of manhood and masculinity:

> Some analysts speak of Middle Eastern culture as a 'macho' culture, in which the manhood of the individual is intimately bound up with the prestige of the extended family or the tribe, and in which the leader legitimizes himself by defending the *honour* of the tribe, rather than by looking for accommodations with the enemy who has brought shame on the collective. This approach is clearly relevant to the strategic dialogue in the Middle East, and it demonstrates the link between domestic political traditions on the one hand, and the conduct of external strategic relations on the other. (Ben-Dor, 1998: 202, emphasis added)

Here, the term 'honor' is used to explain how domestic concerns shape strategic decisions and prestige-driven bargaining behavior that seeks to avoid insult, shame, or humiliation. However, by ascribing these choices to traditional Arab societal values associated with tribal masculinity, patriarchy, and dominance rather than to rational choice or collective interests, this citation demonstrated an ethnocentric tendency and a simplistic, one-dimensional, and even Orientalist image. As I show later, this usage demonstrates Unni Wikan's (1984) argument that 'honor' falls under the category of what Clifford Geertz identified as 'experience-distant' conceptualizations (Geertz, 1974). An experience-distant concept is one that theorists and specialists of one sort or another (including clergy, bureaucracy, policymakers) may employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims, but yet it may not necessarily reflect real-life experiences or informants' self-perception. So, although ideas *about* honor play an important role in how Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies think about themselves, 'honor' as an explanatory factor may reflect other epistemological constraints, such as men's dominance in 'theory' discourses that position women either as the bearers of 'shame' (the binary opposite of 'honor') or as completely invisible and silent.

Such ideas about 'honor' and masculinity as core values in Arab culture echo various Western and non-Western scholarship about Arab societies. For example, in an edited volume entitled *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Peristiany, 1966), personal honor (*sharaf*) – understood as linked to the family or the tribe – was identified as the highest social value, determining individual status in many rural communities in the region. In the 1970s, the notion that, in Arab culture, family honor and good reputation (*'ird*) are related to sexual purity, chastity, and control over one's women (Abou-Zeid, 1965) became widely acknowledged. 'Once lost, *'ird* is difficult to regain,' explained Peter Dodd (1973: 45), who concluded that despite processes of change and modernization (e.g. urbanization, political revolutions, state-structures, education), Arab societies were still deeply attached to the 'value of honor.'

Even conflict resolution scholars who attempt to move away from the 'culture clash' assumption by adopting a multicultural or culture-sensitive approach tend to agree that honor is central for understanding how Mediterranean societies manage conflict. For example, works about Arab traditions of mediation and reconciliation, such as the *sulha* ritual of reconciliation and forgiveness, stress that one of the differences between Western-based and Arab-Islamic approaches toward conflict is the

'emphasis on honor, faith, dignity, prestige, just compensation, and respect of individuals and groups' (Funk and Irani, 1998: 66); or that 'the perception of loss of honor fuels the eruption of the conflict in many cases, and the perception of restored honor is a crucial component required to resolve a dispute' (Pely, 2011: 431).

Some critics of the attempts to use the East–West categorization in analyzing Israeli and Palestinian strategic preferences and negotiation styles go back to the Orientalist legacy that shaped Western attitudes toward the Arab world. Referring to works done in the context of Palestinian citizens in Israel, Gideon Kressel (1992) has argued that usage of the phrase 'honor and shame' portrays a pair of concepts on a rather simple, one-dimensional scale that has led to an overemphasis of general traits at the expense of the specific, particular, and contextual meanings that these terms carry within Middle Eastern communities. Others have pointed out that by overestimating the centrality of blood feud, violence, and revenge, contemporary scholars studying conflict in Palestinian society are perpetuating stereotypes of pathological brutality that reinforce an 'us versus them' dichotomy (Lang, 2002). Similar criticism has been voiced in relation to the phenomenon of honor killings or 'crimes of honor' against Israeli-Palestinian women. Manar Hasan (2002) has demonstrated how the cultural framing of honor killings as an axiomatic, predetermined, and static cultural tradition of 'Arabs' enabled Israeli officials to ignore the fact that the preservation of traditional patriarchal *hamula* structures was historically encouraged by the State of Israel in order to 'reduce the costs of control' over the local Palestinian population. Also, contrary to the dominant Israeli narrative, studies about gender in Palestinian society have found that practices of masculinity under Israeli military occupation are related to rites of resistance, imprisonment, martyrdom, and endurance of physical or emotional pain. Accordingly, the overperformance of masculinity categorized as 'honor,' rather than manifesting a static cultural package, is deeply linked to the nature of local political struggles as it serves to transform humiliation into empowerment (Sa'ar and Yahia-Younis, 2008).

From a broader perspective, the tendency of Israeli intellectuals and Arabists to use the term 'honor' as a keyword for describing Arab culture could also be viewed as a product of what Gil Eyal (2002) identified as the 'liminal space' in which scholars and policymakers interact as creators and consumers of expert analysis within post-1948 Israeli Oriental studies. In this space, neither military Arabists nor academics recognize the domain of contemporary events as significant. Consequently, assumptions about the deep differences between Arabs and Jews reflect a stubborn interpretive framework created under specific political conditions of partition, cultural separation, and ongoing conflict.

## Knowledge schemata, gender stereotyping and negotiations in Israel/Palestine

Not all scholars of Israeli–Arab dialogue and negotiations have adopted the binary, culture-clash point of view. In contrast to the rational/competitive logic that sees cultural knowledge as part of a 'learning race' in which negotiators seek opportunistic occasions to outlearn each other (Gray, 2007), liberal scholars of conflict resolution in social psychology emphasize that although cognitive frames and stereotypes play a critical role in shaping perceptions about interests and outcomes, these are not always a product of rational choice. Constructivist scholars such as Kevin Avruch (1998), who examined aspects of cooperative negotiation behavior between Israelis and Palestinians, explain that the iteration of cultural differences in conflict resolution settings is an act of knowledge construction. Knowledge structures, known also as schemata, guide negotiators as they make sense of their conflicts and counterparts, and may reflect perceptual and cognitive biases rather than national decisionmaking styles or fixed values, norms, and beliefs (Morris and

Fu, 2001). In Dalia Kaye's (2001) work, the 'contact hypothesis' approach in social psychology was used to explain how bilateral and multilateral talks between Israelis and Arabs provided an opportunity for a shared learning process among individuals. Similarly, the 'shared culture' approach in diplomacy (Kleiman, 2005) has shown that in confined settings, such as peace talks, organizational subcultures are as important in shaping negotiators' perceptions of threat and concessions as national identity, and that both Israeli and Palestinian/Arab negotiating styles tend to be more consistent with either elitist diplomatic culture or military subcultures than with popular traditions and values.

The major contribution of constructivist approaches to conflict resolution is in recognizing that national cultures are not monolithic and may exhibit diverse and even contradictory values and norms (Gelfand and Brett, 2004). Broadening the scope of research beyond traditional questions about identifying cultural bargaining styles or isolating the influence of cultural differences on strategic negotiations has advanced the development of new themes, models, and methodologies for understanding peace negotiations, one of which is the role of gender and gender stereotyping in cross-cultural dialogue exchanges in general, and in Israel/Palestine in particular. However, owing to the overall paucity of women in official peace negotiations, much of the empirical literature on gender, culture, and conflict resolution in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been discussed using examples from Track Two negotiations, civil society-based women's peace activism, surveys, or laboratory experiments. Rarely has it been integrated into mainstream accounts about strategic dialogue and culture.

Empirical attempts to evaluate the effect of gender differences on various types of conflict resolution activities have shown inconclusive results. Several authors paid particular attention to micro-level dialogue projects that flourished during the Oslo peace process and the role local women played in their formation to examine whether shared gendered experiences such as motherhood or political marginalization have assisted in maintaining cross-national dialogue. For example, a comparative study by D'Estree and Babbitt (1998) of the behavior of Israeli and Palestinian women and men in three problem-solving workshops found that women were more effective in collaborative negotiations, as they tended to be more personal, empathetic, and receptive than men. However, longitudinal analysis has shown that structural or rational reasons for women's cross-national cooperation played a far greater role than so-called feminine preferences toward dialogue. Galia Golan and Zahira Kamal (2005) argue that, in the 1990s, Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian women demonstrated a clear preference for creating all-women dialogue groups due to the similar discrimination they faced within their respectively male-dominated societies. Likewise, Simona Sharoni's (1995) work on feminist politics of resistance in Israel/Palestine shows that shared ideological concerns about the persistence of Israel's military occupation appeared to be the primary incentive for creating cross-national links between Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian women. More than a decade later, Sophie Richter-Devroe's (2008) study of Palestinian women's own understandings of their role in conflict resolution after the Second Intifada exemplifies how collective/national and practical gender interests associated with local culture and political struggles against the Israeli occupation became more important for Palestinian women than strategic gender interests imposed by external agents, including women's representation, fighting violence against women, or maintaining contacts with Jewish-Israeli women.

A different approach was used in an experimental study by Ifat Maoz (2009) that examined the effect of the national identity and gender of negotiators on Jewish-Israeli evaluations of a compromise proposal. This study documented the existence of a *gendered evaluation effect* that caused a proposal to be evaluated as *more* beneficial to the Israelis when it was ascribed to female Palestinian negotiators than when the same proposal was ascribed to male Palestinian negotiators. However, the experiment also found that the gender of the Israeli negotiators had an opposite effect, as

Jewish-Israeli respondents rated the proposal as more beneficial to Israelis when it was offered by *male* Israeli negotiators than when it was ascribed to *female* Israeli negotiators. These findings suggest that while the very stereotype portraying women as more peace-oriented and trustworthy may affect how negotiators value the opponent's proposal, this tendency is reversed when the same proposal comes from female negotiators from one's *own* side in a dispute, causing a gender *devaluation* effect.

One possible way of interpreting the logic behind the *gender devaluation effect* could be to link it to the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, 'culturally sensitive' approaches to conflict resolution or peace negotiations may exclude women in order to accommodate cultural values and norms. Accordingly, women's exclusion from cross-cultural conflict resolution efforts may reflect a categorical separation or binary framing of strategic dialogue as *either* culturally sensitive *or* gender-sensitive. Cordula Reimann (2004: 18) explains this as follows: 'To be gender-sensitive means "to bring women in" [while] to be "culture sensitive" means to accept local social and political traditions that very often imply exclusively inviting men as participants.'

Although critics of this hypothesis have argued that it falls into an essentialist trap by failing to recognize the dynamic ways in which culturally specific gender roles can be successfully incorporated into conflict resolution processes (Richter-Devroe, 2008), little is known about how gendered and cultural stereotypes actually intersect. Hence, the following case study offers a primary analysis of how the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis may cause a gendered devaluation effect in which stereotypical perceptions of Palestinian masculinity appear to be linked to how Jewish-Israeli men and women perceive the performance of female negotiators from their *own* side.

## A narrative approach

In line with recent feminist contributions to the field of security studies, I assume that narratives about security and gender are thoroughly intertwined (Wibben, 2010), and that rigid or essentialist framings of either gender or strategic culture restrict multifaceted forms of agency that may result in more imaginative approaches to conflict resolution in general and in the Israeli–Palestinian case in particular. For the purpose of this research, I used Susan Chase's definition of *narrative* as a distinct form of discourse: an oral or written act of retrospective meaning-making of 'understanding one's own and others actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of action and events over time' (Chase, 2005: 656). Concurrently, building knowledge based on women's and men's actual life experiences enabled me to further investigate the differences between public discourses about the failed Oslo process and the personal or private stories of actual negotiators.

The stories I heard were gathered in a series of long semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in Hebrew during 2005–2006 with 31 Israeli women and 10 Israeli men who participated in formal Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations, joint committees, and policymaking during the Oslo peace process (1993–2000). The relatively small sample illustrates the fact that peace negotiations, like other forms of strategic dialogue, are usually conducted by a carefully selected, close-knit, and secluded or even secretive group of 15 people or less – policymakers, military personnel, and professionals. Since men's perspectives have been dominant in the official, accessible narratology of the Oslo process, I decided to focus on women's relatively unknown stories to gain a broad understanding of Israeli women's 'peace work' as legal advisers, spokeswomen, professional experts, diplomats, military secretaries, and typists. So, instead of adopting a rigid comparative approach to gender differences, this sample covered the actual women who participated in the official talks and was initially meant to include few men. Consequently, the selection of women and men reflects the impact of the gendered division of labor within Israeli negotiating bodies (i.e.

the placement of men as primary negotiators and women in major supporting roles) on perceptions, attitudes, and narratives (Aharoni, 2011).

Like other narrative research in conflict resolution (e.g. Johnston, 2005), I used transcribed interviews as 'texts' and applied an interpretive methodology that engages with the question of meaning when analyzing specific references to gender and ethnonational identity. By searching for nuances in tellers' own stories, I tried to capture not only what was *said*, but also the meaning behind it. I was partly able to do this because my narrators discussed personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings at length and offered insights about how actual negotiators and 'peace workers' make sense of real-life dialogic exchanges. Since 'stories must be understood by the audience in terms of their common experience, societal norms, and external reality' (Johnston, 2005: 281), I coded each reference to 'Palestinians' and 'culture' in order to reveal Israeli assumptions about what knowledge was shared within their own identity group and how these assumptions were articulated as facts. This methodology enabled me to ask not only 'What does it mean to be a woman/man in a peace delegation?' but also 'What does it mean to be an *Israeli* woman/man negotiating with *Palestinian* women/men?' and 'How do Israeli women and men tell stories about interactions with Palestinians?'

It should be noted that the main shortcoming of this approach – in comparison with laboratory experimentation, observatory workshops, or surveys – is that personal narratives cannot always be treated as objective descriptions of a given historical or institutional context. Also, narrative analysis is interpretive in nature and cannot show a clear causal correlation between the gender of the interviewees and their perceptions about gender, negotiations, and culture.

## Women's exclusion from peace negotiations: The gender–culture double bind

As the focus of this study was to document Israeli negotiating practices from a gendered perspective, the narratives also contained specific information about how negotiators perceived the gendered Other (female or male) and the national Other (the Palestinian or Arab counterpart). These two perceptions collided in a specific manifestation of the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis, which appeared as a narrative construction, voluntarily suggested in various interviews. This hypothesis, which I will refer to as the 'cultural hypothesis,' was brought up as a response to an open question posed to all participants: 'Why, in your opinion, were there almost no Israeli women negotiators at the time?' This question was used as a 'provoking question,' meant to facilitate an examination of broad attitudes toward women's absence from the peace process. Consequently, participants were encouraged to speculate about formal and informal reasons for gender inequality.

Juxtaposing the different responses with information obtained from a variety of sources and written documents (memories, newspapers, official reports, and parliamentary protocols), my final analysis identified four main reasons for the paucity of Israeli women in the formal peace process. First, the dominant framing of peace as a security-related issue and the centrality of militarized masculinity led to a strict identification of ideal-type negotiating skills with masculinity. Second, the limited representation of women in high-ranking offices in public administration and politics at the time minimized the pool of women candidates for negotiations. Third, societal stereotypes and expectations that place motherhood as a central role for Jewish women materialized in lack of support for women's attempts to maintain a career–family balance in extreme working conditions. The fourth reason, which this article will discuss at length, is the fact that Israeli perceptions about women's weak negotiating skills vis-a-vis an imagined Palestinian masculinity – a *gender devaluation effect* – might have played a role in women's overall marginalization.

More specifically, the hypothesis asserts that Israelis and Arabs differ in their attitudes toward gender equality in general and toward individual women in particular. Adopting the West/non-West binary framework, it identifies cultural perceptions about gender as having a primary role in the process of appointing negotiation teams. Participants who related to this hypothesis asserted that Israeli men, under their institutional capacity as decisionmakers, *may* have decided not to incorporate Israeli women in formal negotiation teams because either (a) Arab men, being part of a patriarchal society and feeling threatened by a female presence, may find it difficult to negotiate with Jewish women; or (b) Israeli-Jewish women, if confronted by Arab men, may find it difficult to bargain successfully.

To reiterate, I argue that the cultural hypothesis is a *discursive construction* that cannot be treated as a documented, official policy. Operating as an Orientalist mirror-image, it reflects deep beliefs among Israeli negotiating elites about the culture and modus operandi of the Other in the context of a protracted, unresolved armed conflict that for a short period of time (1993–2000) included direct and ongoing contacts. Like other relational concepts (frames through which the parties see each other), these ideas are often implicit, denied, and reinterpreted. A close reading of another segment from the interview with Irit[2] reveals how this hypothesis was narrated as an internal and private conversation of the self, occurring within a context of rumors and unofficial remarks:

> There were no official discussions about this, but as to the *feeling*, I can tell you that I am sure that here and there in the decisions about assembling the teams this may have had an influence.
>
> Q: How do you know?
>
> A: From gossip and from things said, all kinds of utterances: 'Could you cope with him?'; 'Would you be able to negotiate … ?'; 'He won't pay attention to you; he won't …'; I don't remember a specific incident right now, but it was a *feeling that that's how it was*…. And also the informality. You know, Arab men kiss. One of the ceremonies of the negotiations is when you meet, especially if you are meeting not for the first time, you kiss. And they don't kiss women. Because it's not *dignified*. But the men, they kiss and hug and clap each other on the shoulder and it – it creates a kind of camaraderie that isn't necessarily possible to have with women and sometimes it's even important to the negotiations.

This sincere depiction reveals a simultaneous reality of estrangement and loyalty. According to Irit, being a professional military servicewoman in a militarized, masculine environment meant that everyday experiences of marginalization were a fact of life. So, in spite of the fact that there were no orderly discussions about incorporating women into negotiation teams, Irit interpreted her intuition, life experience, or gossip and vague utterances using the cultural hypothesis as a rational justification based upon the professional logic of strategic culture. From this point of view, the success of the negotiation process depended upon interpersonal communication that relied on masculine authority ('could you cope with him?') and fraternity ('the men kiss and hug each other') – both characteristics that she, as a *woman*, lacked. Most important, this private narrative illustrates one of the significant empirical findings about how gender stereotypes shape negotiating behavior – that gender differences in negotiation seem greater when perceptions about masculinity are subtly primed and informally communicated (Kray et al., 2002).

One of the benefits of using narrative analysis is that it can provide a snapshot of shared cognitive frames and assumptions about a given subject. So, before I continue exploring the oblique path in which professional discourses were used to justify personal experiences of marginalization and discrimination, it is important to explain why the respondents felt comfortable to share

this unsubstantiated hypothesis as a possible explanation for Jewish women's absence from negotiations. Perhaps, since the interviews were conducted in Hebrew by a female Jewish-Israeli researcher whose position could be defined as 'an outsider within' (Hill Collins, 1999), the discursive context in which this hypothesis appeared was often that of common knowledge.[3] Indeed, the cultural sense of this hypothesis appears to deeply resonate with an internal, Israeli-Jewish image of Palestinians.[4] Many of the people I met presented a matter-of-fact approach when describing Arab culture, implying that 'everybody knows' (meaning, 'we Israeli Jews know') that the Palestinians are part of a patriarchal, religious, traditional, and conservative society that is characterized by fear of women's political power. In particular, they related to the unequal legal, economic, and personal status of women in Palestinian society as a mark of deep cultural difference between Israelis and Palestinians. As one woman concluded: 'There's nothing to be done; the mentality in Arab society is *different*, and the attitudes toward women are just *different*!'

A particular group of interviewees who speculated that cultural norms related to women's societal roles symbolize the differences between Israelis and Palestinians were women administrators and secretaries. From their point of view, supervising the gendered composition of delegations or regular meetings was intertwined with their overall responsibility to maintain a functioning working environment. One of the Israeli secretaries, Liron, told me that her impression was that Palestinian representatives 'saw women as weak.' As she herself was not a negotiator, she speculated that negotiating with a woman would have been a sign of denigration for a Palestinian man. In her personal narrative, she related to the idea that 'honor' was central in defining Palestinian masculinity, and that Jewish women secretaries were careful not to violate it:

> They [Palestinians] saw a woman as something like a weakness. That a *woman* would negotiate with them? I think there is also an issue of honor…. There's honor and pride. Oh yes, when someone was insulted, a thousand secretaries would have to be sent there [to the Palestinians] to ease things.

Michal, another secretary, also stressed that it was important for the Palestinians to negotiate with men, especially with high-ranking military representatives or prominent politicians. She explained that it was the secretary's role to make sure that the delegations were staffed appropriately:

> It was *necessary that the negotiators be men*…. I think that in general it was *very, very* important to the Palestinian team that there would be men in the talks, and that they would be *very* high-ranking and at the decisionmaking echelon.

The secretaries' standpoint presents a unique example of how institutional hierarchies, professional background, and organizational culture affected the ways in which Israeli administrators were actively involved in constructing the peace talks as an exclusively masculine environment. Another example of how professional discourses about Arab culture appeared within personal narratives was found in the stories of ex-military personnel. Zion, who was a high-ranking officer in the General Security Service (Shabak) and a member of official Israeli negotiating teams in 1995–2000, presented himself as an 'Arabist' and life-long expert on Palestinian lifestyle and culture (himself being of Mizrachi origin). When suggesting the cultural hypothesis, he explained why Palestinian mentality made it unacceptable to negotiate with women:

> Actually, this [negotiating with women] is a problematic situation. Because for the counterpart, the starting point of negotiating with a woman is already problematical. Okay? In terms of *mentality* … a truly patriarchal society, absolutely, where the status of women is not exactly the same or parallel to what exists in Western society. So if it is about receiving services, fine, I mean to tell a woman 'Kindly do this for me; type this up; draft this; tell me how this could be said,' that's okay…. But, to negotiate? That, that's just,

> in practical terms – that's just not accepted in Arab society in general. Certainly not in Palestinian [society], no, *it's not acceptable that the lady would sit and negotiate*.

This citation manifests how professional discourses about cultural differences, mentality, and masculinity operate as a closed and static structure even when they are presented as personal narratives. By insisting that Palestinians were unable to negotiate with women, Zion's approach reveals how the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis is in fact based upon stereotypical notions about female incompetence and wider approval of women's marginalization. In a sense, this citation indicates not only that the cultural hypothesis builds upon the culture-clash assumption, but also that it enabled Israeli officials to supply rational explanations for the near absence of women in the negotiations by 'blaming' Palestinian culture.

While Palestinian 'patriarchal' culture was presented as static and primordial, Israeli patterns of women's inclusion were often described to me as situational, responsive, and rational. As explained by Uri, an internationally known male Israeli negotiator, the issue of gender representation was linked primarily with the need to maintain symmetry between negotiating parties:

> [There is] the question of who is your counterpart? And in the Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese delegations – there were no women. In the multilateral talks, where there were 13 Arab states, there was not a single woman. We had women with us. Very few, but there were women…. So there could be an *impact* to having only men on one side, while on the other side one or two women are sitting.

Uri's interpretation is a classic example of how the act of calculating the 'costs and benefits' of placing women as negotiators adds a rational explanation to practices of gender discrimination that are in fact based on informal perceptions concerning the centrality of masculinity in promoting national interests. This narrative tells us that from the standpoint of top male negotiators who participate in all-male negotiation settings, women's absence from strategic dialogue is sometimes understood as a form of rational adaptation to the Other's culture, and not as a manifestation of structural gender discrimination.

Another way of diverting the discussion from national practices of gender discrimination that resulted in the overall marginalization of Jewish women in the peace talks was by emphasizing *Palestinian* women's oppression and invisibility. Women in veils were described as the ultimate Oriental Other, signifying physical and symbolic invisibly. As described by Nadav, a man who served as a military assistant: 'They did not have secretaries. No. And if there were one or two, they were the sort with veils, in other words they were not there.' Or by Rina, a retired executive from the Ministry of Agriculture: 'They hid their women…. The only session where women attended [Egyptian women] they came with veils, of course.'[5] By linking this specific form of invisibility with cultural difference, Israeli negotiators were also demonstrating their own Western self-image. 'It is clear,' said Ariel, a man and ex-military professional negotiator who compared the two delegations, 'that in Israel the discrimination comes from the military … but when you encounter Arab societies, then suddenly we seem like balanced and considerate…. Women's position in Arab countries is lower than low. They're only the assistants.' One of the official spokeswomen, Meira, used this comparison to create a cultural 'scale of women's representation,' identifying European countries as the most progressive and Arab countries as the most discriminatory:

> I think that there were dozens of cases when I was the only woman walking around with the Arabs … meaning in talks with the Arabs, with the Palestinians. It is, with the Europeans it's clear that there are always more women. But dozens of times when we went down to Cairo, I think I was the only woman on site.

Such examples reveal how personal narratives about gender and culture in settings of strategic dialogue involve a process of reconstructing cultural hierarchies that reflect existing distinctions and dichotomies.

These empirical findings suggest that the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis is highly relevant for understanding how Israelis involved in negotiations with Palestinians view the issue of women's inclusion in strategic dialogue. They also seem to suggest that the linkage between gendered roles and cultural norms reflects an Orientalist or ethnocentric scheme that reinforces preexisting notions among Israeli Jews about 'patriarchal' Palestinian society versus 'egalitarian' Western/Israeli society. Furthermore, by promoting an egalitarian, Western, and democratic self-image, Israelis were in fact able to blame Palestinian culture for their own practices of exclusion.

## Questioning the cultural hypothesis

Speculations about the benefits of using cultural concepts in the analysis of strategic dialogue have taken, in some of the personal narratives, a different interpretation. This counter-approach can be understood as an attempt to express a more progressive form of 'cultural sensitivity' that seeks to reformulate traditional notions of cultural essentialism, especially with regard to Palestinians' attitudes toward women. According to this view, the cultural hypothesis reflects a mistaken and outdated conceptualization of culture that not only minimizes the possibility for more Israeli–Palestinian cooperation, but also affects practical bargaining decisions.

Ariel, who was part of a gender-mixed negotiating team from 1993–2000, explained that generalizations like the cultural hypothesis are mistaken since 'not all Palestinians are the same.' Similar to his earlier differentiation between Israeli military culture and broad societal beliefs about gender roles, his understanding of Palestinian attitudes was based on a subculture classification reflecting specific political, geographical, and socio-economic contexts:

> 'Palestinians' is not a good word. There are different kinds of Arabs and different kinds of Palestinians. There are the Western Palestinians who grew up in the West and they have imbibed the same discourse on equality between the sexes as everyone, and they will behave in an egalitarian way. They won't act superior toward women.

According to this understanding, Western-educated Palestinians who returned after the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 shared cultural values and norms that were different from those of the local Palestinian leadership from the West Bank and Gaza, which by itself was divided into secular and more religious groups, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad factions. This analysis deviates substantially from the cultural generalizations presented earlier, not only in that it recognizes the connection between competing cultural contexts and different notions of masculinity, but also in opening the possibility for including women as negotiators.

Another critique of the cultural hypothesis and of 'Arab mentality' discourses within the security services was voiced by David, a military commander and security analyst who negotiated official bilateral agreements during the 1990s together with a female co-negotiator. In his narrative, the cultural hypothesis was mentioned as a widespread yet false and erroneous scheme that was founded upon prejudice and the discriminatory attitudes of Israeli Jews toward Palestinians:

> Look, there are *arguments* that I am aware of. That when you negotiate with an Arab, masculinity is significant because they can sort of get insulted if someone sitting across from them is a woman and so forth. All that stuff on mentality and so on…. But I'm telling you all this *just to refute it…. It's totally absurd when negotiating with Palestinians….* I'm telling you that it's totally absurd, because you are not

> conducting negotiations with people off the street. You are conducting negotiations with a Palestinian negotiating team, and it's made up of people from the Palestinian elite…. It's like they have no problem having contact with Condoleezza Rice. Because even if in their cultures it's different, they know that in the *West* things are like, this way. Besides, the Palestinians, I think are more progressive than most Arabs.

David's main argument resembles Aharon Kleiman's (2005) 'shared culture' approach that sees negotiators as part of an educated sociopolitical elite that is accustomed to changing diplomatic norms, including gender-related ones. In this narrative, the idea of cultural and gender *difference* is only subtly invoked, whereas the prospect of communication and gender balance is directly linked to similarities in the professional identities of negotiating elites.

As demonstrated by the above citations, the gender of the interviewee could not predict his/her acceptance or disapproval of the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis. In fact, institutional factors and organizational culture seemed to be much more important in shaping participants' perceptions than gender. This can also explain why women who served as military secretaries, like Liron and Michal, tended to accept the 'honor'/'shame' scheme uncritically, while women who actually served as negotiators were more skeptical about its applicability.

The stories of this very small group of women who participated as negotiators in face-to-face encounters reveal the gap between personal experiences of communication compared to external perceptions about cultural difference and gender. One of these women, Osnat, who worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained that being a woman was never a problem: 'I never saw what some say might happen or ought to happen, the problem of a woman's coping with men in the discussion,' and added that the gender issue 'didn't come up even once.' As in David's case, the practice of refuting the cultural hypothesis by claiming the *lack* of cultural differences is illuminating in itself, since it hints at how negotiators try to make sense of implicit essentialist cultural discourses in their professional environment.

Other women who described their experience of active negotiations with Palestinian representatives tended to emphasize that, contrary to the cultural hypothesis, Palestinian men treated them respectfully, using explicit sayings like: 'they showed me a lot of respect,' 'they treated me nicely,' 'we developed a firm friendship,' and so forth. One of the women, Rina, said: 'I must say that the Palestinians treated me very respectfully, in a very friendly way, and I really formed good relations with them.' When describing her Israeli colleagues, however, she used a much more critical tone: 'There were Israelis who tried to show superiority and belligerence. I had arguments with them.' Galia, a military legal adviser, also noted that the main problems she encountered arose within the Israeli team and were not related to Palestinian men: 'It's always within the team. That's also how it was with the Lebanese and the Syrians, *the problem is never with them, the problem is only within the Israeli team.'*

Finally, the gap between professional narratives about culture and private experiences was most evident in various anecdotes that reveal how Jewish women and Palestinian men were able to engage in constructive negotiations by utilizing their peripheral position vis-a-vis the hegemonic Israeli man-as-negotiator. The implicit assumption in these stories was that, given the overall asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians, it was easier for Palestinian men to negotiate with Israeli women. Netta, a woman who headed the negotiation on water agreements in the Joint Water Committee, recalled:

> I see this with a lot of [Palestinian] men, that it's easier for them to deal with women than with men. *They have to project an entirely different ego when they have to deal with men*…. I feel it in their approach, in the way that they address the issues, they are more comfortable. They know I'm not going to judge them the way a man judges them. Now, my attitude to them is also different. I never give up Israeli rights or interests, but my attitude toward them is different.

This narrative exhibits another form of essentialist gender logic that links positive or 'peaceful' outcomes with interpersonal contacts, cooperation, and other feminine-oriented negotiating traits. But the important point here is that, from Netta's perspective, it is not Arab culture that was the cause of miscommunication in the Joint Water Committee, but rather the inherent asymmetry and power relations between Israelis and Palestinians. The standpoint from which this narrative is told echoes Galia Golan's (2011) argument about the correlation between power relations, asymmetries, and masculine dominance.

These counter-narratives add two important insights. First, that it is hard to determine the existence of a clear correlation between female or male gender and the degree to which individuals tended to positively endorse the cultural hypothesis. Second, two factors seem to be linked to the Israeli tendency to view cultural explanations positively or negatively: (a) while Israeli women who had personal experiences of face-to-face negotiations with Palestinian men tended to *refute* the cultural hypothesis, women who performed administrative or supporting roles tended to support it; and (b) Israeli men who were part of all-men negotiating teams tended to use the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis to explain the absence of women more than men who were part of mixed-gender negotiating teams.

## Conclusion

Cultural essentialism poses an old problem for scholars, policymakers, and negotiators involved in cross-cultural dialogical exchanges. However, this case study, which is based on a feminist approach to strategic dialogue and peace negotiations, implies that the problem of culture is even more complex when viewed from a gendered perspective. Using a narrative analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews with Israeli women and men who participated in the Oslo peace process, I suggest that the *gender–culture double bind* hypothesis demonstrates an essentialist and Orientalist discourse about both women (as gendered Others) and non-Westerners (as cultural Others). In particular, it reinforces the idea that Israeli–Palestinian encounters reflect two incompatible cultures with clashing values, distinct societal structures, and different gendered norms. This claim has been used by Israeli defense intellectuals to explain the limitations of communication and the overall failure to reach a negotiated peace agreement. Yet, as seen in the majority of narratives presented, it has been also used to justify Jewish-Israeli women's exclusion from official talks, and may be linked to the impact of a *gendered devaluation effect* upon proposals from female negotiators from one's *own* side in a dispute (Maoz, 2009). However, as seen through the counter-narratives, such an approach not only ignores the asymmetrical structure of Israeli–Palestinian relations and specific political and historical circumstances of military occupation, but also perpetuates a static image of Palestinian masculinity as obsessed with the 'honor'/'shame' complex, and of Israeli women as incompetent negotiators.

In summary, neither of the assumptions presented in dominant discourses – namely, that Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations represent a prototype of East–West encounters and that Israeli women's negotiating skills may weaken their bargaining position vis-a-vis Arab men – can be made without supporting evidence. Similar to Richter-Devroe's (2008) argument that highlights the existence of many possibilities for incorporating women into culturally sensitive dialogue in the Israeli–Palestinian context, this study clarifies the need to develop more fluid understandings of the meaning of 'gender' and 'culture' in strategic dialogue. This conclusion suggests a research agenda for studying gender in cross-cultural strategic dialogue and official peace negotiations. It identifies a linkage between acts of gender stereotyping and cultural framing, and may imply that under specific conditions of asymmetry, dominance, and mistrust, these stereotypes could be enhanced and reproduced. Further investigation is needed to understand whether drawing

on cultural differences to secure power (military power *and* masculine dominance) deepens the polarization between parties to armed conflict in general and in the Israeli–Palestinian context in particular.

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## Notes

1. Historically, the Palestinian framing of the Oslo Accords stressed heroism, not defeat. In his public address at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, Yasser Arafat borrowed a term from Charles de Gaulle, 'peace of the brave,' to salute the martyrs whose 'generous sacrifice has enabled us to behold the Holy Land, to tread our first steps on it in a difficult battle, *the battle for peace*, the peace of the brave'; see http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1994/arafat-lecture.html (accessed 1 May 2014).
2. All the names of interviewees have been altered.
3. My status as an 'outsider within' was even more complex since I self-identify as a Mizrachi woman – that is, a Jew of Oriental-Arab origin – while the majority of my interviewees were Ashkenazi-European Jews.
4. Many of the people I interviewed used the terms 'Arabs' and 'Palestinians' interchangeably, using the term 'Arab' as a generic, ethnic, and cultural signifier of the other group.
5. The full veil was not in common use among Palestinian women during the 1990s. These remarks probably refer to the more common headscarf (*hijab*).

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