

**PhD Dissertation:**

# **Cultural Diversity in Mental Time Travel**

## **- Middle East versus Scandinavia**

I have always found the thought of travelling in time fascinating. As a child, I spent hours pondering over time travel in physical form, but it took this Ph.D. project for me to realise that humans engage in time travel on a daily base. When we remember something from the past or imagine an event in the future, it can be perceived as time travel. This is referred to in the psychology literature as mental time travel.

For me this project has been an interesting journey both physically and mentally. It started long before I knew that I was going to take on the challenge of writing a PhD. In the spring of 2008 my family and I started a new life chapter by moving to the small Middle Eastern country Qatar. Adjusting to life in this markedly different culture was an interesting challenge from our Scandinavian perspective.

There are immense differences between living in Denmark and in Qatar, e.g. religious views, perception of time, hierarchal organisation and social relations. I found the different views on gender roles especially interesting, and I started to notice small everyday events in both cultures that I had never noticed before. I saw the Scandinavian man wondering if it would be polite of him to pull out the chair for a woman or if it would be considered a chauvinistic act. I saw the Muslim woman carrying herself in a private way and doing

everything to avoid eye contact with the opposite sex, but still drawing attention by the elegant and alluring way she adjusted her veil. Small, insignificant events like these exemplify how the tacit rules imbedded in culture affect the way we think and act.

I contacted Qatar University in order to get acquainted with local Qataris, and started working as a research assistant for the head of Social Sciences, Professor Fadwa El Guindi, who introduced me to the field of anthropology during the two-and-a-half years I lived in Qatar. Simultaneously, I started my collaboration with Professor Dorthe Berntsen at Aarhus University in Denmark. Her theories have become crucial in my exploration of cultural influences on cognition in Scandinavia and the Middle East.

My PhD dissertation examines differences in mental time travel, goal conceptions, and life scripts between a Scandinavian and a Middle Eastern culture and how these differences interact with gender. Considering recent development in the world (e.g. increased turmoil in the Middle east and the refugee crisis) this research focus has been original and timely. The dissertation consists of three articles (all published, or in press, in respected international, peer reviewed journals).

One common thread in my series of articles is that gender differences are especially pronounced in the Middle Eastern sample, and that Middle Eastern men differ from both Middle Eastern women and Scandinavian men and women by being more reliant on cultural norms and religious dogma. This has implications for their perception of goals and goal values, their tolerance of personal unhappiness in the pursuit of culturally sanctioned goals

and their internationalized “life script” – that is, their representation of significant life events and their timing. These findings have important theoretical implications in relation to understanding cultural differences and their effects on basic psychological phenomena, such as goal perceptions and planning.

The findings also have important societal implications. Increased understanding of cross-cultural differences in cognition is valuable in a world that grows increasingly small through digital connections. Extending this line of research therefore potentially has practical implications in relation to integration, immigration and international negotiations, either politically or regarding cross-cultural trading.

All together my findings indicates that Middle Eastern women are holding the key to bridging the gap between Middle Eastern and Scandinavian culture. Specifically regarding the current refuge crisis these findings may inform research addressing the greater difficulty in integrating Middle Eastern men into Scandinavian societies compared with Middle Eastern women.

I recently narrowed my research focus to diversity in management. My research aim is to facilitate sound decision-making and sustainable development in organisations through increased cultural awareness and collaboration across gender in top management around the world.