

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

2012

Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches

Kelsy Burke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches

Kelsy C. Burke

Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh

Correspondence: Kelsy Burke, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln,
742 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE, 68588-0324; kburke@unl.edu

Abstract

The concept of agency is useful for feminist research on women in gender-traditional religions. By focusing on religious women's agency, scholars understand these women as actors, rather than simply acted upon by male-dominated social institutions. This article reviews the advantages and limitations of feminist scholarship on the agency of women who participate in gender-traditional religions by bringing into dialog four approaches to understanding agency. The resistance agency approach focuses on women who attempt to challenge or change some aspect of their religion. The empowerment agency approach focuses on how women reinterpret religious doctrine or practices in ways that make them feel empowered in their everyday life. The instrumental approach focuses on the non-religious positive outcomes of religious practice, and a compliant approach focuses on the multiple and diverse ways in which women conform to gender-traditional religious teaching. This article concludes by discussing the future direction of scholarship.

Published in *Sociology Compass* 6/2 (2012), pp 122-133.

doi 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00439.x

Copyright © 2012 Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Used by permission.

Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have grappled with the agency of women who participate in gender-traditional religions. These women's agency is an especially interesting phenomenon to study, since agency is typically defined through intention and autonomy and those are characteristics *not* typically used to describe religious women. According to feminist theorist Lois McNay (2000, 10), agency is "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities." In other words, people exhibit agency when they act in unexpected ways, despite the ways in which actions are shaped by social institutions (Giddens 1979) and internalized customs and traditions (Bourdieu 1990). Drawing on a large body of scholarship on how women negotiate their lives within patriarchal systems (see, for example, Kandiyoti 1988), feminist scholars of religion have attempted to illuminate religious women's agency and therefore overcome characterizations that religious women are victims or dupes when their beliefs differ from modern and secular understandings of gender equality (see Griffith 1997, 4; Mahmood 2005, 1–2).

Gender-traditional religions are those, such as Catholicism, conservative Protestantism, Orthodox Judaism, Mormonism, and some sects of Islam, that promote strict gender relationships based on male headship and women's submission. These religions tend to emphasize ontological differences between men and women, noting that men are predisposed to leadership, activity, and a strong work ethic, while women are naturally nurturing, passive, and receptive. Gender-traditional religions promote the belief that men and women were created to fulfill different and complementary roles that tend to privilege the status of men. These religions can vary significantly in doctrine and practice but understand gender roles in similar ways (Brink and Mencher 1997). Feminist scholars studying these religions attempt to understand women through their own experiences, rather than through the experiences of their husbands or fathers, in order to understand these women as agentic (see, for example, Braude 1997).

This article synthesizes the progress of feminist scholarship on women's agency in gender-traditional religions by reviewing four approaches to understanding religious women's agency. Scholars

working within these approaches contribute to a productive debate over the meaning of agency. This article concludes by discussing the state of current research and posing two questions to advance future scholarship.

Conceptualizing the agency of religious women

The concept of agency has “maintained an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness,” within the social sciences (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962). Within sociology, scholars have struggled to negotiate the role of social structures and cultural influences in relation to individual behavior and outcomes (see Alexander 1992; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hays 1994; Sewell 1992). Questions abound as scholars attempt to understand how to best measure agency (see Hitlin and Long 2009); how agency is related to identity formation (see Holland 1998); and how to understand actions that reproduce social structure (see Sewell 1992).

The definition of agency has also been contested within feminist scholarship (see Butler 1999; Davies 1991; McNay 2000). As Susan Hekman (1995) points out, early feminist work used agency as a way to resolve tensions between individual action and patriarchy, often seen as a dominating and deterministic social structure. And more recently, as poststructuralism gained prevalence within feminist thought, scholars have attempted to identify agency within a paradigm that risks over-emphasizing discourse as a deterministic force. The use of agency within feminist scholarship continues to be challenged. Most notably, postcolonial feminists have problematized notions of agency as being determined by western feminists who recognize only certain kinds of agency that align with women’s efforts at empowerment and freedom from patriarchy (see Mohanty 1988; Narayan 1997; Suleri 1992).

This article responds to the need to clarify agency (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007) by reviewing how the concept has been used within a similar research context, the study of women who participate in gender-traditional religions. Recent reviews of research on the agency of religious women criticize paradigms that present a false dichotomy of women being either empowered or victimized, liberated or subordinated (Bauman 2008; Bilge 2010; Hoyt

2007; Mahmood 2005). I, however, draw from Orit Avishai (2008), who distinguishes between four conceptualizations of agency used to describe women who participate in gender-traditional religions: resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and her own conceptualization of “doing religion.” In this article, I extend her discussion of resistance, empowerment, and instrumental agency, and place her “doing religion” approach under a broader category of compliant agency. These categories are distinct but not mutually exclusive and they are also chronological, as scholars extend or reevaluate agency in studies of women involved in gender-traditional religions. **Table 1** summarizes these four approaches.

Resistance agency focuses on the agency of women participating in gender-traditional religions who attempt to challenge or change some aspect of the religion (see Arthur 1998; Bayes and Tohid 2001; Brink and Mencher 1997; Gerami and Lehnerer 2001; Hartman 2007; Katzenstein 1998; Salime 2008; Weaver 1995). The *empowerment agency* approach focuses on how women participating in gender-traditional

Table 1. Four approaches to agency

	Advantages	Limitations	Example
Resistance	Women do not passively accept religious doctrine. Women may challenge male-dominated institutions in creative ways.	Compliant women are excluded. Assumption of women’s universal opposition to gender-traditional practices.	Catholic feminists who write letters urging leaders to reconsider the Church’s official stance on women’s ordination (see Katzenstein 1998).
Empowerment	Women do not passively accept religious doctrine. Women may experience religion in positive ways.	Compliant women are excluded. Assumption of women’s universal desire for empowerment.	A Pentecostal woman who feels empowered by God’s love, when her own father abandoned her as a child (Griffith 1997).
Instrumental	Positive outcomes may result from women’s religious participation. Religion interacts with other factors in women’s lives.	Assumption of instrumental action. Religious actions that are not explained by non-religious outcomes are excluded.	An American Muslim woman who veils and notices that male co-workers value her intellect rather than her appearance (Read and Bartkowski 2000).
Compliant	Women do not passively accept religious doctrine. Women are compliant in multiple ways, depending on their circumstances.	At risk of over-extending the definition of agency to include all actions, making agency meaningless.	Mormon women who view acts of submission as necessary to become goddesses in heaven after death (Hoyt 2007).

religions reinterpret religious doctrine or practices in ways that make them feel empowered in their everyday life (see Beaman 2001; Brasher 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Elson 2007; Franks 2001; Griffith 1997; Ozorak 1996; Pevey et al. 1996; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Rose 1987; Wolkomir 2004). *Instrumental agency* is similar to empowerment agency but focuses on the non-religious outcomes of religious practice rather than feelings of empowerment (see Afshar 2008; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chong 2008; Davidman 1991; Franks 2001; Gallagher 2003; Jalal 1991; Mir 2009; Orsi 1996). The final approach, *compliant agency*, attempts to overcome the limitations of the previous three approaches by recognizing agency in women who participate in gender-traditional religions for reasons other than those outlined above. This approach focuses on the multiple and diverse ways in which women conform to the rules of gender-traditional religions (see Avishai 2008; Bauman 2008; Bilge 2010; Bracke 2003; Griffith 1997; Hoyt 2007; Korteweg 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005).

Resistance agency

Agency is most easily visible when individuals resist the status quo. As George Simmel (1971, 75) pointed out in his classic sociological essay on conflict, it is “our opposition [that] makes us feel [...] we are not completely victims of circumstances.” Research on women’s involvement in progressive religions understands their activities as agentic, without question, as these women often attempt to break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles (for example, see Olson et al. 2005). Research on women’s involvement in gender-traditional religions frequently reproduces this notion of agency by focusing on instances when women challenge or attempt to change religious beliefs and practices (Arthur 1998; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Brink and Mencher 1997; Gerami and Lehnerer 2001; Hartman 2007; Katzenstein 1998; Salime 2008; Weaver 1995).

Women’s non-compliance has been documented for many gender-traditional faiths. For nearly all Christian denominations within the United States, the feminist movement had profound consequences (Manning 1999; Stacey 1990). In some cases, visible feminist resistance takes place. For example, feminists within the American Catholic Church “challenged, discomfited, and provoked, unleashing a wholesale disturbance of longsettled assumptions, rules, and practices” by

creating informal networks of sympathizers and formal events to demand church reform (Katzenstein 1998, 7). For other faiths, resistance may be less obvious. Linda B. Arthur (1998) documents how Mennonite women resisted men's control of women's bodies by subtly deviating from strict dress codes. For example, some women in Arthur's study cinched belts tight around their waists in order to accentuate the curves of their bodies, "resulting in dresses that are acceptable, but deviate from the ideal" (Arthur 1998, 87). These slight modifications reveal agency through what Judith Butler (1999, 185) calls "the possibility of a variation" in the "regulated process of repetition" in which we engage.

In addition to research on women involved in Christian religions, there is a large body of popular and academic literature on Muslim women's resistance to gender-traditional Islam. Scholars studying Muslim women's groups document the ways in which these groups gain visibility within their communities, including how they encourage women to pursue higher education and professional careers, and advocate for women's civil rights related to divorce, alimony, and child custody laws (Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Salime 2008). Accounts of Muslim women in the Middle East refusing to veil were popularized after 9/11. Memoirs written by Afghani or Iraqi Muslim women now living in the United States suggests that Islam oppresses women and women exhibit agency only through their resistance to Muslim men and Islamic law (for titles and critiques of these memoirs, see Mahmood 2009). Indeed in one study on the effort to establish an Islamic justice center in Canada, Anna Korteweg (2008) finds that the vast majority of newspaper accounts articulated women's agency only through their resistance to Islam.

Defining agency only through acts of resistance is not without costs. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 2009) has argued, agency as resistance excludes compliant women and favors a classical liberal notion of freedom that simply doesn't apply to women living outside of a Western context (see also Narayan 1997). Focusing on women's resistance to Islam, for example, reproduces anti-Islamic cultural stereotypes that blame Islam for Muslim men's violence against women and may promote the spread of US-led democracy throughout the Middle East (Mahmood 2009). The agency as resistance model provides a convenient way for feminist scholars who find gender-traditional religions unpalatable to depict women participants who resist as agentic. Yet it

problematically “ignore[s] other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse” (Mahmood 2005, 153). In other words, defining agency as resistance excludes women who comply with gender-traditional religions from being actors.

Empowerment agency

Like resistance agency, empowerment agency assumes that the basic elements of gender-traditional religions are harmful to women. Unlike resistance agency, the empowerment model does not require that women challenge or attempt to change religious beliefs or practices, but rather that women change their response to beliefs or practices (Beaman 2001; Brasher 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Elson 2007; Franks 2001; Griffith 1997; Ozorak 1996; Pevey et al. 1996; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Rose 1987; Wolkomir 2004). This research notes how women use religion to empower themselves in their daily lives, focusing mostly on affect, or how religion makes women feel.

Many scholarly accounts of evangelical women suggest that these women, while believing in their subordination to men, find some aspect of their religion to be empowering. For example, Brenda Brasher (1998) shows that many women who convert to evangelical Christianity credit their conversion with empowering them to feel more control over mundane aspects of their lives, for example to have the strength to speak up to a cruel co-worker or to be optimistic about a recent divorce. Especially for women, Brasher argues, conversion stories usually do not involve the changing of life’s circumstances, but rather the power to change one’s perception of those circumstances. Similarly, Michelle Wolkomir (2004) finds that evangelical women who are the wives of “ex-gay” men use their religious beliefs to cope with their husbands’ same-sex desires. Although these women initially blamed their inability to be the object of sexual desire for their husbands, many women overcome this guilt when they realize that their husbands are engaging in sin.

[T]he wives were, at least momentarily, able to grasp divine masculine power, the same power that subjected them to their husbands’ authority, and use it as a tool to assert their

will, providing some sense of agency and some serious influence in a situation that otherwise left them feeling powerless. (Wolkomir 2004, 751)

These wives therefore are no longer obligated to submit to their husbands, but rather only submit to God.

Scholars have used similar empowerment arguments for women who veil in Western countries. Despite its reputation for epitomizing women's subordination to men, veiling may allow Western women to feel empowered within a culture that sexualizes women's bodies through clothes, makeup, and hairstyles (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Mir 2009). Additionally, women who veil in the West may feel that they are standing up against Western imperialism and Islamophobia (Afshar 2008).

It is problematic that both the resistance and empowerment approaches to agency assume that women must experience a disparity between feminist-influenced modern culture and their gender-traditional religions. Scholars working within these approaches seek actions that remedy this disparity, either those that challenge religious practices or that reinterpret them. Women who do not perceive a disconnect between their religious faith and the modern world in which they live or who do not perceive this disconnect to be problematic are excluded from being agents. While it is important to recognize the presence of dissent and empowerment within gender-traditional religions, it is equally important to recognize when they are absent.

Instrumental agency

Rather than focusing on how women attempt to change oppressive aspects of their religions, some scholars focus on the ways in which women use their participation in gender-traditional religions for advantages in non-religious aspects of their lives (Afshar 2008; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chong 2008; Davidman 1991; Franks 2001; Gallagher 2003; Jalal 1991; Mir 2009; Orsi 1996). Like resistance and empowerment agency, instrumental agency assumes women want to free themselves from patriarchal culture and particularly stifling aspects of their lives. Unlike empowerment agency's emphasis on the internal feelings of power that may result from religious participation, instrumental agency emphasizes external advantages (either material

or relational) that may result from religious participation. This approach suggests that religion is a means to reach an end goal that is unrelated to religious faith itself. As John Bartkowski and Jen'nan Ghazal Read (2003, 88) argue, "even the most traditional elements of [...] conservative religions often end up serving progressive ends."

The material advantages of religious participation may include employment or educational opportunities. For some Muslim women living in the United States, for example, Read and Bartkowski (2000) find that beyond providing empowerment within Western culture, wearing the veil allows some Muslim women to feel comfortable pursuing higher education within co-educational institutions and employment within mixed-gender offices. One woman from their study claims that she is respected for her "intellectual abilities" instead of her appearance (Read and Bartkowski 2000, 405). And as Bernadette Barton (2010, 466) points out, identifying as an evangelical Christian in the American South affords numerous social advantages, since evangelical language and symbols infiltrate almost all aspects of social life, from "the pulpit, [...] in the pews, on the playground, in the bar, at work, and during family dinner."

There are numerous examples in which women's gender-traditional faiths provide relational advantages in everyday life (Chong 2008; Davidman 1991; Gallagher 2003; Mir 2009; Orsi 1996). Read and Bartkowski (2000) find that for Muslim women in the United States, veiling may help them develop and sustain friendships with other Muslim women because of the veil's distinct religious and cultural marker. For evangelicals, a wife's conversion before her husband's allows her to become the spiritual leader of the household, even though ideologically she may believe that this is a duty reserved for her husband (Ammerman 1987). Evangelical women may use their superiority when it comes to spiritual and domestic matters to assert their authority in marital decision making (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997). Elizabeth Brusco (1995) describes Columbian women who convert to evangelical Christianity and then convince their husband to do the same. In doing so, they gain much leverage over their household. Brusco cites that in many cases, women successfully forbid their husbands to drink excessively (and thereby reduce their aggressive, abusive behavior).

Critics of the instrumental approach to women's agency argue that such a perspective can "blind us [...] to the fact that 'agents' who act to combat one form of oppression may at the same time be preserving

and validating another” (Bauman 2008, 8). In other words, focusing on only the progressive results of religious participation may mask the ways in which religious participation reinscribes inequalities and hierarchy. Chad Bauman (2008) reveals the complexity of Christian conversion in colonial India. He demonstrates how converts used Christianity to improve their standard of living. This resulted in abiding by customs primarily associated with the upper-caste, which had strict penalties for deviating from appropriate feminine behavior. Similarly, Kelly Chong (2008) finds that evangelical women in South Korea use religious involvement to help heal domestic distress but that this involvement also may reproduce this distress by reifying traditional gender roles. As a result, women experience confusion, contradiction, and anxiety.

Compliant agency

Scholars dissatisfied with the previous three approaches to understanding agency focus on the context in which women perceive and enact their religious beliefs. Compliant agency suggests that women exhibit agency in the ways in which they choose to conform to religious teachings – that not all women comply in the same way, even though it may appear the same to some outside scholars (see Avishai 2008; Bauman 2008; Bilge 2010; Bracke 2003; Griffith 1997; Hoyt 2007; Korteweg 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005). Scholars of compliant agency show how many women practice their faith without challenging religious institutions, striving for empowerment, or seeking non-religious advantages (Avishai 2008). This approach to agency draws from postcolonial and post-structural theories to challenge that agency mustn’t be equated with the classic liberal perception of man’s freedom (see Bhabha 1994; Foucault 1990). Defining agency through autonomy, these scholars argue, makes invisible workings of power that make autonomy impossible to achieve. It is inappropriate to require autonomy in order to recognize agency, especially for persons living outside a western context.

Compliant agency seeks to identify the multiple ways in which religious women comply with religious instruction in their everyday lives. This approach recognizes the “sensibilities and embodied capacities” that are contained within religious customs and traditions (Mahmood 2005, 115). In other words, the ways in which women

understand their world – what they are capable of – may lead to intentional actions of conformity *or* resistance, both of which should be considered as agency. However, scholars working in this approach tend to focus their research on the ways in which women conform to religious teachings since there is already a large body of literature on other forms of agency.

One lesson learned from the compliant agency approach is that one woman who liberally interprets sacred texts about women's proper role within her religion does not exhibit *more* agency than another woman who interprets those same texts in a way that uphold gender-traditionalism. Rather, both women draw from their experiences and everyday life in order to exhibit agency through the practice of interpreting (Mahmood 2005). In the words of Orit Avishai (2008), women exhibit agency when they “do religion,” regardless of the motivation or outcome of such doing. She finds that Orthodox Jewish women living in Israel create “palatable narratives of assent” that allow them to conform to *niddah*, instructions for sexual purity, without feeling oppressed. Instead of finding non-religious advantages that motivate these women, Avishai (2008, 413) argues that their religious practices are ends in themselves: “religion may be done in the pursuit of religious goals – in this case, the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other.”

Resistance, empowerment, and instrumental approaches to agency depend upon a notion of autonomy, that is, that individuals act for themselves. Yet compliant agency reveals that agency perceived as autonomy is inadequate when faithful individuals do not strive to be completely autonomous – they strive to act not for themselves, but for a divine God. Phyllis Mack (2003) finds that 18th century Quaker women insisted that their actions were not the result of free will but were, on the other hand, selfless acts of obedience to God. They used self-negation to describe their agency. In another example, Amy Hoyt (2007) demonstrates how Mormon women comply to traditional gender roles to fulfill duties dictated by a divine female, the Mother in Heaven. This ensures that they will become goddesses after death. Autonomy should not be the only criteria for agency when religious persons believe in God's will in addition to (or instead of) their own. Compliant agency attempts to overcome the shortcomings of other approaches to agency by taking seriously the nature of religious women's beliefs and practices within a specific socio-historic context.

Compliant agency usefully expands the definition of agency to include the various ways in which women exhibit agency by conforming to religious teachings. Yet this expanded definition, if left unchecked, may incorporate all actions taken by religious women, thereby rendering the definition of agency as useless. In order for an analytical concept to be meaningful, it must include both a sense of the core (what the concept is) but also a sense of its boundaries (what the concept is not) (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). A potential weakness of compliant agency is that it does not recognize when actions are not agentic. With an analytical gaze focused intently on “proving” the agency of religious women, scholars may lose sight of the ways in which institutions linked to gender-traditionalism, including church and state, shape what actions are possible and what actions are impossible. As Bronwyn Winter (2001) warns, scholars must be wary of inadvertently legitimizing religions that limit the range of possible actions taken by women by only focusing only on what those women can do (their agency) instead of what they can’t.

Conclusion

Investigating agency for religious women is both empirically and theoretically interesting precisely because agency for women who participate in gender-traditional religions seems to defy the prevailing notion of what agency is. Steeped in modern, secular, and western assumptions about individual desire for liberation and freedom, agency is typically understood through intentional actions that strive for autonomy. And indeed many scholars who study religious women’s agency find examples of autonomy and liberation in these women’s lives – through resistance, empowerment, or non-religious advantages. Scholars have displayed religious women’s great maneuverability within what are sometimes extreme restraints on their actions. Yet other scholars recognize that many women act in ways that are distinctly *not* autonomous or liberatory when they conform to religious teachings that are gender-traditional. These women, some scholars argue, also exhibit agency in the multiple ways in which they comply with gender-traditional doctrines.

Detaching the definition of agency from ideas about autonomy and liberation is a lesson not only for those studying religious women, but

also for any scholar interested in understanding the agency of individuals whose identities may appear to oppose progressive western sensibilities. Since this type of research does not attempt to find actions that challenge structural or cultural constraints, these accounts of agency are especially equipped to show how agency exists *within* structural and cultural limitations, not outside them. For example, sociological research on beauty standards reveals that women exhibit agency not solely when they challenge mainstream beauty standards, like thinness and femininity, but also when they reproduce these standards in order to achieve advantages in their everyday lives (see Kwan and Nell Trautner 2009; Weitz 2001). By expanding typical definitions of agency, scholars are better able to reveal the complexities inherent in life in a variety of social contexts.

By expanding definitions of agency, however, feminist scholars are forced to examine what is at stake politically and intellectually in focusing on how non-feminist actions are agentic. Have scholars compromised feminist ideals by focusing on the agency of women who, in some cases, work to undermine feminist efforts (see Chong 2008; Winter 2001)? Or, does focusing on the agency of gender-traditional religious women change the very notion of what a feminist project is (see Griffith 1997; Mahmood 2005)? These questions illuminate the uncertain terrain with which feminist scholars approach their research. Instead of answering “yes” or “no” to either of them, I instead pose two additional questions that may help scholars negotiate their own positions when it comes to feminism and agency and also advance future research.

First, what is to be gained by showing religious women as agentic? If the answer is simply that it is because religious women’s agency defies modern secular sensibilities, scholars risk becoming overly focused on proving how “these women are agents, too.” When taken too far, this mode of thinking has two negative consequences. First, making sure to prove research subjects’ agency may produce a kind of “othering” and homogenizing that postcolonial feminists have long argued that scholars should avoid. As Farida Shaheed (1999, 62) says of scholars’ interest in the relationship between Islam and gender, it may “implicitly overdetermine the role of Islam in the lives of women while glossing over the complexities involved.” Even for scholars who wish to illuminate the complexities of religious women’s lives, emphasizing women’s religious identity over other identities may shadow

or limit other aspects of women's lives (see also Bilge 2010). Second, scholars intent on proving religious women's agency may lose sight of the boundaries of agency as a concept – boundaries that are essential for making agency empirically and theoretically useful rather than an all-encompassing term that offers little for productive research.

A second question, then, to guide future research is: what are the boundaries of agency as an analytical concept? The scholarship reviewed in this article developed out of an academic milieu that problematically assumed religious women lacked agency. By seeking to understand religious women's agency – through resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and compliant approaches – scholars remedy, at least in part, the tendency to assume women's lives are completely determined by male-dominated structures. Thanks to advances in this research, scholars today assume that all religious women exhibit agency in some way. This assumption may lead to the problematic supposition that all actions taken by religious women are agentic. A task for future researchers is to further develop a definition of non-agency – what types of actions or choices are limited or made impossible. Well-developed definitions of non-agency will help strengthen existing definitions of agency, by better understanding agency's boundaries.

In surveying existing research on the agency of women who participate in gender-traditional religions, there are multiple possibilities and potential for further development on how agency matters for sociological inquiry. As the various approaches to understanding religious women's agency reveal, there is a continual debate about what agency looks like for individuals in a variety of social contexts. Scholars no longer take for granted the meaning of agency as one that is fixed or universal. Debates over agency for women who participate in gender-traditional religions continue to offer theoretical gains for feminist sociology and offer promising directions for future research.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Kim Creasap, Brittany Duncan, Kat Bulger Gray, Amy McDowell, Matt Landry, Marie Skoczylas, and especially Kathy Blee for their helpful comments on this article.

Biography

Kelsy C. Burke is a Sociology PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh studying the intersection of sexuality, gender, and religion in the United States. Her dissertation uses mixed methods to examine how contemporary American evangelicals promote sexuality within marriage using websites, books, and face-to-face programs. She has published her research on evangelicals, gender, and mediated culture in an article co-authored with Amy McDowell. She teaches undergraduate sociology courses at the University of Pittsburgh in the areas of gender and social inequality. She holds a BA in Sociology from Eastern Connecticut State University and an MA in Sociology from the University of Pittsburgh.

References

- Afshar, Haleh. 2008. 'Can I see Your Hair? Choice, Agency, and Attitudes: The Dilemma of Faith and Feminism for Muslim Women who Cover.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* **31**: 411–27.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1992. 'Some Remarks on 'Agency' in Recent Sociological Theory.' *Perspectives* **15**: 1–4.
- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 1987. *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Arthur, Linda B. 1998. 'Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women's Bodies in a Mennonite Community.' *National Women's Studies Association Journal* **10**: 75–99.
- Avishai, Orit. 2008. 'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency.' *Gender and Society* **22**: 409–33.
- Bartkowski, John P. and Jen'nan Ghazal Read. 2003. 'Veiled Submission: Gender, Power, and Identity Among Evangelical and Muslim Women in the United States.' *Qualitative Sociology* **26**: 71–92.
- Barton, Bernadette. 2010. 'Abomination' – Life as a Bible Belt Gay.' *Journal of Homosexuality* **57**: 465–84.
- Bauman, Chad M. 2008. 'Redeeming Indian 'Christian' Womanhood: Missionaries, Dalits, and Agency in Colonial India.' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* **24**: 5–27.
- Bayes, Jane H. and Nayereh Tohidi (eds) 2001. *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*. New York: Palgrave.
- Beaman, Lori B. 2001. 'Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists, and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the LDS Church.' *Sociology of Religion* **62**: 65–86.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Bilge, Sirma. 2010. 'Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women.' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* **31**: 9–28.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. R. Nice (trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Bracke, Sarah. 2003. 'Author(iz)ing Agency: Feminist Scholars Making Sense of Women's Involvement in Religious 'Fundamentalist' Movements.' *European Journal of Women's Studies* **10**: 335-46.
- Brasher, Brenda E. 1998. *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Braude, Ann. 1997. 'Women's History Is American Religious History.' Pp. 87-107 in *Retelling US Religious History*, edited by Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Brink, Judy and Joan Mencher (eds) 1997. *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross Culturally*. New York: Routledge.
- Brubaker, Roger and Frederick Cooper. 2000. 'Beyond 'Identity.' *Theory and Society* **29**: 1-47.
- Brusco, Elizabeth E. 1995. *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Columbia*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1999 [1990]. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chong, Kelly H. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Davidman, Lynn. 1991. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Davies, Bronwyn. 1991. 'The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis.' *Social Analysis* **30**: 42-53.
- Elson, Omowale Tanimu. 2007. 'Gender-Agency as Communicated in the Intra-Inter-organizational Structures of the Spiritual Baptists of Barbados: A Postcolonial Account of Cultural Resistance.' *The Howard Journal of Communications* **18**: 15-37.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. 'What is Agency?' *American Journal of Sociology* **103**: 962-1023.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990 [1978]. *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, Vol. 1. R. Hurley (trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Franks, Myfanwly. 2001. *Women and Revivalism in the West: Choosing 'Fundamentalism' in a Liberal Democracy*. New York: Palgrave.
- Gallagher, Sally K. 2003. *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Gerami, Shahin and Melodye Lehnerer. 2001. 'Women's Agency and Household Diplomacy: Negotiating Fundamentalism.' *Gender and Society* **15**: 556-73.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradictions in Social Analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Griffith, R. Marie. 1997. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hartman, Tova. 2007. *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- Hays, Sharon. 1994. 'Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture.' *Sociological Theory* **12**: 57-72.

- Hekman, Susan. 1995. 'Subjects and Agents: The Question for Feminism.' Pp. 194–207 in *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*, edited by Judith Kegan Gardiner. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Hitlin, Steven and Glen H. Elder. 2007. 'Time, Self, and the Curiously Abstract Concept of Agency.' *Sociological Theory* **25**: 170–91. Hitlin, Steven and Charisse Long. 2009. 'Agency as a Sociological Variable: A Preliminary Model of Individuals, Situations, and the Life Course.' *Sociology Compass* **3**: 137–60.
- Holland, Dorothy C. 1998. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hoyt, Amy. 2007. 'Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women.' *Feminist Theology* **16**: 89–100.
- Jalal, Ayesha. 1991. 'The Convenience of Subsistence: Women and the State of Pakistan.' Pp. 77–114 in *Women, Islam, and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. 'Bargaining With Patriarchy.' *Gender and Society* **2**(3): 274–90.
- Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod. 1998. *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest Inside the Church and Military*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Korteweg, Anna C. 2008. 'The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam, and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency.' *Gender and Society* **22**: 434–54.
- Kwan, Samantha and Mary Nell Trautner. 2009. 'Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency.' *Sociology Compass* **3**: 49–71.
- Mack, Phyllis. 2003. 'Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* **29**: 149–77. Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2009. 'Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror.' Pp. 193–216 in *Gendering Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities*, edited by H. Herzog and A. Braude. New York: Palgrave Mac- Millan.
- Manning, Christel. 1999. *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple With Feminism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- McNay, Lois. 2000. *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Mir, Shabana. 2009. 'Not too 'College-Like,' Not too Normal: American Muslim Undergraduate Women's Gendered Discourse.' *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* **40**: 237–56.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1988. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.' *Feminist Review* **30**: 61–88.
- Narayan, Uma. 1997. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Olson, Laura R., Sue E. S. Crawford and Melissa M. Deckman. 2005. *Women With a Mission: Religion, Gender, and the Politics of Women Clergy*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

- Orsi, Robert A. 1996. *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ozorak, Elizabeth Weiss. 1996. 'The Power, but not the Glory: How Women Empower Themselves Through Religion.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **35**: 17-29.
- Pevey, Carolyn, Christine L. Williams and Christopher G. Ellison. 1996. 'Male God Imagery and Female Submission: Lessons From a Southern Baptist Ladies' Bible Class.' *Qualitative Sociology* **19**: 173-93.
- Read, Jen'Nan Ghazal and John P Bartkowski. 2000. 'To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation Among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas.' *Gender and Society* **14**: 395-417.
- Rose, Susan D. 1987. 'Women Warriors: The Negotiation of Gender in a Charismatic Community.' *Sociological Analysis* **48**: 245-58.
- Salime, Zakia. 2008. 'Mobilizing Muslim Women: Multiple Voices, the Sharia, and the State.' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* **28**: 200-11.
- Sewell, William H. Jr. 1992. 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation.' *American Journal of Sociology* **98**: 1-29.
- Shaheed, Farida. 1999. 'Constructing Identities: Culture, Women's Agency and the Muslim World.' *International Social Science Journal* **51**: 61-73.
- Simmel, Georg. 1971. 'Conflict.' Pp. 70-95 *On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by D. N. Levine. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Stacey, Judith. 1990. *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Suleri, Sara. 1992. 'Woman Skip Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Conduction.' *Critical Inquiry* **18**: 756-69.
- Weaver, Mary Jo. 1995 [1986]. *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Weitz, Rose. 2001. 'Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation.' *Gender and Society* **15**: 667-86.
- Winter, Bronwyn. 2001. 'Fundamental Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islamism.' *Journal of Women's History* **13**: 9-41.
- Wolkomir, Michelle. 2004. "'Giving it up to God': Negotiating Femininity in Support Groups for Wives of Ex-Gay Christian Men.' *Gender and Society* **18**: 735-55.