

**Introduction:**

Different cultures engage in a wide range of practices to dress and adorn the human body. Veiling is one common practice that involves covering the head, face, and body, either partially or completely. It is employed for many reasons, and with many meanings cross-culturally. However, it also has a specific history entangled deeply with notions of Orientalism, imperialism, and colonialism as applied specifically to women in the Muslim world.

In this exercise, participants unpack some of these assumptions about the veil and learn how their views of cultural others are shaped by this history. Participants are shown a photograph by Steve McCurry, either *Woman in Canary Burqa* (2002) or *Afghan Girl* (1984) and asked to write a short narrative about the woman in the picture and her life. The purpose of this activity is for participants to explore cultural assumptions connected with the obscuring of a Muslim woman's face.

**Facilitator notes:**

It is recommended that this activity only be chosen for an audience for which participants will feel safe participating (we caution against this topic if any audience member might feel "othered" or burdened in any way by this activity). Thus, this activity can be customized to the cultural context of your audience. If a different photograph and cultural practice is more relevant to the audience, you can adjust accordingly with the same lens toward unpacking assumptions about practices different from one's own.

**Facilitator Notes:**

This activity works with a minimum of two participants but works best with ten to twenty participants.

**Objectives:**

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Assess how judgment impacts our choices.
2. Consider how we filter our point of view based on situation/judgment.
3. Practice intercultural empathy with culturally diverse others.
4. Explore the history, values, and beliefs underlying and applied to the Muslim practice of veiling.

**Time:**

45 minutes.

**Group Size:**

Entire Group.

**Materials:**

Paper and writing utensils; Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)); The two Steve McCurry photographs (Photo Analysis Women of Cover Photo Handouts in [Downloads](#)).

Optional: Lughod, A. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>

*This is one of the most cited scholarly articles on this topic in anthropology. It can be used to inform the facilitator's debrief, and/or given to participants as homework either before or after the activity.*

Optional: Third photograph: a contemporary reproduction of Steve McCurry's Afghan Girl (Optional\_Photo Analysis Women of Cover Photo Handout in [Downloads](#)). In this photograph, the woman wears a surgical face mask in addition to the red head covering.

### **Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:**

- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

### **AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:**

#### Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

#### Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group.

### **Other Skills:**

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

### **Activity Instructions:**

1. Begin the session by randomly distributing the photograph handouts (in [Downloads](#) and at the end of this lesson plan), so that about half of the participants get the photograph on the first page of the handout and half get the other (on the second page of the handout). As much as possible, do not let them see that there are different photographs being distributed.
2. Ask participants to free write (15 minutes) a short narrative about the life of the woman in the photograph. They can write about any aspect of her life that they wish, and write in either a non-fiction or fiction style, as long as she is the central character of the narrative.

3. Once they have finished writing, reveal that some participants received a photograph with a woman's face veiled, and others with it unveiled. Ask them to pair up and share their stories with one another (15 minutes).
4. Debrief with the entire group (15 minutes) using the following questions:
  - What commonalities are there among the stories about the veiled vs. unveiled women?
  - What assumptions did they make based on the status of the woman's face?
  - Additionally, encourage participants to think about the ways that the face (un)covering elicited certain notions about difference, beliefs, freedom, morality, health, security, justice, equality, and other cultural ideals.

*Note:* Lughod (2002) (see Materials on page one of this lesson plan and [Links](#)) provides useful descriptions about the ways that women's veiling has historically been a tool of empowerment, morality, and security— as well as a justification for violence. The facilitator can choose to enhance the debrief by referencing some of these ideas from the text.

### **Learning Points:**

- Human material culture means different things to different people.
- History impacts our interpretations of cultural practices.
- Something that is uncovered is not more easily perceived and understood!



*Figure 1. Steve McCurry, Woman in Canary Burqa (2002)*



*Figure 2. Steve McCurry, Afghan Girl (1984)*



Figure 3. @dutkaakosfoto/Hungary, reproduction of Steve McCurry's Afghan Girl for Agora's #BestPhotoOf2020 Award