



Testing the impact of the Islamic veil on intergroup attitudes and host community acculturation orientations toward Arab Muslims^{☆, ☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted to examine the impact of the Islamic veil on ethnic attitudes and acculturation orientations toward Arab Muslims. Using computer-generated photos, study 1 investigated Quebec Francophone ($N = 76$) attitudes toward the Islamic veil. Results revealed that undergraduates had the least favorable attitudes toward a woman wearing a niqab followed by one wearing the hijab, while favorable attitudes were held toward a woman dressed in western clothing. In Study 2, the same female experimenter distributed survey questionnaires to Quebec Francophone undergraduates in the following experimental conditions: (1) control condition, experimenter wearing western clothing with Francophone name ($n = 86$); (2) experimenter with an Arab Muslim name wearing western clothing ($n = 83$); (3) experimenter wearing a hijab with an Arab Muslim name ($n = 81$); and (4) experimenter wearing a niqab with an Arab Muslim name ($n = 95$). Attitudes toward Arab Muslims were affected by the dress code of the experimenter, but not in the expected direction. Participants expressed more favorable attitudes toward Arab Muslims in the niqab condition than in the control condition, a result partially accounted by a counterstereotype effect. Results showed that the four experimental conditions did not affect endorsement of five out of six acculturation orientations toward Arab Muslims suggesting the stability of host community acculturation orientations under religious prime manipulations.

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Since the September 11 terrorist attacks by Muslim fundamentalists in New York and Washington in 2001, Arab Muslim communities have become the target of negative stereotypes in the media across the western world (Biles & Ibrahim, 2002). In Canada, a national survey showed that 45% of Canadians believe Islam encourages violence, while in the Province of Quebec as many as 63% of Quebec Francophones endorse this view (Geddes, 2009). Perceptions of Arab Muslims are aggravated by the wearing of the Islamic veil in public spaces such as the street, in commerce and within educational and health institutions of western receiving societies (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). The Islamic veil has become the flashpoint of intergroup tensions between Christian host communities and immigrants of Arab Muslim background. This paper proposes two empirical studies dealing with the impact of the Islamic veil on intergroup attitudes and the endorsement of host community acculturation orientations toward Arab Muslims in a receiving society of the new world, namely Quebec, Canada.

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As with speech style, dress styles can serve as a marker of religious affiliation, gender, geographical origin, ethnic origin, profession, and social class (Hoodfar, 2003). Like skin color, ethnic origin, and gender, stereotypes about religious dress style can also be particularly virulent given the perceived voluntary nature of its adoption by individuals. There are different types of Islamic veils worn not only across Muslim countries, but also in receiving societies of the western world (Hoodfar, 2001). In line with religious prescriptions requiring women to dress modestly, many Muslim women wear a scarf covering their hair, but not the face; a veil commonly known as the “hijab”. The hijab is the most commonly worn Islamic veil in Muslim countries and in western societies, including Europe and North America. The “niqab” is prescribed mainly in Saudi Arabia and is a black cloth covering the whole body and entire face, leaving only the eyes visible. The niqab is rarely worn in receiving countries of the western world but is the focus of much media attention and is being banned from public space in a growing number of European countries including France in 2011 (Welch, 2007). In this article, the term Islamic veil will sometimes be used generically in referring to these two head coverings.

Recent studies have sought to understand the Islamic veil from the point of view of Muslim women who wear it (e.g., Alvi, Hoodfar, & McDonough, 2003). For many Muslim women settled in western democracies, the veil can symbolize personal and collective identification with particular varieties of the Islamic faith, while it can also serve as a marker of social differentiation from the Christian mainstream. Qualitative interviews with veiled women in Canada have also shown that the veil can be worn by Muslim women for strategic reasons related to freedom of movement and individual upward mobility (Hoodfar, 2003). Wearing the veil can also be used to reassure Muslim family members that one remains loyal to the precepts of Islam while pursuing western educational and professional achievements not otherwise acceptable without wearing of the Islamic veil.

Host communities of the western world are often ambivalent or hostile toward Muslim women who wear the Islamic veil in public settings (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). Attitudes toward the hijab and especially the niqab are very negative in the European Union. For example, a recent study measured Belgian host majority attitudes toward the Islamic veil, subtle prejudice, and anti-Arab attitudes (Saroglou, Lamkaddem, van Pachterbeke, & Buxant, 2009). Results showed that willingness to ban the veil and being uncomfortable with its use were related to subtle prejudice against immigrants in general and high scores on the anti-Arab western ethnocentrism scale. The study concluded that “aversion toward the veil thus seems to reflect both ethnic prejudice and anti-religious disposition” (p. 427).

In Quebec, the Islamic veil also triggers negative reactions and is seen by many as a religious symbol challenging fundamental French Canadian values. Muslim women wearing the veil are seen by some as a threat to the hard fought equal rights achieved by the women’s movement of the last 50 years as well as the secular gains achieved in Quebec after a century of struggle against the domination of the Catholic Church (McDonough, 2003). Some also perceive the veil as a political symbol of the rising power of religious fundamentalism in the world, while others perceive it as a refusal by Muslim women to integrate within mainstream secular society in Quebec.

The present studies were conducted during a time when the presence of Arab Muslims and the issue of the Islamic veil were controversial topics in Quebec. Citizens of Arab background represent 2.8% of the total Quebec population (109, 000) and 13% of the province’s immigrant population (Canadian Census, 2006). Given that a sizable proportion of immigrants from Arab countries are Muslims, they tend to be perceived negatively by members of the Francophone majority who remain predominantly of Roman Catholic background (Antonius, 2002). Attitude studies conducted in French colleges showed that Quebec Francophone undergraduates were least comfortable with Arab Muslims and evaluated them less favorably than other immigrant groups, while feeling more threatened by their presence than by other immigrant groups including Haitians and West Indians (e.g., Bourhis, Barrette, & Moriconi, 2008).

Attitudes toward Arab Muslims can be aggravated by the issue of the Islamic veil. A public opinion survey showed that 62% of Quebec Francophones believed that Muslim women who wear the Islamic veil pose a problem for Quebec society (Roy & Gagné, 2007). Another polling survey found that 57% of Quebec respondents thought the Quebec government should ban religious signs such as the Islamic veil worn by some civil servants in the public administration (Castonguay, 2010). Because the niqab covers the whole face, public attitudes toward such face veils are more negative than those toward the hijab. In 2010, the Quebec government proposed Bill 94 banning the niqab from the public administration, schools, and hospitals. A recent public opinion poll showed that 95% of Quebecers and 80% of Canadians supported this provincial ban on the niqab (Angus Reid Public Opinion, 2010).

Other than snapshot opinion polls concerning the Islamic veil, few detailed social psychological studies investigated host majority attitudes toward wearing the hijab and niqab (for exceptions, see Saroglou et al., 2009; Unkelbach, Forgas, & Denson, 2008). Given the contentious issue of the Islamic veil in Quebec, Study 1 was designed to assess attitudes toward the hijab and the niqab endorsed by Quebec Francophone undergraduates.

1. Study 1

Undergraduates completed a questionnaire containing photos of a woman dressed in western clothing, dressed as a catholic nun, wearing a hijab, and wearing a niqab (see Fig. 1). Participants were asked to give their first impressions of each woman depicted in the photos.

We expected attitudes to vary depending on the dress code of the stimulus women. The White woman in the photo wearing western clothing was the most similar to Quebec Francophones and could be perceived as an ingroup member. Reflecting the classic ingroup favoritism effect, Francophone undergraduates were expected to have the most favorable

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