



# Explaining the Muslim employment gap in Western Europe: Individual-level effects and ethno-religious penalties <sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 September 2013

Revised 21 July 2014

Accepted 5 August 2014

Available online 20 August 2014

### Keywords:

Muslims

Europe

Employment

Economic integration

Religion

Immigration

## ABSTRACT

It is well-documented that Muslims experience economic disadvantages in Western European labor markets. However, few studies comprehensively test individual-level explanations for the Muslim employment gap. Using data from the European Social Survey, this research note briefly examines the role of individual-level differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in mediating employment differences. Results reveal that human capital, migration background, religiosity, cultural values, and perceptions of discrimination jointly account for about 40% of the employment variance between Muslims and non-Muslims. Model specifications for first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants reveal a similar pattern, with migration background and perceived discrimination being of key relevance in mediating employment difference. While individual-level effects are indeed relevant, unexplained variance suggests that symbolic boundaries against Islam may still translate into tangible ethno-religious penalties.

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## 1. Introduction

Economic disadvantages among Muslims, who constitute a substantial share among immigrants in Europe ([Pew Research Center, 2012](#)), have received wide attention in the media and within academic scholarship. It is indeed striking that the most disadvantaged migrant groups across European labor markets, such as North Africans in France, Turks in Germany or Pakistanis in the UK, come from Islamic countries of origin. Numerous studies in the burgeoning literature on “ethnic” penalties have amply documented that Muslims tend to have lower rates of labor force participation, employment, and occupational attainment ([Bisin et al., 2011: 7](#); [Cheung, 2014](#); [Connor, 2014](#); [Connor and Koenig, 2013](#); [Lessard-Phillips et al., 2012](#); [Luthra, 2013](#); [Van Tubergen et al., 2004](#), see also [Pichler, 2011](#)). To be sure, the migration background of the Muslim population makes it notoriously hard to strictly distinguish ethnic from religious penalties; among religiously homogenous immigrant groups such as Moroccans, Pakistanis, or Turks it is virtually impossible to distinguish ethnic from religious penalties. Yet, several methodologically innovative studies have demonstrated that religious difference, being Muslim in particular, does indeed have an independent effect upon labor market performance ([Khattab, 2009](#); [Lindley, 2002](#); [Model and Lin, 2002](#)). Thus, [Heath and Martin \(2013\)](#) in their standard-setting study on labor market performance in the United Kingdom find a

<sup>☆</sup> Previous versions of this article were presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Conference (2013), Population Association of America Conference (2014) and at the Council of European Studies Conference (2014); we thank audiences as well as the five referees of this journal for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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strong Muslim penalty for men and women from various religiously heterogeneous ethnic groups in terms of economic activity as well as employment.

Such economic disadvantages of Muslims are of crucial relevance for European societies. If indeed religious differences are linked to inequalities on the labor market, this might indicate the emergence of an ethno-religious underclass, with far-reaching potential repercussions for cleavage structures in European democracies (Cesari, 2009; Kurth, 2007; Parekh, 2012). It would confirm that the “barrier” which, according to some authors, some Muslim immigrants have faced in Europe (unlike in the US, see Foner and Alba, 2008) not only concerns questions of symbolic and institutional recognition of Islam, but also translates deeply into individuals’ access to material resources and socio-structural positions.

Of particular importance are repeatedly documented employment gaps for Muslim groups (Aleksynska and Algan, 2010; Fleischmann and Dronkers, 2010; Van Tubergen et al., 2004; for Germany see Kanas et al., 2011; Luthra, 2013; for France, Silberman et al., 2007; for Britain, Heath and Martin, 2013; Cheung, 2014). To some degree, these disadvantages are certainly due to the migration history of post-war Western Europe (Lucassen et al., 2006). Many Muslims arrived as labor migrants, but after the mid-1970s economic crisis found themselves unemployed without the necessary skills or language ability to succeed on an increasingly competitive labor market. However, compared to other labor migrant groups, Muslims have faced particular difficulties in staying employed after the mid-1970s economic crisis. Even second-generation Muslims who have higher educational credentials than their parents (albeit often still lower than European peers with and without migration background) remain far more likely to be unemployed (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2012; Reisel et al., 2012).

Despite these by now well-established descriptive findings, the current research literature is less conclusive on how actually to explain the Muslim employment gap. Heath and Martin (2013: 1006, 1026), while providing the currently most definite test for the existence of a Muslim penalty only hint at potential explanations for this aggregate pattern. After all, various social mechanisms might be at work in producing lower employment rates among Muslims. On the one hand, Muslims may differ from the general population in terms of human capital, migration biographies, or religious values, thus making it less probable for them to search and find jobs regardless of public perceptions of Islam. On the other hand, such individual differences notwithstanding, Muslims as a group may suffer from discrimination by employers tending, whether out of subjective prejudice or instrumental calculation, to discard their job applications.

In this article we build upon previous studies by testing several hypotheses for the Muslim employment gap, using pooled data from the European Social Survey (ESS). Theoretically, we review alternative arguments that explain the employment gap by individual-level differences and stress that salient symbolic boundaries against Islam should be expected to impact upon socio-structural integration at the group level. Having introduced our data and methods, we put these theoretical arguments to an empirical test. We estimate models of employment comparing Muslims to non-Muslims in Europe, before adding separate model specifications for first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants. Our analyses show that about 40% of the employment variance between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe can be explained by measured individual-level differences. Of these individual-level differences, the greatest variance is due to migration-related factors. However, a substantial portion of employment differences between Muslims and non-Muslims is also due to individual perceptions of discrimination, particularly among second-generation Muslims. In sum, our findings lend partial support to the assumption that “bright” symbolic boundaries have tangible effects for access to material resources.

## 2. Theoretical background

To explain the Muslim employment gap, we draw upon our theoretical reformulation of Foner’s and Alba’s (2008) metaphor of religion as “bridge” to immigrant integration (Connor and Koenig, 2013:7). Within that conceptual framework, employment gaps among religious minorities would be explained by a mechanism of social closure in which publicly salient or “bright” religious boundaries are activated to limit access to material resources in the receiving society (for conceptual background see also Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Fox and Guglielmo, 2012; Brubaker, 2014). Given the salience of symbolic boundaries against Islam in the context of secularized European societies with remnants of Christian privilege and strong anti-Muslim attitudes (e.g. Strabac and Listhaug, 2008), belonging to Muslim minorities would thus result in barriers to structural assimilation among first- and second-generation immigrants, regardless of actual religious practice. In the following, we further elaborate this argument about ethno-religious “penalties” by relating it to a number of alternative, individual-level explanations for employment disparities between Muslims and the general population, derived from the standard literature on immigrants’ socio-economic assimilation (Heath et al., 2008; Van Tubergen et al., 2004).

The *first* alternative explanation for employment gaps between Muslims and non-Muslims evidently focuses upon individuals’ human capital. Most Muslim immigrants entering Europe have come from a lower socio-economic class background compared to the European population as a whole and sometimes to other immigrant groups. Differences in parental socio-economic background and education could indeed explain a substantial proportion of the variance between Muslim and non-Muslim employment rates and therefore need to be taken into account in any analysis of ethno-religious penalties (Heath et al., 2008). Moreover, given that many second-generation Muslim youth grew up in economically disadvantaged households, this same set of human capital explanations could carry through to children of immigrants as well, despite their education in the receiving society. Only if religious differences persist after controlling for individuals’ human capital could the above mentioned mechanisms of social closure at all be expected as operating.

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