



Coping with Islamophobia: The effects of religious stigma on Muslim minorities' identity formation

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ABSTRACT

Islamophobic sentiments in the Western world have gained scientific attention, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. However, the effects of religious stigma on Muslim minorities' identity formation have rarely been studied. Using structural equation modeling, this cross-sectional study examined direct and indirect effects of different forms of religious stigma on the national affiliation of 210 Norwegian-Pakistani and 216 German-Turkish Muslims. Furthermore, the study examined the mediator role of religious identity. Our results suggest that being a Muslim in Norway is more reconcilable with affiliating with the nation than being a Muslim in Germany. However, across the samples, the results indicated that various forms of religious stigma affected Muslims' national identity and engagement in the public and private sphere in distinct ways. These effects were both positive and negative, differed between the two samples, and in Germany, were mediated by the participants' religious identity. The findings indicated that the ways in which religious stigma influences Muslims' national affiliation is context and culture bound.

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1. Introduction

Anti-Muslim and islamophobic sentiments in the Western world have gained increased scientific attention following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks (Sirin & Balsano, 2007). Although the identity formation of ethnic minorities in general has been a frequent topic of research, the effects of religious stigma on the identity formation of Muslims living in societies that are suspicious of Islamic beliefs have been a neglected topic. Accordingly, this study set out to explore the extent to which perceptions of an islamophobic society, experiences of religious discrimination and negative representations of Muslims in the media influence Muslims' religious identity, national identity and national engagement in a group of Norwegian-Pakistani and German-Turkish¹ Muslims.

1.1. Rise of Islamophobia in the western world

While the religious composition of many Western European countries have remained stable over long periods of time, increasing south-north migration in recent years is contributing to the development of multireligious societies (Simon, 2004). Many of the immigrants come from countries where Islam is the majority religion, and currently, between 13 and 14 million people living in Western Europe have Muslim backgrounds (Maréchal, 2002). The changing intranational religious

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¹ In order to reflect their hyphenated cultural backgrounds, the participants in the present study are referred to as Norwegian-Pakistanis and German-Turks.

composition of many European countries, however, is not embraced by everyone. As Poynting and Mason (2007) point out, there has been a shift “from anti-Asian and anti-Arab racism to anti-Muslim racism” (p. 61) and this has been heightened following the terror attacks of 9/11. Likewise, political debates have increasingly focused on questions regarding Muslim immigrants, who are often seen as difficult to integrate (Field, 2007), whereas right-wing political parties and individuals in many countries have promoted the idea of insurmountable cultural differences, creating an atmosphere of hostility (Betz & Meret, 2009).

The term ‘Islamophobia’, which was reportedly introduced at the end of the 1980s (Runnymede Trust Commission, 1997), has increasingly been used to describe this fear of Islam and of Muslims as a social group. Furthermore, various studies and reports have reported a rise of Islamophobia in many Western majority populations and in Western media (e.g., EUMC, 2006; Poynting & Mason, 2006; Saeed, 2007).

1.2. *From anti-immigrant to anti-Muslim: the emergence of Islamophobia in Germany and Norway*

In Germany, immigration has been the subject of highly charged and partly inflammatory political discourse over the last four decades (Thränhardt, 1995). Since the beginning of the 21st century, public discourse on immigration has increasingly focused on Muslims and Islam as a major challenge to “liberal democracy and Germany’s political order” (Bauder & Semmelroggen, 2009, p. 20). A 2004 opinion poll in Germany indicated that a vast majority of the participants associated Islam with terror and with the oppression of women. Moreover, more than half of the respondents did not believe in the peaceful coexistence of Christianity and Islam (Noelle, 2004; PEW Research Center, 2006).

This development ultimately peaked in August 2010, when Thilo Sarrazin, a representative of the German Social Democratic Party, in a bestselling book stated that migration from Islamic countries constitutes a major threat to the European cultural model and that Muslim migrants generally are uninterested in education, unwilling to integrate and a threat to the nation.

Although Sarrazin’s views were spurned and criticized by some, they seemed to reflect the *Zeitgeist*. In recent representative opinion polls, about half of the German participants agreed with Sarrazin’s statements, and nearly 20% indicated that they would vote for a political party with Sarrazin as a leader (Consumer field work, 2010; Silalahi, 2010). Moreover, an opinion poll published in 2010 showed that most participants agreed with the statement that “Muslims’ religious practice in Germany should be substantially restricted” (Decker, Weißmann, Kiess, & Brähler, 2010). Finally, the recently appointed interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich, publicly asserted that “Islam does not belong to Germany” (Vitzthum, 2011).

In Norway, since the 1980s, negative attitudes against immigration have received increased public attention and support from the majority population (Andersen & Bjørklund, 1999; Blom, 2009). As in other Western countries, Muslims in Norway have received a lot of attention in the media following 9/11, reaching its climax in 2006, when the Norwegian magazine “Magazinet” reprinted the Danish caricatures of the prophet Mohammed, which caused Muslims all over the world to protest (Steien, 2008). As a result, questions related to the compatibility of Islam with basic Norwegian societal values have repeatedly been raised, specifically dealing with Muslim women’s veiling practices, oppression of women, freedom of speech and democracy in general (ECRI, 2009). Not surprisingly, increasing numbers of Norwegians are skeptical to Muslim immigrants and immigration (IMDi, 2007). On the 22nd of July 2011, the terror attacks by Anders Behring Breivik, a self-declared Islam-hater and enemy of multiculturalism, tragically indicate that these sentiments also have become part of the Norwegian society in a radicalized form.

Norwegian-Pakistanis and German-Turks constitute the largest Muslim minority groups and the largest non-Western groups of labor immigrants in their respective countries. However, whereas nearly 55% of the Norwegian-Pakistanis possess a Norwegian passport (Statistics Norway, 2010), only about one fourth of the German-Turks have a German passport (German Federal Foreign Office, 2010), suggesting that the naturalization process of labor migrants to Europe has come a longer way in Norway.

Lastly, German-Turks and Norwegian-Pakistanis are often seen as unsuccessful minority groups compared to other ethnic minorities. Several reports have described both groups as poorly integrated in light of their high unemployment rates, low academic achievements and relatively poor proficiency in the national language (see, e.g., Daugstad, 2008; German Federal Statistical Office, 2007; also see Table 9 of Statistics Norway, 2009).

1.3. *Identity formation of stigmatized minority groups with a migrational background*

For immigrants in plural societies, the task of reconciling their cultural and ethnic heritage with a new national identity constitutes a central issue (Sam & Berry, 2010). The process of acquiring a national identity does not imply that immigrants abandon their cultural roots. Rather, according to Stepick and Stepick (2002), given that the new country encourages cultural variation, immigrants become part of the multicultural composition within the nation’s territory. Thus, immigrants can maintain their cultural identity while adopting a new national identity.

In a settlement society where cultural diversity is not celebrated, immigrants may perceive their cultural identity as being derided and may experience discrimination, negative stereotypes and prejudice based on their group membership. In this regards, because individuals’ self-concepts are based to a large extent on their social identities derived from various group memberships (see, e.g., Brown, 2000), individuals who perceive that they lack the resources to deal with being a target of stigma may experience threats to their selves (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). When individuals face identity threats, they

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