What is it like to be a Muslim in the Netherlands?

Understanding, experiencing, and narrating Islamophobia

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Abstract

For this thesis, I conducted qualitative research, using the narrative approach, to get insight into the lived experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands. The motivation for this topic was the increase in Islamophobia that we have witnessed in the West over the past few decades, to which I dedicated the first part of my thesis. Here, I elaborately discuss the topic Islamophobia, first in general and then specific to the Netherlands.

The second part of my thesis revolves around the lived experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands. I wanted to explore what it is like to be a Muslim in the Netherlands and to what extent Muslims have to deal with prejudices and discrimination. This is something that was still lacking in existing literature. I did come across a book discussing Islamophobia in the Netherlands, but without sharing experiences, and I came across papers discussing the lived experiences of Muslims in other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Canada. However, the lived experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands remained untouched.

I find this topic highly relevant, because my personal conviction –supported by the Intergroup Contact Theory– is that once people get to know a Muslim personally, they will be less negative about them. Therefore, I shaped my thesis in such a way that it is as if you get to meet my six participants. I gave them the space to share what Islam is like in their eyes. Hopefully this will contribute to more understanding of the religion.

In my study it becomes clear that when asking them directly, many Muslims indicate not suffering from Islamophobia at all. However, when the conversation continues, more and more incidents come up: critical questions, jokes about terrorism, and troubles when applying for a job. In my eyes, these are clear examples of Islamophobia, but somehow my participants don't identify them as such. I relate this observation to what is known about the way people narrate their lives, namely in such a way that it makes sense and feels good. My study shows how Muslims filter out negative incidents from their personal story so that it feels coherent and fitting. Also, when they do describe negative incidents, it often comes with "of course." It could be that Muslims are so used to negativity that they therefore barely notice it, or at least have accepted it as a fact of life. More research is needed to investigate which mechanisms exactly are at play in this blindness that Muslims seem to have for expressions of Islamophobia.

Table of contents

Introduction

Context

Over the past decades we have witnessed an increase in feelings of hate and fear towards foreigners, especially Muslims (Triandafyllidou, 2017). This stark increase of Islamophobia started with the terrorist attacks on the 11th of September 2001 and in the Netherlands it was intensified by the murder of Theo Van Gogh in 2004. The impacts of these events were long-lasting, partly because the media kept feeding into people's negative feelings towards Muslims. In fact, ten years later, anti-Muslim sentiment was at its all-time high, far higher than in the immediate aftermath of the tragic events on 9/11 (Aslan, 2011). Unfortunately, the terrorist attacks we have faced are often seen as a consequence of Islamic religion itself, instead of placing it in a context of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Simultaneously, over the past few decades, there has been an increase in the number of Muslims present in Europe and the United States. Due to conflicts, many Muslims have fled and are still fleeing their countries to seek refuge in the Western world. In times where we speak of a "refugee crisis," Islamophobia is clearly still very topical. Moreover, the news is filled with terrorist attacks in Europe and politicians discuss implementations of the Burqa ban, critique Islamic schools et cetera. All of these events contribute to the negative discourse around Muslims and Islam in the West. Lately, both the secularity and the Judeo-Christian heritage of Dutch society are remarkably often highlighted in popular media and by politicians, sometimes to prove contrast with Islam (Van der Valk, 2017). As a result, many believe that Islam is not compatible with Western or Dutch society. Last year, for instance, Dutch sociologist and researcher at Humboldt University in Berlin Ruud Koopmans published a book in which he discusses all that is wrong with the Islamic world and Islam (Koopmans, 2019). Although Koopmans is a controversial one, he is not the only non-Muslim academic criticizing Islam from an academic perspective.

Aim of my study

In my study I shed light on a different perspective: that of the "ordinary" Muslims in the Netherlands. How do they experience the increase in Islamophobia in the West? Have

they personally experienced Islamophobia? Do they think non-Muslims have an accurate idea of Islam? If not, what would they like more people to know about their religion? And are there any critiques to Islam that they find fair? What do they think of the idea that Islam and Western society do not go together? How do they experience their religion? My belief is that this perspective is under-represented because Muslims are not often given a voice, neither in popular media nor in academia.

The aim of this study was thus to hear what Muslims in the Netherlands —the people who know and experience Islam from within– have to say about their religion, and about Islamophobia. I tried to create a better understanding of Islam as it is lived on a daily basis and experienced by its own believers, hoping it would eventually lead to a more nuanced view of the religion. With this study I contribute to narrowing the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims that we witness now. Because of the large number of Muslims present in the Netherlands, and because this number will keep growing, Islamophobia is an important problem to tackle. In fact, regardless of the country or the number of Muslims present in that country, Islamophobia –like anti-Semitism, homophobia and other forms of discriminatory behavior– should never be tolerated. Reading about the lived experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands will possibly make people more aware of the negative impact that prejudice, discrimination, and Islamophobia have. I believe that we should no longer try to avoid Muslims but accept that their presence in the Netherlands is a reality to come to terms with. I think that hearing stories from "ordinary" Muslims in the Netherlands, as opposed to the fundamentalists we often see in the media, will also help to see the commonalities instead of differences. As I will elaborate on in the chapter "Ways to combat Islamophobia", contact with a group different from your own has been proven an effective remedy against prejudice and discrimination (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Literature-based relevance of the study

A few academic studies have already investigated people's every-day experiences with Islamophobia (e.g. Bakali, 2016 and Mirza, 2018). Bakali studied the lived experiences of Muslim youth in Canada and Mirza studied the experiences of British-Pakistani women living in England with anti-Islam sentiments. Both inquired whether their participants experienced Islamophobia and how they dealt with it. Mirza noted that it is difficult to determine whether it is religiously, racially, or culturally founded, but all women

experienced some kind of prejudice and discrimination. Bakali also explores the theoretical tradition of critical race theory to clarify how he would position himself in the debate of anti-Muslim racism. It is useful to see how these authors have gone about studying the experiences of Muslims living in Western countries. I will be contributing to this small amount of existing literature by focusing on a different group, namely Muslims living in the Netherlands. A survey commissioned by the European Union in 2008 reported that one in three Muslims of Turkish or North African origin in the Netherlands had experienced such discrimination on the grounds of faith or ethnic origin (Van der Valk, 2012). So far, I have not encountered any study on the lived experiences of these people. I also noticed that many studies focused on women or youth, whereas I want to include both genders and adults in my study.

The following quote of a British-Pakistani Muslim woman living in the UK from Noreen Mirza's (2019) study I found encouraging and supportive for my research: "Non-Muslims should feel comfortable asking Muslims about Islam and not feel they are perhaps going to offend by asking questions. The only way non-Muslims can truly know about Islam is by asking their Muslim friends whatever questions they have. This way myths and misconceptions about Islam are dispelled and people will realize that what is in the media about Islam is not always accurate or fact for that matter" (p. 316). Mirza wrote that the women of her study were happy to participate in her research because they could share in their own words what being a Muslim (living in a European country) meant to them (Mirza, 2019). I wanted to provide the participants of my study such a platform too, and make my readers learn from them.

Organization of this thesis

This thesis consists of two main parts: "Understanding" and "Experiencing". The "Understanding" part is based on theory. Here I provide background and context to my study. It is divided in four chapters: 1) What is Islamophobia; 2) Global rise in Islamophobia; 3) Islam and Islamophobia in the Netherlands; and 4) Ways to combat Islamophobia. The "Experiencing" part is based on my own investigation, done through interviews. Here I describe Dutch Muslims' experiences with being a Muslim in the Netherlands and with Islamophobia. I also gave room for my participants to share what their religion is like in their eyes and what they wish more people knew. Where possible,

I link my findings with existing literature. This part is divided in the following chapters: 5) Experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands; and 6) Islam according to Muslims.

Research design

Methodological approach

I shaped my research in such a way that it resembles a dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. The voice of non-Muslims is very present in the academic literature. From there I drew reasons for Islamophobia. From interviews I created a response. By clearing out some misconceptions that people in the West might have about Islam, I hoped to provide a more nuanced view on the religion, to bring both groups a bit closer together.

Narrative approach

For this thesis I conducted qualitative research, specifically narrative research, by focusing on people's lived experiences with Islamophobia. People were free to share their life stories, and especially their experiences with being a Muslim and living in the Netherlands. During the interviews, I gave them the opportunity to respond to prejudices on Islam. Studies within the Psychology of Religion field show how narrative as an approach to knowledge and the self is a useful way to make sense of one's religious life. The narrative approach is based on the idea that events in the lives of humans have lasting effects, and because we are storytelling beings, we put these events in a story form. This narration of our lives helps to explain why things are the way they are, and to make sense of incongruent aspects of our lives. To create a story that fits with the ideas that we and others have about us, we either erase unfitting events from our story, or connect them in a way that they fit together. This helps us create our own identity (Nelson, 2009; Buchanan et al., 2001).

I found this approach to be useful for studying Muslims living in the Netherlands, because at many moments and in different ways they are being told that their religion is not compatible with the society they live in, or that their religion is backward and even violent. Creating a personal narrative can be helpful to understand what makes their religion important for them, and how it does fit within their lives in the Netherlands. Sharing how they deal with prejudice and discrimination possibly contributed to their personal narrative as well. Ozyurt (2013) confirms this in his paper on negotiating multiple identities and constructing Western-Muslim selves in the Netherlands. The abstract of that paper says that "Western cultures negotiate their traditional and modern identities and self-representations and construct a coherent self-narrative about their

bicultural existence as 'Western-Muslim,'' and that "successful negotiation of bicultural identities depends not so much on whether the individual perceives these identities and cultures to be compatible with each other, but rather on the availability of a coherent self-narrative of belonging to both cultural worlds" (Ozyurt, 2013, p. 239).

Conceptual framework

At the basis of my study lies what we know about Islamophobia and its increase over the past years. The outcome of my study is how the increase of Islamophobia in the West relates to the experiences of Muslims living in the Netherlands, and especially how they narrate these. Based on theories from the field of intergroup relations, mainly the Intergroup Contact Theory, I aimed to promote understanding of Muslims by getting to know them and listening to them, which will hopefully contribute to a decline in Islamophobic sentiments. Hence, key variables of my study are: Islamophobia, Contact Theory, and the narratives of Muslim's lived experiences. There are related in such a way that the presence of Islamophobia influences how people narrate their experiences living in the Netherlands and that, based on the Intergroup Contact Theory, listening to these experiences, and Muslim's experiences with their religion in general, could in turn influence the occurrence of Islamophobia.

Research methods

I started my research with a literature review to be well-prepared for the next step: interviewing Muslims living in the Netherlands. In the interviews I applied a combination of different types of interview methods: semi-structured, narrative-biographical, and problem-centered. I aimed to get to know my participants' personal stories, helping them a bit by structuring the interviews using the questions that can be found in the appendix. These were not always fix, they could be adapted to the participant and the course of the conversation. Through these interviews I hoped to get a better understanding of the prevalence of Islamophobia in the Netherlands. Do Muslims in the Netherlands experience prejudice and discrimination based on their religion, and how do they experience this? Because the interviews revolved around the question whether my participants experience Islamophobia in the Netherlands, my method can be considered problem-centered.

When analyzing these interviews, I looked for recurring themes. My main goal was to show the experiences of "ordinary" Muslims in the Netherlands which might reduce the negativity, or at least promote a better understanding of Islam as it is experienced by its believers. I see this as a first step towards making non-Muslims in the Netherlands see that they have more in common with Muslims than they thought, which might eventually bring the two groups a little closer together.

Data sources

I focus my study on individuals, but when analyzing the interviews I examined whether there were differences between categories, such as gender, age, or time spent in the Netherlands. All interviews were conducted one-on-one, one in person and all others online. I would have preferred to conduct all interviews in person, but due to the pandemic this was unfortunately not possible.

Sample/participants

Since this is a narrative research, the unit of analysis is the individual: the "Muslim next door." I started by asking around if anyone in my circle knew any Muslims who might want to participate in my study. This already gave me enough participants. However, one participant recommended a converted Muslim woman to me, a profile which was not yet covered by my sample, so I added her to the sample because it would possibly give a different perspective. Eventually I found six participants, four women and two men between 21 and 45 years old. The only requirements were that they identified as Muslim, and that there was a common language in which we could communicate properly. I ended up with a diverse group in terms of cultural background, time spent in the Netherlands and the way in which they practice their religion. All interviews were conducted individually. With the participants who were born and raised in the Netherlands and the woman who came here fifteen years ago I spoke Dutch, with the student who has lived here since a few years only I spoke English. This means that in the latter two cases, the interview did not take place in the interviewee's nor the interviewer's first language.

As I only interviewed a total of six participants, I do not intend to create generalizable truths for all Muslims living in the Netherlands or even in Groningen. The aim is to

provide a glimpse of their experiences and share their views, or as Bakali (2016) very nicely said: to slowly "unveil" their lived realities.

Ethical considerations

When doing research, it is crucial to consider some ethical issues. Below I will discuss the ones I identified and how I decided to address them.

Informed consent

Firstly, it is important to note that my participants collaborated with me voluntarily and on a basis of informed consent. This means that I provided sufficient information about my research for them to make a decision and to understand the implications of participating. Before starting the interview and its recording, I explained the purpose of the interview, that I would record it, and what I would use the recording for. I wanted to establish basis for trust –to the extent that was possible– and show that I want to bring people closer together instead of polarize them. I wanted to make clear that all in all, I wanted to have a focus on the positive, not on the negative. Also, I clearly expressed that they had the right to withdraw at any moment if they would wish to do so.

Privacy

Another important ethical aspect of conducting interviews is the participants' privacy. To most of them I explicitly asked whether it was okay for them if I used their real name in my thesis. Only to Hadiya I did not, because knowing her story I did not want to risk anything using her real name and I decided for myself that I would use a pseudonym. My other participants were all okay with me using their names and I did not see a problem in this. However, to make it a bit more difficult to trace them back I decided to leave out their last names. For this same reason I slightly edited some things they share about their lives, making the description of their study or employer a bit more general. Even though they might not foresee any problems, I would rather be safe than sorry and make sure that they cannot be identified too easily, especially because Groningen is such a small city. Doing this, I did try to keep the descriptions of my participants as rich as possible because that fits best with my idea of the study. After all, I try to encourage getting to know a few Muslims, so I wanted the descriptions to be quite personal.

Difficult topics

I am aware that it might be painful for respondents to recall incidents where they have suffered from prejudice or discrimination. It can also be very difficult to hear or discuss the arguments that "attack" your religion, something that could be very important to them. I can imagine it is very sad for many Muslims to be linked to other Muslims who have done horrendous things, while for them their religion is something beautiful. It could therefore happen that in my interviews people might have felt as if they have to defend themselves and their religion, although I tried to avoid this as much as possible through clear communication.

Justifying unethical ideas
Before conducting my research, I also considered the option that I would interview more conservative or radical Muslims who have ideas that I would also not agree with, for instance concerning the position of women. It could have been that in these interviews, people would justify things which I feel they should not be justified. Luckily, this did not happen because all my participants were very progressive in their way of thinking and living their religion. However, the other side of this fact is that I thus do not have the broadest range of opinions present in my study. There must also be highly conservative Muslims in this country but I did not encounter them and thus they are not represented in my study. By all means, I must note here that my idea of conservative and progressive is biased and based on my context and perspective. Moreover, I do not intend to make a normative judgment here. What I do or do not agree with is merely a personal opinion.

Re-enforcing prejudices
I also want to acknowledge that discussing prejudices about Islam in my thesis might actually re-enforce them. Reading them, as explained or described by academics, could confirm the reader's ideas and keep the prejudices in place. However, I hope my final chapters will be strong enough to balance this out.

All in all, I have ensured honesty and transparency throughout my entire research. I have made my intentions clear to my participants, without trying to steer them into a certain direction.

THEORY: UNDERSTANDING ISLAMOPHOBIA

1 What is Islamophobia?

1.1 "Othering"

One could say that a phenomenon such as Islamophobia is the outcome of processes of "selfing" and "othering". This assumes that people tend to distinguish, in social life, between "us" and "them", between the group they belong to and the people they do not belong to. According to social psychology theories, such a categorization assists individuals in creating a self-image and finding a place in life. One's social identity is part of someone's self-image which is based on the belonging to a group and the emotional value which is attached to this. It is common that people attribute more positive qualifications to the in-group than to the out-group. In consequence, the contrast between "us" and "them" will increase and people will be more inclined to stigmatize "the other" and attach negative qualifications to the out-group if they feel threatened by that group. These could be socio-economic threats, but also the threat that people experience through vandalism, aggression, crime, and potential acts of terrorism. These are so-called realistic threats. One could also experience symbolic threats, which are rooted in conflicting values and beliefs. The category of social threat encompasses threats to social position and group esteem. Research emphasizes that emotions play a significant role in the rise of prejudice, especially fear and anger (Vellenga, 2018).

1.2 Definition and etymology

We live in a world in which two of the largest world religions of Semitic origin are under attack. For the discrimination of Jews we have had a powerful term for a long time already: antisemitism. There was no such term for the discrimination and violence directed at Muslims, until Islamophobia was introduced (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). UN diplomat Kofi Annan said the following about that during a UN seminar about unlearning intolerance: "When a new word enters the language, it is often the result of a scientific advance or a diverting fad. But when the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia" (United Nations, 2004). According to

the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Islamophobia is "the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam." It is universally agreed that Islamophobia relates to the discrimination of Muslim people (Van der Valk, 2012). The term Islamophobia only became common parlance in the 1990s (Cecari, 1991), but the phenomenon itself is not this recent. It goes back to colonial Orientalism, which made Muslims be seen as exotic, but also as aggressive. Recently, the phenomenon underwent a revival due to international developments, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and developments in our ethnically diverse society, due to migration. The etymology of the word is related to the better-known terms xenophobia and homophobia. Islamophobia literally means "fear of Islam," but fear is not the ideal word to capture the meaning, because Islamophobia is a much more complex phenomenon. Fear is only a small part of what Islamophobia entails nowadays, but it is common that terms take a contemporary meaning based on the context in which they evolve (Van der Valk, 2012).

1.3 Multi-dimensional concept

Just like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia is a multi-dimensional concept, because you can distinguish religious, social, political and economic aspects. What also contributes to the complexity of Islamophobia is the increasingly popular idea that Islam is not just a religion but a culture or even an ideology. This development leads to more exclusion. When Islam is seen as a religion, people will find the commonalities, especially if they are religious themselves. If not, people find it harder to relate to Muslims. Another contribution to the complexity of the term is that religious dimensions of discrimination are often interwoven with ethnic and gender aspects. Muslims are rarely discriminated simply because they are Muslims. In fact, victims of discrimination are often not identifiable as Muslims, but are regarded as such on account of features such as skin color (Van der Valk, 2012). Islamophobia thus sometimes is racism in disguise. According to Van der Valk (2012), "Islamophobia is a modern version of racism that is being shaped by processes of stigmatization in which prejudices and stereotypes fulfil a central function" (p. 27).

1.4 Intersectionality

An important contribution to the discourse around Islamophobia is the commission on anti-Semitism published in 1941 by the British think-tank the Runnymede Trust. This report documented the similarities between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia under the heading of racism, drawing on similarities between religion and race-based discrimination. A few year later, in 1972, the Runnymede Trust report established a concrete definition of Islamophobia. It described Islamophobia as the "dread or hatred of Islam", therefore "to fear or dislike all or most Muslims". However, this definition is somewhat limiting because it focusses on explicit forms of prejudice such as hatred and disliking (Mirza, 2019). In his book called 'Islamophobia', Allen (2010) calls for a broader definition which would address nuanced forms of racism such as the claim that Islam is a "threat to our way of life". Finally, the 2017 Runnymede Trust report updated their original definition to "anti-Muslim discrimination or racism." I think that adding racism to the definition is an important step. It may appear that Islamophobia targets a religion, but in reality it overwhelmingly impacts ethnic minorities. One could say that not only Muslims are being discriminated, but also people that are perceived as Muslims, for instance because of their appearance, race, name, or clothing (Van Mulligen, 2020). Thus, even though it might seem or be presented otherwise, Islamophobia can be considered a form of racism (Massoumi, Mills & Miller, 2017). Elahi and Khan (2017) highlight this in the Runnymede Trust report. They write that Islamophobia is a form of racial discrimination because misrepresentation and bigotry fuel Islamophobia as a form of discrimination. Also noted in this report is the fact that justifying discrimination or inequality based on cultural practices of ethnic minorities constitutes racism and prejudice (Elahi and Khan 2017). More importantly, the 2017 publication of the Runnymede Trust report recognizes that all forms of racism have a cultural element, and more recently cultural racism has become more widespread than racism based on skin color (Elahi and Khan 2017). In conclusion, when speaking of Islamophobia we are almost automatically speaking of intersectional discrimination, and not only because of the racial aspect, but also gender plays an enormous role. Islamic women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, especially when wearing a headscarf. A study in Belgium showed that out of ten victims of Islamophobia, nine are women (Van Mulligen, 2020).

1.5 Contested term

Because of the complexity of Islamophobia, the term is rather contested. Islamophobia is used in the context of many different phenomena, ranging from xenophobia to anti-terrorism. Thus, it is sometimes confusing what exactly is meant when the word Islamophobia is used. Also, it is still unclear how Islamophobia differs from other terms such as racism, anti-Islamism, anti-Muslimness, and anti-Semitism (Cecari, 1991). At the same time, Islamophobia is not yet universally recognized as a form of racism. Others do agree that it is a form of racism, but do not agree with the term Islamophobia. Vellenga (2018) lists the four main points that criticism to the term is usually related to. The first is that the emotional component of hatred and aversion is not taken into account. Secondly, it is difficult to make a distinction between a prejudiced attitude towards Islam and fair criticism of the religion. Third, the term conceals that the implications of Islamophobia concern mostly Muslims and not Islam. Lastly, Islam is being treated as an essentialized whole and Muslims as a homogenous group. Related to the third critique, Halliday (1999) argues that because the racism that Islamophobia is targets a people rather than a religion, 'anti-Muslimism' is a more accurate term.

1.6 My use of the word

Even though I agree with Halliday that anti-Muslimism or in some cases simply racism are more accurate terms, I do think that these terms are still not perfect because it does not fathom all the complexity of the phenomenon that I study in this thesis. For simplicity, and because it is not the aim of this thesis to come up with a better term, I will stick with the most-used and best-known term Islamophobia., although I realize that it is a questionable one. The definition I keep in mind is the one from the 2017 publication of the Runnymede Trust report, underlining the fact that Islamophobia is a form of racism.

2 Global Rise in Islamophobia

2.1 Contributing developments

Migration and globalization

In recent history, a combination of developments or events have contributed to an increase in anti-Islam sentiments in the West. One of these developments is labor migration. In the Netherlands we have received workers from southern Europe, Morocco, Turkey, and many people from Surinam (Van der Valk, 2012). Discrimination of immigrants has always existed, whether they were Muslims or not. Newcomers in a country are often seen as a threat to the security and identity of the host country. Such fears and suspicions toward minorities have increased with the intensification of globalization and are linked to the renewed emphasis on the nation state in many Western countries. Migration, globalization and their socio-economic consequences have weakened the communal ties between individuals in a society (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Yet, this connection, a common identity, and a sense of belonging are essential to people. Many people feel that the nation state can provide safety and solidity in times of internationalization and the uncertainty that comes with it (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Moreover, people find comfort in knowing what defines their national identity because it is an important aspect of their personal identity. In social psychology, this is described by the Social Identity Theory: one's social identity is the part of a person's self-concept that is based on membership of groups that are important to the person. People always strive for a positive ingroup identity, which exists in relation to the outgroup. The feeling that one's identity is being threatened can foster negative prejudices and xenophobia (Kite & Whitley Jr., 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Global financial crisis

Another important factor in the surge in anti-Muslim sentiments was the global financial crisis (Aslan, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2017). In times of economic distress, people will look for a scapegoat to thrust their fears and anxieties upon (Aslan, 2011). This relates to the Realistic Conflict Theory, which proposes that people want to maximize the rewards they receive in life, even if it means taking away rewards from others. In order to be more successful in this, people join forces to combat the ones competing for those rewards. This leads to conflict with and negativity toward competing groups (Kite & Whitley Jr., 2016).

Global political issues

Global political issues also played a role in the rise of Islamophobia. Since the 1980s, after the Shaw of Iran was overthrown, the Gulf War, and the end of the Cold War, Islam increasingly became target of discrimination. Especially the end of the Cold War played a large role, because with the end of this war a common enemy, a shared Other disappeared. A shared Other can be very helpful to strengthen feelings of connectedness within the nation because a negative view on an outgroup can improve the view on the ingroup. In fact, Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, and Swann (2006) found that people are more likely to bond over a shared aversion than over a shared affection. For some time, the function of the shared Other that connected people had been fulfilled by the communist. However, with the collapse of Communism in 1989 came the need for a new shared Other that could unite Europe or the Western world (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Around that time, in 1993, Samuel Huntington wrote an article on 'The Clash of Civilizations?'. Three years later he published a book with the same title minus the question mark, which became a bestseller. The disappearance of the question mark seemed a confirmation that different civilizations clash due to religious and cultural differences, thus for instance Muslim civilizations and Western civilizations do not go together. Conveniently, a new shared other was provided: the Muslim (Van der Valk, 2012).

Terrorist attacks

This development was enforced by the increase in Islamist extremism and terrorism witnessed since the start of the new millennium and the subsequently declared 'war on terror'. Through a number of terrorist attacks across the globe, extremist and jihadist forms of Islam became highly visible. Since then, Americans have used the fear of Islam as a unifying concept in defining America (Ogan et al., 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2017). These anti-Islam feelings have also spread to Europe, by including Europe in the ingroup. Because many Europeans considered themselves as part of the same group as Americans, –"The West"– they also felt themselves to be victim to the attacks. This is illustrated well by Tony Blair's response to the 9/11 attacks: "We are all Americans!" Such a statement binds people over a shared anger and fear, in this case fear of Islam – Islamophobia. In their research, Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, and Gordijn (2003) showed that when people face a context in which they are reminded of a common group membership with victims, they felt more desire to move against the perpetrator. As a result, Muslims

became more and more associated with violence and seen as a threat to Western security (Van der Valk, 2012).

2.2 The Muslim as convenient "other"

Thus, with the loss off communal ties due to globalization and the 2008 financial crisis came the need for a shared "other", which was easily found after the terrorist attacks that followed: the Muslim. The religion of Islam and the mainstream Muslim majority were easily conflated with the beliefs and actions of an extremist minority (Lean, 2017). Consequently, Muslims became the embodiment of all that was going wrong. A good example of that is given by Reza Aslan in his book on the origins, evolution, and future of Islam. There he writes that a poll in the United States showed that in 2010, nearly a quarter of Americans believed that President Obama was a Muslim. In fact, polls consistently show that the more one disagrees with Obama's policies, the more likely one is to consider him a Muslim. "Whatever is fearful, whatever is foreign, whatever is alien and unsafe is begin tagged with the label 'Islam'" (Aslan, 2011, p. xiv). But what exactly makes Muslims such a convenient "other"? Is it just because the 9/11 attacks happened at a moment where there was a need for an "other" that Muslims have become the scapegoat of the 21st century? Or is there something about Muslims that makes them an easy target for xenophobia and hate?

Quantity and alleged homogeneity
An important reason that Muslims are a convenient scapegoat is the quantity of Muslims present in many Western countries. Muslims are the largest immigrant group in Europe (Triandafyllidou, 2017), at least, if one considers Muslims as a single immigrant group, which many people do. Muslims are often presented as one large homogeneous group without recognizing the differences in nationality and whether they are practicing or non-practicing, liberal or fundamentalist, Shi'ite or Sunni (Van der Valk, 2012). This questionable labelling all as Muslims is very much in line with a current trend of categorizing immigrants by their religion instead of their ethnic or cultural background for instance (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Kite and Whitley Jr. (2016) explain this in their book on the psychology of prejudice and discrimination. Here they describe the Outgroup Homogeneity Effect, which entails that people view members of their own group as very diverse, whereas members of the other group are very similar. This is partly because

people simply interact more with members from their own group and can therefore more easily learn their unique characteristics.

Visibility

Another reason is Muslims' visibility (Amiraux, 2016). This plays an important role in people's natural tendency to categorize other people. We do this in order to simplify our environments, and to do so we form stereotypes in our heads. These are beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes and behaviors of members of various groups. Such stereotypes are formed on the basis of easily observable or easily obtainable information (Kite & Whitley Jr., 2016), such as someone's appearance. It is usually difficult to recognize a Christian, or someone's precise nationality, ethnicity, or occupation. However, Muslims can be very recognizable, especially when wearing a headscarf. This precisely touches upon something that makes the matter a bit more complicated. Namely, Muslims were never a problem when they were not obviously Muslims. Only since there were more female Muslims –at first there were mostly male guest workers– and Muslims making claims to the host society they started to be perceived as a problem (Triandafyllidou, 2017).

For this reason, I think that in fact it does not matter much who 'the other' is, the problem has more to do with the need to reaffirm European supremacy. Currently, many western societies are proud to be secular and liberal, as they see it, and foreigners making claims on religious grounds threaten these values (Triandafyllidou, 2017). It is important to note here that religious issues are only a very small portion of the claims migrants make, there is just a strong fixation on religious matters (Koenig, 2009). Furthermore, in an earlier study by Triandafyllidou (2000), she shows that it does not even matter which values precisely the newcomers threaten, by showing how new features are introduced to each country's national identity only to justify the exclusion of immigrants (Triandafyllidou, 2000).

2.3 The role of the media

As mentioned previously, people categorize others in order to simplify their environment, based on easily observable or easily obtainable information. An important source of information and basis on which to form stereotypes is the media.

Negativity

One problem with the media is that it does not properly reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of European societies, and when immigrants are shown, it is often in a 'clash of civilizations' context. The media tends to focus on negative aspects of migration for several reasons: journalists have limited time and resources to do their research; a lack of specialized knowledge on migrant issues; and simply because strong claims sell better than a nuanced examination. When positive reporting does occur, it is often presented in such a way that it seems an exception to the rule (Triandafyllidou, 2013).

Stereotypes

Moreover, the media including film, television, and social media, is saturated with stereotypes (Kite & Whitley Jr., 2016). For instance, in Hollywood films, almost all Arabs are portrayed as heartless, brutal, uncivilized and religious fanatics, as was shown by Shaheen (2003) after examining more than 900 films. Moreover, these films reinforced the incorrect belief that all Arabs are Muslims and vice versa. The same goes for European media, as Bennett, Ter Wal, and Lipinski (2011) found. Here, Muslims were generally portrayed in stereotypical terms as well, and Islam was considered a threat to security. The coverage of the 9/11 events also played an important role in shaping people's opinions on Muslims and Islam. There have been countless headlines and reports that link Muslims and Islam with violence. This contributes to feelings of fear and distrust, not only toward the perpetrators but toward Muslims in general (Bail, 2012; Choma, Hodson, & Costello, 2012; Green, 2016).

Justifiability

Such stereotypes highly influence people's perceptions of social groups. This was shown by Martin, Grande, & Crabb (2004), who found that, for example, the more news people watched during the United States-Iraq war, the more likely they were to exhibit implicit prejudice toward Muslims. Also, the way in which the media portrays Islam makes it easy for people to justify their Islamophobia. Islam is often portrayed as a religion of intolerance and violence. Even though people know that certainly not all Muslims are terrorists, they do think that there is something fundamentally wrong with their religion which makes it unfit for democratic societies and thus impossible to accommodate in the "secular" system of Western countries (Aslan, 2011; Ogan et al., 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2017), because this view is often promoted by the media. Only examining Dutch politician Geert Wilders's words already gives us plenty of examples of this. In parliamentary

debates he has mentioned several times that Islam is a religion that does not belong in the Netherlands; that its norms and values are at odds with Dutch culture; that Dutch culture is a thousand times better than Islam; that Islamic culture is a backward culture; that Muslims are intolerant; that Islam is an intrinsically violent ideology (Verkuyten, 2013); and the list could go on. With such claims, he makes it very easy to justify Islamophobia. If Muslims are intolerant, we should be intolerant to them. If they are violent we should protect ourselves from them.

3 Islam and Islamophobia in the Netherlands

3.1 Muslims in the Netherlands

What exactly is the context in which this study took place? How many Muslims are there in the Netherlands, and how do the Dutch feel about them? Engy Abdelkader provides some answers to these questions in his comparative analysis of European Islamophobia (2017). At that time there were approximately one million Muslims in the Netherlands, representing 5.8 percent of the total population. The first big wave arriving in the Netherlands was in the 1960s and 70s, consisting of mainly Turkish men seeking employment. These workers were needed because of the extensive economic growth that took place after World War II. Hiring Turkish workers was cheaper and helped satisfy the demand for unskilled labor. As a result, the cultural map of Dutch society changed drastically. After a period of irregulated immigration, the government started to control the process and streamlined the immigration of people from Mediterranean countries, especially Turkey and Morocco. In 2004, more than 1.6 million non-Western immigrants resided in the Netherlands. Moreover, the Netherlands has received a significant number of asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iran. More recently, since 2015, the Netherlands received many refugees from Syria (Shadid, 2006).

3.2 Attitudes towards Muslims

Unfortunately, their reception has not always been with open arms. The Dutch have advocated for border closures to stem the recent flow of refugees and have even begun a ferry service designed to return refugees to Turkey. In 2016, polling data revealed that 65 percent of Dutch respondents believed immigration was the greatest challenge for their nation (Abdelkader, 2017) This was obviously before Covid-19 became the most present challenge. Although somewhat pushed to the background, it does remain a big topic of discussion. Quite some people seem to have a negative opinion on Muslims entering the Netherlands. Research shows that 65 percent of the Dutch believe that Muslims are against integration. An even higher percentage of people –76 percent– is worried about violent extremism among Muslims in their country while about one half –51 percent– see members of the minority religious group in a negative light. Moreover, strong majorities view the Islamic faith as violent and see immigration from the Middle East and North Africa region as something bad. In 2016, 61 percent believed refugees increased the

likelihood of terrorism in their country and 44 percent feared that they would take jobs and social benefits (Abdelkader, 2017). I suppose that these numbers always fluctuate a bit, depending on the recency of terrorist attacks for instance.

3.3 Political context

The Netherlands used to proudly consider itself a multicultural society, but lately people have been prouder of the idea of the Netherlands being a progressive and predominantly secular society (Vellenga, 2018). More and more, religious expressions, especially non-Christian ones, are reduced to the private sphere because they are assumed to not fit within the modern Dutch society. An example of this is the ban on facial covers that was implemented in 2019. Since then, it has been a much-discussed issue because it is in conflict with the freedom of religion and self-expression. In September of 2020, a black paper was released on this burqa ban because in essence it is an Islamophobic law, according to Ibtissam Abaâziz from the website Meld Islamofobie (Report Islamophobia). In an article in Dutch quality newspaper Nederlands Dagblad, she explains: "Corona and the obligation to wear a facemask shows the true nature of the burqa ban. According to this law, face covering would impede communication. However, now that everybody wears a facemask, no one complains about communication anymore" (Van Mulligen, 2020). However, for the national elections of this year (2021), this was still a topic of discussion. All Dutch political parties have expressed their opinion on this ban, and quite some are still in favor of it. Only 9 out of 30 parties want to see this ban lifted again. I will quote a few large parties on why they think this ban should remain in place:

> **Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV – Party for Freedom):** "Islam is not a religion, but a totalitarian ideology. Islamic expressions such as the burqa do not belong in the Netherlands. That's why we have to de-Islamize the Netherlands."

> **Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD – Party for the Animals):** "The PvdD makes a tradeoff between the freedom to wear a burqa and the freedom for women to free themselves from the clothing requirements and feel supported in this by legislators. As an emancipation movement we see te burqa rather as a symbol of oppression, than one of free choice."

> **Forum voor Democratie (FVD – Forum for Democracy):** "The burqa does not belong in Dutch society. Therefore, FVD wants to expand the prohibition of facial covering. Wearing niqabs, burqas, and other facial covers (except due to health reasons) will be forbidden in public." (Source: https://tweedekamer2021.stemwijzer.nl/)

Also among smaller parties, it a persistent belief that Islam and burqas do not fit within a Western/Dutch/free society. Thus, since the Netherlands has become a mainly secular society, religious minorities do not hold a central position anymore but are reduced to the margins of Dutch society. In particular, Muslim communities are seen to propagate traditional values which are supposed to be incompatible with the dominant progressive values of Dutch culture and it is expected that they assimilate (Vellenga, 2018). As Gloria Wekker quotes in her book *White Innocence* (2016), racialized others in the Netherlands are often presented with the message: "If you want to be equal to us, then don't talk about differences; but if you are different from us, then you are not equal" (p. 15). But, as Wekker (2016) also writes, based on the image that the Dutch as well as many other Europeans have of themselves, there is a "fundamental impossibility of being both European, constructed to mean being white and Christian, and being black-Muslim-migrant-refugee" (p. 21). In terms of racial or ethnic origins, the dominant representation is one of Dutchness as whiteness and being Christian. Wekker calls this a paradox in white Dutch self-representation: there is no identification with migrants, even though one in six has migrant ancestry.

3.4 Discrimination

Even though freedom of speech is a highly important value in this country, discrimination is illegal in the Netherlands. The ban is part of the Constitution and is embedded in national, European and international law. For her book *Islamophobia in the Netherlands*, Ineke van der Valk (2012) investigated the occurrence of Islamophobia. She found that in recent years, many expressions of racism and extremism have been identified by for instance the Monitor Racisme & Extremisme. Those involved in studies about the rise of Islamophobia and discrimination of Muslims have regularly raised concerns. This also regards the use of violence and offensive language towards the Muslim community. For several years now, the Meldpunt Discriminatie Internet (Dutch Complaints Bureau for Discrimination on the Internet – MDI) has been highlighting the large number of reports of discriminatory comments on the internet. This is not a big surprise, considering that the public debate about Muslims is already quite heated on television, newspaper and other public areas. Then, one can only imagine how much negativity there must be on the internet, where the threshold for making offensive remarks is low and anonymity high. As demonstrated from the statements and messages of support in the various new media, there is a ready audience in the Netherlands

showing different variants of an Islamophobic ideology: extremist, extreme, or moderate (Van der Valk, 2012). Van der Valk (2021) even goes as far as to say that worldwide, the Netherlands is regarded by Islamophobic ideologues as the front line in the 'clash of civilizations'.

3.5 Possible causes

How can it be explained that in a country that for a long time was known for its tolerance, Islamophobic ideas have gained such a strong foothold? One of the possible causes of that change could be the secularization process that has been taking place since the 1960s. It could be that there is a cultural conflict between the libertarian Netherlands and Islam. Also, religion is seen as a private matter in the Netherlands, a lifestyle element that is not meant to be displayed publicly. At the same time, there is a trend that Vellenga (2018) calls "religionization", which entails that when looking at immigrant groups, the religious dimension has become more visible in the expression of aversion to them. This contributes to the increase of Islamophobia. Moreover, if this religion is one that is somewhat new in the country and is associated with inequality, repression and intolerance, its display is considered even less acceptable. The Netherlands like to show that they are all about tolerance, but the question is: how tolerant is a country really, if this tolerance is not applied to groups that are suspected of being intolerant?

Of course, the change in attitudes towards Islam can also be seen in a more general light, it is not only a Dutch problem. Overall, worldwide, there have been major changes in the perception of the integration of minority groups. In Europe specifically, the Syrian refugee crisis and the influx in immigration as a result has made many people afraid of terrorism and job insecurity, which contributes to a more negative approach of Muslims (Abdelkader, 2017)

4 Ways to combat Islamophobia

4.1 Personal relationships

A good first step towards combatting Islamophobia could be to provide people with more accurate information about Islam, and to make news and media more nuanced. As Esposito & Mogahed (2007) found in their study, 57% percent of their (American) respondents indicate knowing nothing or too little about "the opinions and ideas of people living in Islamic countries" and the more they indicate knowing about Islamic countries, the more positive their opinion about those countries is.

However, only providing information would not be enough. Minds are rarely changed through facts (Aslan, 2011; Green, 2015). Green (2015) calls this 'complex ignorance', which refers to cognitive frames that will prevent correct information from entering the mind and transforming one's thinking. He does think it is important to educate people on Islam and especially its diversity and its similarities with Western tradition, but he adds to this a very important strategy that might be more effective in combatting Islamophobia, namely to cultivate personal relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. This idea is in line with what many scholars (e.g. Aslan; 2011; Kite & Whitley Jr., 2016; Ogan et al., 2015; Putnam & Campbell, 2010) have found to be a successful way of acting against Islamophobia. Putnam and Campbell (2010) studied religion and politics in the United States, and found that the key to reducing hatred against Muslims can happen through inter-religious contact. They show that people perceive Muslims most negatively when they do not have any contact with people from other religions. They conclude that "the image problem will disappear even more rapidly as more and more Americans count a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a Mormon among their friends and family" (p. 534). Aslan (2011) writes that "it is solely through the slow and steady building of personal relationships that one discovers the fundamental truth that all people everywhere have the same dreams and aspirations, that all people struggle with the same fears and anxieties" (p. xv). Indeed, in Esposito & Mogahed's study (2007) it was confirmed that Americans who know at least one Muslim tend to have a more positive view on Muslims and Islam.

4.2 Intergroup Contact Theory

This advice is supported by the Intergroup Contact Theory, which entails that contact between members of different groups can lead to a reduction of prejudice on both sides. The process of reducing prejudice happens through de-categorization and re-categorization. Firstly, through contact people see the members of the outgroup as individuals rather than members of a social category. This personal view makes it easier to like the other. Subsequently, ingroup and outgroup members form a common social identity. Prejudice is reduced because people see themselves as members of a single unified group rather than as two competing groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996).

4.3 Nothing to lose effect

Related to this, it is interesting to be aware of the "nothing to lose effect", which is an infrequently discussed reaction to a negative social identity. It is the idea that people with a stable negative social identity –people who are part of a consistently negatively evaluated group– are more likely to execute more extreme forms of pretest because they have nothing to lose. This is important for understanding extremism, e.g. terrorism, but also for self-sacrifice for the group (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje & Manstead, 2006). Clearly, the most common response to the recent terrorist attacks has been hate and exclusion of all Muslims. However, the more this happens, the more negative a Muslim's social identity becomes, and the more the problem is being reinforced. The less valuable relations Muslim people can establish somewhere, the less they have to lose. Thus, the 'nothing to lose effect' explains that a negative social identity makes people more likely to fall for extremism. Therefore, promoting fear and hate –the currently common response to extremism– is not all effective. Hence, we should do the opposite of what is being done now: interact with Muslims, establish valuable relationships with them. Give them something to lose, and we will have nothing to fear.

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STUDY: EXPERIENCING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE NETHERLANDS

5 Experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands

5.1 Introducing the participants

As mentioned earlier, I interviewed six Muslims, varying in age, gender, cultural background, time spent in the Netherlands, and practical execution of religiosity.

Hadiya

First I spoke with Hadiya (pseudonym), a 42-year-old woman born in Morocco and living in a city in the North Holland province. Hadiya has lived in the Netherlands for fifteen years now. For some time she volunteered in an elderly home, but now she is a stay-at-home divorced mother. About ten years ago she stopped wearing a headscarf and she also does not go to a mosque regularly. For her, Islam is praying five times a day and treating people around you well. Sharing is a key value.

Mohamed

Secondly, I met up with Mohamed, a 21-year-old student at the Hanzehogeschool in Groningen. He was born in the Netherlands, but his parents migrated here from Egypt. Mohamed very easily combines his Western identity with his Islamic identity. He is currently living in a student association house (while not being a member of the association) where it is almost impossible not to drink alcohol, and so he does. But he is more careful with alcohol than some other students may be, he does not want to do stupid things as a consequence of drinking. Vrijmibos (Friday afternoon drinks) are not for him either, because on this day he goes to the Mosque. This spiritual quiet moment in the week is very important for him. He also participates in Ramadan.

Nalan

Then I talked to Nalan, a 26-year-old woman who also studies in Groningen, but lives in Amersfoort at the moment with her husband. Most of her life she lived in Turkey. This was the only interview I did in English. Her story was very different, very interesting. She really reflected on her religion a lot, and considered well in which way she wants to practice it. It is not so much about the rules for her, but about feeling comfortable. One

example of that is her going to church instead of a mosque, because she likes the vibe there better. She also has no strict idea about wearing a headscarf or not, she just wears it when it serves her. Nalan is very passionate about women's rights and feminism.

Habon
The next participant, Habon, was born in Somalia. Both her brother and her suffered from an eye disease. Because of that, her family gathered money so that they could go to the Netherlands to have a better life. First the kids came with their mother. Later her father came as well, and the family grew to one with eight children. Habon graduated from Law School in Groningen and is now working in customer service at a big corporation. Due to her minimal eyesight, she hasn't been able to get a job in her own field. When I spoke with her she was about to turn 30 ("and still single"). Habon wears a hijab and always has her full body covered. She was raised in a "for Dutch terms strict Islamic family." She goes to the Mosque on Fridays if she doesn't have to work and she tries to always do her five prayers.

Linda
Habon referred me to a converted friend of hers, "she is very outspoken, like me". Linda is also 29 years old and finishing a social study in Social Work at the Hanzehogeschool in Groningen. Beside her studies she works in youth care. She is Dutch and raised Christian, but converted to Islam five years ago. Linda never drank much, but now she completely quit drinking alcohol and quit eating pork. She wears a headscarf and covers her body – in summer she swims in a burqini. Linda, having converted from Christianity to Islam, considers herself a kind of bridge between Dutch, Western culture and her own, Islamic beliefs. For her, it's mostly about respect, and therefore she still celebrates Christmas with her family, and invites them to celebrate the end of Ramadhan. Both holidays can coexist perfectly as long as people don't condemn each other. She tries to pray five times a day, but usually doesn't manage to. She also doesn't go to a mosque so often, because she doesn't feel so comfortable there.

Saïd
Lastly, I spoke to Saïd, a 45-year-old, born and raised in Groningen. He used to work as a lawyer and now teaches at the Hanzehoogeschool and has his own coaching business. Besides that he –together with his wife– takes care of their four children. Saïd's parents are from Morocco, his dad came as a guest worker. Saïd was brought up with Islam. Later,

however, he shaped his own way of being a Muslim. Currently, the five prayers are a very important practice for him, as well as the Ramadan. He also doesn't drink alcohol and eats halal.

Clearly, the majority of my participants is highly educated and connected to Groningen in some way. Later I will discuss how this may have influenced the experiences that were shared with me. Also, my participants were relatively young which might have influenced the outcomes as well.

5.2 Being a Muslim in the Netherlands

Overall, my participants are very positive about living in The Netherlands as a Muslim. Hadiya, for instance, says she lives very well here, that she never encounters any problems due to her being Muslim. Of course she has heard of other Muslims encountering problems but she herself has never experienced any, neither in the building where she lives nor on the streets. Mohamed also finds it easy to be a Muslim in the Netherlands, he just combines the best of both worlds. This goes for most of the participants. However, there still are a few difficulties they have run into being a Muslim in the Netherlands.

Holidays
The only downside for Hadiya is that she sometimes misses celebrating the Islamic holidays with other Muslims, the way she used to celebrate in Morocco. This is something Mohamed mentions as well. Being a Muslim in the Netherlands is easy according to him –if you are not too strict with all the rules– but you don't usually get free for the Islamic holidays. He himself, however, did get a day off from school to celebrate the end of fasting when he was a kid.

Duties
Also performing some of the religious duties can be hard to combine with a normal job. To do the five prayers, you need to have a prayer room at work, this is not always the case. At Habon's job, however, she can make use of the lactation room, which is equipped with a small sink so that she can also do her washings. Going to the Mosque on Fridays and Ramadan can also be difficult to combine with the working hours here.

Abovementioned things, however, are mostly practical issues. These are experienced due to the fact that Dutch society is organized around Christianity, and thus does not always

fit with a Muslim's lifestyle. Although it is about time that The Netherlands becomes more inclusive towards people with a different religious background, I would not call these inconveniences Islamophobia.

Questions

For Nalan, one of the hardest or at least most annoying things about being a Muslim in the Netherlands is all the questions you get. Because Dutch people are quite direct, they easily ask you anything, even very personal things. She shared, for instance, that sometimes when she would go out guys would hit on her and maybe want to go home with her. She however was still a virgin at the time and didn't want to do those things. The guys then would be very curious why she was still a virgin, whether that was for religious reasons or personal ones. Some other questions also were quite critical, such as: if you are a Muslim, then why do you drink alcohol? All of these questions made her decide to start wearing a headscarf for a while, which really helped.

> "Yeah, it's just that you have to answer a lot of questions, whenever you start a conversation with someone. They will ask you about anything, and then you're like: go learn yourself. Now with this whole black lives matter movement, yeah, I should have told them: go learn yourself! Don't ask, I don't have to educate you. But yeah, it's a responsibility, definitely, to answer people's questions."

Mohamed also experiences that Dutch people can be very curious about Islam. He shares a little anecdote about the grandparents of one of his friends who could not stop asking questions during dinner. This didn't bother him at all, however, except that his food and tea got cold.

According to Bakali (2016), it is very common to receive many questions about your religion when you are openly Muslim, especially for women. In the interviews he did for his research on Muslim high school students in Canada, he identifies a pattern in which Muslim women are often subject to interrogations whereas men are mostly subject to jokes. Bakali writes that "Muslim men dit not face a barrage of questions associated with their faith, whereas some of the women described how questioning was central to their experiences as a Muslim in secondary school" (p. 129). This is something that mostly came up in my interview with Nalan. The main reason for her to start wearing a headscarf was her annoyance with all the critical questions she got on being a Muslim but also living a "Western" life. In Bakali's study it often comes back that the female Muslim students

feel like they have to be the spokesperson for "the entire Muslim ummah of the world" (p. 88). This seems be the case for most of my female participants too. Many show a hope of giving the people around them a good image of Islam.

> **Linda**: "Yes, often people have some negative prejudices about my religion. But I think that through my work, through helping people, I can also show people a different side of it, which I am really happy about."

However, it could also be a positive thing for people to have some curiosity and show interest in how Muslims are. The women in Mirza's study (2019) indicated that it was important for them to be able to show that they are not that different, and that their religion is often mis-interpreted due to the way it is portrayed in the media. Therefore, all women found it important for them and their children to have contact with white British people, so that barriers could be broken down. Some felt that small talk was already beneficial, others felt that only through stronger relationships prejudice and discrimination could be reduced.

Jokes

Mohamed also experienced is as something positive when people would ask him all kinds of questions about his religion. However, it did become very clear in both my interviews with men that they are also often being ridiculed for being Muslim, just like Bakali noticed among his participants. Both Saïd and Mohamed indicated being subject to jokes, which are often linked to terrorism. E.g.:

> **Saïd**: "…and of course the jokes in my daily life. When we talk about bomb belts or whatever there's always some joking."

The fact that he says "of course" shows how common such jokes are. I will get back to this later.

Bakali relates these differences between men and women to a trend he notices in the media, namely that Muslim women are often displayed as imperiled and Muslim men as dangerous. It could be that women get so many critical questions because people feel as if they need "saving", that it cannot be that they are completely voluntarily Muslims, and voluntarily covering their bodies and hair. Muslim men are mostly considered dangerous, people immediately picture the bearded terrorists from the news, and therefore jokes about terrorism come to mind easily.

Questions and jokes may not seem to be Islamophobia at first sight, but because they are often based on negative prejudices and assumptions they are. That is what Islamophobia is: a different (worse) treatment of Muslims because of the negative ideas people have about them. Thus, although many people think they are, jokes are rarely innocent. In her book *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker (2016) also dedicates some pages to this. She describes how common it is in Dutch culture to make discriminating remarks to an "other" disguised by a joke. She claims that a big part of the Dutch self-image is based on the idea of their own innocence, being a small, Christian country. This innocence "enables the safe position of having license to utter the most racist statements, while in the next sentence saying that it was a joke" (p. 17). Often these jokes are being justified by the closeness of the relationship with the person addressed, which is also something that came back in Mohamed's interview. Especially his friends would make jokes about his religion, but he says that does not really bother him. Apparently, the belief that this is okay within close relationships is so ingrained that also the victim is sometimes fine with it, or at least beliefs he should be. I think, however, that we should not just tolerate these jokes, because they are racism in disguise. As Wekker writes, there is a "preferential mode of bringing across racist content by means of humor and irony" (p. 17).

Values

I specifically asked my participants what they thought of the claim often heard in the Dutch media, for instance from politicians, namely that Islam does not combine well with Western norms and values. In a way, they understood where this statement comes from because they partly agree with the image that Islamic countries are less tolerant and open and sometimes oppressive, especially for women. All of them, however, explain this as a confusion between religion and culture. Hadiya replies the following to the question what her religion entails:

> "Yes… well, what I just said: Islam is peace. What we see here, that is just different. For instance what happens in Arabic countries. But what I know is that Islam is peace, Islam is helping, Islam is sharing. I can tell you that now but…"

Then, when I ask her opinion on the idea that Islam doesn't go well with Western values:

> "See, some Arabic or Muslim men, they use their power. 'I am a man, so…' They use Islam for things, but it's only about power, I think, because some men are like: a woman is

nothing. I have also experienced things in my life. Sorry, Deborah, I'm getting a little bit…
[emotional]"

With Mohamed I also discussed the topic of the supposed inferiority of women in Islam:

"I don't even know what that is. It's something separate from our religion, because you
just cannot find that in the Quran. I think it was just made up by extremists to make a
point. Some people think they just want to put us in a negative light, that we are not real
believers. I don't want to go into that too much, it's a lot. But we think then: "it's not in
Quran, so why do you make it up?" All that matters is that you're a good person, and
which good person stones women because they teach children? That's just messed up."

Nalan really understands why people think that Islam and Western society don't go well
together. However, it is not true that Islam clashes with the Western world, but many
Muslims do.

"I definitely think that Muslims generally clash with the western values. But I don't think
that Islam does. Because, yeah, I consider myself a devoted Muslim, whatever, like, I don't
represent a specific group of people or whatever, but for me, I would always try to do my
prayers, give, because there are five must dos in Islam, and one of them is prayer, the
other is fasting, and the other is going to the pilgrimage, and giving poor people money.
And there is to say 'I love God'. I do those things. I haven't gone to the pilgrimage, but I
do all the other things, so that means I am a Muslim right. But I never thought of myself
as, you know, when I'm living in this society I feel much more comfortable than living in
Turkish society. This society, Dutch society, goes with my values much better than
Turkish society or any Islamic society so to say. Yeah, like, as I said, it's more about how
you perceive religion, and how you practice it, that makes you go against the values of
western society. Because yeah, lying is a really bad thing for Islam, stealing, talking, even
gossiping is a really bad thing in Islam, and I think it goes with the western society much
better than the eastern ones actually."

Habon agrees that in fact Muslim values match very well with the Dutch ones.

"I actually find it quite beautiful, the way in which Dutch people say: just be on time; stick
to your agreements; if you think something just say it. These are actually things that are
also Islamic values. If you make an agreement with someone you stick to it, because you
shouldn't waste someone's time. Those decency norms are very similar. Also the work-
hard mentality fits with Muslims. Of course, they think Allah provides, but that does not
mean you can sit still land beg. I think there are many similarities between Dutch and

Islamic values, they very well go together. Sure, there may be some clashes, but I think it's very doable, it just depends on your mentality."

The conclusion of this is that it is important to not confuse Islam as a religion with the cultural beliefs of many Islamic countries. This relates to what I wrote in the first chapter: that seeing Islam for a culture or an ideology makes it easier to marginalize Muslims (Van der Valk, 2012).

Secularity

Clearly, Nalan is very positive about being a Muslim in the Netherlands. She thinks that it being so easy is partly due to the fact that she feels no religion is very powerful here, except in the "Bible Belt."

> "More people don't really have religious opinions, a lot of people have different spiritual feelings. So yeah, I would say I don't feel that much exclusion. I don't, day to day, feel the difference of being a Muslim than being a Christian or being an atheist."

Coming from Turkey, Nalan experiences the Netherlands as a very secular country, in which she feels much more free to believe what she wants to believe than she did in her home country. Probably, opinions are divided on whether the Netherlands is a very secular country or not, but it could very well be that in a country where it is not the norm anymore to be religious, and where religion is quite a private matter, one feels free to personally believe what they want to.

Adapting

Another reason that Muslims can very well live in and integrate in a Western society is the fact that adaptation is encouraged in Islam. Muslims have moved for much longer already and have often had to adapt to their new environment. Quran clearly asks its followers to adapt to a new country in such a way that it fits within the Muslim frame, as Habon tells me when I bring up the assumption that Islam does not go well together with Western values:

> "Yeah, I think that's bullshit. You have to image – here comes a mini history lesson – the moment the Muslims left Mecca for Medina in the days of our prophet, when they fled Mecca, they arrived in a different village with their own customs. Then Aisha, the prophet's wife, came. She had been to a wedding and was asked: so did you sing for the bride? And she said: no. You people from Mecca, you are in a new city, in Medina it is

usual to sing for a bride and now you didn't sing! The lesson we took from that is that whenever you're in a new place with different norms/values/customs, it is fine to adopt those as long as they do not clash with your religious frame. So I think a lot is possible."

Saïd confirms that adapting is an important commandment in Islam:

> **Saïd**: "I think Islam can combine with Western society very well. An important commandment in Islam is that you have to adapt to your surroundings, without negating the principles of your religion."
> **Deborah**: *"What does that entail?"*
> **Saïd**: "Praying, fasting, not eating pork. That's all possible in a Western society."

Mohamed also clearly adapts to his non-Muslim student environment, by for instance deciding to drink alcohol, even though it goes against the values with which he was raised.

> "People wouldn't expect it of course, because, well, I do believe, you know, but I just take the best parts from it, and the things I don't agree with I don't do. Drinking et cetera, I do enjoy doing that, as long as I keep measure. It is of course generally known that Muslims are not allowed to drink, but there is a reasoning behind that, because say you drink, the things you do then are not a hundred percent you. You're not completely in control anymore, but that is immediately assuming the worst. I think you can also just drink to make things a bit more fun. I just take the good parts of my religion, just believing and doing good to people."

Linda also indicates that she adapts to the Netherlands and her family. Begin a convert, considers herself a kind of bridge between Dutch, Western culture and her own views. For her, it's mostly about respect, and therefore she still celebrates Christmas with her family, and invites them to celebrate the end of Ramadhan. Both holidays can coexist perfectly as long as people don't condemn each other.

A way in which Habon adapts is by shaking hands with men. She would preferably not do that. However, she does do it here because "the backlash you get when you don't do it is bigger." She also admits that she now does it because she is in a stage of her life where she is working on her career, wanting to get higher up. "Well, now it's easy with corona! I don't have to shake hands at all!"

This example in my opinion clearly show that Muslims are not fully accepted in the Netherlands, or maybe only when they entirely adapt to Dutch norms and values. As

soon as you indicate you do not want to shake hands with men, according to Habon, you get an enormous "backlash".

Quite remarkable that Habon herself uses this example of shaking hands as a way to show how accepting Dutch people often are, whereas I see in this same example that a Muslim's values are not always respected in the Netherlands. She shares that men sometimes even ask her: "How do you feel about shaking hands?" And when she explains she prefers not to, they tend to respect it. I find it interesting that in her eyes the Dutch are very accepting, whereas this seems to completely contradict her reasoning that she decided to just shake hands with men because of the backlash you get when you don't.

Groningen

Habon does add the side note that people are not this open and accepting in the entire country: "That is absolutely a difference between here and there in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, there it's just different." Overall, the fact that most of my participants lived or had lived in Groningen seems to have affected my outcomes, if I may believe my participants. As they say, people are more educated and more used to internationals in this city. This combination, they thought, could make people more acceptant of Muslims and foreigners in general.

> **Linda**: "Ehm… I have to say that, certainly in Groningen, I don't run into many problems. You just notice that Groningen-city has mostly highly educated people, it's not even a very big city but people are used to diversity, so I don't feel like I get any strange looks, but for work I am often in small villages in North-Groningen, then you do notice that people look. And when I go to my mother in Hoogeveen, Drenthe, and walk on the streets there people do look."

> **Habon**: "I find it quite chill. But that is also because I live in Groningen. I also have friends in the Randstad who have it a lot harder. I don't feel like in Groningen I am being discriminated for who I am, because many people are like: how you act is how you are. What for me makes a difference I think, is that I am very social and open and accessible and then you speak more easily to people and people will see you for who you are instead of for your religion. I know that friends in the West of the country very much have an 'us-them feeling' with other people. Therefore they feel it is hard to find a job, to get higher up at work, this feeling of: they don't want me because I am a Muslim. On the one hand I really understand that, but on the other hand I think: you shouldn't always see yourself as the victim. It's in your own hands how people see you."

Deborah: *"Yes. But you think that Groningers look a bit more at the person behind the religion and that in the Randstad they judge more easily, like 'oh, you're a Muslim'?*

Habon: "Yes, but that is also because… if you look at the Randstad, where are the problem neighborhoods? Many of them are the neighborhoods with a lot of Muslims. So there the association is more like 'they don't do anything, they just cause problems,' whatever. So the problems are being linked to the religious background, and because in Groningen you have less of those problem neighborhoods, that association is less strong. Look, of course, if you leave the city you also find people who think like that. That is because they have very little or no contact with Muslims and only see what's on the news. I did an internship in Ten Boer and, let's put it this way, if you hear the discussions they have there at the municipality during lunch I think: 'wow, they really have never talked to foreigners.'"

Nalan: "Other than that, I don't know, like… because Groningen is also really international, I think it also shows that whatever you're wearing they usually don't judge, or they don't show the prejudice at least openly. But yeah, I am a student, so I probably would feel it when I apply for jobs and stuff, because I am hearing it from people."

It seems like Groningen is quite an ideal climate for Muslims to be in, because it is a young, highly-educated, and international city which is not big enough to remain fully anonymous but still big enough for people to be familiar with seeing Muslims around. This may have influenced the outcomes of this and the following chapter.

5.3 Experiences of Islamophobia

When I ask my participants if they have any experiences with negative prejudices or even discrimination, most start by saying something like "no, not really."

Habon: "I don't really feel like in Groningen I am being discriminated for who I am…"

Mohamed: "Actually, no. Sometimes amongst some of my friends, I'm not going to elaborate on that, but I can deal with it. It doesn't really affect me."

Linda: "I find that hard to say."

Hadiya: "Ehhh, actually, to be honest I don't feel that. Once, when I lived in Zwolle, I wore a headscarf and then someone criticized that, but since then never again, to be honest, no no…"

However, as the conversation goes on, it slowly becomes clear that all have experienced prejudice or discrimination in some way. Saïd's first memory of discrimination was when

he got bullied by other students in the first year of high school, which continued until he solved it with violence. Something he is not proud of, but at the time it was the only way he knew and it helped. Nowadays, he would explain things with confidence or just be silent when people make humiliating jokes about him. "That silence is always awkward."

Work

More examples come when discussing work and job applications with my participants.

> **Said**: "Yes, I have experienced that in my professional life as a lawyer, that they judge you negatively. (…) That clients or people look at you weirdly. Or when I say on the phone "this is [his Arabic last name], and then they say: 'I would like to speak to the lawyer now!' 'Yes, that's who you're speaking with,' and then it turns quiet. They think 'That [last name], that must be the concierge or something.'"

> **Linda**: "Also once during an evaluation of my work in youth care, a father told me that beforehand he did not have much faith in me because I wore a headscarf, but that he now realizes that I am actually very good at my job. Which made me think, 'Uhh, thanks..?' (…) So yes, people do have an opinion about it, but I am actually really happy that through my work, through helping people and families I can show a different side, that I really like."

Clearly, people tend to have lower expectations of Muslims, which is an example of the negative prejudices that Muslims get to deal with. Somehow, there is the assumption that Muslims (or Arabic immigrants) must be lower-educated and less competent. This is also shown by some of my participants' stories on applying for jobs.

Job applications

It becomes clear that Muslims –or more broadly people who are perceived as Muslims– have to work much harder to show that they are capable of doing their desired job.

> **Said**: "Well, I can tell you, my first job interview was at Dorhout Advocaten and I was hired there but… I had 268 ECTS or so and really high… I had been a student assistant for three years, did two masters and who knows what else. They said: 'you're the perfect candidate, but we do have to ask you, what's the deal with your religion exactly?' (…) What I also found remarkable… normally they don't really check your references, because usually your list of grades says enough, but this time they did call one of my professors: 'what is this Saïd like?' And then it was not at all about anything law-related, just about my personality. That I found really interesting. They clearly had to cross some boundary.

Deborah: *"Yes, so basically you have to work harder to achieve the same."*

Saïd: Well, yes, it sounds like a cliché because it is often said, but clichés are often true, and in this case, in my case, yes. Also, during that job interview I ran into someone I knew from high school, and she was a secretary there and that day there also happened to be job interviews for the position of secretary. So that girl from high school was like: 'ah, you're here for the secretary position?' I said 'secretary? Law-intern, that's what I'm here for!' 'Oh, oh sorry…'"

Mohamed shares something similar. Even though he doesn't see it as a big problem, he does indicate that he has to overachieve a little.

"Yes, so like I said, it [discrimination] hasn't affected me much, also in the work field. When people see who you really are, that you have a good image, if you say 'I am Mohamed, I study at HBO (university of applied sciences)', then you know it's a guy who takes good care of himself, knows what he wants. Of course people are gonna think 'oh, Mohamed, MBO (practical education), lives more on the street' etcetera."

Linda does acknowledge that her being a Muslim can play a role in the job application process. She prefers to make her religion clear before having the job interview, because she is aware that she could be discriminated on the basis of her headscarf. She does not want to waste her time and energy on that.

"Yes, I have to say that I consciously decided to apply for jobs with a picture on my CV, because I really do not want to arrive to a job interview and have a conversation like 'huh, Linda? But you wear a headscarf.' Then I think: just don't invite me. If you don't invite someone because she wears a headscarf then I don't want to work for you."

However, one time when she was invited to a job interview, they did focus very much on her headscarf.

"Yes, what I did experience once during a job interview, that was to work at a living community for youth with mental disorders, and then they asked: 'but what if there's an escalation and someone pulls your headscarf off, what do you do then? What if people don't respond well to the headscarf?' so I noticed that it was a bit of an issue for them. And, I don't know, some kind of gut feeling tells me it's not completely right, but is it discrimination? Maybe subtle discrimination? I don't know. But I think that us humans very much tend to assume the good in people, thinking 'ah that person probably didn't see me' or, I don't know, but those small things. If it doesn't feel right then I think it probably isn't right. So yes, that I experienced once during a job interview."

As I shortly mentioned, I do not think that these issues are limited to Muslims only, but maybe happen to most people with a background of immigration. This idea is supported by the study *Liever Mark dan Mohammed?* by Andriessen et al. (2010) – a very fitting title in these days when our present Mark Rutte remains popular despite the structural discrimination that took place under his reign, as came out in the form of the "toeslagenaffaire". Andriessen et al. investigated whether two job applicants who are equally well qualified for the position but are from different ethnic origin have the same chance of being invited to a job interview. The outcome was that job applicants of non-Western origin have a significantly lower chance of being invited to attend a job interview. In this study, 44% of native Dutch applicants were invited for interview, compared with 37% of non-Western candidates. It became clear that only having a foreign or Arabic-sounding name could already make navigating the job market a lot more difficult. This relates to what I wrote earlier, that Islamophobia is a kind of racism. It is not only religion that makes people targets for prejudice and discrimination, but mostly one's overall "otherness". According to the same study, discrimination in the job market is even more prevalent in lower and middle-ranking jobs. However, it also shows that having a good CV and application letter does pay off. The fact that most of my participants are highly educated and speak excellent Dutch could explain that they do not find that they had serious issues during the job application process. Moreover, Andriessen et al. rarely encountered any blatant expressions of discrimination. Non-Western applicants are generally treated in a correct and friendly way. This makes it more difficult to identify the discrimination that does take place, however in a very subtle way.

Headscarf

The fact that Linda also gets to deal with such negative prejudices shows that it is not *merely* a racial issue, but also very much related to Islam. It becomes clear that many of the discrimination incidents are associated with the headscarf. It seems to make a big difference for Muslim women, in the way they are being perceived by others. Both Linda and Nalan provide interesting proofs of that. Because they have both experienced being a young woman in the Netherlands with and without headscarf, they can make a comparison. Beside the abovementioned, Linda recalls some other instances in which she was discriminated, which would probably not have happened if it wasn't for the headscarf:

"I also once had an annoying incident in the train, but I do think those guys were a bit drunk or so, I don't know. In any case, they were a group of three or four and talking very loudly about how stupid it was of me that I had become a Muslim, it basically came down to that."

Both Habon and Nalan also recall uncomfortable moments related to them wearing a headscarf, even though in the first instance they thought they never really suffered from discrimination.

Habon: "Only once in high school I had a small clash with a girl. Very Dutch countryside girl, who often wanted to sit next to me in History class, especially when we had had an exam and we were going to discuss the results, because then she could compare her answers to mine, because I did well and she not so. Well, I'm not that difficult so fine, I don't mind sitting next to you so that you can check your answers. But later, during the break, she suddenly tells me: 'I do have some problems with your headscarf.' That pissed me off a lot. Dirty profiteer, I'm never gonna help you again!"

Nalan shared this very clear and shocking experience:

Deborah: *"And ehm, have you ever felt judged or that you got negative comments because of your religion?"*
Nalan: "Well… in the supermarket it definitely showed. Because I always go to those electronic cashier things. And I notices that after I started wearing a headscarf they always checked my bag."
Deborah: *"Really?! Wooow."*
Nalan: "Maybe not always, but usually. I realized that after starting wearing headscarf I didn't know it was a practice to check your bag. And then I realized 'oh, is this a thing?' so probably because of those prejudices and stuff I felt that difference. Other than that, I don't know, like… because Groningen is also really international, I think it also shows that whatever you're wearing they usually don't judge, or they don't show the prejudice at least openly. But yeah, I am a student, so I probably would feel it when I apply for jobs and stuff, because I am hearing it from people."
Deborah: *"You hear from other Muslims that they have problems with that?"*
Nalan: "No, like, if they apply for a job and they're wearing a headscarf and someone else doesn't wear a headscarf, they're more likely to hire that person."
Deborah: *"Oh wow. And what do you think the overall image is of Islam in the Netherlands? How do Dutch people think about Islam? Do you have an idea about that?"*

Nalan: "Eehm. I remember reading a newspaper article, or something, I don't know, maybe a research, that like 80 percent of Dutch people did not want their kid to be a Muslim. They asked like these questions 'would you be okay if your child was gay, was Muslim, was this, was that' and I remember that the highest number was for not wanting them to be a Muslim."

White privilege

Something very interesting that Linda shared is that since the moment she converted and started wearing a headscarf she realized that she lost her white privilege. White privilege is something white people usually are not very aware of, but if you suddenly lose it you apparently notice in the little things, the little things that used to be normal but now are not anymore.

"If you smile at someone on the street they would automatically smile back, or when you run to the bus they would still stop for you. Those kind of things you lose. However, it is not something I worked for or deserve, so it is not really a problem to lose it."

This is a very unique insight that all other participants could never really have, either because they always wore a headscarf or because they already belonged to a minority group or both. This is also one of the very few cases where you can extract anti-Muslim discrimination from a more intersectional form of discrimination. With all my participants, there can always be a combination of factors at play. Many of them –besides being Muslim– are black or Arabic looking, female, non-Dutch, with an international name, handicapped, or a combination of these. Therefore, it can be hard to see what the basis of the discrimination is. Of course, Linda is also a woman, but the fact that when she started wearing a headscarf she started being treated differently shows that anti-Muslim discrimination is very real.

"Of course"

Something striking about my study has been the contrast between theory and practice. My main motivation to interview Muslims in the Netherlands was the fact that literature shows how Islamophobia has increased and my curiosity whether "ordinary" Muslims in the Netherlands experience any of that. However, every single one of my participants indicated that they have not or not really experienced any Islamophobia. At least, this was usually the case at first instance. After some more concrete questions, slowly some cases of discrimination or prejudice started to come out. This gives me the suspicion that

in a way, for Muslims, having to deal with discrimination is a fact of life. It could be that it is not something they very much notice because they are so used to it. Part of this suspicion is based on my participants' word choice in some occasions. Saïd, for instance, used the word "natuurlijk" (of course/obviously/naturally) twice when he described being discriminated in some way:

> **Said**: "…and of course the jokes in my daily life. When we talk about bomb belts or whatever there's always some joking."

> And: "When I was young they often called me dirty Turk of course and… well, of course… but then someone biked by telling 'dirty Turk!' and then I said 'I'm not a Turk', but oh well…"

> **Mohamed**, similarly, said: "Of course people are gonna think 'oh, Mohamed, MBO (practical education), lives more on the street' etcetera."

This "normality" of jokes about Muslims is something I also encountered in Bakali's 2016 study on Muslim high school students in Canada. On page 112 he writes: "In all three cases, the Muslim students did not feel that the racism they were experiencing was troubling or something that needed to be seriously addressed" whereas "if students are being labeled as 'terrorists' in secondary schoools, it should not simply be taken as a joke and should be seriously addressed by teachers and by the school." Related to this, I noticed that Linda almost justified others' bad behaviour, when she talked about the young guys speaking negatively about her on the train: "They were probably drunk or something." As if then it is understandable, then it is okay.

Personal narratives

Many of the findings in this chapter can be related to the approach I used for this study: the narrative approach. It is very interesting how all my participants say that being a Muslim in the Netherlands is very easy, but at the same time several of my participants have indicated changing their behavior in order to fit in better. So yes, maybe they feel very accepted in Dutch society, but this is not without any requirements or losses. Most of my participants have to negotiate on a daily basis how they can be Muslims in the Netherlands. To relate this observation to my methodological approach, I think this has to with the way we usually tend to narrate our lives. It is most pleasant if our personal narrative is one that is positive, and one that makes sense. It could thus be that my participants shape their lives in such a way that their story is one with as little clashes

and contradictions as possible, and that is a story that is easy to live with, one that makes them feel content with their lives. A clear example of a participant shaping her story in such a way that it feels good and makes sense is when Linda tells me that she did lose her white privilege the moment she started wearing a headscarf, but then immediately goes on to say that that is fine. She does not consider it a problem, because she hadn't earned this privilege anyway. So even though it is quite wrong that you suddenly get treated very differently the moment you convert to Islam, she justifies that by saying that she did not deserve the privilege in the first place. This way being a Muslim in the Netherlands still feels good. It may be too painful to acknowledge that your religion does come with very negative consequences. There are a many other parts that can be related to the creation of a coherent, positive narrative. One other example is Habon finding Dutch people very accepting, whereas she actually feels the need to adapt when it comes to shaking hands. Mohamed explaining why he does drink alcohol even though it does not fit with his religion is also a way to shape a fitting narrative for himself. It is not easy being a student in the Netherlands and not drink, so he created a story to make these two parts of his identity –Muslim and student– become more congruent. When Nalan describes how she went back and forth between wearing a headscarf and not wearing a headscarf, she also clearly creates an understandable narrative around these decisions.

6 Islam according to Muslims

6.1 How Muslims view Islam

Because Islamophobia is often reduced when a person knows a Muslim, I introduced six "ordinary" Muslims to the reader. In this final chapter I will outline what Islam is according to them, and what they wished more people knew about their religion.

6.2 What Muslims wish more people knew about Islam

Since I am trying to bridge the gap between Muslims and other people living in the Netherlands, that exists partly as a result of misinformation and misunderstanding, I asked all my participants the question: "What do you wish more people knew about Islam?"

For Hadiya it was hard to answer this question, because she considers her religion very much as a private, personal matter. She does not really need other people to know anything about it.

> **Hadiya**: "Yes, look, to be honest, I never speak with others about Islam, I'm not going to lie. Because, well, that is my faith, that is for me. So yes, I do have a friend, but yes, she respects my faith, and I respect hers. Besides that, no, I never speak with anyone about it to be honest, I don't want to lie. No."
>
> **Deborah**: *"And why don't you like to talk about it?"*
>
> **Hadiya**: Yes, I don't know, I actually also don't have that many connections here. I'm not going to sit down with the neighbor and talk about Islam, or with people outside. I have a friend and sometimes we can just talk about her faith. Me too, sometimes, then I say: oh, it's almost the same! It's not… you know? Such things. But yes, we just respect each other, that's it. I am a Muslim, she is a Christian. She is my best friend, and I think I am her best friend.
>
> **Deborah**: *Ah how nice! But imagine your neighbor would ask: what is that religion of yours all about? How would you then simply explain it?*
>
> **Hadiya**: Yes… well, what I just said: Islam is peace. But what we see here, that's just different. For instance what happens in Arabic countries. But what I know, Islam is peace, Islam is eh, helping, Islam is sharing. I can tell you that, but well…

Mohamed does feel strongly about this question, because it saddens him that there are so many misconceptions about his religion.

"Yes, that Quran would write things such as that women are not allowed to go to school, such things, and all the things that happen in the Middle East, that's all not true. There's really only good thing in Quran. Sometimes things are taken from you, such as alcohol and pork, and I don't know what, but that is not something… that is not bad. The things is indeed, that if women do something, children, that is all not true. It's just not true, it's not in Quran. If you think, if you would like to read it for yourself some time, then you will see that there are only things written in it that are meant to improve a person. It just makes a person better, better for the people around them. It's to everyone's benefit."

Nalan also finds it important that people know more first-hand information on what Islam entails, instead of all the negative things we see on the news.

"That it's not as tough as it seems, because, yeah the jihadis and other terrorist groups that connect themselves with Islam, it looks so harsh but it is definitely not Islam. Even the jihad parts, like Quran, the prophet always says: 'the biggest jihad is the jihad in yourself,' where you have to overcome your own bad intentions, desires, or worldly desires. So there is this incident where they go to a war and they come back and he says: 'okay, the biggest jihad starts now, because now you have to overcome whatever you felt, your anger'. And also, yeah, I mean, I feel like when I read the Bible and the old testament of Quran, they all sound so harsh. It's not that the Bible is less harsh than Quran, it is the representation and it's how we know about Islam. It's always with the terrorists, because it's on the news, that's how we learn about it. But it's not that the people just know how Islam relates to people and how it's personal. Not just about making people do something, it's just a religion. It's not going to tell you to kill people. That's not the deal, right?"

Habon thinks people sometimes judge to quickly, without understanding the ideas behind certain Islamic customs. She illustrates this with a personal story.

"I see around me that people respond very surprised when I tell my dad that I am leaving town. They think that you need to have permission for everything, that girls are more restricted than guys. But what do you think underlies that? My dad… I am 29 years old, many people already stop communicating things with their parents when they are 16, I do still do that. Why? The idea is that you ask permission so that your parents know where you are and that you're safe. I don't see it as controlling. My parents are worried and want to know that you are fine. That's why I ask permission. So, when people think 'women are more restricted than men', I hope that they will also look at the idea behind it, and not only think 'it's not fair.' I experience that when for instance… Well, I was gonna go to Canada in November, that is cancelled due to Covid-19, but my dad would have some

51

difficulties with that, if it weren't the case that we have a very strong base of trust now, that he knows what I will and will not do. And not because it is or is not allowed by my dad, but because I respect him. I was gonna go to family, so that would have helped a lot, then he knows I'm okay. Just that. That people don't think 'it's constraining, it's not fair, it's not feminist,' but that they see the line of thought behind it."

Saïd would mostly like people to focus more on the similarities than the differences, and then especially the similarities between Christianity and Islam.

"Well, I wish more people knew that Jesus is an important prophet in Islam. Many people, and I always tell people: 'there is no Muslim who does not believe in the prophet Jesus and his mother Maria.' Then some of them think: what is happening here? What is this? What i want to emphasize is that we really have a lot in common, without… because some people think we are some kind of exotic… and that of course is partly caused by politics –read Wilders– that we are some kind of sectaric… that we are a sect in fact, and not a religion. And I want to emphasize: we are an Abrahamic religion in which Abraham is the origin of many prophets, and one branch leads to Jesus and the other branch leads to Muhammad."

Linda keeps her answer short:

"Yes, that it's actually a very peaceable and inclusive faith"

In summary, my participants would like other people in the Netherlands to know that Islam and Christianity are more similar than people think (Hadiya & Saïd); that Islam is peace, peaceable, inclusive and about helping (Hadiya & Linda); that Islam is not as harsh as it seems and definitely not harsher than the Bible (Nalan); and that there are good reasons behind certain Islamic customs that are not common here, which means Islam is not simply unfair towards women and anti-feminist (Habon). All in all, I think it is important for people to know that Muslims are not that different from themselves. From their six-year-long study on Muslims in 35 countries by Esposito and Mogahed (2007) it became very clear that Muslims mostly deal with the same issues and worries as other people and they generally want the same things in life (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

6.3 Religion versus culture

Something only Mohamed specifically replied to the question of what they wished more people knew about Islam, but what did come up in many of the interviews is that there

is a difference between Islamic religion and the culture in Islamic countries. I think that this is indeed a crucial thing to know, because many people might view them as one and the same. Of course, they are intertwined, but they are not equal. Hadiya, in her interview, makes very clear how it hurts her that Arabic culture or the things Arabic people –especially men– do negatively shapes other people's image of Islam. Multiple times she says: "That is not Islam, because Islam is not like that." One example of this is terrorism, and the other one, a topic that is very personal to her, is the way Arabic men assume they have power over women simply because they are men, and how they abuse this power.

6.4 How to change negative prejudices according to Muslims

Earlier, in the theoretical part, I wrote some ideas on how to combat Islamophobia. Here, I would like to highlight a few quotes from my interviews that link to this part.

> **Mohamed**: "Everybody who knows what a Muslim can be like think's we're great, or well, great, they think we're just chill."

> **Habon**: Look, of course you also have such people here [people who are negative about Muslims]. That's because they have little or no contact with Muslims and only see what's on the news. When I did my internship in a small village and heard their conversations during lunch I thought: 'wow, you clearly have never spoken to any immigrant.'"

> **Habon**: I notice that giving the right example without explicitly mentioning it has more positive effects than saying 'I'm a Muslims and that's why I do this.' I really believe that a good example tends to be followed. When you look at the more strongly Islamophobic people, they often say: 'all those foreigners, those Muslims, I don't want them here. Except for my neighbor Ali, he can stay!' Why? They have a positive experience with hem. It's extremely unfair, but that's what I aim for."

> **Linda:** "Everybody just needs to know a Muslim, that's what it comes down to."

One of the participants in Bakali's study, Ayesha, gives the following advice: "I think that Muslims need to slightly get out of their comfort zone and reach out to people because as a Muslim community I think we just wait for people to understand us without trying to make ourselves understood" (Bakali, 2016, p. 92). Personally, I think it should not be a Muslim's responsibility to make others more positive about their religion, but on the other hand, reality shows that this is what's necessary, because the initiative generally

does not come from the non-Muslim. Thus, I think that what Ayesha suggest is a good first step towards reducing Islamophobic sentiments in the country.

Conclusion

Aim of this study

This thesis aimed to promote a better understanding of the increasing presence of Islamophobia in the West, and especially to unveil the lived experiences of Muslims in the Netherlands. After providing a definition of Islamophobia, and discussing its complexity, I described the background and context of the problem, outlining the developments that contributed to an increase in Islamophobic sentiments. This information is important because being aware of what shapes Islamophobic sentiments is the first step towards resisting them. Moreover, discrimination and prejudice are often founded on ignorance, so education and spreading awareness are key steps towards improvement. However, solely providing information is not enough to combat the problem of Islamophobia. Research in the field of social psychology –specifically in intergroup relations– has shown that a more effective approach is inter-religious contact, as is explained by the Intergroup Contact Theory. Through the establishment of relationships with Muslims, we break down our stereotypes and start seeing them as "the same" instead of "the other". That is why, with my thesis, I wanted to provide a platform for Muslims to introduce themselves and share their stories, so that the reader in a way gets to meet a couple of Muslims personally. This is the reason I described my participants in a somewhat detailed manner, and I dedicated quite some space to their words.

Outcome of this study

To my surprise, most participants told me that they hadn't had much experience with discrimination and prejudices based on their religion, and thus with Islamophobia. I had expected to hear stories that indicate the widespread presence of Islamophobia in this country, which I could then balance with them sharing what their religion is really like for them. However, I encountered quite the opposite: six interlocutors who immediately replied that life as a Muslim here is easy, and that they do not suffer from any discrimination at all. Nonetheless, I think it is in any case very beneficial to learn about Islam through the perspective of its believers, which is why I still dedicated space to describing what Islam is like in Muslims' eyes. It is not so often that we get to speak to Muslims and especially in such depth. My interviews counterbalance the negative way

in which Muslims are often portrayed in the media. The ones who reach the news are often extremists, but when do we get to meet an "ordinary" Muslim? So even though I did not reach the outcome I expected, I still think we can still learn from what they have to say.

Explanations

A few explanations for the outcome of my study can be identified. Firstly, the experiences of my participants may have been shaped by the fact that most of them live or lived in Groningen. Some of my participants themselves provided this as an explanation, saying that if they had lived in the Randstad, it would have been a different story. Groningen is quite an international, young, educated city in which the people are overall quite left-wing, progressive and open-minded. Also, Groningen does not have the kind of "problem neighborhoods" that one finds in some of the larger cities, in which there is a high concentration of immigrants. Moreover, the fact that all my participants live in a city could have also impacted the outcomes. Some indicated that when they would visit or work in a village, they were confronted with more negative prejudices.

Something else that could have affected the interviews is that I knew or had a link with most of the participants. It could be that if the interviewees would have been complete strangers, or if the interviews would have taken place in an anonymous way, people would have shared different things. I could imagine that now they wanted to keep up a positive attitude and have a nice conversation. Something that is also important to note is that five out of six interviews took place online, due to the Covid-19 situation. Possibly, it is easier to go more into depth when talking face-to-face. Then the interviews would maybe also have taken longer and yielded more elaborate stories.

Reflection

Although the outcome of my study was not exactly as expected, what I did found is actually far more interesting. Namely, this study exposes a kind of blindness for negativity in Muslims, which I relate to the way they –like all humans– narrate their lives. My participants tell themselves and others that they do not suffer from prejudices or discrimination, because they create a positive, congruent narrative of their lives, from which they filter out negativity and aspects that do not make sense. This becomes clear

through the striking contradictions between the way they overall experience being a Muslims in the Netherlands and the stories they shared.

Firstly, all my participants say being a Muslim in the Netherlands is easy, whereas at the same time several of them indicate having adapted to Dutch culture in ways that do not always resonate with their own belief. Apparently, being accepted does require adaptation and comes with losses. Most of my participants have to negotiate on a daily basis how they can be Muslims in the Netherlands. However, my participants do not seem to be very aware of this need to adapt in order to be accepted.

Secondly, all my participants indicate that being a Muslim in the Netherlands is very easy. Yet, when diving deeper, it becomes clear that their experiences in the Netherlands are not all positive, and that they have actually all been victim to some kind of discrimination due to their religion. The more I ask, the more incidents come up; sometimes in the form of questions, sometimes jokes, and sometimes blunt discrimination. It seems as if I need to help them to remember such incidents, or as if they do not identify them as Islamophobia. Somehow, they are very good at downplaying or justifying these negative incidents, sometimes even turning them into something positive. This observation –that all my participants first say they do not experience any discrimination in the Netherlands, but go on to actually give examples of discrimination– is a phenomenon that I did not encounter in any of the literature I read and seems to be a unique finding of my study.

My suspicion is that Muslims are very used to negative remarks or jokes here and there, and see it as a normal aspect of life, which could be why they so often describe the incidents using the words "of course". Possibly, if we would have had longer conversations, or if I tried a bit harder, I could have gotten more examples of Islamophobia from them. But it might be easier for Muslim people to somewhat forget about the moments that they were ridiculed or discriminated and to not let them affect you too much. Therefore I think that blocking such incidents or taking them very lightly could be some kind of coping mechanism.

Overall, I think that the outcomes of my study are highly related to the methodological approach I used, namely the narrative approach. Because I asked them about their stories, they have told them to me in such a way that they make sense, both for themselves and for me. This is the way us humans generally narrate our lives. It is most pleasant if our

personal narrative is one that is positive, and one that makes sense. It could thus be that my participants shape their lives in such a way that their story is one with as little clashes and contradictions as possible, and that is a story that is easy to live with, one that makes them feel content with their lives.

Recommendations for future research

The findings of my study immediately spark some new questions. Mainly: what exactly explains this blindness that Muslims seem to have for expressions of Islamophobia? I now linked this to creating a fitting personal narrative, but I am not entirely sure which mechanisms are at play here. Do Muslims really forget the majority of the negative experiences? This would explain why they are so positive about being a Muslim in the Netherlands. Or do they not forget but somehow block negativity as a coping mechanism? Do they filter out negativity from their personal stories to make them more bearable? Do they just barely notice negativity anymore because they are so used to it and it has become normal to them? Do Muslims in the West grow a thick skin because of all the negative opinions they have to deal with throughout their lives? These are questions that would be interesting to explore in future studies.

Once it is confirmed which mechanisms are at play in Muslim's blindness for negativity, it would be of great value to study to what extent this discovery is generalizable. Most likely, my findings are not limited to Muslims in Groningen or even in the Netherlands but could actually be generalized to all Muslims worldwide. In fact, I consider it quite likely that the same mechanisms can be witnessed in other minority groups. Future studies could examine how for instance black people, native Americans, or Asians deal with the constant discrimination they have to face. I would not be surprised if one can identify similar coping mechanisms in many other marginalized groups worldwide.

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Appendix

My questions for the semi-structured interviews:

1) Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What is your name? How old are you? Where were you born? Where do you live?
2) Is it correct that you are a Muslim? For how long have you been a Muslim? What does being s Muslim mean to you? How do you practice your religion? Has this changed after –if applicable–
3) What is it like to be a Muslim in the Netherlands?
4) What kind of image do you think Dutch people have of your religion?
5) Have you ever felt discriminated based on your religion or felt that people had negative prejudices about you? Do you have any examples?
6) Do you feel that non-Muslims have a good image of Islam? If not, what is wrong with the image they have?
7) Is there anything you wish more people knew about your religion?
8) Are there any critiques to Islam that you understand or even find fair? If yes, which and why?
9) Something I often heard and read during my study is the idea that Islam and Western society are not compatible. What do you think of that?
10) Is there anything you'd like to add still?