

Managing the Stigma: Islamophobia in German Schools

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ABSTRACT *As Islamophobia is on the rise in German society it also reaches into public institutions like schools. Not only students are influenced by the bad image of Islam being reflected by many media reports and public debates, teaching staff are also not immune to the effect of hostile attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. However, the stigmatization of certain groups is especially problematic, given the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. The following article presents some of the findings of an ongoing research project about the reactions of Muslim students to Islamophobia in German schools. It looks at Muslim religiosity as a kind of stigma in German society and evaluates the possible ways in which students who belong to the stigmatized group can react to and manage to cope with these attitudes. It also discusses the possible empowering role that religion can play for some of the students.*

Islamophobia in Germany

Decades before Germany officially declared itself an immigration country and opened up its citizenship law in the year 1999 it had been an important destination for migrants from a variety of different countries and for various reasons of migration. One of the biggest immigration movements was that of the so called *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers), who had initially been invited to Germany from Turkey, Italy and many other countries to stay for a certain time during the prospering years of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) and help rebuild the war-torn country's economy. Other people have come to Germany for example as refugees fleeing persecution or wars, the latest being the war in Syria. In 2015 alone 1.1 million refugees registered in Germany, about two thirds of whom came from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.¹

Apart from language and other cultural differences, many of these immigrants and their families also adhere to non-Christian religions and belief systems.

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Together with the aspects of racism, hostility towards the religion also plays an important part in the exclusion of Muslims in Germany and Europe

As the largest immigrant groups came from Turkey and other Muslim majority countries, Islam has become the largest religious minority in Germany, developing from around 6000 in 1945 to something between 3.8 and 4.3 million in 2009. According to a quantitative governmental survey 45 percent of Muslims are German nationals. The largest ethnic groups among them are people with Turkish roots at 63 percent and people from the South East European countries like Bosnia, Bulgaria and Albania at 18 percent. The largest religious denominations are Sunni Muslims and Alevi at 74 and 13 percent

respectively. The survey also found that a considerable number of people from Muslim majority countries do not consider themselves as Muslims, for example 40 percent of people with Iranian roots do not claim to be Muslim, even though they are perceived as such by the society at large.²

The diversification of society in terms of language, culture and especially religion does not always meet welcoming attitudes on the side of the autochthonous groups, and Germany seems to be particularly vulnerable to hostility towards people perceived as others. Regarding the hostility towards people perceived as Muslims Germany even seems to be on the forefront according to certain academic surveys. Just quoting one of the many examples, the Bertelsmann-Foundation presented the findings of their survey *Religionsmonitor* early in 2015, in which they asked Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany, among others, about the place of Islam and Muslims in the society. They found that 57 percent of the non-Muslim Germans perceived Islam as threatening and 61 percent thought, it did not fit into the “Western world.”³

That this hostile attitude towards Islam is also affecting the people who adhere to the religion is shown for example in the survey of the *Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung* (Berlin Institute of empirical Integration and Migration Research) BIM in 2014. 60 percent of the interviewees would like to forbid the male circumcision, 48 percent the wearing of Islamic headscarf by female teachers and 42 percent would restrict the construction of mosques. 38 percent of the participants of the survey thought, a woman wearing hijab could not be German.⁴

Even people, who are not religious or don't even identify as Muslims, but are perceived as Muslims due to their Turkish or Arab origin, become victims of these hostile and even racist attitudes.

Islamophobia has recently been mainly analyzed as anti-Muslim racism in Germany as well as in the Anglo-Saxon debates. German scholars like Iman

Attia, Yasemin Shooman⁵ and others have shown how the hostility towards Muslims is based on historically established stereotypes of the Muslim other. They analyze anti-Muslim racism as a structurally operating form of cultural racism that is deeply rooted in the European memory reaching back to the times of the crusades and the colonization of Muslim countries. The rejection and exclusion of groups of others play an important part in the formation and stabilization of nation states. Especially Muslims and all people who are perceived as such due to their looks, names or countries of origin are ascribed a variety of negative character traits, like anti-Semitic, homophobic or misogynist, that not only label the strongly marked group as negative but thus justify its exclusion from privileges and access to social and monetary resources. They also tend to be the projections of all negative character traits that Germans don't want to identify with themselves. The projection of negative attributes onto another group that is constructed as absolutely different from their own helps in relieving the German or European national identity from a lot of attributes that were formerly found to be commonplace, like anti-Semitism. This positive identification with the nation and simultaneous negative demarcation from a group perceived as outsiders also helps unifying the nation –at least those parts of the nation that don't define as Muslim. In Germany the term Islamophobia is largely criticized for not capturing the phenomenon of cultural racism and instead focusing too much, and in a pathologizing manner, on the perceived fears of the majority.⁶ The editors of the European Islamophobia Report 2015 Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez however use the term Islamophobia synonymously to anti-Muslim racism and state: "As Anti-Semitism studies have shown, the etymological components of a word do not necessarily point to its complete meaning, nor to how it is used. Such is also the case with Islamophobia studies."⁷ In general the Anglophone debates increasingly perceive Islamophobia as a kind of racism and view Muslims mainly as a racialised category.⁸

The analyses of this article is located in the same theoretical approach of viewing Islamophobia as a kind of cultural racism that constructs people as Muslims and at the same time as significant others to the national 'we.' This construction of Muslims does not depend on real religious affiliation and also targets people, who do not consider themselves Muslims. The findings of my research however suggest that together with the aspects of racism, hostility towards the religion also plays an important part in the exclusion of Muslims in Germany and Europe. Whereas Meer and others argue "that religious discrimination in most Western European societies does not usually proceed on the basis of belief but perceived membership of an ethno-religious group,"⁹ I largely agree with this point but want to argue for a stronger focus on specifically anti-religious aspects of Islamophobia. They are in my perception not mainly a marker of an ethno-religious group, but carry aspects of specifically anti-religious attitudes that target Muslims also as a specific (non Christian)

Muslims hoist the German and the Turkish flag at half-mast outside the Merkez Mosque in Duisburg, on January 9, 2015 to pay tribute to the victims of Charlie Hebdo.

AFP PHOTO / DPA / ROLAND WEIHRACH



religious group. Whereas my young Muslim interviewees certainly had experiences with discrimination due to their Arab names or their seemingly Turkish appearances, many times the quality of discrimination became more severe the moment they openly identified as religious. It is the daily prayer, the fasting in Ramadan and most importantly the decision to wear hijab that make Muslims appear as religious and potentially problematic in the eyes of big parts of the German society. This group easily associates Islam and Muslims with violence and terrorism and feel threatened by a perceived “*Islamisierung des Abendlandes*” (Islamisation of the Occident), as the steady number of people joining the movement PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes – patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident*) and their regular anti-Muslim demonstrations in various German cities prove.

I thus use both terms of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, (resp. *Islamfeindlichkeit* in the German context, translating as ‘hostility towards Islam and Muslims’) taking care to include both the culturally racist and the specifically anti-religious aspects of the hatred against Muslims.

Islamophobia in Education

The area of education is especially vulnerable to any form of discrimination or racism.¹⁰ Students from minority ethnic groups are generally taught by teachers from the ethnic majority, of whom many reflect the above mentioned views about Islam and Muslims. The hierarchical nature of school education makes it even more difficult to object to discriminatory treatment than other situations, where adults are the victims of discrimination and at least theoretically can defend themselves and ask for support. In addition experiences of discrimination and racism in school can be especially detrimental to the development of the young people, because the institution and its staff are perceived as reflecting the values and principles of society and teaching the children morals and good conduct besides knowledge. If a teacher now talks or acts in a way perceived by the students as discriminatory or even racist, this behavior can potentially

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destroy much of the trust, that was not only put in the teacher but in the institution of the school as such and so into the whole society.

In a survey that I had conducted for the Open Society Foundations' program "At Home in Europe" about Muslims in Berlin many of the Muslim respondents reported some kind of discrimination in public schools and some of them also spoke about a climate of low expectations and discouragement of Muslim students by certain teachers. The respondents, especially the girls wearing headscarves, felt that this behavior of the educators originated in their ethnic, social and mainly their religious backgrounds. More than half of the Muslim respondents of the survey felt that religious customs, other than Christian, were not respected well enough in German schools. 11 percent had experienced religious discrimination in public schools and eight percent mentioned discriminatory or racist treatment of Muslim children by the educational staff.¹¹

Other surveys, like the *Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes* (Federal Anti-discrimination Office) that carried out a research in August 2013 about discrimination in education and work, have shown similarly alarming amounts of discrimination against young people with a migrant background (many of them Muslims) in German schools.¹² According to this research one quarter of the students, with a migrant background, perceived discrimination in school. The survey also found that discrimination could have negative effects on the performance and motivation of the students.

The international TIES-survey¹³ that looks among others at discrimination at schools in different European countries had similar results: 40 percent of the students, with a migrant background, that were interviewed in the German cities of Frankfurt and Berlin, did not feel welcome in their schools. The same percentage of students reported hostile or unfair treatment towards them and 16 percent said they experienced this regularly or often. These numbers were much higher in the German cities than in the other countries of the survey.

Regarding institutional discrimination in German schools Mechthild Gomolla and Frank-Olaf Radtke found in a qualitative survey that German teachers were more likely to recommend non ethnic German children to lower school

forms than ethnic German pupils. When endorsing the children for the Gymnasium, which leads to the university entrance diploma 'Abitur,' perfect German language skills as well as an educationally supportive family were seen as inevitable prerequisites by the teachers. Ethnic German teachers don't seem to think that these requirements were to be found in the average migrant family, which leads to a small percentage of migrant children in grammar schools and other detrimental effects.¹⁴

Apart from academic research we get a good idea about the reality of discrimination from NGOs counseling the victims. The Berlin based "Netzwerk gegen Diskriminierung und Islamfeindlichkeit"¹⁵ (Network against Discrimination and Islamophobia) for example reported in the year 2013 that almost one third of the announcements of discrimination of Muslims that had reached them in that year were situated in the area of school and education. The project of the Muslim NGO Inssan e.V. is one of the few organizations in Germany, that document numbers of anti-Muslim discrimination and racism and offer counseling for the victims.

Surveying the Experiences of Young Muslims - Research Methodology

Looking at the above listed evidence, from surveys and counseling NGOs, about alarming cases of anti-Muslim discrimination and racism in German schools, I focus in my ongoing research project on the question of how these experiences influenced the young people who were targeted by it and how they managed to deal with the Stigma that was attributed to their religious affiliation.

For the purpose of my research I talked to young Muslims, who were at the end of their school education or had recently graduated. Although Muslims are not a clearly definable social group, but rather one that is largely marked as such from outside, there are people who are perceived and often stigmatized as Muslims by large parts of the society, whether or not they are actually Muslim. For this research I was interested in young people who had had any kind of experience with anti-Muslim discrimination or racism in schools. They did not necessarily have to be really Muslim, but in fact all of those who were ready to talk to me about their experiences defined themselves as believing Muslims. I approached the young people through my own personal and professional contacts in the Muslim communities of the respective cities by asking for young people who had had some kind of experience with discrimination due to their religion and who would be willing to tell me about it.

Altogether I spoke with 14 young women and 11 young men between the ages of 14 and 24 as well as one mother of two of my interviewees, a child therapist and a lawyer, who had founded an organization for countering discrimination

in schools. These additional interviews, as well as a group interview with young people in the Hamburg organization YES,¹⁶ about the overall issue of discrimination in education were mainly used as background information regarding the experience of young Muslims with racism and discrimination in school.

Some interviews were conducted in mosque organizations, because some young people go there in their free time and suggested the locations as quiet and easy to reach. For others I visited the interviewees in their homes or met them in other quiet locations. All of the interviews were conducted between October 2012 and May 2013 in the German language. The interviews were one to two hour face-to-face semi-structured guideline interviews most of which were held with one young man or woman and some with two or more persons together.

The guideline interview is open to the narration of the interviewee and at the same time insures a certain structure and comparability between the different people interviewed. The openness of the interview was a crucial factor because the subjective perception of the young people was the main focus of the research and needed to be given enough freedom for developing their own reflections, narrations and interpretations without being guided towards pre-conceived concepts and ideas. The guideline interview is not based on a fix questionnaire but merely provides a guideline of important aspects to be covered at some time during the interview.¹⁷

I especially wanted to focus on the religion as a possible reason of discrimination and how the young people would deal with it, even though it goes without saying that the different reasons for discrimination cannot clearly be differentiated and mutually influence and reinforce one another. I thus focus on the Islamic religiosity as a reason of discrimination and conceptualize it as a kind of ‘Stigma.’

Erving Goffman has defined a Stigma as “eine Eigenschaft (Attribut), die den „Fremden“ von anderen in der Personenkategorie auf negative Art unterscheidet. Im Extrem wird (die Person) (...) in unserer Vorstellung (...) von einer ganzen und gewöhnlichen Person zu einer befleckten, beeinträchtigten herabgemindert. (...) Es konstituiert eine Diskrepanz zwischen virtualer (angenommener, geforderter) und aktueller sozialer Identität.”¹⁸ [a characteristic (attribute), that differentiates the ‘stranger’ from others in the same category of persons in a negative way. In extreme cases (the person) (...) changes in our imagination (...) from an ordinary person to a blotted, damaged one. (...) It constitutes a discrepancy between virtual (perceived, stipulated) and actual social identity.]



Even the non-visible Muslims become in some way victims of the Stigmatization of Islam

The hijab functions as a strong symbol for the Stigma of being a (religious) Muslim and is used as such in almost every media article about Muslims in Germany

kind of relationship between the characteristic and the stereotype], because it is only partially made of that which identifies the specific person (outwardly) and partially –probably more importantly– of the prejudices and stereotypes that others have about the person and its characteristics.

Goffman differentiates between the “Discredited” among the stigmatized persons and the “Discreditable.” The latter defines people, who are not obviously identified as belonging to the stigmatized group. For that reason they can decide to hide or downplay this belonging and the part of their identity that is stigmatized by others. According to Goffman most of the stigmatized people know both of the categories and have already experienced them.

Stigmatisation of (Religious) Muslims

Regarding my young Muslim interviewees, this differentiation between the “Discredited” and the “Discreditable” was interesting to apply to the Stigma of Muslim religious belonging, because some of them were for one reason or the other not directly marked as visible Muslims in society. Some of the students had an ethnic background other than Turkish or Arabic and were –for example as children of Bosnian immigrants– not outwardly perceived as being different from the German ethnic majority. Also ethnic German converts to Islam, even though I had none within my sample of interviewees, fall within this category and are only perceived as Muslims if they decide to openly show their religious affiliation through clothes or practicing religious rituals.

These young people, who were not marked as (religious) Muslims by society, unless they decided to openly display their religiosity, are interesting for studying the specifically anti-religious aspects of Islamophobia. One young Bosnian woman for example explained to me that she had felt completely accepted and belonging to the society since she was a child, because she had blond hair and blue eyes and was never seen as different. However when she started wearing the hijab things changed for her completely and she had strong experiences of discrimination both in school and outside of it. Other young women, who were perceived more strongly as Muslim due to their Turkish or Arab back-

This discrediting characteristic however is not there generally, but should be understood as a relationship, because it does not always and not in all situations have negative effects. Therefore Goffman describes the Stigma as “eine besondere Art von Beziehung zwischen Eigenschaft und Stereotyp”¹⁹ [a special



A supporter of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany Party displays a placard showing Chancellor Merkel dressed in a Burqa during a demonstration against the German government's asylum policy on November 7, 2015.

AFP PHOTO / JOHN MACDOUGALL

ground, also had this experience. Even though they had experienced racist discrimination before outwardly showing themselves as religious Muslims, those experiences became more severe when they started wearing the hijab. The decision to wear the Muslim headscarf is one very obvious marker of difference that leads to the young women being perceived as religious Muslims. However the young men are also perceived differently in school and society at large, whether they openly practice their religion by asking for a prayer room in school or fasting in Ramadan, or whether they don't mention the degree of their religious practice. Some of the young students who were not outwardly perceived as Muslims, decided to hide or at least not explicitly demonstrate their religiosity and belonging to the Stigma, in the context of the school. Others, like the girls who started to wear the hijab while they were in school, decided to openly live their religiosity and thus show their belonging to the stigmatized group of religious Muslims at some point in their lives. They changed from "Discreditable" –belonging to the Stigma but hiding it– to "Discredited," openly belonging to the stigmatized group of (religious) Muslims. This change from one status to another is in some cases thought about and prepared very thoroughly beforehand. Others seem to be more or less surprised by what happens to them and how their surrounding changes its perception of them, once they start wearing the hijab or otherwise become visibly Muslim.

In addition to the above mentioned concepts of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia Goffman's Stigma-Theory seems to be useful for analyzing the effects of the Islamophobic Stigma on the young Muslims in school and the way

in which they deal with these experiences. People are discriminated against as Muslims due to societies' perception of them, quite independently of whether they are actually religious Muslims or even Muslims at all. This holds true for large parts of the victims of anti-Muslim racism. However, there are others, who are not directly perceived as Muslims and are able to more or less hide their belonging to the Stigma. Nevertheless they belong to the stigmatized group, whether others directly perceive that or not, and this has a lot of inner implications for them. While they might prevent some of the negative treatment towards them, that they would experience if they made their 'identity' open, they still witness their friends and family being discriminated against as well as observe the negative portrayal of their religion and other Muslims in parts of German media and politics. They might even feel ashamed or guilty because they are able to avoid discrimination while others are not. Therefore even the non-visible Muslims become in some way victims of the Stigmatization of Islam. On the other hand it is often an especially open and visibly declared belonging to the religion of Islam, which encompasses more or less intense practice of some or most of the rules and rites of the religion, that makes people especially vulnerable to the hostility towards the religion of Islam that is portrayed more and more openly in German society.

I therefore hold the opinion that religion is one distinct marker of otherness and Islamophobia. The experiences of discrimination and racism towards visibly religious Muslims are possibly enhanced when compared with non-religious Muslims, even though the different reasons for discrimination are very closely interlinked and can hardly ever be clearly differentiated from each other.

The following quote of a young Muslim woman I interviewed shows how the first day with hijab at an old school, where she had thus not been perceived as especially religious, can mark a drastic change of the perception of the respective woman by others:

“On the first day I was nervous. I was not afraid, but nervous. And I told myself: God is with me. So why am I nervous? (...) The first who saw me was a friend of my brother and he smiled at me. And that was extremely important for me. Had the first reaction been bad, I don't know, if I had been able to even go to school at all this day. But he smiled at me and so I thought: Ok, the first reaction is good, that strengthens me. After that it only became worse. My hijab was torn, I was called Ayşe all the time. I was mobbed constantly no matter where I was.”²⁰

Putting on the hijab quite evidently marks the belonging to the group of people who are seen as Muslim, and in this case especially religious Muslims, whereas this belonging might have been assumed before it did not become

evident until wearing the hijab. The hijab functions as a strong symbol for the Stigma of being a (religious) Muslim and is used as such in almost every media article about Muslims in Germany. Wearing the hijab in public positions, for example as a teacher or judge is a highly contested focus of political and legal debates. The woman wearing it, quite independently of her ethnic

or social background, is immediately associated with these debates and thus becomes the absolute other in society and the focus of all the stereotypical and even racist ideas ascribed to this group of others.

Whereas all the fellow students of the above mentioned young woman knew her as “Süreyye” for years, before she started wearing the hijab, she became “Ayşe” in the moment of appearing in school with the scarf, a name that is often used in a derogatory manner for people with Turkish background. She later reports that one of her teachers, whom she had earlier liked very much due to his approachable character, announcing in front of all his classes, that he would never teach a student with hijab. While she was probably seen as a Muslim and/or member of an ethnic minority by large parts of the population, the way in which the behavior of her fellow students and teachers changed towards her from the moment she started wearing the hijab, can be seen as a clear sign of specific hostility towards her as a religious Muslim woman and thus as the specific anti-religious part of Islamophobia, that enhances the already existing racist aspects of the phenomenon.

Managing the Stigma

Anger, Helplessness and Depression

Many victims of discrimination tend to firstly react to the experiences with anger and feelings of helplessness. From research on racism and coping strategies we know that racism is an important stress factor, that contributes to mental and health impairments, depending on how well the victim is able to cope with the experience and draw on positive support mechanisms.²¹ The young woman, described above, who had been strongly discriminated against by her fellow students and even some teachers described her direct emotional reactions to the experience in the following way:

“I could not go to school for two consecutive weeks. I was so depressed. I only cried all the time. I told myself ‘Ok, that’s it. I got stuck now at the Secondary

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School Level. I will not even be able to get my university entrance diploma. That was the most terrible time ever. I hated myself!”²²

It had especially been the active discrimination of her teachers, one of whom even rejected teaching a girl with a headscarf, which shocked her the most. Like some other young interviewees she had perceived teachers as moral examples and expected them to be more tolerant and accepting of religiously or culturally others than the majority of people. Likewise open discrimination by teachers was especially likely to leave strong negative impression with the students and eventually even lose trust with the educational system and institutions at large.

Adopting Negative Perceptions

Losing trust however proves that there had been an original feeling of trust in the school and its staff, which also points towards an initial feeling of belonging. Someone, who never felt some kind of belonging and maybe never tried to achieve it, does not feel rejected in the same way as someone who perceived him- or herself as an entire part of the society and experienced exclusion thereafter. One young man with a Bosnian background for example, although he was born in Germany, stated that he perceived himself as totally Bosnian and just a guest in Germany. He explained that not being accepted as an entire part of the German society did not make him feel bad. Those however who felt the right to be accepted as Germans and wanted to be treated equally perceived any denial of this right as painful exclusion. To a certain extent therefore the decision to perceive oneself as non-German and focusing on the origin of the parents is a strategy of coping with the discrimination. The self-chosen Bosnian identity cannot be denied and enables a positive self-image, whereas the German identity is denied regularly and therefore less able to give a sense of stability. This way of presenting a positive self-identification is described as the management of damage to the self-concept and the social identity being one of the possible responding aspects to experiences with racism suggested by social psychologists like David Mellor.²³

Even though critical analyses of social discourses and realities was present among the young Muslims interviewed, some also tended to adopt the negative stereotypes about Muslims at least partially and blamed their presumably bad behavior for the negative public image of the whole group. Some thought, that by trying to behave particularly well and teaching other Muslims to show good moral conduct, to become more like “real Muslims” they could fight those negative stereotypes.

“I think you have to understand them also, because they don’t know anything else, than what they see. If we behave badly it is taken as evidence, that Muslims are bad.”²⁴

This however ignores the fact that those stereotypical images are deeply rooted in public images and discourses and are thus more telling about the society which created them than about the Muslims themselves. As large parts of the non-Muslim population in Germany have hardly any contact with Muslims themselves, most of the images about Islam and Muslims are taken from media reports. Consequently even the best behavior of individual Muslims would likely be seen as merely being an exception from the rule and hardly able to change the deep seated negative ideas.

According to Goffman this partial adoption of negative stereotypes about the own group, which he calls “Accepting,” is a crucial aspect of the stigmatized person’s development. It describes the feeling that some of one’s attributes and character traits justify exclusion.

Mellor distinguishes between tasks of coping with racist experiences that serve to prevent personal injury and those that are intended to remediate, prevent or punish racism. The ‘accepting’ according to his framework would be a coping strategy that tries to prevent personal injury instead of remediating racism. The latter could rather be seen in the reactions described in the following chapters.²⁵

Trying to “Correct Mistakes” and Counter Stereotypes

A possible reaction to the perception of presumed mistakes is the “Versuch, diese Fehler zu korrigieren, indem Tätigkeitsbereiche gemeistert werden, von denen man annimmt, dass sie für den Stigmatisierten verschlossen sind”²⁶ (An attempt to correct these mistakes by mastering areas of activity that are presumably closed for the stigmatized person).

This is exemplified when a young Muslim woman interviewee with hijab consciously decides to join the chess group at her school and shows strong ambitions in it, because she believed being good in chess was not something the society thought she as a religious Muslim woman could do. Others chose technical professions and fields of study for the same reason, to prove the stereotype of the Muslim woman as backward and less intelligent wrong. In this case the overlapping and intersection of different reasons of discrimination can be observed well. The young women not only try to counter the stereotypes about Muslims and especially Muslim woman, but also general prejudice about women and their professional choices. Both the chess club and the technical field of study and work are generally perceived in German society to



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Supporters of the PEGIDA movement attend a protest rally on October 5, 2015 in Dresden. The banners read 'Freedom for Germany.

AFP PHOTO / TOBIAS SCHWARZ

be male dominated fields, where only few women can be found. Every woman who enters these fields would potentially feel the need to prove to herself and the people around her, that she can master this field at least as well as any male and thus will most likely become especially ambitious. The young Muslim women, and especially those who are visibly Muslim have to counter these general ideas about women and additionally the strong image about the oppressed and backward Muslim woman who some of them feel is perceived as less intelligent and less prone to make active choices of her own than other women or than Muslim men.

However despite differing reactions to the perceived stigmatization and stereotypes; the partial adoption and acceptance which lead to the attempt to correct the presumed mistakes in oneself and other members of the own group on the one hand, or the attempt to counter negative stereotypes by proving them wrong on the other: it is almost impossible to completely free oneself from the context of the Stigma and to act independently from it.

Acquiring Knowledge as Self-empowerment

Even if the attempt to counter stereotypes somehow gets stuck within the same logic of the Stigma that it tries to counter, it sometimes causes more ambitious and active behavior and the attempt to acquire knowledge about the religion and other fields, which some of my interviewees perceived as positive for their lives. One line of reaction to stereotypical ideas of Islam and Muslims being expressed in school seems to be the attempt to acquire knowledge about the religion in order to be able to successfully counter negative ideas

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of the teachers. Positively meant attempts of educators often perceive Muslim students as experts about Islam and Muslim societies, even though the particular student might not be very religious or knowledgeable about his or her religious or cultural background. The request of the teacher, to give a presentation about something related to Islam or to ones (perceived) country of origin or to explain something related to these issues to the teacher and the class, is then often felt as cornering the student and sometimes results in the attempt to acquire more knowledge about the religion and to be able to fill the image of the expert about Islam in a positive way.

For some of the interviewed students this acquiring of knowledge about Islam was a first step to counter the feeling of helplessness towards the stereotypes that were ascribed to them, because they could start to counter negative ideas even of their teachers, who were otherwise perceived as more knowledgeable and difficult to convince. They thus learned to counter negative images of the religion instead of being helpless victims of the stigmatization. In some cases the acquisition of knowledge also caused the students to turn to the religion and religious communities more intensely at a later point.

On the one hand the interviewed students who had developed into such “experts of Islam” at some point in their school career perceived this as a positive development for both the school and their private lives. On the other hand however some of them confessed that the responsibility they felt with portraying their religion in the right way and correcting possibly wrong images of their teachers, fellow students (Muslim and non-Muslim) and the media, constituted some kind of burden for them.

Religiosity as Resource and Empowerment

In addition to the feeling of empowerment, when being able to successfully counter stereotypical ideas about Islam after acquiring knowledge, the religion also plays another important part for some. It has the potential to provide them with an opportunity to reframe the sometimes destructive and discouraging experiences of exclusion and racism in a positive way and thus empower them.

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Some described, that in their religious understanding they interpret difficult experiences as a kind of test, which can be seen as a distinction by God and thus becomes the opposite of the debasement that is caused by the stigmatization. The young woman, who had been heavily discriminated by her teachers for example, explained it in the following way:

“This task has been given to me by Allah, who told me: ‘You have to pass this, this is your task, I test you with it now’. Due to all the hardships I went through I internalized this and I learned to appreciate everything, all the good and also all the bad. We always say: Behind every bad can be something good, you just have to find it.”²⁷

In fact it seemed that those who could use their religiosity and/or knowledge about the religion as resources (among others) against the discriminatory experiences, managed to cope with them better, than those who had less resources available. Even if some of the more religious students also passed through very difficult times, they seemed to have come out of it stronger and more resilient than before. One of the young men, who had himself acquired a lot of religious knowledge and became very observant, explained that many young Muslims, who don't have a lot of knowledge about the religion but nevertheless identify with it and feel hurt when someone talks badly about Islam or Muslims, reacted to the feeling of helplessness with aggressiveness and supported the religion with aggressive arguments. He explained that helplessness in the face of Islamophobic utterances of their teachers led them to speak about the hereafter in a way that they hoped to get revenge there: “(They say:) ‘We will meet in the Akhira, in the hereafter, just wait what will happen to you there.’ And these arguments make everything more difficult. But if you don't see a way out, you just say anything to get out of the situation. And some even start screaming because they don't find any good arguments and don't know what to say.”²⁸

Another way to deal with the aggression caused by discrimination and the feeling of helplessness was mentioned by another young man, who did martial arts and explained that their teachers helped them to control their aggressive impulses.

It seems as if those Muslim students who had less knowledge about their religion and were less secure in their own identity, were more prone to get confused in their identity by negative utterances about Muslims.

On the other hand those who could make use of their religiosity and knowledge as empowering resources against the discrimination sometimes even managed to not only avoid aggressive behavior, but even to counter attacks with openness and friendliness. They referred to the Islamic ideal of ‘countering evil with good.’²⁹ At least in one case this seemed to have worked well and the relationship between the student and his teacher improved strongly due to the deescalating behavior of the student.

On the one hand the religiosity seems to be a specific reason of discrimination for the young Muslim, reinforcing possible other reasons like ethnic background or social status, especially if the religiosity is practiced openly and/or visibly. On the other hand the religiosity can become an empowering resource against the discriminating experience in certain cases, which helps the young people to counter the helplessness, empower themselves and create a positive identity as Muslims. It should however not be left unmentioned that perceiving discrimination as a test, that has to be overcome, might lead some young people towards not countering the discriminatory and racist treatment and not to seek help against it. It could in the worst case –even though none of my interviewees directly mentioned it– result in excessive demands that the individual directs towards him- or herself, which might especially be a danger if the young person lacks family or community surroundings that can support him or her in this experience and development.

Conclusion

It can be observed with the young Muslim interviewees that they are able to deal with stigmatization and racism if they have more empowering resources at their disposition. Some of these resources, that the young Muslim students could refer to, were not only the relationships with their families, but also the strength and resources that the respective families could refer to, like the social status in the society, the educational resources or the degree of rooting in the surrounding society. If multiple reasons for discrimination come together and mutually reinforce each other –like migration, gender, religion, education or social status– and few empowering resources are available, a positive management of the stigmatization is likewise more difficult than it was for the interviewees of the current research who had received a good school education.

Considering the negative effects of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia that can be witnessed on young Muslims as discussed here, even with comparably multiple resources at their disposal, we can vividly imagine how devastating those experiences could be for young Muslims with few empowering factors and resources. ■

Endnotes

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REKLAM