

# How Discrimination Narratives Resolve Ambiguity: The Case of Islamophobia in Quebec

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## ABSTRACT

Discrimination frequently appears in ambiguous rather than overt forms. How do individuals manage the challenges associated with ambiguous discrimination, such as classifying incidents of negative but ambiguous treatment? Building on studies of microaggressions and perceived discrimination, this article develops an explanation rooted in a novel theory of discrimination narratives. Discrimination narratives express collective beliefs about discrimination's patterns and features, which enable individuals to resolve ambiguity in their personal experiences and expectations. Based on a study of perceived Islamophobia in the Canadian province of Quebec, the article describes one common discrimination narrative and uncovers how Muslim Quebecers use it to 1) classify negative but ambiguous treatment by imputing missing information; (2) direct their attention to social situations they perceive to be high-risk; and (3) adjust to anticipated patterns in discrimination. Implications for research on ambiguity, microaggressions, perceived discrimination, and narratives are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** ambiguity; microaggressions; narratives; perceived discrimination; Islamophobia.

Discrimination frequently and increasingly appears in ambiguous rather than overt forms. This holds true for a wide spectrum of negative treatment ranging from labor market discrimination to quotidian microaggressions (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017; Hall 2017; Quillian 2006; Small and Pager 2020). The ongoing shift towards ambiguity imposes a great deal of uncertainty on individuals who must expect to face discrimination (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Sue 2010). When confronted with potential incidents, individuals must first resolve ambiguity to transform negative treatment into perceived discrimination (Feagin 1991). Moreover, ambiguity complicates efforts to respond or adjust, because counteracting or circumventing discrimination requires information about when and where discrimination is likely to materialize (Lamont et al. 2016). Uncovering how individuals manage the challenges associated with negative but ambiguous treatment thus constitutes an important task for research on discrimination (Small and Pager 2020).

In this article, I develop a novel, micro-sociological explanation of how individuals deal with ambiguous discrimination by combining insights from several distinct sociological literatures. First, research on microaggressions illuminates, especially, the harms of ambiguity, which include rumination, self-doubt, and adverse health outcomes (e.g., Douds and Hout 2020; Eschmann 2021; Johnson et al. 2021; Sue 2010). Those who experience negative but ambiguous treatment thus yearn for certainty

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(Doering, Doering, and Tilcsik 2023), but the microaggressions literature does not explain how individuals can succeed in resolving ambiguity and making definitive classifications. To fill this gap, I draw on the sociology of narrative (Loseke 2007; Polletta 2006; Somers 1994) and associated research on perceived discrimination that provides direction for thinking about narratives and the classification of negative treatment (Beaman 2017; Lamont et al. 2016; Mohatt et al. 2014; Prins et al. 2013). Building on these foundations, I develop the concept of discrimination narratives. Discrimination narratives circulate within marginalized communities and express collective beliefs about discrimination's patterns and features within a given social environment. In doing so, discrimination narratives provide individuals with information they can use to selectively overcome ambiguity and pinpoint discrimination in their personal experiences, as well as society overall. Discrimination narratives, I argue, deeply shape perception, experience, and behavior.

To examine discrimination narratives and how individuals use them to resolve ambiguity, I focus on ambiguous manifestations of Islamophobia (Cainkar 2009; Garner and Selod 2015; Hall 2017). Specifically, I draw on 41 in-depth interviews and participant observations that detail Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia in the Canadian province of Quebec (see also Doering and Peker 2022; Eid 2012; Rousseau 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme 2018). The Quebec case is well-suited for studying how individuals navigate the challenges that ambiguous discrimination poses. While explicit Islamophobia is not socially accepted, many Quebecers resent Muslims' purportedly excessive religiosity, which clashes with French Quebec's identity as a secular and post-religious nation (Zubrzycki 2016). The wearing of religious clothing in public is widely viewed as a sign of failed immigrant integration and has triggered legislative efforts to suppress such practices (Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). Especially Muslim women wearing the hijab and niqab report facing hostility in public (Montpetit 2019). Such altercations are often brief and involve strangers, which can make it difficult to attribute Islamophobia because incidents frequently remain ambiguous.

I find that many Muslim Quebecers use a discrimination narrative—which is disseminated through social networks and during community events—that blames political leaders for inciting Islamophobia. According to this narrative, politicians who propose restricting religious expression encourage French Quebecers to target Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab. Visibly Muslim women and those who accompany them thus scrutinize public interactions with French Quebecers, especially during periods of tense political agitation. When facing situations that fit the discrimination narrative, many Muslim Quebecers classify negative treatment as Islamophobia even in the absence of overt references to religion, ethnicity, or race. Moreover, Muslims draw on the discrimination narrative to selectively adjust their behavior and self-presentation by, for example, avoiding certain spaces or downplaying their religious identities at particular times. In short, the narrative provides a basis for classification and action under conditions of uncertainty, enabling individuals to overcome the paralysis and brooding that is so frequently associated with negative but ambiguous treatment (Doering et al. 2023; Sue 2010).

This article advances scholarship on ambiguity, narratives, microaggressions, and perceived discrimination. First and foremost, it engages and extends existing research on discrimination and microaggressions, which provides promising directions for studying ambiguous discrimination without fully explaining how individuals can resolve ambiguity. The article complements these literatures by developing the concept of discrimination narratives and showing how such narratives provide information about discrimination's patterns that enable individuals to interpret their social experience and plan their behavior. While discrimination narratives necessarily differ across groups and the specific findings from Quebec therefore cannot be generalized, scholarly findings as well as familiar cultural tropes indicate that such narratives exist and shape classification in other social contexts. Moreover, the concept of discrimination narratives provides opportunities for linking studies of discrimination and microaggressions to scholarship on social networks and political sociology, which may help to generate novel insights in these fields. I further develop these conclusions and implications in the discussion section.

## AMBIGUITY AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF NEGATIVE TREATMENT

Research on ethnoracial discrimination is thriving in sociology (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Reskin 2012; Small and Pager 2020), and race scholarship widely acknowledges an ongoing shift from overt to subtle—and therefore often ambiguous—discrimination (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2003;

Hall 2017). For potential victims of discrimination, this means that negative treatment must first be classified as discrimination to become legible as such. While all social interactions require classification and interpretation (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Schütz 1967), negative and ambiguous treatment poses a particularly acute challenge, because classification has substantial social and emotional ramifications while taking place in the absence of definitive cues.

Especially microaggressions research has revealed ambiguity's prevalence and importance in people's encounters, defining microaggressions as "racial slights, often subtle, that [serve] as markers of belonging" (Dominguez and Embrick 2020:3). While not all microaggressions are ambiguous, many of them are (Jones 2022; Sue 2010). In relation to ambiguous microaggressions, scholars emphasize the cognitive and emotional toll that ambiguity has for microaggressions' victims, who face the labor of making sense of their experiences, in addition to coping with the indignities they have suffered (Ayala and Chalupa Young 2022; Ballinas 2017; Eschmann 2021; Johnson et al. 2021; Sue 2010). For instance, Jones (2022:747) reports that Black women showed a continual "inclination to question the potential racial undertones" of negative situations they had encountered. The corresponding uncertainty often paralyzes individuals and detrimentally affects their physical and mental health (Douds and Hout 2020; Sue 2010). In describing ambiguous incidents and their harmful effects, microaggressions research has greatly advanced scholarly understanding of racism's contemporary manifestations.

When seeking to explain how individuals overcome ambiguity and classify negative treatment as discrimination, some microaggressions research points to the role of ethnoracial peer groups that can provide collective affirmation (Eschmann 2021; Jones 2022; Lewis et al. 2012). Rooting classification in groups is plausible and also consistent with microsociological theory (Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1967), but the account remains incomplete. A peer group explanation relocates the puzzle of classification from the level of the individual to the group—but how do groups overcome ambiguity and classify incidents as discrimination? To improve this explanation, I draw on research that points to the importance of narratives for perceived discrimination.

A small but growing body of work indicates that narratives shape how members of marginalized groups perceive discrimination (Beaman 2017; Lamont et al. 2016; Mohatt et al. 2014; Prins et al. 2013). For instance, Beaman (2017) argues that narratives circulating within French Maghrebin communities encourage young Maghrebins to view themselves "as racial and ethnic minorities within France... preparing them for the obstacles they will face" (Beaman 2017:34). Similarly, Lamont et al. (2016) suggest that narratives influence how individuals perceive and respond to negative treatment, although they do not show how, precisely, this happens. Pertinent narratives have been found to circulate widely within ethnoracial communities (Cornell 2000; Mohatt et al. 2014; Prins et al. 2013; Skadegård and Horst 2021).

A focus on narratives can complement and strengthen microaggression scholarship's emphasis on peer groups as sites in which incidents are classified and ambiguity is resolved. After all, individuals frequently learn, disseminate, and collectively apply narratives in group settings (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2007; Prins et al. 2013). In the following section, I introduce the novel concept of discrimination narratives, which helps explain how individuals navigate contexts in which discrimination is presumably frequent but mainly appears in ambiguous forms.

## DISCRIMINATION NARRATIVES

The concept of narratives<sup>1</sup> allows scholars to trace how individuals interpret their social experience (Bruner 2004; Gergen 1994; Loseke 2007; Somers 1994), a sociological task that emerges out of social phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Schütz 1967). Narratives are rhetorical structures that contain characters and events, which they connect through plot, a logic that ascribes meaning to these characters and events (Bruner 2004; Gergen 1994; Loseke 2007; McAdams 2001; Polletta 2006). Some narratives are elaborate and

<sup>1</sup> As tools of interpretation that shape meaning-making, narratives resemble schemas and frames. However, narratives circulate among people through verbal communication and influence meaning-making through conscious use (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2007), while schemas and frames are widely taken to operate preconsciously, meaning that individuals cannot necessarily articulate them (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Wood et al. 2018). Narrative's emphasis on conscious meaning-making and social dissemination provides a better fit with this study's methodology and findings than existing alternatives.

lengthy, but narratives can also be concise. Polletta (2006:9) provides an example of a maximally concise narrative as “the king died and then the queen died of grief,” with “of grief” providing a minimum amount of plot that links these events and makes them meaningful. Moreover, narratives usually include an emotional and normative evaluation of the events they describe (Polletta (2006).

People use narratives to ascribe meaning to their past, present, and anticipated experiences (Bruner 2004; Gergen 1994; McAdams 2001; Somers 1994). Depending on their meaning-making needs, they may rely on narratives that revolve around personal experiences such as conversion or incarceration (DeGloma 2014; Harding et al. 2017) but also on narratives that are rooted in their belonging to social classes or ethnoracial groups (Cornell 2000; Polletta 2006; Somers 1994). Such narratives are collective rather than individual and flow through the groups in question (Loseke 2007; Mohatt et al. 2014). In this article, I focus on discrimination narratives, one type of collective narratives.

I define discrimination narratives as rhetorical structures that communicate collective beliefs about discrimination’s patterns and features within a given social environment. Discrimination narratives emerge and evolve as group members share and discuss experiences about negative treatment in group settings. They provide answers to some or all of the following questions: Who faces discrimination? What kinds of discrimination does one have to expect? When, where, and why does discrimination occur? Who are the likely perpetrators and how does one recognize them? Discrimination narratives are always specific to the group, social environment, and historical period in question. Moreover, different and even competing discrimination narratives may exist within a group at any time. However, all discrimination narratives provide blueprints for individuals to interpret personal experiences, plan their behavior, and set their expectations about the future.

The concept of discrimination narratives is new, but it is consistent with studies arguing that narratives shape perceived discrimination (Beaman 2017; Lamont et al. 2016; Mohatt et al. 2014; Prins et al. 2013). It is also consistent with microaggression scholarship’s focus on group settings (Eschmann 2021; Jones 2022; Lewis et al. 2012), because it is here that discrimination narratives are shared and learned. Additionally, the concept of discrimination narratives resonates with phenomena that many race scholars will recognize. For instance, “the talk” signifies a conversation during which Black parents impart narratives about forms of discrimination that involve police officers and other persons of authority (Whitaker and Snell 2016). Likewise, as a narrative character that spread on social media, “Karen” describes a type of person that non-White Americans must expect to face—a White woman whose sense of entitlement implies that her needs must always take precedence, no matter what costs or dangers this may entail for non-White people (Goldblatt 2020). Both “the talk” and “Karen” underscore the prevalence and importance of discrimination narratives as well as the characters and events they contain.

In the findings section, I describe one discrimination narrative that circulates among Muslim Quebecers and analyze how group members use it in practice. Specifically, I find that discrimination narratives help individuals (1) impute missing information and thereby classify negative but ambiguous treatment as discrimination, (2) guide their attention to high-risk situations, and (3) adjust their behavior to limit their exposure to discrimination.

## THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN QUEBEC

Originally colonized by French settlers, Quebec is a primarily francophone province that many French Quebecers regard as a distinct nation within Canada (Breton 2005). Quebec’s national identity is deeply tied to secularism. Until the 1960s, Quebec was dominated by an anglophone elite but also the Catholic Church, which controlled many public services and promoted conservative social values and deference to the existing power structure (Zubrzycki 2016). In the 1960s, a French-nationalist movement gained control of the state, secularizing public services and shifting power to French Quebecers. Having overthrown the influence of the Catholic Church, many French Quebecers view Quebec as a secular and post-religious nation (Zubrzycki 2016).

Muslims evoke negative associations among some Quebecers (Wilkins-Laflamme 2018), especially because many of them publicly express their faith, which clashes with French Quebecers’ proud embrace of secularism. The Muslim community’s growing size and visibility have led to complaints about Muslims’ religious practices and purported unwillingness to integrate (Jamil and Rousseau 2012; Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). Correspondingly, Muslims face discrimination in the labor

market and public institutions (Eid 2012; Oueslati, Labelle, and Antonius 2006). Hate crimes have also been documented. Most notably, in 2017, a 28-year-old French Quebecer engaged in a shooting rampage at Quebec City's Centre Islamique mosque, killing six worshippers.

Provincial politicians have drawn on public resentment by promising to curtail the public expression of religion. Since 2010, two secularist policies that ban religious clothing in certain public contexts have been passed into law; two more were hotly debated without ultimately being implemented (for details, see Doering and Peker 2022; Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). In 2019, the provincial government also established a “values test” for immigrants that prominently features questions about secularism and the “proper” role of religion in public. As I show below, Muslim Quebecers tend to blame politicians for aggravating Islamophobia by pursuing these policies.

Quebec thus constitutes a difficult social context for Muslims, especially for women who wear religious clothing and thereby violate many Quebecers' aversion to religion in public. Overt Islamophobia is, nevertheless, socially taboo. Expressing overt Islamophobia has, for example, forced politicians to withdraw their candidacies during electoral campaigns (Visser 2015). While Islamophobic sentiments are widespread (Wilkins-Laflamme 2018), their expression thus tends to remain muted or covert. For Muslim Quebecers, it is a context that is ripe with ambiguity.

## DATA AND METHODS

This article draws on 41 in-depth interviews and approximately 80 hours of participant observation. The data were collected between summer 2017 and winter 2021 in the Montreal metropolitan area, where 90 percent of Muslim Quebecers live. The study was designed to examine Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia. Its more specific focus on narratives and classification under conditions of ambiguity emerged abductively (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Early results underscored the predominance of ambiguous (rather than overt) discrimination but also revealed a striking pattern of participants classifying ambiguous encounters as Islamophobia when the latter occurred during periods of secularist politics. This suggested the existence of a collective tool of meaning-making—a discrimination narrative—which I then sought to describe and embed in existing theories of discrimination and microaggressions.

As a White and non-Muslim researcher, I depended on community support to conduct this study. Before commencing research on the topic, I participated in several initiatives and protests for the rights of Muslims in Quebec. In the process, I became acquainted with two well-connected activists. When I launched this project, their support provided the entry point for recruiting interviewees and connecting with community organizations, such as mosques, student associations, and advocacy groups. These organizations advertised my recruitment efforts and generated opportunities for participant observation. While my initial community ties emerged through activism, I paused my political involvement to avoid priming interviewees and people I encountered during fieldwork. I also did not mention my political stance or Islamophobia when introducing the study but rather described it as an effort to better understand the views and experiences of Muslim Quebecers.

I used a variety of recruitment tools, including purposive sampling through community contacts (Weiss 1995), snowball sampling, and social media posts. I worked to ensure that the participant pool extended beyond the politically involved individuals my activist contacts primarily knew. Aside from political involvement, I sought out variation in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, religiosity, and social class. For an overview of interview participants, see Table 1. In total, 41 interviews were conducted with 34 Muslim Quebecers (19 women and 15 men). Seven participants were re-interviewed, because a change in their experience of Islamophobia over the duration of the study seemed plausible. These participants were primarily recent immigrants whose knowledge and experience of Quebec was quite limited during the first interview. Interviews were conducted in English or French depending on participants' preferences. The median interview length was 75 minutes. Respondents were asked about their biographical background, religious and political practices, and their views and experiences of Islamophobia.

Conducting participant observation, I observed community gatherings, activist group meetings, protests, and other events organized by the Muslim community in Montreal. These observations were crucial, because they allowed me to watch and listen as the discrimination narrative

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Occupation	Place of birth	Status in Canada	Religious clothing	Discr. narrative
Abdul	39	IT support staff	Tunisia	Citizen	/	Salient
Adam	27	Retail clerk	Lebanon	Citizen	/	Rejects narr.
Aliya	20	Undergrad student	Canada (parents: Ethiopia)	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Basma	23	Grad student	Canada (parents: Pakistan)	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Fariha	34	Writer	Canada (parents: Pakistan)	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Hafsa	25	Mosque staff	Canada (parents: Bangladesh)	Citizen	Niqab	Salient
Hedi	46	High school teacher	Tunisia	Citizen	/	Salient
Hossam	33	Real estate agent	Algeria	Permanent resident	/	Salient
Ibsham	21	Undergrad student	USA (parents: Palestine)	Study permit	/	Does not know narr.
Jafar	50	Retail clerk	Tunisia	Citizen	/	Salient
Kareem	71	Machinist (retired)	Egypt	Citizen	/	Rejects narr.
Khadija	28	Corporate office staff	Canada (parents: Malaysia)	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Lina	20	Undergrad student	Jordan	Study permit	Hijab	Salient
Lulwa	48	Language instructor	Lebanon	Permanent resident	/	Rejects narr.
Maheen	23	HR staff	Canada (parents: Morocco)	Citizen	/	Salient
Mariam	33	Daycare staff	Somalia	Citizen	Hijab (now removed)	Salient
Michel	33	Engineer	France (White convert to Islam)	Citizen	/	Salient
Mohamed	64	Travel agent	Egypt	Citizen	/	Salient
Muhammad	40	Bank staff	Morocco	Citizen	/	Salient
Nadia	36	High school teacher	Pakistan	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Naila	23	Undergrad student	Algeria	Citizen	/	Salient
Noha	53	Daycare staff	Lebanon	Permanent resident	Hijab	Does not know narr.
Ola	41	Lab assistant	Egypt	Citizen	Hijab (now removed)	Salient
Rami	24	Retail clerk	Canada (parents: Yemen)	Citizen	/	Salient
Samaa	70	Translator (retired)	Egypt	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Sami	36	IT support staff	Canada (White convert to Islam)	Citizen	/	Salient
Sara	29	Child therapist	Iraq	Citizen	Hijab	Salient

Table 1. Continued

Name	Age	Occupation	Place of birth	Status in Canada	Religious clothing	Discr. narrative
Sarah	18	Trade school student	Canada (parents: Bangladesh)	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Sofia	27	Grad student	Lebanon	Study permit	/	Does not know narr.
Touqad	79	Engineer (retired)	India	Citizen	/	Salient
Uzma	59	Language instructor	Morocco	Citizen	Hijab	Salient
Wael	41	Engineer	Morocco	Citizen	/	Salient
Wahid	31	Grad student	Bangladesh	Study permit	/	Does not know narr.
Zeinab	38	Personal coach	USA (African American)	Work permit	Hijab	Does not know narr.

materialized in-situ when Muslims invoked and discussed it (see also [Prins et al. 2013](#)). After each event, I wrote up detailed field notes that I used to complement the interview data. I also read, collected, and analyzed media contributions by and about Muslims in Quebec in the local media.

I coded the interview transcripts, field notes, and supplementary media data with the help of qualitative data analysis software. Searching the data for patterns in how individuals talked about Islamophobia in Quebec, I wrote analytic memos that ultimately yielded a description of the discrimination narrative. Moreover, by examining specifically how participants navigated the challenges associated with ambiguity, I identified three practical uses of the discrimination narrative for resolving ambiguity, which I describe below.

## FINDINGS

As a first step, I describe a discrimination narrative that circulated widely among Muslim Quebecers. This narrative provided study participants with information about Islamophobia that they could use for resolving ambiguity. In three subsequent sections, I show how study participants relied on the narrative to (1) classify incidents of negative treatment, (2) direct their attention, and (3) adjust to discrimination under conditions of widespread ambiguity. In those sections, I focus especially on the experiences of women wearing the hijab or niqab, because they reported the bulk of negative but ambiguous encounters.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, due to the article's goal of understanding classification under conditions of ambiguity, I do not discuss overt incidents of discrimination, which several study participants also reported.<sup>3</sup>

### The Discrimination Narrative

Throughout my fieldwork, I continually encountered a narrative that explained and described Islamophobia in Quebec. Study participants shared this narrative during interviews and within field sites I observed. As is true for collective narratives in general, specific individuals expressed the

<sup>2</sup> Insofar as men (and women who did not wear religious clothing) reported ambiguous incidents, they mainly talked about interactions they had observed while accompanying friends or family members who did wear religious clothing. Notably, male participants rarely mentioned the forms of mistreatment that US research frequently finds among Muslim men, such as aggressive scrutiny in the context of air travel ([Cainkar 2009](#); [Naderi 2018](#); [Selod 2018](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Five women and two men reported encountering overt incidents, such as being called a "terrorist" or being told to "go back to your country." While harmful and important, such incidents require little interpretive work for classifying them as Islamophobic and I therefore do not discuss them.

narrative in slightly different ways, using their own words or emphasizing some aspects more than others (Prins et al. 2013). Indicating the narrative's status as a collective and highly salient tool of interpretation (Cornell 2000; Somers 1994), however, its fundamental elements were strikingly consistent across study participants, except for eight individuals I discuss at the end of this section.

The narrative asserted a link between cynical politicians and negative incidents that Muslims encountered in their everyday lives. By repeatedly demanding secularist policies that would restrict religious symbols in public, politicians purportedly encouraged impressionable Quebecers to insult or attack Muslims wearing such symbols. The narrative thus comprised archetypal narrative characters (Bruner 2004; Gergen 1994): villains (politicians), fools (manipulable Quebecers), and scapegoats (Muslims). Moreover, the narrative made negative personal experiences meaningful by rooting them in political evil, a common trope in collective narratives (Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). For example, during one interview, 33-year-old Hossam said that “many [Islamophobic] incidents happen to people on the bus, in the metro, in cafés” when politicians discuss secularist policies. He explained that “usually, racist people don't have the courage to express their racism,” but that divisive politicians encourage them to do so. A woman named Fariha also expressed this link between politicians and negative everyday encounters, saying that “many Quebecers don't know what Muslims are all about. It depends [on] what our government and elected officials are saying. If they're preaching fear of the other, then, yeah, it makes them [Quebecers] wary, so that's when you see more judgmental looks.”

The discrimination narrative was often invoked in public discourse, which underscored its collective character and dissemination through interpersonal communication and certain media outlets (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2007). For example, a newspaper opinion piece written by a community activist suggested that Bill 21, the most recent secularist policy, had “been taken by some people as permission to hurl insults at fellow citizens” (Naqvi-Mohamed 2018). Speeches and signs at a subsequent protest linked the political leaders who had fielded the policy to Islamophobic incidents. One sign described Bill 21 as “a poisonous fruit that makes people sick [with racism].” Similarly, at a mosque event in 2017, attendees discussed a proposed secularist policy and its harmful effects, predicting an uptick in interpersonal aggression that women wearing religious symbols would now have to endure. As one man said, “The politicians here, they always throw the Muslim community under the bus.”

The discrimination narrative communicated collective beliefs about Islamophobia's patterns in Quebec. Since political agitation was seen as stoking Islamophobia, the narrative suggested that hostility peaked during periods of divisive political debates. Moreover, the narrative identified French Quebecers (rather than anglophones or non-Muslim immigrants) as likely perpetrators, because messages condemning religious expression were seen as resonating particularly with French Quebecois nationalism. Fleshing out the description of likely perpetrators, some participants characterized the people who would confront Muslims as uneducated or rural, describing them as “really simple people,” “closet racists,” and “people living in very White worlds who don't know anything and drink up the propaganda.” The discrimination narrative also indicated specific spaces and forms in which Islamophobia would materialize. Since Islamophobes were assumed to have no personal relationships with Muslims, they would encounter Muslims primarily in public settings: stores, the subway, parks, and so on. When study participants described the types of discrimination and hostility they expected perpetrators to commit, they therefore talked about insults and physical altercations like shoving or headscarf-pulling that could easily occur when strangers encountered each other in public. Finally, the narrative identified women wearing the headscarf or veil as likely victims, because they were especially identifiable as practicing Muslims and wore the religious symbols that politicians were stigmatizing.

Not everyone I encountered knew or agreed with the discrimination narrative. Five immigrant interviewees were unfamiliar with Quebec's politics and did not link politics to Islamophobic encounters. Having arrived in Quebec relatively recently, these participants might not have had many opportunities to learn the discrimination narrative. Three more interviewees (two men and one woman who did not wear the hijab) knew the narrative but rejected it, arguing instead that some Muslims exaggerated the pervasiveness of political hostility and Islamophobia. However, all other interviewees as well as most people I encountered in fieldwork settings knew and affirmed the discrimination narrative. In the following sections, I discuss how study participants used the narrative to resolve ambiguity.



### Classifying Ambiguous Incidents as Discrimination

Especially the female study participants reported a host of personal encounters with Islamophobia. To classify these incidents as such, however, they typically had to overcome ambiguity. They did so by drawing on the discrimination narrative to impute missing information when the incidents in question featured the kinds of people, places, and times the discrimination narrative linked to discrimination. Insofar as incidents occurred in public interactions with francophone strangers during periods of divisive politics, participants both noticed negative treatment and classified it as Islamophobia.

Several participants reported hostile utterances in public. However, the utterances' language content often remained unclear because they were either muttered in passing or shouted from a distance, making them difficult to understand. Moreover, utterances were usually delivered in heavily accented French, which many participants could barely decipher. One incident of this kind happened to Basma, a 23-year-old law student, who wore the hijab and had been born in Montreal to parents of Pakistani descent. Basma had not personally encountered Islamophobia until 2017, when Quebec politicians debated and eventually passed Bill 62, which prohibits veiling one's face in certain public contexts. Basma said, "Bill 62 was a turning point for me, in particular after an incident that happened to me in Montreal." One rainy day, Basma was walking to campus and had nearly reached the law school when she heard a man screaming:

Actually, I didn't know at first if he was screaming at me, I just heard, like, a violent outburst. I couldn't make out what he was saying—it was raining and there were cars running by. And when I turned around, I knew he was talking to me. Again, I couldn't make out what he was saying. It was a very thick accent, it was I think a Quebecois accent—from what I understood—and it was in French. I crossed the street, and I kept looking back because I was very confused that this was actually happening. It didn't feel right.

Basma interpreted this incident as Islamophobic aggression but had to overcome ambiguity to do so. First, she had to decide that the man was shouting at her. She also did not know *what* the man was shouting due to his accent as well as ambient noise. And she had to attribute the man's outburst to her religious identity, made visible by her hijab. How did she do so? After Basma finished describing the incident during our interview, she emphasized its occurrence during a period of divisive politics. She said, "Beyond the politics, Bill 62 has a great impact on people day-to-day. That incident made me realize that even if I don't want to engage, I'm part of this discussion [about religious rights], just by being a Muslim woman." In keeping with the discrimination narrative, Basma established a link between the charged political context and her personal encounter on a Montreal sidewalk. While ambiguous, her encounter seamlessly fit the discrimination narrative: a French Quebecer with a heavy accent yelled at her, a hijab-wearing woman, in a public space while politicians were calling for banning religious symbols in public settings. Against this backdrop, Basma overcame the incident's ambiguity and classified it as Islamophobia.

Even when study participants could make out what strangers said to them, they still faced ambiguity when those comments did not reference Islam. Aliya, who had been born in Canada to Ethiopian parents, said that, during the 2017 debate over Bill 62, "There have been insults on the street, or on the bus, or whatever. That is what people experience quite commonly, especially if you are a woman." When asked for an example, Aliya said: "Like, one time it was just 'tabarnak.' Yeah, so it's just like that. Sometimes, I haven't caught it, it's just fleeting... trying to leave the metro. I have not always heard what they say, but people say something." Like other participants, Aliya frequently did not understand strangers' muttered comments and therefore had to infer that they had been insults. The one time she had understood a comment, it was the French-Quebecois expletive "tabarnak" (from "tabernacle"), which deploys Christian terminology for blasphemous use. Saying "tabarnak!" as a one-word utterance communicates strong displeasure and could be translated as saying "fuck that!" The cursing person's anger was therefore easy to discern, but the anger's reference point remained unclear and had to be imputed. Within the political context of Bill 62, however, Aliya identified her hijab as the target of the man's anger.

Most women wearing the headscarf also reported incidents of hostile staring. Such incidents inherently entail a great deal of ambiguity—whether extended eye contact is to be classified as hostile

staring depends in part on the beholder. Ola, a 41-year-old-woman, had migrated from her native Egypt to Quebec in 2009. During the 2013–2014 debate over the so-called “Quebec Charter of Values,” which would have banned public employees from wearing religious symbols, Ola felt unwelcome because she wore the hijab. One time, Ola was waiting for a bus, when she noticed a person looking at her from across the street: “He was looking at me in very bad anger. And I felt he’s going to come and hit me at some point or pull the hijab off my head [takes a deep breath]. And I don’t know if he was going to do that or not, but he was looking with all this anger, so I just got on [the next] bus and left.” Ola interpreted this incident by drawing on the discrimination narrative’s central tenet: “Politicians, they play with the feelings of very simple Quebecers.” As a result, Ola said, “people had a problem with my appearance, with wearing [the] hijab.” Like other participants, Ola used the discrimination narrative’s linkage between divisive politics and negative encounters to classify her personal experiences.

Another participant, Maheen, reported incidents of rude treatment as well as staring. Maheen did not personally feel targeted, because she did not wear the hijab, but perceived discrimination and hostility when accompanying her hijab-wearing mother. In accordance with the discrimination narrative, she viewed these incidents as flowing from divisive politics: “It’s especially since this Bill 21, last year [2019] and this year [2020]. It’s horrible to see your mother, like... scared to get out of the house and to be herself. It’s not easy for a lot of women. The looks that people give her! It’s unbearable, honestly.” In addition to hostile looks, Maheen reported rude treatment. She said:

The people, they’re mean to my Mom. The cashiers, they give us attitude for nothing. Sometimes they even do it on purpose, to make us wait longer or to create problems. And my Mom, me and my Mom, we always stay calm, but it’s, like, it’s clear.

Like staring, rude or slow treatment is suffused with ambiguity—in the absence of references to Islam, it remains unclear why and possibly even *whether* a cashier is intentionally making one wait. However, Maheen attributed intent (“on purpose”) to the cashier’s behavior, which transforms bad service into an aggressive act. Once more, Maheen’s main cue for doing so was the incident’s occurrence during a period of divisive politics. She noted that her mother eventually adjusted to avoid discriminatory treatment during this period. As Maheen said, her mother “would even sometimes wear her hijab a certain way so that people wouldn’t notice it. When the debates about Bill 21 were going on.” The discrimination narrative, which highlighted the impact of divisive politics on Muslims’ everyday experience, thus profoundly shaped Maheen’s family’s experience and behavior.

In sum, participants used the discrimination narrative to classify ambiguous encounters as discrimination by imputing missing information. To perceive Islamophobia, strangers’ actions—including eye contact, indistinct utterances, and gestures—had to be interpreted as intentional, hostile behavior and then attributed to the wearing of religious symbols. As ethnomethodologists have long argued, social actions carry a host of potential meanings from which observers have to select (Garfinkel 1967; Schütz 1967). The discrimination narrative aided in this task by describing and explaining Islamophobia’s patterns and thereby enabling Muslims to situate their experiences in this larger context. Insofar as incidents featured public encounters with francophone strangers during periods of divisive politics, participants tended to notice negative treatment and classify it as discrimination. Under these circumstances, participants attributed motives or intent to their counterparts to render their actions meaningful as expressions of Islamophobia (Blum and McHugh 1971; Mills 1940).

### Guiding One’s Attention

In social settings where discrimination frequently remains ambiguous, individuals must scrutinize their environment for signs that discrimination is occurring or about to occur. Especially in urban environments, however, individuals can only ever devote their full attention to some of their social encounters, because remaining fully attentive throughout all encounters is overly taxing and interrupts the necessary flow of everyday life (Garfinkel 1967; Rawls and Duck 2020; Schütz 1967). By flagging certain places, times, and people as high-risk, discrimination narratives enable individuals to direct their attention to some situations while disregarding others. For the case at

hand, the discrimination narrative encouraged Muslim Quebecers to closely monitor public encounters with French Quebecers during periods of tense political debate over religion and immigrant integration.

Khadija's case shows the power that discrimination narratives can have in guiding a person's attention. Khadija was a 28-year-old woman who wore a headscarf. Her case was unusual—unlike other participants wearing the headscarf, she had not yet personally experienced an Islamophobic incident. However, Khadija was fully expecting to face Islamophobia sooner or later. When I interviewed her in 2017, several months after Bill 62 had been passed, she said:

When I am downtown, I feel safe, there are a lot of Muslims. But if am walking somewhere where there are a lot of—I don't know if I am allowed to say it—Quebecois [French Quebecers], I would not feel safe.... In the back of their mind, I always feel like they are judging me. I feel like I can just know what they are thinking just by how they look at me. It is usually older men who are, like [continues in French], "Why are you wearing that? Take it off or go back to your country! I bet she doesn't even speak French!" [Resumes in English] I am thankful that I have never gotten those kinds of comments.

Since Khadija had never experienced such comments herself, I asked how she knew that such an incident might happen to her. She said she knew "through stories" she heard from community members. Those stories included information about perpetrators, their actions, and the times and places where discrimination had occurred. Other participants also indicated that the discrimination narrative was frequently invoked in their social circles. Nadia, a high school teacher, said that this happened so often that she sometimes had to ignore it to maintain her mental well-being:

In my community, it is always a balance between believing in conspiracies and trying to live your life being totally oblivious. I can't be oblivious and say there is no racism. But I also don't want to be scared into thinking that every single person who cuts me off on the road did it because I wear a hijab. I can't do that either.

The discrimination narrative thus percolated through participants' social networks and influenced when and where they paid particular attention to potentially facing discrimination. As in Khadija's case, that applied even to individuals who had not knowingly faced Islamophobia so far. This highlights the collective nature of respondents' beliefs about Islamophobia's patterns. When deciding which situations were high-risk and needed to be scrutinized, Muslim Quebecers drew not only on personal experience but also on the collective information the discrimination narrative provided.

### Adjusting to Discrimination

The discrimination narrative also enabled Muslim Quebecers to resolve ambiguity in order to plan their behavior and self-presentation. People who must expect to face discrimination may wish to take measures to reduce their exposure or even ready themselves for contesting it (Kaufman and Niner 2019; Lamont et al. 2016; Naderi 2018). Inhabiting environments in which discrimination frequently occurs in ambiguous forms, they lack the necessary information for doing so, but discrimination narratives provide this information and thus make adjusting to discrimination possible. I here focus specifically on evasive measures of changing routines or self-presentations with the goal of reducing one's exposure to discrimination and hostility. Some participants also responded to discrimination in different ways, such as engaging in activism. For reasons of space, I discuss the entire range of responses elsewhere (Doering and Peker 2022).

The discrimination narrative warned Muslims specifically about rural Quebecers who were purportedly less cosmopolitan and educated and therefore assumed to be receptive to hostile political messages about Islam. Participants reported avoiding travel outside of Montreal whenever politicians debated secularist restrictions. If they could not avoid travelling, they sometimes took protective measures. For completing her master's degree in child psychology, Sara had to travel through rural towns during the debate over the "Quebec Charter of Values" in 2014. Sara needed to do home visits and interview adults about parenting practices. She said:

This was in 2014! Things were really, really difficult, and people were really judgmental. And it [the research] was in [rural] Quebec, not in Montreal. So I was debating: “Should I go with my hijab? I don’t know, like, what if they refuse to talk to me?” And I really needed those interviews! So, yeah, I took it [the hijab] off. I did it out of protection. I’m not saying that the parents would have, like, hurt me—of course not, they’re parents—but I didn’t want this to affect my research and my degree.

Using the discrimination narrative, Sara thus predicted that Islamophobic hostility throughout rural Quebec would be so prevalent during this period of divisive politics that she needed to avoid discrimination by temporarily removing her hijab.

Maheen’s mother also disguised her religious identity when leaving Montreal. As described further above, Maheen witnessed her mother facing rude treatment and hostile looks in Montreal after a secularist policy was passed. Maheen said that her mother regularly disguised her headscarf during this time, especially when leaving the city, because she anticipated even more hostility outside of Montreal: “When she [Maheen’s mother] goes to Mont Tremblant [a skiing destination], she always wants to wear a hat on top of her hijab, because she says there’s a lot of French Quebecers there.” Both Sara and Maheen’s mother thus drew on the discrimination narrative’s portrayal of likely perpetrators (francophone strangers), time periods (debates over divisive policies), and spaces (here: rural Quebec) of Islamophobia to reduce their personal exposure by temporarily removing or disguising their headscarves.

As this section shows, the discrimination narrative facilitated adaptive behavior by resolving uncertainty about when, where, and how discrimination occurs. Participants avoided travelling outside of Montreal during periods of heightened political debate, because they believed rural Quebecers to be particularly receptive to divisive politics. When nonetheless leaving the city during those periods, female participants reported removing or disguising their headscarves to downplay their religious identities. The discrimination narrative thus shaped more than classification and experience: by disseminating collective beliefs about Islamophobia’s patterns and features, the narrative also generated behaviors and presentations of self (Goffman 1959) that were designed to proactively reduce exposure to discrimination.

## DISCUSSION

Discrimination frequently materializes in ambiguous forms, making it challenging for individuals to classify, anticipate, and respond to negative treatment (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hall 2017). At the same time, lingering uncertainty has substantial emotional and cognitive costs as individuals struggle to make sense of their experiences and plan their behavior (Doering et al. 2023; Douds and Hout 2020; Sue 2010). How do individuals avoid paralysis and manage the challenges associated with ambiguous discrimination? This article argues that individuals do so by relying on discrimination narratives, which circulate within minority communities and disseminate shared beliefs about discrimination’s patterns and features. Individuals use the information these narratives contain as a blueprint for resolving ambiguity and locating discrimination in their personal experiences and society overall.

My explanation of classification under conditions of ambiguity builds on but also extends existing research on microaggressions and perceived discrimination. Microaggressions scholarship emphasizes ambiguous discrimination’s prevalence as well as its emotional and cognitive toll (Eschmann 2021; Jones 2022; Lewis et al. 2012), but it does not fully explain how individuals can classify incidents as discrimination despite their ambiguity. Narrative sociology and related contributions to the study of perceived discrimination complement this work by centering interpretation and its embeddedness in communities (Beaman 2017; Cornell 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Lamont et al. 2016; Loseke 2007; Prins et al. 2013). The concept of discrimination narratives combines insights from both literatures and enables scholars to trace how individuals navigate the practical challenges that are associated with ambiguous discrimination.

Based on research conducted among Muslims in Quebec, this article describes one discrimination narrative and shows how Muslims use it to resolve ambiguity. Specifically, this narrative suggests that politicians generate Islamophobic encounters by demanding policies that activate some Quebecers’

hostility towards public displays of religion. The narrative communicates collective beliefs about the specific times, perpetrators, and spaces that purportedly correlate with Islamophobic encounters. Muslims use this information to 1) classify incidents of negative treatment as discrimination, 2) direct their attention to contexts in which they believe discrimination to be likely, and 3) adjust their behavior and self-presentation in ways that seek to reduce their exposure to discrimination. Accordingly, discrimination narratives substantially influence individual experience and behavior.

Racism and associated forms of discrimination take different shapes in different places (Fredrickson 2015; Hall 2017) and differentially affect members of the same group (Hill Collins 2000). As I have shown, visibly religious Muslims women in Quebec experience hostility and negative treatment in public settings, but male participants reported few incidents related to stereotypical associations of Muslim men with terrorism, which are common in the US and elsewhere (Cainkar 2009; Garner and Selod 2015; Kaufman and Niner 2019; Naderi 2018; Selod 2018; Tarlo 2010). However, the Quebec case does resemble the experience of US Muslims in at least one important way: politicians have repeatedly targeted Muslims as undesirable outsiders, especially at election time (Kaufman and Niner 2019; Selod 2018). Accordingly, it would not be surprising if a discrimination narrative that links electoral politics to attacks in public settings were to also circulate among American Muslims. Analyzing how narratives diverge or coalesce across contexts is one important task for future research.

To understand how and when individuals overcome the ambiguity that obscures many incidents of negative treatment, scholars must first identify the discrimination narratives that individuals may be using for this purpose. While this article's empirical findings are specific to the unique case of Muslims in Quebec, existing research suggests that members of other minority groups also use discrimination narratives to resolve ambiguity (Beaman 2017; Lamont et al. 2016; Mohatt et al. 2014; Prins et al. 2013; Skadegård and Horst 2021). For example, in his research on Orthodox Jews in Los Angeles, Tavory (2010) documents the "folk sociology" that enables his participants to classify and anticipate negative treatment. As one of his study participant notes, antisemitic incidents occur "usually on holidays, when people drink and lose their inhibitions" (Tavory 2010:62). These findings point to an underlying discrimination narrative that disseminates information about the social patterns of antisemitism. Likewise, familiar cultural tropes like "the talk" and the "Karen" character point to the dissemination of narratives among Black Americans that enable the latter to selectively avoid or resist discrimination associated with specific perpetrators (Goldblatt 2020; Whitaker and Snell 2016). Both scholarly and popular writing thus indicates that people across social settings and groups use discrimination narratives to classify negative treatment, guide their attention to high-risk situations, and adjust to expected patterns of discrimination.

Researching discrimination narratives provides opportunities for more closely linking research on discrimination and microaggressions to other fields of inquiry, especially the study of social networks and political sociology. Scholars of social networks can examine how discrimination narratives percolate through networks, reaching (and convincing) some group members more than others. Differential exposure to discrimination narratives—possibly within the peer groups that microaggressions research highlights (Eschmann 2021; Jones 2022; Lewis et al. 2012)—may help to explain why some classify certain ambiguous experiences as discrimination while others do not. In this way, the sociology of networks can shed new light on noteworthy patterns in perceived discrimination, such as recent immigrants reporting few incidents in comparison to those who are more established (Banerjee 2008; Flippen and Parrado 2015; Vang and Chang 2018; Waters 1999). Moreover, the availability of discrimination narratives may shape whether individuals experience or manage to avoid the adverse effects that ambiguity can have for health and mental health (Douds and Hout 2020; Sue 2010). Future research should attempt to trace these effects.

Political sociologists can help to illuminate the making as well as the political consequences of discrimination narratives. Regarding the former, minority activists, elites, and social movement organizations probably play prominent roles in creating and disseminating narratives that highlight discrimination and its manifestations (Brubaker 2004; Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). Their respective success in doing so may systematically alter perceptions of discrimination among minority groups over time. Likewise, political sociologists can examine the consequences of discrimination narratives beyond shaping the individual perceptions and behaviors that I have examined. Once they have become salient, discrimination narratives may facilitate political mobilization against certain

forms of discrimination. In this context, research on discrimination narratives could fruitfully link to scholarship on social movements (see also Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011).

On a broader level, this article highlights the importance of advancing research on ambiguity. Recent research underscores the frequency and substantial impact of negative but ambiguous treatment (Doering et al. 2023; Embrick et al. 2017; Hart 2021). It also reveals the unique burdens of ambiguity, which include rumination, lingering uncertainty, and self-doubt. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done to better understand how ambiguity affects people's experience and behavior, including their response to discrimination, group consciousness, politicization, and personal outcomes like health and mental health. Scholars of perceived discrimination should therefore incorporate ambiguity into their research designs. Such research can help to clarify processes of interpretation as well as contingent forms of response, action, and personal outcomes in relation to ambiguous discrimination. Given the growing sophistication and prevalence of experimental designs that measure discrimination independent of whether its victims perceive it or not (Pager 2007; Quillian 2006; Quillian and Midtbøen 2021), a focus on ambiguity and meaning-making provides both a direction and a compelling justification for the continued use of self-report data in research on discrimination.

From a methodological as well as ethical perspective, ambiguity must be studied with great care. Analyzing how individuals resolve ambiguity requires encouraging study participants to describe incidents that may have constituted discrimination but about which they do not feel certain. Moreover, participants have to be asked to explain how they arrived at their ultimate classifications. Any such probing must be done sensitively and avoid putting the participants' lived experience in question—researching ambiguity and how individuals deal with it should never undercut individuals' classifications. Rather, such research should reveal the uncertainties, interpretive work, and related anguish that individuals experience as they inhabit societies in which discrimination is common but increasingly materializes in ambiguous forms.

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