The Wounds of Populism: How Muslims Adopt Narratives of Collective Marginalization

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Working paper
Version: February 2020
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Abstract: Experiencing racism is, in part, a narrative accomplishment. Instances of racism frequently contain a degree of ambiguity, which individuals have to resolve in order to experience them as such. Narratives of collective marginalization serve as interpretive tools in this process, linking individuals and their experiences to the overall manifestations of racism against their group. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a supplementary media analysis, I describe and analyze narratives of collective marginalization among Muslims in the Canadian province of Quebec. I show that individuals adopt such narratives specifically as a result of two biographical turning points: exposure to populist politics and experiencing overt Islamophobia first-hand. After encountering these turning points, respondents expect to face Islamophobia and are therefore likely to interpret ambiguous situations as such. Additional support for these hypotheses is drawn from an analysis of six respondents’ cases who did not embrace narratives of collective marginalization. Implications for the study of populism, political mobilization, and perceived discrimination are discussed.

How do individuals come to view themselves as members of marginalized ethnoracial groups? One obvious answer to this question is that it is the marginalization itself—its forms, intensity, and frequency—that turns individuals into disaffected and thus self-conscious group members. But prior research on a range of ethnoracial groups shows that there is no straightforward connection between discrimination and the extent to which it is perceived. African Americans living in segregated neighborhoods regard racism as less of a factor shaping their lives than those residing in more integrated environments (Wilson and Taub 2006; Young 2004), notwithstanding the fact that racial segregation is arguably the most pernicious manifestation of racism (Massey and Denton 1993). Similarly, recent immigrants to the United States and Canada tend to perceive less discrimination than more established ones (Banerjee 2008; Waters 1999), even though recent immigrants are typically more identifiable in terms of dress, speech, and behavior, which would lead scholars to expect that they face more discrimination (Vang and Chang 2018). And despite substantial racial inequality and discrimination, black Brazilians hesitate to interpret negative treatment in racial terms (Lamont et al. 2016).

In this paper, I argue that perceiving racism is a narrative accomplishment. Narratives enable individuals to “know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (Somers 1994:606). On the basis of data collected with Muslims in the Canadian province of Quebec, I examine how some Muslims
embrace narratives that allow them to interpret negative personal or collective experiences as Islamophobia\(^1\) while others interpret similar phenomena as benign or, at least, as unrelated to their group category. I will refer to the former as “narratives of collective marginalization” (henceforth: NCMs). Once adopted, such narratives serve individuals as tools for the interpretation of past, present, and future experience, thus transforming ethnoracial categories into lenses of social cognition (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004).

I draw on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a supplementary media analysis that illuminate how Muslims in Quebec variably assess the prevalence and intensity of Islamophobia. The case of Muslims Quebeckers provides a valuable opportunity for examining NCMs. Over the past two decades, repeated debates over religious rights in this province have produced friction between white, francophone, and often proudly atheist Quebeckers and immigrant minorities, especially Muslims. Scholars have documented substantial resentment and discrimination against Muslims (Bouchard and Taylor 2008; Eid 2012; Helly and Dubé 2014; Rousseau 2012; Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). At the same time, I will show that not all Muslim Quebeckers have adopted NCMs. While many perceive Islamophobia as a severe personal and collective challenge, others report no significant hostility and believe that there is very little Islamophobia in Quebec. In addition to describing NCMs, therefore, I also examine the factors that lead some individuals to adopt them while others do not.

I identify two types of turning points (Denzin 1989) that can reshape the narrative identities of Muslim Quebeckers. Depending on their personal characteristics, respondents are more or less likely to experience these events and, if they have experienced them, they have typically adopted NCMs. First, I show that directly observing populist political agitation against immigrant minorities represents an important turning point. Conversely, some respondents who are largely isolated from politics have not adopted NCMs. Poignant personal encounters with overt Islamophobia constitute a second type of turning point. But since not all Muslims are equally visible as such, exposure to overt interpersonal hostility varies. While all women wearing the hijab or niqab reported Islamophobic confrontations, those men and women who were less identifiable as Muslims did not always do so and had thus also not necessarily developed NCMs. Additionally, I show that these two turning points appear to be linked: respondents reported that their most overt confrontations with Islamophobia occurred during periods of populist political agitation against Muslims.

\(^1\) Garner and Selod (2015; see also Love 2017) have argued that the concept of Islamophobia denotes a special case of racism, that of anti-Muslim racism. But the marginalization of Muslims occurs as a complex compound of overlapping ethnic, racial, and religious difference (Eid 2014; Maghbouleh 2017). It is therefore difficult to select one term and define it in such a way that it applies to all phenomena I seek to capture. For instance, the concept of “racism” typically implies that differences between groups are perceived as innate and insurmountable (Hall 2017), but there are certainly those who hate Muslims while accepting those who leave Islam behind. In other words, the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims is not necessarily insurmountable or crossed only by means of covert “passing.” On the other hand, the term “Islamophobia” insinuates that the marginalization of Muslims is rooted in fear, but hostile treatment can certainly occur in the absence of fear. Without being able to resolve these conceptual problems here, I will largely use the term “Islamophobia,” because, as I will show, Muslims who are unlikely to be perceived as such by strangers also experience or anticipate marginalization in case their faith affiliation is disclosed.
Describing narratives as a crucial element of self-conscious group membership, this paper generates immediate consequences for a broad range of sociological research. First, I show that narratives serve as a mediator between negative experiences and perceived discrimination. Perceived discrimination affects a broad swath of social outcomes (e.g., Ensher, Grant-Vallone, and Donaldson 2001; Krieger 2014; Padela and Heisler 2010), and it is therefore important not only to ask about discrimination itself but also about who is likely to perceive discrimination and who is not. NCMS are also a precondition for political mobilization and efforts to improve a group’s social standing. While the mechanisms that produce self-conscious group membership I present derive from the specific context of Muslims in Quebec, it is likely that they also influence social experience in different contexts. Furthermore, the paper contributes to research on populist agitation, especially populism’s effects on minority populations—an increasingly important but nonetheless understudied field (Flores forthcoming; Pérez 2015; Simonsen 2019). In the discussion, I discuss these and other implications in further detail.

**Narratives of collective marginalization**

To trace how Muslims assess their social situation in Quebec by adopting narratives of collective marginalization, I combine scholarship on narrative identity (DeGloma 2014; Denzin 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2007; Somers 1994) with work on ethnoracial cognition (Brubaker et al. 2004; Tavory 2010) as well as groupness and reactive ethnicity (Brubaker 2004; Flores forthcoming; Rumbaut 2008).

Narratives allow individuals to draw connections between their personal lived reality and larger levels of collective life (Loseke 2007; Small 2004; Somers 1994). It therefore makes sense to regard shared narratives as a foundational source of ethnoracial identities (see also Weber 1978). As Cornell (2000:51) writes, “for ethnic groups […] the ‘we’ begins with stories, with the events and interpretations that tell us that ‘we’ are a people and what kind of people ‘we’ are.” The intuitive plausibility of this argument notwithstanding, the concept of narrative has not been applied widely in the study of race and ethnicity (but see Mohatt et al. 2014; Nagel 1994), although it is widely used throughout other areas of the social sciences (for reviews, see Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2007; Polletta et al. 2011). For this paper, I build on insights from the sociology of narrative identity to uncover tools for analyzing NCMS and their emergence.

Narratives exist in public form as they are distributed by the media and opinion leaders but also as private culture in people’s minds (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Lizardo 2017; Loseke 2007). Individuals draw on preexisting public narratives to guide their meaning-making efforts, but they also furnish, revise, and recombine narratives in order to fit their personal outlook and needs (Loseke 2007; Somers 1994). Furthermore, both private and public narratives change over time as groups and individuals renegotiate their social situation (Loseke 2007). This means that members of the same group may never hold exactly the same narratives about their group membership even in the face of similar shared experience.

Tools for analyzing NCMS can be drawn from constructionist studies of narrative performance (DeGloma 2014; Denzin 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). I here highlight two such tools: narrative linkage and turning points. Narrative linkage refers to the fact that narratives combine events in such a way that new meaning emerges through their combination. For instance,
individuals might reference similarities between a set of situations to indicate an overarching phenomenon. In Somers’s (1994:616) words, narrative linkage “gives significance to independent instances” and “translates events into episodes.” Narrative linkage is a fundamental aspect of NCMs. If individuals regard potential instances of racism and discrimination as unconnected, these instances may not reshape their identities and, in turn, NCMs would not emerge. Furthermore, NCMs also entail narrative linkage in that group members connect their personal experiences to the overall realm of collective life and intergroup relations.

Turning points, a second concept, also matter substantially for NCMs, specifically in social contexts in which NCMs have not yet publicly solidified as a result of prolonged social conflict. Turning points represent moments or periods in time that initiate a substantial shift in perception and thinking. In addition to turning points, scholars also speak of “epiphanies,” which “cut to the core of the person’s life and leave indelible marks on them” (Denzin 1989:39), and “awakenings,” which divide an individual’s life into a preawakening period of (self-)delusion and a postawakening period of clarity and insight (DeGloma 2014). For analyzing NCMs, it is important to identify the turning points that lead individuals to reconsider their lives and become self-conscious members of a marginalized group. Once they have encountered these turning points, individuals may then contrast a prior, naïve life—potentially full of overlooked hostility and marginalization—and a subsequent period of awareness action (DeGloma 2014).

Given the use of terms like awakenings and epiphanies, scholars of narrative identity clearly argue that narratives shape memory and cognition (Zerubavel 1997). This argument is consistent with existing work on cognition and ethnicity. Brubaker and colleagues (2004), for instance, argue that internalized knowledge structures “guide perception and recall, interpret experience, generate inferences and expectations, and organize action (Brubaker et al. 2004:41).”

Demonstrating this point empirically on the basis of an ethnography of Orthodox Jews, Tavory (2010) has shown how ethnic categories that repeatedly attain salience in everyday life become elements of routine cognition. Located at the “margins of consciousness” (Tavory 2010:52), the ethnic category remains constantly available for interpreting experience. This, I argue, is precisely the effect that NCMs have on social cognition. Once adopted, NCMs make it likely that individuals draw on the group membership in question to make sense of their lived experience. Among other things, this means that they are likely to interpret and remember negative but ambiguous situations as instances of racism—situations that individuals without NCMs might well overlook, forget, or interpret in non-ethnic terms.

Furthermore, NCMs connect individuals more strongly to fellow group members. Since this connection emerges as an outcome of shared marginalization, scholars speak of “reactive ethnicity” to describe this phenomenon. For example, Flores (forthcoming), Pérez (2015), and Rumbaut (2008) have argued that anti-immigrant politics increase groupness among immigrants and may ultimately also mobilize them for political action. Consequently, I assume that NCMs

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2 Scholars have used a plethora of concepts to describe social filters of cognition, including frames, schemas, and cognitive lenses. Recently, Lizardo (2017) has introduced a systematic distinction that defines schemas as pre-conscious and hence non-declarative culture. In contrast to schemas, narratives are elements of declarative culture that individuals can articulate. Following Lizardo’s distinction and considering the fact that I derive my findings from interviews and observations, I use the concept of narratives. Nevertheless, given the substantial overlap within existing scholarship on social cognition, I draw on insights from research on schemas as well as narratives.
among Muslims in Quebec also correspond to a heightened sense of groupness and in-group solidarity.

The situation of Muslims in Quebec

Colonized by French settlers but conquered by the British in 1759, Quebec is a francophone province of Canada. To appease sovereigntist sentiment and fears over the durability of French as the province’s dominant language, Quebec has been granted extensive powers to control immigration, language, and other policy areas within its territory. The province has used these powers to stimulate francophone immigration, including from majority-Muslim countries in North Africa, the Arab peninsula, and South and South-East Asia. In 2011, the most recent year for which data were available, Quebec’s Muslim population stood at 243,430, which corresponds to about 3% of the province’s overall population. Between 2001 and 2011, this population grew by 124%.

Muslim immigrants can evoke conflicting associations in Quebec. As desired, most Muslims speak French, but many actively practice and express their faith, while French Quebeckers tend to disapprove of religion and religiosity. This aversion entails Islamophobia, but more general, historically rooted disaffection with religion matters as well. Until the 1960s, French Quebeckers were dominated not only by an anglophone elite (Hughes 2009) but also by the Catholic Church, which controlled many public services and used this control to enforce conservative social values and promote “a life outlook focused on humility and acceptance of one’s fate” (Zubrzycki 2016:57). In the 1960s, a sovereigntist movement gained control of the state, gradually shifting power to French Quebeckers and also rolling back the influence of the Catholic Church. Accordingly, Quebec’s identity includes a proud commitment to secularism, which draws on the memory of struggle against the Catholic Church as well as the French model of “laïcité” (Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). Today, 75% of Quebeckers continue to identify as Catholic, but this identification tends to be cultural rather than religious: 73% of Quebec’s Catholics reject or feel ambivalent about religion as an influence on society and few actually practice the faith (Reid and Bibby 2016).

At least since the early 2000s, conflict over the status of Islam in Quebec has increased (Bouchard and Taylor 2008). The growing size and visibility of the Muslim community as well as the repercussions of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent “war on terror” have incited negative feelings about the Muslim community (Jamil and Rousseau 2012; Sharify-Funk and Guzik 2017). Politicians have drawn on this discontent and tried to mobilize voters by deploying populist policies that would limit religious rights. These include 2013’s Bill 60 (“Quebec Charter of Values), 2017’s Bill 62 (“Act to foster adherence to state religious neutrality”), and 2018’s Bill 21 (“Act respecting the laicity of the state”). All of these bills seek to contain the expression of religion in public life. Table 1 provides a summary of these legislative projects. Furthermore, many incidents of social conflict have taken place. Most notably, in 2017, a 28-year-old French Quebecker engaged in a shooting rampage at Quebec City’s Centre Islamique mosque, killing six worshippers. The man explained his attack by saying that “I don’t want us to become like

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Europe” (quoted in Perreaux 2018) and that he had felt compelled to do something to stop Islamist terrorist attacks from occurring in Quebec.

Table 1: Major policies seeking to restrict religious rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and year</th>
<th>Political party proposing the policy</th>
<th>Policy’s effects on religious rights</th>
<th>Status of the policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill 60: Quebec Charter of Values (2013)</td>
<td>Parti Québécois (PQ)</td>
<td>Prohibit public employees from wearing “ostentatious” religious symbols (including hijab, turban, kippah but not a small crucifix). Prohibit individuals from covering their faces when giving or receiving public services.</td>
<td>Not passed after the PQ failed to win reelection in 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill 62: Act to foster adherence to state religious neutrality (2017)</td>
<td>Parti liberal du Québec (PLQ)</td>
<td>Prohibit individuals from covering their faces when giving or receiving public services.</td>
<td>Passed in 2017. Ban on face coverings temporarily suspended via court order</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Against this socio-political background, scholarship shows that Quebec provides a somewhat difficult receiving context for Muslim immigrants. Compared to the rest of Canada, Quebeckers on average harbor more resentment against Islam and Muslims (Helly 2015; Wilkins-Laflamme 2018). Studies also reveal discrimination within schools and especially the labor market (Eid 2012; Oueslati, Labelle, and Antonius 2006).

How has this social context shaped the narrative identities of Muslim Quebeckers? Sufficient material for developing narratives of collective marginalization clearly exists. At the same time, it is important to note that many of the policies, incidents, and patterns I invoked above reveal Islamophobia only in covert or blurred ways. Bill 21, for instance, does not just ban Muslims but public employees of all faiths from wearing religious symbols. Awareness and interpretations of discrimination certainly vary, and not all Muslims regard Islamophobia as a defining problem in their lives. For example, a recent study of everyday life in Montreal portrays interpersonal conflict as a rare phenomenon and concludes that “our participants indicated that overemphasis on problems contributes to a pejorative foregrounding of their religious identities that they found unrepresentative and tiresome” (Selby, Barras, and Beaman 2018:5). It therefore does not go without saying that Muslim Quebeckers have necessarily developed NCMs.4 As a study context for examining NCMs, Quebec thus has the advantage that narratives may not yet have solidified so much that their emergence—both on the individual and collective level—becomes obscured.

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4 The situation in Quebec may thus be different from that in France or the United States, where scholars have documented a rather pervasive and salient sense of marginalization among Muslims due to more overtly Islamophobic discourses and policies (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016; Cainkar 2009; Garner and Selod 2015; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014).
Data and Methods

Most of the fieldwork for this study was conducted in the summer and early fall of 2018 in the leadup to Quebec’s provincial elections on October 1st. Given the history of populist political campaigning targeting the Muslim community, the fieldwork sought to illuminate Muslims’ political views, experiences, and participation. Primarily, the paper draws on 28 in-depth interviews with 24 Muslim men and women from the Montreal metropolitan area. I also spend approximately 60 hours observing electoral debates, protests, and other events organized by the Muslim community. To trace the socio-political discourse about Muslims in Quebec, furthermore, I archived and analyzed discussions and representations of the Muslim community in the local media. Finally, representatives of three of the four political parties in the provincial parliament (assemblée nationale) were interviewed about their parties’ policy stances on minority and religious rights, immigration, and their outreach strategies for including and potentially mobilizing Muslim voters.5

All respondents were either first- or second-generation immigrants. To recruit interviewees, I initially drew on support from Muslim community leaders and organizations and then continued through snowball sampling. Sampling for range, I asked my contacts and respondents to refer me to a broad range of respondents in order to avoid overlooking experiences and opinions that might correspond to socio-demographic characteristics (Small 2009; Weiss 1995). I specifically sought out variation in terms of gender, age, ethnic background, religiosity, political involvement, and class and education. As the research progressed, it became clear that the emerging sample included a large proportion of comfortably middle-class and politically involved Muslims. Through targeted efforts, I was able to interview more respondents who were less interested and involved in politics. Variation in terms of education proved elusive, however. Reflecting Canadian immigration policy, which strongly privileges education in the selection of immigrants, all respondents had completed postsecondary degrees or were currently in the process of doing so. Advanced education probably raises the likelihood that respondents had created narratives of collective marginalization, a difficult task that education facilitates.

I conducted 14 of the 28 interviews with Muslim respondents but relied on two trained research assistants (neither of them Québécois) to interview those respondents who had expressed a preference for being interviewed in French. On average, the interviews lasted 70 minutes and focused on establishing the respondents’ immigration background and general biography, religious commitment, interest and involvement in politics, as well as their perception of Quebec as a receiving context for Muslims. When recruiting respondents, I did not mention Islamophobia or the marginalization of Muslims but instead advertised the study as an effort to “better understand the views and political participation of Muslims in Quebec.” During the interviews, the research assistants and I only asked about Islamophobia towards the end of the interviews to learn whether—and in which contexts—the respondents would raise these issues themselves. This strategy proved useful, because most respondents nevertheless spoke about Islamophobia right away, without being prompted.

5 The research team interviewed party representatives from the Parti Liberal, Parti Québécois, and Québec Solidaire. Unfortunately, no one from Coalition Avenir Québec, the party that won the 2018 election, was interviewed, because no representative willing to participate in the study could be identified.
I coded the interview transcripts and observational field notes, using open coding to identify emerging themes but also codes I drew from the relevant literature the project aimed to engage (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). After completing the coding, I wrote hermeneutic memos for each respondent that summarized and condensed their perspectives on politics in Quebec, political involvement, degree of Muslim groupness, perception of Muslims’ overall social situation in Quebec, personal experiences with discrimination and Islamophobia, and biographical experiences that the respondent identified as turning points in their views on living in Quebec as a Muslim. To ensure their validity, I repeatedly shuttled back and forth between the hermeneutic memos and the transcripts. Finally, I used the memos to systematically compare and contrast individual cases with the help of truth tables (Becker 1998). These truth tables indicated the shared features of NCMs that respondents expressed, as well as the factors that shaped whether respondents had adopted NCMs or not.

Analysis

The analysis proceeds in five steps. First, I describe how NCMs facilitate the perception of Islamophobia. In a second and third step, I then describe biographical turning points that changed how the respondents viewed themselves as Muslim Quebeckers and embraced NCMs. Fourth, I show how, in the process of embracing NCMs, respondents overcome group-internal divisions. Finally, I discuss the lessons we can learn from those respondents who did not adopt NCMs.

Narratives of collective marginalization facilitate the perception of Islamophobia

Out of 24 respondents, 18 articulated NCMs. These narratives were never completely alike, but they did exhibit major similarities. All 18 respondents thought that practicing Muslims, people bearing Arab names, and especially women wearing the hijab or niqab faced formidable discrimination and racism in Quebec. Sara, a 29-year-old woman who had been born in Montreal to Iraqi immigrants, said: “I might not have the same chances as someone else to be hired just because I wear a hijab.” A 50-year-old man named Jafar commented on name discrimination. Jafar had completed a Master’s degree in management in Tunisia but had struggled to find an appropriate position in Quebec, despite searching for years. He now worked as a grocery store cashier. He said:

If you look, my friend, to all these taxi drivers especially, many of them have PhDs and they have Master’s and at minimum they have baccalaureates. This is the reality. And I personally, I sent a lot and a lot and a lot of CVs. But forget about it! … Even me and my wife, after one year, two years, we decided, ‘Okay, we’re going to go to the college or the university [to get a degree in Quebec],’ you know, and we did many things. The same thing, the same result, because my name is Jafar.

Consistently with Sara and Jafar’s assessments, some respondents, who had arrived in Quebec many years ago and who had established successful careers in the meantime, expressed concern that younger or more recently arrived Muslims could not accomplish the same level of success today. During an interview, one respondent broke out in tears and said: “When I am with my kids and with their friends, with this new generation, they’re so smart, but [Quebec] is not able to
benefit from their intelligence. … When you find someone that is close-minded and he is refusing us—why?” Similarly, when asked whether things were getting better or worse for Muslims in Quebec, Wael, an engineer in his forties, said:

Worse. Oh yes, worse. It doesn’t affect me so much because I have been here for a long time. My career is on track. But good luck to anyone like me who arrives today and tries to follow the same path that I did. Good luck! That’s not going to be easy. I am not saying it was easy for me either, but for me it was just a question of… when you work hard, society is going to reward you for it. Today, I am not so sure that that’s still automatically going to happen.

Importantly, respondents did not only perceive Islamophobia in the labor market and other institutions but also saw it shaping their everyday interactions. In one of the more forceful expressions of this perspective, Sofia, a twenty-three-year-old college student, said that she tried to avoid non-diverse neighborhoods and towns because she did not feel comfortable there. She said:

I don’t know if I am allowed to say it—among French Quebeckers, I kind of feel out of place. I do know a lot of people who have been harassed, like people who wear the headscarf. It is usually older men who are like “Oh, why are you wearing that? Take that off, go back to your country.” I am always worried that the person I am interacting with is racist or has an Islamophobic mind.

Together, the statements in this section reveal the close connection that NCMs have to social perception. For example, Sofia believes that Islamophobia is so prevalent that the possibility of encountering it colors all of her interactions with French Quebeckers. Similarly, Jafar explains his lack of success in finding better work by invoking his Arab name. This shows how NCMs make the difference between simply experiencing negative but ambiguous situations and interpreting those situations as instances of racism. Sofia, Jafar, Wael, and Sara are ready to explain encounters and observations with Islamophobia, because they have developed the interpretive tools and situational expectations they need to do so (Tavory 2010).

Populist political campaigning as a turning point

The 18 respondents holding NCMs were in striking agreement about the main factor that had brought about and now sustained the negative social climate they perceived: they emphasized political campaigns seeking to restrict religious rights as a direct cause of the hostility and discrimination that Muslims faced. The tense and politicized periods during which such policies had been debated stood out as notable turning points in the respondents’ NCMs (Denzin 1989). Respondents invoked them to distinguish a relatively harmonious “before” from a tense “after” (DeGloma 2014). For those respondents who had reached maturity (or arrived in Quebec) by the beginning of the Charter of Values debate in 2014, this policy debate constituted the most decisive turning point, because it was the first time a provincial government had tried to substantially constrain religious rights. Subsequent policy proposals then simply confirmed for those respondents the insights they had already drawn earlier. For younger respondents and more recent arrivals to Quebec, Bill 62 or Bill 21 fulfilled a similar turning point function.
Respondent described their first encounters with populist politics as a shock, even if they had been aware of the general aversion against religion in Quebec. For example, Sofia said about the Charter of Values debate: “It got me so scared for my future, because I was a teenager back then. […] I did not think this kind of thing could be real, that someone would actually suggest something like that, you know? It was really scary.” Wael said:

[The Charter of Values] meant that, if you are not a descendant of the French settlers, if you don’t adopt this culture here, then you are not a part of this society. And so the government tries to shove this charter down your throat in order to make you assimilate. And that deeply shocked me!”

Many respondents noted that they fundamentally reevaluated their lives as a result of witnessing populist political campaigns. This was true especially for the younger, second-generation respondents, who noted that they had grown up without a strong sense that their faith and ethnic backgrounds constituted a potential problem. The climate of populist politics engendered a sudden political awareness that led respondents to reconsider what Quebeckers thought about them and other Muslims. A 21-year-old woman named Fatima, who did not wear the hijab, expressed this personal transition very clearly when she recalled her experience of the Charter of Values debate:

I didn’t know anything about politics before [the Charter of Values], and then I was just like: ‘What’s going on?’ You know, people around me, I’ve always had amazing friends. I’ve always been very comfortable with my differences. The fact that, like, I grew up in a different family … it was just normal. And then the climate just, you know, changed. So before [the Charter of Values] I was totally fine, and now it leads you to second-guess a lot.

Of course, respondents identified populist campaigns as turning points even more forcefully when the proposed policies personally affected them. As a case in point, I interviewed a teacher wearing the hijab. Both the Charter of Values and Bill 21 had left a deep imprint on her experience of living in Quebec. I also spoke with a young woman wearing the niqab. Hafsa said that she had been too young during the Charter of Values debate to fully understand its ramifications, but she attended college when Bill 62 was discussed and eventually passed. The bill prohibited individuals from covering their faces when giving or receiving public services. When the law was introduced, it was not clear how the concept of “public services” should be interpreted and whether it might include university attendance and even public transportation. Hafsa said:

They banned, um, people who cover their face or niqabi women from giving or receiving any services. So at that time, that was like a shock, because I do, I am active outside, I do use services, of course. And that was—I was confused at how I would live, thinking back.

As a result of the repeated political agitation against religious rights, all the respondents holding NCMs were certain that, for the time being, future provincial elections would also include some
kind of Islamophobic campaigning. When I asked Mohamed, a 64-year-old man who had been born in Egypt, what he perceived to be the main issues in the upcoming 2018 provincial elections, he said:

Well, I would say that the main issues here would be education and health. That’s the main services in Quebec. But for sure, speaking about Muslims, it will come again, as usual, the idea of reasonable accommodation, acceptance, ugh, minority rights. It usually comes. Because, unfortunately, parties use it in order to gain votes. So it will be an issue for sure.

Mohamed’s statement that “it will be an issue for sure” was widely shared by the Muslims I encountered, who considered populist campaigning against Muslims to be a durable and fundamental feature of Quebec politics. I conducted most interviews before the 2018 provincial elections in Quebec and, like Mohamed, all respondents who articulated NCMs expected that anti-Muslim campaigning would be a salient feature of the upcoming election.

Exposure to overt Islamophobia as a turning point

Personal encounters with overt Islamophobia represented another salient turning point that led respondents to adopt NCMs. Admittedly, this finding may give the impression of circular reasoning: I have argued that NCMs enable individuals to perceive negative personal experiences as racism, while I here posit that such experiences lead individuals to adopt NCMs. But there is a key difference between the initial turning point experiences and most of the subsequent experiences of Islamophobia that the respondents reported: turning point experiences were always overtly Islamophobic. That is, aggressors explicitly invoked Islam or the respondents’ Muslims identities. Sara, a college student, held a temporary job at a bank during the Charter of Values debate. She said:

I really didn’t want to mention these incidents, because I will cry, and I really don’t want to cry in the interview … but the true colors come out. I think people felt like they were entitled to do things that they wouldn’t normally do because the government was supporting it. People were openly telling me to go home, to go back to my country, refusing that I help them at the bank, because I was wearing a hijab. It kind of left a bitter feeling.

In Sara’s statements, the overt nature of the Islamophobia she experienced become very clear. As a hijab-wearing member of the bank’s front staff, she was uniquely exposed to interpersonal confrontations. Furthermore, Sara linked these confrontations to the first type of turning point I discussed—populist political campaigning. Sara argued that populism facilitated unprecedently overt expressions of Islamophobia. Indeed, many respondents made this point. In a case of narrative linkage (Somers 1994), respondents drew direct causal connections between populist political campaigning and the hatred and fear they perceived among ordinary Quebeckers. For instance, Ola, a 41-year-old Muslim woman who does not wear the hijab, said that in 2014 she encountered a French Quebecker in a work context who wanted to discuss the Charter of Values with her.
He was a really simple man, but [the then-leader of the Parti Québécois] Pauline Marois, she was a hero for him. “She’s trying to protect the identity of Quebeckers. And, uh, when we approved that you come, uh, to live with us [in Quebec], that’s because you promised that you would be like us, okay? And, uh, Pauline Marois she wants a law that you don’t wear your hijab or niqab.” So, really, [Pauline Marois] was playing on the feelings of these simple, like uh, people.

In the heated context of the Charter of Values debate, therefore, even a non-hijab-wearing Muslim could encounter overt Islamophobic. Nevertheless, women wearing the hijab or niqab typically had to confront overt Islamophobia more frequently and intensively than men or those women who did not wear obvious religious symbols. As I show further below, this allowed some respondents who were less visible as Muslims to not develop NCM.

In addition to negative encounters they personally faced, respondents also drew narrative linkages between populist politics and major incidents of Islamophobia, including the 2017 shooting rampage at the Centre Islamique mosque. During a 2018 commemoration of the shooting at McGill University, a young woman named Fatima said that, initially, she had been impressed by the outpouring of public support after the shooting. But she added: “And then, just a few weeks later, the Parti Liberal tables Bill 62, which is the same thing as what caused this attack [at Centre Islamique] to begin with: the misinformation, the hate.” Accordingly, Fatima asserted a causal connection between the shooting at Centre Islamique and political initiatives to restrict the religious rights of Muslim Quebeckers. In their interviews, many respondents drew the same link. Additionally, during several protests against Bill 62 and Bill 21 I observed in 2017 and 2018, protesters held up large canvasses depicting the images of the six men who had been slain at Centre Islamique. In doing so, the protesters publicly linked politics to the most heinous manifestations of Islamophobia.

Turning points engender reactive ethnicity

In Quebec and elsewhere, Muslims are a heterogeneous group, comprising people from a host of ethnic and national backgrounds who practice their faith to different degrees and in different ways. But in order to develop an NCM rooted in shared religion, individuals have to create a sense of groupness that links them to other Muslims, including those with beliefs and behaviors they personally dislike. I spoke to a number of Muslims who noted that they had once disapproved of the practice of wearing the hijab or niqab but had changed their minds as a result of witnessing political or interpersonal hostility against Muslim women. The engineer Wael said:

There was a process of Islamization in Egypt in the ’80s, where the social pressure was more and more that women had to veil themselves. My mother refused to do so, okay? And for me, this made me very much opposed to the veil. I have to say that I was even prejudiced. I had prejudices about girls simply because they wore the veil. I refused to listen to them, you know, to have cordial relationships with them. But after arriving here [in Quebec], I changed completely [laughs]. Because here the social pressure is now against women wearing the veil and so I now strongly believe in defending veiled women. I don’t have women who wear the veil in my family, but I defend the right of women to wear the veil—fiercely!”
Many respondents noted that the collective marginalization of Muslims had given them a stronger connection to other Muslims. In an extreme instantiation of this process, the respondent Abdul said that he had come to embrace a Muslim identity only because he felt that living in Quebec had left him no other choice. Abdul was an atheist and did not observe the seven pillars of Islam. Like Wael, Abdul contrasted his time in his country of birth to his life in Quebec.

All I knew is that I was okay with Islam [in Tunisia]. I didn’t really care, and I never believed in god. … Then I was somehow born-again Muslim when I came here [to Quebec]. … I understood that people saw me as Muslim. Both Muslims and non-Muslims. I could be Buddhist or whatever—people didn’t care. Your name is Abdul, you’re from Tunisia, you’re Muslim. That’s it. Especially after [the Charter of Values], I was going to be seen and discriminated as Muslim. So actually, what I feel does not count.

Abdul was a leftist political activist and had initially worked simply as a class-oriented organizer. As he learned more about the situation of Muslims and also his personal “racialization” (his term) as Muslim in Quebec, he moved more towards working with and on behalf of the Muslim community. Therefore, my data indicate a process of reactive ethnicity (Rumbaut 2008), in which social repression unifies, strengthens, and mobilizes the targeted population.

Deviant case analysis: respondents without narratives of collective marginalization

Six of the 24 respondents did not embrace NCMs. Given their substantially different perspective, these respondents provide valuable analytic contrast to the findings reported above. In this section, I thus examine their perspectives in some detail. First, the six respondents expressed doubts about Islamophobia being a severe problem for Muslim Quebeckers. Asked whether there was Islamophobia in Quebec, Kareem, a 71-year-old retired engineer, said: “I believe there is, but I believe it is limited. Because it is limited, there is no problem.” Similarly, Ibsham, a 21-one-year-old college student, said he did not believe that Quebeckers treated him differently as a result of his faith. He acknowledged that Islamophobic incidents occasionally occurred but added: “It’s not like the majority thinks like this. It’s probably, like, an individual or a very small group of individuals.” Regarding the shooting at the Centre Islamique mosque, these respondents emphasized that the perpetrator had been a single individual and that Quebeckers had roundly condemned the attack. Lulwa, a 48-year-old permanent resident, said: “It surprised me that it happened in Canada. Still, uh, you find that in any society. You have the people who are extreme, and they don’t want, uh, any foreigners to be here.”

Five of the six respondents also explicitly questioned the reports of Islamophobia they heard from other Muslims. Lulwa commented: “Sometimes you create the fears.” She pointed specifically to women wearing the niqab and to Muslims insisting on halal food. She said: “The people, they concentrate [on whether food] is halal or not. Go to your country and get it there! Don’t stay here!” Mohammed, a real estate agent in his 40s, believed that Muslims needed to limit their expressions of faith in public: “If I have traditions, I have to practice it or express it in harmony with society. I have the feeling that you don’t have the right to violate this harmony. So
there are things that you have to practice in private or a little bit at home, maybe in mosques. Not in public.’ Like Mohammed, Kareem also believed that Muslims “have some kind of responsibility about what is happening to them,” because they made excessive demands for accommodation. He said:

When I came, in 1974, there wasn’t this issue about Muslims and non-Muslims. We did not bother anyone, and no one bothered us, and this is the right thing. Now when, uh, other Muslim immigrants came with headcovers or whatever and started making too much noise about their religion, it is not the right thing.

In addition to provoking hostility, furthermore, the college student Ibsham said that Muslims might also be imagining negative encounters:

My Mom wears the headscarf. She sometimes complains that—and in the winter she doesn’t wear it, in the winter she just, like, covers up with a hat or something—and she does complain that, when she is driving, that drivers are more aggressive. Things like that happen more often when she is wearing the headscarf. But at the same time, it could all just be in her head. I don’t know [laugh].

These six cases complement the findings derived from respondents expressing NCMs. They demonstrate a disinclination to interpret ambiguous incidents as Islamophobia—in fact, the respondents argue that other Muslims may be provoking or even imagining discrimination and racism. They distance themselves from Muslims who complain about marginalization, thus revealing a degree of within-group division. In their minds, those situations that demonstrably reveal Islamophobia—like the mosque shooting at Centre Islamique—merely constitute isolated incidents. None of the six linked politics to the shooting, for example. Neither did they object to laws restricting religious rights. For example, when asked about Bill 62, the respondents emphasized that the Quran does not require women to wear the niqab and that therefore banning the niqab does not infringe upon the rights of Muslims.

How can this divergent type of response be explained? Since I can draw on only six cases, any explanation must remain tentative, but I submit two hypotheses. First, isolation from politics appears to be one factor. With the exception of one respondent, who saw himself as a voice of moderation in pro-Muslim activism, none of the six showed much interest in Quebec politics. Given that I had advertised the study as an effort to better understand “the views and political participation of Muslim Quebeckers,” a participant named Hedi initially did not want to participate in the study, because he told me that he was not interested in politics at all. Ibsham and Lulwa could not name the main political parties in Quebec, and both of them had arrived in Quebec only a few years ago. As a result of their limited exposure to Quebec politics, these respondents had been relatively shielded from the first turning point I identified above: negative discourse about Muslims that accompanied debates about policies seeking to restrict religious rights. Second, the six respondents were less identifiable as Muslims than many other respondents. Five of the six were men and therefore less identifiable as Muslims than women wearing the hijab or niqab. Lulwa, the sole woman among the six respondents, did not wear the hijab. Accordingly, the six respondents may not have adopted NCMs due to their relatively low
chances of facing stark interpersonal encounters whose Islamophobic qualities are difficult or impossible to overlook—the second turning point I identified.

**Discussion**

Narratives of collective marginalization allow individuals to describe and explain negative personal experiences in light of a group membership that influences their social opportunities and public encounters. Producing the situational expectation of encountering racism (Tavory 2010), they enable individuals to overcome the ambiguity that frequently surrounds racism and discrimination. And in linking individuals and their fates to a shared collectivity, NCMs also connect group members to one another. That is, they produce groupness on the basis of a sense of linked fate (Brubaker 2004; Dawson 1994). As I have shown, this process may entail overcoming group-internal divisions. Some respondents reconsidered their views about the hijab or niqab after witnessing the political targeting and interpersonal hostility that women wearing these religious symbols faced. One atheist respondent even started to identify as Muslim only after realizing the collective marginalization of Muslims in Quebec. Scholars describe such processes as “reactive ethnicity,” group identification that strengthens as a result of external adversity (Flores forthcoming; Rumbaut 2008).

As biographical turning points that lead Muslim Quebeckers to adopt NCMs, I identified exposure to populist politics and personal encounters of overt Islamophobia. Furthermore, these turning points frequently coincided, because respondents reported facing unusually overt confrontations especially during periods of intense debate over policies seeking to restrict religious rights. This finding adds to the literature that analyzes the recent resurgence of anti-immigrant populism (Brubaker 2017). Researchers have done much to examine how anti-immigrant rhetoric influences opinions and behaviors among members of the majority society (for a review, see Flores 2017), but “how this rhetoric affects its objects—first- and second-generation immigrants—remains an understudied question” (Simonsen 2019:3). Simonsen (2019) reports that anti-multiculturalist party programs lower immigrants’ political trust and satisfaction with democracy in several European countries. Similarly, with the help of a survey experiment, Pérez (2015) finds that xenophobic rhetoric reduces political trust and increases ethnocentrism among Latinos with strong group identities in the United States. These studies are able to establish a quantifiable link between populist messages and immigrant attitudes, but they say little about mechanisms, the experiences and microprocesses that gradually reshape immigrants’ identities and social cognition. Findings from this paper thus complement these studies by identifying biographic moments and subsequent narrative work that mediate the effect of populist rhetoric and interpersonal hostility on the formation and content of NCMs. Future research should seek to test these mechanisms with the help of quantitative data. For instance, scholars might compare immigrants who directly experienced populist campaigning to those who remained isolated from politics or even arrived in the country in question after a period of populist politics had subsided.

In relation to personal encounters with overt Islamophobia, I have emphasized the importance of visibility, which shapes exposure to such situations. Due to the hijab and other religious garments, women tend to be more identifiable as Muslims than men, which also increases their risk of facing interpersonal hostility (Cainkar 2009; Tarlo 2010). Men are therefore less
likely to adopt NCMs than women, as my analysis of deviant cases in the prior section showed. Further developing the link between visibility and the formation of NCMs is an important task for future research. For example, if my explanation is correct, Jewish and Sikh men should be more likely to adopt NCMs than Jewish and Sikh women, because—among these two groups—it is the men who are more easily identifiable. For similar reasons, light-skinned African Americans who may be taken for white in public settings should be less likely to adopt NCMs.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the importance of narratives for the experience of race and ethnicity, but scholarship in this field has rarely incorporated the concept of narratives (but see Cornell 2000; Mohatt et al. 2014). Nevertheless, promising opportunities for doing so exist. For example, the group position framework seeks to explain behavior towards outgroups by invoking the sense of group position, “a very general orientation or broad-spectrum understanding of where the […] group should stand relative to the [other] group” (Bobo 1999:449–50; see also Blumer 1958; Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Group position scholars have so far not tried to clarify the phenomenological shape of the sense of group position. But with the help of the sociology of narrative, one can conceptualize the sense of group position as a possibly skeletal but shared narrative about group entitlements. Studying such narratives may show how a sense of group position initially emerges through the interplay of private meaning-making and collective efforts to create a public narrative that unifies the group in question. Such a focus on the initial emergence of the sense of group position is necessary to apply the group position framework outside of contexts in which intergroup conflict has been salient for generations, such as black-white conflict in the United States. Group position theory may thus benefit from incorporating narratives by developing a more dynamic and also microscopic understanding of the sense of group position.

Finally, findings from this paper have implications for the study of perceived discrimination and political mobilization. As a measurable concept, perceived discrimination necessarily combines exposure to negative experiences with the interpretation thereof. Understanding this interpretive component thus obviously matters. Researchers find that perceived discrimination negatively affects physical and mental health, happiness, job satisfaction, and much more (e.g., Ensher et al. 2001; Krieger 2014; Padela and Heisler 2010). Since NCMs and the situational expectations they engender make it possible for individuals to perceive discrimination as such, they would therefore seem to contribute to negative individual-level outcomes. On the other hand, an awareness of collective marginalization, which accompanies perceived discrimination, also produces ingroup solidarity and mobilizes group members for political initiatives to improve a group’s social standing and influence, as research on reactive ethnicity shows (Flores forthcoming; Pérez 2015; Rumbaut 2008). Narratives of collective marginalization stand at the core of both perceived discrimination and political initiatives seeking to eradicate it. Therefore, both literatures would likely benefit from systematically addressing the narrative features of social cognition.

**Bibliography**


