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Rejecting Muslim or Christian religious practices in five West European countries: a case of discriminatory rejection?

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ABSTRACT


Rejection of Muslim religious practices in West European societies is typically explained by prejudicial feelings towards Muslims as a group. However, although people can oppose Muslim religious practices because they feel negatively towards Muslims as a group, they might also have more general reasons for doing so. By simultaneously considering multiple religious acts (wearing religious symbols and following religious education in public schools) and multiple religious actors (Muslims and Christians), we theoretically differentiate between individuals who apply a double-standard by rejecting Muslim but not Christian religious practices (*discriminatory rejection*) and those who reject practices independently of the religious group engaged in them (*equal rejection*). Among majority members in five West European countries, the findings support the existence of equal rejection next to discriminatory rejection with both patterns of responses having different associations with people's prejudices towards Muslim, their endorsement of civil liberties and secular values, and their religious affiliation.

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Wearing of a headscarf in public schools or by civil servants, the building of Mosques and the founding of Islamic schools are some of the controversial issues when it comes to accommodating Muslim religious practices¹ in West European societies (Fetzer and Soper 2005). These practices tend to evoke much political and public debate and various studies have examined whether the public is willing to accept or rather reject them (e.g. Statham 2016; Van der Noll 2014). In this type of research, respondents are typically

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presented with two types of information: the group of Muslims and the specific religious practice. This means that people can respond to the group, to the specific practice, or a combination of the two. For example, one can resist the idea of the wearing of a headscarf by public servants because one feels negatively toward Muslims as a group or because one endorses secular principles and thinks that religion, in general, has no place among representatives of a secular state (Imhoff and Recker 2012; Mouritsen and Olsen 2013). When people apply a double standard by accepting the same or a similar practice from Christians but not from Muslims (discriminatory rejection; Hurwitz and Mondak 2002), this suggests negative feelings towards Muslims as a group. However, group-based negativity might be less relevant when practices are rejected regardless of the religious group engaged in them (equal rejection). Furthermore, rejecting a particular practice of a Muslim minority does not suggest that other Muslim practices are also rejected. For example, a person who rejects the wearing of veils might accept Islamic primary schools (Mondak and Sanders 2003).

These possibilities make it necessary to take more acts and more actors into account when evaluating why people reject Muslim minority practices. Such an approach allows to simultaneously consider whether people are rejecting or accepting across religious actors and across acts. The current analysis aims to demonstrate the importance of taking two actors (Muslims and Christians) and two acts (religious symbols and religious education) into account for improving our understanding of how people respond to Muslim minority members. We try to show the benefits of such a *multiple-acts-multiple-actors* approach by analysing data of a large-scale survey of majority members' attitudes towards Muslim minority citizens from five West European countries, and by considering the role of prejudice, the endorsement of civil liberties and secular principles, and religious affiliation.

Anti-Muslim reactions

Various studies indicate that negative feelings towards Muslims are more widespread than negative feelings towards other immigrant and minority groups (e.g. Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009; Spruyt and Elchardus 2012; but see Strabac, Aalberg, and Valenta 2014). For example, research that distinguishes between people's attitudes towards Muslim and Christian immigrants (e.g. Creighton and Jamal 2015), and towards Muslim and Christian religious practices (e.g. Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski 2015), demonstrates that Muslims are evaluated less positively than Christians. Anti-Muslim feelings have been found to be connected to group-based prejudice and to negative attitudes towards dissenting Muslim practices (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). Experimental research has demonstrated that the latter is a more decisive factor than the former, which suggests that people tend to

reject specific Muslim religious practices and do not *per se* view Muslim immigrants more negatively than Christian immigrants (Helbling and Traunmüller 2018; Sleijpen, Verkuyten, and Adelman 2020). However, only a few studies examined the combination of different religious actors and acts for understanding anti-Muslim reactions. To address this limitation, we used a multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach that we will explain by contrasting it to three other approaches.

Different approaches

In a *one-act-one-actor* approach, people are asked if they would accept a controversial, but legal, practice when performed by Muslim minority members, such as the wearing of a headscarf. Several studies applying this approach conclude that the rejection of an act is associated with dislike of Muslims (Helbling 2014). Erisen and Kentmen-Cin (2017) demonstrate that hostility towards Muslims increases intolerance of their political and social practices. Saroglou et al. (2009) conclude that subtle prejudices underlie the support for banning the wearing of the headscarf. Further, Van der Noll (2014) finds significant associations between the dislike of Muslims and the willingness to ban various civil rights (wearing headscarves, Islamic education, building mosques).

However, acceptance or rejection of Muslim religious practices does not always align with how people feel towards Muslims as a group of people. One can accept Muslim practices despite having negative feelings towards Muslims or reject Muslim practices without harbouring negative feelings towards the group. For instance, Van der Noll (2014) found that 20 per cent of the respondents rejected headscarves, Muslim symbols and minarets despite having positive attitudes towards Muslims. Similarly, Sniderman and Hagendoorn (2007) employed a covered measure of prejudices, and showed that rejection of Muslim practices can be based on more principled concerns, rather than dislike of the group.

A *one-act-one-actor* approach ignores the possibility that people might be opposed to the practice *per se*. Such a more general objection implies that individuals do not apply a double standard and would object to the same practice when, for example, Christians are engaged in it. Further, the objection might be act-specific and individuals might not reject other Muslim practices.

A *multiple-acts-one-actor approach* tries to address the latter limitation by taking more acts into account. People are asked whether they would accept several acts when performed by the same actor, such as Muslim teachers wearing religious symbols and the founding of Islamic schools. This approach offers insight into the depth of acceptance by differentiating between those who accept or reject all acts, and those who accept some acts but reject others. This improves the research by capturing the idea that acceptance

may not be a global construct, but rather topic specific, as it depends not only on whom people are asked to accept but also on the nature of the dissenting practices (e.g. Gibson and Gouws 2001; Petersen et al. 2011). For example, rather weak intercorrelations of acceptance of different Muslim practices (ranging from $r = 0.09$ to $r = 0.48$; Van der Noll 2014) indicate that cross-practice consistency in acceptance is not common and that people take the nature of the practices into consideration.

This approach prevents equating rejection of a particular practice with prejudicial attitudes towards the group. Considering multiple acts might reveal that people differentiate between practices by rejecting some and accepting others, as different practices evoke different moral and normative concerns. For instance, people might object to the wearing of a headscarf due to concerns regarding gender equality (Sarrasin 2016) but accept other practices where these concerns are not relevant, such as religious education in public schools. Yet, when people accept some practices and reject others, it is still possible that they do so because they dislike Muslims as a group. For example, Adelman and Verkuyten (2020) identified a group of people who rejected various Muslim practices without having prejudicial feelings towards Muslims, and a group of people who rejected the same Muslim practices but reported negative affect towards Muslims.

A *one-act-multiple-actors* approach entails asking people if they would accept the same act when performed by different actors, such as allowing Muslim and Christian teachers to wear religious symbols in public schools. This approach makes it possible to differentiate between individuals who reject a particular practice across groups and those who apply a double standard and reject the practice only when performed by Muslims. For example, in a study in Germany, it was found that negative attitudes towards Muslims contributed to the discriminatory rejection of Islamic education, whereas secular individuals were more likely to reject religious education for both groups (Van der Noll and Saroglou 2015). And in a study in Quebec (Bilodeau et al. 2018), a distinction was made between individuals who favoured a ban of all religious symbols and those who favoured a religious minority restriction. While the former group of individuals was motivated by secular and liberal values, the latter was motivated by prejudices and feelings of cultural threat.

The one-act-multiple-actors approach enables to identify whether rejection is more general anti-religion or rather discriminatory and reflecting dislike of Muslims as a group (Mondak and Hurwitz 1998). If people are equally opposed to Muslims and Christians engaging in the same act (actor consistent; no double standard), it is more likely that they have general reasons for doing so. And if people apply a double standard and reject a particular act only for Muslims (actor inconsistent), it is more likely that negative feelings towards Muslims are involved.

However, this approach does not allow to assess whether the equal or discriminatory rejection is practice-specific. People might reject both Christian and Muslim civil servants wearing religious symbols, but accept Christian primary education and reject Islamic schools. Or they might be rejecting both Muslims and Christians across both practices. These possibilities indicate the need to simultaneously consider multiple actors and acts.

The *multiple-acts-multiple-actors* approach entails asking people if they would accept different acts when performed by different actors. For example, for two acts (religious symbols and education) and two actors (Muslims and Christians), there are sixteen logically possible combinations of acceptance and rejection. Nine of these combinations are presented in Table 1 (the remaining seven combinations of positive discrimination of Muslims will not be considered here, but see Table A1 in the supplementary materials).

With this approach, we can logically distinguish between subgroups of individuals with different patterns of responses. The first four patterns represent a more general position characterized by an equal rejection or acceptance of the acts (rows C1–C4). Regardless of whether they accept or reject practices, these individuals do not apply a double standard by making a distinction between Muslims and Christians. Within this equal position, we can logically distinguish between those who are consistently accepting the acts for both groups (C1 – *equal acceptance*), those who are consistently rejecting the acts for both groups (C4 – *equal rejection*), and those who are partial accepting/rejecting by displaying inconsistency across acts (C2 and C3 – *partial equal rejection*). The remaining patterns reflect *discriminatory rejection*, characterized by a double-standard in which there is the rejection of act(s) when performed by Muslims but not by Christians (C5–C9).

This approach gives a more detailed and nuanced understanding of people's responses toward Muslim minorities. It allows us to examine the proportions of those showing different forms of equal and discriminatory rejection/acceptance (Hurwitz and Mondak 2002). Additionally, the distinction between equal and discriminatory rejection can be further examined by testing whether the subgroups differ in terms of prejudices toward Muslims, endorsement of secular values and civil liberties, and religious affiliation.

The role of prejudice, principles and religious affiliation

Prejudices

The rejection of Muslim practices is often linked to prejudice, which is examined, for example, in terms of negative stereotypes (e.g. Saroglou et al. 2009), xenophobia (Helbling 2014), outgroup hostility (Erisen and Kentmen-Cin

Table 1. Combinations for the multiple acts (symbols and education) and multiple actors (Muslims and Christians) approach with percentages of classified respondents.

| Combinations | Symbols | | Education | | Interpretation | Percentages in the samples | |
|--------------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| | Christian | Muslim | Christian | Muslim | | Five countries ($N = 1,580$) | The analytical sample – three countries ($N = 739$) |
| C1. | Accept | Accept | Accept | Accept | Equal acceptance | 16.6% | 19.4% |
| C2. | Reject | Reject | Accept | Accept | Partial equal rejection | 28.9% | 27.3% |
| C3. | Accept | Accept | Reject | Reject | | | |
| C4. | Reject | Reject | Reject | Reject | Equal rejection | 15.3% | 8.4% |
| C5. | Reject | Reject | Accept | Reject | Discriminatory rejection | 39.2% | 44.9% |
| C6. | Accept | Reject | Reject | Reject | | | |
| C7. | Accept | Accept | Accept | Reject | | | |
| C8. | Accept | Reject | Accept | Accept | | | |
| C9. | Accept | Reject | Accept | Reject | | | |

2017), general feelings of dislike or feelings of cultural threat (Bilodeau et al. 2018). Regardless of the specific operationalization used, the findings are similar: prejudice is positively related to the rejection of Muslim religious practices (e.g. Bilodeau et al. 2018; Erisen and Kentmen-Cin 2017), and increases the likelihood of rejecting Muslim compared to Christian religious practices (Van der Noll and Saroglou 2015). We expected that individuals with stronger prejudicial feelings towards Muslims (higher social distance and higher perceived cultural threat) will be more likely to display discriminatory rejection (C5–C9, Table 1) compared to equal rejection (C4). We did not expect prejudicial feelings to have an effect on displaying different patterns of equal responses (C1–C4) as these patterns do not involve the use of a double standard at the disadvantage of Muslims.

Principles

Civil liberties

The endorsement of *civil liberties*, such as freedom of speech and freedom of expression, is a reason for accepting dissenting religious practices in the public domain (Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran, and Adelman 2019). Recognizing the right of each citizens to express their views and live the life they want is related to political and social tolerance (Sullivan and Transue 1999). People who emphasize the importance of protecting individual rights and freedoms tend to be more accepting of minority practices (Helbling 2014). For example, valuing civil liberties was associated with lower support for banning headscarves in Germany (Van der Noll 2014). Further, Saroglou et al. (2009) showed that those who value freedom more tend to be more accepting of Muslim religious symbols. And those who emphasize that the state should not restrict individual choices, tend to express less negative attitudes towards veiling (Gustavsson, van der Noll, and Sundberg 2016). Therefore, we expected that stronger endorsement of civil liberties will be associated with higher likelihood of displaying equal acceptance (C1) and partial equal rejection (C2–C3), compared to equal rejection (C4).

Secular principles

Research has demonstrated that secularism predicts rejection of Muslim religious practices on top of negative feelings towards Muslims as a group (Van Bohemen, Kemmers, and De Koster 2011). Secular critique involves an objection to religious interference in governmental affairs and public institutions, which can form the ground for rejecting Muslim minority practices (Imhoff and Recker 2012). In a German study, respondents were asked if public schools should offer only Christian education, both Christian and Islamic education or no religious education at all. It was found that secular principles play a role in rejecting Islamic education, net off negative attitudes towards

Muslims (Van der Noll and Saroglou 2015). A study in Sweden comparing the willingness to prohibit the wearing of religious symbols (Aarøe 2012) found that those who support secularism do not differentiate between the banning of Christians' and Muslims' symbols. Further, Breton and Eady (2015) showed that secular beliefs predicted support for a ban on religious symbols in Quebec, in addition to prejudicial feelings. Similar findings were reported in another study in Quebec, which compared the willingness to ban only Muslim religious symbols (by supporting the Charter of Values) to both Christian and Muslim religious symbols in public spaces (support for removing the crucifix from the National Assembly in addition to support for the Charter of Values; Bilodeau et al. 2018). Therefore, we expected that endorsement of secularism will be associated with higher likelihood of displaying equal rejection (C4) compared to equal acceptance (C1), partial equal rejection (C2–C3) and discriminatory rejection (C5–C9).

Religious affiliation

Being *affiliated with Christian religion* might be another reason for rejecting Muslim religious practices. Social Identity Theory proposes that being a member of a group results in the tendency to favour members of one's in-group and discriminate against out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 1979). There is a large amount of empirical evidence supporting this ingroup favouring pattern of intergroup relations. Therefore, individuals affiliated with Christian religion might be inclined to favour their own religion and religious in-group members. For example, a predominantly Christian sample in the US was found to have more positive attitudes toward Christians than Muslims (Rowatt, Franklin, and Cotton 2005). Thus, those affiliated with Christianity can be expected to be more accepting of Christians than of Muslims engaging in the same practices. In contrast, for religiously unaffiliated individuals both Muslims and Christians are religious out-groups and they might be more likely to reject the same practices for both groups. Therefore, we expected that, compared to Christians, religiously unaffiliated individuals will be more likely to display equal rejection (C4) than equal acceptance (C1), partial equal rejection (C2–C3) and discriminatory rejection (C5–C9).

Method

Data and sample

Data for the study are from the majority members of the EURISLAM research project that focused on national identity, citizenship and the incorporation of Muslims in six European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, the

Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK; Hoksbergen and Tillie 2012). Participants were randomly selected members of the national majority older than 18 years. The data were collected over the course of 2011 and the first month of 2012 by professional polling agencies using computer-assisted-telephone-interviewing. In total, 2,317 majority members participated. Response rates varied from 31 per cent in the Netherlands to 92 per cent in the UK.

For the descriptive analysis, we focused on national majority members who were either Christian or religiously unaffiliated and who provided an answer to all four items regarding Muslim and Christian religious practices ($N = 2,097$).² Further, the very small number of participants who accepted practices for Muslims but rejected these for Christians were excluded since they were not of interest in our study. In addition, we excluded the UK data from the analyses because in this country participants were asked about public rather than state schools. The former are selective private schools that are typically affiliated with or established by Christian denominations and therefore almost all British respondents displayed discriminatory rejection. This reduced the sample size to 1,580 respondents.

Finally, the explanatory analyses focused on respondents from Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, who provided information on all of the variables of interest ($N = 739$). Questions on several predictor variables were not asked in France and the Netherlands. Thus, these countries could not be considered in the explanatory analyses, although they were considered in the descriptive analyses.

Measures

Dependent variable

In order to classify people into the different subgroups (Table 1), we used the four items that assessed the acceptance of two religious practices for both Christians and Muslims: "Public schools should offer < Muslim/Christian > religious education for those who want it", "Teachers in public schools should not be allowed to wear a veil" and "Teachers in public schools should not be allowed to wear visible Christian symbols such as a cross or a nun's habit." The items were presented in random order and respondents indicated on a 4-point scale whether they (strongly) agreed or (strongly) disagreed with each of the four items. For each of these, we computed a dichotomous variable indicating either acceptance or rejection. There were two main reasons for doing so. First, we are theoretically interested in the multiple-act-multiple-actors pattern of rejection versus acceptance, rather than the degree of rejection or acceptance. Second, using an ordinal variable with four categories as a continuous variable can lead to biased estimates (Rhemtulla, Brosseau-Liard, and Savalei 2012). Thus, participants were classified into four

groups: those who showed acceptance across the groups and across the acts (equal acceptance; C1 in Table 1), those who consistently rejected across groups and acts (equal rejection; C4); those who were consistent across groups but act inconsistent (partial equal rejection; C2–C3) and those who responded in a double standard way in which they discriminated against Muslims (discriminatory rejection; C5–C9).³

Independent variables

Prejudice. Prejudicial attitudes toward Muslims were assessed with two measures: social distance and perceived cultural threat. Social distance was measured with six items. Four items were measured on 3-point scales (for example, “Imagine that you got a Muslim neighbour, would you find that pleasant, unpleasant or would it not make a difference to you?”), and two additional items were measured on 4-point scales (for example, “I try to avoid places where there are a lot of Muslims”). Responses to each item were normalized to range from 0 to 1 so that higher scores indicate higher social distance. The items formed a scale with an acceptable reliability ($\rho = .76$) and were thus averaged ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.16$; for the estimates per country see Table A3 in the supplementary materials).⁴

Cultural threat was calculated as the average score of four items measured on 4-point scales (for example, “Muslims are trying to destroy Western culture”). The four items formed a reliable scale ($\rho = .77$) and a higher score indicates higher perceived cultural threat ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.67$, Table A3).

Secularism was measured on a 5-point scale by the following item: “It would be better for <country> if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office.” The response scale was reversed so that a higher score indicated stronger support for secularism ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.22$; Table A3).

Civil liberty was measured on a 5-point scale by the following item: “Everybody has the right to say whatever he or she wants in public.” A higher score indicates higher agreement with civil liberty ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.09$; Table A3).

Religiously unaffiliated versus Christian. Being religiously unaffiliated refers to individuals who reported being atheist or not belonging to any religious affiliation (21 per cent; Table A3), versus self-reported affiliation to a Christian (i.e. Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox) denomination.⁵

Control variables

Demographic characteristics. We controlled for age, gender and education. For age we subtracted respondents’ birth year from the year in which the data were collected (2011; $M = 49.7$, $SD = 17.3$; Table A3). The per cent of female respondents in our sample was 54.5 (Table A3). Further, since the frequencies of those who completed only primary education or did not complete any education were low, the original variable was recoded into a bicategorical

variable. Respondents who completed secondary education or lower were classified into a “low education” category, whereas those who completed tertiary education were classified into a “high education” category. The per cent of high education was 41.1 (Table A3).

Countries. The sample for the explanatory analyses consisted of citizens from Belgium, Switzerland and Germany. These countries differ in various respects. In 2010, a year before the EURISLAM fieldwork, the percentage of Muslim citizens living in these countries was 6 per cent, 4.9 per cent and 4.1 per cent (Pew Research Center 2017), respectively. Most of Muslims living in Belgium are of Moroccan and Turkish origin (Manço 2000), whereas those living in Switzerland or Germany come from Turkey or ex-Yugoslavia (Lathion 2008; Thielmann 2008). All three countries are characterized by a regime that entails cooperation between state and church, but differ in the extent to which they accommodate non-Christian religions, with Belgium being the most accommodating (Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski 2015; Fox 2012). Existing research does not provide consistent evidence about the extent to which these regimes influence individual-level attitudes towards religious outgroups and their practices (Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski 2015; Fetzer and Soper 2005; Helbling and Traunmüller 2018). Therefore, we controlled for country differences, with Belgium as the reference category. In addition, we examined the robustness of the findings across the countries to assess the generalizability of the pattern of “act-actor” responses and their correlates. For this, we conducted a multi-group comparison which indicates whether the associations found are similar across countries.

Analyses

In the first step of the analyses, descriptive statistics were computed for the different “act-actor approaches”. In the second step, multinomial logistic regression analysis was used to estimate the likelihood of displaying equal acceptance, partial equal rejection or discriminatory rejection compared to the likelihood of displaying equal rejection. In the third step, multi-group multinomial logistic regression was performed to test if the effects were robust across countries.

Results

Descriptive findings

The *one-act-one-actor* approach indicates that 49 per cent of the respondents did not approve of Muslim religious education (Graph A1 in Figure 1; see Figure A1 for the analytic sample), and 72 per cent of Muslim teachers wearing religious symbols in public schools (Graph B1). These numbers

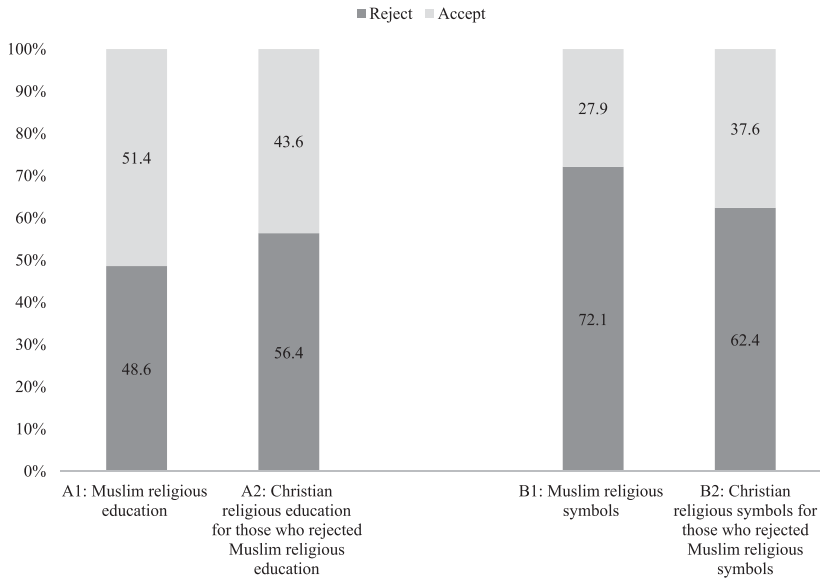


Figure 1. Percentages of rejection of Muslim religious practices (A1 and B1) and percentage of rejection of Christian practices among those who rejected Muslim practices (A2 and B2): the pooled sample from five countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, The Netherlands, $N = 1,580$).

should, however, not be interpreted as suggesting that a majority of respondents was biased against Muslims. When the Christian actor is taken into account (the *one-act-two-actors* approach), 56 per cent of those who objected toward Muslim education also objected toward Christian education (Graph A2). Furthermore, 62 per cent of those who rejected Muslim symbols also rejected Christian symbols (Graph B2). Thus, there are relatively high percentages of consistent responses towards Muslims and Christians, suggesting no double standard against Muslims for many of the respondents who rejected Muslim religious practices.

When both acts and actors are considered simultaneously (the *multiple-acts-multiple-actors* approach, Table 1), around 61 per cent (55 per cent in the three countries) of respondents belong to one of the equal subgroups with 17 per cent (19 per cent) displaying equal acceptance, 15 per cent (8 per cent) equal rejection and 29 per cent (27 per cent) partial equal rejection. The remaining 39 per cent (45 per cent) respondents belong to discriminatory rejection (for the percentages per country see Table A2 in the supplementary materials). These percentages provide a nuanced picture of the different ways in which majority members evaluate Muslim practices, thereby demonstrating the benefits of the multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach over the other approaches.

The predictive analyses

The results of multinomial logistic models comparing the subgroup of equal rejection (C4, Table 1) with discriminatory rejection (C5–C9), partial equal rejection (C2–C3) and equal acceptance (C1), respectively revealed, as expected, that social distance was associated with higher likelihood of displaying discriminatory than equal rejection (see Model 1 in Table 2 for results of

Table 2. Findings of multinomial logistic regression analysis (equal rejection as the reference category).

| | Model 1 Pooled sample, N = 739 Log odds (SE) | Model 2 Belgium, N = 259 Log odds (SE) | Model 3 Switzerland, N = 234 Log odds (SE) | Model 4 Germany, N = 246 Log odds (SE) |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| <i>Discriminatory rejection versus equal rejection</i> | | | | |
| Intercept | 1.36 (1.14) | 4.38* (1.89) | −1.90 (1.64) | 3.07 (2.74) |
| Country (ref. Belgium) | | | | |
| Switzerland | −0.61 (0.39) | | | |
| Germany | 0.14 (0.47) | | | |
| Gender (ref. male) | 0.07 (0.30) | −0.28 (0.49) | 0.67 (0.44) | −0.64 (0.71) |
| Education (ref. lower education) | −0.28 (0.33) | −1.00 (0.56) | 0.53 (0.56) | −0.29 (0.73) |
| Age | 0.00 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) | −0.02 (0.01) | −0.01 (0.02) |
| Social distance | 2.95* (1.26) | 1.89 (2.11) | 2.60 (1.71) | 6.98 (4.08) |
| Cultural threat | 0.15 (0.26) | −0.35 (0.47) | 1.05* (0.41) | −1.45* (0.64) |
| Religiously unaffiliated | −0.87* (0.34) | −0.89 (0.57) | −0.21 (0.62) | −2.95** (1.04) |
| Secularism | −0.63*** (0.16) | −0.74** (0.27) | −0.52* (0.24) | −0.82 (0.59) |
| Freedom of speech | 0.42** (0.13) | 0.16 (0.19) | 0.52** (0.20) | 1.13* (0.46) |
| <i>Equal acceptance versus equal rejection</i> | | | | |
| Intercept | 5.65*** (1.29) | 10.32*** (2.22) | 0.27 (2.18) | 9.14** (3.35) |
| Country (ref. Belgium) | | | | |
| Switzerland | −1.36** (0.44) | | | |
| Germany | 0.36 (0.50) | | | |
| Gender (ref. male) | 0.40 (0.33) | 0.10 (0.57) | 0.81 (0.54) | −0.16 (0.72) |
| Education (ref. lower education) | −0.51 (0.37) | −0.80 (0.64) | 0.31 (0.70) | −0.88 (0.76) |
| Age | −0.02 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.02) | −0.02 (0.02) | −0.04 (0.02) |
| Social distance | −0.51 (1.51) | −4.24 (2.75) | −0.08 (2.57) | 4.11 (4.19) |
| Cultural threat | −0.96** (0.30) | −1.97** (0.59) | 0.37 (0.49) | −2.66*** (0.73) |
| Religiously unaffiliated | −0.85* (0.39) | −1.04 (0.63) | −0.32 (0.76) | −2.68** (1.03) |
| Secularism | −0.80*** (0.17) | −1.02** (0.31) | −0.68* (0.27) | −0.98 (0.59) |
| Freedom of speech | 0.49** (0.16) | 0.33 (0.23) | 0.57** (0.22) | 1.04* (0.47) |
| <i>Partial equal rejection versus equal rejection</i> | | | | |
| Intercept | 3.33** (1.19) | 7.00*** (2.04) | −1.45 (1.77) | 5.43 (2.91) |
| Country (ref. Belgium) | | | | |
| Switzerland | −1.58*** (0.40) | | | |
| Germany | −0.39 (0.48) | | | |
| Gender (ref. male) | 0.04 (0.31) | −0.23 (0.49) | 0.50 (0.49) | −0.54 (0.70) |
| Education (ref. lower education) | −0.22 (0.34) | −1.03 (0.57) | 0.79 (0.61) | −0.23 (0.73) |
| Age | 0.00 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.02) | −0.01 (0.02) | −0.01 (0.02) |
| Social distance | −0.21 (1.35) | −2.20 (2.27) | 2.64 (2.00) | 2.16 (4.05) |
| Cultural threat | −0.26 (0.27) | −0.76 (0.46) | 0.31 (0.46) | −1.70** (0.61) |
| Religiously unaffiliated | −0.10 (0.34) | −0.09 (0.54) | 0.47 (0.65) | −1.91 (0.97) |
| Secularism | −0.60*** (0.16) | −0.81** (0.29) | −0.47 (0.26) | −0.75 (0.58) |
| Freedom of speech | 0.44** (0.14) | 0.27 (0.19) | 0.42* (0.21) | 1.07** (0.41) |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

the pooled sample; see Table A4 in the supplementary materials for odd ratios). However, perceived cultural threat did not predict higher discriminatory rejection compared to equal rejection, but was associated with a lower likelihood of displaying equal acceptance than equal rejection. Our expectations were confirmed for civil liberties and secular values. Those who were less in favour of freedom of speech and those endorsing secularism were more likely to show equal rejection compared to equal acceptance, partial equal rejection and discriminatory rejection. Furthermore and also as expected, the religiously unaffiliated were more likely to show equal rejection than equal acceptance or discriminatory rejection. However, religious affiliation did not significantly predict equal rejection compared to partial equal rejection.

Country comparisons

The country main effects indicated that respondents from Switzerland were more likely to display equal rejection than equal acceptance or partial equal rejection compared to participants from Belgium. Models 2, 3 and 4 in Table 2 show little variation in the estimates between countries. There were differences in the statistical significance of effects due to the smaller sample sizes but the direction of effects was mostly consistent. The one exception was a cultural threat, which was associated with a lower likelihood of displaying equal rejection compared to other forms of rejection/acceptance in Switzerland but not in the other countries. In order to examine whether the overall pattern of associations was similar across the three countries, we compared the model for the pooled sample (Model 1) to a model in which the effects of all the main predictors were constrained to be the same in all countries. There was no significant difference between the constrained and the unconstrained model, Wald χ^2 (48) = 61.01, p = .098, which indicates that there is a similar pattern of associations between the different variables in the three countries.

Discussion

The current study examined the acceptance of Muslim practices that continue to be much debated in Western Europe, namely the wearing of a headscarf in public schools and Islamic public education. The aim of our study was to show that an approach that simultaneously considers different religious groups (actors) and different religious practices (acts) provides a nuanced understanding of the different patterns of rejecting or accepting Muslim minority practices. Furthermore, by examining how different forms of rejection relate to prejudices towards Muslims, civil liberties and secular values, and religious affiliation, we tried to improve our understanding about why people reject or accept Muslim minority practices.

An important advantage of a multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach is that it makes possible to differentiate between discriminatory and equal rejection. Much of the previous research on anti-Muslim feelings has considered only Muslim practices which can lead to the misidentification of individuals as either having negative or positive feelings toward Muslims. For example, around half of the respondents in our sample who rejected Muslim practices also rejected the same practices for Christians. This indicates that half of those who rejected a Muslim practice were not applying a double standard in which Muslims are discriminated against. Furthermore, whereas half of the people responded in an actor-inconsistent way by rejecting only Muslim practices (discriminatory rejection), around a third displayed actor-consistent rejection, either by rejecting all practices for both groups (equal rejection) or only one of the practices for both groups (partial equal rejection). These findings provide empirical support for the existence of general rejection in addition to the discriminatory rejection of Muslim minority practices (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007). It is therefore likely that previous research has overestimated the role of antipathy toward Muslims in explaining the rejection of specific Muslim practices, which is also suggested by experimental research (Helbling and Trauttmüller 2018; Sleijpen, Verkuyten, and Adelman 2020).

The findings regarding the role of secularism, religious affiliation and prejudices toward Muslims further support this interpretation. Equal rejection is more likely to be based on secular values for which there is empirical support (Bilodeau et al. 2018; Van der Noll and Saroglou 2015). In contrast, discriminatory rejection involves a pattern of Muslim specific opposition, and Christian affiliation (vs. non-religious) and higher social distance were found to be related to a higher likelihood of displaying discriminatory rejection of Muslim practices. These findings are in line with Social Identity Theory according to which group belonging promotes ingroup favouritism (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and with findings that feelings of antipathy can underlie the discrimination of Muslim minorities (Saroglou et al. 2009; Van der Noll 2014).

Unlike social distance, perceived cultural threat was not significantly related to a higher likelihood of displaying discriminatory rejection compared to equal rejection. Although perceptions of cultural threat are related to anti-Muslim feelings (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007), it might be that cultural threat reflects more general concerns about incompatible moral values that challenge social cohesion and the functioning of society. According to Mouritsen and Olsen (2013), one of the modalities of equal rejection is the perception that the national unity is undermined. Furthermore, in experimental research, it is found that practices that are considered to contradict society's normative and moral ways of life are rejected independently of the religious minority group engaged in them (Hirsch, Verkuyten, and Yogeeswaran 2019; Sleijpen, Verkuyten, and Adelman 2020). The notion that perceived cultural incompatibilities can drive equal rejection is further supported by our

finding that higher cultural threat – but not social distance – was associated with a higher likelihood of displaying equal rejection compared to equal acceptance. While individuals who rejected both practices for both religious groups (equal rejection) and those who accepted both practices for both groups (equal acceptance) had similar social distance towards Muslims, the former perceived Muslim practices as more incompatible with the western way of life.

Another advantage of the multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach is the possibility to examine whether different forms of equal rejection are guided by different principles. While individuals who displayed equal rejection endorsed secularism more strongly and those who displayed equal acceptance endorsed freedom of speech, individuals who displayed partial equal rejection were in-between. They were more in favour of freedom of speech than those with equal rejection and more in favour of secularism than those with equal acceptance (for the latter comparison see Table A8 in the supplementary materials). Individuals with a partial equal pattern of responses (group-consistent and act-inconsistent) are particularly interesting for two reasons. First, these individuals demonstrate that rejection or acceptance does not have to generalize across different acts. This indicates that it is not very useful to think of acceptance as a concept that implies a positive attitude toward all forms of dissenting practices (Gibson 2005). Second, it suggests that people are not always clearly guided by a single principle or value but can follow different principles that might be conflicting. This raises the question for future research of how different principles and values are used in accepting or rejecting Muslim practices (e.g. Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001).

Limitations

Three limitations of our study provide additional directions for future research. First, our multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach focused on two acts and two actors. This is an improvement compared to most of the research on people's attitudes towards Muslims in western societies. However, it is still limited as it is possible to consider more religious groups and a wider range of practices, which might introduce further nuances in our understanding of the rejection of Muslim practices. Specifically, it offers the possibility to more fully examine the breadth (number of religious groups) and depth (number of practices) of rejection and acceptance (Mondak and Sanders 2003).

Second, we cannot rule out the possibility that social desirability response tendencies affected the findings but it is difficult to estimate in what direction. Some people may perceive strong social norms in favour of Christians over Muslims and may thus feel obliged to express support for Christian but not for Muslim practices. In line with such social norms, U.S. researchers found

that respondents favoured Christian over Muslim immigrants in an explicit survey question but not in an unobtrusive measure of bias (Creighton and Jamal 2015). Other people may perceive strong social norms of fairness that prevent the open expression of double standards. Asking the same question for different social groups in a survey, as it was the case here, can affect results if respondents favour one group over the other but do not want to violate fairness norms (Stark et al. 2018). Thus, it is possible that some people accepted Muslim practices because they just said that they accept the same practices by Christians or that they rejected Christian practices because they just rejected the same practices by Muslims. The role of social desirability concerns is likely to fluctuate not only between people but also in time and across contexts, which makes it difficult to assess whether and how exactly these concerns might affect the current findings.

Third, our findings show that being affiliated with Christian religion (vs. non-affiliated) had opposite effects: Christians were more likely to display equal acceptance as well as discriminatory rejection. These contrasting results might be explained by whether Christians endorse social inclusive versus exclusive religious beliefs and values (Schaffer, Sokhey, and Djupe 2015). While the former are characterized by a more open and welcoming orientation toward minority groups, the latter involve the belief that minorities should be avoided and excluded. Future studies on the rejection of Muslim practices should distinguish between these different dimensions and forms of religiosity and religious belonging (Djupe 2015).

Conclusion

We demonstrated that a multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the rejection of Muslim minority practices in Western societies. The findings were similar across the different countries and indicate that there are different meaningful subgroups of majority members. People who reject Muslim minority practices can either reject or accept similar practices for Christians, and accepting a particular practice of both Muslims and Christians does not have to mean that other religious practices of these groups are also accepted. The distinction between equal and discriminatory rejection is important because it prevents us from making anti-Muslim attributions to those who have more general objections to religious practices in public life and thereby provides a further understanding of the public and political controversies over the accommodation of Muslims in Western societies.

The multiple-acts-multiple-actors approach can be applied to a wide range of societal issues and minority groups (e.g. Sniderman et al. 1989). Its usefulness is not limited to people's responses to Muslim minorities but can provide valuable insights about intergroup relations in culturally diverse societies

more generally. In many situations, it is important to know whether people feel negative towards a particular minority group or toward specific practices of that group, or a combination of the two. The presented approach makes it possible to gain a more detailed insight into people's evaluations of (religious) minority groups and their practices which is important for finding productive ways for accommodating differences in our increasingly diverse societies.

Notes

1. By using the term "religious practices", we are not implying that these are typical for Muslims but rather indicating how these practices are often perceived in Western societies.
2. Analytic scripts can be found at <https://osf.io/bjuey/>.
3. We explored an alternative way of clustering whereby within the group showing discriminatory rejection we differentiated between those who consistently discriminated against Muslims (C9), those who discriminated against Muslims in one act but accepted the engagement in the other act (C7–C8), and those who discriminated Muslims on one act and rejected the engagement of both groups in the other act (C5–C6). Comparing abovementioned categories with equal rejection revealed similar findings as when all the discriminatory categories were merged (Table A5 in the supplementary materials).
4. An alternative way of coding based on standardized items revealed the same pattern of results (Table A6 in the supplementary materials).
5. Participants were also asked about their religious identification. However, the question was only asked to those who reported being religiously affiliated, which substantially reduced the sample size. Despite this, considering religious identification instead of religious affiliation (Table A7 in the supplementary materials) revealed the same pattern of findings.

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