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Hijab-wearing women face interactional discrimination in everyday encounters: two field experiments

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Abstract. The document introduces the idea of interactional discrimination and puts it to test through two interlocking field experiments. As a first approximation, interactional discrimination covers part of the phenomena usually designated with the more informal label of “everyday discrimination”. It is also close to other more formal ideas such as “interpersonal discrimination”, “micro-aggression” and “assault on self-worth”. The latter three ideas are predicated on an opposition between economic and non-economic outcomes of discrimination. In contrast, the defining feature of interactional discrimination is the specific context in which it occurs: a spatio-temporally bounded episode of social interaction. The two reported field experiments show that women who wear an Islamic headscarf in France are exposed to interactional discrimination on the part of men. The data indicate that in the course of a face-to-face engagement with a hijab-wearing woman, men avert gaze, and that on average this pattern of gaze aversion causes strong negative emotions or stress in the recipient. The study shows that stress represents a specific form of harm that interactional discrimination causes to women who wear the hijab in public. It is argued that pre-existing ideas of everyday discrimination, owing to their focus on the conceptual experience of indignity, are not well-suited for accommodating the often unreflective experience of stress.

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Interactional discrimination: justification and definition

Before dealing with its interactional variety, it is useful to start with a definition of discrimination in general. It may be said that actor X discriminates actor Y when X treats Y differently from Z, the cause of the difference in treatment is the fact that Y and Z are (seen as) members of different social groups, and the consequence of the difference in treatment is an outcome less favorable to Y than it would had been the case had X treated Y as Z (adapted from Lippert-Rasmussen 2006). Discrimination is a causal and comparative concept. Its causal story is made up of two stages: first, a difference in group membership (e.g. Muslim vs non-Muslim) causes a difference in treatment; second, the difference in treatment causes a relative harm or disadvantage. Comparison is necessary at each stage: first, to establish a contrast between the way in which Y and Z are respectively treated; second, to establish an ordering (in terms of more and less, better and worse) between the consequences of that difference in treatment for Y and Z.

The typical “correspondence study” in labor economics and other related fields perfectly conforms to this definition (Bertrand and Duflo 2017). To investigate discrimination in the job market, the researcher creates at least two CVs that are identical in all respects save for a piece of information that allows the employer to assign the (fake) applicant to one social group or another. To assess if the two candidates are treated differently, the researcher records whether a given CV sent to a given employer (the experimental stimulus) prompts a reply, e.g. an invitation to a job interview (the response). By aggregating these dichotomous responses across the two experimental conditions, the researcher obtains a callback rate by condition – more rarely, researchers go on to see whether the callback translates in a job offer. If these turn out to differ, the researcher concludes that discrimination is at work.

Correspondence studies have been remarkably successful in demonstrating discrimination on various grounds across a variety of contexts. But one unintended consequence of their success, I surmise, has been to lead researchers and the public to restrict the practical applicability of the

concept of discrimination to domains in which the detrimental outcome of receiving unequal treatment can be inferred from the act of applying, as in correspondence studies. Thus the concept of discrimination has been extended to other areas in which, analogous to the labor market, the obtention of a desired object goes through an application process, such as access to housing, credit or education (Pager and Shepherd 2008). Because the objects for which applications are relevant tend to coincide with goods and services that can be assigned a monetary value, another unintended bias present in public debates as much as in scientific practice has been to restrict the outcomes that may be affected by discrimination to the sole economic dimension (Lamont et al. 2016).

Given this unintended but unnecessary restriction of the concept of discrimination, stress research is well poised to widen the view. Stress is generally undesirable. If stress is the consequence of a difference in treatment caused by assignment to different social groups, it follows that stress must be admitted, alongside economic utility, as an independent dimension of life upon which discrimination may impinge.

However, to the best of my knowledge in the area of stress the objectivistic definition of discrimination that I have spelled out has not been used. In its lieu, what has been measured is *perceived* discrimination, as self-reported (Williams et al. 2019). Perceived discrimination raises the vexing methodological problems of unreliable recall, absence of an external criterion and confounding with the outcome. At the time of responding, does the respondent remember all the experienced occurrences of discrimination? Did discrimination really occur? Is the respondent's report of perceived discrimination an indication that discrimination occurred or a symptom of the respondent's mental health condition?

Discrimination may be said to be interactional when its constituent components (assignment to a group, difference in treatment, detrimental outcome) occur within a spatially and temporally bounded unit of social interaction. The idea of interactional discrimination operates entirely at the "micro" level of interpersonal encounters and leaves the nature of the adverse consequence unspecified. The detrimental outcome may manifest itself on the economic dimension, on that of

stress, on both or on any other. Further, interactional discrimination primarily designates an objective episode of social exchange, a pattern of observable behavior, and only secondarily a subjective report of that episode.

In this sense, the idea of interactional discrimination addresses two mostly tacit limitations of contemporary research practice in the field of discrimination. The first limitation is conceptual. Although not necessarily in theory, in practice most research on objective (vs. perceived) discrimination has restricted the application of this concept to the economic realm, focusing on access to employment, housing, credit, etc. The second limitation is methodological. Again, although not necessarily expressing a theoretical choice, in practice most research that has inquired into the non-economic adverse consequences of discrimination (e.g. stress) has done so on the basis of self-reported measures of perceived discrimination. The concept of interactional discrimination is at the same time neutral with regard to the adverse outcome of differential treatment (vs. a restricted focus on economic disadvantage) and designates primarily an observable episode of social interaction (vs. a possible confusion with the analytically distinct experience of being discriminated against).

In sum, what makes discrimination *interactional* is not any particular form of harm or disadvantage, economic, emotional or other, but the particular unit or context within which the discriminating occurs: a spatio-temporally delimited episode of social exchange in conditions of copresence – that particular social unit whose classical sociological analysis can be found in the writings of Erving Goffman (1963). In this sense, the cognate ideas of microaggression (Sue et al. 2007) and assault on self-worth (Lamont et al. 2016) point to a specific variety of interactional discrimination characterized by a particular type of harmful consequence, namely the experience of indignity. But the variety of interactional discrimination documented in the present article is different. Its harmful consequence is stress, whether or not the stressful confrontation is interpreted as an assault on dignity.

Muslims and interactional discrimination

The available cross-national evidence from Europe indicates that a sizable proportion of non-Muslims hold anti-Muslim views and, at the other end, that Muslims feel discriminated against. Depending on the survey, the measure and the country, in the ten European states with the largest proportion of Muslim residents the incidence of anti-Muslim attitudes oscillates between 5% and 38% of the population (European Commission 2019; European Values Study 2017), and the part of Muslim respondents who report incidents of discrimination ranges from 9% to 37% (FRA 2017; Pew Research Center 2006).

Moving from subjective perceptions to objective measures of discrimination, the results depend on gender, the context of social activity and the stimulus used to signal Islamic affiliation. In the context of hiring, and typically using the mention of a religious volunteering antecedent in a fake CV as the signal, correspondence studies conducted in France (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Pierné 2013; Valfort 2020) but also in other European countries (Di Stasio et al. 2021; Koopmans, Veit, and Yemane 2019) consistently show that Muslim applicants have a lower probability of receiving a job callback. In the context of everyday contacts in public places, typically using a perceivable sign of Islamic religiosity as the stimulus, the research design allows to know more about the perpetrators and the act of discrimination, but the results are less clear-cut. A series of field experiments in European cities have examined the effects of the Islamic headscarf or hijab on helping behavior. Some have found that people are less likely to offer assistance to a woman if she wears the hijab (Aidenberger and Doehne 2021; Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis 2020) but others indicate no difference in helping between the presence and the absence of the headscarf (MASKED; Diekmann, Jann, and Näf 2014). One of these field experiments, performed with the same procedure in Brussels, Paris and Vienna, also included measures of more subtle cues of interpersonal involvement, finding a mix of warmth and coldness in response to the hijab depending on the city and the gender of the participant (MASKED). Another field experiment in Paris, using a similar procedure to assess whether people treated a bearded man differently when he insinuated

that he was going to a mosque, indicated that in this “mosque condition” participants offered help less often and showed lower interpersonal involvement (MASKED).

The mentioned differences in treatment observed in the context of interpersonal encounters in public places are candidate instances of interactional discrimination against Muslims. Depending on how they are interpreted, they may cause stress in the recipient. Using the Daily Life Experiences subscale of a checklist instrument named RaLES (Harrell 1997) as a catalogue of acknowledged stressful experiences, not being helped when in need or being the recipient of inadequate interpersonal involvement in day-to-day contacts with strangers could be experienced as instances of “being treated rudely or disrespectfully”, “others reacting to you as if they were afraid or intimidated”, “being treated as if you were stupid”, “having your ideas ignored” or “not being taken seriously”. Even an intensification of interpersonal involvement could be stressful if the recipient interprets the increase in warmth as an instance of “being treated in an ‘overly’ friendly or superficial way”.

In this sense, there is some evidence that European Muslims regard instances of inadequate nonverbal involvement as offenses. According to the EU-MIDIS survey, nearly 40% of Muslim female respondents who indicated that they wear religious attire in public (mostly, the hijab) reported that they were the target of “inappropriate staring” or “offensive gestures” because they did so (FRA 2017). To the best of my knowledge, the connections between Islamic faith, interactional discrimination, stress and mental health have not been investigated in previous work.

Hypotheses

The studies that follow investigate the hypothesis that women who wear the Islamic headscarf are exposed to interactional discrimination. This hypothesis implies two different predictions:

P1: In face-to-face encounters, women who wear the hijab are treated differently from women who do not wear it.

P2: The differences in treatment to which hijab-wearing women are exposed in face-to-face encounters cause them a disadvantage.

To anticipate, a first field experiment shows that the difference in treatment takes the specific shape of a deficit in visual contact in the course of a face-to-face conversation. The second field experiment shows that the average woman responds to this deficit in visual contact with strong negative emotions or stress. In other words, a surplus in stress arises as one of the penalties that interactional discrimination imposes on women who wear the hijab in public.

Method

Field Experiment 1

Experimental design. The experiment follows a 2 (headscarf vs. uncovered hair) x 2 (female vs. male passengers) x 6 (metro stations) between-subjects design with random assignment of passengers to conditions and with equal sampling time devoted to each of the 24 unique factor combinations.

Sampling. Data collection proceeded between May 6 and June 21, 2019. The sampling technique consisted in approaching the first passenger arriving to the platform after the departure of the last train and before the arrival of the following one, alternating between the sexes to ensure equal representation.

Procedure. Experimental assays took place on metro platforms and involved a team of three: Experimenter 1, Experimenter 2 and a female confederate. Experimenter 1 recruited passengers as they arrived at the platform, inviting them to participate in an experiment “on decision making.” If the passenger accepted, her or she was told that he or she would be playing an ultimatum game (Camerer 2003) with another passenger. While Experimenter 1 explained the rules of the game to

the recruited passenger, Experimenter 2 approached discreetly with the confederate, pretending to be filling a questionnaire. Experimenter 1 then introduced the passenger to Experimenter 2 and greeted the confederate, presented as the second player of the ultimatum game. At this point, players were told that before the roles in the game were randomly assigned and the corresponding decisions made, the procedure required them to have a short discussion about the game. With the passenger's (and the confederate's pretended) consent, the ensuing interaction was videotaped with two cameras. The confederate's contributions to the conversation followed a script.

Experimental treatment. In one condition, the confederate wore an Islamic headscarf or hijab. In the other, she appeared with uncovered hair. The rest of the clothing was identical between the conditions. The confederate is the same woman in both conditions.

Measurements. The demographic variables probed with the questionnaire were age, educational achievement, income, and religion. The outcome variables included, on the one hand, the passenger's response to the game and, on the other, a set of nonverbal behaviors indicative of interpersonal involvement, including eye contact. The responses to the game were directly recorded on the tablet as they were given but the nonverbal measures were taken in the laboratory on the basis of the collected video and audio materials, using to this effect the program Elan Linguistic Annotator (Sloetjes and Wittenburg 2008). Regarding the nonverbal outcomes, intercoder reliability was assessed by computing Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007) for interval data for a subsample of independently coded assays (at least 20%), yielding in all cases coefficients higher than 0.7.

Eye contact : measurement details. The intensity of eye contact was operationalized as a proportion known as the "gaze rate", which equals the time spent looking at the other's eyes or face divided by the total observation period. Two observation periods were considered in this connection, namely the time spent in the role of the listener and alternatively the time spent in the role of the speaker (Exline, Ellyson, and Long 1975). The script is organized in such a way that the confederate speaks at length twice but the passenger once. Consequently, each passenger contributes two measures of

gaze rate while listening and one measure of gaze rate while speaking. In this experiment, eye contact is used to examine differences in treatment between conditions (not whether differences in eye contact are stressful, which is the aim of the second experiment).

Statistical analyses. The outcomes were analyzed using regression models estimated with Bayesian inference. The gaze rate measurements, continuous but restricted to the interval $[0, 1]$, were treated with a beta-distributed logistic regression. The dichotomous choice in the game was analyzed with a linear probability model.

Field Experiment 2

Experimental design. The experiment follows a 2 (experimental condition) x 6 (metro stations) between-subjects design with random assignment of passengers to conditions and with equal sampling time devoted to each of the 12 unique factor combinations.

Pilot work. During October 2019 a series of field visits were scheduled to calibrate the procedure. The experimenters served as confederates and played a simplified version of the script that a professional actor was to perform in full-fledged version for the main study. This pilot work confirmed that most women spontaneously framed the ultimatum game in terms of an “obvious” egalitarian division. It also helped to design an adequate stimulus, i.e. a credible and effective imitation of the pattern of gaze that men had directed to the hijab-wearing confederate in Experiment 1. Last, it contributed to phrase in relevant everyday terms the questions meant to capture women’s experience of this look.

Sampling. Data collection proceeded between November 4 and December 4, 2019. The sampling technique was identical to the one used in the previous experiment, except that only female passengers were approached.

Procedure. With minor differences, the unfolding of the task was identical to the procedure used in the previous experiment.

Experimental treatment. In the control condition, the male confederate was instructed to look at the interaction partner in a “normal” way when he was in the role of the listener. More precisely, he had to gaze continuously, with minor interruptions such as occasional blinks, while the passenger spoke to him. In the treatment condition, his gaze followed a “program”, i.e. an explicit set of rules, which were active as long as the passenger held the floor. The goal of the program was to generate a natural-looking imitation of the pattern of gaze of the men who had interacted with the hijab-wearing woman in Experiment 1. The program was not a fixed repetitive routine but a set of responses contingent on the passenger’s visual and verbal behavior, in such a manner that its performance did not result in an awkward “robotic” gaze, partly because the underlying rules were not easy to infer. To assess stimulus equivalence and adequacy, the visual behavior of the confederate was measured for all assays. In performance of the program, the confederate’s gaze rate turned out to fall within the second quartile of passengers’ original gaze rates in the hijab condition in Experiment 1. The term “hijab-gaze” refers to the pattern of visual behavior that resulted from the performance of this program.

Measurements. The demographic variables measured with the questionnaire were age, educational achievement and income. The outcomes were measured using 9-point Likert-type questions concerned with i) stress operationalized as negative affect (four items), ii) attributions of interpersonal involvement (two items) and iii) judgments of conformity with rules of politeness (two items). The negative affect items inquired into the degree to which the confederate’s gaze elicited negatively-valenced emotional states (*mal à l’aise, gênée, agacée, perturbée*). The involvement items sought to capture the extent to which the confederate’s gaze indicated that he was attentive to, and interested in, the participant’s speech (*attentif, intéressé*). The politeness items asked about the degree to which the confederate’s gaze was judged to be correct and respectful (*correct, respectueux*). Internal reliability was satisfactory for all sets of questions related to the same construct, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha (negative affect, $\alpha=0.82$; involvement, $\alpha=0.86$; politeness, $\alpha=0.83$).

Statistical analyses. The answers to the 9-point scale questions were analyzed with ordered probit regressions estimated with Bayesian inference.

Results

Field Experiment 1: female confederate wears the hijab

On average, passengers gaze at the confederate [78%, 83%] of the time. Confirming P1 for men, in the hijab condition male passengers reduce by [-12%, -2%] the intensity of eye contact.

Additionally, a treatment*gender interaction in the interval [-18%, -3%] indicates that the effect of the hijab differs by gender, suggesting opposite effects of the garb for men and women. In contrast, the responses to the game do not appear to differ between the experimental conditions, neither overall nor within gender.

Field Experiment 2: male confederate replays the “hijab-gaze”

Building on the results of Field Experiment 1, P2 reads more precisely: The pattern of gaze that male passengers directed to the female confederate when she was wearing the Islamic headscarf is stressful for the recipient.

Regardless of the experimental condition, on a 9-point scale the average score is [0.17, 1.28] for negative affect, [6.25, 7.22] for involvement and [7.78, 8.75] for politeness. Confirming P2, being the target of the hijab-gaze increases women’s negative affect by [0.81, 2.63], with effect size $d=[0.42, 1.37]$. Similarly, the hijab-gaze leads to a [-1.94, -0.08] decrease in the level of interpersonal involvement attributed to the confederate, with $d=[-1.56, -0.06]$. Although only credible at a less stringent $\alpha=0.10$, participants similarly reported that the hijab-gaze was on average less polite than the control gaze.

Discussion

Using a version of the “ultimatum game” in a public place of Paris, Experiment 1 assessed whether a female confederate is treated differently in a brief face-to-face exchange with a stranger when she signals high Islamic religiosity by wearing a headscarf. Replicating the result of another experiment (MASKED), the study found that male passengers do diminish the intensity of eye contact in response to the headscarf.

Using the same procedure in the same setting, Experiment 2 investigated the average effect, for women, of being the target of this less intense pattern of gaze, as performed by a male confederate. The results revealed that this look causes stress and the effect size statistic (whose most probable value nears one standard deviation) underscored that this seemingly harmless pattern of gaze actually functions to elicit a powerful negative reaction in the recipient.

Three analytical benefits of the concept of interactional discrimination

Whenever types of discrimination have been distinguished in the past, there has been a tendency to dichotomize the phenomenal field into two categories, setting discrimination in the labour market (especially as it can be measured with correspondence studies) as the point of reference. The other category has been traditionally constructed as a residue, that is to say, as the type of discrimination that is left once discrimination in the labor (or credit, or real estate, etc.) market has been taken out. This presupposes a prior definition of what is essential to this paradigmatic type of discrimination, and the usual approach has been to locate this essence in the economic nature of the disadvantage at stake. By opposition, the residual category has tended to cover forms of discrimination whose detrimental consequence is non-economic. Some prominent instances of discrimination types constructed with this residual logic are the ideas of “interpersonal discrimination” (Hebl et al. 2002), “microaggression” (Sue et al. 2007) and “assault on self-worth” (Lamont et al. 2016). The

latter two in particular are centrally concerned with the experience of indignity, as the counterpart of economic disadvantage.

The notion of interactional discrimination is not predicated on the opposition between the economic and the non-economic. It arises rather from the acknowledgement of a simple fact: a significant portion of the phenomena covered by those residually constructed categories manifests in the realm of face-to-face interaction. Whatever else may mark out these phenomena, they are also characterized by the setting or context within which the act of discrimination is embedded, namely a spatio-temporally bounded episode of social interaction.

When the criterion for constructing types of discrimination is shifted from the nature of the adverse consequence (economic vs. non-economic) to the setting or context of discrimination (interactional vs. non-interactional), two implications follow. First, nothing prevents an act of discrimination embedded in an episode of social interaction from being economic in its detrimental consequence. Bargaining, for instance, represents a form of face-to-face interaction where the occurrence of discrimination may clearly impose economic disadvantage on the recipient. Second, the form of economic disadvantage widely documented by correspondence studies is notoriously non-interactional: when the decision is made not to call back the discriminated applicant, the decision is obviously not made in the presence of the applicant.

But in the research reported here the form of disadvantage under scrutiny, namely stress, is non-economic. Why bother to introduce new concepts if already established categories such as “micro-aggression” or “assault on self-worth” can surely do an equivalent job? The answer is that they actually do not. These categories are not meant to cover *every* form of disadvantage arising in the course of an interactional encounter, but only a quite specific sub-class: acts by others that victims interpret as attacks on their dignity. This is a very demanding definition indeed. It is not difficult to argue that a person may well be discriminated in an interpersonal encounter without realizing it, or experience the discriminatory act yet without invoking the concept of dignity.

In the realm of experience, stress manifests as negative emotion. Interpreting others' behavior as an attack on one's dignity is not necessary for that behavior to arouse a negative emotion. In other words, the conceptually mediated experience of indignity is not necessary for stress to occur, and more generally conceptual thought is not necessary for emotions to be elicited (Lambie and Marcel 2002). The essentially non-reflective experience of negative emotion does not necessarily have a correlate in the essentially reflective experience of indignity.

The concept of interactional discrimination thus brings three immediate benefits: 1) it subsumes "micro-aggressions" and "assaults on self-worth" as specific sub-types concerned with lived indignity, 2) it makes theoretical room for discrimination that is interactional *and* economic (e.g. bargaining), and 3) it carves out an analytical niche for stress as a detrimental consequence of discrimination that is *neither* economic *nor* necessarily concerned with the experience of indignity (e.g. the stressful experience of the "hijab-gaze").

These three types of interactional discrimination have been empirically investigated in the research presented above. The "hijab-gaze" could have been construed as a micro-aggression if it had been rated by its recipients as impolite, disrespectful, or improper. But it was not. After bargaining, participants in the first experiment could have discriminated the hijab-wearing confederate on the economic dimension by taking advantage of their privilege as "dictators" in the simplified ultimatum game. But they did not. Nonetheless, male participants did discriminate the hijab-wearing confederate in that they looked at her in a way that on average elicits strong negative emotions in the recipient. Without the concept of interactional discrimination, this subtle differential treatment and its powerful detrimental outcome would have gone unnoticed.

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