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# Where Are You Really From? Understanding Misrecognition From the Experiences of French and Dutch Muslim Women Students

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**Supplementary Materials:** Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



## Abstract

We investigate experiences of misrecognition through comparative focus groups with headscarf-wearing Muslim women students in France (N = 46) and in the Netherlands (N = 32). In both countries, women reported experiencing misrecognition across four interrelated dimensions: (1) totalising misrecognition, having their Muslim identity highlighted at the expense of other group affiliations; (2) membership misrecognition, having their national belonging denied; (3) content misrecognition, having negative characteristics associated with their religious identity, and (4) invisibility, having their voices unheard in society and/or their identities excluded from (public) professions. Participants conceptualised misrecognition as a product of deficient intergroup (Muslims vs. non-Muslims) contact and as being worse in France. French women felt relatively more invisible in the public sphere than their Dutch counterparts and perceived politicians across the political spectrum as an important source of misrecognition. These findings suggest that misrecognition is present in Europe, and potentially worse in France, raising the question about what measures might be taken to counter this form of group-based exclusion.

## Keywords

misrecognition, Muslim women, headscarf, social identities, social representations

“Where are you really from?” is a question that could be asked out of curiosity. However, from a minority members’ perspective it can be conceived as a typical example of *misrecognition* (Zdanowicz, 2017), involving a mismatch between the way people see themselves and the way they are seen and treated by *powerful others*, i.e., those in positions of power in a society (Blackwood, N. Hopkins, & Reicher, 2015). This question can give rise to a sense of not belonging, of not being regarded as a national citizen but as a foreigner, which goes against the image that one has of oneself.

Several studies have reported European Muslims’ experiences of misrecognition (Amer, 2020; Blackwood et al., 2015; N. Hopkins, 2011; N. Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011; N. Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; Van Es, 2019). To our knowledge, however, these experiences have not yet been systematically categorised nor compared across countries. Drawing on comparative focus group data in France and the Netherlands, we explore and categorise the different experiences of misrecognition among headscarf-wearing Muslim women students. By wearing this visible and politicised identity marker, they are particularly likely to experience misrecognition (N. Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Moreover, these experiences of misrecognition can give rise to different understandings, which, in turn, can affect these women’s



practices (Jodelet, 2006; Moscovici, 1984a). In the present research, we therefore engage in an exploration of the most salient elements of their social representations of misrecognition (Rouquette, 2009).

## A Social Identity and Social Representational Approach to Misrecognition

In our analysis of misrecognition, we draw on two well-developed theoretical approaches. First, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) focuses on how processes of social categorisation and identity construction shape (and are shaped by) intra- and intergroup relations. Second, social representations theory poses that social representations are naive theorisations about social objects that allow us to comprehend the world around us, facilitate our communication with other individuals and orient our practices (Moscovici, 1961/2004), contributing to the construction of a *shared reality* (Jodelet, 1994). Social categories and social representations are interdependent: ingroup and outgroup images are interpretations constructed within one's ingroup and differ from one group to another, as with any social representation (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011). Thus, misrecognition is the result of how a dominant group (e.g., non-Muslim French) defines a certain (e.g., national) identity, with this definition being different from the one held by the dominated group (e.g., Muslim French).

## Misrecognition

Experiences of misrecognition are the result of discrepancies between people's internal and external social categorisations, which can be seen as a threat to one's identity (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). It can take multiple forms. For instance, Scottish Muslims reported being seen only as Muslims by Scottish airport authorities, while they would prefer to be seen as Scottish in this particular context (Blackwood et al., 2015). Another study shows that Scottish Muslim women felt that their Scottishness was not recognised by non-Muslim Scottish (N. Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Also, Dutch Muslim women felt that non-Muslims associated their Muslim identity, and the wearing of a headscarf in particular, with oppression (Van Es, 2019). Finally, Dutch Muslim women can be neglected in political decision-making processes concerning the headscarf (Ghorashi, 2010).

Misrecognition is an interactional phenomenon, taking place in a three-way relationship (Moscovici, 1984b) established between *Ego* (the individual), *Object* (a person's social identity) and *Alter* (the dominant group) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Misrecognition as an Interactional Phenomenon*



Thus, one's social identity does not only rely upon one's self-conceptions (*Ego*), but also on how one sees oneself through the interactions with powerful others (*Alter*). Misrecognition happens when these two perceptions (*Ego* vs. *Alter*) differ. This becomes exceptionally relevant in power relations because the *Alter*'s vision of a person may be imposed on the person's self-perception (*Ego*). This understanding of misrecognition allows us to move from an (inter-)individual to a positional level of analysis (Doise, 1982). Misrecognition becomes a dynamic, interactional, rather than static phenomenon.

### Misrecognition in Context

To understand misrecognition, we need to consider its social context, as different (national) contexts might lead to different outcomes. For instance, contextual differences regarding secular policies explained differences in Islamophobic experiences between French and British Muslim women (Najib & P. Hopkins, 2020). By comparing the accounts of misrecognition among headscarf-wearing French and Dutch Muslim women, in the present research we aim to identify such context-related specificities.

In France and in the Netherlands, respectively, the Muslim population was estimated at 8.8% and 5% of the total population (Pew Research Center, 2017; Statistics Netherlands, 2020). A comparison between these countries seems particularly interesting because of the institutionalised different approach to religion and religious minorities. France has a more strictly secular legislation than the Netherlands. Secularism has been well-situated in France since 1905 with the establishment of the law separating the church from the state. Other secularism laws followed since then such as the laws preventing public servants (N° 83-634/1983) and students (N° 2004-228/2004) from displaying their religious affiliation, respectively, in the exercise of their duties and in public schools. In contrast, Dutch Muslim women are relatively free to wear visible religious signs (although this is prohibited for certain professions, like police officer and judge), because of the historical accommodation of conflict between politicised religious and social groups in the country (Uitermark, 2012). Religious minorities are entitled to certain rights, like founding religious schools and immigrant representative organizations (Statham, Koopmans, Gugni, & Passy, 2005).

These differences between national contexts imply a more important limitation to French Muslim women's identity performance compared to their Dutch counterparts (i.e., to behave in accordance with ingroup norms, including wearing identity markers; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). As identity performance can be conceived as a strategy of consolidating group membership (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007), the ban on the headscarf in public schools constrains not only French Muslim women's identity performance, but also their identity assertion.

Despite these national differences, both countries are in many ways comparable. They are large Western-European democracies characterised by strong anti-Muslim discourses in which the headscarf takes centre stage. In the 2000s, stereotypes of the *oppressed Muslim woman* gained increasing prominence in public debates in the Netherlands (Van Es, 2019). Public figures such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali argued for the incompatibility between Islam and liberal, allegedly 'Dutch/Western values', and that (Muslim) women needed to emancipate themselves by abandoning Islam (Ghorashi, 2010). In France, several French mayors tried to ban the burkini on the French beaches in 2016 (Hackett, 2018) and in 2019 a large controversy followed the advertisement of headscarf adapted to the practice of sport by a national sports brand, culminating with the brand's withdrawal from selling the product (Couvelaire, 2019).

### Misrecognition and Power

Although power can have positive outcomes, allowing people to meet various needs (Pratto, Lee, Tan, & Pitpitan, 2011), when it comes to understanding the link between power and misrecognition, we should consider asymmetric power relations. Taylor (1992) discussed that misrecognition occurs when powerful others impose their identities as the prototypical norm, reassuring their hegemony upon minorities, like Muslim women, in society. As we focus on the repercussions of misrecognition Muslim women experience, we understand power as control over others (Dahl, 1957) and as the means to sustain intergroup oppression (Mills, 1956).

The lack of power leads to a lack of autonomy on two levels: to *define* and to *act upon* one's own identity (McNamara & Reicher, 2019). Misrecognition is thus a materialisation of negative power in which powerful others impose identities on the relative disempowered. We therefore focus our analyses on the interactions between those who have the power

to define others and those who, through their lack of power, are subjected to such definitions (Moscovici, 1972). It is precisely because one group exercises power over another that the first can misrecognise the latter, who, by their lack of power, have little room for manoeuvre when facing misrecognition (Moscovici, 1961/2004).

Theoretical frameworks that consider power relations may be interesting to blend with interactional and trauma informed methodologies. Focus groups are a powerful tool for studying participants' shared experiences. By taking social interaction as the unit of analysis, it allows us to observe collective meaning making associated with experiences of misrecognition, our focus (Caillaud & Flick, 2017). Instead of collecting individual accounts of misrecognition through more traditional methods (e.g., individual interviews), focus groups allow us to understand how participants make sense of misrecognition together.

To analyse the data collected and, thus, to understand how headscarf-wearing Muslim women respond to the *negative operation of power* when facing misrecognition in a context of domination, our research questions are based on the *Power Threat Meaning Framework* (PTMF; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). This framework captures traumatic experiences (such as misrecognition can be) as a product of asymmetrical power relations. It aims to empower people by allowing them to reconstruct their narratives and thus to give meaning to their traumatic experiences. The innovation of this tool is that it replaces the analysis focused on the individual with an analysis focused on the social interaction producing harmful effects through the negative exercise of power. In doing so, it replaces the question "What is wrong with you?" by four<sup>1</sup> questions, two of which we employ as our research questions:

*What has happened to you?* This question addresses the (negative) operation of power in people's lives. Through this question, we seek to understand how misrecognition was experienced by the participants and how asymmetrical power relations featured in these experiences.

*What sense did you make of it?* This question addresses the meanings constructed upon the (negative) operation of power into people's lives, that is, upon the negative experiences people faced. These socially, relationally, and personally constituted meanings are central "in shaping the operation, experience and expression of power" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p. 9). To understand how people experience (and respond to) the negative operation of power, it is important to identify the meanings constructed upon these experiences. To do so, we apply a social representational framework (Moscovici 1961/2004), which also allows us to understand why people conceive their experiences of misrecognition in the way they do and how such understandings derive from asymmetrical relations. Furthermore, reconstituting a negative experience in one's own words is a means to regain control of one's life. The social interactions made possible by the focus group are of great importance here, because they can enable participants to collectively make sense of their individual experiences and, thus, regain agency by reconstructing their narratives.

## Method

### Sample

We approached potential participants in educational settings and proceeded through snowball sampling. The study was presented as a discussion on the different negative experiences headscarf-wearing Muslim women face in the country. In France, we ran ten focus groups with a total of 46 participants ( $M = 20.46$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ), most of them with a Maghrebi background ( $N = 42$ ), who make up the largest Muslim population in France (Tribalat, 2015). The other participants had a Comorian (one) and Afghan (one) background, while two are ethnic majority French converts. In the Netherlands, we ran five focus groups with a total of 32 participants ( $M = 21.24$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ), most of them with a Moroccan background ( $N = 20$ ), who constitute one of the largest ethnic minority groups, most identifying as Muslim (Verkuyten, Thijs, & Stevens, 2012). The other participants had a Turkish (three), Pakistani (two) and Somali (one) background (six participants did not state their background).

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1) The other two questions (How did it affect you? and What did you have to do to survive?) will be covered in a future paper (in prep.).

## Data Collection

The focus group sessions were conducted in the national language of the countries involved. They took place at a French university between January-March 2019 and at a Dutch university between May-June 2019 (partly during Ramadan<sup>2</sup>). An interview schedule was first created in French, then translated into English to make its translation into Dutch possible. Moreover, we used four cartoon images as stimuli for the discussion which were also translated from English to French and Dutch. Each cartoon picture introduced a new topic about misrecognition. The first cartoon displayed a headscarf-wearing Muslim young woman who smiles and holds a cat. We first asked participants to describe her and then to stress how a non-Muslim person would do so. Here we were tackling the general aspect of misrecognition, that is, the discrepancies in how these women see themselves and how they think they are seen by the dominant group. Then, we showed a pair of cartoons (see [Appendix](#)) with concrete (but subtle) examples of misrecognition to encourage participants to discuss these experiences and provide personal examples. Finally, we presented a last cartoon picture with a more extreme stance in which misrecognition leads to aggression: a non-veiled woman tears off the headscarf of a veiled woman. Here, we were searching for accounts of extreme experiences among participants.

## Moderator and Observer

In France, one South American female researcher moderated the sessions with the assistance of one Middle Eastern female moderator. In the Netherlands, one ethnic majority Dutch female researcher moderated the groups with assistance from different Dutch moderators (one of whom had a Jewish Israeli background). Moderation by someone who could be considered an ingroup member can facilitate the discussion, by lessening the social desirability bias, with participants anticipating the moderator's understanding and acceptance because this person is assumed to live the same kind of experiences (Bhopal, 2010). However, moderation by someone who can be considered an outgroup member can also have its advantages. Indeed, it might motivate participants to share detailed information, since they cannot take for granted any shared pre-existing knowledge (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996). For instance, in our focus group sessions, when participants mentioned Islamic outfits (e.g., jilbab or burka), they took the time to explain each one. This suggests that the non-Muslim moderators were able to grasp in detail participants' accounts. Moreover, it did not appear that participants refrained from discussing a specific topic because of the moderators' position as outgroup members. On the contrary, the discussions moderated by outgroup members on the issue of misrecognition may have been perceived as an instance of recognition itself.

## Transcription

We audio recorded the discussions and produced full transcriptions, attributing pseudonyms to participants, followed by F for France and N for the Netherlands, and the group number (e.g., Manël\_F1 is a student who has participated in the first focus group session in France).

## Data Analysis

The data collected was submitted to a reflexive thematic analysis, a method for generating, analysing, and interpreting features of the data pertinent to the research questions while acknowledging the researcher's subjective role in this process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Due to language constraints, the French and Dutch data were analysed by the first and second authors respectively, starting in France with the transcription and reading of the discussions. The first author coded the topics appearing to be connected to the research questions. From these topics, she generated themes (i.e., "patterns of shared meaning [...] united by a core concept", Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593) through a back-and-forth process. The second author did the same in the Netherlands. Both authors were in constant communication to discuss similarities and differences between the countries (for additional information, please consult Supplementary Materials).

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2) Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar in which Muslims fast in the daylight and pray. The women who participated in our study during Ramadan may have been more sensitive to misrecognition as Muslims because they were more occupied with their religion.



## Results and Discussion

### What Has Happened to You? Experiences of Misrecognition

As noted earlier, the discussions were stimulated by cartoon images in three rounds, in which we first asked participants to give their first impression. Many participants reacted by laughing or by indicating that they recognised the situations displayed, connecting these to similar personal (and family and friends') experiences. They further recounted different experiences of misrecognition, some of which are presented in this section, that were unrelated to those specified in the cartoon pictures. In such accounts, we identified four interrelated dimensions of misrecognition: *totalising*, *membership*, *content*, and *invisibility*. Overall, participants conceptualise misrecognition at the collective level (as targeting Muslim women in particular and Muslims in general) and not so much at the individual level (as targeting them individually).

#### Being Seen as Muslim and Nothing Else: Totalising Misrecognition

Participants indicated a sense of self curtailment in their interactions with dominant group members. They explained that their Muslim identity is singled out, to the detriment of other group memberships, which happens in situations where they do not want to be identified as Muslims. We conceive such experiences as *totalising misrecognition*. For instance, Souad reports an episode where she helped a French non-Muslim woman and engaged in a conversation with her:

**Souad\_F10:** [...] it was very cold and there was a lady in a skirt [...] I had a shawl above all my clothing, my coat and everything. I handed her the shawl, and she was surprised, she said that it was adorable, and she began to speak with me about fundamentalists or whatever and I was surprised because I wasn't aware that before seeing me, she saw my religion [...] I wasn't thinking about her miniskirt at all. I was just thinking about a woman among other women. [...]

While trying to be nice to a stranger, Souad was surprised that she was reduced to her religion and possibly associated with fundamentalism. Souad focused on their shared social identity as women, but the ethnic majority woman emphasized differences between them. In this episode we can clearly see the interactional component of misrecognition: the way Souad is perceived by the ethnic majority woman (in terms of her religion, which is further connected to fundamentalism) does not match with the way Souad sees herself (as a woman among women). This episode also shows us how what some might stress as an "innocent question" can be perceived as an attack to one's identity, which may have further consequences at an intra-individual (impacting one's own image) and inter-individual/intergroup levels (impacting subsequent interactions).

Participants also indicate facing misrecognition when dominant group members focus on their ethnicity (e.g., being seen only as Moroccans). This frequently conflicted with their multiple identifications (e.g., as Moroccan and Dutch/French).

**Salima\_N12:** At the first school day of the year, [a teacher] [...] wanted to know everyone's name, and then he went right up to me and a girl of Turkish origin. And he wasn't even interested in what our names were, no, it was like that: "Oh, and where are you from?", so I replied: "from [city in the Netherlands]". And he said: "No, no, that's not what I mean; Morocco or Turkey?"

**Esma\_N12:** [smiling] Only those two.

**Salima\_N12:** I don't understand how it's relevant at all [...] the moment they ask you [something like that, they] push you into a certain corner, [that] I do mind.

Salima does not attach particular importance to her Turkish background, while the teacher singles out this group membership over everything else. Importantly, participants indicate that the issue is not that they are seen as Muslims and/or people with an ethnic background, because they do identify as such. The issue is that others "push them into a

corner”: by communicating a fixed perception of them in every context, which restricts their identity, excluding them from other groups and ways of being.

*Totalising misrecognition* neglects the richness of social identities which are composed by many groups to which we belong and with whom we identify (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). This perception of identity as something singular (instead of multiple) is politically potent (N. Hopkins, 2011): it can increase intra and intergroup tensions that may lead to conflict (Sen, 2006). From a social identity complexity perspective (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), besides coexisting harmoniously, these women’s multiple identities overlap only partially. For instance, not all women are Muslims, not all Muslims are French/Dutch. As a result, those who are fellow ingroup members on one identity dimension (e.g., national) may be outgroup members on other (e.g., religious). In the face of this non-convergence of group memberships, it looks like the strategy employed by these women is that of compartmentalisation: the context-dependent activation of one social identity. However, the dominant group, by focusing on a single aspect of these women’s identity, makes it difficult for them to pursue such a strategy. For instance, in the context of interaction depicted by Souad, the social identity that was pertinent for her was her gender identity, placing the interaction on an ingroup basis, while her interlocutor, by highlighting Souad’s religious identity, was relating to her on an outgroup basis.

### Not Being Seen as French/Dutch: Membership Misrecognition

Participants reported that because their religious (or ethnic) identity is perceived by the dominant group as incompatible with their national identity, *totalising misrecognition* often goes hand in hand with not being accepted as a national group member, which we term *membership misrecognition*. Dounia\_F6 shares an incident she faced when registering for an association. The person who registered her was surprised by the fact that she had a French surname and then assumed she converted to Islam, as if it was impossible to be both Muslim and French from birth. Dounia\_F6 states: “As soon as people see [you with] the veil, [they are like] ‘definitely you do not come from France, you must come from abroad’”. Again, one social interaction which could be conceived by some as insignificant, highlights the interactional aspect of misrecognition. This person’s surprise with Dounia’s combination of headscarf and French surname underlines how this person perceives them as incompatible. In contrast, for Dounia, there is no incompatibility at all: her own existence is the proof that it is fully possible to be both Muslim and French.

*Membership misrecognition* also appears prominently in the Dutch discussions, as we can see in the following:

**Ezra\_N11:** [...] I work at customer service, and phone contact is not face-to-face. And people very often assume I’m Dutch. Except when they see my name in the email [to which they sometimes reply like] “Oh, that sounds like a foreign name”. Or if they ask my name on the phone, [...] they say: “Oh, that does not sound like a Dutch name.” [...]

**Maryam\_N11:** People automatically assume that you just can’t speak Dutch.

Both conversation partners note that, even though they are born and raised in the Netherlands, dominant group members can still act surprised that they are Dutch, implicitly questioning their national membership. In Ezra’s account we can clearly see how *membership misrecognition* is tied to the visibility of her ethnic background, through her family surname.

### Being Seen as Oppressed Women: Content Misrecognition

French/Dutch participants indicate that the dominant group often associates headscarf-wearing Muslim women with coercion by Muslim men and with a lack of personal agency. It seems that the social representations held by the dominant group about the headscarf are completely different from those held by the Muslim women interviewed. This became apparent when Aicha\_N11 started to wear a headscarf at the beginning of the new school year: “The teacher who’d also taught me the year before asked, ‘Oh, are you happy with it?’ And I thought that was a really crazy question, and then she was like, ‘Oh did you decide that yourself?’”

While Aicha and the other participants see the headscarf as a personal choice, as part of a spiritual path, her teacher sees it as a sign of oppression, as something that was imposed upon her by her father. We conceive this form of



misrecognition, when powerful others associate one's identity with characteristics with which one does not agree, as *content misrecognition*.

**Yüna\_F3:** *It is true that it is often said that veiled women are manipulated [...] but not at all because it is a personal choice.*

**Fadia\_F3:** *They think we are forced to wear it when we are not at all [...].*

**Salma\_F3:** *[or that] she is not free.*

**Yüna\_F3:** *Especially because she is submissive.*

**Salma\_F3:** *Yes, that's exactly it, that others think for us, that we have no brain, we have no conscience of our own, we can't think, we can't make choices.*

There is a clear disparity between how participants see themselves, as Muslim women who actively make personal choices, and how they are seen by powerful others, as passive and submissive. Their use of the personal pronoun “we” when referring to headscarf-wearing Muslim women highlights how their personal experiences of misrecognition leads to an understanding of the misrecognition of Muslim women in general.

These associations are highly gendered and racialized. They reflect the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman and reveal gender as a critical aspect of misrecognition, while non-Muslims can presume perpetrators to be male family members. Moreover, Muslim women's perspectives on the headscarf are silenced. For the participants, the real oppression comes from the state and the dominant group: They feel oppressed when they are not allowed to cover as (and where) they wish, when they are (verbally, physically and/or symbolically) assaulted because they wear a headscarf. Overall, their being is not accepted unless they comply with the (secular) standards of the dominant group, by withdrawing from covering, and even from their religion, which leads to the last dimension of misrecognition: *invisibility*.

### **Not Being Seen (nor Heard) at All: Invisibility**

In France, participants regard the laws prohibiting face-covering in public spaces, burkinis in municipal swimming pools and expressions of religious affiliation in educational settings as a form of exclusion, which makes them invisible and unwanted in society.

**Zahra\_F5:** *[...] in France, we don't have much space [...]. There's not much for us [...]. The [Muslim] schools are very new, there are very few of them. They are expensive, [...] because they are not subsidised by the state. [...] it's a pity that some people are deprived of an education that includes their religious values [...].*

As we can see in Zahra's account, religious identity performance is very restrained for headscarf-wearing Muslim women in France, constituting a real issue because of the importance of identity performance in consolidating one's group membership (Klein et al., 2007). Furthermore, the lack of public funding for religious schools highlights that their needs as Muslim citizens are not being heard. This also obliges headscarf-wearing young women whose families do not have the financial means to pay for a private education to give up the headscarf during their school time, and in doing so to give-up one part of their identity as stressed further by the same participant: “I find it horrible, it's as if we were in a certain schizophrenia, so I go to school, I play a role, I take off my headscarf to conform to what I'm asked [to do], whereas I don't feel like it and when I leave the school I become myself again, [...]” Her statement calls attention to the negative repercussions of misrecognition on Muslim women's mental health.

Muslim women become invisible in the public sphere because they cannot enact their Muslim identity. However, if they stick to displaying their identity as they wish, by not giving up covering, they can also become invisible by being excluded from activities like school trips, as stated by Yasmine\_F5:

**Yasmine\_F5:** [...] *I refused several trips with the school, because I was told that ‘no, you can’t wear your veil’. That means that I would have to travel miles and live a whole week without my veil, it was impossible. I had to deprive myself of several things.*

Like many Muslim women, Yasmine faces an invisibility trade-off: either she makes invisible her Muslim identity, or she is made invisible in the school activities.

French Muslim women feel especially excluded from working as public servants or politicians, because they are not allowed to do so while wearing a headscarf. This is particularly relevant, since it can be seen as a way in which the state symbolically demarcates the national community, by allowing (and forbidding) ways of being. Dutch students equally indicate that they feel excluded from professions like in the justice and public safety domains, where religious affiliations cannot be displayed. Nora\_N11 for instance notes: “A policewoman may or may not wear a headscarf. So, when you say, ‘you have to look neutral’ the problem is that a certain appearance is singled out, which is seen as the norm.” Nora argues that the construction of ‘neutrality’ in clothing policies is not neutral at all, but is based on the dominant group norm, rendering Muslim women invisible.

However, Dutch Muslim women can cover in schools and in most professional settings and therefore do not perceive the public sector in such a negative light. Instead, they are relatively optimistic about their future visibility. They mention occasions in which they do feel that their needs as Muslims were considered (e.g., by having access to prayer rooms at university, or celebrating Islamic religious festivities at their workplace):

**Nour\_N13:** [...] *a while ago [...] if you were doing a sport; yeah, you should take it [the headscarf] off. And I do think that these days, even if you’re wearing a headscarf or something, you know, you can just attend more and more activities. [Others affirm]*

[...]

**Nusrat\_N13:** [...] *you can also see those very big companies [...] suddenly organise a day [during Ramadan] in which everyone will fast.*

In contrast to their French counterparts, Dutch participants increasingly feel visible. However, in both countries, when controversies around the headscarf arise, participants find that they rarely have a say. To this, Salma\_F3 responds: “[...] let me wear what I want and do not speak for me [...] You’re not in my head or in my life”. Here, Salma asserts that, as personally concerned by the issue in debate, Muslim women should be able to explain their position, in line with the feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1991). Nora similarly remarks that, in the Netherlands, Muslim women’s point of view is not taken seriously:

**Nora\_N11:** *And right now, it’s [wearing the headscarf] not just seen as oppression, that you’re coerced, it’s just that you’re supposedly indoctrinated. So even though you think that you’ve chosen it yourself, you haven’t actually [...] To free you from that indoctrination we actually have to get rid of that headscarf. [...] Then you restrict my freedom to choose what I do. [...]*

When denouncing their exclusion from some career fields and stressing how they are denied voice and agency when it comes to controversies about their clothing style, and how their opinions and arguments are silenced or not taken seriously in an environment that privilege non-Muslim’s (especially men’s) opinions, participants call attention to the gendered aspect of these experiences of misrecognition that we term *invisibility*. They also call attention to the inequality in power and influence that different social groups have in shaping discussions that affect them primarily.

## Summary Discussion

Participants report that dominant group members only highlight their religious/ethnic identities (*totalising misrecognition*), neglect their national identity (*membership misrecognition*), and perceive them as oppressed (*content misrecognition*). Participants also feel excluded from some career fields and ignored by the dominant group (*invisibility*). The headscarf plays an important role here as a visible identity marker (N. Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). It draws the

dominant group's attention and overshadows anything else. It is important to note that it is not the headscarf per se that triggers misrecognition, but the way the headscarf is perceived by the dominant group. These experiences of misrecognition are the product of asymmetric power relations: they arise during social interactions with dominant group members who can impose their perspectives (which is more difficult for dominated groups) and, by doing so, define, accept or reject others.

Although French and Dutch participants reported similar experiences of *totalising, membership and content misrecognition*, their conversations about *invisibility* notably differed. French participants feel invisible and constrained in their identity performance, as they must choose between giving up their identity performance or being excluded from numerous activities. Dutch participants, while also denouncing their invisibility, presented a more optimistic stance by stressing instances of recognition. Institutional differences in the way both countries treat religion and religious minorities are key to understanding this. As noted earlier, France has a stricter secular legislation than the Netherlands. Consequently, the French participants are way more exposed to invisibility in the public sphere than their Dutch counterparts, and this is reflected in their accounts. The impact of the secularism and security laws in French Muslim women's lives cannot be neglected, as these laws create an environment in which they feel unwelcome, while Dutch participants feel relatively enabled to express their religious identity, at times feeling welcomed by the institutional environment. As state laws and policies communicate *who belongs* to the nation, they appear critical to understanding differences in how misrecognition is experienced between countries.

### “What Sense Did You Make of It?” Social Representations of Misrecognition

In this section, through a social representational approach, we examine how participants collectively make sense of misrecognition experiences. Our analysis focuses on the consensual elements mobilised by participants in the discussion and how they link these to power and history. This is important because social representations, especially their consensual elements, guide individuals' social practices (Moscovici, 1961/2004). Thus, the way one understands what happened to oneself impacts one's future behaviour. Moreover, meaning making is also a means to regaining agency by reconstituting a negative experience in one's own words.

Overall, the content of the discussions was predominantly consensual, underlining a shared understanding of various individual experiences. Muslim women made sense of misrecognition by identifying its causes (Why does misrecognition happen?) and sources (Who are the misrecognisers?). For participants, misrecognition happens because of deficient intergroup contact, and country-specific historical and institutional practices. Regarding its sources, participants attribute it to politicians who disseminate anti-Muslim stereotypes. Considering that these elements (e.g., misrecognition being acted mainly by politicians and encountered in places where there is little intergroup contact) were not depicted in the cartoons stimulating the discussions, it seems that participants' responses were spontaneous and built on experience.

#### Who Are the Misrecognisers?

**Anti-Muslim Rhetoric by Politicians as Catalyst of Misrecognition** – Participants theorised that the continuous problematisation of Muslims by some politicians results in their everyday misrecognition. As we can see in Zohra\_N13's account: “It [Islam] is just present all the time in the House of Representatives [...] The whole time it's about Muslims [...] it's become kind of a heavy subject. It's not easy to talk to anyone about that anymore.” This political scrutiny can increase animosity among dominant group members towards their Muslims counterparts. Dutch participants are shocked by the increased support for extreme right-wing parties:

**Lamya\_N14:** *But it's that we don't see how many people actually feel connected to someone like... Baudet? [extreme right-wing politician] [...] That he's become number two [in the elections] is just insane. Apart from Islam, what he thinks about women [...] That he thinks that the Western World has deteriorated because more women go to work or have an abortion [...] Or using words similar to the white racist supremacist [others affirm].*

However, rather than extreme right-wing, French participants frequently mention mainstream politicians as a problematic source of misrecognition. According to them, as politicians are supposed to represent the nation, if they misrecognise national citizens of Muslim faith as foreigners or oppressed, they legitimate such discourse: “If the state already departs from a principle where ‘Islam is no good, veiled women are no good’, the citizens can do no other than follow” (Nora\_F7). Participants thus emphasise the influence of politicians as powerful actors in imposing their perspectives upon the nation. This echoes social representations theory, according to which those in positions of power can more easily impose their social representations upon others (Jovchelovitch, 1996).

The power of political statements to create the prototype of the “French citizen” and, consequently, to exclude everyone who does not fit it, is also discussed:

**Salma\_F3:** *[...] when Manuel Valls said that Marianne [the symbol of the French Republic] was not veiled, [...] it hurt me so much, [...]. Besides he was the Prime Minister, [...] supposed to represent the country. France is also us; you know what I mean? [...] you're shutting us out. We're not your ideal France [...] such a high-ranking representative who says such low things.*

Manuel Valls questioned headscarf-wearing Muslim women’s belonging to France by instrumentalising Marianne, because social representational processes condensed this artistic image with a feminist meaning of the bra as oppressive, turning Marianne’s breast into a symbol of “liberty”, of the “emancipation” of the French Republic, in the name of which covering appears as incompatible with “French values”, hence an instrumental anchor, and “justification”, of misrecognition practices against those who cover (Abric, 1994/2011).

### Why Does Misrecognition Happen?

**Deficient Intergroup Interaction** — Participants discussed the spatial distribution of misrecognition experiences. According to them, misrecognition is more frequent in areas with less ethnic and religious diversity. In line with intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), participants conceive intergroup contact as a means of breaking down prejudices.

For French participants, Paris is considered worse than the suburban area, yet still better than the countryside (see also Najib & P. Hopkins, 2020). The suburban area is regarded by participants as a safe space, as it is mainly populated by people with a minority ethnic background. To illustrate how Paris can be an aversive place, Manël\_F1 explains that if someone who always lived in the suburb moves to Paris, this person will feel the difference in people’s gaze, “because this person has always been used to living in a place where s/he is allowed”. Note that she describes the suburb as a place where Muslims are allowed to live, while in Paris they are not. Although negatively regarding Paris, participants understand misrecognition as being more frequent in the countryside. For example, Rania\_F4 indicated that her family had to move from Brittany, because her mother was constantly insulted in the street market.

Likewise, in the Netherlands, students attribute misrecognition to the lack of intergroup contact. That is why they indicate encountering these experiences more often when they are in the countryside or other places where Muslims are less present.

**Nadia\_N14:** *[...] If I look here in Amsterdam, Amsterdam is the number one or so multicultural city in the world, but if you look closely, it's divided into districts, like in Osdorp [neighborhood]...*

**Hakima\_N14:** *Moroccans.*

**Nadia\_N14:** *Moroccans. South [of Amsterdam]? Dutch.*

**Salima\_N14:** *Dutchmen.*

**Nadia\_N14:** *[...] We live together, we don't live together.*

Nadia directly ties her experiences of misrecognition to the spatial segregation in Amsterdam and lack of intergroup contact (we live together, we don’t live together). The others immediately recognise the spatial distribution that she has

in mind. Nadia notes that, though Amsterdam may appear multicultural, segregation reduces actual contact and social interaction is what matters to reduce stereotypes and what affects the misrecognition she experiences.

**Historical and Institutional Causes of Misrecognition: France as a Special Case** — French and Dutch participants conceive the misrecognition of headscarf-wearing Muslim women as being worse in France and point to its historical and institutional factors: the secularism laws, the legacies of colonialism, and the Republican model of integration.

French participants illustrate their perspective by comparing their experiences to those of Muslim women living in other countries (e.g., United Kingdom and Canada). Their explanations are based on the French colonisation of Maghreb: “[...] for me [the notion of the headscarf as submission] is anchored in France. It's not new, it dates back to the colonisations. [...]” (Widad\_F6), echoing the *historicity* of social representations according to which our experiences are embedded in a continuum of time (Rouquette, 2003). Furthermore, they associate misrecognition with the Republican model of integration: “[other countries] accept Pakistani outfits, they accept everything because they are on a multicultural basis, you know?” (Dalila\_F3); and the secularism laws and their misinterpretation and instrumentalization by the government: “[...] [they say] ‘we’re a secular country’, but when it comes to Islam, ‘ah, we’re a country with Christian roots’, well, the country is secular only when you want it to be” (Samia\_F8). This misinterpretation and instrumentalization of the secularism laws culminates in a *new secularism* through which the domination of one group over another is legitimised (Roebroeck & Guimond, 2016).

As previously mentioned, in the Dutch discussions, France was also mentioned as a worst-case scenario. In three cases, this happened without any prompting from the researchers. In one case, students reacted when they heard, during debriefing, that the same study had been carried out among French Muslim students: “I have to say that the Netherlands is really much, much more tolerant towards Muslims than France. [addresses moderators] Yeah that should become clear from your research” [participants laugh] (Salima\_N12). Dutch participants indicated that, in terms of misrecognition, they are relatively better off in the Netherlands because they perceive the position of religious minorities comparatively well safeguarded, and they regard the Dutch dominant group as *relatively* tolerant. This does not mean that they disregard the negative climate regarding Muslims in the Netherlands, but that they consider France to be comparatively worse. Salima\_N12 continues: “[In France] you notice that you're stared at when you walk down the street, [...] people are just much less tolerant towards Muslims. [...] you can't wear a headscarf in the schools. [...] This is a legal requirement. And that kind of thing [...] [is] a breeding ground for feelings towards the headscarf [...]”

Dutch students mainly attribute the severity of misrecognition in France to the prohibition to wear headscarves in schools, which could act to legitimise Muslim women's misrecognition in everyday situations by dominant group members. Like the French students, they also point at France's position as a historical coloniser of Maghreb. Nora\_N11 refers to a propaganda poster that the French (men) used in colonised Algeria. It featured an “unveiled woman” facing a “veiled woman”. In French, it ordered: “*Unveil! Are you not beautiful?*”, conveying a sense of domination and a beauty norm by imposing the withdrawal of the headscarf in the name of “modernity”. Again, we can witness the social representations (on beauty and modernity) from the dominant group (the French colonising men) being imposed upon the dominated group (the colonised Algerian women). Moreover, this example highlights how, according to participants, the past gendered and racialised stereotypical images are perpetuated in the present.

The participants' explanations for how misrecognition is worse in France help us to understand the differences we observe regarding their experiences and understandings of misrecognition. Indeed, our analysis indicates that the situation of French Muslim women in relation to misrecognition is much worse than that of their Dutch counterparts. Explaining why this is so, participants echoed our claims that the strict secular legislation in France leads to the misrecognition of Muslims. They go further in their reasoning by adding a historical factor into the equation: the French colonisation of Maghreb, highlighting the historicity of misrecognition to which we should turn our attention in future research.

## Summary Discussion

French and Dutch participants theorised their experiences of misrecognition in very similar ways. Even though these elements are connected to context, as they are driven by the participants' personal experiences, they are not limited to it: they were relevant in explaining participants' misrecognition but also and notably in explaining the misrecognition



of Muslims in general. As we saw, from a socio-representational perspective, experiences go hand in hand with understandings (Jodelet, 2006). More than finding out *what* is in the participants' social representations of misrecognition, this theory allowed us to identify *how* power (and history) build a consensual interpretation by participants of what could be rather different experiences in different contexts. It explains how, beyond the variety of experiences and interpretations of misrecognition, many participants who did not know each other shared similar perspectives and social representations.

Participants perceive politicians as an important source of misrecognition. By their power and influence, politicians affect how Muslims are singled out and negatively regarded, thereby inciting and legitimising these women's experiences of misrecognition. While the Dutch participants mention extreme right-wing politicians, the French sample perceives politicians across the political spectrum as an important source of misrecognition, which further hints at the severity of misrecognition in France. French and Dutch participants also understand misrecognition in terms of intergroup contact theory: In places where there is little intergroup interaction, stereotypes can persist and, consequently, misrecognition is likely to occur. They are thus aware of spaces that are "for them", or that are relatively unsafe. They also believe that misrecognition is caused by the perpetuation of historical colonial stereotypes and institutional factors such as secularity laws or integration policies. They thus picture *France as a special case* of misrecognition (see also Najib & P. Hopkins, 2020), supporting our expectation that headscarf-wearing French Muslim women would be more exposed to misrecognition in comparison to their Dutch counterparts because of the institutional differences in the way both countries treat religion and religious minorities.

## Conclusion

Considering the importance of social recognition of one's own sense of identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and thereby the interactional aspect of the identity-building process—especially in contexts marked by asymmetrical power relations—we explored and systematically compared headscarf-wearing French and Dutch Muslim women's experiences and understandings of misrecognition. Drawing on social identity and social representations theories, and using the Power Threat Meaning Framework, we situated our analysis of misrecognition at a positional level, rather than only intra- or interindividual one (Doise, 1982). In doing so, we aimed to understand experiences of misrecognition as a political, rather than psychological, phenomenon. Our theoretical approach also enabled us to understand misrecognition as a materialisation of power: misrecognition seems severe in asymmetrical power relations where those who misrecognise are in a dominant (and the misrecognised in a dominated) position. Therefore, from the participants' perspective, the politicians are the main source of their misrecognition, as they have the power to construct identities and thus influence others.

Beyond the contextual differences observed in the French and Dutch participants' accounts and discussed in the previous section, the similarities in their narratives are striking. This resemblance draws attention to the repercussions of misrecognition in Muslim European women's lives, cross-nationally experienced as negative. Research showed that misrecognition can be deleterious by being a constraint to the full exercise of citizenship (N. Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011), by impacting feelings of belonging (De Jong & Duyvendak, 2021), by harming psychological health and well-being and leading to conflictual relations within the national group (Da Silva et al., 2021).

The consequences of the consensus in the participants' understandings of misrecognition should also be considered. Perceiving politicians as a main source of misrecognition might impact participants' attitudes towards them, and lead to political alienation. Perceiving some places as worse than others might lead people to avoid going to those places so as to avoid the anticipated misrecognition, hindering their right to free movement. This raises questions about the relationship between spatiality and human interrelationships. Future research might tackle this issue<sup>3</sup> by focusing on the consequences of certain spaces being labelled as "safe places", placing minorities in suburbs, etc. Finally, conceiving France as a place of worsened misrecognition might considerably affect French Muslim women's mental health and

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3) In another manuscript (in prep.), researchers from the MisMiE project are addressing this topic.



well-being and lead them to leave the country (or at least to intend to do so), while their Dutch counterparts might see more opportunities to challenge stereotypical images of Muslim women and publicly display their religious identities. However, the Dutch Muslim women's situation might change (e.g., a partial interdiction of face-covering became effective a few months after data collection, [Government of the Netherlands, 2019](#)).

One important limitation of our study is our sample composition. The experiences of young Muslim women who are students might considerably differ from those of more senior or less formal educated Muslim women. Moreover, the Dutch sample mainly consisted of descendants of labour migrants, while French participants descend from post-colonial citizens. Future research could address this issue through systematic cross-country comparative designs across ethnic/religious minoritised groups. This could allow for a nuanced understanding of misrecognition by highlighting what is common to all these categories and what is specific to each. Future research should firmly apply an intersectional approach ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) to further unpack how misrecognition on the basis of ethnicity or religion may intersect with other identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, age, and social class). Another limitation relates to the data collection dynamics. Besides discussing the advantages of focus group moderation by outgroup members and having the impression that our positionality as non-Muslims did not negatively affect data collection, we cannot be sure if participants would not have shared different experiences with an ingroup moderator. Future research, comparing moderators' positionality (Muslim vs. non-Muslim), is needed to fill this gap. Finally, three out of four cartoon pictures, used as stimuli to the discussions, targeted negative experiences, placing the discussion directly on this domain. Future research interested in assessing the importance Muslim women attribute to their experiences of misrecognition might employ an alternative, less direct approach.

As we have seen throughout this paper, misrecognition can be hurtful and have important negative repercussions on the lives of European Muslims, in general, and European Muslim women, in particular. For this reason, countering misrecognition should be a priority for European and national policymakers aiming to build a more equal, just and inclusive society.

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## Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below):

- Additional information to the method's section (focus groups rationale, participants' recruitment, and ethics).
- Additional quotes for the different dimensions and social representations of misrecognition.

### Index of Supplementary Materials

Da Silva, C., De Jong, J., Feddes, A. R., Doosje, B., & Gruev-Vintila, A. (2022). *Supplementary materials to "Where are you really from? Understanding misrecognition from the experiences of French and Dutch muslim women students"* [Additional information and quotes]. *PsychOpen GOLD*. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.6884>

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## Appendix

The pictures presented below can be found on Tuffix website (<http://tuffix.net>).

