"You Tense Up": How Muslims in Switzerland Cope with Anti-Muslim Racism

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ABSTRACT: Anti-Muslim racism in Switzerland remains significantly under-researched. In this paper, we explore how Muslims, as well as individuals perceived as Muslims, respond to the racism they experience. Drawing on a group discussion and problem-centered interviews, we identify six distinct strategies. These are situated within the framework of standpoint theory and contextualized within the specific setting of Switzerland—where racism is still largely understood as an individual attitude, the country's colonial entanglements are denied, and public discourses on Muslims are heavily securitized. Through our analysis, we show that while some strategies may inadvertently reproduce racism, this occurs in ways that can be explained theoretically.

KEYWORDS: anti-Muslim racism; Switzerland; experience; strategies; standpoint theory

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1. INTR0DUCTI0N

The Swiss electorate famously adopted two initiatives directed against Muslims: a minaret ban in 2009 and a ban on face coverings in 2021. While the initiative to ban minarets was unilaterally aimed at Muslims and subsequently led to the increased problematization of Muslims in Swiss public debate (Gianni 2016), the initiative to ban veils was formulated in more general terms. However, a closer look at the debates on the latter reveals further *Othering* and demonstrates the extent to which public debates on Muslims in Switzerland are gendered (Dahinden and Manser-Egli 2023). In addition, the latest report by the Counselling Network for Victims of Racism (*Beratungsnetz für Rassismusopfer*) shows that counseling due to anti-Muslim racism is frequently requested, and that cases increased strongly in 2024 (EKR and humanrights.ch 2025, 16). It is therefore astonishing that anti-Muslim racism in Switzerland remains under-researched, both in terms of its manifestations in various areas of life, such as education or health, and in its impact on those affected.

This article sheds light on how Muslims and individuals perceived as Muslims in Switzerland deal with the racism they experience. Hence, it intends to focus on those affected and the strategies they employ. The analysis is based on interviews and a group discussion conducted as part of a research project on anti-Muslim racism (Trucco et al. 2025), commissioned by the Federal Service for Combating Racism (SCRA). We will take a closer look at the strategies reconstructed from this material by situating them within the framework of standpoint theory and contextualizing them within the Swiss setting. This may help explain, on one hand, why some strategies may inadvertently reproduce racism, while others may result in forms of agency for those who apply them.

To speak of anti-Muslim racism is a deliberate choice, even though the term is still less common than Islamophobia (UN 2020). As it contains "phobia," the term Islamophobia pathologizes and individualizes a social phenomenon—which we consider problematic. Building on previous studies (Balibar 1998; Mecheril and Melter 2009; Attia 2013; Shooman 2014; Hall 2019 [1992]; Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021; Dehbi and Dziri 2023), we define anti-Muslim racism as follows:

> Anti-Muslim racism is a historically evolved social relation within society. It is characterized by patterns of thought, perception, and action that produce difference and otherness to create and legitimize relations of power and inequality. Muslims and those perceived as Muslims are subjected to a process of racialization, through which they are constructed as a homogeneous and essentialized group defined by ascribed characteristics. As such, they are positioned in a dichotomous and hierarchical relation to a dominant in-group. This production of difference is rooted in notions of "race," "religion," and "culture," which are typically interwoven.[1]

Rather than presuming a person's intent and associating racism with direct physical violence, this definition extends to non-explicit, unintentional, and subtle forms of racism. At the same time, social relations, in which people are embedded and thus involved in different ways, must be understood as systematic and structural relations. Furthermore, patterns of thought, perception and action are part of societal knowledge orders, which means that discursive, longer-term developments are considered in the definition.

This article first illustrates the anti-Muslim racism specific to the Swiss setting, explaining the pertinent context in detail (section 2). The subsequent section (3) presents current research regarding strategies of people affected by anti-Muslim racism. Then, we outline

standpoint theory and its relevance to the question pursued here (section 4). This is followed by a brief explanation of the method applied (section 5), before we present the strategies reconstructed from our empirical material and situate them within the previously identified framework (sections 6 and 7).

2. ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM IN THE SWISS CONTEXT

In Switzerland, everyday understandings frame racism primarily as an individual "behavior, action, or attitude" and remain correspondingly "one-dimensional and partially ahistorical" (Lentin 2016, 36). Racism as "a thing of the past" (Lentin 2014, 1280) is strongly associated with those defeated during the Second World War and with colonial powers (Dos Santos et al. 2022, 18). The prevailing view in Switzerland is still that the country did not participate in colonialism (Purtschert, Falk, and Lüthi 2016, 287), although there is a growing body of research on the subject (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015; Lüthi and Skenderovic 2019; Darman and Schär 2023). This obscures Switzerland's colonial entanglements (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015, 4), but it also results in the "unnameability of the continuity of racism" (Michel 2015, 421). As Stefanie Boulila (2019, 1412) writes: "the belief that race and racism do not have a historical "Swiss" dimension is part of a broader amnesia informing the trope of Swiss neutrality." Linked to this understanding of racism is a particular interpretative pattern in debates about immigration and integration that has proved remarkably persistent since the beginning of the 20th century: the idea of "over-foreignization" (*Überfremdung*; Lüthi and Skenderovic 2019, 6). It is at the core of a narrative that portrays Switzerland as a small country threatened by "over-foreignization" through immigration, against which it must defend itself (Dahinden 2014, 98). Thereby, every foreigner represents a potential threat to the Swiss nation-state (Dahinden and Manser-Egli 2023, 144). This "self-definition *ex negativo*" (Kury 2008, 24) has enabled Switzerland to achieve national homogenization through demarcation from the "foreign," while simultaneously preserving its linguistic-cultural heterogeneity (Erlanger, Kury and Lüthi 2003, 442). Over the years, the term "over-foreignization" has been used against a variety of different groups: "first Jews or communists, after the Second World War Italian and Spanish labour migrants, since the 1980s labour migrants and asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey, and recently Muslims" (Dahinden, Duemmler, and Moret 2014, 335).

Since the adoption of the 2009 minaret ban, it has become clear that Muslims are widely perceived as problematic (Gianni 2016). Muslims have become a topic of public debate in the context of initiatives, votes and procedural requests in the national parliament, as well as in Swiss mass media (Ettinger 2018; Trucco 2021, 2025). These discourses are strongly securitized, i.e., phenomena of threats and protection are constructed and negotiated (Bosco 2014; Fox and Akbaba 2015), which also serves to domesticate Islam (Sunier 2023). Muslims are constructed "as figures of alterity, namely as subjects who cannot belong to the Swiss nation if they are unwilling to assimilate" (Baycan and Gianni 2019, 187). Accordingly, 34 percent of the Swiss population holds negative stereotypes about Muslims (FSO 2021, 11). Consistent with this, Muslims are the group with the highest level of perceived discrimination at almost 40 percent, regardless of life domain or attributes such as gender, employment situation, or level of education (Lindemann and Stolz 2021, 182, 185). Anti-Muslim racism in Switzerland occurs in practically all areas of everyday life (EKR and humanrights 2023; Trucco et al. 2025). For example, there is a significant Muslim employment gap in Switzerland: Muslims are 2.4 times more likely to be unemployed than non-Muslims, and Muslims with a very low or a very high level of education are often disproportionately unemployed (Lindemann and Stolz 2018,

159). Furthermore, anti-Muslim racism in Switzerland is gendered: Muslim women who wear headscarves are more strongly affected by discriminatory practices (Gasser 2020; Lindemann 2021). As a recent study shows, "pedagogies of coloniality are deployed to pressure veiled Muslim women to submit to altering their appearance and displaying adhesion to the majority norms" (Kebaïli and Lépinard 2025, 1057). Moreover, class affiliation appears to play a role, for, as Barbara Dellwo (2019, 110) demonstrates, Muslim elites are not racialized in the same way as Muslim workers or refugees. In addition, there is a high level of underreporting of discriminatory incidents: "for every 2,471 Muslims who perceive discrimination, only one reports it" (Lindemann and Stolz 2024, 1986). The reasons for underreporting are various: Muslims generally have less confidence that reporting will lead to a positive outcome, are more concerned about being seen as "victims," are less well-informed about reporting centers, have less trust in government bodies, and have only a few community-based alternatives to turn to (Lindemann and Stolz 2024 1992). Given that anti-Muslim racism is so widespread and structurally embedded in Switzerland, the question arises as to how Muslims and individuals perceived as Muslims respond to the racism they encounter.

3. DEALING WITH EXPERIENCES 0F ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM

A number of studies have already examined experiences of anti-Muslim racism (e.g., Carr 2016; Allen 2020, 51–74; Hopkins 2025). For the research interest pursued here, studies that systematically examine which strategies Muslims and individuals perceived as such apply as a result of their experiences of racism are of particular interest. In his literature review of Muslim experiences with social exclusion, Edin Kozaric (2024, 918–920) found that articles on measures taken by Muslims to cope with negative situations can be divided into pro-active and re-active ways of coping: modifying their appearance or avoiding going to certain places would classify as pro-active, while talking back, remaining silent or behaving in ways that signal distancing from established stereotypes would be re-active. Iman Attia and her collaborators (Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021) examined how people who self-identify as Muslims deal with the security discourses around Islam in Germany. They show that while their interviewees reject the essentialization and homogenization inherent in anti-Muslim racism, they simultaneously adopt some of its gendered, sexualized, colonial, and classist positionings (Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021, 172). They identified three different self-positionings of people affected: first, some respond through performative interventions, that is, by articulating a resistant consciousness, countering discrimination with their own standpoints (Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021, 148). Second, some bring to light experiences and historical links that are obscured in hegemonic historical narratives, emphasizing global-historical interconnections (Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021, 160). Thirdly, some people distance themselves intellectually, emotionally, or physically. Racism is experienced as a challenge; its impact on one's wellbeing is analyzed, and people then attempt to distance themselves from it as a form of self-protection (Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021, 136). A French study can also be connected to this last finding. It demonstrates a more extreme form of distancing: it shows that well-educated French Muslims are leaving the country due to experiences of racism (Esteves, Picard, and Talpin 2024).

In the Swiss context, there is a strong focus on discrimination against Muslim women—particularly those wearing headscarves (e.g., Gasser 2020; Aeschbach 2024; Kebaïli and Lépinard 2025). Nathalie Gasser's findings on how discourse shapes young Muslim women's educational trajectories are particularly relevant here. She identifies three strategies employed by these women: a first strategy is determined upward mobility, i.e., despite educational

barriers, these women succeed in realizing their educational aspirations through great effort (Gasser 2020, 191–192). A second strategy is religious community building, i.e., a turn toward the religious community, which leads to an accumulation of social capital and thereby professional advancement (Gasser 2020, 219–221). A third strategy is to develop resistant micropractices, through which the young women adjust their religious self-representations just enough to be able to navigate society as Muslim women. This strategy is employed primarily by women who are affected by intersectional multiple discrimination on the basis of migration background, class, religion, and body (Gasser 2020, 247–248).

Finally, a study by Janine Dahinden (2014) examines positioning processes among young people in Switzerland and shows that a clear boundary has been established in relation to Albanian-speaking and Muslim youth (Dahinden 2014, 112). Those affected respond in three ways: first, through assimilation efforts without questioning the ascriptions of others. Second, by attempting to reverse power relations through reinterpreting the unequal gender relations ascribed to them and presenting themselves as morally superior. And thirdly, some young men actively confirm the stigmatizing image because doing so allows them to circumvent discrimination based on their own origin and gain greater recognition through their status as men (Dahinden 2014, 115–117). As Dahinden (2014, 117) pointedly concludes: the collective boundary-drawing processes are what produce so-called Albanian and Muslim machos in the first place.

What these studies make clear is one thing above all: those affected cannot escape the effects of racializing interpellations and experiences of discrimination. They must always position themselves in relation to them in some way. Which strategies emerge from the empirical material depends on the aspect under investigation. To date, studies have either focused on specific discourses or domains of life (security discourses, mass media debates, educational trajectories), or have examined a particular sub-group (women wearing headscarves, young people). However, we aim to identify strategies of a heterogeneous sample of Muslims and individuals perceived as Muslims with regard to anti-Muslim racism in general, not limiting the analysis to a specific area.

4. STANDPOINT THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIES DEALING WITH ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM

We understand these strategies as situated within the framework of standpoint theory. Standpoint theories emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critique of the relationship between knowledge production and power, and assume that knowledge is socially situated (Harding 1991, 119). As gender scholar Sandra Harding (1991, 142) notes, "[t]he standpoint epistemologies call … for the acknowledgement that all human beliefs—including our best scientific beliefs—are socially situated." With the concept of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988), the traditional notion of objectivity is challenged—namely the idea that scientists (typically imagined as male) are neutral observers who examine their object of study from an external standpoint. This is, so to speak, a "god trick," a view from nowhere that conceives of knowledge as detached, as if floating in space (Haraway 1988, 581–590). Moreover, standpoint theory assumes that socially marginalized groups, by virtue of their position within relations of power and domination, possess a specific, epistemically privileged access to social realities (Harding 1991, 124–126; hooks 1990, 149). This means that a marginalized positioning within societal power relations, along with the experiences associated with it, can result in a distinctive perspective and specific knowledge regarding the patterns and mechanisms of social power. This is explained by the fact that for individuals in dominant societal positions, these

patterns and mechanisms are more difficult to perceive, as their "life patterns and ways of thinking fit all too closely with the dominant institutions and conceptual schemes" (Harding 1991, 124).

Harding emphasizes that women's everyday experiences and daily lives form the starting point for knowledge production in gender studies (Harding 1991, 178). Ethnographies of women's lives, however, are only a beginning and not an end in themselves; the main goal is to understand the workings of societal power relations, such as the naturalization and normalization of systems of oppression (Harding 2004, 6). Therefore, the experiences or perspectives of women alone cannot provide reliable foundations for knowledge claims, because experience is shaped by societal conditions. For example, Harding notes that women first had to learn to recognize sexual assault within marriage as rape, rather than as a "normalized" form of marital sexuality (Harding 1991, 123). Likewise, the knowledge of racially marginalized individuals is similarly shaped by dominant societal understandings of racism, meaning that people experiencing racism often do not initially identify these experiences as such. Consequently, racialized persons' experiences and testimonies are important, but cannot, on their own, constitute knowledge claims. Donna Haraway (1988, 584) emphasizes that "[t]he positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry."

Such a theoretical viewpoint raises the question of agency of individual actors within these social knowledge and power relations. We do not understand agency as either subjugation or resistance, but as simultaneous and connected to both (Brodersen et al. 2026). Agency thus encompasses both the ability to participate in and to reject social orders: "Given divergent norms, agency therefore describes a subject's fundamental ability to position themselves, and take action" (Brodersen 2026, 84). Strategies for dealing with racism can thus be interpreted as an expression of agency.

5. METHOD

For this research, we conducted ten problem-centered interviews with 11 interviewees[2] from all over Switzerland. In addition, we organized a group discussion with six young people in their twenties in German-speaking Switzerland. The discussion was designed as a "safe space," meaning that it should be as non-discriminatory as possible, where experiences can be shared and reflected upon (Dehbi 2021; Schmid et al. 2024, 131, 256). The discussion leader, for example, was already known to the young people and identified as Muslim. For ethical reasons, we disclosed the topic of the research in advance, thereby setting the frame of relevance: we reached out to individuals who perceived they had experienced anti-Muslim racism. Experiences of racism can be traumatic, so participants were fully informed about the topic beforehand and gave their informed consent to avoid being retraumatized by the interview or group discussion. The researcher entrusted with conducting the interviews had also completed training in trauma-informed interviewing.

Problem-centered interviews were chosen because they facilitate "a conversation structure that helps to uncover the actual perspectives of individuals on a particular problem in a systematic and dialogical way" (Witzel and Reiter 2012, 24). They draw on the researcher's prior knowledge in the form of sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954), encouraging the interviewees to share narratives, while also asking follow-up questions to elicit further details. We therefore began by asking interviewees to recall situations in which they felt they had been perceived as Muslim, in order to first inquire about their experiences of being positioned by others. At a later stage of the interview, we intended to ask about discriminatory situations. However,

many of the interviewees spoke about experiences of discrimination immediately following the first question. This was probably linked to our deliberate disclosure of the research topic.

Interviewee selection was based on purposeful sampling, with the aim of achieving the greatest possible heterogeneity (Patton 2002, 230–242). The basic idea of this is that "[a]ny common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimension of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton 2002, 235). The relevant dimensions for the sampling included interviewing approximately the same number of women and men, as well as people from the three major language regions (German-, French-, and Italian-speaking Switzerland). The interviews were conducted in Swiss-German, German, French and English, depending on the participants' preferences.[3] Five women and five men were interviewed, as well as a person of the third gender. Seven live in German-speaking, three in French-speaking, and one in Italian-speaking Switzerland. In addition, we considered different intersectional perspectives: women with and without headscarves, converts, individuals perceived as Muslims who do not identify as Muslim, as well as queer and Black Muslims. In doing so, we tried not to understand these aspects as "characteristics" of the individuals in question, but rather as diverse, interwoven dimensions that interact to produce certain experiences and perspectives (see Attia, Keskinkılıç, and Okcu 2021, 52–53). One limitation is the sample's relative homogeneity in terms of social strata. Although socio-economic status was not used as a selection criterion for sampling, we asked about occupation and level of education at the end of each interview. Most interviewees had a high level of education: 10 of the 11 hold at least a bachelor's degree. This bias may be explained by the fact that people with a high level of education are more likely to report discrimination (Diehl and Liebau 2017). Since the subject of the research was disclosed from the outset, we appear to have primarily attracted people with a higher level of education for the research. We therefore call for greater attention to social class or social strata in future investigations of anti-Muslim racism (Dellwo 2019).

For the group discussion, we followed Bohnsack (2022, 380–382): addressing the whole group, providing a thematic input quote, avoiding interruptions, and only asking questions once the discussion is under way. The participants in the group discussion were also selected according to the principle of purposeful sampling (Patton 2002, 230–242). The aim was to include young Muslim adults between the ages of 18 and 30, with an equal number of women and men participating. This was achieved: three women and three men took part in the discussion. The age range was between 20 and 29, with an average age of 24. They came from a total of three different German-speaking cantons.

The interviews and the group discussion were recorded, transcribed in full, and anonymized. We used an abbreviation for anonymization for the interviewees (e.g., "Ms D."), while the participants in the group discussion suggested an anonymized first name of their choice. The data were coded in MAXQDA. Selected passages were jointly interpreted by several researchers in accordance with the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge approach in order to challenge preconceptions and assumptions (Reichertz and Schröer 1994). For this article, we focus only on codes related to strategies in dealing with anti-Muslim racism, which were developed inductively from the material.

6. "WHY AM I DOING ALL THIS?" COPING WITH ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM

We identified six different, equally valid strategies in the material. The order of presentation should not be interpreted as a ranking, as all of the strategies serve to protect against and to cope with experiences of being positioned and discriminated against in different ways. For all interviewees and discussion participants, a particular way of coping with the experiences they described could be identified. However, we deliberately do not form types to which

individuals are exclusively assigned, as is often the case in qualitative research. Instead, we assume that the interviewees and discussion participants draw on different strategies depending on the particular discriminatory challenge and situation, but can also acquire new strategies over time. This temporal dimension is still a research desideratum, as it would require a qualitative longitudinal study (for example, see Röhrer 2026).

6.1. De-Thematizing and Negating

The first strategy presented here downplays or even denies experiences of racism and positioning by others: "I never had problems about uh situations- uh like uhm- you say, discriminatory things,"[4] says Ms B. (lines 138–139). This can be directly tied back to standpoint theories: if the dominant knowledge orders deny racism, as is the case in Switzerland (see section 2), and the knowledge of individuals is shaped by those collectively shared bodies of knowledge, then racialized individuals are not necessarily able to perceive racism as such. They have to learn to recognize racism, just as women had to learn to recognize sexual assault within marriage as rape (Harding 1991, 123). We can therefore consider it as an expression of the normalization of systems of oppression.

We found two variations of this strategy: one uses religiously or spiritually grounded arguments, the other a self-positioning as part of the national community. Generally, the strategy focuses strongly on positive circumstances and places them center stage. Ms B. highlights that she is proud, happy and grateful to be Muslim. She furthermore stresses that it is important to see "the beneficial part [of migration] as well" (line 406). Ms B. emphasizes how important it is "to show … good behaviour" as a Muslim (Ms B., lines 67–68). The aim of behaving "correctly" is, among other things, to demonstrate that "Islam is something different" (Ms B., line 77) from its negative portrayals in the media. This focus on behavior risks individualizing and personalizing experiences of racism, attributing them to the actions of the individual rather than pointing out the structural and systematic conditions. This strategy thus perpetuates hegemonic knowledge. However, the de-thematization and focus on the positive cannot be maintained throughout the whole interview; there are moments where it becomes fragile: "I never had really problems with discriminatory- … then of course I heard about situations uhm" (Ms B., lines 116–118). Later in the interview, Ms B. explains that "for a Muslim, it is important to- uh that when you say something that you are sure … because I didn't see … I just heard" (Ms B., lines 189–194). Here, she uses arguments that are explicitly rooted in faith to justify why she is cautious to talk about racism. Denying exclusionary structures and experiences of racism can serve as a protective mechanism for individuals: they do not want to be equated with certain ascriptions and stigmatizations about Muslims or forced into the role of victims.

This can also be clearly seen in the second variation of this strategy. Murad rejects the input quote of the group discussion:[5] "Personally, I can't relate to that sentence at all, because I am Swiss and I have been a Muslim for ten years" (Murad, lines 5–7). Murad positions himself as Swiss in order to reject negative positioning by others, in particular the central ascription to Muslims of being "foreign." This can be understood as a form of stigma management (Goffman 2022 [1963]). By distancing himself from ascriptions and experiences of exclusion, Murad attempts to maintain his self-image as Swiss and Muslim, but his presentation also becomes frail at certain points in the interview. Murad is partially aware that not everyone can make use of his type of presentation:

> When I'm out on my own, I have absolutely no problems because I'm recognized as Swiss, but when I'm out with my sister, who wears a headscarf, I notice those stares. (Murad, lines 427–430)

Women who wear headscarves cannot escape being positioned as "foreign," as Murad's quote clearly shows. Murad can only position himself as Swiss because he is a white Swiss man who is not immediately and visibly identified as a Muslim—in contrast to his sister who is positioned as a "foreign" Muslim because of her headscarf. At another point in the interview, it becomes clear that Murad is unable to fully reconcile being Muslim with being Swiss:

> When I think about it, I'm actually quite happy that I'm practicing [my religion], because when I see what happens on Saturday or Friday nights when people go out, and I'm lucky enough not to be part of it, I'm actually really happy (.) to be part of this society, but also not part of it. (Murad, lines 737–741)

Murad thus positions himself strategically as Swiss to manage stigma but seems nevertheless to occupy an ambiguous position.

In summary, both variations of this strategy serve to protect individuals from *Othering*, stigmatization and racism by distancing them from, denying or downplaying such experiences. While this strategy represents a response to relations of violence through which individuals attempt to manage experiences of exclusion, it simultaneously perpetuates hegemonic knowledge structures that deny racism.

6.2. Withdrawal

Individuals who use this strategy withdraw into circles of like-minded people. Ms G. and Ms K. both describe clear experiences of *Othering* in their interviews. "As a child, growing up, the only thing that made me feel like a stranger in this country was that I knew, okay, I'm Muslim, and somehow that's not really accepted as Swiss in Switzerland" (Ms K., lines 68–71). Following bell hooks (2004, 158), one could argue that Ms K. is speaking from a place in the margins where she is different—but therefore also sees things differently. Interviewees with this strategy recognize *Othering* and racist experiences as such. In Ms K.'s case, constant positioning by others and experiences of discrimination appear to have led to a certain disillusionment. She speaks of losing hope, "when you see that these are people who actually have contact with Muslims and still think that way" (Ms K., lines 79–81). And she goes on:

> What is the point of being a good person, in the sense of integrating well into society, if you are ultimately still perceived as different? (Ms K., lines 83–85)

What we see here, similar to the previous strategy, is a perpetuation of hegemonic knowledge, even though the interviewees clearly recognize anti-Muslim racism as such. Nevertheless, they feel obliged to accept a dominant interpretation pattern: society does not want to see people who are different as part of society. Ms K. seems to have accepted this external positioning as "different." Positioning is thus not actively contested through this strategy.

The interviewees speak of their experiences being "difficult" and "stressful" (Ms G., lines 657, 665) and making them "sad" (Ms K., line 75). Ms G. concludes that "I like to be around people that understand me" (Ms G., line 617) and adds "I go and meet people, but only who are like me" (Ms G., line 622–623). Ms K. also explains:

> Now I tend to focus more on interacting with people who have the same background as me, second-generation Muslims who hold on to their faith but are just as Swiss as everyone else, only with a different religion … Sometimes you still feel like a stranger

> in your own country, but you feel less like a stranger with like-minded people. (Ms K., lines 89–94)

This strategy therefore shows how racist structures can lead to a decline in people's participation in society, because they withdraw into circles of like-minded people in order to avoid being positioned as "foreign" and to experience a sense of belonging and recognition. Depending on how far-reaching the withdrawal is, it may not be desirable from a broader societal perspective.

6.3. Reporting Incidents, But Not Causing Problems

This strategy consists of reporting serious incidents of racism while at the same time trying not to attract attention and cause problems. As Mr H. explains in the interview: "The best solution is just to let it go. I have to go, I'm sorry, and just walk away" (lines 186–187). Mr H. experiences continuous racism in the workplace, but says: "Their insults go in one ear and out the other. We don't take it personally" (Mr H., lines 156–158). However, he does raise the question of how discrimination should be addressed in society when a big part of the workforce consists of migrants. After severe discriminatory incidents with a neighbor, he reported the incidents to building management. But he says:

> Our best solution is simply to keep our distance … so that we don't, let's say, exacerbate the problems and simply make them worse … We just live here. Municipality, police, they know where we are and what we are doing; everything is good, we are not just sitting here illegally or something, but at the same time, we don't want to look for problems. Our goal is that we live normally. (Mr H., lines 566–574)

This strategy results from the intersection of several dimensions of exclusion: besides religion, these include body (skin color), experience of forced migration and potentially, as a consequence of migration, a socio-economic status that is below average in Swiss society. The strategy can thus possibly be linked to Mr H.'s position in Swiss society and can be understood as a submission to coercive Swiss integration discourses. As Matteo Gianni (2016, 29) shows, integration "is based on the idea … that Muslim immigrants should demonstrate a willingness to adjust to Swiss values," which he deems very close to assimilation. It is important not to attract attention and to conform to the image of the "good citizen" who "lives in conformity with the written and unwritten social norms. He or she earns money in an orderly way, pays debts, does not rely on social benefits, respects law and order and does not commit crimes" (D'Amato and Carrel 2017, 73–74). To adapt and not attract attention is the main tactic of this strategy, but from a standpoint-theoretical perspective, Mr. G.'s selective reporting shows that his marginalized position provides him with specific insight into power relations, enabling him to navigate these dynamics with agency by deciding when to report severe incidents and when to step away.

6.4. Fighting

This strategy consists of fighting against racism and *Othering*. Almost all of the interviewees employing this strategy use the word "fight" in the interview: "You really have to fight," says Ms F. (line 301), while Mr A. states, "I fight against Islamophobia, racism, discrimination" (lines 335–336). Here, knowledge becomes explicit. Racism is clearly named as

such. All five interviewees who use this strategy describe in different ways how they fight: Mr A. reported hate mail he received to the police. Ms D. has been an activist in the past and continues to fight daily discrimination. Mr G. has fought for and won the right from school authorities for his son to be allowed to participate in Friday prayers. Ms F. has been fighting against discrimination since her teenage years; this includes standing up for her parents, her daughter, and even her daughter's classmates. For Lou, it is important "that we stand up for ourselves" (Lou, lines 504–505). She recounts:

> I also have days when I'm in a good mood or a bad mood, and then someone keeps coming and saying, "Your headscarf doesn't protect you" or shit like that … and yes, then either I say something back or I think to myself, I'm not in the mood right now. And sometimes I shout something back (Nora laughs) and then I also involve everyone who's watching; I really kick everyone's arse. (Lou, lines 240–246)

In addition to its focus on fighting, this strategy is gendered. Whereas the two men do describe certain emotions such as indignation or frustration, they nevertheless present themselves as mostly unaffected on an emotional level: "it doesn't affect me personally," says Mr A. (line 64), while Mr G. states, "I also have some kind of thick skin" (line 100–101). In their self-presentations, a certain masculine positioning of invulnerability and strength becomes apparent. However, there are moments in the interviews where this self-image becomes fragile. Toward the end of the interview, Mr A. admits:

> I'm worried, I'm very worried uhm well, I'm also wondering if I'm going to stay in Switzerland all my life, frankly. I like Switzerland, but uhm maybe they're right, maybe I'd be better off somewhere else, I don't know (laughs). (Mr A., lines 371–374)

The three female interviewees who use this strategy all wear a headscarf and are thus always identifiable as Muslims in public, experiencing intersectional discrimination as a result. This leads to daily confrontations and seems to weigh heavily on Ms D. and Ms F. "It took an enormous amount of energy," explains Ms D., and later, "it's tiring, it's heavy" (lines 111–112, 127–128). "It was such a struggle every day, and at some points it got me down," says Ms F., "we just have to be very alert all the time, and that makes me tired" (lines 50–52, 835–836). Ms D. explicitly discusses fear:

> And I'm afraid (laughs), but I go ahead anyway, I'd say "Don't be afraid (uses her own name), don't be afraid." And obviously, I don't talk about it; I don't talk about that, I don't talk about that, I don't talk about my fears. I don't talk about my fear (softer), no, I don't talk about my fear. I live with my fear. (..) And I work so that it does not limit me (laughs). (Ms D., lines 509–513)

In this quote, the striking repetitions ("I don't talk about that") make it clear how stressful her constant fear must be. Nevertheless, Ms D. refuses to be discouraged and explains that she prepares daily to fight against discrimination: "I'm actually conditioning myself, psychologically and- (.) I'm preparing myself, if you like, for discrimination" (Ms D., lines 358–360). In a similar way, Ms F. refuses to give up: "Why am I doing all this? So that at some point it stops for everyone, for lots of people, right?" (Ms F., lines 1158–1159).

Whereas the heavy burden of fighting against discriminatory incidents becomes evident in various statements by Ms F. and Ms D., Lou displays a greater sense of ease, which may

be related to the fact that she is younger. She says she has "a big mouth" and even admits that she is lucky that she "never had a brawl" (Lou, lines 117, 233–234). Through her sometimes-confrontational manner, Lou deliberately breaks with the image of the unfree and oppressed Muslim woman. It seems as if she draws strength from this. She has learned to reinterpret stressful situations:

> I've had to change it so that's just fun and I'm no longer so upset, yes … Yes, I don't know how good that is either, but my coping is really just humor … Just making jokes out of it. (Lou, lines 122–125)

In summary, specific situated knowledge becomes explicit in this strategy. It is a gendered strategy: unlike male interviewees, two of the three women clearly speak about the emotional toll that the daily fight against racism takes on them. Lou, as a younger woman, admits to being upset at certain moments, but has learned to cope with situations either through confrontation or humor.

6.5. Relying on Knowledge and Experience

This strategy explicitly relies on knowledge, with two variations: either anti-racist knowledge or strongly embodied experiential knowledge. In this strategy, a description of power relations from one's own positionality takes place, including reflections on one's own internalized racist structures: "It is really so blatantly inside you, you have to reflect and confront yourself so much to get out of it" (Mr C., lines 340–342). Mr E. (lines 57–58) sees the main problem lying in "a hegemonic culture that wants to dictate what the norm is, what is allowed and what is not allowed." Later in the interview, he says: "if it's about discrimination, then it's about privileges" (Mr E., lines 829–830). A clear articulation of observations and theory of racism from the perspective of those affected becomes evident here, relying on anti-racist theoretical knowledge in the first variation of the strategy. The interviewees are able to embed their personal experiences within the theoretical framework: "it's not the individual story, that I've been a victim … it's about more, it's a societal problem" (Mr E., lines 850–852). They clearly describe the impact of their experiences:

> I think there are days when you find it funny, when you can laugh about it, (.) there are days when it offends you, there are days when it hurts you, there are days when it makes you angry. (Mr C., lines 142–145)

> In most cases, I actually manage to react quite well with a backpack of knowledge, knowing how to respond. But there are also moments when you're stunned afterwards, perplexed, where you- where you have almost no answer. (Mr E., lines 106–110)

Interviewee J., on the other hand, draws on identity-related, intersectional, experiential, bodily knowledge. As a queer Muslim anti-racism expert, J. holds a dual position as an outsider within. J. mobilizes their own specific, intersectional knowledge, as becomes evident in recounting a discriminatory incident at a workshop. J. first describes the bodily pressure triggered by a participant's ascription, then illustrates:

> Then you're directly affected by your emotions, which rise up in your body, you tense up, you feel your face trying to- I've got to smile, and then there's even something going on in your head, and it's really a stressful situation. And then after … But it's

> mainly the aftermath, because during the moment- you react as best as you can … it still leaves a mark on you. (J., lines 191–198)

This statement demonstrates J.'s awareness of the embodied dimensions of a discriminatory situation. Anti-racist and intersectional bodily knowledge thus provides a framework that enables those affected to situate their experiences of *Othering* and anti-Muslim racism within a broader social context of power relations, understand and interpret them and, ultimately, to cope with them.

6.6. Strategically Manage Ascriptions

This is a strategy only employed by young Muslims. At its core is a thorough understanding of *Othering* and positioning by others, followed by a strategic management of ascriptions. The group discussion participants employing this strategy understand how racism functions: "diversity is simply denied to us," says Nora (line 1056). And Mohammed points out: "What bothers me personally is that … I'm somewhere in a category where I don't want to be. They think … he's not self-determined, he's praying, he's like, I don't know, semi-radical" (Mohammed, lines 1121–1124). Thus, they try to strategically manage ascriptions:

> I always have the feeling that I immediately generate an image when I say just one sentence, and I don't like being in this image//Lou: Yes, totally!//I want to be in a different image, because (.) yes, I'm not that or I'm not just that. (Mohammed, lines 166–169)

Accordingly, Mohammed says that he deliberately chooses not to mention that he is Muslim, but, for example, simply says that he does not eat meat. Conversations are thus strategically steered, which can result in empowerment and a feeling of agency: "I control it a little bit, like if you give a funny answer like that, then things go very differently," says Mohammed (lines 185–186). This can also include not explaining anything:

> Depending on the situation, I also find it really (.) empowering … if you don't say anything//Lou: Yes//If you don't explain and don't justify. (Nora, lines 258–260)

Through heightened awareness and strategic management of ascriptions, the young respondents recognize that they can become tokenized: "I'm a token, and I have to be … everything, but if I am, I am … excluded, and if I'm not, I'm also excluded" (Nora, lines 1030–1032). This strategy involves not only strategically managing racism but also anticipating it, thereby undermining the basis of others' positioning. Overall, this strategy is characterized by a high degree of reflexive and critical understanding of the forms and functioning of anti-Muslim racism, as well as by considerable agency in questioning and managing ascriptions and positioning by others.

7. CONCLUSION

In this article, we identify six different strategies through which Muslims and individuals perceived as Muslims in Switzerland navigate experiences of racism and positioning by others. In doing so, we are responding to a need to particularly focus on agency in anti-Muslim racism research (Kozaric 2024, 930). We built on data from research on anti-Muslim racism in

Switzerland (Trucco et al. 2025). These strategies reveal different relations to bodies of knowledge. Two strategies perpetuate hegemonic knowledge in Switzerland, where racism is still strongly attributed to individual intent and disconnected from historical context: the strategy of de-thematizing and negating internalized normalization of this knowledge, and the strategy of withdrawal in principle, which accepts being positioned as "different" and the "other." Situating these strategies within standpoint theories demonstrates that racialized people do not necessarily recognize racism as such. Furthermore, these strategies must always be understood as serving a protective function, shielding individuals from experiences of exclusion.

The strategy of reporting incidents while avoiding causing problems can be situated within the broader Swiss context, where coercive integration discourses prevail. However, adaptation should not be understood as complete subjugation, as the temporal dimension must be considered: adaptation over time holds a prospect of gaining more agency (see Trucco and Pokitsch 2026; Röhrer 2026); though this remains a research gap in the present study. Moreover, this strategy incorporates another dimension of agency from the outset: racist incidents of a certain severity are reported, and thus a decision to act or avoid is made.

In two further strategies—the strategy of fighting and the strategy of relying on knowledge and experience—knowledge becomes explicit. While the former explicitly recognizes and challenges racism as such, the latter more deeply embeds personal experiences within knowledge systems and experiential knowledge, in order to understand and ultimately cope with them.

The final strategy goes even further: young Muslims not only possess knowledge about racism, but can also anticipate ascriptions and positionings, manage them strategically, and thereby undermine their foundations. The fact that only young Muslims strategically manage ascriptions introduces a further, possible temporal dimension. Perhaps these younger individuals have acquired knowledge through school or training that was not as available to older generations? Whilst our study cannot conclusively substantiate this, strategic management represents an interesting finding that calls for further investigation. Moreover, we recommend that future research examine changes in strategies across different situations, and over time, through qualitative longitudinal studies.

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STATEMENT OF ETHICS AND INFORMED CONSENT

At the time of the research, the University of Fribourg did not have an ethics committee, and therefore no ethics approval could be obtained. The research project on which this article is based was commissioned by the Federal Service for Combating Racism (SCRA). Accordingly, the research design had been reviewed and approved in advance by the Federal Service, and an advisory group,* led by the Federal Service, supervised the work on the research project. The interviewees and group discussion participants were informed orally about the research project and the use, anonymization and storage of the data before the interview and group discussion. For the publication in academic journals, written consent was additionally obtained from the participants quoted in the articles, confirming that the transcript of the anonymized interview or anonymized group discussion could be used.

(*The advisory group consisted of the following experts: Cenk Akdoğanbulut, historian; Pascal Gemperli, mediator and Muslim association representative; Meral Kaya, historian and gender scholar; Meryam Mastour, lawyer, consultant, and trainer on gender, diversity, and inclusion; Fatima Moumouni, playwright and advocate for intersectionality and anti-racism.)

NOTES

[1]See the detailed explanations for the different parts of the definition, albeit in German: Trucco et al. (2025, 6–12).

[2]One interview was conducted with a couple.

[3]All interview excerpts in French, Swiss-German, and German were translated into English for this article by the authors.

[4]We transcribed the text as closely as possible to the spoken language; that is, filler words and sounds were included in the transcription, incomplete sentences were signaled with a hyphen, stress was underlined, and pauses were marked, as is commonly done in interpretive social research.

[5]The input quote was as follows: "In the past, my name made me the foreigner, today, I am the Muslim."

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