(De)Humanising People in Discussions around Race and Religion – A conversation with Iram Khawaja, Lene Kühle and Christian Suhr

By Lea Skewes

Postdoc, Department of Culture and Language, University of Southern Denmark, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6217-7870

Introduction

Social psychology shows that majority groups typically are allowed greater latitude in defining who they are, while minorities, on the other hand, typically are labelled narrowly and stereotypically. This means that everybody does not have the same starting point in social interactions. One's starting point is shaped by the social labels others - such as politicians and the media - and we ourselves, associate with us and the multiple social groups we belong to.

How we choose to speak about, and to, concrete people and social groups matters for how they are perceived by others and by themselves. The more powerful a position one speaks from the greater effect one's choices of words and labels have – especially for the people who are being spoken about. Politicians and media outlets are particularly powerful players in shaping discourses around social groups. The way in which Danish politicians and Danish media speak about religious minorities and race matters.

There are many different kinds of social categories – for instances gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality – but in this conversation we have chosen to focus on religion (particularly Islam) and race, or rather racialisation (that is how race is done in social interactions). We have chosen to discuss these two social categories and their intersections because the discourse around these have become increasingly hostile – and often even hateful – in both Danish political discourse and in the Danish media coverage of people categorised as belonging to these social groups (we see this in discussions around religious minorities' right to wear a veil or circumcise their children). This often rather hostile discourse functions as great clickbait but can make it difficult to contribute constructively to the conversation as a researcher with knowledge about minority groups.

The following panel discussion was part of a *Gendering in Research* seminar which took place the 26th of May 2023, at Aarhus University. We invited three speakers from three different disciplines to offer their take on how racialisation and religion intersect in different Danish contexts. Coming from the field of Educational Psychology Associate professor Iram Khawaja from Danish

School of Education spoke about *Muslimness as a racialized category.* In her talk she offered examples from her interview data about how religion and race intersect in Denmark, especially in the educational system where discourses contrasting religiosity and secularity govern. Professor Lene Kühle from the Department of the Study of Religion at the School of Culture and Society offered a talk entitled, '*Is the regulation of religious individuals and communities in Denmark discriminatory or racist?'* As the title indicate she offered a more judicial take on how we navigate religion in a Danish context. And finally, we had Professor Christian Suhr from the Department of Anthropology, at the School of Culture and Society offer the talk '*Muslims, Muslims, Muslims: flimflam about Muslims in Europe*'. Suhr's talk was based on his experiences as a filmmaker, and he drew attention to how the framing of movies about minorities (like Muslims) shape our understanding of what it means to belong to a particular minority. So, this is where our conversation starts.

Positioning the researcher in a dehumanising discourse

Lea Skewes: I would like to start with a very open question about whether you have any reflections, or comments, to each other after hearing each other's different takes on things?

Iram Khawaja: At the end of his presentation Christian [Suhr] showed two film clips: one from the documentary *"The mosques behind the veil"* (TV2 2016, in Danish *"Moskeerne bag sløret"*) and the other clip from his film *"Light upon light"* (Hassala Films 2022) in which a Muslim person describes how they had experienced a religious light. It was very powerful to see these images – there is just something about the visual media that is very powerful. What struck me about it was the contrast between the documentary *"The mosques behind the veil",* and the clip from your own movie Christian [with the person describing their experience of religious light]. It was clear that you used the medium of film to humanise this person. And I think a very important part of countering racialisation is actually the process of humanising, exactly because part of what racialisation does is to dehumanise. And it is important that we, as researchers, strive to counter processes of racialisation and dehumanisation. In the first documentary *["The mosques behind the veil"]* where Muslims are cast as the bad guys, there is this use of a shaky camera; the images are blurry and graded in certain dark colours. This creates a distance between the viewer and the Muslim people depicted in the documentary. Whereas you have chosen to place the person you are talking to in your documentary in a soft light. The way you have centred the person in your movie helps create a human being – a human being who happens to be talking about an experience that has had a deep spiritual effect on him. This contrast made me think of how dehumanisation can be countered by humanisation through the visual medium. And it made me wonder, how we as 'normal' researchers might achieve this – when we do not have your visual means. How do we humanise people? How do we counter some of the very toxic dehumanising, racialising, and discriminatory rhetoric, which we sometimes are invited into by the media, or more broadly in relation to the political debates? We have had this discussion in regard to the banning of head scarfs. We were debating whether we should become part of this discussion by answering the different journalists' questions, or whether we thereby become part of reproducing a certain discourse that has dehumanising effects. We were discussing whether we were actually able to contribute with something that could add nuance to this discussion, or whether we would just fuel a toxic debate?

Lene Kühle: That is true we have had this discussion about how to engage with discourses like that. I completely agree that we need to counter the dehumanisation. But I think it is also important that discussions of racialisation are not used to dehumanise those who hold these opinions – even if they are hurtful to others. As researchers, we should strive not to make the debates more polarised or more hostile. It is important that scholars strive to heal some of the wounds in both

camps. We should not take up too explicit positions. Of course, we are never completely neutral, and of course we are all influenced by what we see when we do fieldwork, or by what we hear in political discussions. But I think it is important that we continue to speak with journalists and that we continue to talk to politicians. We should try to understand why they think the way they do, and why they are acting the way they do. This is important because we should strive to avoid becoming part of the conflicts ourselves.

Christian Suhr: But we do have a position. We need to take a position. There is no neutral space in this discourse. It is an illusion that we can be neutral. However, it is important to be attentive to the fact that this so-called 'neutral position' is how we, as scholars, are cast in the media. I remember seeing myself with the label of 'expert of Islam' – but what does that even mean? I do not know. It was in the news – and I was being cast as one of the 'neutral experts'. We have a responsibility to be reflective around the positions we speak from. Because we are not neutral. We have a position. This concept of 'objectivity' that journalists sometimes speak of is nonsense. It really is nonsense when journalists claim a position of objectivity – they are never completely objective, and they are never completely neutral. Neutrality when used in this way is usually a cover for a serious bias. And I think it is important to be aware of that. I do agree that we should continue speaking with journalists. And there are a lot of great journalists! Sometimes journalists are better than scholars at identifying these positions and problems. But maybe we, as researchers, need to be pro-active and identify which problems are the relevant ones. It is not always easy, or even possible. Sometimes we are just in the position of being called by a journalist from *Ekstra Bladet* who wants to discuss what Denmark would look like if the Islamic State took over. But with such a journalist, it might still be possible to point out that there could be other, more urgent or relevant questions. But it is not easy because how do you change the parameters of a whole debate? And this becomes particularly complicated when it is as harsh a debate as this one about Islam and Muslims has been. Perhaps now there is a moment with some breathing space – we hear a little less about Muslims and Islam, perhaps because the Russians have taken over as the main threat to our society. But back in 2015-2016 the debate about Islam was very intense. I found it very difficult to manoeuvre.

Iram Khawaja: I actually do not agree that there currently is some breathing space on this topic. There is no peak right now in the focus on the subject of Muslims and Islam, but I think it is continuously there as a theme. And I think it pops up in different ways – specifically around election time. Unfortunately, I think it is a very stable current theme, and it is something which appears in Mette Frederiksen's speeches as well. For example, recently, she introduced a discussion about the safety in apartment blocks' basements where you might have to do laundry. This discussion was centred around which types of people might be lurking around there. Or the discussion around train stations and specific people occupying those spaces – and the laws that are associated with this. The fact that you can actually take away young peoples' belongings, their coats, and so on, in the name of safety. I also hear this from the people I interview – that if they turn on the TV or the radio – they are worried that there will be more news targeting people like them. So, they constantly have that as a backdrop. We might not be at the peak of a wave – you know we have these news waves for instance with the ban of hijabs in schools which was quite an intense wave – but no matter whether we are at the peak of a new wave, it is there lurking. We also see it in the focus on negative social control in schools. It is constantly there in different ways. Exactly, because it is always there, I agree with both of you, that we need to keep talking to journalists and keep trying to shape what we are discussing. My strategy has been to always base what I talk about on research. So that becomes my position. I speak about what the *research* is saying, not what *I* am saying. Maybe, also because I am positioned in a very different way than you [Christian Suhr and Lene Kühle] are. I am seen as someone who has a personal opinion about this, because I am read as

a Muslim and of ethnic minority background. So, I really have to tread very carefully and struggle to maintain an authority as a researcher. So, I do not automatically get the expert position – I have to argue for that – which is interesting as well.

Christian Suhr: That is interesting!

Iram Khawaja: And that is why, for me, it is a very strategic and a very conscious strategy to say something which is always based on research.

Signe Vogel [GIR coordinator and audience member]: I think this positionality is very interesting. The fact that it varies to which degree you need to position yourself as a researcher. I am personally very inspired by Nancy Scheper-Hughes work *"The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology"* (1995) – I am a really big fan of hers. I do not necessarily think it should be an imperative, but I do think it is okay for researchers to take a moral stance. For instance, I research gender discrimination, and I find gender discrimination morally wrong. This is a normative and subjective standpoint. But, like Christian [Suhr] said, there is no objective or neutral position to occupy. But some people still think that researchers are not allowed to position themselves morally at all.

Lene Kühle: But on the other hand, I do think that people expect some degree of positionality from researchers. I think people would find it weird if a researcher did not support democracy for example, or if they said that racism was great.

Signe Vogel: And yet, many researchers, within our fields, have been accused of not doing research, but activism.

Christian Suhr: 'Research' is a complex word with complex meanings. And there are different ideals for what we consider to be 'proper research'. When I present my opinions then I hope my opinions are informed by my research. But research is inevitably also impacted by the opinions and sensibilities we have as researchers. However, I agree that if we use our authority as scholars in the media and use people's time, then there needs to be a foundation for what we are saying. We must consider in which ways we are qualified for the discussion. There are many opinions about what 'proper research' is. And in your case Iram [Khawaja] it sounds like you have developed a concrete strategy out of necessity.

Iram Khawaja: Yes, I have.

Christian Suhr: I am rarely positioned like you Iram [Khawaja]. I am not questioned as an authority like that – at least not unless I have shown some very far out videos.

Iram Khawaja: Whereas I recently got the question, before we went on air for a radio program, whether I was speaking as a *debater* or as a *researcher*. And those positions, or labels, matter – it makes a great difference where I am speaking from.

Signe Vogel: Yes labels matter. Words matter, which leads me to another thing I find difficult. Sometimes you cannot use the words you would like to use if you want to be part of the conversation. I mean, sometimes you will be excluded if you use too confrontational vocabulary. But if you accept that as a premise for participation in the conversation, then you end up indirectly agreeing that this cannot be spoken about or addressed. For instance, when we are not allowed to label racism exactly that – racism. But on the other hand, if we do not participate in the conversation then we cannot contribute to any change either.

Christian Suhr: I felt exactly like that at some point in the discussion around Islam. I felt like I was called in to speculate about who those Muslims were. I was drawn into a debate about how they might not be *as* bad as expected – but *how* bad were they then? In that discussion, there are no nuances. The discussion is kept within very specific parameters. Whenever there is a scandal – such as the sense of scandal raised by TV2s' *"Mosques behind of the veil"* - then you seem to end up contributing to it and keeping the momentum of the scandal going – no matter what you say.

Lea Skewes: So, you might end up contributing to an othering, or a dehumanisation, even when your intentions were different.

Is there anything unique about religion and racialisation in Denmark?

Lea Skewes: Over the last few years, we have seen a right-wing or maybe even fascist turn all over the globe. This is a turn which shines through in the Danish political context as well. But is there anything unique about how racism and Islamophobia gets entangled in Denmark, compared to the rest of the world, or are we just copy-pasting what all the other countries are already doing?

Lene Kühle: I think there is something unique about Denmark. In Denmark we do see a right-wing turn, but I think that many of the discussions here are not driven solely by the right-wing. For instance, the green-left has been quite prominent in some of the discussion around social control and the ban on hijab. It used to be the case that the political scene was very polarised, but that is no longer the case. And I think that might be unique to Denmark.

Christian Suhr: I think there are two other things as well. If you take the US as an example, then there is a different socioeconomic composition amongst people who identify as Muslim, compared to Northern Europe. So, there is a class and educational difference. In the US – at least until recently – there was an idea that Muslims might actually be well-off or highly educated, whereas in the Danish or Scandinavian welfare states, many Muslims came as refugees, and you have people who took up jobs in production during the 60's and 70's. I think this has shaped the perception of 'the Muslim' as someone who is uneducated. So, this is unique to our context. But this is changing – the statistics on education are changing rapidly. Apparently, coming from a traumatised background in Lebanon does not translate into your children becoming unemployed or uneducated at all. So, that is the positive side of this. Another unique thing about Denmark, is that we have a strange kind of secularism. Secularism has roots in Protestantism, and in Denmark, and other Northern European countries, we combine this with a preservation of the State Church. So, we have a kind of normative secularism that insists on having a State Church as a kind of Cultural Christianity. I think this is different from the American context. It is a different relationship between the State and the Church.

Iram Khawaja: I think there are some things that I would like to highlight that make Denmark, or the Scandinavian context, different from the rest of the world. We have this basic discomfort when talking about differences. We have this ideal of equality – which is a very humanitarian and a humanistic ideal – but in practice it is often translated into *sameness*. This is what we have seen when we do research in educational institutions – in daycares and schools – there is this ideal of equality that becomes restrictive of difference. This is called *Nordic exceptionalism*. We have a concept for this difficulty in talking about differences. And it is particularly difficult to talk about differences associated with racialisation or religion. We might be able to talk about gender differences by now because we have had a historical and political focus on that. But for Danes, this *Nordic exceptionalism* is also expressed as a discomfort in talking about, or not being open to, able to, or having experiences with talking about, our colonial past and race. Having a discomfort in talking about race might stem from the fact that we have a certain history with Nazism and Germany. So, we are entangled in certain sorts of discursive restrictions which makes it difficult to talk about issues which are related to religion, racialisation, and diversity itself. That is unique to Denmark.

Lene Kühle: Yes, our society is built on the idea of cohesion, and an expectation that we all have to negotiate, and that we all have to avoid conflicts. We have to strive, to not have conflicts, which makes it more difficult to talk about the thorny issues.

What does it require to be Danish?

Lea Skewes: The Danish discourse around who we are as Danes often positions us as liberal and open-minded, but at the same time the Danish cultural script for what it requires to be Danish seems to be quite narrow. Do we all have to be white and secular (or Christian) in order to be read as Danish?

Iram Khawaja: I think this ties into how we conceive of integration. One thing is how we understand Danishness, which is a place we could start. But we could also look into what it is we expect of people, and when it comes to people from different ethnic backgrounds and different religions, then we have this idea of integration. In research, we need to look very critically at what this concept of integration actually entails. Mikkel Rytter has done great work on how the concept of integration – also in research – is carrying certain ideas of the Nation, certain ideas of the ideal citizen, and how those ideas are restrictive of who you can become. And I think we need to look more into this. We have a tendency of mentioning integration as a goal in itself and not explore what we mean by this. In fact, it is not so much *integration* as *assimilation* which we seem to be expecting of people. This means that you can strive as hard as you want, but you will never be accepted as a Danish person or citizen on equal footing with others. Like the examples I showed in my presentation of the interviews I have done with young students in high schools and higher education. They feel that no matter how much they study, how much they contribute to society, or how well they do in life, they will never be accepted as people who rightfully belong in this society. Many young people are losing hope because they are seen as 'perpetually arriving' never really 'here', even though we are speaking about 2nd and 3rd generation immigrant youth. So, I think we need to unpack what we mean and also change the way in which we are using the word 'integration'. It is a word which carries a taken-for-granted notion of otherness, which we reproduce when we use it.

Lene Kühle: I think the Danish state is also a very intrusive state. It interferes in the lives of everyone, not just people with an immigrant background. For instance, the school will be interested in what is in the lunch box – is it healthy enough? It is a very demanding relationship which every Dane has with the state. And the debate on integration is just one part of that relationship. The Danish state also requires quite a lot of us when it comes to religion. I have just written an article about this paradox of freedom of religion. Because Denmark is one of the greatest promoters of freedom of religion in the world – it is part of our foreign policy – but on some measures we have problems living up to those ideals ourselves. The narrative, which we tell about ourselves as Danes, and our own expressions of the ideal often clash. I do not mean to say that there is something wrong with being Danish – or that we cannot be proud of being Danish – but we also need to critically explore which kind of society we are creating. We need to explore how we, as researchers, can help produce a better society with less exclusion and more room for everyone.

How do we become more inclusive?

Lea Skewes: How can we become more inclusive? How can we make Denmark a better place for everyone? Where can we find inspiration – maybe in other countries?

Lene Kühle: Everything is better in Norway (laughing).

Lea Skewes: So, we should all go to Norway – we should all immigrate! (laughing).

Iram Khawaja: The question you are posing is what we can do about it, right? I think there are many levels of potential solutions. For me, it is about shifting the discourse and showing nuances. What it means to be a Muslim is not one thing. There are many different ways of doing Muslimness. So, the theoretical and political movement we have had in *Gender Studies* around gender – as something that you *do* – can be an inspiration.

Talking about gender as a *doing* has opened up a space for talking about different ways of doing gender. For me it has always been very important to do the same with the category of Muslimness – to show that this is something we do. This helps us to open up spaces where we can have these conversations about how there are different ways of being Muslim. It might seem very banal to show that – but that is actually were we still are, because the stereotypes about what it entails to be a Muslim have actually not become less stereotypical, they have become more stereotypical. That is, it has become more and more fixed because of what you mentioned Lea [Skewes] with the right-wing political movement on the rise. This movement has normalised certain ways of talking about this group and certain ways of understanding Muslimness. For example, it has great consequences when the Prime Minister is singling out a specific group of Muslims, a specific ghetto, or a specific area – pointing towards a specific segment of the population and describing that group, or that area, in derogatory ways. It normalises that others speak about Muslims in that way as well. So, I think shifting the discourse at the theoretical level is important. On a more practical level, it is important to go out to educational institutions and speak with practitioners in different places. Because I am from educational psychology; this is where I see a great potential for change. And I see a lot of practitioners who are hungry for knowledge and ways of thinking and doing things differently. So, we can help them by giving them some tools. First, we need to give them a sense of what is problematic. We need to look at how we think about this field. How might we unwillingly be reproducing *othering*? How can we do things differently? There are lots of studies internationally, but also within the European context, on how we can think about diversity, how we can think about social justice, and how we can think about norm-critical leadership. All of this research can be brought into high schools, schools, or daycare institutions. We can address how Muslimness is done there in that concrete setting or context in order to move away from generalising and stereotypical understandings. It is very important not to focus on the 'other' or the person being othered – the minority (which we often do when we stay within the discourse of integration) – and instead focus on the spaces we create for all of us. We need to pay attention to how these spaces include and exclude certain bodies, topics, and social categories.

Christian Suhr: When you asked the question, I was thinking about these wonderful teachers in Berkeley. We had our children in a public school in the US – and we had imagined that public schools in the US would be awful, but actually it was amazing. It was also Berkeley, but Berkeley has more social problems than the neighbourhood we live in here in Aarhus, and much more inequality. But the teachers did an amazing job. For example, they did not just celebrate Christmas but also Eid and Hanukkah. They invited parents into the class to describe these different religious practices. When it was time for the Eid, a parent might come into the class and speak about what the Eid is like. It created this atmosphere where it was possible for the children to be proud of their backgrounds, and to share in the joy of these different traditions. I thought that was a beautiful practice that I have not seen in Denmark. Here, everything but this cultural version of Christianity is often looked upon with scepticism and as something that potentially could be dangerous. It would be interesting to see what would happen if we included more diverse practices and cultures in our schools. Back in 2009-2010 I worked with a group of young men who later became so-called radicalised Muslims. I have often thought about how they could have benefited from being invited to give a presentation in their school about the meaning of the word 'Salaam' (a greeting which they used), but their schoolteacher tried to stop them from using the word. Or perhaps they could have been invited to give a presentation about how they went about their praying rituals, or what they felt like when they prayed. Instead, the school reacted by trying to prevent them from praying. For some reason there is a taboo around the topic of religion. What would happen if it was possible for schoolchildren to talk openly about these things just as they can talk openly about other things.

Lea Skewes: That beautifully ties in with where we started with this humanising perspective. The challenges get cemented if we dehumanise or reproduce othering; maybe we need to create more spaces to have these open expressions of difference.

Lene Kühle: I would like to add that I think it is positive that Danes think of their own society as one of the best societies in the world – but maybe we need to understand it as an *aspiration,* rather than a *reality*. That is, maybe we should keep striving for a better society for everyone, rather than assume that we have already achieved it.

Recommended readings

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Suhr, C. (2022). Light Upon Light. 78 minutes. Hassala Films.

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