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Muslim employees within ‘white’ organizations: the case of Moroccan workers in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT
The managing of religious diversity is a topic that is of increasing interest as countries and organizations become increasingly multi-cultured and religiously diverse. In this paper, we aim to understand how Muslim employees perform agency and identity work within the context of white, Western organizations. Interviews with highly educated Muslim employees in diverse sectors in the Netherlands were analyzed from the perspective of structuration theory and the concepts of identity regulation and identity work. The study shows how Muslim employees encounter constraints and opportunities within their white organizations and how they perform identity work and agency in relation to their religious practices. We contribute to the HRM and diversity management literature by providing a relational view on religious diversity and bringing in the notion of whiteness in studies on diversity management.

KEYWORDS
Identity work; Islam; religious diversity; structuration theory; whiteness

Introduction

As the world of organizations and business is globalizing and nations become increasingly multi-cultured, the topic of managing diversity within organizations is ever growing in importance. Diversity management is usually linked to Human Resource Management: Diversity forms a part of HR policies or diversity is approached as a lens that informs HR policies (Benschop, 2001; Shen, Chanda, D’Netto, & Monga, 2009; Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005). Whereas most research regarding diversity focuses on gender inequality and ethnic minorities, the reality of globalization and increasing (im)migration streams also increasingly requires recognizing and accommodating religious diversity in organizations and HRM policies (Bouma, Haidar, Nyland, & Smith, 2003; Gröschl & Bendl, 2015).

If organizations want to attract, retain, and motivate talents with a different religion, they will need to take into account how their organizational structures
impact on those employees and how those employees work within those structures. In this paper, we focus on the Islam and Muslim employees in Western organizations. In Western Europe, Islam is growing in prevalence. Islam was only explicitly introduced to the organizational diversity literature in 2003 by Bouma et al. (2003). Organizations in Western Europe more and more tap from a pool of employees with a Muslim background. Yet, Kamenou and Fearfull (2006) state that religious stereotyping is central to Muslim people’s work and societal experiences in the West. This paper therefore focuses on how Muslim employees perceive the structures of their Western organizations and how they seek agency within those structures.

The paper is built from the perspective that the structures of Western European organizations are ‘white’, i.e. based on a Western, Caucasian, and atheist or Christian world view. These white organizational structures provide both opportunities as well as constraints for Muslim employees. They deal with these structures through identity work leading to agency. Their agency either reproduces or challenges the white organizational structures in which they are embedded. This relational view of organizational structures and individual agency is inspired by structuration theory (Giddens, 1984).

The empirical basis of our study consists of 16 interviews with highly educated Muslim employees from Moroccan descent working in different sectors in the Netherlands. In this country, as elsewhere, polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims is growing alongside a largely negative media discourse on Muslims (Siebers & Dennissen, 2014). We chose to interview Muslim employees of Moroccan descent because they are one of the largest Muslim communities of workers in the Netherlands. Moreover, our focus is on highly educated Muslim employees, because skilled minority workers receive little support in terms of HRM practice and the agency of skilled ethnic minority workers is underrepresented in HRM studies (Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Game, 2013). Additionally, different than lower employed minority workers, skilled workers may face employment discrimination because of the threat they pose to ‘local’ (i.e. Dutch) skilled workers, a phenomenon indicated by Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton, and Gabarrot (2015) as a ‘skill paradox’. A last reason is that popular discourse is (implicitly) revolved around lower class and lower skilled Muslim workers rather than higher educated Muslims. Hence, we want to provide a more nuanced picture of Muslim workers to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Muslims in the West.

Based on the interviews, we discuss four concrete religious practices that are characteristic of Islam (Bouma et al., 2003) and are highly visible in popular discourse: alcohol and food; Ramadan and holidays; prayers; and wearing a headscarf. For each Islamic practice, we analyze how the Muslim interviewees experience constraints and opportunities concerning the practice, and how they engage in identity work and hence enact agency in their predominantly white organizations. As such, we contribute to HRM, IHRM, and diversity literatures by providing a relational view (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009) on religious diversity. The theoretical
framework based on Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) and identity regulation and identity work allows us to understand how multiple levels of social reality interact and impact on religious diversity (management). Additionally, we contribute to the diversity management literature by incorporating the notion of whiteness, arguing that it is the white structures and practices of Western European organizations that make up the space in which Muslim employees maneuver and work on their Muslim and professional identities.

In the next section, we explain our theoretical framework, combining structuration theory with the notion of identity work and whiteness with diversity management. We then continue with the methodological section and the elaboration of the results. In the discussion, we reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

Theoretical framework

Structuration theory and identity work

Following Giddens (1984), we approach organizational life as the result of people continuously engaging in agency within the structures provided to them by laws, regulations, national culture, and organizational cultures and practices. Through these organizational practices, a constant interplay exists between what people do in ‘the heat of the moment’, i.e. agency, and the social structures of which they form part (Giddens, 1984). Structures not only enable people to engage in organizational life, but at the same time also constrain their room to act and be themselves, providing pressure to do things in a certain way and not differently. Structuration theory holds that when people engage in certain practices, they either reproduce these structures or change them.

This relates to the concepts of identity regulation and identity work. Identity regulation is a form of organizational control to shape and influence the identities of people at work in line with the cultural norms they are surrounded with. This entails language use, habits, dress codes, rules/arrangements, and other symbolic expressions of power (Alvesson & Billing, 2009), and denotes what is acceptable behavior, what is deviating behavior, and who one should be (Essers, Doorewaard, & Benschop, 2013, p. 1655). Identity work refers to how subjects, in this case Muslim employees, form, maintain, strengthen, or revise constructions of self in relation to the claims and demands issued on them by identity regulation. Identity work is both prompted by identity regulation, but also informs identity regulation. For example, Zanoni and Janssens showed the identity-regulating discourses of management (2007, pp. 1371–1372), which not only discursively and materially control minority employees, but also provides opportunities for resistance and micro-emancipation. Accordingly, Muslim employees are being constrained by organizational constraints but also seek opportunities through identity work.
(Essers et al., 2013). Their identity work reproduces or challenges organizational structures, which are predominantly white.

**Whiteness and diversity management**

Relating to the debate on structure and identity regulation, we contend that organizational structures in the Netherlands are predominantly ‘white’, meaning that Western organizations are historically dominated by white – i.e. Caucasian – people and that their structures (goals, norms, values, practices) are predominantly based on a Western, Caucasian, atheist, or Christian view of the world. The growing number of whiteness studies in organization studies explore the formation and maintenance of white cultural practices and white identity (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010), which naturalize white hegemony in organizations (Kersten, 2000) and is an issue of organizational power relations (Grimes, 2002). Though studies of whiteness are mainly US-based, the concept is applicable to the European context as well (Garner, 2006). Garner (2006) sees whiteness as a contingent social hierarchy granting differential access to economic and cultural capital, intersecting with, and overlying, class and ethnicity, as well as gender and sexuality. (2006, p. 264)

Whiteness is deeply embedded in economic and political structures (Duster, 2001). It forms a basis for identity construction relative to minority Others (Arber, 2003; Garner, 2006) but at the same time is mostly invisible for those with ‘white privilege’ (Arber, 2003; Grimes, 2001).

As Caucasian/white people have historically dominated Western European organizations, their values and interests form the basis for organizational practices (Nkomo, 1992; Ward, 2008). Though seemingly neutral, the legal and employment structures of white organizations render people different who have a religion and culture that deviates from the norms, values, and practices of these white organizations (Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005; Syed, 2007). We argue that it is the practices constituting the historically ‘white’ organizations in the Netherlands in which Muslim employees operate and which frame their agency. Consider for instance the practice of socializing at informal gatherings with alcoholic drinks, a common and widely known cultural practice of socializing inside and outside white organizations. Within certain Islamic interpretations, this practice might bring discomfort to Muslim employees who are not allowed to drink alcohol (Bouma et al., 2003). This may result in a conflict between the white organizational culture and some Muslim employees who may experience difficulty in aligning their professional identity and their Islamic identity in the workplace. On the other hand, ‘white’ organizations have an increasing HR policy of flexible working, which may provide Muslim employees with a certain room to, for instance, arrange their praying practices.
Diversity policies play an important role in opening up possibilities for ‘Other’ practices than white practices and building an inclusive workplace. Grimes (2001) introduced the notion of ‘interrogating whiteness’ in organization studies to grow awareness of scholars’ role in reproducing racial relations via their research. In 2002, she applied this notion to diversity management to uncover the systemic nature of whiteness (Grimes, 2002). She argued that diversity management could be improved if whiteness was taken into account. This is evidenced by Ward’s (2008) study on an L.A.-based LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) center. She showed how white normativity informed the organization’s efforts to diversify for the sake of their ethnically heterogeneous target group: The organization’s white culture was sustained by its mainstream and corporate approach to diversity rather than becoming diversity-friendly. In this study, we apply the notion of whiteness to explore how religious diversity fits into Western European organizations. Before we elaborate on the empirical study, we will first explain the context.

**Context**

**Islam**

The Islam constitutes several requirements that impact the daily lives of Muslim practitioners, such as praying five times a day, the Friday congregational prayer, fasting, holidays to celebrate the end of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, dietary prescriptions, and restrictions on shaking hands (Bouma et al., 2003). These requirements can impact Muslim employees’ behavior in the workplace either as direct or indirect symbols of faith, e.g. their food preferences during lunch or dinner, days off, dress, work schedules, attitude toward hierarchy, and leadership (Rao, 2015). Several of these symbols and practices come back in the findings section, in which we look at how Muslim employees in relation to these practices experience constraints and opportunities and engage in identity work and agency. As for every religion, heterogeneity exists within the Muslim community with regard to the degree to which people actively practice Islam and the type of Islam they follow. Alevi Muslims, for instance, follow less strict rules than Sunni Muslims, e.g. they do drink alcohol and participate in a different fasting ritual than the Ramadan (Essers & Benschop, 2009).

**Muslim Moroccans in the Netherlands**

In this paper, we specifically focus on Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands. Today, Moroccans constitute the second largest ethnic minority group in the Netherlands, and this group continues to grow in number (Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005). Similar to Germany (Syed & Özibilgin, 2009), Moroccans’ migration history in the Netherlands dates from the 1960s when they were recruited as guest workers (Crul & Doomernik, 2003). Their stay was presumed to be temporary by the
Dutch government (Essers & Benschop, 2007). When the guest workers did not return to their country of origin and immigration increased, the Dutch government started promoting integration of immigrants (Crul & Doomernik, 2003).

Islam is the state religion of Morocco. According to the World Factbook1, in Morocco Muslims take up 99% of the population (virtually all Sunni), with 1% other religions such as Christianity and Judaism.

The number of first- and second-generation Moroccans in the Netherlands was 374,996 in 2013. This is about 2% of the total population. In 2014, 122,000 workers were from Moroccan descent (of whom 73,000 were men and 49,000 were women). Moroccans are overrepresented in the percentage of unemployed people relative to the whole Dutch population, and the percentage of Moroccan men (11.2%) is slightly higher than the percentage of Moroccan women seeking a job (9.6%) (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2012; De Boom, van Wensveen, Hermus, Weltevrede, & van San, 2012). Regarding educational level, Moroccans, together with Turks, are the groups with the lowest educational level in comparison with other groups in the Netherlands. Less than 20% of Moroccans has obtained a higher educational diploma. This is also reflected in their job level as the difference in job level relative to the ‘autochthonous’2 Dutch population is the highest for Moroccan employees (Bouma, Coenen, & Kerckhaert, 2011).

Where until recently the merits of a multicultural society were emphasized in Dutch discourse on migration, this has been replaced by a discourse on integration and assimilation (Gowricharn, 2003; Prins & Slijper, 2002). Despite decades of efforts to make integration successful, the ‘failed multicultural society’ of the Netherlands has more and more become a topic of debate. Over the past decade, Moroccans, and in particular Moroccan youth, are openly criticized by politicians (especially one explicitly anti-Islam party) and in Dutch popular discourse. The discourse on a failed multicultural society may have been fueled by political and economic events, such as the attacks of 9/11, the assassination of two important detractors of Islam, the problems with Moroccan youth, and the economic recession. There is a growing distrust toward Islam, resulting in discourses such as the headscarf being a symbol of female oppression. These societal developments have significantly affected the position of Moroccans in the Netherlands (Essers & Benschop, 2007).

Methodology

Qualitative approach

We adopted a qualitative approach to give voice to Muslim employees working in white organizations. In particular, we conducted interviews with sixteen highly educated employees of Moroccan descent, working in organizations across the Netherlands. We chose to do in-depth qualitative interviews as they allow for building in-depth understanding of perceptions, agency and identity work (Essers
The principle of theoretical saturation (Saumure & Given, 2008) entails the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the phenomenon. For us, this point was reached at sixteen interviewees. The rationale for including interviewees from different sectors is that the study is explorative and that we want to gain a varied picture of the experiences of Muslim employees in the Netherlands. The interviewees were found through the personal and online networks of the third author and snowballing. The interviewees ranged from IT professional to school directors, which means that the interviewees have very different perceptions and experiences of organizational life. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. We selected participants on the basis of the level of their educational degree, specifically professional level and highly educated participants. Giving voice to highly skilled Muslim employees is important because they remain under-researched within the Dutch context and are equated with a negatively stereotyped group notwithstanding their educational level and professional status (Al Ariss et al., 2013). The interview sample was gender and generation (first or second) balanced. The participants differed in degree of actively practicing the Islam. Some did not engage in Islamic practices whatsoever; others were more strict in following prayer conventions, Ramadan, or participating in receptions where alcohol was served.

**Empirical material**

All interviews were conducted by the third author, a 25-year-old male Muslim Moroccan who was born and raised in the Netherlands. This may have allowed
for more openness from the participants to discuss their experiences, as ethnic minorities and Muslims, in a Dutch/white working context. The interviewer, being a man, may have influenced women interviewees’ willingness to discuss traditional gender roles within Moroccan culture and Islam. However, the interviewer felt that his relatively younger age helped minimize their inhibition to discuss such matters.

The interviews were semi-structured and included questions based on the theoretical framework about personal background, the role of Islam, and ethnicity in their lives; situations in which they experienced struggles or opportunities (including positive and negative media discourses) in their jobs and organizations; interactions with colleagues, superiors, subordinates, and clients; work-life balance; and ambitions. Questions ranged from ‘In which situations did you experience your background to provide an advantage at work?’ to ‘To what degree can you speak of a “Dutch” organizational culture within your organization? And how does this influence your job experience?’ Interviewees were allowed to add final comments at the end of the interview. The interviews had a duration ranging from 45 min to 1.5 hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbally. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, and the interview transcripts did not display any information that could trace back to the interviewees. The interviewees were given the option to read the interview transcripts to make adjustments or correct mistakes.

Analysis

We adopted an iterative approach to the data analysis. The first (a white, atheist woman of Dutch descent) and third author read through and open coded all interviews separately using Atlas.ti. The third author’s religious and ethnic background served as an advantage, as interpretations that were implicitly or explicitly articulated could be placed within the right context. The third and first author

Table 2. Overview of Islamic practices, white structures, and illustrative quotes regarding employee’s identity work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islamic practice</th>
<th>Structure and identity regulation</th>
<th>Agency and identity work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halal food and non-alcoholic drinks</td>
<td>Social gatherings and alcohol Lunches/dinners and Halal food</td>
<td>‘Also within such occasions you have the freedom to be yourself’. (Zinédine, 43, m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan and holidays</td>
<td>Christian vs. Muslim holidays Participating in Ramadan</td>
<td>‘So then you start to negotiate, to compromise, it is accepted’. (Najat, 37, f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayers</td>
<td>(Lack of) Prayer room Time flexibility</td>
<td>‘There is space for others, but you have to make it yourself. Don’t expect that there is a manager who will think about your needs for a prayer room’. (Mustapha, 38, m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing a headscarf</td>
<td>White employee norm and dress Colleague reactions Failed job application</td>
<td>‘I think that many would find it very strange. That they will think why are you suddenly wearing a headscarf?’. (Soumia, 30, f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
then discussed their interpretations of the transcripts to reduce the chance for researcher bias and give way for a reliable, inter-subjective analysis.

The open coding helped to identify practices, perceptions, and attitudes that were close to the interpretations and descriptions of the interviewees (Essers & Benschop, 2009). The practices and conflicts identified by the first and third author were combined, and a selection was made of white and Muslim practices that could illustrate well the meeting of white organizational structures and Muslim employees’ identity work and agency: food and alcoholic drinks, Ramadan and holidays, prayers, and wearing a headscarf. These are four concrete religious practices that are characteristic of Islam (Bouma et al., 2003) and are highly discussed in popular discourse.

Together with the second author, a female white Dutch researcher who has extensive experience with studying Muslim workers, each of these practices were analyzed based on the theoretical framework. First, we analyzed the constraints and opportunities the Muslim interviewees encountered related to the four practices. Then, we explored their identity work and agency. The most illustrative and concrete quotes that relate to these topics were discursively analyzed, in order to show how the interviewees made sense of these issues and by showing ‘what has been said, how and why’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In Table 2, an overview of the four practices, structural properties identified regarding those practices, and illustrative quotes of employees’ agency and identity work in relation to the practices can be found.

Findings

The majority of the interviewees indicate that Islam plays a central role in their daily lives. However, interviewees believe that being Muslim or Moroccan does not or should not play a role at work. They thus decouple the private practicing of their belief from their professional identity. Despite this decoupling, the findings show how Islam and being a Muslim are not and cannot be decoupled from the workplace: Muslim employees experience how their organization’s white structures sometimes constrain them, and at other times enable them to practice their religion, whereas at the same time they engage in agency to align their professional and Muslim identities.

Halal food and non-alcohol drinks

The Qu’ran prohibits the consumption of alcohol and pork (Bouma et al., 2003). This relates to the white organizational practice of engaging in after work gatherings with alcoholic drinks. Some interviewees say they feel uncomfortable with this practice, which conflicts with their Islamic values. They face a dilemma and doubt whether they should go to such gatherings. Zinédine has found a solution
to this dilemma, justifying his attendance of organizational gatherings without abandoning his Islamic practices:

The whole idea of a gathering is not to consume alcohol, it goes beyond that. (…) It has a certain function (…) you can take a lot of good things out of it. (…) I think it is a matter of understanding what it is all about. (…) Yes it can be a sensitive matter at times, I’m aware of that, but personally I never really experienced that as a problem. Also within such occasions you have the freedom to be yourself. (Zinédine, 43, IT professional, m)

Zinédine shows that going to informal gatherings with alcoholic drinks may be a sensitive issue, but to overcome this sensitivity, one has to be aware of the function and benefits of the gathering. He constructs his identity as such that he adjusts to the Dutch practice (going to after work drinks) without losing his Islamic values (not drinking alcohol). He does not experience constraints stemming from this white practice, but finds agency and the opportunity within this framework. Using the word ‘freedom’, he indicates that even though after work gatherings are considered to be a white practice, this does not necessarily mean that the actual event is organized in such a way that Moroccans or Muslims are not able to participate. He emphasizes the individuality of his religion as he acts according to his individual interpretation of Islam and speaks of his ‘personal’ experience. As such he legitimizes and finds agency to go to such events, bending the rules of Islam to his benefit.

The interviews suggest that the intersection of being a female, Muslim, and Moroccan results in more challenging identity work regarding the practice of after work gatherings. Moroccan women seem to experience more constraints and are less inclined to participate in events that involve alcohol. For them, Islamic norms hinder engaging in these white organizational practices. The judgment of their Moroccan environment on engaging in such events plays an important role in these dilemmas; it might be viewed as shameful by the Moroccan community (Buitelaar, 2002), whereas at the same time it is perceived as normal behavior within Dutch society and organizations. However, there are also women that create their own room when white and Islamic norms seem to clash:

You are constantly in conflict with yourself […] what is found to be normal but you think to yourself “should I do it? Is it wise?” (…) I push that away because I know that my work has priority and also because I know what my intention is in light of Islam and what my objective is (…) and that I am engaging in making an honest living. I justify and put that in perspective for myself. But I think that if an outsider would want to judge me, then I’m a bad Muslim or a bad Moroccan, or I’m bringing shame upon my name, […] but personally I know what I am doing and I justify it from all angles. From my upbringing, from my culture, from the Islam. (Najat, 37, kindergarten director, f)

The pressure of this practice on her identity work is evident as Najat perceives she is expected to participate in this white practice that is ‘found to be normal’. She indicates that this white organizational practice leads to identity struggles. The concept of shame is an important driver of these struggles. Yet, Najat justifies going to such events by emphasizing her good intent and the value of ‘honest
As such, she strategically deals with the dilemma by determining which cultural and religion rules apply in this situation and which do not (Essers & Benschop, 2009), much like Zinédine does. She uses Islam as a frame structuring her behavior, within which she can maneuver to fit her Islamic values with white organizational practices. Additionally, she puts her professional identity above her religious practices to legitimize her choices.

Besides drinks, a couple of interviewees mentioned dinners and other food-related activities as an organizational practice that confronted them with their ‘Otherness’. For Muslims, halal food and the avoidance of pork are important eating practices (Bouma et al., 2003). For Kenza, no problems arise as her company takes the food wishes of the Muslim employees into account. However, this is not the case for others. A few interviewees do experience difficulties regarding food practices within their company. Several interviewees respond by accepting that and justifying why so. Soumia, for instance, refers to the unintended, because unconscious, practice of her organization of not taking her food requirements into account. She legitimizes this on the basis of the lack of diversity of her company, in which few employees have the same food wishes as she does. She compromises her Islamic practice by putting this in that perspective and, as a result, remains passive in dealing with this constraint. Tarik and Younes respond in a different manner to this conflict of food practices: They engage in agency by leaving the event if their food needs are not met. In the past, Tarik’s company did not arrange food in accordance with the needs of the Muslims in his company. Though it is slowly getting better, he still responds quite fiercely against ‘white’ practices of food in which his needs are not met. Above examples indicate that this diversity when it comes to concrete daily needs is generally not accommodated; being able to engage in Islamic practices hence requires a rather individualist and pro-active approach.

**Ramadan and holidays**

The second practice we discuss concerns the Dutch and Islamic practices related to holidays. Interviewees indicate that all employees in their companies get a (legal) day off for Christian and Dutch national holidays such as Christmas and Saint Nicholas (‘Sinterklaas’). This can be considered as a white practice, because Christian holidays are historically embedded within society and accordingly within organizations. The interviewees accept these holidays and take them for granted as they are part of Dutch society. Holidays such as the Islamic Eid al-fitr – a holiday to celebrate the end of the Ramadan – are often not formalized in their organizations. Most of the interviewees do not perceive this as a constraint per se, because they are allowed to take a day off for their own holidays. In that sense, the organizational structure provides them the room to engage in their Islamic practice. However, having to take a day off for this also indicates Otherness. Moreover, in this respect, they maneuver with regard to their Muslim identity.
to accommodate their professional identity. This is illustrated by Najat’s identity work:

I can also say that I participate in Ramadan, but they also see that my targets are always reached and that I always give more than 100%. I can easily say that because of culture or whatever that I am expected to be home during the ‘feast of sacrifice’ and because of that I decide to take a day off. Unless there are appointments that are very important for my organization. Then, I say, okay, I can be there, but [only for] one hour. So then you start to negotiate, to compromise, it is accepted. (Najat, 37, kindergarten director, f)

Najat is allowed to take a day off during important Islamic holidays, but she has to be available when something important comes up on the agenda. The white structure of her organization implies that important appointments can be scheduled on Islamic holidays because they are not public holidays. This causes identity struggles because she is expected to be at home and at the office simultaneously. Her response is to compromise on both ends. She legitimizes her prioritizing this practice to her organization by showing that she puts in extra efforts and performs well, despite the practices that may temporarily draw her away from work. Framing it this way, she seemingly has to ‘earn’ her right for a day off.

Other interviewees respond to the conflict of the Islamic practice of Ramadan and their white organizations by withdrawing themselves from non-Islamic colleagues, therewith compromising their social relations within the organization. Nasim connects more with fellow Ramadan participants during Ramadan, and Younes refuses to participate in certain activities during this period, for instance if it is linked to food. They thus engage in agency by retreating from the white structure of their organization.

However, there are interviewees who do experience their colleagues to have a good understanding of their participation in Islamic practices such as the Ramadan:

If you look at the management then an attempt is made to take that [room for other cultural influences] into account (…). The rest of the organization takes other cultures into account more and more, despite Wilders [a right wing politician]. (…). People know at a certain point when it is Eid al Fitr and people do not find it strange anymore that you take a day off. (Nasim, 50, head of IT, m)

Nasim perceives that colleagues’ experience with different cultural practices helps to make them more accepted in his organization. His quote also points to the importance of management to the acceptance and incorporation of divergent practices such as Ramadan in the organization. Indeed, management support is seen as an important aspect which helps or hinders the employees in engaging in Islamic practices. Soumia, for instance, is very positive about her managers who are Jewish and open to other cultures and hence supportive of her Islamic practices. Indeed, multiple interviewees indicate that managers, who are open-minded and have experiences with diversity, are able to build a climate that is inclusive to non-white practices.
Prayers

The third practice entails the requirement for Muslims to pray. The formal procedure of the prayer ritual requires time investment, five times a day, of which a few during daytime (Bouma et al., 2003). For some interviewees, the employer had a prayer room at some point, but most are constrained by their organization’s structure to find their own way to engage in this Islamic practice. Flexibility is key. Interviewees emphasized that they engaged in the practice of praying whenever it did not intervene with their appointments or work performance. They thus molded their practice to fit within the overall organizational structures. For some, this resulted in passivity: They did not pray at work, did it afterward, or less often. They adapted their Islamic practice to the structures of their organizations. Others did engage in agency and worked to challenge the structures, to create space in which they did fit.

Prayer is so essential for so many people […] Sometimes I try to do it on time, and if you’re in an organization in which that is difficult, then you try to find a solution […] It has never really been a problem. You do try to deal with it creatively. (Zinédine, 43, IT professional, m)

Zinédine points to the importance of the Islamic practice of praying and simultaneously to the constraints Muslims encounter in performing this practice. He shows a pro-active attitude toward changing these restrictions and puts responsibility to resist and challenge these structures with Muslims themselves. Being ‘creative’ and ‘finding a solution’ implies building room to act. More interviewees are pro-active in this respect: They asked for a praying room, they asked permission to pray from their boss, used flexibility regarding appointments to find time to pray, or found an alternative space for themselves. Mustapha has a strong stance on this pro-activity:

There is space for others, but you have to make it yourself. Don’t expect that there is a manager who will think about your needs for a prayer room […] from day one, I arranged prayer rooms for the companies I worked in […] You can whine about how everybody treats you wrong […] and] that you don’t get a prayer room or whatever […] Organize, do something about it […] if you frame it wisely, tactically […] you can change many things. (Mustapha, 38, project manager, m)

Like Zinédine, Mustapha takes an individualistic approach and emphasizes that the responsibility to change the structures of organizations lies with Muslims themselves. He does not identify with passive onlookers. There is space for his practices, but not until he himself creates that space. He maneuvers within the space available within existing structures, and as such empowers himself to get what he wants and needs. Management, diversity management included, is not seen as pro-active in this respect. On the contrary, Mustapha’s tone implies a skeptical view toward his management’s involvement in this matter.
Headscarf

Religious values dictate dress codes (Rao, 2015). Within the structure of white organizations, the Islamic practice of wearing a headscarf induces complex identity work for women wearing a scarf, or considering wearing one.

The day I started wearing a headscarf, everyone was in shock. [...] They found it very strange, very odd, very weird. ‘Why would you do such a thing?’ My religion clashed with their norms and values at that moment. And you also saw wry faces. [...] I did not like it of course. I remained calm. I explained them why I did it. Why it is my choice. And that I am still the same person as before. [...] But they didn’t understand that of course. But later they noticed that I am still the same person and they have accepted it, but I did feel … irritations. (Naima, 26, debt counselor, f)

Naima’s quote demonstrates the potential difficulties when religious affiliation, ethnicity, gender, and professional identity intersect in the workplace. The fact that ‘everyone was in shock’ the moment that she started wearing a headscarf indicates that she does not fit the criteria of a white employee anymore, indeed that she even emphasizes her Otherness, which leads to negative emotions of her colleagues. This is in line with Kamenou and Fearfull (2006) who found that Muslim employees with headscarves tend to encounter more conflict between their personal and work lives. Naima’s choice to explain and legitimize her wearing a headscarf is a form of agency and creating acceptance. Interestingly, even though she expresses her religious affiliation by wearing a headscarf, she emphasizes that her behavior does not change. She thus positions herself as such that her professional identity is still the most important identity at work. This identity work implies the absence of inclusiveness regarding this issue and her individualistic approach toward this matter.

Unlike Naima who has found a way to reconcile her professional identity with her Muslim and gender identity, Soumia seems to have difficulties with this when considering wearing a headscarf:

I think that many would find it very strange. That they will think ‘why are you suddenly wearing a headscarf?’ Nevertheless, I do have a feeling that they might be open to it. Yet I don’t do it, because I still find it very hard somehow. [I don’t know] where that comes from … The way that I have been brought up and raised that I do not dare to take that step. (Soumia, 30, financial controller, f)

Soumia takes the white norms of her colleagues into account when deciding to not yet wear a headscarf at work. She believes that as the management consists of ethnic minorities, her company might be open to it. Still she finds it ‘very hard’ without being able to pinpoint exactly what causes her struggles, but at the same time blames her own upbringing. She deals with this struggle by avoiding this Islamic practice and not wearing a headscarf to evade potential conflicts. While she makes it a personal problem and individualizes this issue (referring to her upbringing), her not feeling comfortable with wearing a headscarf seems to be also caused by her not being convinced that her management appreciates and stimulates diversity.
There are also examples of women prioritizing Islamic values over white norms. Zeyneb experienced a job application in which her wearing of a headscarf became an important issue in the job interview. A woman in the committee started questioning her wearing a headscarf in interaction with clients, implicitly displaying a white norm of a good employee and a lower image of the ‘Other’. Zeyneb’s response was to defend her position as an experienced expert. Hence, in her argumentation, she focused on her professional identity instead of her religious identity. Zeyneb ended up declining the job offer because of this interview experience. This shows how the HR practice of job application procedure can be ‘white’ in practice as well.

**Discussion**

The aim of our paper was to answer the question how Muslim employees perceive the structures of their Western organizations and how they seek agency within those structures. The study shows that Muslim employees working in predominantly white organizations engage in agency and identity work to balance between maintaining their professional identity, performing ‘white’ organizational practices, and engaging in their Islamic practices that may conflict with those organizational practices.

Our study contributes to the HRM and diversity management literature in two ways. We firstly contribute to a relational approach to religious diversity that takes into account multiple levels of analysis and their interrelations (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). We did so by applying a structuration lens which allowed us to link agency on the individual level to white organizational structures. We agree with Syed and Özbilgin (2009) that this provides a better understanding of diversity and how it can be managed within organizations. We learned that the employees took a largely individualist approach toward their religious background and wished not to emphasize their Muslim identity too much in the workplace, due to work/privacy distinctions or fear of exclusion. Despite this making invisible of their ‘Otherness’ or diminishing of their Muslim identity, the study showed that there are situations in which the employees’ Other religious practices and values are bound to clash with white organizational structures and practices. Simultaneously, we observed how Muslim employees form a heterogeneous group with different degrees of active practicing and encountering different constraints, based for instance on gender.

We learned that in the case of confrontations or difficulties of alignment, the employees engaged in agency and identity work so as to align in some way their religious identity with their professional identity. We observed three strategies in the Muslim employees’ identity work within their white organizational structures: adapting and negotiating; avoiding; and rejecting and resisting.

*Adapting and Negotiating:* Employees adapted their religious identity in such a way that it also provided room for their professional identity and to fit within the white structures of their organizations, for instance, when legitimizing going to
gatherings where alcohol drinks were served. Rather than inducing conflict, Islam was constructed in such a way that it worked supportively as adaptation to white norms and values was well possible within the boundaries of Moroccans’ religious framework. Negotiating the celebration of holidays or the availability of a prayer room was a strategy deployed by several interviewees. Individual responsibility for making changes was a recurring theme in this respect. This strategy challenges the white organizational structures, in the sense that through their negotiating, the employees find a way to stretch the boundaries of the dominant white structures. As such, their practices gain acceptance and legitimacy within the organization without them having to denounce the dominant structure.

Avoiding: The second strategy we observed was avoiding situations in which white and Islamic practices could conflict or cause difficulties for the employees. We saw, for instance, how a Muslim woman denounced her religious identity in favor of her professional identity, e.g. choosing not to wear a headscarf, out of fear of exclusion. The white structure in this case provided such pressure to conform that they did not find the space to align their Muslim and professional identities, and so had to choose between the two. This strategy reproduces white organizational structures as the employees comply with dominant practices and structures and do not work to stretch their boundaries.

Rejecting and Resisting: The third strategy was to reject and resist those white practices that are incompatible with some Muslim Moroccans employees’ cultural and religious beliefs. Islam provided interviewees with a frame in which they constructed room for dealing with white practices. However, these boundaries could not be stretched infinitely. Leaving an event because their food requirements were not taken into account, some interviewees actively showed their resistance regarding the dominant organizational practice. In the case of this strategy, employees refused a task or resisted a situation out of religious beliefs, a strategy being the result of unbridgeable value differences. They were not able to adapt and construct their identity in such a way that rejection would not have been necessary (i.e. adapting and negotiating). This resistance may work to eventually challenge the dominant organizational practices and gain more room for different other practices.

Classifying the Muslim employees’ responses acknowledges their agency and shows that they are active participants within the white structures of their organizations. It adds to the growing stream of studies examining how ethnic minorities perform identity work and which challenges they come across (Essers et al., 2013; Essers & Benschop, 2009; Syed & Pio, 2010; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). Although they accepted constraints in order to fit in, employees also actively responded to opportunities and constraints within the workplace (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

The relational approach furthermore taught us the importance of the role (model) of management. Previous work on gender equality policies has pointed to
this role (e.g., Benschop & Verloo, 2006), and from the current study, we learn that this is also valid for religious diversity. Although management was perceived to be important for acceptance and accommodation of religious diversity, the findings showed that this is not a panacea. Indeed, prior research has shown that having a diverse and diversity-focused management does not necessarily lead to more inclusive organizations. Ward’s study (2008) on a LGBT organization showed, for instance, how despite good intentions, a Western and white approach to diversity management (e.g., a corporate discourse toward diversity using a mere business case) may work adversely for including minority employees.

The second contribution to HR diversity literature is that we demonstrated the relevance of using a whiteness lens to study religious diversity within organizations and the structure and agency of Muslim employees. Whiteness is mostly used as a concept in US-based studies (Essed & Trienekens, 2008), but our study has shown that incorporating this concept in the study of European (Dutch) organization can provide new insights in minorities’ experiences and identity work. It appeared to be a fruitful approach to shed light on whiteness as a cultural formation embedded in organizations (Ward, 2008) which impacts non-white employees. Approaching organizations as ‘white’ helped to understand how employees with a different religious background than the dominant (atheist or Christian) background fit or do not fit within the organizations in which they are embedded and how they engaged in agency within that space. Taking the Dutch context as exemplary, we learned that whiteness is also present in Western European organizations.

From the analysis of the agency and structure around the four Islamic practices, we learn that organizations and, in particular, HRM may seem religion-neutral but that their structures are based on and biased toward a certain world view, whether atheist or Christian in the case of the Netherlands. Whiteness is thus implicitly and sometimes explicitly present in processes, routines, and practices of these organizations. This is evidenced by the normalized practices the interviewees came across, such as the receptions with alcoholic drinks or non-Halal food, the celebration of Christian holidays but not Islamic holidays, or colleagues’ positive or negative reactions to Islamic practices such as dress and prayers. These structures provide the space employees have to incorporate their religion within their professional identity and the degree to which religious diversity is accommodated for. We have shown how Islam (and taking it broader, religions in general) impacts the daily lives of Muslim employees and thus their ways of working.

Incorporating the whiteness lens in structuration theory taught us that white structures do not only constrain Muslim employees, but also provide opportunities. The focus on individual responsibility and flexible working hours give Muslim employees flexibility in arranging their own working days and weeks, for instance, regarding praying or participating in the Ramadan. Interviewees talked of managers who were aware of the employees’ added value to the company or who were open to accepting head scarfs. All in all, using a whiteness lens helped to understand how religious diversity can play out within white organizations,
and can inform the management of religious diversity, which can help to attract, retain, and appreciate religion-diverse talents as valuable resources to organizations.

**Practical implications**

The accommodation of religious diversity in organizations is an issue that managers have to deal with as religious diversity increases (Bouma et al., 2003). To create an organizational environment in which employees with diverse religious backgrounds can prosper, an inclusive HRM policy can be built and implemented. This culture would enhance how organizations include and accommodate all their employees.

The paper provides a framework for setting up religious diversity management, as it points to how policies could be aimed at multiple levels of organization: both organizational structures and practices, and individual needs and agency. The study showed that religion (or atheism for that matter) is all-encompassing through values, practices, and norms, and is brought into the workplace, both in organizational structures and by individuals. The reality of organizations being increasingly diverse, including in terms of religions and spiritual backgrounds of their employees, requires management to consider how their organizational structures can better accommodate religious diversity. To do so, existing historically white structures could be bent by either the management or – in case management does not – employees themselves, as the paper showed, to create space for Muslim employees to balance their professional and religious identity.

The role (model) of management is generally acknowledged to be important for diversity management. For diversity to be valued and prosper, a culture needs to be created in which divergent practices are respected – for which, as the findings suggested, management needs to set the right example. Having a diverse non-all-white management team is not a guarantee for this: experience with and understanding of religious diversity are. For this to happen, managers (and colleagues, as the study showed) need to be open for dialog with employees with a different religious background and enhance dialog between non-Muslim and Muslim employees. In line with what Grimes hoped to achieve for the organization studies community (Grimes, 2001, p. 146), HR and diversity managers will need to explore their own assumptions, awareness of other viewpoints, debunk stereotypes, get and provide education, to create more inclusive organizations. Additionally, they also need to be aware of heterogeneity among Muslim employees when it comes to gender and degree of religiosity.

HR policies could also take into account the potential biases in job application procedures and evaluations. As the practice of wearing a headscarf showed, appearance matters and a ‘white’ norm of the employee may be explicitly or implicitly
be used to evaluate Muslim candidates (especially women wearing headscarves). Biases against this dress may lead the organization to miss out on talent.

The study furthermore implies that Muslim employees can better align their Muslim and professional identity if they are provided room to be flexible and arrange their own weekdays and holidays, e.g. regarding prayers and holidays.

Regarding employee social gatherings, management and communication could emphasize the social nature of receptions, to accommodate Muslims in their abstinence from alcohol. This may help these employees to build and maintain social capital which is beneficial to them and to their organizations. Also, more awareness regarding food choice for dinners and lunches could help to better include Muslim employees.

Future research

We see a few areas for further exploration. The study focused on Muslim employees of Moroccan descent, because they are one of the largest minority groups in the Netherlands and they are surrounded by a negative polarizing discourse on Islam (Siebers & Dennissen, 2014). In this study, we did not focus on the consequences of this macrocontext but paid most attention to the organizational HR diversity and employee practices. Follow-up research may explore further how this discourse impacts the white organizational structures (whether reinforcing or challenging) and the agency of Muslim employees. This would further advance a relational perspective on religious diversity and help HR managers to understand the relations between the macro, meso, and micro levels of diversity. Additionally, studying other Muslim ethnic minorities in the Netherlands could be interesting to understand how the different social positions of the diverse minority groups impact on how minority employees engage in white organizational practices and their own Islamic practices. Turkish migrants in the Netherlands, for instance, seem more accepted and less controversial than Moroccans. Question could be how this different status in society affects their identity work as Muslim employees in comparison with Moroccan Muslim employees. Finally, though we pointed to gender, a more explicit focus on gender would help to increase our understanding of the heterogeneity within the group of Muslim employees and how diversity management should take these differences into account. This would add to the stream of research that acknowledges the idiosyncratic position of ethnic and religious minority women in organizations (Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006; Pio & Essers, 2014; Syed, 2007).

Notes

2. In the Netherlands, a distinction is made between ‘autochtonen’ (both parents born in the Netherlands) and ‘allochtonen’ (at least one parent born abroad).
References


