

Douglas Mattsson

Interview with Edin Kozaric

Meet the Doctor



Can you tell us a bit more about yourself. Who are you? Both as a person and a researcher?

I consider most of my research interests to be conditioned by my Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) background. Generally, I have always been preoccupied with understanding what it means to be Muslim in Europe, especially in cultural, social, and political terms. In my personal life, and particularly in my youth, these have been questions of identity. As a researcher, I consider them primarily as empirical questions. In the opening chapter of my thesis, I use a concept of analytical positionality to discuss how these two types of inquiries – the personal and the academic – have come together in my work.

What was your dissertation about?

My dissertation explores how Muslims in Norway experience social exclusion and inclusion. I conducted focus groups and interviews, primarily in mosques, in ten different municipalities in Norway.

A key part of my thesis is engagement with, and critique of, concepts and theory in the field. In particular, I argue that the concepts Islamophobia and racialization are commonly used in ways that restrict and universalize the "Muslim experience" in Western societies. To put it bluntly, I argue that not all Muslim experiences of exclusion ought to be understood as instances of Islamophobia or discrimination, and that the role of religiosity ought to be given more attention in research. Furthermore, I argue for the need to actively explore experiences of inclusion, both in order to understand inclusion as a phenomenon, but also to avoid over-stretching concepts of exclusion. To address these challenges in my own work I use recognition theory to differentiate between what I call lived misrecognition, lived non-recognition and lived recognition.

Which results did you find particularly interesting in your dissertation?

Visiting different municipalities allowed me to compare experiences in different places, which revealed the local conditionalities of exclusion and inclusion. For example, the organization Stop the Islamization of Norway (SIAN) had carried out a Quran desecration event in most of the municipalities that I visited, and it was striking how locality-dependent my interlocutors' experiences of these events were. In some localities, my interlocutors experienced that the local Quran desecration event portrayed them as barbaric, violent, uncivilized, un-Norwegian, etc., which echoed what they considered to be typical prejudices in their local community. However, in other localities my interlocutors emphasized how local non-Muslim resistance to SIAN made them feel seen and protected as Muslims, reflecting what they considered to be general practices of inclusion and respect in their municipality. This interesting contrast highlights the importance of paying attention to local dynamics when discussing something like "Muslim experiences in the West". It also qualifies claims about the universalizing impact of Islamophobia and racialization on Muslim lives, which is common in much contemporary scholarship.

Did anything surprise you?

The centrality of religiosity in my interlocutors' experiences with exclusion. It might seem odd for the readership of this journal that this came as a surprise to me, but it was not something that was originally on my radar. Initially, I expected experiences of exclusion to be exhausted by prejudice, and that this would also cover religiosity.

What I discovered however is that many of my interlocutors' experiences of exclusion were rooted in simply being a believing and practicing Muslim in a secular, liberal, progressive, Norwegian society. For example, holding conservative norms and values pertaining to sex and gender was in and of itself experienced as something that was not accepted in mainstream Norwegian society. So, I realized that I had to differentiate between experiences of exclusion due to generalizing negative perceptions of what Islam is, and experiences of exclusion due to being a religious Muslim in contemporary Norwegian society. This realization necessitated the development of concepts capable of accounting for this type of data, and that's when I started think-

ing about experiences of exclusion and inclusion within the confines of recognition theory.

Was there something in the process that you found challenging? If so, what and why?

Finding out how to analyze my data was quite challenging, primarily because of the various directions that were open to me. Should I employ an intersectional lens? Should I solely focus on my interlocutors' experiences with Islamophobia and racism? Should I develop my own concepts? Considering the possibilities made me aware of the subjective prioritization involved in data analysis, which in this field often involves the intermingling of theory and politics. So, I found it challenging having to justify my analytical and theoretical choices politically, mostly to myself, but also to other scholars in my field.

In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?

I sense that the right answer here is yes followed by some introspective self-critique, but the most honest answer I can give you is not really.

Were there aspects about working on your dissertation that you found particularly fun or rewarding? If so, which ones and why?

It was very rewarding to develop my own concepts and then use these concepts to challenge key scholars in the field. The scholar with whom I engage with most critically throughout my thesis, Tariq Modood, also ended up being the primary opponent at my PhD defense. So, articulating a thorough critique and then having it confronted by the very scholar I was engaging was a full-circle-experience that gave me a deep sense of fulfilment.

Now that you have become a doctor, is there something special you would like to do afterwards? Any academic (or non academic) interests that you would like to begin pursuing?

These days I am trying to convince a friend of mine to join me in creating a podcast about the war in Bosnia. There is a big knowledge gap about this war in Norwegian society, and I think it would be interesting to create an accessible, but also relatively detailed, podcast series aimed at the general public.

Do you have any future research projects in mind? Or areas of research you would like to delve into?

I would like to delve deeper into the local dynamics of exclusion and inclusion by also interviewing non-Muslim actors in select communities. How are Muslims perceived locally by different actors, and what types of practices and rationales for exclusion and inclusion exist? Additionally, and pertaining to this journal, I would like to explore possible ways of attaching my understanding of recognition theory to some of the recent developments in the field of Islamic studies. For example, I think that there are interesting parallels between my concept of non-recognition and Petersen and Ackfeldt's non-Muslim Islam, which I only briefly touch upon in my thesis. What I like about non-Muslim Islam is that it encourages analyses of discourses about Islam without placing moral judgments about the discourses at the forefront of the scholarly debate. This opens for some possibilities in theorizations about exclusion that I find important to explore.

If one would like to get in contact with you for future research projects or presentations, how can we reach you?

Feel free to contact me at edin.kozaric@gmail.com