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Abstract

Decomposing Discrimination: Why a Holistic Approach to Racism Hides More Than It Reveals

by Ruud Koopmans

In recent debates on "race" and "racism", a broad definition has emerged that encompasses phenotypic appearance as well as ethnicity and religion. In addition, the "intersectional" interactions between these different characteristics are a core element of this holistic concept of racism. On the basis of labor market and survey experiments, this article shows that such a concept of racism is not very helpful in understanding actual patterns of discrimination. Phenotype, ethnicity and religion each have independent effects on discrimination. Tendencies towards discrimination differ greatly between social and political groups and are not limited to the majority population.

Keywords: Racism, discrimination, intersectionalism, ethnicity, religion

JEL classification: J15, C93, J61

Zusammenfassung

„Rasse“, Ethnizität und Religion

Nur ein differenzierter Blick auf Diskriminierung hilft, sie zu verstehen und zu bekämpfen

Von Ruud Koopmans

In jüngeren Diskussionen zu „Rasse“ und „Rassismus“ hat sich eine breite Definition durchgesetzt, die sowohl phänotypisches Aussehen als auch Ethnizität und Religion umfasst. Außerdem werden in dieser ganzheitlichen Rassismuskonzeption die „intersektionellen“ Wechselwirkungen zwischen diesen verschiedenen Merkmalen betont. Auf der Grundlage eines Arbeitsmarktexperiments sowie eines Umfrageexperiments zeigt dieser Beitrag, dass ein solcher Rassismusbegriff wenig hilfreich ist, um tatsächliche Diskriminierungsmuster zu verstehen. Phänotyp, Ethnizität und Religion üben jeweils voneinander unabhängige Effekte auf Diskriminierung aus. Diskriminierungstendenzen unterscheiden sich stark zwischen sozialen und politischen Gruppen und sind nicht auf die Mehrheitsbevölkerung begrenzt.

Schlüsselwörter: Rassismus, Diskriminierung, Intersektionalismus, Ethnizität, Religion

JEL Klassifikation: J15, C93, J61

Since the trans-Atlantic diffusion of the "Black Lives Matter" movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, "race" and "racism" – which have long been central categories in debates on inequality in the Anglo-Saxon world – have also become central categories in continental European academic and political discussions. Under the influence of theories of "intersectionalism", which stress the interaction of various dimensions of inequality and discrimination, a wide and encompassing definition of "racism" has become predominant. In this view, "race" and "racism" are not necessarily tied to inalterable physical features such as skin tone, hair texture and colour, and facial traits, but derives from specific combinations of difference related to descent, including cultural features such as religion and ethnicity (as exemplified for instance in the controversial term "anti-Muslim racism"). In this view on racism, even the labels "white", "black" and "person of colour" no longer refer to given physical features, but have come to mean "any group that does not [or in strong versions of the argument: by definition cannot] experience discrimination", respectively "any group that does suffer unequal treatment". In this view, Jews can be defined as "whites" and not subject to racism because they (supposedly) are not disadvantaged, whereas other groups – which may physically be indistinguishable from Jews – such as Muslims, become defined as "people of colour" because they are disadvantaged. This makes "race" and "racism" either irrefutable theoretical assumptions, or empirical tautologies. Either way, these holistic views of race and racism obscure the contribution of different components of descent-related difference and whether and how they interact.

In an experimental study on labour-market discrimination in Germany that I conducted with my colleagues Susanne Veit and Ruta Yemane (formerly WZB; now at the German Institute for Integration and Migration Research – DeZIM), we decomposed descent-related difference into three dimensions: phenotype, ethnicity, and religion.[1] Phenotype refers to inalterable physical features (i.e., "race" in the narrower, "old-fashioned" sense of the word), distinguishing the three main categories that are commonly used in the

[1] See Ruud Koopmans, Susanne Veit & Ruta Yemane. 2019. Taste or statistics? A correspondence study of ethnic, racial, and religious labor market discrimination in Germany. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42: 233-252.

Anglo-Saxon debate: whites, blacks and Asians. Needless to say, there is no assumption here that these "races" are in any objective sense real and meaningful. However, in spite of their fuzzy boundaries and arbitrary demarcation they are subjectively recognizable and salient to most people around the world. Ethnicity refers to origins in a particular group, usually tied to a specific country or region of origin (of oneself or one's ancestors). Ethnicity and phenotype are only loosely linked: two ethnicities that elicit very different stereotypes (e.g., Greeks and Turks) may be phenotypically hard to distinguish, whereas within these ethnic groups there may be a high degree of phenotypical variation. Religion, finally, refers to a dimension of difference that has been at the centre of debates around immigration in Europe, particularly in the form of contention around Islam.

Our labour-market study revealed three key results. First, each of the three dimensions of descent-related difference had effects of a similar magnitude on discrimination by employers. Non-German ethnic affiliation (indicated by a non-German name), a black phenotype (indicated by the job applicant's photo on the CV), and Islamic religiosity (indicated by volunteering for a Muslim social association) each significantly reduced the chance of being invited for a job interview by about five to seven percent. Second, we did not find a general pattern of discrimination against non-German, non-white and non-Christian groups. Some ethnicities did not elicit significant discrimination (e.g., Poles or Chinese), nor did Asian phenotypes or Hindu or Buddhist religiosity. Second, contrary to intersectionalism theory, we found no significant interactions among the three dimensions of difference. Being black, of foreign origin, or Muslim independently affects chances on the labour market, but there is no evidence of complex interactions that render specific intersections particularly vulnerable, over and above being subjected to the additive effects of two or three independent sources of discrimination. Third, in explaining these differences, we found that they are strongly related to cultural value differences, rather than to educational group differences, suggesting an explanation of discrimination in terms of a cultural taste for people with similar values, rather than statistical discrimination based on assumptions about skill differences across groups.

In a more recent study conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, I implemented this design as a survey experiment within a representative online survey of the German population.[2] Again, three dimensions of descent-related difference were implemented: foreign ethnicity, phenotype, and religion. Respondents were presented with a so-called vignette, which included a photograph of a young man or woman, who can be seen as belonging to four stereotypical phenotypes: North European, South European/Middle Eastern, (East) Asian, and Black. The photographs we used are the same as those that were used in the labour-market experiment and were pretested for similar attractiveness. They are shown in Figure 1. Below the photograph was a short biography of the person, which stated the person's first name, which could be either German/international (Emma, Simon) or clearly identifiable as foreign, but not identifiable as belonging to a particular country of origin (Asilah, Aqil[3]). Religious affiliation was indicated, as in the labour-market experiment, by a reference in the CV to volunteer work in respectively a neutral, Christian or Muslim social work association (with no volunteering as the reference category). Which combinations of these traits a respondent received was fully randomized. In addition to the three descent-related traits, the vignette also contained information on their age, place of birth (always Kassel in Germany), and educational career, which I will not analyze here.[4] Respondents were then asked to indicate on a scale from zero to ten to what extent they would welcome it if this person would become their neighbour, someone whom they would have to collaborate with at work, or a member of their close family. To minimize the risk of socially desirable answering, each respondent was asked to rate only one fictional person, thus making the detection of discrimination impossible at the individual level.

[2] The Migration & Diversity Corona Survey, which was fielded two-weekly with an n of 500 per week, between the Spring of 2020 and the Winter of 2021. The experiment reported here was include in the Fall of 2020 and Winter of 2021. The total number of respondents was 9,400.

[3] These names are in fact Malaysian, but as there are very few Malaysians in Germany, it is very unlikely that any of the respondents would have recognized them as such.

[4] Because some of this additional information was constant (age, place of birth as well as schooling and professional training in Germany) while other information was fully randomized (having spent time abroad for a high-school exchange and a gap year, and having a professional training certificate or a university education), this other content of the vignettes does not affect the interpretation of the descent-related traits central in this article.

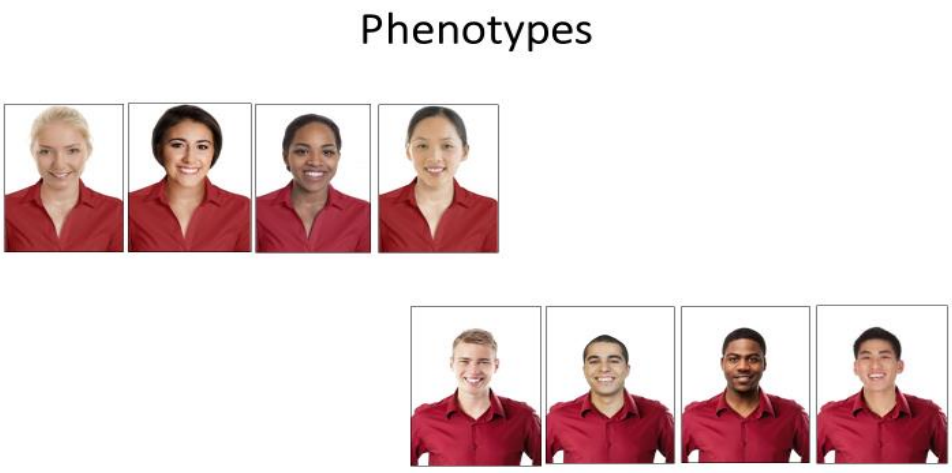

Figure 1: Photo set

We can however investigate whether on the aggregate level persons with certain descent-related characteristics are more or less likely to be welcomed as a neighbour, colleague or family member. Figure 2 presents the main results. Having a foreign name lowers the chances of being welcomed as a family member, but has no significant impact on acceptance as a neighbour or work colleague. In line with the findings of the labour-market experiment, volunteering for a Muslim association elicits a significantly more negative response across all three domains. Unlike the labour-market results, however, having a black or Asian phenotype, and for acceptance as a work colleague also a Mediterranean phenotype, is associated with higher acceptance rates compared to the reference category of persons with a "white", North European phenotype. As in the labour-market study, we find no evidence of interactions among the three dimensions of descent-related difference, once again refuting a central tenet of intersectionalism theory.

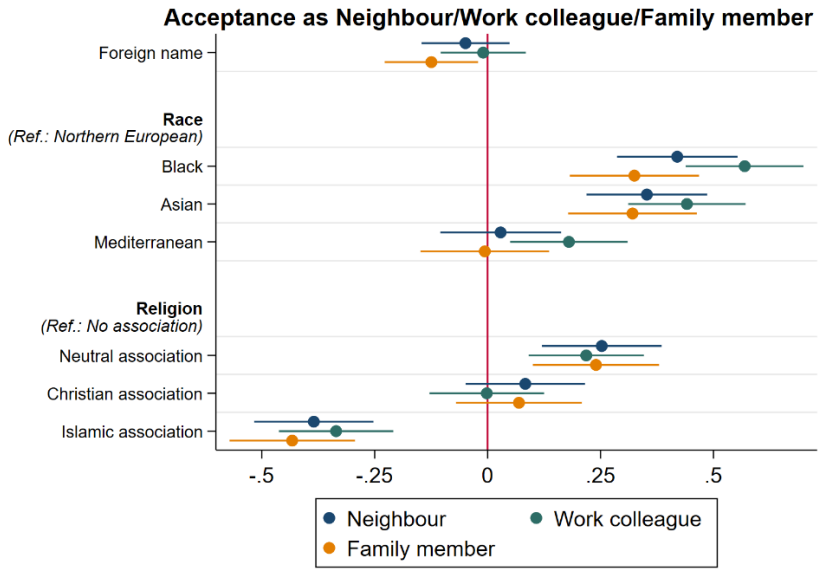

Figure 2: coefficient plot of effects of foreign name, race and religious volunteering on acceptance as neighbor, work colleague, and family member

These patterns are very similar for male and female respondents, as well as for respondents with and without migration background. As a tendency, persons with migration background show lower acceptance of Muslims than persons without migration background. If we exclude persons with migration background who are themselves Muslims, this difference is even statistically significant. Respondents with Muslim migration background, by contrast, display strong preferences for the Muslim profiles, and the magnitude of this preference is larger than the reverse rejection of Muslims by non-Muslims.

Acceptance of different others is strongly related to ideological left-right self-placement and party preference. The positive evaluation of black and Asian profiles is largely due to those who place themselves ideologically on the left and have a vote preference for Die Grünen and Die Linke. Adherents of other parties do not significantly prefer non-white phenotypes, but, with the partial exception of AfD voters, do not significantly reject them, either. Conversely, the significantly lower level of acceptance of Muslims is mainly due to AfD, CDU and SPD voters. Figure 3 shows this for the black phenotype, Muslim volunteering, and acceptance as a neighbour.

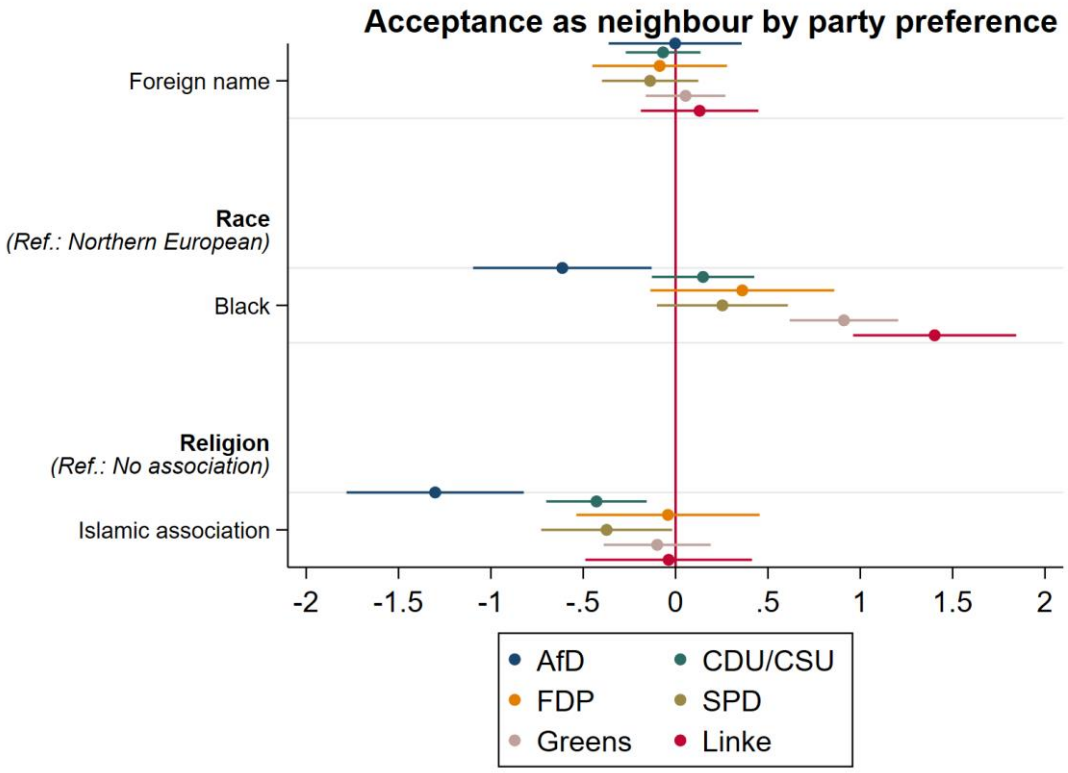

Figure 3: coefficients for acceptance of blacks (reference category: whites) and Muslims (reference category: no volunteering) by party preference: AfD, CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD, Grüne, Linke

This heterogeneity in patterns of rejection and acceptance may also explain a major divergence between the labour-market experiment and this survey experiment: the positive evaluation of black and Asian profiles in the survey experiment, and the negative discrimination of blacks (and neutral treatment of Asians) that we found in the labour-market experiment. Whereas the survey was administered to a representative sample of the German population, employers were the decision makers in the labour-market experiment. As a specific subset of the general population, employers may have different attitudes towards descent-related difference. Zooming in on those in the survey experiment who are self-employed[5] allows us to see whether this is the case. Figure 4 shows that self-employed respondents share the reluctant acceptance of Muslims, but do

[5] Unfortunately, the data do not allow us to exclude those self-employed who do not have personnel.

not display the positive discrimination of non-white phenotypes that we find among the general population. They even discriminate significantly against the profiles with a Mediterranean phenotype.

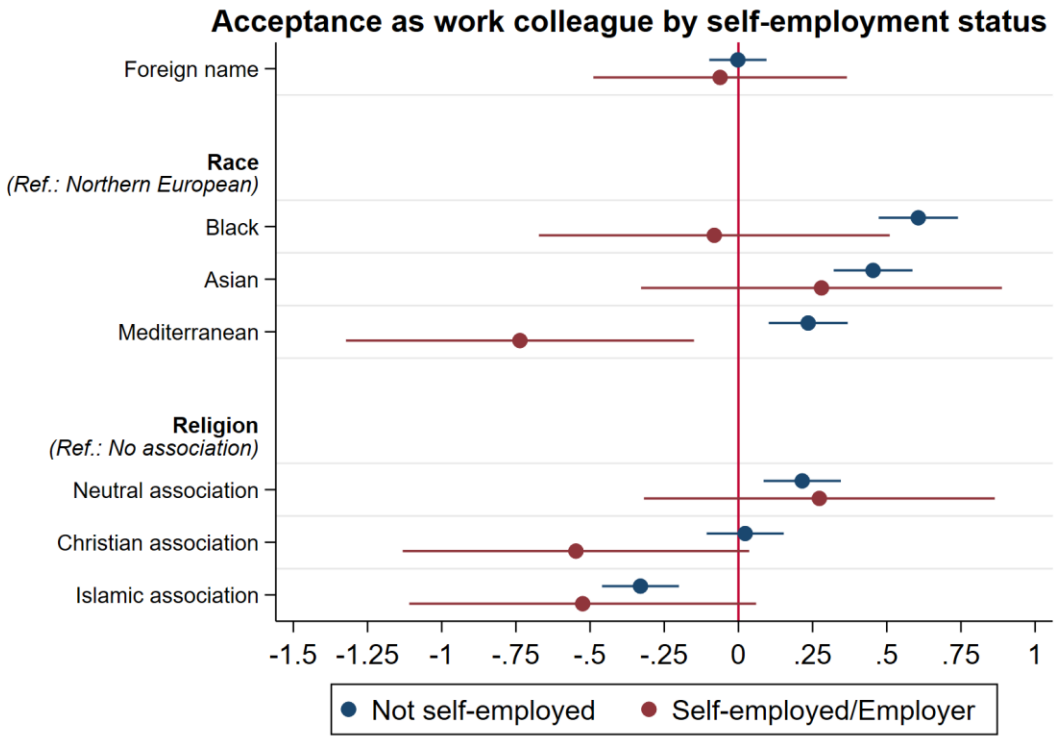

Figure 4: Acceptance as a work colleague for self-employed respondents compared to all other respondents

What conclusions can we draw for studying and combating racism and discrimination? First, that it is not wise to conflate different dimensions of difference into holistic (and hard to test or refute) conceptualizations of race and racism. Discrimination on the basis of phenotype, ethnicity, and religion all occur, but they are conceptually and empirically distinct and independent, and are not necessarily rooted in the same causes. Second, the independence of these different dimensions refutes a central tenet of intersectionalism theory, which precisely emphasizes the intertwinement of different dimensions of inequality. We found no evidence of any such interactions among ethnicity, phenotype, and religion.

Third, racism and discrimination vary strongly across social groups, especially along the left-right spectrum. In studying particular forms of discrimination, for instance on the labour market, it is therefore important to understand who the decision makers in that particular social field are. The results of the survey experiment indicate that employers in the private sector of the economy hold less positive views of people with non-white phenotypes than the general population. The possibility that personnel decision makers in the public sector may have different attitudes and preferences than those in the private sector deserves more attention in future labour-market discrimination studies.

Racism, stereotypes, and discrimination are social variables and need to be decomposed into several independent dimensions of difference, including phenotype, ethnicity, and religion. Holistic approaches of racism and discrimination that see them as structural factors that pervade all of society, and that jumble all non-discriminated groups in a container category "white" and all others into an equally ill-defined category of "people of colour", are of little help in empirically studying and effectively combating descent-based inequality.