

A CASE OF MUSLIM GIRLHOOD SUBJECTIVITY IN THE NETHERLANDS

“The Good Muslim Girl”

A Case of Muslim Girlhood Subjectivity in the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

With regards to Girlhood Studies and the importance of incorporating intersectionality theory, this thesis set out to explore how a specific group of people who are denied agency on basis of their identity can be understood in their understanding of themselves. While Muslim females are cause for debate in Western societies, challenged or denied agency concerning their identification with an “oppressive” religion, another group of Muslim females are denied agency on basis of their age, namely; young Muslim ‘tween’ females. Operating along feminist standpoint epistemology, this thesis set out to provide a closer look at how three specific ‘tween’ Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a multi-cultural, Western society. Through understanding which identities these girls ascribed themselves and how they performed these identities, this thesis aims to provide insight in their lived experiences as *Muslim girls*.

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INTRODUCTION

“one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 249)

The inspiration for this thesis came about when I was placed as head-counselor for an “after-school homework program” as part of my internship at a social organization called Diversiteitsland.

During this time, I was involved with children from an Islamic primary school situated in a suburb of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. There were three groups, spread out over three different days, where children from ages 10-12 (groups 6, 7 and 8) took part.

In one particular group, group 7, there was a large class of about 14 pupils, of which only four of them were girls. These particular girls would always sit together, choosing to have at least one counselor at their table at all times and work quietly on their homework. From their position they would also help the counselors police the behavior of the boys. Always aware of their surroundings and often indignant and affronted when a counselor would ask them to focus on their work, they demanded respect from the counselors, because in their “defense”: they were showing “us” respect as well.

These same girls held a rather special position: they were not the “immature” group 6-children, nor were they part of the “older” girls of group 8 who were about to leave the school. In this specific position they were “powerful” in the sense that they were, seemingly, at all times aware of what the others were doing. They would mostly gossip about the boys and girls around them as well as the boys and girls in the grades above them. Even the teachers were not safe. They also took pride in having knowledge of what “everybody” was doing. This made me particularly interested in this specific group of girls.

It has been a long time since I was their age, since I was considered a “little” girl. Hearing and seeing these girls, their awareness, their consciousness and intelligence, reminded me that these girls have as much (if not more) interesting conversation-fodder as an “adult”.

When I talked to these girls before or after class and during recess, I got a chance to catch a glimpse of their lives, their thoughts and world views. When our short talks progressed into talks about religion, ethnicity and femininity, and thus identity – topics that are very close to me and a large part of my interests within Gender Studies as well as Social Psychology – I felt a

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“jolt” of pure interest. I wanted to know more about these girls, I wanted to have a deeper understanding of their views and how they constituted themselves.

My interactions with these girls made me realize that in the world of academics and more specific in my areas of studies – as previously mentioned: Gender Studies and Social Psychology – there seems to be a complete disregard of this age-group as “people”, and as a place of knowledge. They seem to be disregarded on the basis of age, not seen as individuals with their own set of views and opinions.

This reminded me the infamous quote by Simone de Beauvoir: “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 249). Beauvoir speaks of a certain cultural socialization of women, in which they are “deemed” women when they start showcasing and “performing” feminine traits, such as certain clothing and manner of speech and conduct.

It is easy to forget that when one is becoming “woman”, first there has been a process of “becoming girl”. In this sense, becoming girl can entail the same “becoming woman” cultural socialization, influenced by multiple intersecting categories that “mold” the identity of “girl”. As such, when academic authors write about women or adolescent women, it seems to be forgotten that there are also “other women”: pre-pubescent girls with a whole set of their own specific experiences that have already shaped them in a certain way. Pre-pubescent girls are disregarded as a place of knowledge. When these girls are dismissed, solely on basis of age, research being done is simultaneously overlooking how particular discourses influence people in different stages of life. When considering this matter through intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), it seems that girls who are not women “yet” are disregarded in a sense, seen as not yet developed individuals who have agency. Especially when it comes to young Muslim girls, who are extremely visible due to their headscarf, it is crucial to “add” age as an identity category along with gender, ethnicity and religion.

In true Foucaultian fashion, one can argue that by ‘making visible’ and gaining knowledge, this knowledge can be used to ‘control’ the Other. In this manner, one would be engaging in normalization and production of certain discourse in itself (Foucault, 1975). However, I do not think we can solely speak about becoming woman for *women*, without considering the process of becoming from the standpoint of girls.¹

¹ Philosophical theories on “Becoming Girl” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) are beyond the scope of this thesis, specifically in regards to Muslim Girlhood Subjectivity.

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Especially, when we consider the current debate surrounding agency and agency of “third world women” (Spivak, 1988), there seems to be a disregard of young Muslim girls who are being denied agency on basis of their gender, religion, ethnicity as well as their age.

These considerations led to the main research question that informs this thesis: *How do young Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a multi-cultural, Western society?* This question prompted me to ask these girls to enter into deeper talks with me regarding a variety of topics, ranging from religion to gender and ethnicity.

In doing this research within this framework, I hope to avoid generalization of the experiences of Muslim girls in a western country or the experience of Muslim girl in the the Netherlands. As such, the aim of this thesis is to provide a deeper understanding of young Muslim girls’ lives, their notion of “girl”, and how they can and should be seen as social actors in society. This aim is thus in direct opposition to the idea of an invisible demarcated line after which “third world women” or “Muslim women” are deemed to have agency and can thus speak about their (conscious) experiences. Furthermore, I hope to present “children” as co-creators of the knowledge produced in this research rather than merely as an object/subject of study.

In the following section I will discuss how my research was done concerning the main question and as such, the methodology used. In the following section I will also introduce the further set-up of the thesis and I will outline some of the deeper theoretical concerns so as to arrive to the re-formulation of my main research question and sub-questions.

Outline of the chapters

In the following sections I will first discuss the **Methods and Methodology** used in this research; next, in **Chapter 1**, I will introduce the history of Girlhood and Girlhood studies and where its development currently lies. Here, I will also make clear what is currently lacking in the field of Girlhood studies and how this has fueled the subject of this thesis, Muslim Girlhood Subjectivity, and the main research question:

How do young Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a multi-cultural Western society?

In order to answer the main question, how young Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a western multi-cultural society, it is important to understand the notion of identity.

Thus, in **Chapter 2** I will first briefly discuss the relevant literature on identity, identity-formation and identity negotiation. Furthermore, discussing Muslim girlhood identity cannot be

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done without involving the notion of gender, femininity, sexuality, ethnicity, Islam and thus religious and cultural identity. This will be discussed in the second section of Chapter 2.

This leads to the following sub-questions:

SQ1: In which identities do these girls position themselves?

SQ2: How are these identities performed?

In **Chapter 3** I will delve fully into the analysis of the talks with the girls to answer the main question as well as the sub-questions. This entails discussing their self-determination, their identity and identity performativity. For this I will analyze the notes I took during my time with the girls, entailing the different subjects discussed, my own observations before, during and after our talks, and place them within the theoretical framework I discuss in chapter two.

In the **Conclusion** section there will be a reflection on the findings, what this means for current literature and possible future research regarding girlhood studies, Muslim girlhood subjectivity and research with children.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to avoid writing with “blind spots”, and to avoid inserting some objectivist distance between me and the thesis subject and as such perpetuating certain discourses on young Muslims girls, I operated within the guidelines of Feminist Research Methodology and more specifically of Feminist Standpoint Epistemology. With this I mean that I have tried to make the lives and experiences of the girls I was working with a point of entry (Hill Collins, 1990; as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 59). By working on the subject of Muslim girlhood subjectivity, I aim to contribute to the field of Girlhood Studies and to provide a deeper understanding of girls’ cultures, i.e. “tweens” and more specifically Muslim “tweens”.

Working on this subject meant being aware of the implications of working with a power-sensitive group, i.e. young children. It thus entailed being sensitive and aware of one’s own standpoint, and of my positionality and reflexivity as a researcher and a person. I tried to be aware of those very same things when it came to the girls I worked with, their standpoint and positionality.

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‘Doing research’ with children comes with its own slew of considerations, seeing as it is easy to “put words in their mouths”, to direct the conversations towards socially acceptable answers and to keep it as superficial as possible as to not offend one another. This is more-so the case with children due to the very present power imbalance due to the age difference. The interviewer is in most cases viewed as the authority, but this ‘authority’ becomes overtly clear when children are taught to ‘respect their elders’. In my particular case, even though I was closer in age to for example, the girls’ eldest brother or sister, I was also the authority figure in their afterschool homework program and I was in a position of policing their behavior and treating them a certain way in and outside of class. This was affirmed by them calling me the Dutch polite form of “You” (“U”) as opposed to the informal “you” (“Jij”). I believe this was my biggest challenge to overcome on working with ‘my subjects’, to even out this power imbalance as much as possible and to level with them while maintaining their ‘respect’ of my authority in the classroom.

Doing Research with Children

Children are often overlooked as agents of their own world due to biases about their age and thus about their cognitive development (Mason and Urquhart, 2001; as cited in McNamara, 2011). Research in its traditional sense has viewed children as either objects, subjects, but more recently as ‘social actors’ and as ‘active participants in research’ (Christensen, 1998; Christensen & James, 2000; Alderson, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000; as cited in Christensen & Prout, 2002).

A conceptual framework for doing research with children that would acknowledge children as agents would entail *inclusion*. By making use of “inclusion”, one creates intersubjective knowledge, which is knowledge that is co-created by the researcher and the ‘researched’. This would be a more egalitarian way of creating knowledge than other research methods and would then contribute to awareness (and perhaps a reduction of) power imbalance (Patai, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Stacey, 1991: as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 190). Including children means to respect their personhood, by for example allowing them to take the course they want to take in the research and in their level of participation. This level of participation should be granted in all stages of research, from conducting the research to final interpretation and presentation of the results. By allowing for this to happen, one is contributing

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immensely to the empowerment of children and to the amount of trust they have for the researcher and the process itself (McNamara, 2011).

In order for this respect of the personhood of children to thrive in the research, a “rights-based narrative research” is one such approach that facilitates this. This would mean that children are given the opportunity to talk about their lived experiences through their own lens and their own voice and discourse (McNamara, 2009; McNamara and Neve, 2009; in McNamara, 2011). This is what I tried to incorporate in my conduct with the girls. I ‘allowed’ for them to use their own vernacular, slang and manner of speech, without ‘correcting’ them as a teacher or adult would do. I would try to follow their talks and topics, by talking *to* and *with* them on their level; using their own slang, asking about it and referring to it, and as such showcasing my understanding of them.

There are several important principles when it comes to working with children (McNamara, 2011). The most important aspect seems to be ensuring trust within the “researched”, which can be reached by diminishing power relations and allowing for active participation. As a researcher it is important to possess a level of emotional intelligence (Christensen & Prout, 2002) when it comes to working with children. Being able to connect with children (or people for that matter), being able to level with them, contributes to the approachability of the researcher. This would, for example, mean that a researcher is aware of the social world the children are situated in, understanding their use of language, their local (sub)cultures, obtained through dialogue (Christensen, 1999; Christensen & James, 2000; idem).

Working with the Girls

Working in an organization that is focused on social issues, it was important to be able to see signaled ‘needs’. I happened to stumble upon a ‘need’ during the interactions with girls in the projects I was involved with. This particular need was, for example, to understand social/sexual realities for young girls in society, such as the presence of “loverboys” (boys who “groom” girls into prostitution). This “need” soon translated, for me, into a “need” to understand the lived experiences of young females who are not part of their ‘community’. Not being part of their community often meant being white and/or a non-Muslim female. The signaling of these ‘needs’ happened over time in small increments during innocuous informal conversations. This prompted the researcher within me to ask a few girls, who I had seen regularly during the home-

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work program, if they would be interested in more ‘informal’ talks with me, during which we could discuss whatever topics they would prefer². This was due to my interest in their world views and curiosity to see if they could help me think of future ‘fun’ projects involving them, or girls ‘like’ them. I also told them that apart from maybe setting up potential projects, I also wanted to write about our talks and about them. While skeptical about their words being published, they said it was “okay” with them as long as I would keep their names out of it.

After the girls agreed, I then set up an informed-consent letter for them to take home to their parents to sign. Due to a language barrier between me and the parents of the girls, I spoke with either a sister or brother for a verbal explanation. For one girl, the mother needed to talk to me to understand my positionality and to be assured of my intentions (as was the case with the brother and sister of the two other girls). All three girls I asked returned the form, signed, to me and agreed on doing the conversations every Friday until the end of the school year, which amounted to six “talks” total, of an average of two hours. One conversation took place at the public library close to their home, their own choosing because they had the day off. The other conversations happened in rooms cleared for me at the internship location at Diversiteitsland, right after their homework-program.

In short, the group in question involved three girls of 11 year olds, in group 7, all with the same religious and ethnic background: with parents of Moroccan descent, attending a Muslim primary school in Amsterdam.

Location, Situatedness, Positionality & Intersectionality

Upon starting the talks it became apparent to me that I was in a position of ‘authority’, due to my assigned task of ‘head leader’ of the project the girls were involved with. This made me very sensitive to the idea of ‘power’, not only because I was twice their age, but also because of the authoritative role I had in the classroom (i.e. project). It was thus extremely important to stress that our interaction would remain informal and respectful, our talks would be contained within the space we had cleared for it, and they were free to decide on their level of participation.

Apart from being aware of my age, my own cultural background, my non-religiousness, socio-economic background and involvement as a Gender Studies students, I was also deeply

² The topic that was discussed most often was religion.

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aware of the position of the girls, their situated knowledges and the way these knowledges had come from their intersecting lived experiences.³⁴

During our first get-together, it was important for me to point out that *I* was there to listen to *them*: I would at all times be respectful to their opinions; there was no such thing as right or wrong topics. It was also important for me to ask if they could also be considerate of my “lack of knowledge”. With this I explained that when I did not understand what they were telling me or if I was asking questions, it might be due to my own different experiences. I stressed that we should all be open to listening to each other. They readily agreed to this after giving me a look that said ‘of course we know’.

I was in no way consciously or actively trying to change or challenge their worldviews, instead I was interested in asking them why they said the things they said, where their beliefs had come from, and if these would differ from mine, I would try to explain them in the same manner. This is incidentally where one research principle was very important to consider, namely: “maintaining vigilance for themes of oppression and marginalization on the basis of gender, culture and ethnicity” (McNamara, 2011). As it appears, girls especially are hesitant or wary of ‘getting it wrong’, therefore to ask them to challenge their own realities can often be overwhelming (Tannen, 1990; Luepnitz, 1988: as cited in McNamara, 2011). Especially when it comes to feminism, I was aware I had my particular feminism, which had been heavily influenced by a Eurocentric way of thinking. This meant that I was extra vigilant of professing my thoughts and of being aware of the reason why I was asking a certain question and not to go ‘fishing’ for an answer that would eventually match my opinion. Being aware of one’s own positionality as a researcher is extremely important, but also as an adult working with children.

³ I was born in Iran and moved to the Netherlands at the age of five. My parents identify as Muslims, but my mother refuses to wear a headscarf as she experiences the veil as a visual representation of oppression. However, this view of headscarf of oppression comes more from a political stance (see Hoodfar, 1997). This has influenced my view of the headscarf as well and my tentativeness when it comes to religion. I thus identify as agnostic. Furthermore, we have a middle-class socio-economic standing, where both my parents work and have provided me with the ability to live on my own and to study abroad and to travel the world. This has shaped my way of thinking and it is made especially apparent in my choice of studies.

⁴ I will also discuss my situatedness and location as a person in Chapter Three, as it was often grounds for our conversations. The discourse of the girls’ world became apparent during their questions of “Why?” and “Why not?” during our conversations.

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With this, I am talking about the arrogance of adults who actively try to ‘mold’ children towards their own worldviews.

Diminishing Power Relations

In doing feminist research, it is extremely important to be aware of one’s position of power. In this case I was aware of my position of power on several levels, namely: as an adult, as a person who could contact their parents, a person who would dictate the conversation and as a person who would hold certain information and have a choice in publicizing said information.

This awareness led me to make sure there was as much *transparency* as possible during the whole process, asking for the girls’ participation on all levels. It is along these lines that, as a methodology to study this particular group, I opted for the unstructured interview in a focus-group setting. The unstructured interview approach was extremely important for me as a researcher in contact with these girls. The unstructured nature of it, along with a focus-group setting gave a heavy feeling of ‘conversation’ instead of that of an interview, allowing the girls in question to choose their own topic and to see where the topic would eventually lead with minimal prompting from myself as a researcher. This feeling of a ‘conversation’, to me, was extremely conducive to the feeling of informality and in that sense, equality. Creating this feeling of equality, I believe, contributed to decreasing power relations between myself as ‘the researcher’ and the girls as ‘the researched’.

Having a focus-group setting, with girls who are good friends also contributed to the feeling of equality and freedom to discuss. However, this focus-group setting also resulted in a somewhat chaotic conversation style, but seemed to suit the specific group I was working with. I noticed that this sense of ‘trust’ and ‘safe space’ was ensured when the girls asked me directly about a specific sensitive ‘taboo’ subject after weeks of having talks. When I asked them why they had not asked their older sisters who were closer to my age (and married), their reasoning, as I interpreted, was that I was not in their community, that I would not judge them for acting out of script (that of a “good Muslim girl”).⁵

Creating an egalitarian space of conversation meant (to me) sharing personal details and anecdotes honestly when asked. In this sense, I was showcasing my “emotional” sensitivity and

⁵ The topic of “the Good Muslim girl” will be further discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

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emotional intelligence. This was done by trying to level with them, to understand their position by trying to openly relate through my own experience.

Specifying the Methodology to the Situation

As previously mentioned, as a researcher in contact with children, it is important to be able to level with them, which can be achieved through understanding their (sub)culture. This is also applicable to any ‘research group’ a researcher wants to become involved with. One way to reach this understanding can be through inserting oneself as part of the culture and the social world (Ethnography; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). I was offered this possibility of becoming a part of their social world through the projects I was involved with. This meant that I had the opportunity to observe and to be observed by others (*researcher roles*: Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 201). However, a limitation with this was that I did not set out to be involved with this group for “research” from the beginning. This meant that the group in question became familiarized with me in a different manner and I was for example known as the ‘strict’ teacher. Even though I was eventually able to change this view, it is not possible to account for the bias or feeling of ‘distance’ between myself as a researcher and the group.

Due to the fact I did not set out to become part of their social world as part of research and yet I had become a part of it, I was inadvertently involved in an ethnographic way of doing research. This meant I received the opportunity to study “the lived experiences, daily activities and social context of everyday life” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 230: as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 188). However, because I was mainly involved with their social lives in a school setting, I perceived it as semi-ethnographic, meaning that I was only approaching a segment of their social world. Doing feminist ethnography entails being more focused on the lived experiences of women. This focus is informed by feminist theory and seen through a feminist lens, with attention for gender and power relations (Idem, 2007).

Because I was mainly interested in their subjectivity and in finding a direction for future research and for possible projects, the focus-group setting was extremely helpful as an explorative “tool”. A focus-group setting can have limitations, however. Even though a focus-group setting can contribute to keeping the conversation ‘going’, it can also silence others in the face of dominant others (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). This can, for example, mean that people

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who are more prone to talk and to share their opinion can overrule those who do not possess the same disposition. This can also create a homogenous opinion for example, because others do not voice theirs. As previously mentioned, these girls had a chaotic conversing style, often shouting over one another. This turned out to be the norm for their friend group and they would often ‘pull’ one another back and allow for a person to have their say. Thus, in the case of these specific girls, a focus-group setting was very conducive to touching upon different topics through a natural conversational flow.

Furthermore, I had given the girls an assignment, asking them to write down in their own words “What does it mean to be a Muslim girl” [to them]. The inspiration for this was due to how the girls would often be critical of how a girl had behaved, indicating with this how she *should* behave. Thus, the question for the assignment was left purposely open-ended. I was hoping for an essay that would explicate what their religion means to them and how it makes them “feel”. However, the girls interpreted this as “what *is* a Muslim Girl” and then provided me a set of rules that constitute a “good Muslim girl”. This has provided me with content for discourse analysis as well. I will further delve deeply into the analysis of our talks in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER ONE

Contextualizing the Debate

In this chapter I will discuss the field of Girlhood Studies, its history and current development. I will specifically focus on the lack of inclusion of younger girls, i.e. pre-pubescent girl (tweens), and of non-western/non-white girls, more specifically: of “Muslim” 11-12 years-old girls. Additionally, I will touch upon the current debate surrounding Muslim women and girls in the Netherlands.

1.1 Girlhood: a Brief History of Girlhood Studies

A ‘foremother’ of Girlhood Studies, Angela McRobbie, was one of the first to point out that research done on youth culture was almost exclusively about boys. She pointed out that it was important to not only study this site, i.e. girls and young women, but to also study how “young women saw themselves as women” (2000, p.4; as cited in Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007).

However, in the late 20th century, there seemed to be surge of interest in the lives of young girls. Young girls became the subject of concern and academic interest, for ‘they’ were especially vulnerable to a slew of detrimental consequences caused by popular media content (Mazzarella & Pecora 2007). Studies on girls emerged as an interdisciplinary response, with its roots in psychology and cultural studies, to shed light on the different aspects of young girls’ lives. Girl studies, as Gayle Ward dubbed it, can be seen as part of feminist scholarship which recognizes “girlhood as a separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation” (1988, p. 587; as cited in Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007).

Author’s Mitchell and Reid-Walsh discuss in their book “Seven going on Seventeen” (2005) how female adolescence was constructed in the 18th-19th century as it can be read in famous women writers’ works such as Jane Austen. Young women of certain standing were being groomed to leave the private sphere of the home and to enter the public sphere. This grooming entailed “becoming” woman, with its own set of rules concerning manner of dress and conduct and as such, eligibility for marriage. These rules of conduct can be seen as a woman’s guide to ‘becoming’, seeing as how young girls were taught from an early age, explicitly and implicitly, what a lady *is* and *should be* like and to ultimately ‘perform’ as a lady.

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This good girl or nice girl construct has persisted throughout the centuries. Being a ‘lady’ or lady-like was not just for the elite, but for all girls. Fox (1977) introduced the “nice girl”-construct, which embodies a normative, internalized restriction. Along or aside the other (c)overt restriction that women face, such as being outright restricted to the private sphere or allowed into the public sphere when “escorted”, this normative restriction allows for women to enter the public sphere without “protection”, but with a set of (internalized) rules to follow and thus still restricted in their “movement”. Complying with these internalized norms means performing behavior that is socially approved for women.

Becoming woman comes with its own set of cultural socialization. In the Victorian era, becoming woman was to behave as a ‘lady’ in order to marry. Girl culture in those days meant, for a certain class, to engage in activities that were conducive to this ‘becoming’. This could, for example, entail becoming skilled (but not excel) in embroidery, languages, art, etc. However, girl culture has changed throughout the years, but these constructs seem to still persist (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005).

Along with the availability of media content to the public and media content catered to the youth in particular, girl culture took different turns. In the 1950s, post Second-World War and with the rise of modern technology, the ‘woman’ was acknowledged as a subject to be targeted for consumption. Not only did women help this modernization along by having joined the workforce, they were now also a target for new marketable goods. Along with “the youth”, “women as subjects” had also become a sign of modernization and a viable marketing target (Gonick, 2006).

In the decades leading up to the 1990s, the ‘teenaged girls’, being women and youngsters, were deemed as “dupes of culture industries” (Driscoll, 2002; as cited in Gonick, 2006) and as such ‘neglected’. However, again with shifting social changes and further globalization, they had become a site of problematization and study in the 1990s. The ‘teenaged girl’ was a consumer and as such especially vulnerable to media content, subject to over-sexualisation, lower self-esteem and body image issues (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). Gonick dubbed this discourse on girls as “Reviving Ophelia”, where the girls were viewed and presented as “vulnerable, voiceless and fragile” (2006, p. 2). However, on the other end of the spectrum, during the same time-period (1990s), there seemed to be a discourse on girls under the guise of Girl Power and popular

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feminism, in which the girl was “assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity” (Idem).

The presence of media and popular culture is what prompted cultural studies to take a vast interest in the lived experiences of teenaged girls. McRobbie, the previously mentioned foremother, is most notable for her work on girls and their experiences in regards to popular culture. Furthermore, she is also notable for calling for the “unfixing” of young women and to instead see them (“young people”) as active agents and not mere consumers (1991, p. 408-423; as cited in Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). This was foremost in response to how early research done on girls was mostly targeted to ‘what is wrong with *them*’ and how can we change/prevent that’.

Girlhood Studies Critiqued

In the late 1990s, studies done on girls developed towards a deeper look at how girls were behaving in different settings and different subcultures. Their actions were written about and scrutinized, their ‘teen idols’ slandered for the message they were sending out (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). Two discourses were seemingly on opposite or competing ends: Reviving Ophelia and Girl Power (Gonick, 2006). Gonick however, proposes that these two discourses contributed to the idea of the ‘neoliberal girl subject’ today, an individualization process where inequality is explained through “personal circumstances and personality traits” (Idem, p. 2).

Power Girls (Girl Power) tried to fight this invisibility of girls’ voices brought on by this discourse. The “youth feminism” of, for example, the Riot Grrrls, a “girl movement”, tried to fight sexism in the exclusionary subculture of Punk and grew out to a movement trying to reclaim ‘girl’ (Garrison, 2000, p.142; as cited in Gonick 2006). However, after the Riot Grrrls, this idea of a “Power Girl” became in itself a marketable resource: all female music groups, movies and TV-show featuring powerful, combating female heroes became popular media for the girl youth (Ventura, 1998, p.62: Idem). With this “popular feminism” came an outcry from feminists, complaining about the hyper-sexualized nature of Girl Power, having feminism be made into something commercialized and marketable. In this regard many feminists critiqued those who were supportive of the Power Girl discourse as representative of the ideology of “white, middle class individualism” in which personal responsibility takes precedence over collective social problems (Gonick, 2006, p. 10).

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In both regards, those early feminist thinkers and authors were critiqued for their approach⁶: critiquing the (often) older, upper-class, white women for constructing ‘the girl’ and ‘girl culture’ and adding to the discourse. The (feminist) ‘writers’ were critiqued for engaging in that very same generalization and silencing of an ‘other’ that had spurred feminist thoughts in the first place (Duits, 2008). They were participating and contributing to the exclusion of certain voices: that of girls. Foucault discusses how girls are in this sense “reprieved from having the power to define their own actions” (1995, p. 203: as cited in Duits, 2008). By writing and talking about ‘them’, while not hearing ‘them’, there is a confirmation of the thought pattern that girls do not possess the power to self-determine, they cannot make an ‘independent rational contribution’ to any debate. This discourse, the inability to recognize actions can be a result of ‘their own’ choices, is written off being due to capitalism. This questioning of agency and inability to self-determine is deemed to be due to Islam for female Muslims. Either way, girl’s bodies are disciplined and governed (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006).⁷ This thought pattern exemplifies what Gonick (2006) dubbed as the Reviving Ophelia discourse: representing girls as fragile, voiceless and passive consumers and thus not able to think for themselves.

Not only were the authors and scholars involved with Girl studies critiqued for their ageism, denying agency and being dismissive on basis of age, they were also critiqued for their generalizing approach: girls’ subculture is neither homogenous nor a coherent social group (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; as cited in Duits, 2008).

Along with the recognition that there are various girls’ cultures, there comes the critique of a mostly “white” site of study. Thus, authors have also called for the need to acknowledge the range of variation that constitute girls and as such girls’ cultures, and thus stressing the importance to incorporate race, class and national origin within the field of Girlhood studies (V.A., as cited in Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). This is especially important if we think back to Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory, which illustrates that no ‘one’ experience can be approached from a singular category, especially when we consider the array of –“isms” that can influence the categories which constitute a person (1989). Especially if we consider young girls, who seem to

⁶ Third Wave Feminism emerged in the early 1990’s as a way to critique the essentialist notions of femininity Second Wave Feminists were operating from, calling for recognition of the fact that women are of “many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds” (Tong, 2009, p. 289)

⁷ The issue of ‘agency’ of Female Muslims will be further unpacked in section 1.3 of this chapter.

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be denied agency not only on the basis of their gender but because an intersection of gender and age, the importance of recognizing that other identity categories such as their race, class and sexuality are influencing their lived experiences in very particular ways is crucial to feminist thought and for social change.

In a rapidly changing Western world, where technology is abundant and cultures are becoming “multi-cultures”, what does this mean for a sense of identity for young girls? How do they experience a sense of self?

What is often overlooked is how the girls themselves, the girls who are written about, view themselves; what subcultures they recognize and if these subcultures are in any sense conducive to their sense of being, their identity: exactly what McRobbie called for. This approach is very closely related to feminist standpoint epistemology, which calls for making those who are ‘silenced’ a point of entry to garner a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. This is also the epistemology from which I operated, as previously mentioned.

An important group of girls have been disregarded as a site of subculture and girls’ culture: pre-pubescent girls (7-12 year olds). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) have also presented an array of work on how the teenaged girl target has shifted towards a “tween” target. Thus, instead of the “adolescent” target of 13-17 year olds, this shift has moved to include a target group of 7-12 year olds. However, many researches done on girls’ cultures have used puberty and as such adolescence as a way to demarcate the base line for studying girls. Seemingly, this is due to the idea that that is the age when teenagers and teenaged girls ‘start to possess’ the ability to think *of* and *for* themselves. With this ability come the anxieties and inner turmoil which enter while trying to find an identity, which apparently makes ‘them’ more interesting to study (Gonick, 2006). The teenaged girl is the one who is considered to be psychologically extremely fragile while she goes through the biological and hormonal throes (Pipher, 1994; idem). Even though the field of Girlhood Studies has been developing towards a more inclusionary approach, it is still mainly focused on adolescent young girls. The ‘onset’ of their experience as girls seems to be only valuable when they are already in their teens, with a disregard of their lived experienced as pre-pubescent girls.

As previously mentioned, in the practice of doing research in Girlhood Studies, young girls themselves are often overlooked as individuals. They are denied agency on the basis of their age, left out of the adult-centric feminist debate (Kearney, 2009). While, with the emergence of

girls' studies, younger women have entered the debate, "tweens" appear to be the newer form of 'exclusion'. Tweens are on the cusp of 'entering' womanhood on their way to *start* "becoming woman", but they are still children, thus seemingly not relevant for a study about 'young women'. This idea stems again from the view of children not possessing the cognitive abilities to possess citizenship (Kearney, 2009). A specific set of people, i.e. young(er) girls, are dismissed as a valuable source of understanding womanhood and as such women's culture.

1.2 Being denied Agency: the "-isms" and Muslim Women

I mentioned previously that young girls' bodies are governed and disciplined, their ability of self-determination denied when it comes to their choices and actions. I also mentioned that for Western girls this is believed to be due to invisible influence of capitalism, but that it is believed to be due to Islam for Muslim girls. Duits and van Zoonen (2006) discussed in their article how young western girls were a cause for distress for society (parents, schools, government) due to their 'lack' of clothing, while Muslim girls were cause for distress due to their 'over'-clothing, i.e. wearing a headscarf. Either way, young girls are cause for debate and public concern, seemingly for very different reasons, but ultimately boiling down to the very same thought: young girls cannot self-determine and are not worth listening to. Young girls and young Muslim girls are treated as if they operate under a 'false consciousness', meaning they do not possess the mind to really see their oppression, i.e. through capitalism or Islam (False Consciousness; online Dictionary).

While young girls seem to be denied agency in general, it appears that young Muslim girls are denied agency on several levels. The debate surrounding Muslim women and their manner of dressing showcases not only anxieties surrounding the female body, but anxieties surrounding the "Other".

As Göle has stated: "no other symbol than the veil reconstruct with such force the "otherness" of Islam to the West" (1996; as cited in Duits, 2008, p. 4). Thus, Muslim women are, in the eyes of the West, displaying outright submission to a religion that embodies patriarchy, something that appears to be in direct contrast to Eurocentric (feminist) thought. Muslim women have been, in this sense, a gateway for targeting Islam, often victimized and homogenized. As Spivak (1985) explained in her essay, 'brown women' are seen as being in need to be saved by 'white men' from 'brown men'. Essed explains how this view of Muslim women is in itself a

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way of inflicting humiliation and as such demonstrating “everyday racism” and its embedded Islamophobia (2009, p. 144-145).

Muslim women and young women have garnered more attention and are seen as a ‘point of entry’ to gather deeper insights into their lived experiences. In this manner there has been an endeavor to demonstrate these women’s agency concerning their own choices and actions. However, it appears, again, that a particular group is left out of the equation. Young(er) Muslim girls are in this sense not only denied agency on the basis of their gender, religion and ethnicity, but also on basis of their age.

It is important to consider the voices of the young girls that are often written about, but not heard. To listen to these voices means to have the possibility to actually “hear” and to “understand”. Thus the aim of this thesis is to offer an alternative approach to the gender/headscarf discourse through the eyes of young(er) Muslim girls, as well as provide a deeper insight in to their specific girl culture. Having an alternative approach means opening the eyes and ears towards “Others” and thus contributing to a more inclusionary field of scholarship.

Furthermore, to understand the “Other” means to understand “Other-ing”. Thus, in the following chapter I will discuss identity and identity formation in general, explaining how “Other”-ing comes to existence as soon as one identifies with one location, entity or subject position, and therefore not identifying with an “other”. The second part of the chapter will specifically address the topic of Female Muslim identification.

CHAPTER TWO

Who You Are Is Who You Are Not

2.1 A Sense of Self: Social Identities

In the previous chapter I briefly mentioned how having an identity simultaneously entails an identity one does *not* hold. In this chapter I will delve further into “why” people seek an identity and how the formation and negotiation of identities can result in “Other-ing”. Furthermore, I will discuss how a singular identity approach would be shortsighted when discussing a Muslim female identity, using intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) as a theoretical framework.

Identities have always been a large part of feminist struggles and feminist theories, made especially visible in ‘Identity Politics’. Identity Politics have been a way for minorities who have been disadvantaged, in the face of a society that privileges the majority, to gain representation and recognition. Within these struggles, certain groups have relied on their shared identity and thus (perceived) shared characteristics to gain equality or empowerment. Whether an identity was chosen for oneself or ascribed to one (or another), it appears that there is always an identity to speak of. For a social movement to get mobilized, a sense of identification with a social group has to occur. Identity is necessary in this sense.

Hall (1992) introduced that especially in current times, times of globalization, the concept of the ‘Self’ is in peril. Identities are always shifting and in constant flux. Thus, now more than ever, people feel the need for a ‘stable’ identity. Hall introduces that cultural and national identities are a way of providing this stability. Cultures and nations can be seen as social identities that have pre-dated the person, brought forth by a strong past and as such, will also out-date the person.

Social Identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains that the *need to belong* and thus to identify with a group is an essential part of being human. Humans are born group-mammals with an embedded sense of fear of having to fend for oneself. Belonging to a group not only ensure one’s own survival but also ensures kinship survival. This drive for one’s (and thus ‘kin’) survival goes hand in hand with an actual psychological need. In belonging, one is provided with a source of pride and self-esteem along with having a sense of self in the social world (Maslow,

1954).⁸ Thus, having a social identity is the knowledge that one belongs to a social group and that the membership has some emotional and value significance (Tajfel, 1982: as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

The need to recognize similar and dissimilar people is a part of human nature. This *need to categorize* is believed to be due to the need to be able to ‘make sense’ of the world and have control through believed predictability (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). Categorizing provides a sense of control and safeness through familiarity, bringing a certain order and perceived predictability to the world. It is also this need to make sense of the world and to categorize humans, objects and events that has been found can lead to ethnocentrism, stereotyping and racism (idem).

Identity Formation and Negotiation

It appears humans have a psycho-biological need to seek groups and as such identities. This ‘seeking’ of an identity and the eventual finding of an identity entails a process of identity formation and a negotiation.

The ‘modern’ identity is an identity believed to be consciously sought for with the ability to be self-observing (Hetherington, 1998; Adams, 2003: as cited in de Koning, 2008). Self observing means that on the one hand, there is the ‘Self’ that consciously seeks to self-categorize itself and is aware of which categories (i.e. social identities) it belongs to. On the other hand however, there is also the ‘Self’ that is unaware of how its identity has come to be formed, through routines and dispositions (Bentley 1987, 1991; Yelvington, 1991: idem).

Finding an “identity” or “self-categorization”, whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, through experience and/or socialization, comes with a certain negotiation of identities. Having an identity goes hand in hand with the identity one does not have, or the characteristics (often negative) that the Other holds and one does not believe one holds for themselves. Thus having a social identity is to find belonging through self-categorization and filling the need of still being *positively distinctive* through social comparison with “Other” groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This can eventually polarize into inclusion as an “in-group”,

⁸ For example, research has shown that people can experience actual physical pain when socially rejected/excluded. Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science*, 302, 290-292.

and exclusion as an “out-group”. In its extremes, this can result in advantaging the in-group and disadvantaging the out-group, i.e. racism (Infrahumanisation theory; Leyens, 2001; as cited in Leyens, 2009).

Furthermore, in social settings, there is a distinction between the social self and the personal self. When the social self is activated, due to a social setting, there appears to be no space for the personal self. A social identity (and similar others) can be searched for in one’s own reference group, depending on the setting and its salience. Social identities can be made salient through one’s friends/colleagues/inner circle or social categories such as that of one’s gender/age/physical appearance. This salience can be stretched further culturally, based on geographic proximity, religion and/or language.⁹

Where a social identity can supply a person’s concept of the ‘Self’ through group-membership, Identity Theory states that this ‘self-concept’ is derived from the role and actions one performs while being a member of said group (McCall & Simmons 1978; Stryker, 1980: as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000).¹⁰ Thus, when self-identification occurs, there appears to be a need that others perceive and acknowledge one as belonging to this group as well. Whether this will be consciously or unconsciously done, a certain level of “performance” rears its head: a person can pick up on patterns of dress, vernacular and behavior to showcase their identification level and their role. When performing their roles (i.e. identity) well and the performance is positively reviewed and acknowledged by their group, this can enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy (Stryker, 1980; Franks & Marolla, 1976; idem).

The role performance is tied to “impression management”, which entails managing and influencing of other’s perception of oneself (Goffman, 1958; as cited in Duits, 2008, p. 36). Goffman (1958) introduces the ‘dramaturgical theory’ regarding general social performativity. Here, the person is an actor, the social world the stage and one is interacting with an audience, following a certain script. Thus, impression management is the role the actor plays, which is

⁹ However, identification can also occur with a random group, for example, when there is a (perceived) common goal (minimal groups; Neil, Stangor & Hewstone, 1996).

¹⁰ Note: The similarities and differences between Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory are beyond the scope of this thesis. Stets and Burke (2000) provide a general review of these two theories.

specified to the specific audience and the setting of the stage.¹¹ Socialization is then the “training” and the “script” that an individual can call upon to perform well in a certain situation.

In this sense, the better a person performs their role, sticks to the script, the more this person has a claim on their group-membership. This ‘belonging’ to a group is simultaneously perceived by the in-group as well as the out-group. However, the perception of belonging has different consequences for those involved as will be made apparent in the following section.

Along the lines of identity performance, Judith Butler (1990) discusses how gender is *performative*. Meaning that, inherently, gender is constructed and performed through, for example repeated acts and words and that the understanding of gender is created through discourse and perpetuated through repeated performativity. In other words, through these repeated acts of ‘doing’ gender, gender identity is constructed and internalized. This means that in understanding Butler’s theory along the lines of general identification with social categories, one does not first identify and then ‘performs’ the identity, it is the performance which constitutes the identity.¹²

Specifying Goffman’s dramaturgical theory and Butler’s gender performativity to this thesis, gender identity performance is a large part of social identity performativity. As I understand and apply it, this means that ‘performing’ a social identity also entails performing the gendered aspect of that identity and through the performance, identification occurs. This is especially visible in the identity ‘performativity’ of a female Muslim which will be discussed in the section 2.2. and further elaborated on in chapter three.¹³

Negotiating a Minority Identity

Identification can occur automatically, unconsciously and consciously, and appears to be a certain human psychological need. However, identifying yourself and similar others also means

¹¹ *Stereotype Threat* is a form of impression management where there is a fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group. See, Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(5), 797.

¹² Butler’s theory regarding gender performativity is far more extensive and expansive than what I have discussed and is beyond the scope of this thesis. I treat her notion of gender performativity as an addition to the general dramaturgical theory regarding identity performativity.

¹³ It should be stated that ‘performance’ in the theatrical sense is more complex than what I discuss in this thesis. Performativity does not entail one can simply step out of the role or put on ‘clothes’ for a new role.

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that one is always in the process of “Other”-ing: identifying dissimilar others. This proves to be also problematic for Identity Politics (Grosz, 2011). When categorizing people as belonging to certain groups, one is also assigning and attributing believed essential characteristics to Others as well as to the “Self” and similar others. Getting organized under an “identity” for empowerment means a certain naturalization and homogenization of characteristics, furthermore emphasizing differences from Others, and yet still engaging in the exclusion of those that could also be empowered through organization (Idem).¹⁴

Especially when groups are perceived to be homogenous, they are, for example, ascribed less ‘agency’, ‘mind’ and ‘experience’, qualities that are seen as being essentially human (Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima & Bain, 2008). It is not strange then to realize that people holding a minority identity are subjected to everyday racism in a society that privileges the majority and thus they experience ‘humiliations’ (Essed, 2009, p. 132).

Social Identity Theory states, for example, that identification with a social category that holds a minority status in society makes that particular identity more salient and, as such, bringing that particular identity to the foreground of all identities. Most often this can be an ethnic or a gender identity or, in the particular case of the Netherlands and my own research, a religious identity.¹⁵ When minorities are disadvantaged in this sense, challenged in their sense of self and targeted in their pride, this can result in a further stronger divide of “us” vs. “them” through advantaging the in-group and distancing from the out-group.

In the previous chapter of this thesis I mentioned that there are strong tensions surrounding Islam and Muslims in the current Dutch climate. While the politics surrounding this issue are worthy of their own thesis, I would like to briefly touch upon this tension from an ‘identity’ point of view. This paragraph has elaborated upon how people have an essential need to categorize in order to make sense of their world, to have a sense of control in the chaos of life. Especially when people are reminded of their own mortality, this is cause for an even stronger need of control. This is known as Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; as cited in Vaes, Leyens, Paladino, Miranda, 2012). TMT explains the ‘stronger identification’ people experience with their own group especially during times of

¹⁴ The issue of “Identity” in “Identity Politics” is beyond the scope of this thesis. For deeper understanding of this issue one can refer to my Master’s paper “*Transversal Identities*” (11/05/2012).

¹⁵ Essed (2009) further discusses the particular case of everyday racism regarding Muslims in the Netherlands.

turmoil, seeing as how the in-group provides a stable sense of self as previously mentioned. Times of turmoil are visible within current world politics such as ‘the West vs. the Rest’.¹⁶ However, this stronger identification with one’s own in-group goes along with stronger distancing from the out-group. When the minority group is deemed as the out-group they can be subject to systematically supported racism or everyday racism (Essed, 2009). Essed further explicates how the self-esteem of stigmatized minority groups such as Muslims is damaging to their self-esteem and that the continued support of (everyday) racism in society has a hand in this. She further explains that self-esteem is actually what is needed to be able to overcome challenges in life, but also to overcome or act out against oppression (idem, p. 135).

To summarize this paragraph, identification can occur across multiple social categories on different levels and for different reasons. The ‘personal’ sense of self can be derived from the ‘social’ sense of self, and to be part of the ‘social’ means to ‘perform the part’. This paragraph has further shown that the need for identities is a strong, embedded need. This need further results in a need to defend and to hold on to that positive identity image, a continued positive self-esteem as derived from the group-membership and that when this image is challenged, this can result in a stronger us vs. them divide and cause for ‘Other’-ing. Minority identities are especially prone to be subjected to this ‘Other’-ing, and as such, through systemic support of everyday racism and damaging of this ‘positive image’, chances of getting organized and mobilized for social actions are put under strain.

The following paragraph will focus on those particular salient identity categories that are prone to be ‘Other’-ed, that of a Muslim woman in particular, and its performativity.

2.2. Being “Muslim”: The Intersecting of Salient Identities

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a Muslim woman is often very visible in society due to her (visible) visual markers. This visibility marks their identity as society sees them; they are usually not distinguished as a “woman” or as “Moroccan” or “Muslim” but more often as a “Moroccan woman” (with religious identity presumably embedded) or as a “*Moslima*” (a female Muslim). As previously mentioned, *intersectionality theory* (Crenshaw, 1989) calls for an understanding of how social identities can intersect or intra-sect, constituting an individual and

¹⁶ Again, Essed (2009) explicates how there are tensions surrounding Muslims (immigrants) that explain the everyday racism and as such Islamophobia in the Netherlands. This is beyond the scope of this thesis.

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how this individual experiences forms of disadvantages as well as privileges shaped through existing power structures in society. The most important social categories to work from are understood to be “gender”, “race” and “class” after which Lykke (2011) mentions the problem of the “black box” (p. 210). Meaning, how many other social identity categories are to be added to understand the experiences of another? In order to prevent the “black box” abyss of identity categories, the social identity categories in this paragraph will be “religious identity”, “ethnic identity” and “gender identity”. As will become apparent, these identities are not easily separated when it comes to a Female Muslim identity.¹⁷

A Religious Gender Identity or a Gendered Religious Identity

In order to understand a religious identity, religion must be understood. Hemming and Madge (2011) introduce a four-fold definition of religious identity that entail “affiliation and belonging”, “behaviors and practices”, “beliefs and values”, and “religious and spiritual experiences”. Within this religious identity there is a distinction between ‘believing without belonging’ (Davie, 1994; as cited in Hemming & Madge, 2011, p. 40) and ‘believing in belonging’ (Day, 2009; Idem). Believing in belonging would then be a form of socialization into a religious identity. Religious identity should also be understood and seen as any identity, in the sense that it is also in constant flux and subject to negotiation.

When it comes to gender and religion, research has shown that girls express religious observance in higher levels than boys (Francis, 2001; Kay and Francis, 1996; Smith et al. 2003; as cited in Hemming & Madge, 2011, p. 41) as well as differences in religious understandings, attitudes, behaviors and experiences as compared to boys (Erricker et al, 1997; Levitt, 2003; Ramji, 2007; idem). Furthermore, Muslim religiosity differs in extent depending on its location, geographically, culturally and historically (Lewis, 2007; Sahin, 2005; idem).

A Veiled Muslim Woman

As Göle (1996; in Duits, 2008; p. 4) stated, the visibility of the veil on the Muslim woman is a great symbolic way of performing “Otherness”. A veiled woman is in this sense

¹⁷ In Chapter Three, Muslim girlhood identity and other social categories such as ethnic/cultural and age, will be further elaborated upon with regards to the specific girls I worked with.

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always a *Muslim* woman and her body is a source of identity communication.¹⁸ Thus, in this section I will discuss Muslim female-hood or Female Muslim-hood, which cannot be done without discussing the veil.

Muslim (veiled) women have been a site of discussion and contestation, challenged in their agency and identity, a specific form of Islamophobia, namely Gendered Islamophobia (Zine, 2006).¹⁹ Especially in Eurocentric feminism, and general Eurocentric thought-patterns, a veiled Muslim woman is a stigmatized woman, the veil is a stigmatized symbol: a clear visual of patriarchal subjugation. However, this view has been problematized as well, for classifying a veiled Muslim woman as inherently subjugated, means that their autonomy and agency are being denied. In *not* trying to understand the meaning of the veil for the women in question is to partake in that same subjugation, ascribing certain meanings *onto* them. Hoodfar (1997) makes clear that the veiled Muslim woman cannot be merely seen as just that. To understand the meaning of the veil for different women is to understand the intersectionality of their gender, race, class, ethnicity, specific religion, age, political stance in context of culture, politics and economy. The interconnection and intra-connection of these categories clearly testifies to the complexity of understanding ‘the veil issue’ and that there is not ‘one’ explanation existing for it (such as merely patriarchal oppression).

It is necessary to keep in mind at all times that no “one” experience is the same, even though there might be some commonalities involved, as made apparent by the categorical list as derived from Hoodfar’s (1997) text. Having this in mind, this paragraph will further focus on some commonalities that are *believed* to be shared when one is Muslim and female.

The practice of veiling for a Muslim woman has a vast and diverse history as explicated by Hoodfar (1997). The meaning of the veil again is just as vast and diverse for the people who wear it. Wearing specific clothing, and as such the veil indicates not only gender, but also the stage of life, social group and one’s geographical area of origin.

In a religious paradigm, the reasons for veiling are historically and sociologically diverse. The most commonly believed reason for veiling is to showcase one’s piety and as such to protect

¹⁸ Being a non-veiled Muslim can also be a source of Otherness. This is something I will touch upon later on in Chapter Three

¹⁹ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to focus on Islamophobia and the systemic forms of oppression and racism that come with it in Western societies. For further information one can refer to Zine (2006) and Hoodfar (1997).

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the female body from the male gaze and male (re)actions. There is no actual (scriptural) consensus on the extent of coverage: manner and extent of coverage differ per Islamic school of thought and culturally/geographically (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003; as cited in Zine, 2006).

Whether Muslim women choose to veil or unveil for whatever reason, their choices and as such their bodies are governed and regulated by society; whether this is through governmental law that enforces veiling or unveiling or because of a society that partakes in gendered Islamophobia through everyday racism and constant challenging and questioning of women's choices.

Along with the veiling practice, behavior is also prescribed for the piteous Muslim woman. However, veiling practices and behavioral expectations vary culturally, per community and even per family. Therefore, I will refrain from trying to describe a typical Muslim woman in any sense, thus preventing myself (as much as possible) from perpetuating any homogenizing and essentialist notions of what it entails to hold a Muslim Women identity. I will, however, further specify manner of dress and performativity as explained and observed from the specific Muslim girls I worked with. Their particular Muslim female/girl-hood will be addressed in the following chapter.

In this chapter I have discussed how identities can be 'obtained' and 'managed' and what this can mean for people's experienced lives (i.e. 'Other'-ing). In the second paragraph I have tried to touch upon religious identity and its intersection with gender for Muslim women, how it creates a site of contestation on a societal level, without leaving room for what it entails when one holds such an identity, personally.

In the following chapter I will delve further into the analysis at the core of my research with the girls, answering the sub-questions of "which identities do the girls situate themselves in" and "how do the girls perform these identities".

CHAPTER 3

Understanding the Understanding of Others

In the previous section I have described the need for identities, what having an identity can entail and how one can identify with multiple identities. Furthermore, I discussed how people identifying as a Muslim female can perform their identity by wearing the veil and the societal meanings that are ascribed to the veil and its practice. However, in order to prevent the pitfalls of ascribing a slew of social categories, I tried to open the floor to how a specific set of young girls described themselves and others. This chapter is specified towards the girls I worked with, the identities they ascribed themselves and how they performed their identity through their (in)actions and their clothing.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, my decision to have ‘talks’ with the girls was inspired by Feminist Standpoint Epistemology which proposes that women’s own lived experiences should be made a point of entry (Hill Collins, 1990; as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 59). This view also prompted the focus-group setting of the interviews in which experiences and views could be exchanged and further elaborated on. Because the girls were wary of any recordings that might ‘incriminate’ them, we all agreed upon that I would take notes during our talks which they could read and approve. This was done in order to further diminish power relations, ensure mutual trust and set a comfort level.

My notes contained transcripts of conversations that sparked my interests, written in Dutch and as true to their uttering as possible. I have translated the most relevant quotes into English in this chapter. The assignment, which I had given the girls, was also all in Dutch. The full translated transcript from their assignment can be read in Appendix A, whereas the original Dutch assignment can be read in Appendix B. Furthermore, in Appendix C I have transcribed the verbal ‘wish-list’ regarding their future husband, completely in Dutch as well as in English. Short quotes which are found in this chapter will have the Dutch translation in footnotes.

The notes that were taken during our talks, along with my own observation and the assignment given to them, are analyzed in this chapter. Through discourse analysis of the assignment they completed, the notes I took during our talks and further observations, it will be made apparent which identities the girls ascribed themselves. Furthermore, through the analysis

of my talks with the girls and my own observations, I will try to discern their identity performance in context.

Thus, in this chapter I will briefly recapture the methodology and methods I used whilst talking with the girls and which methods I used to interpret the ‘results’. The results will detail a picture of these specific girls’ identity and identity performance regarding Muslim girlhood subjectivity.

3.1. Relating to Each Other: Talks with the Girls

As previously mentioned in the General Introduction, I had six “official” talks with the girls during the span of two months, of an average of two hours each. However, it should also be said that I was familiar with these girls since the start of my internship, which amounted to a total of five months of ‘knowing (of) each other’.

The girls, from now on referred to as N., S. and A., as per their request, were all very excited to have these talks with me. I noticed this in the way they suggested our next meetings and meeting points and in the way they would ask me if ‘we were on’ for that particular week as well.

Two of our talks took place at different locations, one at the public library in the neighborhood (Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam Oost) as suggested by the girls on their day off and one in a bare room at the internship location. After this, the internship organization provided me with a room at the main office, where we had access to refreshments. This was very conducive to the sense of informality of our talks. The girls would walk around, cleaning the table, washing cups and putting on hot water for tea. After our first few talks, I would provide snacks, seeing as how we would meet up right after school and they were often quite hungry. After our talks they would wash up the cups and plates, even if they were not the ones using them. They were very adamant about “keeping clean” and “presentable”. This pertained to their surroundings as well as themselves.

With the help of tea and cookies, our conversation topics were more often prompted by the girls themselves, usually because they would have a question for me, about me. Their curiosity about specific aspects of me is partly what inspired the talks with the girls.

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Due to my Middle-Eastern ethnicity and the features that are usually associated with it (e.g. black hair, brown eyes) I have been often read as Muslim. This has been done throughout my life by people of different ethnicities and of different ages. It became apparent to me that in the social world of the people I came in contact with during my internship, a Middle-Eastern appearance equals Muslim, regardless of veiling or unveiling. Everyone I came in contact with in that specific neighborhood, young and old, would ask the same two questions “Where are you from?” and “Are you Muslim?”. While my ethnic appearance was grounds for a sense of familiarity and ease from the people I came in contact with, the fact that I would tell them I was not a Muslim was often met with a “Why not?” by the children. Especially the girls I worked with were extremely interested in why I did not choose *their* religion, seeing as how I had so much in common with them, i.e. being a “foreigner” (Dutch: Allochtoon). While the adults would accept my answer “No”, the children wanted to *know*. This led to some very interesting conversations with different children during recess, which often went a little bit like this:

G(me): “Well, my parents are Muslim.”

K(them): “That means you were born Muslim.”

G: “I guess you can say that.”

K: “Well, that means you *are* Muslim.”²⁰

Following this logic, I would then state that even though I was “born” Muslim, I was not “practicing”. Following which, the children would give me a certain look and a condescending smile, as if to say: ‘You’ll see. You’ll see what the right path for you is.’

My age, on the other hand, was ground for confusion because I was not married nor was I in the process of getting married (i.e. dating). For the girls this made me even more of an anomaly, because I had ‘the age for it’. But when I explained that I was studying, they would

²⁰ *Dutch*: G: “Naja, mijn ouders zijn Moslim.” –

K: “Dat betekent dat je Moslim geboren bent” –

G: “Dat kan je zo zeggen, ja.” –

K: “Nou, dan ben je dus Moslim.”

accept it, because in their words “Oh, so you’re too busy right now, but after, right?”.²¹ I will further discuss this in section 3.2.4 regarding their ideas about their future.

As previously mentioned in the introduction to my research methodology, the talks took place in a focus-group interview setting during which I took notes. Before starting our talks I would usually have ‘fail-safe’ topics prepared in case the girls themselves did not start their own topic. These fail-safe topics or introductory topics were for example: family life, descent, wearing the veil, racism, the notion of ‘acceptance’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘(self)respect’. The girls would always ask me about what I wanted to discuss next, but their conversational style and personality provided me with a flood of information that I did not have to probe for. While for our first meeting I asked the generic: “How old are you?” – “Do you have siblings?” questions, they would take control of the rest of the conversation, during which I could ‘jump in’ and ask questions.

The focus group setting along with my unstructured interview style allowed for ‘explorative’ talks. This entailed for example that the girls eventually, unconsciously, decided where the focus of the talks and the topics were and as such, inspiration and data for this thesis.

From these notes, the following main themes could be discerned: gender identity and its performativity, and more specifically, successful performativity and unsuccessful performativity. After a short introduction of the girls themselves and their current social world, I will delve further into the topics we discussed.²²

3.1.1 The Girls: an Introduction

A., N. and S. were three young, veiled, Muslim girls. Seeing as their parents, siblings and extended relatives also identified as Muslims, the girls could be deemed ‘believers through belonging’, meaning they were socialized in to their religion (chapter two). All three were finishing their last semester of group 7 when we met. As mentioned, they were all involved with the afterschool homework-help program organized by Diversiteitland. They did this in the hopes of performing well on the pre-entry test in preparation for the final entry-test they have to take

²¹ *Dutch*: “Oh, maar u hebt het heel druk nu! Dat komt wel later toch?”

²² The girls would often agree with each other and complete each other’s sentences. For these instances I will put the entire sentence in quotation and refer to the source, collectively, as “the girls”.

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when in group 8, which would “decide” their future in the Dutch high-school system. Apart from attending primary school five days a week, they had Arabic/Q’uran class on Saturdays as well, so they would “learn to read the Q’uran in its truest written form”. They were all eleven years old and of Moroccan descent. A. and S. however, identified as Berber-Moroccan.²³ All three had older brothers and sisters and all children were born in the Netherlands and had lived in the same neighborhood all their lives.

These girls were also very smart-mouthed with a great sense of justice. With this I mean they often called out anyone who, according to them, was behaving ‘unjust’. They were not afraid to stand up to the teachers (i.e. us, the counselors) even though they still addressed the adults formally.

These girls had the ability to surprise me multiple times during our interactions. I believe this was due to their maturity level, which I discerned through their ability to ‘word’ their experiences to me and to listen, understand and empathize with others. This ‘surprise’ also indicated my own pre-conceived notions under which I was operating. Being surprised means encountering the unexpected which in itself implies certain expectations. These surprises were thus very indicative of my own situatedness and as such, events I should pay closer attention to.

One of the surprises took place when we met at the public library (Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam Oost), where the girls told me that the woman working at the desk was a racist. When I asked them to elaborate they told me that they are always asked to present their cards, just because they wear the headscarf, but that a “blonde” (i.e. a ‘Dutch’ person) can just walk in without a second glance. Considering that in their specific social world, that particular neighborhood, a rather large majority of the residents are Muslim and the women are veiled, I was surprised that they were (already) experiencing ‘racism’, i.e. treated differently and experiencing Islamophobia, which they dubbed as racism. I was even more surprised that, at their age, they could recognize and name their experience. However, this might also be due to the fact that they were (one of) the youngest at home and had older siblings who were at least 6-7 years their senior. Sibling communication and interaction is believed to be more egalitarian compared to parent-child interaction (East & Khoo, 2005). Seeing as the girls’ siblings were also born in the Netherlands and had attended the same primary school, most likely they have had

²³ The differences between Berber-Moroccans and Arab Moroccans are beyond the scope of this thesis.

certain experiences that had been, either implicitly or explicitly, regaled back to the girls. The girls had a very close relationship with their sister(s) and their experiences as girls and young women, might have been more relatable to the girls' own experience and thus easier to recognize and apply.

3.1.2. Context of their Social World

To discuss the lived experiences of the girls, it is important to understand their social world. Seeing as these girls were still in primary school and this was their 'main' activity during the day, I will discuss the school and the neighborhood it is situated in.

Islamic School

Their school is one of the few Islamic schools in Amsterdam and the only Islamic primary school in that particular municipality of Amsterdam. The primary school consists of groups 1-8, which means the children were attending school starting at the age of 4/5 years old up until they were 12/13 years old. After group 8, children would leave for High School.

The school's identity is based around Islam and Islamic teachings and as such, life values. Meaning, the school is not a public primary school with side-religious teachings. The school advocates their objective and philosophy as a way of strengthening children's sense of self and as such, in their Muslim identity while in a non-Muslim society. This is further done through religious teaching by their 'religion teacher' and implemented through for example mandatory prayers during school-time. Not only are the teachers there as educators but also as secondary child rearers.²⁴

Girls and Boys

School regulation mandates that, starting from group 4 (age 7-8), girls wear the headscarf at school, regardless of the religious rules the family regulates. The female teachers at this school are also required to wear a headscarf. Up until group 7 the classes are co-ed, after which, in group 8, girls and boys are separated in class and have a teacher of the same gender. Although

²⁴ The school's vision and objective can be fully read on the school's website: <http://www.as-siddieq.nl/islaamidentiteit>

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not explicitly stated in school regulations, I was told by the girls this was due to the view of them having the age of ‘puberty’. This meant that these girls and boys were becoming interested in each other ‘romantically’, something that is not ‘allowed’ at that age and would be cause for distraction. Furthermore, the girls explained that they received class on more sensitive subjects in group 8, such as specific changes in a girl’s body, the issue of loverboys and sexual abuse. That regarding to these sensitive subject, it was “better” coming from a teacher of the same gender because they [the teacher] understood it better and that it would be less “embarrassing”.²⁵²⁶

The Social World of the Neighborhood

The school is a public school, meaning that anyone who wants their children to follow the philosophy of the school (i.e. religious objective) and what the school represents is allowed to attend. Seeing as parents usually also choose a school that is based on distance, the population of this school can be seen as somewhat representative of this particular neighborhood of Amsterdam as well. While the school does not have the statistics of their student population published, the most common ethnic backgrounds are that of Turkish and Moroccan descendents. The municipality of Amsterdam sets the amount of residents at about 123.000 (Bureau Onderzoek en Statistiek en Stadsdeel Oost, 2013). However, the neighborhood the school is situated in counts about 23.000 residents, which represents a more condensed population. This neighborhood at large, the Indische Buurt, consist of four small neighborhoods; Ambonbuurt, Makassarbuurt, Sumatrabuurt and Timorbuurt. The Indische Buurt is known for its social housing, residing low-income households. Furthermore, this neighborhood has higher percentages of youth-criminality and higher percentages of non-western immigrants compared to the municipality at large (Amsterdam Oost) and the entirety of the city of Amsterdam itself. Low income households are also linked to lower-educated residents as was school-success of children

²⁵ For example, I noticed that the girls and boys from group 7 in the after-school program would deem it a great punishment if they were told to sit with someone of the opposite gender. The children in from group 8 in the after-school program would automatically sit apart with their respective gender. At one point, many boys from group 8 quit the program which resulted in that the one boy who had remained wanted to quit “because he was the only boy”. When we contacted his mother, his mother explained her son’s action through how he thought the other boys would tease him if he remained in the ‘all-girl’ class.

²⁶ I do not have information on how else the space division between boys and girls was regulated during or after school, nor will this particular topic be further discussed in this chapter.

to the education-level of their parents. Meaning, children of lower-educated parents had comparatively lower school-success than children with higher-educated parents (idem).

In this paragraph I have provided a brief background of the girls I worked with and their current social world, which revolves mostly around religion. Their social life further consists of spending time with similar minded people from similar household, i.e. their community.

In the following paragraph I will discuss the identities the girls ascribed themselves, most often done along the lines of gender identity and religious identity, and the way they performed these identities.

3.2. Performing Their Identity

“A good Muslim girl should behave accordingly:”- S.

The fact that the school is relatively small and has children from the age of 4 to 12 years old, means that many students have known each other all their lives. This also means that many have (had) brothers and sisters or relatives attending the same school. Because of this, many students know people from groups/grades below them and above them. As I mentioned briefly in the introduction of this chapter, the girls I was involved with attended group 7. They knew the students we (at Diversiteitland) worked with from group 6 as well the students we worked with in group 8. Having siblings or cousins at school, means that their behavior at school is monitored by teachers, their peers as well as their direct and extended family. Seeing as I did not have access to the girls' lives outside of school and the home-work program, I interpreted their behavior at school, a social setting with social norms, as somewhat representative of their behavior and performativity in other social settings as well.

As was made apparent in chapter two, gender and religious identity are not easily separated nor should they be seen as two separate social categories when it comes to Muslim Female identity. In this paragraph I will discuss the notion of Muslim Girlhood subjectivity for the girls I worked with and I will look at how they considered that being a 'good girl' is equated to being a 'good Muslim' and vice versa.

3.2.1. Gender Identity and Performativity

In order to understand what a Muslim girl identity entails, it is important to see how this identity is performed. When following the theory of ‘dramaturgical theory’ (Goffman, 1958) as discussed in chapter two, performativity can be seen as the role one outwardly performs for ‘others’. In this sense the role would be the identity and the clothing would a part of the performance. In this fashion, this paragraph will focus on the way the girls did and did not dress, their overall appearance and their veiling. In the second paragraph, I will delve further into the behavior of the girls, what they did and did not do in order to perform their identity.

Dress-Code

It appeared that due to the fact that everybody attending and working at their school was a Muslim, this was one aspect of the girls’ identity they did not have to ‘use’ to be differentiated from others, as would perhaps be done if the girls would attend a more diverse school. Referring back to the need for positive distinctiveness when people have identities (Abrams & Hoggs, 1990), my observance of the girls’ behavior indicated that their way of being positively distinctive was to focus on other identity aspects, such as ethnicity. This was extremely visible in the way the girls were wearing their veils. Although school regulation mandates the headscarf, it simply states that the head should be covered and the hair should not be visible. The girls I worked with were all of Moroccan descent (Berber-Moroccan and Moroccan) and they had in common the tradition that along with the head/hair, their necks and their cleavages were to be (somewhat) covered as well. Furthermore, there was a difference in the percentage of curves and thigh that were to be covered. The girls all wore loose fitting clothes and a dress that would cover until their ankles. If they wore pants, they wore a skirt or long shirt to cover their thighs up until one or two inches above their knees.

They would often comment on a couple of girls, often in group 8, who wore tighter fitting clothes and would “hike up their dress, as if to adjust it and showing more leg, when there are boys around”. They would often call the girls who did this “sluts” and “attention-whores”.²⁷²⁸

²⁷ *Dutch*: “dan trekken ze hun jurk up alsof ze het goed gaat doen en dan meer been laten zien wanneer er jongens zijn.”

²⁸ *Dutch*: “Sletjes” – “Aandacht hoertjes”

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It appeared that this policing, often done through gossiping, pertained more to girls and women who were of the same ethnic descent. For example, I never heard them talk about the Turkish girl from group 8 who was part of the homework program, while she would have a loosely wrapped headscarf and would wear longer sweaters over her jeans that only covered her behind. The thought pattern behind this is, as I interpreted: ‘you are the same as us, so you should behave the same as us’ or ‘we are abiding by the rules, why aren’t you?’. I furthered interpreted their gossiping about other ‘similar’ girls as a way for the girls to help define the appropriate behavior for themselves. This can be regaled back to the need for positive distinctiveness and thoughts along the lines of ‘well, at least I am not behaving like that’ or ‘I should not behave like that’. I also viewed their gossiping as a way of setting up social norms for their own circle of friends.

Appearance

A quick look at the current fashionable clothing on the streets, especially worn by teenagers, show many prints of celebrities along with slogans. These clothes can be seen as an expression of identity, a statement.²⁹ The girls however, were very adamant about not wearing clothes with celebrities on them, for they represented idolization and would not fit their religious dress codes. This became apparent when they were gossiping about an older girl who was wearing a top which had Rihanna, a current world-famous singer, on it.

However, the girls used different forms of dress to signify their identity. While A. only wore “sober” monochromatic colors in simple long-sleeved long-dress form at calf-length atop jeans, she would off-set this proudly with ‘cool’ sneakers and a purse. N. would for example match colors: her blue headscarf would match her blue vest and blue jewelry. S. would combine different colors and subtle prints and match her purse to complete her outfit. While picking up the girls from their school, I noticed that the “purse”-fad was something almost all girls from groups 6 to 8 seemed to partake in: instead of wearing a chunky backpack, like the boys all did, the girls were all carrying a purse around. I interpreted this as a way of showcasing their maturity by displaying awareness of femininity.

²⁹ Clothing and other outward-appearance styles are believed to be used to signify identity. For a more extensive reasoning, see Ryan, M. S. (1966). *Clothing: A study in human behavior*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

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Apart from paying attention to the neatness of their clothes (and others') the girls also looked at faces, hair and hands. Though never explicitly brought up as a specific topic to be discussed, the girls would talk about faces a lot. I interpreted this being due to the fact that faces and hands are what are most publicly exposed. Their talks about hair signified their fascination, seeing as the girls and other veiled women around them would 'hide' it in public but took great care of it back home. These subjects often arose in our conversations due to my own appearance. For example, I keep my nails long and wear nail polish daily, I also wear heavy eyeliner, mascara and I straighten my hair and use products to take of my hair. I also often wear skirts and tights along with heavy boots, a band t-shirt and a jacket or a shapeless sweater. The girls would reprimand me for wearing so much black, especially if I wore black nail-polish along with it and would give my heavy boots an equally heavy look. For them, I was not being 'feminine' enough nor was I dressing as was appropriate for my maturity level. Wearing so many dark colors appeared more masculine to them, especially my shoes were deemed very masculine, as opposed to masculine sneakers, which was deemed generally 'cool'. My age, as previously mentioned, signaled a 'grown-up' age, which to them meant that I had to dress in a more mature way, either more 'professional' or more 'feminine'. They would tell me this explicitly and ordered me (in a humorous way) to wear more colors. On different occasions they would ask me if I plucked my eyebrows, straightened my hair and why I wore so much make-up. When I answered them, they would always reply with the same: "But miss, natural is so much more prettier!".³⁰ Feminine beauty, especially, lay in its naturalness for them.

While A. would walk around saying "I'm ugly: I'm too tall, I have ugly teeth and wear heavy braces"³¹, N. and S. were more celebratory of their looks. They would tell me they were often complimented on the natural shape of their eyebrows, their thick lashes, the color of their eyes and the shape of their noses and lips. A. did not view herself positively in that sense; she was already taller than everyone else in her age group, standing at 5'7" and still growing. Her looks were not 'feminine' in her mind and thus not attractive.

³⁰ *Dutch*: "Maar juf, naturel is toch veel mooier!"

³¹ "Juf, ik ben lelijk. Kijk nou: ik ben te groot, ik heb lelijke tanden en grote beugel, alles."

Veiling

The girls all wore a headscarf at school as well as outside of school. A., N. and S. all had started veiling from age seven onwards. They explained to me that they start learning the Islamic teachings at age seven, so this was deemed an appropriate age to start wearing the headscarf. However, when you have reached the age of puberty you *have* to start veiling. The girls, their sisters, mothers and aunts all wore a headscarf. But as the girls put it: “They don’t exaggerate with covering themselves. The prophet only said that your face and hands can be uncovered, but you’re allowed to cover your face as well. You don’t *have* to”.³² With this they referred to women wearing the Niqab, which covers the woman entirely except for the eyes.

Our talks about the veil ran throughout all the sessions. The girls would sometimes uncover their hair on a particularly warm day, only in the presence of other females, and would be extremely cautious of other males accidentally walking in the room. Innocuous happenstances such as these sparked questions and topics that one would not easily arrive at or think of. For example the topic of “unveiling” sparked an entire conversation about the girls’ future and marriage. This topic will be further discussed in section 3.2.4.

The first time the girls took their veil off in front of me was on a particularly warm day, right after homework-class at the internship location. While they had adjusted their headscarf in front of me before while we were in the bathroom, they had never shown outright discomfort wearing their headscarf before. This prompted the following conversation about unveiling:

G.: “Do you take it [the headscarf] off immediately when you get home or just keep it on until you go to bed?”

N.: “No, it’s okay to take it off. It’s important to let it breathe.”

A.: “It’s just our brothers and father at home anyways.”

S.: “It’s okay to still have it off if your uncle visits though. But it’s more respectful if you wear it.”

N.: “Depends on how close you are with your uncle, I guess.”

S.: “But not your cousin though. “

G.: “Why is that?”

³² *Dutch*: “Ze overdrijven niet. De Profeet heeft alleen gezegd dat je gezicht en je handen niet bedekt hoeven te zijn, maar je mag je gezicht wel bedekken. Het *moet* niet.”

S.: “Well, you can still marry your cousin. You know how it is in our culture, Miss.”³³

As Hoodfar (1997) explained, the process of veiling can signal a woman’s stage in life. Here, when the girls started veiling at the age of seven, this indicated their stage of life where there was their onset of awareness of their femininity and its religious significance. Hoodfar (1997) also explains that the veiling performance indicates a woman’s pioussness in the public and the private sphere. In this case, direct family and female relatives and other females constitute the private sphere, whereas the entrance of a male cousin or a male figure is indicative of the public sphere. The ‘public’ eye, as became apparent during when they would order me to keep a look out on the door to see if any men would be entering, is cause for higher observance of normative behavior.

During the same talk, where S. explained that a male cousin is also cause for veiling, I asked them why they wore the headscarf, to which N. immediately replied with:

“Miss, let me ask you this: if you see a half unwrapped lollypop lying on the counter, would you rather pick that one up or the one that is fully wrapped?”³⁴

When I asked her to elaborate, she went further into the analogy:

“Well, with the unwrapped lollypop, you don’t know where it’s been. You don’t know if it has been licked and who has touched it. But with the unwrapped lollypop, you at least know it has been untouched and it’s safe to take it.”³⁵

While it was not explicitly mentioned that the untouched lollypop referred to ‘virginity’, I interpreted it as such. A “wrapped lollypop” is equated to a pious girl who wears the headscarf,

³³ *Dutch*: G: “Doe je altijd gelijk je hoofddoek af wanneer je thuiskomt, of hou je het aan totdat je naar bed gaat?”-

N: “Nee, je mag het afdoen. Het is belangrijk om het te laten ademen.” –

A: “Is toch alleen maar broertjes en je vader thuis.” –

S: “Je mag het afdoen als je oom bijvoorbeeld op bezoek komt. Maar is meer respect als je op hebt.” –

N: “Ligt ook aan hoe close je met je oom bent, denk ik.” –

S: “Maar niet je neef.” –

G: “Hoezo dat?” –

S: “Naja, je kan nog steeds met je neef trouwen. Je weet hoe het in ons cultuur is, Juf.”

³⁴ *Dutch*: “Juf, laat me dit vragen: als je een lolly ziet liggen op het aanrecht met de plastic eraf, zou je het dat dan pakken of de lolly die nog in verpakking ligt?”

³⁵ *Dutch*: “nou met de lolly die half uitgepakt is weet je niet waar het is geweest. Je weet niet of iemand er een likje van heeft genomen en wie het aangeraakt heeft. Maar met de ingepakte lolly weet je tenminste dat niemand er aan heeft gezeten en dat je het kan pakken.”

signaling her values of remaining ‘untouched’. In contrast to this, an unveiled girl does not visibly signal her ‘good girl’ values. Wearing the headscarf, in this sense, means showing your religious commitment and, along that line, displaying your eligibility for marriage.

While for them wearing the headscarf in the public sphere meant signaling their identity performance to the community, they were aware of other views regarding their veiling. This brings me back to the “She is a racist.” comment at the library, where I had asked the girls if they had experienced more of these instances:

S.: “Miss, people say Muslim women are oppressed, but it’s not like that.”

N.: “Yeah, even though people say you are not free, it doesn’t matter as long as you *feel* free, right?”

A.: “There is so much hate. That’s not fun!”

N.: “They’re not all bad though. Sometimes people come up to us on the street, when I’m like, walking with my mom or whatever. They ask us why we wear the veil and what it means. That’s kind of cute.”

S.: “Those people are not racists. They just don’t *know*. It’s our job to teach them. We’ll get points for that.”

G: “Points?”

N.: “Yeah, like we are talking to You right now, we are teaching You about Islam. We get Muslim points.”³⁶

Here the girls touched upon some of the Eurocentric views regarding the veil, in which the headscarf is considered the symbol for female oppression (Kiliç, Saharso & Sauer, 2008). Furthermore, they touched upon the “agency” issue in which a veiled woman is either dismantled of any agency or questioned in her agency, by either the government, feminists or non-Muslim people (Bilge, 2010).³⁷ However, while the girls and their female relatives might be challenged

³⁶ *Dutch*: -S: “Juffrouw, mensen zeggen dat Moslim vrouwen onderdrukt zijn, maar dat is niet zo.” – N:”Ja, ook al zeggen mensen dat je niet vrij bent, maakt niet uit zolang jij je vrij voelt toch?” – A: “Er is zoveel haat. Is niet leuk.” – N: “Ze zijn niet allemaal slecht hoor. Soms komen mensen naar ons toe wanneer ik met m’n moeder ben ofzo. Ze vragen dan waarom wij een hoofddoek dragen en wat het betekent. Dat is best lief.” – S: “Die mensen zijn niet racistisch. Ze weten het gewoon niet. Wij moeten het hun leren. Daar krijgen we punten voor.” – G: “Punten?” – N: “Ja, wij praten nu met U, we leren U over Islam. Daar krijgen we moslim punten voor.”

³⁷ In chapter two I touched upon the issue of agency, explaining that when Muslim women do enter the debate surrounding their veiling or unveiling, their input is often written off as ‘false-consciousness’

in their agency by non-Muslims, it appears they are not budging in their conviction. Rather, these views and questions make them all the more convinced about their belief and practices. This is made apparent in the way the girls view people who comment on them as “uneducated” and appreciate it when they are offered the opportunity to ‘explain’.

This section has primarily focused on appearance regarding identity performativity in which the girls displayed their gender identity and religious identity through the way to would adhere to the clothing regulations by wearing the veil and covering their shapes. Their gender identity was further displayed through either accessories, such as a purse or color coding, i.e. matching of colors and patterns. However, behavior, what one does or does not do is also a large part of ‘performing a role’. This will be discussed in the following section.

3.2.2. To be a Girl is to Not Behave as a Boy

Following Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, in which one’s behavior cements one gender identity, this paragraph will also take a closer look at the girls’ behavior, especially the norms they perceived and adhered to.

N. and S. were more comparable in their view of what the good Muslim girl is or should be, namely that she should act “feminine”. They would express their convictions in the way they paid attention to their appearance but also in their conduct. In their own understanding, a good Muslim is well-kept and well-mannered, that is to say: she behaves in the opposite way of how a boy behaves. She does not get dirty, she takes care of the house and of herself, because “a girl is like a diamond”, she needs to be protected and remain beautiful.³⁸

A. on the other hand was more into ‘cool stuff’. She was often found on social media, up to date on current artists and TV-shows, excited about Dutch rap music and she also used a lot of street slang. She would often say that she was not “a girly girl,” even though she should be, but that she “can’t help it, Miss. I’m just too loud.”³⁹

This difference between the girls was made all the more apparent when I asked them to write down, in their own words what being a Muslim girl entails for them (Appendix A, B). For example, while N. and S. proudly delivered their pieces of paper to me, neatly kept, A. was more

³⁸ The “a girl is like a diamond” explanation was used explicitly in A.’s assignment. (in Dutch: “Een meid is net al seen diamant.”)

³⁹ *Dutch*: “Ik ben geen meisje-meisje.” – “Ik kan er niks aan doen Juf, ik ben gewoon heel luid.”

apologetic about her ‘ugly handwriting’. This could be read as A. signifying her belief that a girl should have a nice and neat handwriting, but (again) that she does not succeed in applying that.

The girls’ rendition of a ‘Good Muslim girl’ fits well into the Nice Girl construct (Fox, 1977). As previously mentioned in chapter one, the nice girl construct exemplifies the normative restrictions girls and women face, which are more visible in the “she should *not*” than the “she should” realm that are internalized.⁴⁰

S. described in her version, which she titled “*A good Muslim girl should behave accordingly*”: a girl should be ashamed, not be too close with boys, keep to the clothing regulation, be polite, not behave like a boy (Appendix A, B). N. on the other hand provided a longer list with basic Muslim behavior, but more so pertaining to girls. Titled “*A girl like me should*” she wrote down: not be too close with boys, not gossip, not wear tight fitting clothes, not do or watch dirty stuff, not express your love for boys, not be arrogant (Idem).

N. also had the rule of “don’t behave like a boy”. When I asked N. what she meant with that, she responded with: “like, don’t yell out on the streets, you’re lowering your worth when you do that. You look uncivilized”.⁴¹ To which S. responded: “Yes, don’t yell. Don’t act like you’re at home”.⁴² Here, “at home” can be read as referring to the private sphere where they can behave however they want without social repercussions.

A. provided a bluntly stated shortlist, starting with: “What is an Islamic girl? An Islamic girl is a girl who is Islamic, logical”. She then states that a Muslim girl is not allowed to have boyfriends, sex before marriage, go to a discotheque, drink alcohol; which she then followed up with “she’s not allowed to do a lot of things, huh? But it’s for your own protection. These days you only see sluts and whores outside” (Idem).

These “rules”, as the girls wrote down, pertain more to social behavior than actual internal beliefs. This demonstrates identity performativity in a clear sense when following Goffman’s (1958) ‘dramaturgical theory’ and Butler’s (1990) simplified notion of gender performativity: the role of a Muslim girl is performed through dress/appearance as well as her

⁴⁰ Normative restrictions can be read as ‘a nice girl does so and so, not so and so’, which means there are unwritten social rules pertaining to behavior and appearance (Fox, 1977). These rules are internalized, which is why it is dubbed ‘normative’ and there is no external agent observing the correct behavior, instead it is the self that does so.

⁴¹ *Dutch*: “Bijvoorbeeld, niet schreeuwen op straat. Dan verlaag je jezelf. Je lijkt onbeschaafd.”

⁴² *Dutch*: “Ja, niet schreeuwen. Niet gedragen alsof je thuis bent.”

behavior. The success of her performance then rests on how well she is received by her audience (i.e. group). Referring back to the process of performing role identity, performing one's role well (i.e. well perceived) can enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy (Stryker, 1980; Franks & Marolla, 1976, in Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus for the girls, not behaving 'like that' means they are doing 'it' right, i.e. performing their role well.

Working from their list, I noticed their behavior patterns and could make sense of previous observations. For example, during the class I had with them, girls and boys sat with their own gender. The worst punishment we as counselors could give them was making them sit with each other. Boys were deemed unruly and unkempt, thus distancing from them meant for the girls to be on higher ground and as such deserving of more respect. The girls often discussed the behavior of other girls who outright showed their interest in boys, with disgust. This fits well into their rule of: "don't get too close with boys" and "don't show your interest in boys".

This previous section discussed how the girls deemed they could perform their roles as good Muslim girls, through appearance and behavior. By adhering to the 'rules' that apply to good Muslim girls and by not behaving like boys they were performing their gender and religious identity 'successfully'. However, alongside what constituted a successful performance was also 'unsuccessful' performance. This will be discussed in the following section.

3.2.3 Unsuccessful Identity Performance: 'Bringing shame on the family'

One phrase that was often repeated, sometimes jokingly, was: "gives shame" which is a direct translation of the Dutch 'geeft schande', which again is a direct translation from their respective Berber/Arabic language. When something "gives shame" it means a certain conduct will reflect badly on them and in that sense their family. For the girls "giving shame" was often equated with embarrassing happenstances, such as a strand of hair being visible. However, "giving shame" was more often related to instances where 'rules' were offending by behaving outside the norm, such as for example, admitting you like a boy. For example, A. had a crush on the singer Adam Lambert and asked me to search for pictures of him on my phone. When I did so, she said: "He is *so* hot," after which she immediately exclaimed: "Ooh, shame!".⁴³

⁴³ Dutch: "Hij is echt lekker" – "Oooh, schande!"

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In order to understand this ‘bringing shame’, the notion honor should be understood. Cultures which value honor also honor social image, reputation and other’s evaluation (V.A. as cited in Uskul, Cross, Alozkan, Gercek-Swing, Ataca, Gunsoy & Sunbay, 2013). Honor cultures are most typically found in the Mediterranean countries, South-America, and the Middle-East, while non-honor cultures are typically found in the West, such as the Netherlands, North-America and Sweden (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Persistiany, 1965; as cited in Uskul et. al, 2013). When it comes to honor, an individual has to enhance this honor, defend and protect it. Failing to do so is again damaging to this honor. Thus, belonging to a collective means one’s public behaviour is reflective of the reputation of one’s in-group. In this sense, a collective is most often the direct and extended family and as such, family members are obligated to uphold and defend the reputation (Persistiany, 1965; idem).

Honor-bound killing is believed to stem forth from the need to defend honor and to remain a family’s reputation in their community. Women, wives and daughters, are tasked with maintaining the family’s honor (Ruggi, 1998; as cited in Awwad, 2001). Honor killing is the male family members’ response to a female’s sexual transgression (V.A.: idem).

This is believed to be due to the fact that these honor cultures stem from shepherding-cultures (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; as cited in Heine, 2008). Shepherding-cultures, especially found in the Middle-East and some parts of North-Africa, are dependent on their possessions to ensure their livelihoods. Furthermore they rely on their reputation within their society to ensure future exchanges which can add to their possessions. Women, as long as they remain pure and virginal, are a great commodity, seeing as they can be ‘exchanged’ for further familial ties and alliances (Ruggi, 1998; Kressel, 1981; Schneider, 1971; as cited in Awwad, 2001). This also explains the extreme retaliation that is typically found in honor cultures when for example, a woman has had pre-marital sex; she is deemed as damaged goods (she cannot be exchanged and will probably remain living at home and ‘costing’ the family). Furthermore, the woman (often daughter) has transgressed her hierachical standing, damaged her reputation and as such the family’s reputation. To maintain their status, through maintaining their honor, the family is bound to restore this, often by killing or ostracizing the girl (Heine, 2008).

While for example Dutch people of Moroccan and Turkish descent are not living in shepherding-cultures and are not dependent on livestock and family ties, they are nonetheless dependent on the community. Referring back to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

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and the need to belong, belonging to a community provides a sense of self-worth and a sense of self in the social world. In this regard, honor-cultures rely heavily on their evaluation by (similar) others, thus being damaged in this honor means not finding inclusion in your community. Tying this to the positive sense of self which holding a social identity can provide, not finding inclusion can be problematic. Furthermore, Essed discussed ‘cultural pain’ inflicted on certain groups such as the Turkish and the Moroccan through humiliation in the Dutch society (2009, p. 134). Considering that it is especially these groups which value honor, connected to their self-image, being attacked in this sense might be especially painful. Intuitively, it is not strange to think that when a society systematically endorses this cultural humiliation, this can also result in over identification of either party on the us vs. them divide. This intuitive musing can further be supported by Terror Management Theory as mentioned in chapter two, as well as Hall’s (1992) idea that in current modern times, people can experience a destabilizing sense of self with regards to their identities and thus have a stronger need for identities.

Thinking back to the social world of the girls, their time spent in the ‘public sphere’ such as at school, home-work program or perhaps their Q’uran class (i.e. their community), their social self (chapter two), seemed to take precedence over their personal self more often. This was for example visible in their constant awareness and vigilance in terms of the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ thing to do. Whether the right or wrong thing to do was done through dubbing an action or inaction through “gives shames” regarding themselves or through gossiping about others, social behavior and appearance was constantly monitored. Furthermore, gossiping in honor-cultures is a way to ensure people, mainly women, behave accordingly and acts as a form of policing. Especially females receive the task to ensure that the family’s honor is not damaged. The girl needs to retain her social status to remain eligible for marriage and to further strengthen the family, and in turn the community, through her reproductive abilities (V.A.; as cited in Awwad, 2001). This became very apparent to me when N., after weeks of talking together, asked me if she could ask me something. After awkwardly shifting in her seat she finally said: “What happens when you get married? Do you just go in a room together and within a year you have a baby?”⁴⁴ S. and A. immediately went quiet and looked at me with rapt attention. After assuring me they knew the basics of reproduction, as explained in biology class, I explained that you do

⁴⁴ *Dutch*: “Wat gebeurt als je dan getrouwd bent? Ga je dan gewoon gelijk samen in een kamertje en dan heb je binnen een jaar een baby?”

not necessarily have to get pregnant immediately: that sometimes it takes “several tries” before pregnancy can occur; and that if married people are not ready to have a baby there are contraceptive ways to prevent that. I asked the girls afterwards why they had asked me these questions and not one of their older sisters (one of them had given birth just the week before) or consulted the internet. They responded with how their internet time is monitored as is their search history and that their sister(s) would reply with “why would you need to know?”. Most importantly, that they asked me because: “You’re not Moroccan”.⁴⁵ This was a loaded statement which signified the fact that I am not in their community, and therefore I could and would not regale this back to their families nor would I judge them on their ‘good Muslim girl’-performativity.

In this section there was a focus on not performing ‘successfully’ as a good Muslim girl and as such, not performing well as a member of one’s community and where this idea of ‘honor’ and ‘shame’ stems from in regards to their culture. Not performing successfully, to them, was to behave in a way a ‘good Muslim girl’ should not, i.e. behavior that would “give shame” and in turn damage ones reputation and that of the family. The following section is therefore focused on what it does entail when one performs ‘successfully’.

3.2.4 Successful Identity Performativity: Aspirations for the Future

Talks about the future were inevitable: the girls were in the process of taking a pre-entry test that would give them their predictive “standing” for their education level in high school. The Dutch educational system holds on to three high-school (continued education) advices: Vmbo, Havo and Vwo. In group 8, children are required to take the CITO test that will decide their appropriate education level. Vmbo is more vocational-education based, whereas Havo is the middle ground between vocational and theoretical education. Vwo on the other hand is known as a pre-university education and is highly theoretically based (website of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science).

The girls were part of the after-school homework help in order to ensure that they did everything they could to get a good score. They were all aiming for Havo or Vwo so they could go on to tertiary education. This was very important to them because “you need to study”.

⁴⁵ *Dutch*: “Mijn zus zou zeggen: hoezo wil je dat weten?!” – “Maar juf, U bent niet marrokaans, weet je.”

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The girls had sisters who were in the process of studying and they wanted to do the same. While N. and A. had no clear ideas what they wanted to ‘become’, S. wanted to be a doctor. The only thing they knew for sure was that in order to get a good job and make a lot of money, you have to study.

During the talk where S. explained that it is important to veil around potential husband material (i.e. her cousin) we arrived to the topic of marriage. Even though studying came first, they foresaw themselves getting married at 19 or 20. I have already briefly mentioned that they regarded me as an anomaly, especially compared to my female Dutch colleague who was 20 years old, studying and also in a committed relationship. While my colleague still lived at home, I had moved out when I started university being eighteen years old. The girls had all this information about my colleague, which made them all the more baffled by my behavior. My colleague was white and Catholic, yet she matched them more in their ideas of how a girl should behave. In contrast to that, I was a foreigner, from a similar culture and more like them, but living on my own and refusing to date (in order to get married). Hence, I was the one demonstrating stereotypical white-girl, Western behavior. In their minds, you only move out when you are married to start your own family. In their immediate vicinity, their older sisters, the ones who had finished high-school, were either already married or in the process of getting married. Their mothers were also married by the age of eighteen. As such, starting from eighteen, you are eligible for marriage. In their words: “you do not have to get married immediately,”⁴⁶ because starting a tertiary education is also important.

When I asked what they were looking for in a potential husband, they all agreed on “Muslim”, preferably a Moroccan man. They then each provided me with a personal checklist of what they, more specifically, did *not* want, namely: an “uncivilized”, “impolite”, “vain” “mama’s boy” (Appendix C). What stood out to me is that each girl, in her own way, was asking for a husband who would not participate in the typical husband-wife, gendered task division. S. for example, wanted a man who was able to cook, while A. explicitly stated she wanted a “house-husband”. A. stated that she did not want one of those men who “forbid their wives things, thinking they’re all better. That’s bad” (idem).

⁴⁶ *Dutch*: “Je hoeft niet gelijk te trouwen. Studeren is belangrijk.”

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While they all wanted their marriage to happen in a traditional, conventional way (e.g.: a man coming to ask her family for her ‘hand in marriage’), they did not want the marriage to be traditional in the sense of the woman becoming a housewife. They wanted to work as well and have an egalitarian division of labor. I interpreted their wish being mostly due to their sense of injustice in the way their brothers were often excused from household labor, while the girls were all expected to help. This was grounded in how they would complain about their brother(s) being “lazy” and doing “nothing at home”.⁴⁷ Their sisters were also behaving in those same patterns they wished to have themselves, this in opposition to how their own parents behaved. For example, N. talked about her eldest sister who just had a baby and how she met her husband in the “non-traditional”-way, namely: they met at work and her husband asked her out, they dated for a while before he came to their house to ask her hand in marriage. According to N., the traditional way would have been for the man to ask permission from the father to approach the woman with the intent of marriage beforehand. This was how their parents had done it, but the girls were more agreeable to the “non-traditional”-way.

In this section I discussed what performing their roles of that of a ‘good Muslim girl’ entailed for them in the future. Their successful performance was contingent with their behavior as girls and as such, a Muslim girl. Performing well, with regards to their future, further entailed having a ‘good’ husband and good social standing by having a tertiary education and to have a good job. Incidentally, this fits in with what Butler (1990) introduces as the heterosexual matrix. Very simply, within this matrix one’s assigned sex entails one’s gender identity, which dictates an opposite sex ‘desire’. Interpreting this heterosexual desire further, performing one’s gender identity well entails having a desire for the opposite sex. In this specific case, the girls’ dubbed the age of maturity (18) as an appropriate age to start displaying this desire. With this, as I interpreted, they indicated that having this desire (i.e. getting married) is their norm. This was also visible in the way that I was deemed somewhat of an anomaly for not having this desire for ‘marriage’. However, I was ‘excused’ because I did not have the time for it at the moment, but ‘eventually’ I would.

In this chapter there was a discussion of the talks with the girls. Through analyzing observations, what and how the girls discussed topics, their identity performance of that of a

⁴⁷ Dutch: “Hij [broer] doet echt niks in huis. Hij zit maar een beetje tv te kijken. Hij mag lui zijn en wij moeten gelijk alles opruimen als er visite komt en thee zetten enzo.”

good Muslim girl was made apparent. Their performativity was displayed foremost through their appearance and further cemented through their conduct in the public (i.e. school and homework-program) as well as the private sphere (i.e. when talking in private). Their appearance as well as conduct demonstrated their religious observance in the way they understood it and had internalized it. This also supported the claim that girls display higher religious observance as compared to boys (chapter two). What the girls believed a good Muslim girl entailed was explained through what ‘she’ should do as much as what ‘she’ should not do.

In the Conclusion of this thesis I will further discuss how my analysis answers the sub-questions and in turn the main question, the limitations of this thesis and its implications for future research.

CONCLUSION

Fueled by Hoodfar’s (1997) text in which she explicated the multiple meanings behind the veil and how veiled women are constantly challenged in their agency regarding their choices, this thesis was heavily focused on the issue of ‘agency’. Not only was this thesis focused on the issue of agency regarding Muslim women, but also focused on children who are also denied agency. In chapter 1, I argued that young girls, i.e. tweens were often left out studies on young women. Furthermore, if ‘tweens’ were included, there was the lack of intersectionality and sensitivity towards several identity categories that constitute a person. I argued that the agency of the ‘tweens’ was more often denied on basis of their age. This led to the main question of how young Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a multi-cultural Western society and the sub-questions of in which identities girls position themselves in and how they perform these identities.

In chapter 2, I discussed how the concept of identity, the need for it and its meaning on a personal and social level can be helpful tools in understanding how other people understand themselves. More importantly, I introduced the concept of performativity of an identity which further cements a person’s belonging to their identity category. I also specified identity theory to that of Muslim women and young muslim girls, whose visible religious markers are grounds for societal debate and whose agency is denied on the basis of age, gender and religion. Furthermore

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I posed that religious identity and gender identity would not be easily extractible or separated when it comes to Muslim females.

In order to answer the sub-questions, and as such the main question, I conducted several focus-group talks with 11 year old young Muslim girls during the span of two months. Along with my own observations during and outside of our talks, I discerned which identities were most important to these girls and how they performed these identities.

Performing Identities

The young girls I worked with positioned themselves mainly as a Muslim girl. No matter the subject or topic of discussion it all boiled down to the discourse of that of a ‘good Muslim girl’. The school the girls attended was a religious primary school, an Islamic school with Islamic teachings as its objective. Seeing how apart from attending their Islamic school, the girls attended Q’uran class as well in the weekends, Islam was a large part of their lives. Their family, extended family and immediate community were all Muslim as well. Every response and uttering during our talk was constructed along the lines of ‘that *is* or *is not* how a good Muslim girl behaves/looks like’. They performed their identities as a ‘good Muslim girl’ through the way they dressed and conducted themselves. They visibly showed their religious identity through wearing the veil and wearing non revealing clothes. However, they showed further showed their gender and personal identity through paying attention to detail of their clothing, such as keeping their clothing neat, matching their veil to their outfit or the other way around; wearing nice shoes or carrying a purse.

Their identity performance was further discernable in the way they would do and would not do certain actions and in the way that they would say “gives shame” when something untoward happened. Even though it was often said in an exaggerated manner, jokingly, responding with “gives shame” appeared to be, as I interpreted, a way of acknowledging boundaries, i.e. social norms, for themselves and showing others that they knew these boundaries.

Their struggle in negotiating what they knew was normatively correct (i.e. normative behavior for a good Muslim girl) and how they actually behaved was also cause for inner tension. This became apparent for example when they mentioned that it is not good Muslim behavior to gossip. When I reminded them on how they would often gossip about their teachers

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and their peers, they blushed and averted their eyes. N. then replied with: “But Miss, we are still learning”.⁴⁸ This tension became further clear when they had told me that you have to have respect for your elders, but yet seemed to struggle to ‘obey’ their elders (i.e. teachers) they were angry with. This negotiation became apparent when they would stick to using the polite form of ‘you’ (Dutch: “U”) while continuing to ‘disobey’ and get into arguments with us, the homework-program counselors.

Their age identity was visible in the way in which they would talk about when they were older, when they would get romantically involved and get married, start a family and have a career. It was also apparent in the way they agreed with N. when she said “we’re still learning”. While gender and religious identity seemed to be most prominent identity markers, ethnic identity was also a way for them to be positively distinctiveness from their peers. Their school was an Islamic school consisting of people of diverse ethnicities, but mainly of people of Moroccan and Turkish descent. When they were speaking to me they would talk about “our culture” (Dutch: “ons cultuur”) collectively, which they also implicated “foreigners” (Dutch: allochtonen). Foreigners, in their mind were generally Muslim immigrants. When they were talking about each other “our culture” became the Moroccan culture, but when they specified themselves it became “I am (Berber) Moroccan”. However, they could not really pinpoint what the general differences were apart from the main linguistic difference between Berber Moroccans and Arab Moroccans.

Their positive distinctiveness was further derived when they compared themselves to their immediate peers, more specifically: boys. As long as they did not behave like boys, who were unruly and unkempt, they remained “good girls”. Being a good girl also entailed not being like ‘those girls’: the girls who openly admitted they liked a boy, spend their time with boys and would draw attention to themselves from boys. Even though they spoke about how they do not want to associate with boys and that it “gives shame” and that they “shouldn’t”, most of their time was spent discussing boys and their own and others’ behavior concerning boys. Which is almost similar to the case of the ironic psychological experiment of “don’t think of the white bear”, which results in people not being able to stop thinking about the white bear.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Dutch: “Maar Juf, we zijn nog aan het leren.”

⁴⁹ Wegner, D. M. (1989), *White bears and other unwanted thoughts: Suppression, obsession, and the psychology of mental control*, New York: Viking/Penguin

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The girls displayed how their identity was mainly an interplaying of gender and religious identity. Performing their gender identity of that of girl entailed performing their religious identity well. These two were not extractable from each other. A good girl was in their minds a good Muslim and vice versa as well, being a good Muslim entailed being a good girl.

Implications and Future Research

When posing the main question of how young Muslim girls negotiate their girlhood in a multi-cultural western society, it is natural for one's thought to go immediately towards how this negotiation takes place in a white space or in a non-religious space. The strength of this thesis lies in the fact that the girls I worked with stemmed from a space where wearing the visible marker of religiousness is actually the norm, even though they are in a multi-cultural space. In this particular case I was able to showcase how a group of girls experience their identity at an age and in a space where they are not implicitly or explicitly challenged by their immediate surroundings, such as a non-religious teacher or non-religious peers: that their main activities during the day, i.e. school, is actually a 'safe' space for them to practice at least part of their identity, their religious identity, and that the environment is conducive to developing self-esteem and self-efficacy regarding that particular identity.

However, I believe this could also be seen as a weakness of this particular case study. Ideally, when considering a multi-cultural society, there would be a smaller sample size representative of that society. A public school in Amsterdam (Oost) would in that sense have been a more representative space of study it would have a more diverse sample of people; people of different ethnicities, of unveiled Muslim girls and non/other -religious people. If this had been the case there would have perhaps been more tensions surrounding the girls and their negotiation of their identities in different social settings. However, the objective of this thesis was not to discern tensions surrounding navigating or negotiating space in a largely white society. The objective was to have a closer look at particular young girls, who happened to be Muslim in this case, and to see how they navigate *their* particular social world and how they understand and constitute themselves.

Future research can take into consideration that for a group of girls in a particular neighborhood in Amsterdam Oost, at a particular primary school, there is a different way of

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understanding Muslim girlhood and girlhood in general. That the idea of ‘generalizability’, which would have been the case if the ‘sample’ was taken from a ‘more diverse’ group, is not really applicable, nor is it realistic if you take intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) into consideration.

In the general introduction of this thesis I mentioned how when working with children in research, the researcher has to be aware of their position of power at all times. Like with any group one a researcher is involved with, a researcher should get to know the person in order to understand them better. My personal philosophy here entailed ‘listening’, listening in the sense of not forcing a subject, but instead ‘listening’ for which subjects they deemed important and wanted to discuss and to instead delve further into those topics. This is how I got rich data concerning their Muslim girlhood identity. In this particular case, it is easy to say that a lot of information was ‘missed’ by paying more attention to one topic, instead of another. For example, even though the girls did not discuss racism or Islamophobia in detail, this does not mean it was not part of their social world, merely that these were not topics they deemed relevant at that point in their lives or did not want to spend much time on.⁵⁰ I also believe my personal philosophy here was suitable for this specific group, because they really enjoyed talking and being heard.

With regards to girlhood studies, it would also be interesting to ‘follow’ girls in their girlhood negotiation in a more longitudinal study. In this case, a follow-up study would be extremely insightful in the girls’ negotiation in not only new spaces such as high-school and a larger variety of religious and non-religious parents and peers, but also in regards to their further maturation and performance of their religious/gender identity in a ‘new’ stage of their lives. It would also be very interesting to see how these same girls would reflect on their words and their identity interpretations at a certain age and how they themselves believe they have changed or remained the same in that regard.

The talks with the girls showcased the multiple layers that constitute a person and how a person can be influenced by their immediate environment. These girls displayed, through their behavior and appearance, not only what was expected of them but also how well they met these expectations. They did that through constant comparison with similar others and through participating in policing behavior of not only themselves, but also others. Furthermore they

⁵⁰ I discuss and suggest a possible way of doing research with children more extensively in my Internship Report (10-09-2013).

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showed support for the importance of intersectionality theory and the importance of context when understanding *their* understanding of themselves. They heavily displayed the intersection of gender and religion in what I had dubbed religious gender identity in chapter two. They clearly showed that these identities cannot be extracted from each other. Furthermore, they also showed that their identity was not ‘in peril’ even though they live in a multi-cultural Western society. Rather, their social world and their social lives were catered to further strengthen their beliefs and as such, confidence and security in their identity. This confidence in their identity was translated to me in the way they were secure in their choices and as such their agency in regards to their choices of wearing the veil, not approaching boys and not doing or doing those same rules they wrote down. Even though skeptics would say that these girls still operate under false consciousness, their level of ‘healthy’ or strong attitude regarding their appearance, their choices and such their identity, makes me question that very same skepticism.

Concluding thoughts

The topics we discussed during our meetings varied because of their incessant curiosity and search for knowledge, which turned our ‘talks’ into exchanges of experiences and knowledge and in that sense, a conversation on an equal level. When we speak of diversity I had never thought that I could meet ‘tweens’ on their level, discuss different subjects, and moreover that these ‘tweens’ could do the same: challenge me and make me ‘think’. That is, I believe, a beautiful life-lesson in and of itself: allowing for diversity on all levels of life, especially from where one least expects it. By taking the time to ‘listen’ to those very same people which are the topic of discussion, one can discover a world of diversity of others, which in turn can only enrich one’s own social and academic world.

APPENDIX A

‘What is a Muslim Girl’ assignment translated into English

Full transcript of the assignment translated into English.

S.:

“A good muslim girl should behave accordingly”:

- Should be ashamed (according to the Sunah)
 - Not be too close with boys
 - Stick to the clothing regulation
 - Be polite to others (adults)
 - Not behave like a boy, and with that I mean not yelling and thinking you are at home
-

N.:

“A girl like me should:”

- Be respectful towards everything and everyone
 - Not be too close with boys
 - Not gossip about others
 - Not lie (only if you really have to)
 - Not wear too tight clothes
 - Always say Bismillah before everything she does
 - Always say as-salamoalaikom when she is about to greet someone
 - Don't do dirty things or watch them
 - Always obey her parents
 - Pray 5 times a day
 - Not express her love for a boy
 - Not be arrogant or behave like that (very haram)
 - Must wear a headscarf
 - Always do ‘woedoe’ before praying
 - Not pray too late
 - Do as your asked
 - Read verses from the Quran
 - Not steal
-

A.:

“Islamic Girl:

What is an Islamic girl?

An Islamic girl is a girl who is Islamic, logical.

What does that entail?

She is a Muslim. She has to pray. When she’s [on her period], then not. She is not allowed to have boyfriends, sex before marriage. She is not allowed to go to a discotheque. She is not allowed to drink alcohol.

She’s not allowed to do a lot of things, huh?

But that’s for her own safety. A girl is like a diamond. Ewaa, these days you only see sluts and whores on the streets.

Clothing

She is not allowed to wear tight clothing, so that boys don’t see her shape. She has to wear something up until the knee. But a lot of people don’t do that, fuck it.”

APPENDIX B

‘What is a Muslim Girl’ assignment in its Original Dutch form

The original Dutch version of the assignments:

S.:

“Een goed Moslim meisje hoort zich te gedragen als het volgende”

- Zich te schamen (volgens de sunah)
 - Niet te close zijn met jongen
 - Zich aan de kledingvoorschriften houden
 - Beleefd zijn tegen anderen (volwassenen)
 - Zich niet als een jongen te gedragen
- Daarmee bedoel ik niet schreeuwen en denken dat je thuis bent
-

N.:

“Een meisje als ik moet.”

- Respectvol zijn tegen alles en iedereen
 - Niet al te close zijn met jongens
 - Niet roddelen over anderen
 - Niet liegen (alleen als het echt moet)
 - Niet al te strakke kleding dragen
 - Altijd Bismillah zeggen voor alles wat ze doet
 - Altijd as-salamoalaikom zeggen als ze iemand gaat groeten
 - Geen vieze dingen doen of kijken
 - Altijd haar ouders gehoorzamen
 - 5 x per dag bidden
 - Mag haar liefde voor een jongen niet uiten
 - Niet arrogant zijn of zich zo gedragen (hartstikke haram)
 - Moet een hoofddoek dragen
 - Altijd woedoe doen voor het bidden
 - Niet al te laat bidden
 - Doen wat je gevraagd word
 - Versjes uit de Koran lezen
 - Niet stelen
-

A.:

“Islamitische meid:

Wat is een islamitische meid?

Een islamitische meid is een meid dat islamitisch is, logisch.

Wat houdt dat in?

Ze is een moslim. Ze moet bidden. Als ze On [ongesteld] is dan niet. Ze mag geen vriendjes, geen sex voor der huwelijk. Ze mag niet naar een discotheek gaan. Ze mag geen alcohol drinken.

Ze mag veel dingen niet hea?

Maar dat is voor d’r eigen veiligheid. Een meid is net als een diamant. Ewaa, tegenwoordig zie je alleen maar sletjes en hoertjes buiten op straat.

Kleding

Ze mag geen strakke kleding aantrekken, zodat jongens niet d’r vorm zien. Ze moet iets aantrekken tot de knie. Maar veel mensen doen dat niet. Fuck it.”

APPENDIX C

A short-list of wishes for the girls' future spouse in English and Dutch

English	Dutch
<p>S.: [He should be]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - able to cook - not be prettier than I am - if he's vain, then he can go outside naked - not a momma's boy - has to be a man! - blue eyes - not a hillbilly 	<p>S.: [Hij moet]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - kunnen koken - niet mooier dan mij - als hij ijdel is, mag hij naakt naar buiten - geen mama's kindje - moet een man zijn - blauwe ogen - geen boer
<p>A.: "When I'm like 19/20 and someone asks for my hand."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has to be polite - Should be able to make a chocolate hazelnut cake - Blue eyes and black hair, tan skin - laugh a lot - give me compliments - Be handsome - Be a "house-man" – "Not like those guys who forbid their wives things, thinking they're better. And that's bad." 	<p>A.: "Wanneer ik 19/20 en ofzo en iemand vraagt om m'n hand."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hij moet beleefd zijn - chocolade hazelnoot cake maken - Blauwe ogen en zwart haar, getint - veel lachen - complimentjes geven - knap zijn - een huisman zijn – "Niet als die mannen die hun vrouw dingen verbieden, denken dat ze hoger zijn en dat is slecht."
<p>N.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He has to be chill, relaxed, calm - Not be arrogant or vain, full of himself - Be sweet 	<p>N.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hij moet chill zijn, relaxed en rustig - Niet arrogant of ijdel. Geen kapsones - Lief zijn

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