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Muslim Community Organizations' Perceptions of Islamophobia: Towards an Informed Countering Response

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Abstract: During the past two decades, Muslim Community Organizations (MCOs) in the West have increasingly become stakeholders in the public debates and the national consultations regarding the Muslim communities. MCO's perception of Islamophobia is critical for understanding their collective response to the problem. Much of the Australian literature, nonetheless, tends to subsume Islamophobia within the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion within a social cohesion paradigm, and primarily through a focus on individuals. This article aims to contribute to the existing literature through a deeper contextual understanding of Australian MCOs' framing of and engagement with Islamophobia in its various manifestations, in order to better cognize its impact on their agentic capacity. Deploying an expanded theoretical framework of agency structure, this article analyzes 25 interviews with representatives of Victorian MCOs, to explore their perceptions of Islamophobia across multiple domains of power—the social, discursive and the political. MCOs' perceptions of the problem impact their responding anti-Islamophobia civic-political engagements towards soft grassroots connections and Muslims' empowerment. In light of the findings, the article points for the need to enhance building inter-community solidarity, utilize supportive institutional multicultural schemes and establish a separate Muslim advocacy organization.

Keywords: Islamophobia; collective agency; civil society; Strong Structuration Theory; Multiculturalism; racism; Australian Muslims; positional practices

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, Muslim Community Organizations (MCOs) in Australia have grown in numbers and scope with the growth of the Muslim communities, from providing religious services to providing settlement support services in areas such as economic, social, cultural, recreational, educational and health (Bouma 1997; Amath 2015b). MCOs' numbers increased significantly following 9/11 and the war on terror, in response to challenges of extremism and Islamophobia, to fulfil new internal and external demands (Amath 2015a, p. 180). Not only do MCOs have to respond to accusations of being sites for isolation and terrorism, in which one in four Australians support policies to stop mosque building (Dunn 2005; Peucker and Ceylan 2016; Hassan and Martin 2015; Underabi 2014), but they also have to engender services to respond to the impact of Islamophobia on the Australian Muslim communities. Moreover, MCOs have had to work with the government, engage with the media and the public to educate, respond to accusations and rebuild networks of trust through peacebuilding and cross-cultural engagements (Peucker and Ceylan 2016; Halafoff 2011; Al-Momani et al. 2010; McAndrew and Sobolewska 2015; Amath 2013).

Indeed within a post-9/11 context and the growing fear of Muslims, MCOs' roles stretched to fulfil a national expectation to account for and engage as representatives of Muslims, as well as attend to the

surge of challenges to the well-being, safety and civic–political participation of Australian Muslims (Amath 2013; Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014a; Mukaty 2013). This has generated an academic interest in exploring MCOs' agency as stakeholders and representatives of Muslims' lives in Australia and comparably in the West (Kortmann and Rosenow-Williams 2013a, 2013b; Malik 2013; Van Heelsum and Koomen 2011; Machtans 2016). Much of the scholarship, however, investigates MCOs' agency vis-à-vis Islamophobia through focusing on their perceptions and actions in response to the grand question of Muslims' integration into Western societies (Bacchus 2019; Karim 2017; Malik 2013; Yildiz and Verkuyten 2012; Yukleyen 2009).

In parallel, there seems to be an increasing national and international attention to capture Muslims' collective voices and experiences of Islamophobia. These efforts attempt to elevate and analyze Muslims' perceptions of Islamophobia to inform future anti-Islamophobia policies and countering strategies. Perhaps it is beneficial to look at examples from the UK and Europe, since Australia's history of white European colonialism and its current connections to the US and the UK informs its public culture and its national forms of Islamophobia (Poynting 2019; Abdel-Fattah 2017; Busbridge 2017; Hage 2011). For example, in an effort to institutionalize a long-relegated phenomenon at the level of the UK government, the All-Parliamentary group on British Muslims (APPG 2018, p. 11) conducted two years of consultations with the UK Muslim community and organizations to propose a definition of Islamophobia: "a type of racism that targets expression of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". The British parliament rejected their proposition based on claims of impinging free speech and countering extremism efforts (Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs 2019). Nonetheless, the partial success of the APPG efforts is equated to the fact that the Labor, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party in Scotland adopted the definition, along with many city councils, besides stimulating an inquiry into Islamophobia within the conservative British party (Sykes 2019). Collective voices of Muslims also form the basis of the *Counter Islamophobia Kit project* CIK produced by the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies at the University of Leeds. The CIK report proposes a policy and advocacy-oriented best practices to counter Islamophobia in Europe, based on empirical data from 27 European reports and surveys of Muslims' perceptions of the nature of Islamophobia and its impact (Law et al. 2018).

At the Australian national level, the Islamophobia reports (Iner 2017, 2019) are among the first initiatives to document Muslims' reported incidents to provoke a public and political recognition to the specificity of Muslims' experiences of vilification. In 2020, the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) issues its public policy statement on Islamophobia to establish the organization's position from the problem, nonetheless, in reference to secondary data. Another effort is the ongoing national consultation project by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2019), which comes as an update to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) project conducted in 2004, to survey Muslims on their challenges. AHRC project finds the key challenges to be media and political narratives, racism, institutional discrimination, policing and countering violent extremism.

This study is inspired by these efforts and commends the significance of sketching an empirically driven account of Islamophobia from the perspective of organized Muslimness. On the one hand, MCO representatives often meet and are consulted by government departments on issues pertaining to the Muslim Communities (Roose 2010; Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014b). Therefore, the ways by which MCOs view the problem of Islamophobia can contribute to the ongoing national efforts to stimulate public and political recognition of the problem, as well as inform future anti-Islamophobia efforts by the government and advocacy groups. On the other hand, the shocking but expected terrorist attack on praying Muslims at Christchurch in 2019, by an extremist far-right, has emphasized the urgency to listen more carefully to Muslims' voices. It is the dismissal of Muslims' voices who have spoken of the danger of mainstreaming and legalizing anti-Muslim racism through politicians' rhetoric and policies that has led to Christchurch massacre (Choudhury 2018; Hage 2019; Herrera and Sabaratnam 2019; Malik 2019; Poynting 2019; Abdel-Fattah 2019).

This paper contributes to the growing academic, public and political need to attend to MCOs as stakeholders in the public discussions regarding the Muslim communities. This article analyzes

MCO representatives' perceptions of Islamophobia and explores how their perceptions can shape their responsive strategies, as well as impact the effectiveness of their civic-political engagements. This paper concludes that MCOs find the implicit, or as Islam (2018) calls it "soft Islamophobia", to be more harmful than the crude and explicit manifestations of the problem. Their active agency is informed but also constrained by these soft forms of Islamophobia.

2. Islamophobia: Australia and MCOs Agency

There is no shortage of literature exploring Islamophobia as a global phenomenon, with many studies examining Western Muslims' experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Since the inaugural attempt to identify and draw attention to the particularity of the UK Muslims' experiences of discrimination and inequality by the [Runnymede Trust \(1997\)](#), the literature has profusely engaged with theories of sociology, psychology, history and international politics, to conceptualize Islamophobia ([Hargreaves 2016](#); [Allen 2010](#); [Iqbal 2010](#); [Beydoun 2016](#); [Modood 2019](#); [Green 2015](#); [Kumar 2012](#)). Parallel to this conceptual attention is the growing empirical attention to capture the experiences of racism and discrimination of Muslims through documenting incidents of Islamophobia ([Bridge Initiative 2015](#); [EUMC 2006, 2006b](#); [CAIR 2015a, 2012, 2010](#); [Bayrakli and Hafez 2016, 2019](#); [Iner 2017, 2019](#); [HIRC 2016](#)). Today, "Islamophobia" is the most widely recognized and employed term to label the various manifestations of anti-Muslim experiences and prejudices, such as negative attitudes, discourses and practices against Muslims and Islam by the media, politicians and members of the non-Muslim communities ([Bridge Initiative 2015](#); [Modood 2019](#); [Klug 2012](#)). This paper does not intend to devise a definition or a theoretical conceptualization of Islamophobia, but rather examine Islamophobia as a lived experience, with multiple manifestations, from the perspective of MCOs' experiences of the problem and its impact on their agency.

Three major interlinked strands of research examine Islamophobia in Australia. One discusses Islamophobia in reference to the national politics of multiculturalism ([Briskman 2015](#); [Briskman and Latham 2017](#); [Poynting 2015](#); [Bouma 2011](#); [Hage 2011](#); [Poynting and Mason 2008](#); [Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2012](#)). The other discusses Islamophobia in reference to Australia's history of white European colonialism and its current connections to the US and the UK ([Poynting 2019](#); [Abdel-Fattah 2017](#); [Busbridge 2017](#); [Hage 1998](#); [Stratton 2016](#)). The underlying argument of both strands is that Australia's liberal democracy guarded by a policy of multiculturalism cannot abandon its racial hierarchy towards migrants, especially "third world" countries, since it is founded on a white Christian colonial history. In this regard, scholars formulate the Australian Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia as exclusionary practices towards "difference" due to an inherited culture of whiteness ([Hussein and Poynting 2017](#); [Mansouri 2020](#); [Hage 2011](#)). The third strand of the Australian literature often explores Islamophobia in reference to Muslims' experiences within social cohesion frameworks ([Humphrey 2010](#); [Rommel 2016](#); [Mansouri 2010](#); [Yasmeen 2010](#); [Poynting and Mason 2008](#)). Under social cohesion, a plethora of literature discusses Islamophobia in reference to its impact on individual Muslim's citizenship, identity, religiosity, belonging and integration ([Johns et al. 2015](#); [Mansouri et al. 2015, 2017](#); [Peucker 2019, 2016](#); [Patton 2014](#)). Similarly, the literature examining organized forms of Muslimness, such as MCOs, subsume Islamophobia within the integration debate when examining MCOs' social capital ([Amath 2015b](#)), their perceptions and strategies vis-à-vis the integration debate ([Sohrabi 2013](#); [Sohrabi and Farquharson 2016, 2015](#)), and their active-citizenship towards social cohesion ([Peucker 2017](#); [Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014b](#); [Peucker and Ceylan 2016](#)). Few studies discuss MCOs' experiences beyond inclusion and exclusion frameworks as an external challenge impacting MCOs' effectiveness and their leaderships ([Faris and Parry 2011](#); [Edwards 2018](#)). These contributions accentuate Islamophobia as an exclusionary force that pushes Muslims into the periphery of Australianness and damages their sense of inclusion, recognition and identity formation. In other words, the exclusion of Muslims from Australia's values, identity and citizenship becomes symptomatic of Islamophobia and integral to the experiences of Australian Muslims.

This paper builds on the previous literature; however, it proposes an expansion to the theoretical framing beyond social cohesion frameworks, in order to explore the notion of Islamophobia beyond the exclusion/inclusion discourse. Through adopting an agency-structure framework, this paper accounts for the impact of varying power dynamics (the macro) on shaping MCOs' perceptions of Islamophobia (the micro). It suggests that MCOs' "frames of meaning" (Giddens 1979) regarding Islamophobia transcends the integration debate and reflect their recognition of the institutional racism and the disciplinary tactics deployed by external actors within their context. These frames of meanings influence their perceptions of their capabilities and positionality as citizens in their spaces and, hence, informs their countering strategies. The paper mainly focuses on Victorian MCOs, the state with the highest level of diverse populations, the second largest population of Muslims (Hassan 2015) and the lowest level of Islamophobia (Hassan and Martin 2015).

3. Theoretical Approach

There is no simple answer to the question, what is Islamophobia? However, there is a multiplicity of conceptualizations of the problem depending on the aspects researched and methods used to undertake the research (Klug 2012). Whilst Bleich (2011) agrees, he also argues that researchers will benefit from situating their research questions within an overarching definition of Islamophobia. Given that Australian Muslims are minorities in non-Muslim dominant context, this paper theorizes Islamophobia within the domains of discourse and power, since they reflect much of the key literature conceptualizing Islamophobia (Kundnani 2016; Allen 2010; Lyons 2012; Beydoun 2018; Massoumi et al. 2017), as well as reflect the inherent inequality in power dynamics between minorities and majorities (Hage 1998).

Discourses on Islam and Muslims create a discursive formation of constructed knowledge, which is, according to Foucault (1972), a "collective system of thoughts around a certain object". This constructed knowledge is both a product of power and, at the same time, an exercise of power (Foucault 1980; Hall 1997). Islamophobia as a discursive field of knowledge about Islam and Muslims, however, often ascribes the centrality of Said's discussion on Orientalism (1979) to the formation of knowledge about Islam and Muslims. This is because many scholars stipulate the significance of the 19th century Eurocentric colonialism in forming and maintaining today's constructed "knowledge" around Islam and Muslims (Said 1979; Meer 2014; Allen 2010). Despite having common threads with Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, Said departs from Foucault's notion of power as ubiquitous to preserve the centrality of power within Eurocentric mechanism of producing knowledge of Islamophobia (Said 2001). This paper draws from both to examine MCOs' perceptions of Islamophobia from the standpoint of the centrality of anti-Islam and Muslims discourses (knowledge) and the historical role of Eurocentric colonial power in shaping and disseminating these discourses. Through using this expanded framework of post-colonial theory within a post-structuralist approach, this study expands the conceptual trajectories of Islamophobia's power. Put another way, it escapes the imposition of preset confining dimensions regarding the problem; hence, it allows a broader investigation of MCOs' perceptions of Islamophobia.

The study deploys Strong Structuration Theory (SST) to examine MCOs' agency. Stones (2005) developed SST in light of Giddens (1984) Structuration Theory, to provide an applicable social practice theory that allows researchers to empirically examine the dynamics between the agents and the structures within their context. SST provides that agents are knowledgeable actors who base their actions on their interpretation of the consequences they might face, their knowledge of their power capacity and their knowledge of the public norms and the contrasting pragmatic plans of possible actions. Hence, SST allows this study to acknowledge and account for the impact of the dynamic of power relations between MCOs and their context on forming Muslims' perceptions of Islamophobia. In light of SST, this study defines MCOs as knowledgeable agents in constant interaction with restraining and/or enabling social and political external structures within their sociopolitical context. In this context, and during their interaction with defined structures, MCOs build their "frames of meaning", which

are their sets of values, beliefs and perceptions that inform their actions. To examine MCOs' frame of meaning regarding Islamophobia, this study examines MCOs' interpretation of their sociopolitical context, their recognition of their power capacities and their responses to the tension arising between their ideals and their pragmatic schemes. In other words, MCOs' frames of meaning are reflexive of their context, as they are formed at the axis of their interactions with these structural terrains. SST provides not only the epistemological underpinning for the relationship between MCOs and their context, but also the analytical tools needed to conduct the empirical analysis. This is unpacked in the following methodological section.

4. Methodology

As part of a PhD project, the researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of 25 Victorian MCOs in 2018, featured in Table 1. The interviewed MCOs are diversified in their focuses, sizes and structures, with one main standard criterion, that of being run and led by Muslims. MCOs who did not provide consent to be named were assigned a two letters pseudonym.

Table 1. List of participating Muslim Community Organizations (MCOs).

Kind of MCO.	Name of MCO
Umbrella organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) • Ahmadiyya Muslim Association (AMA)
Women's organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WO
Youth centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) • YC
Religious organizations, centers and associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NP • IV • Australian Islamic Centre (AIC) • Australian Islamic Mission (AIM)
Educational organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic Sciences & Research Academy of Australia (ISRA) • Australian Intercultural Society (AIS)
University Islamic associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TR • RMIT University Islamic Society
Professional networking organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim Legal Network (MLN) • PA
Creative organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic Museum of Australia (IMA) • Salam Fest Muslim Festival (SalamFest)
Civil community organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BN • Mercy Mission Australia (MMA) • The Moroccan Soup Bar (MSB) • FR • MC
Online initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IR • Voices Against Bigotry (VAB) • CO

The researcher generated inductive themes from the data, using thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2014) and critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk 2001). Simultaneously, she contextualized the interviewees' accounts to secondary data, such as organizations' press releases, websites and media coverages. The overarching scheme of the analysis process, however, was informed by Stones' methodological bracketing of the agent's context and the agent's conduct. As an analytical tool, the methodological

bracketing is the guideline that directs the focus of the researcher to investigate the data in light of a particular dimension, focus or theme.

Both methodological bracketing (context and conduct) analyze MCOs' perceptions; however, each bracketing elevates empirical pieces of evidence towards different points of focus. The agents' context analysis, on the one hand, draws on MCOs' perceptions to lead the investigation into the "social nexus of interdependencies, rights and obligations, asymmetries of power and the social conditions and consequences of action" (Stones 2005, p. 122). Applying this bracketing to this research allows an examination of agents' perceptions of how they interpret Islamophobia and how they see their own social positions and power capabilities within this context. Precisely, this bracketing investigates MCOs' context through exploring their perceptions on (1) the nature of Islamophobia; (2) the challenges they face; (3) their capabilities, roles and responsibilities; and (4) their social positions within imposed positional practices. Positional practices are relational and institutional external structures enforcing restraining positions, identities and obligations on the agent (Stones 2005, p. 63).

The agents' conduct analysis, on the other hand, draws on the agents' perceptions and active agency (actions), to examine their "reflexive monitoring, ordering of concerns into a hierarchy of purpose, motives and the way the agents carry the action and interaction" (Stones 2005, p. 122). This paper uses the bracketing of the agents' conduct analysis to examine MCOs' choices of action, prioritization and justifications for their responsive strategies in light of their understanding of Islamophobia.

MCOs' context and conduct analysis allow an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of MCOs agency, whilst recognizing the impact of the structure on their perceptions and actions. Primarily, this deep understanding is informed through exploring the tension which arises between MCOs' idealistic beliefs (their perceptions of how they should act) and their pragmatic schemes (how they may be pressured to act) (Stones 2005, p. 92). The tension between MCOs' ideals and their pragmatic schemes allows an insight into MCOs' understanding of the influences impacting their capabilities, priorities and responsive actions due to the dynamics of the social system within which they operate. In other words, this study explores how MCOs in Victoria understand the problem of Islamophobia through analyzing MCOs' articulation of the problem, as well as through analyzing how they perceive their capabilities, responsibilities, social positions and responsive strategies within their context as Muslim entities.

The following three sections discuss the research findings pertaining to MCOs' frames of meaning regarding Islamophobia within the interlinked three domains of the social, discursive and political in reference to the manifestation of the problem.

5. Anti-Muslim Racism: Racialization of Muslims and the Problematizing Discourse

When describing the social manifestation of Islamophobia, MCOs' representatives define Islamophobia as racism motivated by lack of awareness, ignorance, prejudice and propagated fear of Islam and Muslims. They believe that anti-Muslim racism impacts the most vulnerable groups: Muslim women, for their apparent association with Islam. For example, responding to the question, what is the organization's understanding of Islamophobia? The (MC) representative says the following: "It's a hatred or dislike of Muslims because of an uninformed and very shallow understanding of anything about Islam". The (NP) representative says, "it is that Muslims being targeted for no reason other than being Muslims".

Findings from the National Anti-Racism Strategy by AHRC (2012) indicate that 66% of Australian respondents face racism. Racism in Australia is not limited to Muslims; nonetheless, they remain the highest recipients of racism in the nation (Hanifie 2019), with one in ten reporting racism, in comparison to one in fifty or one in thirty of Australians in general (Dunn et al. 2015). This is not surprising given that 49% of the Australian public hold negative views of Muslims (Markus 2016).

Indeed, religious diversity and difference are often viewed as challenges to be accommodated within liberal democratic settings (Ezzy et al. 2020). Dunn et al. (2004, p. 410) find that, after the abandonment of a white Australia policy in 1973, "cultural racism" became the prevalent form of

racism in multicultural Australia, as opposed to “old racism” based on inferiority in “white Australia” (Dunn et al. 2004, p. 410). Cultural racism constructs cultural and religious differences as a threat to “social cohesion” and “national unity” (Dunn et al. 2004, p. 410). Nevertheless, after 9/11 and the growing global and national discourses associating Islam with terrorism, Muslims’ culture has been portrayed as the main threat to Western secularism and values (Kymlicka 2005; Levey and Modood 2008; Triandafyllidou et al. 2011). Dunn et al. (2007) add, in light of Modood (2005) and Kobayashi and Peake’s (2000) definition of racialization, that the Australian context produces anti-Muslim racism through constructing Muslims as racially inferior with essentialized and culturally alien values in comparison to a defined majoritarian context. In this logic, Muslims and Islam are racialized into a single group with essentialized visual and cultural cues, despite their diversity to “define what Muslims are” (Ekman 2015, p. 188; Schiffer and Wagner 2011; Rana 2007). Put another way, Islamophobia as a cultural form of racism racializes Muslims, whereby the biological identifiers of race in racism is accompanied with cultural identifiers to target Muslimness (Modood 2019; Rana 2007; Meer and Modood 2009; Kundnani 2007b; Mansouri 2010; Considine 2017; Lentin and Titley 2011).

Primary to this form of racism is the emergent of discourses of Muslims’ alienation, inferiority and incompatibility, which have pervaded the public and political domains of many Western nations, including Australia (Lentin and Titley 2011; Dunn et al. 2007; Kundnani 2007a, 2014). MCOs are aware of the pivotal role of these problematizing discourses in creating a perceived public knowledge about Islam as a problematic culture and Muslims as a problematic minority. These dominant discourses forge a constructed field of knowledge about Islam and Muslims. The Islamic Sciences & Research Academy of Australia (ISRA) representative believes that Islamophobia “is where Islam or Muslims are generalized to be understood in a negative way, which causes the phobia”. Following Foucault (1980), discourses are “the production of knowledge through language and practice”; therefore, the mediation of the problematizing discourses around Islam and Muslims produces perceived or assumed knowledge about Muslims as problems.

Analysis of the data reveals that MCOs believe this constructed field of knowledge around Muslimness generates negative narratives pertaining to the incompatibility of Muslims’ cultures as migrants, their unsophistication, their limited civic disengagement and their association with violence and terrorism. Therefore, these assumptions incite security policies, anti-multiculturalism and anti-immigration debates. Despite identifying the media as the main “culprit” in propagating misinformation about Islam (discussed later), MCOs still identify lack of first-hand interactions with Muslims as a main contributor to the public’s ignorance. Indeed, misinformed or perceived knowledge about Islam and Muslims increases prejudice towards Muslims, especially among people who have less contact with Muslims and particularly with regard to narratives of Islam and Muslims as threats (Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Vergani and Mansouri 2016). This is why many MCOs seem to prioritize educational, interfaith and intercultural engagements with non-Muslims to counter ignorance. The (BN) organization, for example, initiates school and Islam 101 outreach programs, as well as enhances Muslims’ understanding of their faith, to reflect a better image of Islam. Likewise, (MC) initiates events whereby the public can ask and interact with Muslims, besides promoting Muslims to embrace cross-cultural interactions in their everyday lives.

While MCOs’ strategies to educate and create opportunities of interactions with non-Muslims aim at defeating ignorance through cross-cultural engagements, the ways by which they carry out these interactions are influenced by MCOs’ awareness of these underlying assumptions. On the one hand, during their interactions with non-Muslims, many MCOs strategically project Muslims as good, normal, civilized, sophisticated and peaceful citizens. The Australian Intercultural Society (AIS) representative, for instance, believes people fear that Muslims will take over Australia because Islam’s values are presented in ways that are so “archaic and so out of touch and incongruent with Australian society”. The organizations’ awareness of these narratives influences the conduct of the organization towards: (1) choosing an organization’s name that has no reference to Islam, in order to allow initial neutral interactions with others, to build trust ahead of implicit biases, and (2) deliberately

communicate in a civilized, professional, loyal and transparent manner as counterparts to “Christians”, “Australians” and “normal people”, in order to denounce Islamophobia assumptions of Muslims as migrants and violent. The representative says the following:

“So, we try to present ourselves as decent, civilized individuals who shared the same hopes and aspirations as you do, to our Christian friends, and we want the same for this country as you do because we embrace this country as much as you. This was our way of trying to help. Firstly, calm them down to think that there was no threat coming from us. Secondly, we are in the same boat as them. We are also concerned about the current and future well-being of this nation and its general population irrespective of what faith, ethnicity, color. And that we are also working to build this nation so that it’s more advanced, more inclusive and socially cohesive. All those buzz words that people are talking about”.

On the other hand, many MCOs strategically enhance Muslim’ sense of belonging and citizenship to feel, act and be perceived as legitimate citizens, to counter narratives that project Muslims as migrants and “others”. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) representative, for example, believes that Islamophobia is a form of “bullying” by which Muslim youths are made to feel and therefore act like strangers in their own country. Hence, WAMY’s counter strategy is to enhance Muslim youths’ self-esteem and acceptance of their positions as legitimate citizens via building their resilience and empowering them to act to their full capacity to promote themselves as “normal ordinary Australians”.

At the political domain, the majority of MCOs signifies the constitutive role of historical and contemporary national and international political players in constructing and perpetuating the problematizing discourses around Islam and Muslims, hence legitimizing societal anti-Muslim racism. When asked whether Islamophobia manifests at the grassroots level, Salam Fest Muslim Festival (SalamFest) representative said the following: “No, it doesn’t manifest at the grassroots level. It manifests from high above, but it trickles down to the grassroots level”. In fact, many MCOs say that the Australian people are “supportive of Muslims”, “decent”, “open” and “inclusive”, but they have been manipulated by political actors to perceive Muslims as a problem.

This study finds that MCOs’ frames of meaning of Islamophobia at the political domain fall within three interlinked propositions: first, Islamophobia as an institutional disruption to Australia’s egalitarian policy of multiculturalism; second, Islamophobia manifests through the positional practices imposed on MCOs which undermine and discipline their civic–political participation; and third, Islamophobia as systematic structural racism due to inherited white privilege. The problematizing discourses presented earlier are primary to all three propositions of political Islamophobia. Contrary to anti-Muslim racism presented earlier within the societal domain, MCOs’ perceives political Islamophobia as the misrecognition of their religious and national identities and their civic–political participation. The following sections unpack MCOs’ propositions and the impact of these frames of meaning on shaping their activism in response to the problem.

6. A Disruption to an Idealistic Multicultural Context

MCOs perceive Islamophobia as a disruption to an idealistic multicultural context in the form of harmful discourses and practices by the national political actors exemplified in the media and the government. Whilst MCOs identify anti-Islam political parties as a political manifestation of Islamophobia and recognize the influence of their vocality, the majority trivializes their significance. Many organizations share (FR) representative’s perception that anti-Islam groups have “little to no power” in reference to their numbers and the characteristics of their members as “ignorant”, “trolls” and “core-hearted anti-Islam”. Alternatively, the majority of MCOs locate Islamophobia in the mainstream within the interconnected national political factors of history, media and the government’s silence, rhetoric, agendas and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies.

Indeed, Australia’s official policy of multiculturalism is an egalitarian concept that presupposes the protection of minority rights and the inclusion of difference into the national identity

(Kivisto and Faist 2009). It certainly provides the legitimate basis for Australian Muslims to preserve and practice their religion and culture as citizens, as long as they respect the laws of the land (Mansouri 2010; Bouma 2016; Mansouri et al. 2007). Many MCOs believe that the “system is not set up to hate Muslims” (WO), symbolizing their constitutional right of freedom of religion and the financial support they receive to run communal projects.

Australia’s multiculturalism is arguably successful in comparison to Europe’s (Bouma 2016; Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014b). Nonetheless, contemporary international terrorism by political Islamists and growing risks of transnational home-grown radicals have led to significant changes to multiculturalism nationally and internationally. At the international level, many European countries declared the failure or death of multiculturalism among a rise of populism and anti-immigration/anti-Islam political parties within the government (Busbridge 2017; Lentini and Titley 2011). Although Australia did not reach the extent of Europe’s dismay, changes in the national public discourse are noticeable in the negative media coverage of Muslims and the growing national interest in governing and examining Muslims’ identity, religiosity, integration and citizenship in relation to “Australian values” (Hage 2011; Humphrey 2010; Mansouri 2020; Yasmeen 2010; Akbarzadeh 2016; Lentini 2015; Rane et al. 2014; Kabir 2006). This section argues that MCOs perceive these changes and the government’s course of action towards Muslims as a disruption to an idealistic egalitarian multicultural policy and, hence, an embodiment of Islamophobia.

In line with the literature (Poynting 2008), many MCOs mark the Howard government as the point of time when Australia’s Islamophobia started to evolve and become normalized. The (CO) representative denotes the Howard government as the time when “there has been a deliberate campaign to create a group of people, being Muslims in this country, who are targeted by politicians and the media”. MCOs highlight the role of the Australian media in perpetuating the problematizing discourse through “biased” and “selective” representation of Islam and Muslims, which is not surprising and validates the ample studies on the role of media in forming a negative, biased and stereotypical framing of Muslims (Rane et al. 2014; Brasted 2001; Dreher 2010; HREOC 2004; Kabir 2006; Chopra 2015). Moreover, many MCOs are dissatisfied with the government’s course of action towards Muslims, arguing it reinforces the problematizing discourse of Muslims. Many MCOs share the views of (WO) and the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) representatives that the government is “enabling racism”, either by “turning a blind eye to a particularly racist exclusionary policy, and a parliamentary member who has a very antagonistic view, and a very white-Australia view”, or by “saying things that are Islamophobic or marginalize the Muslim community”. In this respect, MCOs believe that politicians’ indifference and language empower and give freedom and license to others to be more extreme.

Primarily, MCOs believe the state views Muslims as a security threat which becomes reflected in the government’s interactions with Muslims through policies, consultations and prioritization of funding. Many MCOs claim CVE legislation mainly targets Muslims as an institutionalized form of Islamophobia within government policy. This aligns with findings in the literature on the negative impact of CVE on the Muslim Community (Cole 2017; Maddox 2012; Parliament of Australia 2006; Faris and Parry 2011). The (CO) representative says the following:

“The government only sees us through the lens of security. Every interaction the government has with Muslim organizations, the Muslim community now is filtered through a CVE lens. So even programs which are purely social programs are funded out of CVE funding. That is not a good thing. As a community we should not accept it. Why should we only be seen from a security perspective?”

Some MCOs take an ethical stand and reject CVE funding to run communal projects despite their financial shortage. The (IR) representative, for example, refuses to take CVE funding to run anti-Islamophobia projects, proclaiming that CVE is “wrong” and “horrifying”, as “CVE is basically, How do we stop Muslims from being terrorists? Because they are inclined to be terrorists”. In addition, other MCOs believe that the underlying securitization discourse influences the momentum and direction of government funding towards policing Muslims. An ISRA representative, for example,

hypothesizes that “maybe” the government “do not care if Islam is hated”, in the aftermath of receiving cuts to their much-needed Islamic Awareness project at the level of the corrective services and the Attorney General department in Canberra. ISRA says, “from what they’ve told us there’s always limited funding for these things and they’ve got to decide where they put the money and then it never becomes a priority”. The AIS representative holds similar views and adds that the government cut funding from “prevention” measures to sustain the expenses of the “policing” measures.

MCOs further accentuate that Islamophobia is an institutional disruption to the egalitarian context of multiculturalism when almost the majority of MCOs places the responsibility on the government to respond to Islamophobia through “anti-Islamophobia legislation”, “speaking up” against it or initiating sympathetic and meaningful engagements with Muslims. This is because multiculturalism in Australia presupposes the government proactivity to halt racism and protect minority rights (Kivisto and Faist 2009). MCOs’ assertion of the government’s liability to represent and protect Muslims, nevertheless, is weakened by the government’s propagation of the problem. For example, the (WO) representative states the following:

“It’s not my responsibility to make it run nice for Muslims. It’s my government’s responsibility, whom I pay taxes, to keep me safe I don’t think it’s the organization’s responsibility to do it. I think it’s the responsibility of the state to stop propping up institutions that feed it, to stop giving license and legitimacy to racist and right-wing Islamophobes, politicians, pundits, business leaders, enterprises, media. As long as they feed the beast, that creates the problem. Take away the funding for the support and legitimacy of the beast; we don’t have a problem. We will still never have 100% harmony, but you won’t have the extent of division that we have now”.

Combined with placing the responsibility on the government, MCOs stress their symbolic and social citizenry. For example, the WAMY representative says the following:

“We are the minority, but we have the full rights. Yes, we came from whatever background, but we are fully Australian citizens. No less no more... In front of the law, we are equal, and this is what’s important”.

In doing so, they refuse to pursue apologetic defensive anti-Islamophobia positions and activities not to undermine their pride as Australians and as Muslims. The assertiveness of their Australianness and Muslimness, notwithstanding, MCOs are aware of the damage to Muslims’ identities, especially the youth. Therefore, many MCOs respond through building Muslims resiliency and providing spaces and programs to cultivate Muslims’ civic and religious belonging and their capacity to feel and act as legitimate citizens to disrupt the underlying assumption of their “other-ness”. The demeaning representation of Muslims’ culture not only casts Muslims as outsiders, and migrants at best, but also harms Australian Muslim’s sense of pride in their dual identities. Taylor et al. (1994, p. 25) provide that liberal democracies’ failure to respect, represent and recognize the cultural particularity of minority groups can cause damages to one’s identity as “non-recognition and mis-recognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being”.

To this end, MCOs assume an idealistic multicultural context by which Muslims as a community are represented, respected and recognized as diverse and contributing citizens. Nonetheless, they perceive the political deviation from fulfilling this idealistic vision as a defect to an otherwise egalitarian context due to the power of Islamophobia. This corresponds to the ways by which many MCOs respond to Islamophobia through building Muslims’ capacity to feel and engage as capable, sophisticated and legitimate citizens to disrupt the underlying misrecognition of their Australianness. The following section discusses MCOs’ perception of Islamophobia as imposed positional practices to discipline Muslims, which adds to their experiences of being misrecognized as equal citizens.

7. Imposed Positional Practices: Obligations, Restrictions and Assigned Narratives

Analysis of the data reveals that MCOs encounter a “ceiling” that curtails their civic–political participation and capabilities due to Islamophobia. Following [Stones \(2005\)](#), this “ceiling” reflects the positional practices imposed due to MCOs’ social positions as Muslims. Positional practices are institutionalized restraining structures that hold in place what MCOs can and cannot do within their position as Australian Muslim entities which further subjugate their symbolic representation as Australian citizens, as well as undermine their capability to participate as autonomous in the sociopolitical life. In this sense, Islamophobia undermines MCOs’ social positions as Australians based on their subscription to Muslimness. The ICV representative says the following:

“You should want to be a fully participating member of the Australian society. And you have as much right to call for change as anybody else. No one should take that right away from you It [Islamophobia] seeks to take that right away from Muslims to actually advocate for certain positions, and it marginalizes Islam and Muslims and it seeks to erase the identity of Islam and Muslims. And that’s one of the reasons it’s really, really damaging”.

[Fraser \(1998\)](#) argues that recognition must allow “participatory parity” that is equal autonomy for members within the society to interact freely on a par with others. Seen in this light, this study puts forward the argument that islamophobia imposes positional practices on MCOs’ civic–political engagements; hence, it undermines their capabilities to engage on a par with others as equal citizens, which contributes to their misrecognition. This is because the analysis of the data reveals that positional practices confine MCOs’ sociopolitical engagements within particular obligations, restrictions and assigned narratives to assert their loyalty to the nation. Implicitly, these positional practices denote the otherness of Muslims as outsiders and migrants who need repetitively to assert their “goodness” as Muslims and their “citizenship” as Australians. Due to Islamophobia, MCOs feel obliged to practice unconditional gratitude, unconditional collaboration, condemnation of actions of “bad” Muslims, provision of commentaries to the media, engagement in interfaith and intercultural activities and transparency and openness. For example, the (IV) representative believes that Muslims are expected by the media, politicians and the general public to condemn every event in the world that is going on against non-Muslims perpetrated by Muslims. He says the following:

“Somebody is attacking in Indonesia, then we have to justify. Somebody is attacking a church, that is beyond our control! The Muslim community is asked to defend . . . every other day there is a major article against Islam in this country, and we are asked to respond to everything. Every other day”.

Moreover, MCOs representatives feel obliged to invite non-Muslims, be open, accessible and transparent to refute accusations of Muslims’ social isolation and political radicalization. The Australian Islamic Centre (AIC) says the following:

“If we don’t invite these people, these people will think that we are closed, that we have something to hide. But we don’t have anything to hide. We are open to everyone, even to people who are afraid of us as Muslims”.

Although Multiculturalism provides Muslims with the tools and capacity to criticize aspects of the government policy and language that disrupt their right of inclusion ([Akbarzadeh and Roose 2011](#)), MCOs believe restricting positional practices refrain Muslims’ freedom of expression, especially their capacity to criticize national and international policies. The (CO) representative says the following:

“Rarely will you find a Muslim organization making a public statement about some action of a Muslim majority government. Because we feel so under siege, we don’t want to add to that If you look at the way the Muslim community is being attacked through media, through the right-wing politics There are so many people who are just looking to attack the community. So, there is a reluctance to add fuel to that fire.”

Besides the positional practices of obligations and restrictions, Muslims' engagements are assigned within scripts to confine their participation within particular accepted discourses. Not only do MCOs perceive their engagements with the media as imposed and reactionary, but also, they believe their engagements are confined within preset narratives pertaining to the problematization of Islam and Muslims. This is comparable to [Abdel-Fattah and Krayem \(2018\)](#) argument that the "privilege" to speak, which is restricted to moderate Australian Muslims, is dictated within a script that confines their civic-political engagements to reproduce the binary categories of good/bad and moderate/radical which, thereafter, feeds Islamophobia. The WO representative, for instance, speaks of how Muslims have been captivated within preset narratives and repetitively being approached by the media to respond to terrorism, violence, oppression of women and aggressive men. She infers that these narratives control Muslims' nature of engagement within their confinements:

"You've got the establishment that paints the strokes and dictates the scripts that we all have to follow. When you step outside the script and you question who wrote it, people feel very uncomfortable. Because they always like to be in control of how I behave and how I speak and how I fit into society We have so much capacity as an organization, as a community. We have so much capacity as a community and what we do. We're artistic. We're entrepreneurial. We're successful. We're high achievers. We work hard. I guess we have problems, as well. But we're only ever sought out for our opinion after a crisis".

Deterring from obeying these positional practices results in political, societal, mediated and economic sanctions. For example, Dr. Ibrahim Abu Mohammed, Mufti of Australia and New Zealand, received extensive backlash from the media and the public in the aftermath of his press release condemning the terrorist act in France because, while at it, he urged the Australian government to reconsider its foreign policy ([Richardson 2015](#)). His political gesture did not fall within the scripted guidelines confining Muslims' rhetoric to the boundaries of acceptable political participation; hence, it incurred public sanctions in the form of defamation in the media. Despite winning the defamation case over the media outlet which orchestrated the backlash ([Knaus 2017](#)), one of the MCOs' interviewed said the Mufti's press release was "the worst kind of press release" and that he knew at that time that "this is going to create a big hoo-ha". This reflects an awareness of these imposed positional practices and the vulnerability of Muslims' citizenship due to Islamophobia.

Beside backlashes from the media, MCOs incur sanctions from the government upon their failure to adhere to the implicit positional practices of unconditional collaboration. The (YC) representative gives an example of the economic sanctions they incurred when the organisation refused to accept the government's stipulation to collaborate by "doping Muslims" in exchange for financial support to their community projects. Similarly, one of the representatives gave the example of when a Muslim organization received abundant backlashes from media and the government upon its refusal to engage in what the organization believed to be a non-genuine consultation with the government on "National Security legislation" amid Tony Abbotts' infamous "Team Australia" rhetoric ([ABC 2014](#)). He believes that the government and the media amplified the organization's shift from complete collaboration into new spaces of negotiations as a breach of loyalty and citizenship. He concludes that Muslims are expected to "always be at the table", or else will be disciplined through backlashes and restrictions:

"Why do you think they labelled us a terrorist sympathizer, and this sort of stuff? Because people are uncomfortable with that shift in what they consider to be mainstream organizations that are meant to toe the line, that are meant to build bridges".

The ICV representative speaks of a similar backlash from the media and the government upon the organization's submission to the federal Joint Standing Committee on Freedom of Religion or belief ([ICV 2017](#)). In its submission, the ICV highlighted the damaging impact of Islamophobia on Muslim youths and made 11 recommendations to propose ways to subside the effects of Islamophobia, one of which is the "the provision of safe places for Muslim youth to meet and talk about a range of issues in

emotional terms ‘where they can be frank and even use words, which in a public space would sound inflammatory’’. After four months of being on the public record, the Australian media, followed by international media, disseminated the news as “the ICV calls for taxpayers to fund ‘rage rooms’ for Muslim youths to plot terrorism” (Masanauskas 2017). According to the ICV, the premier Daniel Andrews called for a review of the ICV’s funding, despite previously being a “strong supporter of the organization”. The ICV representative believes this backlash was triggered not particularly in response to this submission but because the ICV “said no to the Victorian government on a couple of other issues”. The ICV representative reflects on this incident by highlighting the need to remain “resilient”, “sophisticated”, “clever and strategic” to navigate this abusive environment and advocate on behalf of Muslims.

MCOs’ awareness of these sanctions and risks led some MCOs to practice self-silencing, primarily to safeguard their financial funding since many depend on the government to secure financial support for their key services. This compromises their ability to advocate openly against institutional forms of Islamophobia despite their recognition of the institutional aspect of the problem. One of the interviewees, for example, is cautious of speaking against the government, in her capacity as the representative of her organization, to avoid jeopardizing the organization’s funding. She speaks of this paradox, stating the following: “[I]t’s a catch 22 because you basically have funding in an organization to operate because of the racism of the government, and the government is funding you”. Another MCO representative believes “people [MCOs] don’t want to bite the hand that feeds them” and “they are happy to placate and appease and apologize because they know at the end of the day, they might get 50 grands”.

Self-silencing is not bounded to Australian MCOs. The *Civil Voices* report (2017) concludes that 69% of Australia’s non-for-profit Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) practice self-silencing due to fear of losing government funding, despite the idealistic liberal democratic context of Australia (Howie 2017). CSOs believe “dissenting organizations risk having their funding cut”, leading to a practice of self-silencing to “allay retribution” (Howie 2017, 2). However, the politicized and global nature of Islamophobia furthers MCOs’ cautiousness to avoid not only financial sanctions but also an arbitrary and often an amplified backlash from the media, the government and the public, which further denigrates Muslims’ social status. Many studies find that Muslims in the West avoid voicing their opinions regarding foreign and national policies, especially with regards to CVE, out of fear of being labeled as terrorist sympathizers (Breen-Smyth 2014; Cherney and Murphy 2016; Kundnani 2014; Spalek and Imtoul 2007). Breen-Smyth (2014), for example, argues that British Muslims, as a suspect community, are disciplined by security discourses and polices to be “quiet” in order to avoid conflicts and penalties and to be perceived as peaceful, good and moderate.

Islamophobia, in this regard, revolves around governing and managing Muslims to perform within a code of conduct that falls within the expectation of the majoritarian context and discourses. The disciplining of Muslims’ citizenship is not surprising and comes to validate studies on the impact of the securitization discourse on the reception and political recognition of Muslims as legitimate citizens (Breen-Smyth 2014; Cherney and Murphy 2016; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Kundnani 2014; Sayyid and Vakil 2010). MCOs’ identification of these positional practices as manifestations of Islamophobia, however, illustrates the significant impact these positional practices have on shaping, directing and undermining their ability to voice their concerns and challenge Islamophobia as representatives of Muslims. In light of Fraser and Hrubec (2004) notion of misrecognition, this context undermines the social status of MCOs and Muslims in general, negatively subverts and restrains their civic-political participation, and impacts their citizenry and contributions. This leads the majority to prioritize soft grassroots cross-cultural engagements at the level of the civil society, not only to avoid risks of politicized sanctions, but also to fulfil a national expectation to collaborate as active citizens. One MCO representative even suggested that “maybe” it is more effective for non-Muslim organizations to speak up against Islamophobia, since they will not feel “as defensive or as constrained” as MCOs who are “especially getting government funding” and who want to be “respected”.

To this end, positional practices of obligations, restrictions and assigned narratives undermine Muslims' social, political and economic status. MCOs' fear of incurring sanctions results in self-silencing which compromises their ability to advocate openly against institutional Islamophobia. The following section discusses views of MCOs who see the problem in light of white privilege.

8. Islamophobia Embedded within the System: White Privilege

Some MCOs contest the foundations of the Australian nation to elucidate how Islamophobia is engendered within the system. They link Islamophobia to white privilege, denoting that racism and inequalities towards non-whites are foundational to Western societies. By referencing Australia's colonialism and its ongoing treatment of asylum seekers, these MCOs contest the Australian system's ability to implement an egalitarian policy of inclusion. The (BN) representative, for example, infers the following: "Why should we acknowledge Muslims if we haven't acknowledged indigenous people?" She signifies white privilege as the core of Australia's institutional and systematic deployment of racism as a political and cultural attitude towards those who do not fit the Australian criterion of whiteness. Likewise, the (CO) representative believes Australia, like other Western nations, define a "barbaric" population through mechanisms of colonialism and white privilege, to legitimize control and maintain a majoritarian superiority. He adds the following:

"The Western society, this country particularly is built on a racist foundation from day one. It has, from the very beginning, always, sought to create an 'other' that it could then define its identity around. 'They are the bad guys, they are the barbarians' and they started with the indigenous communities. It's continued right through. Because of global issues, we are now the 'other' and that's what it is . . . it's the same phenomenon. It's this idea that white culture is somehow inherently better than other cultures. This is myopic. This is a tunnel vision where there is a complete refusal to acknowledge history and the role colonialism had, and imperialism had".

Other MCOs further accentuate Australia's inherited connections to Europe and other white settler societies, labeling Australia's Islamophobia as "reactionary" and imitative of European experiences and concerns because of an inherited connection. In this respect, these MCOs recognize the influential role of Australia's colonial history and the impact of transnational and contemporary moral and political connections to Western white culture in forming a discursive phenomenon beyond their temporality and national locality. Poynting (2019, p. 4) states the following:

"Islamophobia in Australia is not just in Australia. It is part of thoroughly globalized processes that incorporate this nation into empire. These processes, from an earlier empire, predate the existence of the Australian nation state".

Indeed, Australia's connections to the British empire and similar white settler societies, such as the US and Canada, as well as its colonial history, are influential in forging a unified perception of a "white land" or, in Poynting's (2019) term, "an empire" that is threatened by the existence of "others". In this light, MCOs perceive Islamophobia as racism ingrained within the status quo due to white privilege. This proposition appears in close ties with Critical Race Theory (CRT) notion that races are categorized within cultural and economic hierarchies, and that racism is a product of white privilege embedded within the social structure (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Following CRT, these MCOs view Islamophobia as another form of structural racism embedded within the nation's system to target racialized Muslims despite the nation's efforts to implement a policy of multiculturalism.

In light of this perspective, MCOs believe the civil society is left with no alternative but to take ownership to mobilize against Islamophobia as another form of structural social injustices contrary to their idealistic envisioned top-down intervention denoting the similarities between Muslim struggles and the struggles of African Americans and Aboriginals (WAMY, ICV, BN, Moroccan Soup Bar and MC). The founder of the Moroccan Soup Bar replied to my question of if it is the government's responsibility to respond to Islamophobia, saying the following:

“I wish I could say, government. I wish I could say those with power and privilege. They are certainly responsible, but the reality is they will never give over. If it’s at their discretion that society changes, society will never change. Unfortunately, and sadly, but equally importantly the onus is on those who have been marginalized and vilified to re-organize and organize as coalitions and build on movements in solidarity to then tip across into the mainstream”.

The founder’s placement of responsibility on the civil societies, especially victims of racism, is shared by many other MCOs, such as WAMYs’ representative, who drew a simile between Muslims and African Americans’ struggles in his reply when asked if it is the government’s responsibility:

“No, I’ll put it for the Muslim community first. The Black Americans, nobody stood up for them. They had to die; that lady in the bus who ignited, and they triggered all the revolution. Somebody has to stand up. We have to stand up. It’s all”.

The ICV representative, similarly, asserts that the civil society has a major duty, given the nature of the problem as a “social justice issue” against systematic forms of racism, comparing Islamophobia to the struggles of Aboriginals and people of color:

“I think it’s civil society. Absolutely. Just like civil society fought against racism. And if you think about it, the majority of the civil society is the main cultural group which is the Anglo-Celtic group. Many of them have been at the forefront of fighting racism against Aboriginal people or against people of color. They’ve been fighting against discriminations against LGTB as well. This is a social justice issue. This is a human rights issue. And so they absolutely should be advocating on behalf of the Muslim community. No, it’s not just Muslims”.

MCOs shift from their envisioned idealistic intervention, descending top-down towards a pragmatic scheme coordinated by the civil society and primarily Muslims illuminates, not only their dissatisfaction with the government liability towards Muslims (presented earlier), but also their perception of Islamophobia as systematic racism within the structure of the society. Acting on their dissatisfaction of the government’s liability towards Muslims and their awareness of the entrenchment of racism within the structure of the society, MCOs take ownership of their struggles. Indeed, analysis of MCOs’ conduct reveals a general preference to counter Islamophobia through contact and minute interactions with non-Muslims through day-to-day and cross-cultural activities. Besides, many MCOs collaborate with and learn from the experiences of other minority groups, especially the successful efforts of the Jewish Communities in tackling and reporting anti-Semitism. One main collaboration is the bystander Intervention program in response to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, which is a collaborative project by the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), Australian Intercultural Society (AIS), Australian Union of Jewish Students and Benevolence Australia as part of the Victorian Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Action Plan by the Labour government (AIS 2018; Premier, The Hon Daniel Andrews MP 2017).

In this sense, these MCOs believe that white privilege forms and sustains the contestations of “us” and “them”, which informs Australia’s treatment of its refugees, aboriginals and consecutive waves of migrants, as well as its treatment of Muslims. Islamophobia, in this perception, rises as another symptom of Australia’s problematic foundation of white privilege, despite a policy of multiculturalism. This resonates with scholars who have criticized multiculturalism for operating in close ties with a white colonial history. They argue that multiculturalism is not a racism-free construct, due to the hegemonic impact of white colonial history and ideologies on race (Ahmed 2008; Gunew 2013; Hage 1998). Hesse (2003, 17) agrees and adds that multiculturalism is “reflexes of European coloniality”, as it was implemented as a response to an on-ground reality of cultural diversities formed in relation to post-colonial histories. In this sense, multiculturalism does not deny racism, since its egalitarian context “presupposes white control over what is tolerated” (Ahmed 2008; Hage 1998, p. 98). Hage (1998)

adds that whiteness is the “aristocratic” national cultural capital; hence, Muslims and “third world” migrants are not recognized as part of this formation.

In light of these perspectives, it is safe to argue that MCOs suggest Islamophobia is guarded and sustained within the foundations of the nation, since the system violates the merits of equality due to an inherited defect of white privilege. This results in the system’s failure to recognize and represent Muslims as an integral part of Australia’s multicultural context in a similar manner to the experiences of Aboriginal Australians.

9. Conclusions

MCOs’ frames of meaning around Islamophobia reflect the experiential social manifestations of Islamophobia and the discursive problematizing discourses which emanate from the political domain constituting these two outward aspects of the problem. Based on the discussion above, this study indicates the following propositions to be central to MCOs’ understanding of Islamophobia, thus impacting their responsive actions:

1. Social Islamophobia takes the form of anti-Muslim racism and discriminations.
2. Islamophobia’s power emanates from the problematizing discourse around Islam and Muslims and constructs a perceived public “knowledge” about Islam and Muslims.
3. Islamophobia racializes Muslims as migrants, outsiders and security and cultural problems.
4. Islamophobia is a disruption to an idealistic multicultural context whereby Muslims’ citizenship is delegitimized and misrecognized.
5. Islamophobia assigns institutional positional practices to Muslims’ civic–political engagements and undermines their ability to advocate openly.
6. Islamophobia is another form of the systematic racism embedded within the nation due to colonialism and white privilege.

MCOs perceive Islamophobia in its entirety as systematic and institutionalized social and political injustices targeting Muslims. They locate this implicitly legalized form of racism within the interconnected international and national political and discursive domains of the geographical and historical West. Instead of locating the problem within vocal anti-Islam groups and political parties, MCOs locate Islamophobia within the mainstream system that constructs the discourses, policies and the experiences of vilification and misrecognition Muslims encounter within their multicultural settings. These are the national political silence, rhetoric, agendas and CVE policies and the media. This complements [Beydoun \(2018\)](#); [Massoumi et al. \(2017\)](#) position on the marginality of the far-right and the centrality of the state in manufacturing and propagating Islamophobia through its practices, CVE and foreign policies. These political and external factors generate a discursive field of constructed knowledge about Islam and Muslim, as well as institutional positional practices to manage Muslims’ civic–political participation. This charged context promulgates ignorance and fear within the public; hence, it constitutes the explicit forms of social anti-Muslim racism.

Applying the methodological bracketing of the agent’s context and the agent’s conduct allowed a more in-depth analysis into the impact of the former on the latter. MCOs’ context not only undermines the public recognition of Muslims, but also informs their perceptions of Islamophobia and influences their pragmatic strategies and activities to transform their context. In other words, and in light of Strong Structuration Theory (SST), this study suggests that MCOs are disciplined by the power of Islamophobia to devise responses informed by their context. At the moment, they utilize their limited resources to provide counter narratives through building bridges with grassroots and civil society organizations and building the capacity of Muslims to become ambassadors of Islam. Moreover, they identify their cross-cultural engagements, such as interfaith dialogues and diversity trainings, as a response to Islamophobia.

The government’s “integrationist” approach to social cohesion is problematized for encouraging the integration of religiously diverse groups into the majority’s culture ([Ezzy et al. 2020](#)). Some

scholars label such approaches as symptomatic of Islamophobia (Poynting and Mason 2008; Lentin and Titley 2012; Humphrey 2010). Islam (2018, 7) believes this form of “soft Islamophobia” dismisses the structural underpinning of the problem and holds Muslims, the victims, responsible to “break the stereotypes” through their interpersonal and intercultural engagements, to prove that they meet the standards ascribed by the majority. MCOs, however, take such engagements as necessary to provide counter narratives to Islamophobia, despite their awareness of the underlying perceptions of their accountability and the conditionality of their citizenship. Indeed, the power of ‘soft Islamophobia’ pressures MCOs to fulfil these obligations; nevertheless, they positively transform their cross-cultural engagements, not only as venues to legitimize their citizenship and belonging, but also as venues to educate non-Muslims, grow compassion, foster trust and humanize Muslims. The argument here is that MCOs utilize the macro level of the government’s social cohesion agenda, which is arguably informed by soft Islamophobia, to implement transformative micro-level engagements to educate non-Muslims, normalize Muslims and foster mutual respect. Also, MCOs utilize the macro level of Australia’s multicultural policy, to assert their legitimacy as citizens through initiating venues and opportunities to interact and educate non-Muslims. This is comparable to Meer’s (2014, 2010) proposition that Muslims within “imperfect liberal democratic settlements” recognize their pragmatic possibilities and mobilize within democratic spaces to counter Islamophobia. He reflects on the British Muslim mobilization on issues regarding discrimination, legislation and media representation to argue that “Muslims are not mere objects of regulation or governance, but instead are audible and potentially transformative” through democratic participation, stakeholder representation and consultations (Meer 2014, 23; 2010).

Certainly, multiculturalism as a “civic or political program for diversity management” varies even within a single nation (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014b, 48). The Victorian State Government’s responses to religious diversity are, arguably, more sophisticated than other states, in light of its explicit grants funding for religious and interfaith initiatives, its sophisticated legislation (Racial and Religious Tolerance legislation, and the Equal Opportunity Act) and the fact that it is the only state with a government body dedicated to religious diversity (the Victorian Government Multifaith Advisory Group) (Ezzy et al. 2020; Roose 2010). Within this context, Victorian MCOs’ take pragmatic anti-Islamophobia responses that are informed by their macro context, that of the governments’ attitude towards social cohesion and multiculturalism, but in a manner that fulfils their micro objectives, that of growing the public’s knowledge, respect and compassion. Put another way, MCOs utilize their multicultural particularities to inform their strategies and create opportunities to fight or transform their inequalities. Future research, however, is required here to examine MCOs cross-cultural engagements through the lens of interculturalism, to unpack the processes implemented to redress power imbalances. Moreover, further comparative research is needed to explore the extent to which the Victorian context (in the form of government policies, rhetoric and projects) is influencing the experiences of MCOs in comparison to other MCOs in other states.

In light of the previous discussion, this study finds it heuristic to allocate MCOs’ attention and resources towards strategies of building solidarity among civil society organizations, especially those concerned with advocating for minority rights, diversity and anti-racism initiatives. Building solidarity across the civil society minimizes the risks or impact of sanctions provoked by Muslimness and allows the exchange of political expertise and human-financial resources to amplify responses to all forms of injustices, one of which is Islamophobia. Moreover, it may be worthwhile for MCOs to familiarize their members with protective legislations and cross-cultural and political opportunities provided by a policy of multiculturalism. Knowledge of institutional rights enhances their member’s sense of belonging and citizenship, as well as informs their activism towards utilizing available institutional opportunities and structures. Finally, this study finds necessary the establishment of a separate self-funded Muslim organization with the specialist focus on calling out institutional Islamophobia. At the moment, the ICV undertakes this role in Victoria. Nonetheless, there are limitations to what the ICV can do, given its stringed funding to pockets of the government, its diversified focuses and its limited resources, which heavily depend on community volunteers who might not have the political expertise to navigate

the system. A promising initiative is the Australian Muslim Advocacy Network (AMAN), which is set as a specialist advocacy and policy development body at the national level, in a manner similar to the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) in the US and APPG in Britain. Interestingly, AMAN, which was initiated in April 2017, was not mentioned by MCOs interviewed for this study in May 2018. Its main aim is to lobby the government on behalf of Muslims, provide media representation for Muslims and formulate a strategic think tank to carry out evidence-based research and policy proposals to promote and enhance Muslim–non-Muslim relations in Australia (Abdalla and Omar 2017). The success, strategies and structures of this initiative, however, are yet to be explored at the academic and the political level, which calls for further research.

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