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On knowing how it feels

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The article by Zempi and Awan brings together two studies that bear upon a long-standing epistemological question about the connection between subjectivity, experience, and knowledge. Both studies emerged out of a similar interpellation that occurred during the process of doing research: a recurrent comment by the research subjects to the researchers, suggesting that the latter ‘don’t know how it feels like’. As the two researchers take up different social positions in relation to the Muslim communities they study, these interpellations were different in kind, yet both led the researchers to decide to ‘step into the shoes’ of their interlocutors, or, more accurately in this case, to don the long garments, face-veils, beards, and caps that their interlocutors wear on a quotidian basis. Thus the researchers took on the visible markers of an Islamic identity in the public sphere with the aim of reaching a better understanding of the Islamophobia that was so central to the narratives of their research subjects.

Whether autoethnography is the most adequate term to capture the aims and commitments that speak through this research effort is something I leave to those more knowledgeable about autoethnography and ethnography at large, such as my colleague Annelies Moors. In this brief comment I want to pursue some thoughts about the complex relationship between subjectivity, experience, and knowledge. And I do so from the perspective of standpoint epistemology at large, which I understand as quite a spectrum of different bodies of scholarship that seek to think through the ways in which consciousness and knowledge are always somehow connected to material, historical, and social conditions, and are grounded in lived experiences and the body.

I would like to state that I appreciate Zempi and Awan’s article. As the existence of Islamophobia continues to be denied, contested, or minimized, the importance of scholarly work that documents the forms of racism which, for better or for worse, we have come to call Islamophobia is pressing. Documenting what remains unseen, misrecognized, or ignored through established frames is a crucial commitment of critical scholarship, and it does seem to be one of its more forthright commitments. The very act of documenting has, as we know, a great potential

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to arrest or interrupt those established visions. Yet the politics of documenting are intricate, and standpoint epistemology might help us to trace the ways in which the connections between experience and knowledge are all but direct and straightforward.

At the outset of the article we read about Zempi's desire to become an insider, to feel part of the reality of her interlocutors. This desire runs through the article without ever being adequately unpacked, despite a brief excursion through standpoint theory. Her desire of course complements the wish of her research subjects – a wish one might imagine as an exasperated sigh to be accurately understood, not to be misrecognized yet again. Yet it is precisely this desire that sets up the relationship between knowledge and experience in problematic way. The desire assumes that something like 'the experience of Islamic subjects in the UK' exists in such a way that someone else without that long-standing lived experience can simply step into it. It assumes, and allow me to condense the issues at stake in the following image, that a niqab or a beard can function as the 'magic key' that gives access to the livelihood that the researchers are accounting for. Sara Crawley (2012) calls this 'trying it on' ethnography, which she rejects because of its essentialist epistemological underpinnings. The desire to feel from the inside indeed tends to come with an essentialist and essentializing perspective on experience.

Standpoint epistemology, in contrast, teaches us that standpoints are acquired, that is to say that the connection between social locations, experience, and knowledge is profoundly mediated, whether through analytical efforts (both by the subject and/or the researcher), political labor, artistic interventions, or a combination of these. Experience, then, is profoundly bound to social structures, material bodies, and consciousness in particular ways that are shaped by power relations and constituted over time. A commitment to standpoint epistemology, in other words, enables us to understand that the experiences of the researchers in this case remain substantially different from those of their interlocutors.

This is not to dismiss the experiences that Zempi and Awan gained through what Moors considers to be a social experiment (and I find myself in agreement), which involved changing their self-presentation in the public sphere in such a way that makes them (more) vulnerable to acts of racism. Surely, social experiments in which the social response to a particular image, name, situation, or embodiment is further documented have a role to play in the production of critical knowledge. An obvious example of this are those studies that present the same CV with the name John Smith or Fatima Hussein and document the responses of potential employers or employment agencies. Zempi and Awan's research design is different in nature, and does indeed foreground the role of experience, which leaves us with a question about the kind of knowledge that could be elaborated upon the experiences that they document.

The insights Zempi and Awan acquire through their 'trying it on' ethnography might be made productive (through working through contrast and comparison) for the analysis of the deep embodied knowledge *they potentially already have* in relation to Islamophobia. Without knowing enough about the social locations of both

researchers, let me speculate on the basis of their writing: the knowledge connected to occupying an unmarked or normative body (when it comes to Islamophobia) in the case of Zempi, and the knowledge connected to occupying the position of secular Muslim (and the hegemonic ‘good Muslim vs. bad Muslim’ frame in which that position gets entangled) in the case of Awan. If we take critical epistemological insights into experience, subjectivity, and knowledge production seriously, the ‘view from the inside’ that Zempi and Awan seek to pursue already emerges in a more grounded manner from the narratives of their interlocutors. Yet Zempi and Awan’s experiences might add views from other ‘insides’ – insides considered as standpoints, that is, constructed and materially grounded – that are equally crucial in accounting for Islamophobia.

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