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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parents Subjected to the Asylum System Navigating Racist Discourse: Through the Lens of Resistance and Accommodation

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Abstract
Racism permeates societies globally, including within Germany's educational system. Specifically, people from the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region experience anti-Muslim racism. This study explores how racially minoritized parents subjected to the asylum system navigate racist discourse within societal and institutional structures, focusing on their strategies of resistance and accommodation. Guided by a social constructionist epistemology, interviews were conducted with 11 parents migrating from regions and countries with a majority of Muslim residents. Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis, four themes were constructed: Language as an exclusion and excuse mechanism, Meaning-making of being racialized, Good Migrant, and Going the extra mile. The analysis highlights the dialectical tension parents experience as they navigate racist discourse within social and institutional structures. Parents resisted by challenging school practices, defending "cultural norms", and advocating for their children's educational opportunities. Simultaneously, they strategically accommodated by stressing gratefulness, assimilation, and praising German systems. This research illuminates how racially minoritized parents navigate oppressive systems and racist discourse, emphasizing the interplay between resistance and accommodation. It underscores the importance of recognizing informal resistance within societal constraints, offering a nuanced perspective through the resistance and accommodation framework. Additionally, it informs policy and social responses to migration by elucidating racialization and oppression dynamics.

Keywords: Anti-Muslim racism; educational system; racially minoritized parents; asylum system; resistance & accommodation; reflexive thematic analysis

Introduction

Racism is pervasive, deeply ingrained in and continuing to shape societies around the globe. Racism is not only embedded in our psyche but also in our practices, artifacts, discourse, and institutional structures, such as educational systems (Salter, Adams, and Perez 2017). In Germany, particularly persons with roots in the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region experience racism and discrimination in the educational system. It is intertwined with racist *othering* of Muslims and anti-Muslim racism (Ardekani, Van Lanen, and Van Hoven 2021) due to the racialization of Islam that results in the stereotyping and homogenization of "Muslim(-looking) people" (Love 2020). *Othering* involves viewing certain people or groups as fundamentally different and inferior, creating an *us versus them* dynamic (Hall 1997). Asylum-seeking parents and their children are specifically targeted by anti-Muslim racism and *othering*, as asylum applications in Germany are from predominantly from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Türkiye, and Iraq, and both asylum seekers and Muslims are portrayed as outsiders, disrupting the perceived cultural unity and political coherence of Europe (Engelbert, Van Zoonen, and Hirzalla 2019; European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023). Racist discourses often portray racially minoritized parents in the educational context as passive, uninvolved, and incapable of supporting their children's education, perpetuating deficit-oriented perspectives (e.g., Dahlstedt 2009; Roy and Roxas 2011). Instead of addressing systemic inequities, families are blamed for so-called "achievement gaps" between racially minoritized and majoritized students (Ladson-Billings 2007; Milner 2013; Moffitt, Juang and Syed 2019).

While everyday resistance to these discourses, unjust power relations, and their underlying ideologies like white supremacy and neoliberalism have been studied extensively in the United States, they remain under-studied in Germany (Kollender 2021; Rosales and Langhout 2020), particularly in psychology. Racially minoritized parents subjected to the asylum system navigate constrained spaces where it is difficult to resist oppression in overt ways. Thus, research primarily focusing on building resilience and/or political collective forms of resistance may inadvertently reinforce deficit models that perpetuate oppression (Cruz 2015; Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011). In this study, we contribute to existing research on racially minoritized parents in Germany (Gomolla and Kollender 2022; Kollender 2020) by investigating daily forms of resistance and accommodation, examining how these parents navigate racist discourses.

This study focuses on parents who recently arrived in Eastern Germany from countries or regions in which at least 80% of the population identifies as Muslim. These include Afghanistan, Autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq, Iran, occupied Palestine, Syria, and Türkiye. Drawing on the resistance and accommodation framework (Rogers and Way 2016) and utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2021), we analyze 11 parents' narratives to understand how they navigate racist discourse. The resistance and accommodation framework acknowledges the deep ways in which oppressive structures shape lived experience, while offering a lens through which to center daily acts of resistance (Rogers and Way 2021). We first contextualize German educational disparities, anti-Muslim racism, and regional differences, before elaborating on the racist discourses these families navigate and the ways in which they resist.

German Context: Educational Disparities, Othering, and Anti-Muslim Racism

Educational disparities persist in Germany, with racially minoritized students facing higher dropout rates and underrepresentation in higher academic tracks (OECD 2019; Heublein et al. 2017). Educational disparities in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia (states in Eastern Germany) are highest, where more than a quarter of students without German citizenship leave school without a diploma (Integrationsmonitor der Länder 2022). In 2022, Germany received over 200,000 asylum applications, with one-third being children mainly from countries or regions with a majority Muslim population (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023). Asylum-seeking children face additional challenges accessing education. Families seeking asylum may stay in reception centers for months, excluding children from schooling (Dewitz and Massumi 2015). These children are often assigned to schools without considering their skills, relegating them unfairly to lower tracks, while also experiencing multiple forced school transfers (SVR 2017). Uncertainty about residence status burdens the families' psychological well-being and affects academic performance (Lechner and Huber 2017).

In Germany, the word "race" (*Rasse*) is not utilized, since it is associated with the Holocaust and related Nazi ideologies, where biological inequality between "racial groups" was constructed and used to justify genocide (Anomaly 2022). Instead, racialized terms like foreigner and migrant are commonly used, perpetuating a binary division between a white, "ethno-cultural" Germany and a "non-white," migrant *other* (Moffitt, Juang and Syed 2018; Rühlmann and McMonagle 2019). Because of this racialization of migration and religion, the phrase anti-Muslim racism is increasingly used in lieu of the less specific term Islamophobia. Islamophobia focuses on hostility fueled by ignorance or misconceptions about the religion and its symbols but does not address power structures, racialization, and class. In contrast, anti-Muslim racism highlights systemic discrimination and broader social, economic, and political power dynamics (Richardson 2004). It therefore can also explain how individuals racialized as Muslim, regardless of their actual religion, can be targeted, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the marginalization of people perceived to be Muslim (Love 2020). Anti-Muslim racism is a significant concern nationwide, but particularly in Eastern Germany, which has a relatively low Muslim population (Pfündel, Stichs, and Tanis 2021) and where more than 50% of people believe that migration from countries or regions with a majority Muslim population should be prohibited (Decker 2019). Such anti-Muslim racism permeates daily life, and refugees in Eastern Germany express higher concerns about xenophobia and safety than refugees in Western Germany (Schwitter and Liebe 2022).

Navigating Racist Discourses

Discourses transmit, produce, and reinforce power and knowledge in social contexts, shaping interactions and constructing subjects (Foucault [1998] 2019; Hall 1997; Stoddart 2007). Racist discourse contributes to social exclusion, constructing a visible *other* through interactions. Our engagement with these systems influences how we perceive ourselves and others (Wiggins and Potter 2008). The *other* is

constructed as stigmatized, opposing the perceived attributes of the "self" (e.g., "civilized" vs. "uncivilized," "irrational" vs. "rational"). In racist discourses, asylum applicants and Muslims are both depicted as outsiders challenging the imagined cultural unity and political wholeness of Europe (Engelbert, Van Zoonen, and Hirzalla 2019). Both face associations with danger, cultural incompatibility, and perceived threats to security. Media representations and political discourses further reinforce these negative views, perpetuating stigmatizing narratives. These racist discourses revolve around language use, racialized hierarchies, the perception of being "deserving" or "grateful" to be in the country, and the expectation to assimilate into "German culture."

In racist discourse in the realm of education, parents are depicted as passive and incapable due to perceived cultural differences, and their children are seen as victims of "bad culture," reflecting a deficit perspective (Matthiesen 2016; Isik-Ercan 2018; Archer 2008). With few exceptions (Gomolla and Kollender 2022; Kollender 2021), studies on the experiences of racially minoritized parents in the educational context, which are shaped by neoliberal educational reforms advocating for individualism and assimilationism, are scarce. Notably, there is limited research specifically addressing racist discourses related to parents subjected to the asylum system. We address this research gap and illuminate how this specific group of parents is navigating the unique racist discourses they encounter, being racially minoritized, arriving from countries and regions with a majority Muslim population, and being subjected to the asylum system.

Resistance and Accommodation

Psychological research on how marginalized individuals resist oppressive systems and ideologies has predominantly concentrated on overt forms such as protests and boycotts, resulting in numerous theories explaining the motivations behind and mechanisms of participation in overt and collective resistance (Rosales and Langhout 2020; Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Yet, focusing solely on political resistance overlooks the efforts of marginalized communities who weave more subtle forms of resistance into their everyday lives (Butler 1990; Scott 1990). In oppressive systems, the form of resistance often reflects the nature of power dynamics. Given the risks associated with overt resistance, such as exposure to physical violence, deportation, and punitive measures, marginalized individuals are more restricted in their ability to engage in such actions (Kelley 2002; Watts, Diemer and Voight 2011). As a result, everyday resistance often consists of less explicit and more subtle, informal, and unorganized actions embedded in daily life.

The resistance and accommodation framework (Genovese 1988) helps to understand how marginalized individuals navigate and resist oppressive systems through these subtle and informal means in their daily lives. Historically, the framework was utilized to analyze how enslaved Black people in the United States both accepted the unavoidable and simultaneously fought processes of dehumanization. Accommodation and resistance are two dialectical forms of a single process and highlight that such responses are present in all human interactions with and negotiations of oppression (Anyon 1984; Akom 2003). Accommodation broadly refers to how people reinforce and adhere to ideologies they are socialized into, even

if doing so means upholding discrimination against one's "own group." Resistance refers to challenging subordinating ideologies, norms, and systems (Rogers and Way 2021; Weitz 2001). For instance, accommodation can involve Black boys deemed "successful" by broader societal norms distancing themselves from negative stereotypes by claiming they are not "like other Black boys," thus accommodating to white supremacist views (Rogers and Way 2018). Similarly, girls, under patriarchal norms to prioritize others' needs over their own, may internalize these expectations and adjust their behavior to fit the role of the self-sacrificing, "nice" caregiver in line with patriarchal standards (Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1997). In contrast, resistance occurs when individuals actively challenge these harmful norms. For example, girls embracing and expressing their emotions despite societal stereotypes challenge restrictive norms that dictate they should suppress their feelings, while Black boys expressing love for their friends and acknowledging they couldn't live without them challenge patriarchal norms of masculinity by defying the expectation that men must remain emotionally distant and stoic (Rogers and Way 2018).

Actions can serve as both resistance and accommodation depending on the context. For example, having children may represent an act of resistance for ethnically cleansed indigenous communities, symbolizing cultural survival and resilience. In contrast, the same act might be seen as accommodating patriarchal norms in a different context. People who engage in acts of resistance may concurrently perpetuate dominant narratives, inadvertently reinforcing hierarchies and stereotypes, while also advocating for transformative change, making every individual both the subject and the object of power (Vinthagen and Johansson 2019).

Accommodation can include internalization of harmful systems of oppression, but it often occurs with a level of awareness and intentionality. Dubbed *strategic accommodation*, this captures the tendency for marginalized individuals to employ self-preserving strategies that, while necessary for survival, may contribute to the perpetuation of subordination. This is evident, for instance, when racially minoritized individuals embrace assimilationism (Watts Diemer and Voight 2011) or when Black girls straighten their hair to align with white-centric beauty standards (Rogers, Versey and Cielto 2022). While these actions have currency in the context of a racist society, they also reinforce meritocracy and white supremacy (Robinson and Ward 1991). Yet, *strategic accommodation* can be a first step toward resistance. Cruz-Gutiérrez (2020) analyzed Michelle Obama's decision to avoid showcasing natural hair during specific election periods as *strategic accommodation* to gain approval from American consumers and adhere to Black urban femininity norms. Obama's choices simultaneously challenged stereotypes of Black women's fashion style, sparked mainstream discourse, and raised awareness of natural hair (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2020), highlighting the dialectical nature of accommodation and resistance.

Everyday resistance does not require specific intent, consciousness, or recognition from others (Vinthagen and Johansson 2019). Instead, it emphasizes subtly undermining power structures and oppressive ideologies without specific outcomes being mandatory (Bayat 2000). Woven into the fabric of daily life, this form of resistance often manifests in small, seemingly mundane acts. Although these acts are not organized or explicitly political, they play a crucial role in confronting oppressive norms, ideologies, and systems, contributing significantly to social

change (Butler 1990). This can take the form of *resistance for survival*, as when marginalized individuals reclaim their humanity in small ways. For instance, women of lower socioeconomic status in Nicaragua joking about men without their knowledge are resisting patriarchal norms and shaping their identities (Johansson 2009). *Resistance for liberation*, on the other hand, includes actions and strategies that actively challenge the oppressive system and question social hierarchies for the good of the collective (Iglesias and Cormerie 2002; Rogers and Way 2021). This might manifest as celebrating brown skin and rejecting white-centered beauty norms (Rosario, Minor, and Rogers 2021), which can accumulate and eventually lead to collective organizing and political action, such as the CROWN Act, which protects Black Americans from retribution for wearing natural hair.

The Current Study

This study uses the resistance and accommodation framework to explore the experiences of racially minoritized parents from countries or regions with a majority Muslim population that recently arrived in Germany and are subjected to the asylum system. We recognize the challenging circumstances these families face due to multiple inequitable systems and their navigation of various racist discourses in a climate of rising anti-Muslim racism and racist asylum policies in Europe. We aim to discern whether (aspects of) racist discourse are accepted, emphasized, or left unchallenged (accommodation) including as a conscious strategy, or, how and when they are resisted and challenge underlying racist ideologies (resistance). This approach acknowledges the complexity of their experiences by recognizing both their efforts and the systemic challenges they face.

Our research questions are as follows: (1) How do parents resist and accommodate to racist discourse? (2) Can we find patterns and strategies of both resistance and accommodation reflected within individual parents?

Method

Researchers' Positionality

The first and second authors, both child-free women who migrated from the Netherlands to Germany, conducted collaborative interviews and analyzed the data. Their diverse experiences with racism and *othering* in both countries, along with their understanding of the German asylum system and reflections on migration policies, sparked theoretical discussions enriching the analysis. The third author, a white German woman with children, and the fourth author, an Asian American woman and mother, with experiences as a minoritized person in both the United States and Germany, added their unique perspectives to the project. The last author, a child-free white US American woman married to a white German man, who lived in Germany for many years, drew upon her personal reflections on whiteness and white supremacy in Germany to inform her involvement in the project. Throughout the research, all authors provided feedback, co-shaping the manuscript.

Participants

The first two authors recruited participants through a local human rights organization, social workers, snowball sampling (Robinson 2014), and school contacts. Inclusion criteria were: (a) family having fled and/or seek/having sought asylum in Germany not more than five years ago, (b) having at least one child attending school, and (c) family residing in Thuringia or Saxony-Anhalt. We chose a maximum of five years since arrival to capture varying experiences with the educational system of children between recently arrived and more established parents (Wong 2015). A total of 13 parents with up to five school-aged children participated in 11 interviews. These included four fathers, three mothers, two interviews involving both parents, one interview with a mother and her friend, and one interview with a father and his 17-year-old daughter. The parents sought refuge due to war, occupation, and political persecution, arriving from: Afghanistan (2), Autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq (3), Iran (1), occupied Palestine (1), Syria (1), and Türkiye (3).

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in summer 2021 through fall 2022. We prioritized building trust (Fontana and Frey 2000) by not pressuring participants to directly make an appointment and meeting where they felt most comfortable (e.g., school building, their homes or coffee places). Interviews were conducted in multiple languages (i.e., Arabic, Dari, English, Farsi, German, Kurdish Sôrani, Turkish), interpreters were needed in seven of the interviews. We intentionally included parents who speak languages different from the researchers, challenging the common practice of excluding them (Lee, Sulaiman-Hill, and Thompson 2014). This decision was made to respect their right to participate, avoid reinforcing assimilationist language expectations, and create a more representative and diverse sample within our "target group" (Murray and Buller 2007). Achieving perfect conceptual equivalence across languages is often unattainable due to the unique assumptions, feelings, and values embedded in each utterance. In other words, fully transferring meaning from one context to another, whether across languages or other defined settings, is impossible because meaning is deeply rooted in its context (Haraway 1988). From our ontological and epistemological perspectives, meaning is never unequivocal or self-evident; rather, it is inherently ambiguous and complex, even within a single context. This challenge highlights the complexities of translation, as no single translation can fully capture all nuances of meaning (Phillips 1960). We embraced this perspective, understanding that translation is a process of constructing meaning through the interplay between the original expressions, their multiple interpretations and meanings, and its translated form (Barrett 1998; Spivak 1992). During the interviews, interpreters were encouraged to ask additional questions and seek clarifications with the interviewers' consent, highlighting that interpreters are also co-constructing the dialogue and not objective or neutral. This facilitated a more nuanced and interactive dialog, underpinned by mutual trust and collaboration between interviewers and interpreters (Salaets and Balogh 2015) and interpreters and interviewees. We also valued the interpreters' feedback and insights, which enriched our data itself and

our understanding of the data and ensured that the interviews were both meaningful and contextualized. This approach underscores our commitment to acknowledging the interpretative nature of translation and maintaining the depth and understanding of the data collected, despite some inherent challenges (Phillips 1960).

In addition, we did not exclude three parents who preferred not to be audio-recorded, recognizing that recording devices are not apolitical and innocent entities (Nordstrom 2015). Marginalized people often exhibit more reluctance in using recording devices due to historical issues, safety concerns, legal consequences, and trust in technology (Mbonye et al. 2013).

As audio-recorded transcripts and interview scripts produce comparable data quality (Rutakumwa 2020), we chose to use interview scripts. In this method, one interviewer took extensive, detailed notes including quotes and contextual cues, while the other primarily engaged in dialogue with the participant. The note-taker also had the opportunity to ask questions during the interview, ensuring a thorough and interactive data collection process. Acknowledging that poorly documented interviews can lead to reduced data quality (Rutakumwa 2020), we mitigate this risk by having the two interviewers review and discuss the notes immediately after each session. They clarified any ambiguities and verified the notes against the conversation as remembered by the interviewer who had engaged mainly in dialog. Our approach allowed us to gather rich qualitative data within a participant-centered framework (Shaver 2005), underscoring the importance of creating a comfortable environment for effective interviews and recognizing that audio recording is not always the best method for capturing data (Rutakumwa 2020). Emphasizing the need for context and participant comfort in qualitative research (Glaser 1998; Oakley 2015) and challenges the view of recording devices as "neutral tools" (Nordstrom 2015), demonstrating how these apparatuses, as discursive practices, impact knowledge creation (Barad 2007).

The interviews included mostly open-ended questions about the German educational system, daily school experiences, communication with teachers and headmasters, school climate, and the asylum system (see Appendix A). We adapted to each participant, with a participant-led or more leading role, depending on the situation and diverting from the interview guide if topics were deemed irrelevant by our participants, in an effort to minimize interrogation-like interviews (Pessoa et al. 2019). Interview durations averaged approximately 75 minutes, ranging from 45 to 100 minutes. Participants received a €15 voucher as a token of appreciation.

Epistemological Orientation

This exploratory qualitative research (Ward, Comer, and Stone 2018) follows a social constructionist epistemology with a critical orientation, where meaning is co-constructed between interviewers and interviewees (Braun and Clarke 2013). Adopting a critical orientation allows for analysis considering the social, economic, and political context of participants and unpacking the data situated in systems of power (Hammersley 2018). It offers the opportunity to interpret meaning beyond explicit communication by participants and does not aim to "give voice" (Hammersley 2018). This indicates that our analysis is subjective, informed by theory and aiming to persuade readers of the sophistication and utility of our

account, rather than representing participants' own understanding. We prioritized information power over data saturation (Morse 1995) and determined the final sample size based on sample specificity and quality of dialog (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). High sample specificity was established by including participants who belonged to the "target group," while ensuring some variation in their experiences. Sample size was continuously evaluated, and we stopped contacting new parents when the interviews provided rich data for in-depth analysis.

Analytical Process

Because we were interested in patterned meanings, we applied a RTA (Braun and Clarke 2021), with the two first authors iteratively engaging the six-phase RTA process. This included familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. Collaborative coding was used, allowing for separate and joint coding to develop codes based on individual assumptions and ideas (Richards and Hamphill 2018). Differing perspectives were addressed through discussions until a shared and/or deeper understanding was reached. Inductive coding initially focused on semantic codes capturing explicit meanings, later shifting to more latent coding uncovering implicit meanings. Themes were defined and named based on internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, ensuring that the codes effectively inform a theme, and that the theme is suitable for guiding the interpretation of the dataset (Byrne 2021). The resistance and accommodation framework was applied as we gained deeper understanding, leading to deductive recoding within themes and analysis refinement. We used both electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts, employing MAXQDA 12 software for data management and anonymized participant names using pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were preferred over numerical identifiers to highlight their positionalities in a racist society which constituted the central focus of our analysis.

Analysis

Our coding resulted in four constructed themes: (1) Language as exclusion and "excuse" mechanism; (2) Meaning-making of being racialized; (3) "Good Migrant"; and (4) Despite system barriers going the extra mile. Their meaning-making process in the interviews revealed a recurring tension, as parents demonstrated varying degrees of resistance and accommodation while engaging with racist discourse and societal structures.

Language as Exclusion and "Excuse Mechanism"

The Paradox of German Language Skills as a Proxy to Belonging

Throughout the interviews, we observed a tension where both accommodation and resistance to daily racist discourse coexisted. Language served as a proxy for belonging, leading some parents to strategically accommodate racist discourse about a lack of German skills as the primary cause of their exclusion, intertwined with the

idea of "perfect" German leading to inclusion. While these strategies fulfill social expectations to achieve certain goals that would otherwise be hard to attain, they temporarily de-emphasize language's role as a mechanism of exclusion. In the German context, language functions as an "excuse mechanism" within racist discourse, concealing underlying racial biases and justifying the exclusion of racialized newcomers under the pretense of linguistic competence. This rationale is often reinforced by individuals in subordinate positions and supports, for instance, a monolingual education system and bureaucratic procedures that marginalize those who are not fully proficient in German. Although newcomers from outside the EU are required to learn German, which is promoted as essential for inclusion (Heinemann 2017), this creates a paradox. While fluency in German is intended to signify belonging and participation, minoritized speakers frequently continue to face persistent racialized perceptions and exclusion, regardless of their fluency or accent (Flores and Rosa 2015). This underscores how the emphasis on language proficiency serves as an "excuse mechanism" to rationalize racist exclusionary practices rather than genuinely facilitating inclusion. Consequently, parents navigating the asylum system may strategically opt for accommodation strategies, pragmatically adjusting to pervasive dynamics until other forms of resistance become viable.

In the following excerpt, parents Ahmed and Azra share experiences from their eldest child's previous school.

> Azra: "And we were very new in Germany."
> Ahmed: "New."
> Azra: "And our children didn't speak German yet. That's why they needed to hear German language, speak German language, new cultural adaption."
> Ahmed: "Integration."
> Azra: "Inte-integrate. But if there are many different cultures and different languages, that is more difficult than one cultural or one language. That is why, it is a disadvantage for us."

Azra considers her children's proficiency in German crucial for "cultural adaptation," echoed by her husband, who introduces the notion of integration. Within societal discourse, integration rhetoric often conceals underlying expectations of assimilation (Bowskill, Lyons, and Coyle 2007), creating a divide between "Germans" and "Strangers" or "Foreigners" (Mecheril 2016; Moffitt, Juang, and Syed 2018). Azra and Ahmed are engaging with these sentiments in a societal context where integration is expected of those deemed not (yet) fully part of society (Schinkel 2018). They identify the German language as a tool for navigating oppressive systems and improving their position in society. Furthermore, they mention that having children at a school with many people with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, complicates this imagined process of "integration." Research shows that racially minoritized students often face academic disparities compared to their majoritized peers (Entorf and Minoiu 2005). This disparity is perpetuated by a racist discourse known as the "deficit perspective," which attributes academic struggles to students' backgrounds rather than addressing systemic issues like discrimination and unequal resource allocation (Gillborn 2008). In Germany,

even teachers who imagine having more racially minoritized students in their class experience higher stress and lower self-efficacy (Glock, Kleen, and Morgenroth 2019). Ahmed and Azra's understanding of this discourse leads them to identify a school with more minoritized students as potentially hindering their children's success. Consequently, they adopt a strategic accommodation approach, carefully evaluating options to ensure their children's educational success amidst social barriers. This strategic approach underscores their need to gain more agency and power in navigating their children's educational journey. Simultaneously, it highlights how the racist discourse fosters competition among racially minoritized individuals navigating the asylum system, potentially undermining opportunities for solidarity and collaboration.

In contrast to Azra and Ahmed, mother Nawal focused on the exclusionary role of language. In addition, she volunteers to support women who speak languages other than German and accompanies them to doctors, school, and other institutional meetings. During parents' evenings, she highlights issues faced by parents who speak languages other than German and/or are still learning German.

> Nawal: "I know many parents who have been in Germany for 6 or 5 years but have no possibility to go to a German course because they have a small child, can't find a place in a kindergarten or are a bit older and can't talk to us properly, there is never an interpreter for the parents' evening and then the parents don't come because they say 'We don't understand in German'."

Nawal challenges the prevalent notion of blaming parents for their absence at parents' evenings, which is often found in racist and deficit discourse. Instead, she sheds light on the failure of schools to provide interpreters. Through her volunteering efforts and support for other women learning German, Nawal not only resists the portrayal of racially minoritized women as submissive but also empowers them to become political agents (Bendixsen 2013; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2020), offering a clear example of *resistance for liberation*. By rejecting and contesting ideologies that enforce subordination within racist discourse, Nawal not only has the potential to enhance her own position in navigating oppressive systems but also to contribute to collective liberation (Robinson and Ward 1991).

Meaning-Making of Being Racialized
Naming Racism as Resistance & Making Sense of Being Othered in a Racist Society
The perspective of meaning-making stems from the proposition that humans continually seek understanding and interpret their world (Kurzman 2008). This involves assigning meaning to experiences, particularly in challenging situations, to restore a sense of meaningfulness (Park 2010). Racism's influence is evident in all constructed themes, reflecting its pervasive nature in daily practices, discourses, and institutions (Salter, Adams, and Perez 2017). The second theme, "meaning-making of being racialized," explores how parents perceive and experience racism, positioning themselves within a racialized hierarchy in society. Parents discussed employing multiple strategies, including acts of resistance, to navigate their racialized experiences, such as their interactions with white Germans.

In the following extract, Safae recounted an incident where she faced a racist verbal attack.

> Safae: "Yes, this is a bad word for foreigners. It means 'oriental people', but you don't say that. We could also directly call the police and complain. We were in the group of 10 (. . .) and we were waiting on the tram, and she said, 'do you work?' I said 'I don't work and that's enough. 'It's my business not yours'."
> Interviewer: "And you just said it like that?"
> Safae: "My husband earns well, and I don't work, I raise my daughter, that's my job in life, I think so. There are many people like that in Thuringia."

The derogatory term used against Safae and her friends was K*nakken, a German racist slur primarily directed at racialized individuals from the SWANA region, though originally used specifically against Turkish guest workers and their descendants. It conveys a low status identity, an assumed unwillingness to "integrate" into German "civilized" society, and stereotypes of being rural, uneducated adhering only to traditional gender norms (Deppermann 2007). Safae is interpreting the racist verbal attack from strangers and her awareness that the perpetrators are in the "wrong" by confidently saying she knows she can report them to the police. She resists the *othering* process in racist discourse that often creates an *us versus them* dichotomy. Safae challenges the framing that deviates her from white citizens not subjected to the asylum system, a common tactic used in racist discourse against racially minoritized people (Saeed 2008). Instead, she broadens her "in-group," including all mothers who choose full-time work at home, implying that any judgment she faces should also apply to white German mothers making the same choice.

Parents also actively name racism's influence on their children's school experiences. For instance, Basir recounts his son's bullying, violent attacks, and suicidal thoughts, attributing them to racism. When we asked about the reason for the bullying and attack, he said the following:

> Basir: "It was because of racism; it was utterly racism. I also personally faced this sense of racism among the people there (. . .) It was after that that my son was severely psychologically injured, and he lost his interest in education and everything. Despite his enthusiasm and interest in education he over time lost his interest and he has been highly subjected to racism, and nowadays he would probably prefer not to be in Germany. And he views most of the people as racist."

Racially minoritized people respond to racism in various ways (Andrews 2012). Research with Spanish Muslims reveals silence as a common strategy to avoid problems and fear of sanctions (Lems 2020). Basir naming racism as the reason for his son's bullying and life experiences in Germany resists color-evasive racial ideology, denying or minimizing racism and power dynamics (Neville et al. 2013).

While talking about racist experiences with white German people, mother Nawal said: "*And then something else . . . the German people also have no experience with*

other culture." Mother Nawal was attempting to understand the reasons behind the racism she experienced, asserting that the dynamics between "Germans" and "*others*" are primarily shaped by cultural distinctions, suggesting that "German culture" is fundamentally different from others. Nawal implies that these interactions will improve, resulting in fewer experiences of racism when "Germans" become acquainted with the "non-white, migrant *other.*" However, this notion aligns with the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew and Hammann 2016) which, while foundational in psychological research and present in discourse around migration, has faced criticism for its exclusive focus on "intergroup contact" to reduce prejudice and promote social justice. The assumption that it is normal for "German people" to lack encounters with the "non-white" *migrant other*, leading to discomfort and/or racist attitudes, is present in racist discourse. This idea absolves white individuals from bearing the burden of addressing racial issues and positions itself as something that white people only need to learn when they encounter the "*non-white other.*" However, white racism is ultimately a problem for white individuals, and the responsibility for interrupting it lies with them not for the "non-white" *migrant other* to persuade them of their humanity (DiAngelo 2010).

Lastly, parents seemed to strategically accommodate to ideas about the racialized hierarchy in Germany. In racialized hierarchies, different racialized groups are placed in varying orders in society, resulting in different levels of privileges (Bashi-Treitler 2015). Whiteness traditionally occupies the top position, but this order may not always be fixed (Roth, Solís, and Sue 2022). Racial proximity to whiteness can lead to increased social mobility. Colorism, which has its roots in slavery, is a pervasive issue across the globe (Ellis and Destine 2023).

> Azra: "Eh, some people have prejudices, because you can see it from how you look, for example if one comes from America, or (…)."
> Ahmed: "Or Netherlands, oh, very good!"
> Azra: "Not prejudiced, yes."
> Ahmed: "But Iraq, Afghanistan, – for example, Türkiye is good, but Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, people from there are kept at distant. And also, you can see it directly by their skin."
> Azra: "Directly you can see it (i.e. by the skin). or by their eyes."

In the first part of the extract the parents merely explain the racialized hierarchy in Germany. They position us as interviewers as being higher up (both migrated to Germany from the Netherlands) as "very good." As they introduced themselves as coming from Türkiye, they position themselves somewhere in the middle as "good" and then people from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria as being lower on the hierarchy (i.e., having less privileges) by comparing them with people from Türkiye and explaining they are kept at distance by white German people. They explain and do not resist the racialized hierarchy by stating that one can discern someone's nationality, such as Afghan or Turkish, by their skin color and eyes (i.e., 'Directly you can see it'). The perception of color and racialization is a social process influenced by national context and ideology (Gonlin, Jones, and Campbell 2019; Roth, Solís, and Sue 2022). The tendency to racialize others while being racially

minoritized oneself is commonly observed among people with relatively lighter skin tones within racialized groups. Individuals often utilize phenotypical characteristics, as established by those positioned at the top of the hierarchy, to differentiate themselves from other racialized individuals (Gans 2016). Azra and Ahmed's reasoning aligns with this pattern, given their perceived "middle" position in the hierarchy they described. However, while it can affirm their humanity and improve their own position, this aspect within racist discourse fails to challenge broader power distributions and perpetuates competition among racially minoritized individuals navigating the asylum system.

"Good Migrant"
Proving Their Humanity, Assimilation and Being Very Careful
This theme revolves around parents negotiating the dichotomy of the "Good" versus "Bad" migrant within racist discourse. Parents strategically accommodate to this discourse by stressing gratefulness, assimilation, and praising the German system. This pervasive aspect of racist discourse places immense pressure on migrants to succeed in proving their worthiness and humanity (Song 2017), often leading asylum-seeking migrants to downplay their challenges to avoid negative evaluations (Goodman et al. 2013). Essentially, being perceived as a "Good Migrant" requires delicately navigating societal expectations for inclusion.

In the following excerpt, parents Ahmed and Azra exemplify this perspective as they grapple with the complexities of fitting into a society that demands their conformity.

> Ahmed: "Our task is to take time to consider German culture or (the) German system (...) Learning, because we are guests of Germany, guests."
> Ahmed: "The children integration, integration, integration(.) first of all, the parents must do it. (...): That is, first accept everything, be respectful, and observe, how is Germany, German culture, German language, how is everything going. For example, German people are very quiet, for us, we are not very loud either, but, more than here. But we have to do that, we have to do that – yes, be careful, for example, that's just an example, small example."

Ahmed perceives adjusting and learning about "German culture" as their full responsibility ("our task"). This perspective suggests a unidirectional process where Ahmed must be active in adaptation, while others already part of society can be passive. Describing themselves as "guests" implies grappling with the belief that they are not (yet) fully integrated into society (Schinkel 2018). This aspect of racist discourse positions racially minoritized individuals who have arrived in their new country are perceived as external to society (Boersma and Schinkel 2017), thereby placing an additional burden on them, and making navigation of societal norms more challenging. Ahmed appears motivated to fulfill the societal expectation of being a "Good Migrant," viewing it as a pathway to improving their position and achieving "full integration" into society instead of remaining as guests. This approach reflects a form of strategic accommodation.

Furthermore, Ahmed elaborates on what being a "Good Migrant" entails in the German context. It means accepting everything, being respectful, and avoiding practices that might be viewed as problematic by those who are "*othering*" them. There is implicit knowledge that deviating from the expectations of a "Good Migrant" can lead to negative consequences. To protect themselves, they observe, adjust, and are careful not to upset those in more superordinate positions. Ahmed's stance regarding the expectation of being a "Good Migrant" reflects a long-term strategy, recognizing that once perceived as "integrated," they can resist from a position of greater power. This dynamic exemplifies the dialectical nature of resistance and accommodation, where individuals strategically navigate societal expectations while also asserting agency and resisting oppressive structures.

Another parent, Nawal, facing heightened vulnerability due to her family's rejected residence permit, emphasized her family's proficiency in multiple languages as she navigated the discourse surrounding being a "Good Migrant."

> Nawal: "Yes, he knows German, English, and Spanish and the other German, English and Latin and both know Arabic and Kurdish and Turkmen. But in WhatsApp, always German, but I find that very good, because we now live in Germany, German no Arabic yes."

Nawal grouped German, English, Spanish, and Latin in one group and Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen in another group, which reflects racialized hierarchies of languages, where languages and their speakers are positioned, grouped, and valued based on to which extent they are associated with whiteness (Von Esch, Motha, and Kubota 2020). Nawal seems to strategically accommodate to the belief that if one is living in Germany, one must not speak other languages to be considered a "Good Migrant" and be included (Heinemann 2017).

While many parents were deeply cognizant of the pressure to conform to the "Good Migrant" label, one parent diverged from this pattern by openly resisting and rejecting the notion of being a "Good Migrant." Safae was talking about her German not being fluent and that she is not the exception.

> Safae: "I cannot accept this thing (...). When the father and mother work all day, in our country children like this are like street children. Children also need to learn something from parents. And culture is important. We also have to learn German culture, but not forget ours."

While other parents were cautious about labeling anything German as "not good," Safae was resisting the expectation that migrants must adopt all practices considered common in Germany. She steadfastly rejects the notion that her own parenting practices or cultural beliefs are inferior and emphasizes the importance of preserving her "own culture." In contrast to most parents, who conform to the expectation of migrants to unilaterally "adjust" to be accepted in German society, Safae explicitly challenges this notion. By refusing to conform to racist ideas that dictate full assimilation as a prerequisite for belonging to German society, Safae contests ideologies that enforce subordination within racist discourse.

"Going the extra Mile"
Creativity, Persistence, and Thwarted Agency

Our final theme focuses on parents who "go the extra mile" despite educational barriers. They display remarkable dedication and resist stereotypes perpetuated by the deficit perspective. The parents' persistence aligns with the African American aphorism of working twice as hard to get half as far. Racially majoritized people are rewarded more for the same work ethic, while racially minoritized people are punished more for the same perceived passiveness (DeSante 2013). We interpret "Going the extra mile" as an act of resistance, where parents take a proactive role in shaping their children's educational path and display persistence despite encountering systemic barriers.

For instance, despite being in Germany for six months, Nawal's son faced disappointment when he was unable to attend the highest educational track (*Gymnasium*), which is the path that leads to university (Maaz, Trautwein, Lüdtke and Baumert 2008), like his brother. Nevertheless, she continued to advocate for his educational success.

> Nawal: "He was very sad because in Iraq he had a good school. (. . .) He said: 'I can't do three years in *Realschule* (intermediate track), and I want to study, and I want to do *Abitur* (leaving certificate from *Gymnasium*) and so.' And then I said there is a high school in (. . .) I went there and talked to the principal and she told us "I want to be alone with your child and I said 'no problem' (. . .) then we made an appointment and he was there and after half an hour they came out and she said 'I have possibility for your child' and I said 'what' and she said 'a trial week.' Then I looked like 'What is trial week?' Since six months it is a bit hard to know all the German words. And I said, "Could you please write it on a piece of paper, I'll do the translation at home."

Nawal took the initiative to explore a school for her son, actively engaging in his educational trajectory. Her proactive approach challenges the stereotype of passivity often associated with parents in the asylum system (Bergset 2017) and Muslim parents in Germany in general (Moffitt, Juang and Syed 2019). Neglecting the knowledge of these parents due to deficit discourse is counterproductive and hinders opportunities for success (Roy and Roxas 2011). While some parents faced challenges despite their engagement, Nawal's efforts exemplify the impact of active parental involvement in the educational context, since her son went to the highest level school in the end. While some parents shared proactive and engaged experiences, not all had success stories to share. Some encountered challenges in their efforts to support their children in the educational context, despite continuously reaching out, fighting, and advocating for their needs at school.

Father Ishaq, a parent to six school-aged children with a chronically ill wife, faced challenges in a small city after relocating from a bigger city. His daughter Samar was racially bullied by peers and teachers, prompting him to seek solutions by engaging with social workers and school authorities for a transfer to another school. Despite multiple attempts, the visit to the school authority was disappointing, as they did not want to assist and implicitly forced them to accept the situation.

Ishaq: "It's not like in (...), where we always got public transport tickets, no matter how far away. Here you only get a ticket if it is further than 2.9 kilometers. But my other daughter has a back problem. Every day I must buy a ticket for her, for 2 years. Also, for me and my son when we go to language classes. But I am unemployed, how can I pay for it? I must pay: Clothes, food, materials for schools, tickets. Otherwise, my daughter will cry. And two of our bicycles were stolen from the basement. Before in (...) we were happy, but not here."

Samar was compelled to leave school without earning a diploma, and his other children also faced difficulties at school. Months later, we encountered him at his daughter's school, where he shared all the documents and emails he had sent to the teachers. He was also meeting with the social worker to address ongoing issues with his other children. We interpret his *thwarted agency* as resistance to racist discourse because Ishaq was persistent, very involved, engaged, and did not give up (Bergset 2017) and by his actions is challenging prevailing ideas in racist discourse that racially minoritized parents are passive and do not care about their children's trajectory. In addition, as resistance is a practice to undermine power structures, it does not need a specific outcome (Vinthagen and Johansson 2019). Despite Ishaq's persistence and active engagement, individual agency and resistance alone are insufficient for racially minoritized parents in the asylum system to overcome educational inequities. The educational institutions are structured and organized to cater to racially privileged groups and policies that sustain inequities and restrict families subjected to the asylum system, underscoring the necessity for systemic reforms to combat racism within the educational sphere.

General Discussion

In this study, we drew upon social constructionism to explore meanings beyond participants' explicit communication (Hammersley 2018). We aimed to understand resistance and accommodation in their diverse forms, recognizing that resistance does not always require conscious intent (Vinthagen and Johansson 2019).

As Europe remains a destination for families seeking asylum due to war, climate change, economic instability, imperialism, and political turmoil, it is crucial to understand how systemic racism, including immigration and education policies, shapes individuals' experiences and opportunities. Anti-Muslim racism across Europe also demands attention, especially in the face of heightened anti-Muslim policies and sentiments (Bayrakli and Hafez 2021). Our analysis showed that some racially minoritized parents demonstrated resistance against harmful aspects of racist discourse, even in restrictive and oppressive circumstances. However, it was also evident that all parents engaged in a form of accommodation, aligning themselves with harmful norms to survive and get ahead in a society that is set up for them to fail. This aligns with prior research suggesting that accommodation often serves as a more secure pathway to success within existing structures. By shedding light on the complexities of resistance and accommodation, our research deepens our understanding of how these individuals navigate oppressive systems and discourses as they engage in daily life in Germany, particularly in relation to the

school system. Moreover, recognizing, valuing, and researching informal and furtive expressions of resistance help challenge deficit narratives of oppressed people (Rosales and Langhout 2020). Our analysis illustrates that racially minoritized parents neither passively accept their circumstances nor possess unrestricted agency. Instead, they employ a variety of strategies, alternately balancing what is most useful in specific contexts (Weitz 2001).

Limitations and Future Research

It is crucial to consider broader discourse and the influence of positionality on defining resistance and accommodation. None of the authors of this article are Muslim, have roots in the SWANA region, or have the experiences with the asylum system in Germany, unlike the interviewees. As researchers, we acknowledge that we are not neutral and unaffected by racist discourses. Particularly in the study of strategies employed by marginalized individuals, future research should involve researchers with diverse positionalities to ensure comprehensive understanding, as our interpretations are inevitably shaped by our own backgrounds and experiences.

While our interviewees were all subjected to the asylum system and experienced anti-Muslim racism, they were diverse in gender, country of origin, number of children, educational background, and religious identification. Recognizing that individuals exist within an intersection of power dynamics, they can occupy different positions of power in various contexts (Vinthagen and Johansson 2019). For instance, Safae's relatively higher financial status compared to other parents may have facilitated her ability to engage in more resistance, as compared to, for example, Ishaq, who was more restricted. Future research should therefore prioritize intersectionality, examining how factors such as gender, class, country of origin, and specific asylum status intersect to shape personal experiences. This analysis could reveal patterns in how some individuals are more restricted than others and in various ways navigate racist discourses.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has implications for policy and practice, particularly in Germany's education system. Educators, policymakers, and institutions must acknowledge and address the pervasive ways in which racism constrains and shapes the experiences and opportunities of families subjected to the asylum system, which are often still under acknowledged. Policies and interventions supporting people subjected to the asylum system should also invest in counter spaces where these parents can affirm their identities, engage in, and foster resistance alongside individuals who share similar positionalities and intersections of identities in German society, consequently leading to greater well-being (Lopez-Leon and Casanova 2023; Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011).

Although interventions and support should target people subjected to the asylum system, this study highlights the many barriers both intentionally and unintentionally enacted by those *not* subjected to this system. The onus of responsibility for change cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of those

navigating oppressive systems. Providing professional development addressing the racialization of migrants, *othering*, and racist discourse among teachers, student teachers, staff, and researchers is essential, as is providing information on the detrimental effects of asylum procedures and how best to support newly arriving families navigating inequitable school systems (Kovinthan 2016).

Data Accessibility Statement. The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research and the fact that participants are subjected to the asylum system and an educational system that continuously marginalizes them, supporting data is not available.

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