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Challenging Muslim Family Practices – Investigating a Danish Policy Initiative's Reception by Its Target Group

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Nation states want to control their populations, including how they reproduce. In the present era of migration, this involves not only restricting marriage migration from ethnic minorities' countries of origin, but also involves attempts to affect Muslim marriages within their borders, as some such marriages can be considered 'anti-modern' and a potential threat to the state. Taking a governmentality approach – how states seek to shape 'the conduct of conduct' of its citizens – I explore the workings of a Danish policy initiative entitled the 'Dialogue Corps'. The Corps members, who all have an ethnic minority background, conduct workshops with the particular aim of reducing parental involvement in ethnic minority youth's partner choices. Based on observations and interview data, I document how workshop participants may actively resist Corps members' problematisation of their intimate practices. Instead, participants both challenge the view that majority Danish practices are inherently superior and point out that state interference may make lives worse, rather than better, in ethnic minority families. While the policy initiative has the stated aim of improving the lives of ethnic minority youth, it may instead (re)produce notions of these youth as 'Other', thus positioning them unfavourably within hierarchical schemes of cultural and racial difference.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, legislative changes in many European countries have made it increasingly difficult for immigrants and their offspring to marry partners from abroad (Bech & Mouritsen 2013; de Hart 2015; Eggebø & Brekke 2019). While considering Michel Foucault's term 'biopolitics' (Apatinga 2017; Foucault 1980; Lemke 2001), the tightened policies can be seen as a means to protect neoliberal nation states from the perceived harmful consequences of outside influences. In fact, changing border regimes has increasingly turned national borders into moral borders, especially in seeking to outlaw Muslim-arranged marriages, which are perceived to be 'anti-modern' and a threat not only to the young individuals in question, but also to the state (Bissenbakker 2019; Fernandez 2013; Liversage & Rytter 2015).

Policy initiatives targeting the family practices of ethnic minorities also occur within the territory of the state, even though such initiatives hitherto have received less research attention. Inside state borders, however, intimate practices play out in the private domain and, contrary to immigration-related practices, these practices are difficult to alter through direct political intervention. Instead, states may resort to attempts to affect the 'conduct of conduct' of its citizens, so that subjects change themselves in the desired ways (Foucault 1991; Walters 2015). Departing from Foucault's scholarship of governmentality, in this article I investigate a state initiative aimed at altering the intimate practices of ethnic minority youth in Denmark. The 'Dialogue Corps' has a stated aim to 'promote changes in attitudes related to equality, marriage, individuals' rights etcetera' among ethnic minorities.[1] The primary goal of the initiative is to make ethnic minority youth actively resist the perceived negative influences of parents, culture and religion. Taking a realist approach to analysing governmentality (Stenson 2005), I use ethnographic data to render visible the concrete ways in which the target audience receives this governing activity (McKee 2009). Drawing on Carol Bacchi's approach, entitled 'WPR – What is the Problem Represented to be?' (Bacchi 2009), I ask the question: *In what ways do the ethnic minority target group resist the Dialogue Corp's representations of problems regarding their family practices*?

Before presenting the method and data underpinning the analysis, I discuss in greater depth how ethnic minority family practices have increasingly become an issue that states seek to actively 'improve'.

THE CONTESTED NATURE OF ETHNIC MINORITY FAMILY PRACTICES

Across the globe, different norms contribute to shaping how, when and with whom young individuals engage in intimate relations (Therborn 2004), and migration brings different types of family formations into contact. Although the 'love' marriage is historically a relatively recent phenomenon, tied to structural changes in societies from the 18th century onwards (Wardlow & Hirsch 2006), it is now the unquestioned ideal in a country such as Denmark. Other ways of entering a marriage (e.g., through a family arrangement) are considered suspect (Berta 2023; Block 2014; Bonjour & de Hart 2013; Rytter 2012). Overall, there is a trend of secular nation states instrumentalising 'the freedom to choose whom to marry' to enable/disable certain kinds of marriages

1 https://uim.dk/arbejdsomrader/aeresrelaterede-konflikter-og-negativ-social-kontrol/tilbud-og-vaerktojer-til-fagfolk/vaerktojskassen (translation by the author).

(Moors & Vroon-Najem 2019). State concern over the family formation practices of particularly Muslim minorities is also evident in ongoing debates on how to deal with 'Muslim marriages', which operate outside the realm of state law (Akhtar, Probert & Moors 2018).

Due to concerns about both immigration and ethnic minority youth's perceived lack of individual freedom, the Danish government has for more than two decades sought to affect the family formation processes of ethnic minorities (Liversage & Rytter 2014). As elsewhere in Europe, one stated aim is to protect the welfare of young females in ethnic minorities by combatting forced marriages (Chantler et al. 2009; Razack 2004; Sabbe et al. 2014). While pressure to enter into unwanted marriages is an undeniable challenge for some young women (and also for some young men) (Begum et al. 2020; Chantler & McCarry 2015; Mayeda & Vijaykumar 2016), issues of sexuality and gender equality among ethnic minorities have come to serve a broader political agenda. Thus, such issues now 'figure as rallying points around which differences between the "enlightened" secular West and the "backward" Islamic East become articulated and performed' (Cense 2014: 837). The contrast is established between Western society – considered the epitome of gender equality and individual freedom – and a repressive Muslim 'Other' (Shanneik & Vahle 2023; Yılmaz 2015).

For example, the way in which Danish policy problematises the family practices of ethnic minority families is evident in a document entitled 'National Action Plan to Prevent Honour-related Conflicts and Negative Social Control' (The Government 2016). The preamble states the following:

> Young women and men in Denmark are coerced into marriage. Children are sent on re-education journeys,[2] because parents think they have become too Danish. Youngsters and adults are exposed to extreme social control, and – because of repressive understandings of gender, religion and cultural norms – are deprived of their self-determination over their own body and life. (The Government 2016) [translation by the author]

This preamble thus lays the groundwork for interventions aimed at fostering change. The passage frames parents as culprits who expose younger offspring to undue control and coerce older offspring into marriage, and also suggests that religion is a potential source of repression. Echoing the colonial desire of 'saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988), the aim of the action plan seems to be 'saving brown youngsters from brown parents' to ensure their ability to live as free and independent individuals in a liberal society (Jaffe-Walter 2019).

While intimate practices unfolding across state borders can be affected by modifying visa requirements, changing intimate practices within a nation-state territory is less straightforward. Calling on Foucault's concept of 'governmentality', states may attempt to afford such changes by making individuals act upon their 'conduct of conduct'. Such changes are thus akin to states seeking to make individuals change their diet or begin exercising more in order to lead healthier lives and transform themselves into 'better' (and more productive) citizens (Cisney 2016; McKee 2009).

2 'Re-education journey' is a literal translation of the Danish term 'genopdragelses-rejse'. The word normally connotes a child or young person from an immigrant family involuntarily being sent to the parent's country of origin. Such journeys are commonly believed to occur due to youth having become 'too Westernised', including females having become romantically involved in ways that parents find unacceptable. The empirical reality of such journeys is, however, somewhat more complex (Reisel, Bredal & Lidén 2018; Tiilikainen 2011).

The desired direction of change is towards the practices of the majority Danish population, who are considered to have exactly the 'self-determination over their own body and life' that ethnic minorities are perceived as lacking. With sexuality closely tied to the formation and reproduction of both ethnic minority groups and nation states (Yuval-Davis 1997), intimate practices thus become an index for belonging (Abboud, Jemmott & Sommers 2015; Ayuandini & Duyvendak 2018; Jaffe-Walter 2017). Related to a universal struggle involving territory and populations (Stenson 2005), liberal states depend on the loyalty of their subjects. Such states thus have an interest in family formation arising from the free choice of self-governing individuals unencumbered by loyalties to family networks or tribes (Povinelli 2002).

One way in which states seek to shape the 'conduct of conduct' of individuals is by affecting what is considered 'right' and 'normal', and hence desirable. In the remainder of the article, I unpack how a policy initiative seeking to effect such changes in the practices of private spaces unfolds 'on the ground' by providing observations and data from the ethnic minority target group whose practices the initiative seeks to transform.

METHOD AND DATA

The investigated initiative, the 'Dialogue Corps', was initiated in 2009. Run by SIRI, the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (a subdivision of the Ministry of Immigration and Integration), all members of the Dialogue Corps have an ethnic minority background, either as immigrants or as descendants of immigrants. The primary activity of the Corps has been 3-hour workshops for youth or parents with ethnic minority backgrounds.[3] The present study combines observations and interview data gathered between January 2018 and May 2020.[4] At that time, the Corps was striving to hold 60 annual workshops, and while these were free for participants, SIRI remunerated Corps members for their work. In August 2020, there were 14 active members of the Dialogue Corps.

The data set includes ethnographic observation data from 21 workshops. We selected workshops for observation based on achieving maximum variety; geographically, we participated in workshops in both the capital and in larger and smaller towns across Denmark. Regarding the age of the participants, 14 workshops were with youngsters and seven with parents. Settings for the workshops also varied and included public schools, after-school clubs, cafes in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and immigrant organisations. Youth participants spanned school pupils, teenagers participating in mentorship programs and recently arrived refugees in their early 20s at specialised schooling facilities. The workshops for parents mainly targeted individuals who had limited contact with mainstream Danish society and who, in many cases, did not speak the Danish language well. Hence, parental workshops often made use of translators. The data also includes four observations at competence-building events for Corps members, organised by SIRI employees.

Another source of data is interviews conducted with workshop participants and stakeholders, in most cases after a workshop has ended. These include nine

3 Corps members also deliver presentations to front-line workers, but such activities are outside the scope of this study.

4 The data originates from a SIRI-financed project investigating three different Danish policy initiatives, aimed at preventing honour-related conflicts or radicalization (Liversage & Mehlsen, 2021; Mehlsen & Liversage, 2019).

individual and five focus-group interviews with participants aged 15 and over. Fourteen interviews were with the stakeholders who had solicited the workshops, while seven individual and two focus-group interviews were with Corps members. Finally, two interviews involved the SIRI employees in charge of running the initiative. Hence, the article draws on 39 interviews (with a larger number of individuals) and 25 examples of observation data. The interviews generally lasted between 15 and 30 minutes (when the topic was responses to workshops) to over an hour (in Corps member interviews). This study received research ethics approval from our institution. We obtained informed consent from all participants who partook in interviews.[5]

The interview format varied according to the different categories of respondents. Thus, Corps members were asked about how they found their way into the Corps and their experiences with both concrete workshops (including observed ones) and with the organisation of the initiative. Interviews with participants occurred after workshops, and the questions focused on participants' experiences with the initiative. Interviews with, for example, teachers who had commissioned a workshop focused on their reasons for doing so, their experience of the workshop, and their thoughts on the fit between the initiative and the needs of the specific target group. I and a number of research assistants taped and transcribed all interviews. For the observation studies, we typed all the notes. In nine cases, we supplemented these notes with verbatim transcriptions of selected parts of workshop interaction, based on our sound recordings. When I present quotes from interviews or observations, the names used are pseudonyms, and excerpts include no identifiable personal details.

In the next sections, I first expand on my analytical approach. I then use the Dialogue Corps data material to investigate how a policy initiative aimed at affecting change in the intimate practices of ethnic minority youth translates from a political ambition into something practical (Rose & Miller 2010: 181–182).

ANALYTICAL APPROACH – 'WPR – WHAT IS THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE?'

The article departs from Carol Bacchi's 'WPR – What is the Problem Represented to be?' approach (Bacchi 2009). Inspired by the discourse analysis of Foucault, Bacchi points out that policy is fundamentally about solving problems. A 'problem', however, does not have an objective existence (Bacchi 2010; Rose & Miller 2010). Instead, it can be conceptualised as arising from a 'problematisation', through which certain political 'problems' (and not others) come into existence. As Bacchi points out:

> Commonly, governments are seen to be reacting to 'problems' and trying to solve them. The rethinking proposed here highlights that specific proposals (or ways of talking about a 'problem') impose a particular interpretation upon the issue. In this sense, governments create 'problems', rather than reacting to them, meaning that they create particular impressions of what the 'problem' is. Importantly, these impressions translate into real and meaningful effects for those affected. (Bacchi 2010: 2)

5 Regarding the observations, we gained consent to take notes in 16 cases and were allowed to also make sound recordings in nine cases. When observations took place among school pupils below the age of 16, we also informed parents about our study. Parental consent was not needed, according to the present Danish guidelines.

To investigate such 'real and meaningful effects', I apply what Stenson (2005) terms a 'realist governmentality' approach – a '… grounded, empirical, realist analysis of governing practices' (Stenson 2005: 266). Developed in a response to the …

> '… rather abstract and text centred approaches that have tended to dominate governmentality studies, this mixed-methods approach gives more attention to the empirical concerns of social policy by examining particular mentalities of rule in their local context' (McKee 2009: 467).

The [realist] approach is sensitive to time and place and has a strong focus on the subjects, including their strategies of resistance. The analysis thus provides insights into how nation states attempt to exercise 'biopolitics' in the face of increasing population diversity and its reception by its audience (Stenson 2008).

As stated earlier in this article, the political ambition of the Dialogue Corps is for its activities to 'promote changes in attitudes related to equality, marriage, individuals' rights etcetera'. As indicated in the title of the initiative, the path to this intended change is to foster a dialogue with the ethnic minority participants. Dialogue involves linguistic turn-taking between two or more parties, which has been called 'the atom of the human world' (Jenkins 2008: 78). In this exchange, Corps members' guidelines state that they should be 'appreciative' of participants' viewpoints, but must also 'challenge norms' in an attempt to foster reflection and hopefully engender change in the desired direction (Ministry of Immigration and Integration and SIRI 2017).

My analytical strategy is to investigate how this ambition plays out on the ground, with a particular focus on participant resistance to the political agenda. By conducting a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005), the coding revealed multiple cases where workshop participants questioned Corps members' 'problem representation'. In the next section, I first introduce the Dialogue Corps workshops before discussing examples of the three most prominent types of resistance.

THE DIALOGUE CORPS WORKSHOPS

The Dialogue Corps workshops are intended to mediate between the practices of the majority and of ethnic minorities. Hence, the workshops serve as a kind of 'organised cultural encounter' (Christiansen, Galal & Hvenegaard-Lassen 2017; Wilson 2013). As SIRI only recruits ethnic minorities (predominantly Muslims) as Corps members, these members come to act as a kind of 'intercultural mediators' in these encounters (Agustí-Panareda 2006; Nieuwboer & van't Rood 2016). Such a 'cultural broker' approach may sometimes (Lien & Schultz 2013), but not always (Lindekilde 2012), be effective when devising interventions aimed at promoting change in ethnic minority populations.

Practically, the workshops make use of a variety of exercises and 'tools' to facilitate relevant group discussions. One tool is 'dilemma stories' related to private life and/or self-determination issues, which Corps members present in order to start a discussion. Other tools include 'chair games', where Corps members read various statements out loud. These statements include 'It is acceptable to have sex before marriage' and 'I think it is right for parents to decide who their children marry'. Workshop participants then have to sit or stand to show agreement or not with a given statement. This approach seeks to ensure that all workshop participants express their views and enables the Corps members to pose questions for them to consider.

Below, I present cases from three different workshops, which are all based on verbatim transcriptions of the dialogue that took place. As stated in the above policy documents, in these workshops, the Corps' work is designed to 'promote changes in attitudes related to equality, marriage, individuals' rights etcetera' among ethnic minorities, to help them rally against being 'deprived of their self-determination over their own body and life'.

RESISTING A PROBLEMATISATION I – PARENTAL INFLUENCE CAN BE A GOOD THING

The first example comes from a workshop with 14 ethnic minority teenagers. After a number of warm-up exercises, participants were asked to physically indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements, one of which was: 'You should do what your family thinks is best, even if you do not agree'. One 16-year-old girl, Fatma, who expressed agreement with the statement, was asked to elaborate on her view, and the dialogue evolved as follows:

> *Corps member*: [Points to Fatma, who has raised her hand]. Go ahead – what do you want to say?
>
> *Fatma*: Often, you feel as if listening to your parents is a bad thing. As if: 'You should always listen to yourself!' But you shouldn't, really. Sometimes you need advice. Personally, when I have to make a big decision – education, marriage – I really want to hear what my mother thinks. Because she is rational and she has more life experience than I have. And I think that if I wanted to marry, and my mother was against the guy, and came with some good arguments, I really think I would listen to her.
>
> *Corps member*: But what if you didn't agree with her?
>
> *Fatma*: That depends if my arguments are based on emotions, or if they, too, are rational. I think they should be based on facts, and not on emotions (some of the other girls applaud)
>
> (...). It is not just about love. You are going to have children, and it is supposed to last for many years.

Fatma disagrees with the understanding that she should resist parental interference in her personal decisions, arguing instead that parents are wise. She might thus attribute greater importance to parental concerns about a potential suitor than to her own emotions. In doing so, Fatma problematises the view that romantic love is necessarily a sound basis for a long-term relationship and points to the possible advantages of other ways of entering into relationships (Brettell 2017; Pande 2014; Shanneik & Vahle 2023).

Centrally, Fatma argues that relationships based solely on love may be unstable – a particularly thorny issue when children become involved. Indeed, more Danish children experience family break-ups than children whose parents are immigrants from countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq or Lebanon (Liversage & Petersen 2020, p. 146). Ayse is, however, well aware that her position contrasts with the dominant view in Denmark, where ethnic minority youth's listening to their parents 'is a bad thing'. In a number of workshops with both youths and adults, we heard similar responses that countered the Dialogue Corps' problematisation with the view that parental interference in the private matters of youth could indeed be positive.

RESISTING A PROBLEMATISATION II – ETHNIC MINORITY PARENTS HAVE 'TOO LITTLE' CONTROL

Another way in which participants resisted the Dialogue Corps' approach was to question the premise that there was generally 'too much' parental control in ethnic minority families. We primarily encountered this problematisation in workshops with parents, where the focus was the broader issues of freedom versus control when bringing up children.

One example emerged during a workshop in an immigrant activity centre with 16 women, two translators (in Somali and Urdu) and two Corps members. The topic of this Dialogue Corps workshop was 'negative social control', a term that has entered Danish policy mainly to denote parental 'control or sanctions, which significantly inhibits or limits individuals' life expression, behaviour, choices and rights' (Government 2016: 9, own translation). Such control, which is seen as being at odds with life in Denmark, is considered a potential precursor for parents pressuring children regarding marriage at older ages.

Unsurprisingly, the participating women had little inclination to agree with the way their parenthood was problematised. Instead, they tried to reframe the discussion to position themselves in a more positive light. Thus, through the translators, one woman said that rather than *controlling* her daughter, she was *protecting* her. Nevertheless, she still feared that her daughters would '… go to town, get drunk and be raped, because young women are vulnerable', underscoring the need for such parental protection. Another woman added that, as parents, their ability to protect their children from such dangers was hampered by their fears of being reported to the social authorities. Such fears – including having one's children removed by the social authorities, are a pervasive concern in vulnerable ethnic minority families (Haga 2014; Johansen 2019). Another woman attempted another way of reframing the discussion; she noted that while children did complain about their parents, they also complained about society due to their experiences of discrimination.

These interjections did not, however, lead to much discussion. Given the uneven power balance between the Corps members and the participants, the former repeatedly returned the debate to the issue of 'negative social control' within ethnic minority families. When doing so, they closed down participants' attempts to discuss, for example, perceived problems related to issues such as discrimination or fears related to Danish social policy. The result was a rather stunted debate.

The view that the problem often was ethnic minority parents having too little, rather than too much, control over their children was also echoed in the stakeholder interview at the end of the workshop:

> *Immigrant activity centre employee I*: [The parents] feel very powerless. They are not in charge. The social authorities or the school intervene and decide how their lives should be. And since they are welfare recipients they have to do as they are told.
>
> *Immigrant activity centre employee II*: Already from the 2nd or 3rd grade, the children are being equipped with hotline phone numbers, and told: 'If your parents hit you or anything, then you can call'.

Bringing up children in a new and foreign context can be very challenging (Friberg & Bjørnset 2019; Ochocka & Janzen 2008), and parental authority may come to

be undermined, a development that can have adverse consequences for children (Drummond Johansen & Varvin 2020; Martinez, McClure & Eddy 2009). Along the same line of reasoning – and contrary to the dominant political discourse in Denmark – a relatively high level of parental control in ethnic minority families may be an important protective factor when it comes to avoiding educational drop-outs and youth delinquency (Engebrigtsen 2007; Moldenhawer 2005). Such control is particularly important, as many families live in poor neighbourhoods where crime rates are high (Tiilikainen 2015). A policy initiative that aims at empowering youth – in their upbringing in general and regarding partner choice in particular – thus risks undermining the already-weak parental authority. The end result may, in fact, be detrimental to the youth involved.

RESISTING A PROBLEMATISATION III – IT CAN BE LEGITIMATE TO FOLLOW RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES

The final example of responding to a problematisation embedded in the Dialogue Corps' approach concerns a discussion regarding the ways in which religion may influence the intimate practices of youth. The example is taken from a workshop with 22 participants. Most were 15-to-20-year-old ethnic minority males, and some were their mentors – adults who had volunteered to give the young men one-on-one support. At one point in the workshop, the participants were all asked to indicate whether or not they thought it was acceptable to marry a woman who had had sex with other men. Most participants stated that this would be acceptable, but tied their acceptance to a variety of prerequisites, such as the woman's former husband having died. However, one participant pointed out that he – as a devout Muslim – would expect both himself and his future wife to be sexually innocent. Summing up the discussion, the female Corps member first pointed out that the young men in general did not show unconditional support for young women having sex before marriage, even though many of the men had themselves been sexually active. She then turned to the religious young man, Ali, and the dialogue progressed as follows:

> *Corps member*: Why do you choose to explain yourself with Islam?
>
> *Ali*: Because that is my belief – my own belief.
>
> *Corps member*: And it [= belief and outlook on life] can be affected by all sorts of things, clearly. By experiences, by things from your past, which makes you into who you are today.
>
> *Ali*: Yes, but it will also be my sole belief – I cannot really have any other beliefs than the one I have, can I?
>
> *Corps member*: And that is just fine. You are just the target now (laughs).
>
> *Mentor*: But your own belief can very well be a religiously founded belief.
>
> *Corps member*: Yes, but the challenge may be that one doesn't dare admit – not even to oneself – that one might think a bit differently than how one was raised. Regardless of religion or culture or whatever. And it can be a bit difficult to come out to yourself and to others, and admit that 'I don't agree with this'. And I just felt I sensed something like that in this room just before – or am I wrong?
>
> [Silence, as nobody replies].

The above excerpt was part of a longer exchange where the Corps members were critical of the young men's expectations that future spouses should preferably be sexually inexperienced upon marriage. In many parts of the world, including many predominantly Muslim countries, there are strong norms against female premarital sex in particular (Cindoglu et al. 2011; King 2008; Payton 2015). Such norms may retain their importance after migration, thus affecting the norms and practices of ethnic minority youth. Therefore, studies show both how young immigrant women may place considerable importance on pre-marital chastity and see it as a way to uphold their ethnic identification (Abboud, Jemmott & Sommers 2015; Amer, Howarth & Sen 2015) and how ethnic minority women may be critical of a 'double standard' where chastity is considered an issue for women far more than for men (Aboulhassan & Brumley 2019; Ayuandini 2017; Cense 2014).

By stating that he himself would also be sexually 'pure' when entering marriage, the workshop participant, Ali, did not hold such a double standard. Instead, he tied his view closely to Islam's prohibition of premarital sex. In the interaction, the Corps member questioned whether Ali's stated view was indeed his 'true' opinion or not and sought to have him 'admit' that he, himself, held a view that differed from the one embedded in his 'religion or culture or whatever'. This insistence that the religious young man could be a victim of 'false consciousness' does not align well with the Dialogue Corps' stated aim to be 'appreciative'. The Corps member's response to Ali's views certainly piqued the stakeholder who had solicited the workshop, a mature woman with a majority Danish background. In a subsequent interview, she stated that '… it became a lot like: "Who is right?" Instead of: "That is his perspective; fine" … It became a lot like: "He is not allowed to feel that way"'.

The workshop interaction quoted above resembles one that occurred between an English teacher and a female Muslim pupil in Jaffe-Walter's study of a Danish public school (2013: 622). Jaffe-Walter's case concerns a teacher initiating a class discussion on sexuality. The teacher questions an ethnic minority pupil on her views about entering into a relationship with a 'blond Danish boy', which the pupil says she would never do.

In both Jaffe-Walter's case and the above-quoted Dialogue Corps case, it is the more powerful interlocutor (the teacher/the Corps member) who initiates a discussion related to sexuality. The ethnic minority participant (a female pupil/Ali) stating personal views that deviate from the majority Danish norm leads to repeated questioning, seemingly to elicit another, more 'acceptable', response. Another common trait is that this questioning leads to a growing tension, which culminates with a tense silence in the room (Bengtsson & Fynbo 2017). With specific forms of sexual practices being closely aligned with national identity (Ayuandini & Duyvendak 2018; Cense 2014; Jaffe-Walter 2016), such interchanges contribute to casting individuals who adhere to an Islamic norm as 'outsiders' who are out of place in the Danish nation, and may thus end up marginalising young individuals rather than helping and supporting them (Jaffe-Walter 2016).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on interviews and observational data related to a policy initiative sponsored by the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration, I have investigated the various problematisations involved during Dialogue Corps workshops in practice (Bacchi 2009; McKee 2009). Hence, the article contributes to informing us about how a particular

policy unfolds 'on the ground', when it meets its intended target group (Stenson 2005). In the Corps' approach, the 'problem' is that the expectations of ethnic minority parents, culture and religion circumscribe the lives of youth, making them unfree and unhappy. The 'solution' is thus that youth should rebel against the outdated modes of their ethnic minority surroundings, and parents should allow their children more freedom. Such changes would allow young ethnic minorities to live freer, happier (and 'more Danish') lives. If young individuals resist this change, they may be perceived as harbouring a 'false consciousness', and not know what is best for them.

While some workshop participants may agree with the above problematisation, others will not. A contrasting position, which some of the participating ethnic minorities espouse, is that the 'problem' is that diaspora life is challenging, as minorities suffer discrimination and live in poor urban areas where life is dangerous due to high levels of crime (Tiilikainen 2015). In this context, parental guidance gains heightened importance if children are to enter adulthood safely and embark on lives in good families of their own. The state exacerbates the challenges facing families when it deliberately seeks to undermine parental authority with a discourse of children's rights and the threat of removing children from the family home (Haga 2014; Johansen 2019). According to this view, the 'solution' is less, rather than more, state interference in family matters. Hence, the state should respect different ways of life, including more religiously informed ones. With less pressure on family life, caring and wise parents will be able to guide their children, including in how to form their own families.

In linguistic turn-taking, which has been called 'the atom of the human world' (Jenkins 2008: 78), these two opposing views meet in workshop dialogues considering what should be considered 'right' and 'normal', and hence desirable. The data shows us that these dialogues are not symmetrical, given that the Corps members are in charge of the discussion. Through their initiations and evaluations (Mehan 1979), the Corps members have a large measure of control over which topics are opened up or closed down, and they are the ones who address workshop participants looking for answers to particular questions. When participants begin questioning, for example, established Danish practices or values, Corps members often close down the discussion in order to 'get back on track', and discuss the perceived problematic nature of ethnic minority family life rather than broader issues related to life in Danish society.

The data thus reveals the built-in contradictions of an initiative that aims to be 'appreciative' while also promoting change in a given direction. When Corps members (who were generally skilled and competent individuals) respond to participants, they usually evaluate viewpoints according to how well such views align with the values embedded in the underlying state policies. Regardless of the caring intentions, which are also a part of the initiative, this often seems to end up marginalising those it was intended to support. This dynamic corresponds with a general Danish approach to 'integration', which often amounts to telling 'them' to become more like 'us' (Rytter 2019). The initiative can thus be seen as an expression of 'coercive concern' directed towards Muslim youth (Jaffe-Walter 2016).

While 'concern' generally has positive connotations, the 'coercive' aspect of the approach may feed into a negative dynamic where perceived experiences of marginalisation may make ethnic minorities attach increased importance to the practices of their countries of origin. Such 'reactive ethnicity' (Rumbaut 2008) contributes to increasing and heightening value differences in societies rather than reducing them over time (Maliepaard & Alba 2016). Another potential negative consequence of initiatives

such as the Dialogue Corps is that when some practices and issues are singled out as problematic, others are simultaneously sidelined. The data illustrates how the initiative thus leaves little room for discussing, for example, whether majority Danish family practices (where the divorce rate is high) can also be problematic or discussing the challenges arising from experiences of discrimination. Similarly, a study on sex education in the Netherlands points out that a preoccupation with affecting change among ethnic minority pupils (including making such pupils less homophobic) results in little attention being paid to addressing the presence of homonegativity, especially among male pupils with a majority Dutch background (Krebbekx 2019).

A final, but central, point is that in a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', the call for ethnic minorities to become (more) 'Danish' may in reality be rather illusory. In a Scandinavian context, where equality is closely associated with sameness (Gullestad 2002), the 'visible difference' of ethnic minorities originating from, for example, the Middle East currently seems to pose an insurmountable challenge to their full inclusion in the Danish nation (Skadegård & Jensen 2018). As professor of sociology Richard Jenkins states in his book 'Being Danish', a … 'new notion of *danskhed* [Danishness] is needed: not axiomatically Christian, less prescriptive, and accommodating of visible differences' (2011: 305). In such a less-prescriptive context, ethnic minority youth could possibly experience acceptance, regardless of the ways in which their intimate practices unfold, therefore rendering superfluous initiatives such as the one investigated here. An initiative with the stated aim of improving the life situation of ethnic minority youth may instead (re)produce notions of these youth as 'Other', thus positioning them unfavourably within hierarchical schemes of racial and cultural difference.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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