

Mélodine Sommer

Constructing the Secular Imagined Community

A Critical Intercultural Analysis of
Discourses of Laïcité from *Le Monde*



JYVÄSKYLÄ STUDIES IN HUMANITIES 296

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«Le vent souffle et certains pensent que la tempête est là. Admettons que le diagnostic soit exact ... Alors, la stratégie du chêne peut en séduire beaucoup. Et pourtant, l'école laïque me l'a appris, c'est le roseau subtil qui plie et ne rompt pas.» (Baubérot, 2003)

ABSTRACT

Sommier, Mélodine

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The concept of secularism encompasses numerous aspects beyond the regulation of relations between the State and Churches. Using a critical intercultural communication framework, this research project explores the interplay between secularism, culture, religion, identity, and collective representations. Specifically, this study focuses on *laïcité*, the concept of secularism used in France. Previous studies have criticized *laïcité* for being biased and contributing to inequalities between communities in France. The pervasive (and false) representation of *laïcité* as originally and exclusively French has also been criticized. In the light of the concerns raised by previous studies, this study sets out to investigate (1) how knowledge about *laïcité* was constructed in a selection of articles from the newspaper *Le Monde* and (2) with which implications regarding power relations in France. This research project is informed by social constructionism and draws on concepts from critical intercultural communication, cultural and feminist studies, and a Foucaultian approach to discourse. This study includes four articles, one theoretical and three empirical. The first one explores how culture has been tackled in recent media studies and reflects on the use of critical intercultural communication to examine the construction of cultural realities in media texts. All three other articles use data from the newspaper *Le Monde* to respectively look at (i) *strategic uses of the concept of culture* as opposed to religion, (ii) *collective memories* evoked to associate *laïcité* with specific representations of the imagined community, and (iv) *identity categories* made relevant in discourses of *laïcité*. Results draw attention to the complexity, variety, and agency of using culture as a discursive resource. Findings reveal ways in which culture can be strategically evoked to normalize representations and emphasize differences between practices and individuals. This research project offers insights into post-racial expressions of racism and their practical implications as regards categorizations of individuals.

Keywords: critical intercultural communication, culture, *laïcité*, France, identity, imagined community, media representations, power

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FOREWORD

As I look back over my journey as a doctoral student, I feel extremely lucky. Receiving funding from the Faculty of Humanities throughout my doctoral studies and having an office at the Department of Communication have made it possible for me to fully focus on my work. I am incredibly thankful for that, and I wish every doctoral student could work in the same optimum conditions.

I took several detours before finding myself as a researcher and I am extremely grateful to my supervisors for letting me choose my own path and topic. I would like to wholeheartedly thank both of them for their support. First, Professor Stephen Croucher who invited me countless times to join him on research projects and conferences across continents. Those opportunities have helped me sharpen my academic skills throughout my doctoral studies. Thank you for looking after me over the years and for guiding me onto my next big adventure here in the Netherlands. Second, Senior Lecturer Marko Siitonen who supervised me throughout my Master's thesis and onwards to my Doctoral thesis. You are the first person who made me realize that research was something I enjoyed doing. I have very fond memories of our supervision meetings over coffee during which I learnt a lot from your comments and insights about ethics and research. Thank you for always being so supportive and encouraging!

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The Department of Communication has been a very welcoming and joyful community where I had the privilege to work with generous, friendly, and bright colleagues. Marke, Grethi, Joanna, Diyako, Cheng: thank you for all the hard work and for the fun times! Within that work community I found a small home in L170. Thank you Eveliina, Tomi, and Anne for turning our office into such a fantastic room where creativity had no limits.

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Mélodie Sommier
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- II. Sommier, M. (2016). Strategic uses and oppositions: 'Culture' as a discursive resource in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* about secularism. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- III. Sommier, M. (2016). Memories as a discursive strategy: Exploring representations of laïcité and Frenchness in articles from *Le Monde*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- IV. Sommier, M. (2016). Representations of individuals in discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde*: confirming or challenging the republican framework of identity? *Social Identities, Journal for the study of Race, Nation and Culture*. Ahead-of-print. doi:10.1080/13504630.2016.1179569

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and motivation of the study

The concept of secularism in France, *laïcité*, has triggered discussions, raised questions, and been at the center of several societal and political conflicts over the past decades. The polemics related to *laïcité* in France hint at larger issues related to contemporary processes of glocalization and concomitant issues of influence-resistance between centres and peripheries triggering discourses about one's position and identity (Hall, 1992; Holliday, 2009). In the midst of such context, discourses about "clash of civilizations" have emerged and gained visibility to explain and advance hypotheses about cultural incompatibility and hierarchy between groups based on homogenous and essentialist views of culture (Karim & Eid, 2012). Investigating discursive and ideological uses of culture is therefore primordial to understand and deconstruct the logics of power, opposition, and exclusion that evoking the notion of culture can help convey.

Charles Taylor (2010, p. 25) pointed out that secularism goes beyond codifying "the relation of the state and religion" and also hinted at the "response of the democratic state to diversity". Topics related to secularism therefore provide a relevant basis to investigate discursive uses of culture and relations of power. In addition, literature has pointed out limitations in conceptualizing secularism as an inherent element of democratic states since it elevates one local model as the standard for others (Stepan, 2000). Theoretical assumptions about secularization have also been called out as Western-centric for associating the decrease of religiosity observed in Europe to the rise of modernity, and assuming that such transition had universal validity (Casanova, 2006, 2009). Overall, these discourses dismiss ideas of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt, 2000) and "multiple secularities" (Burchardt & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013), and sustain oppositions between monolithic civilizations.

The present research project focuses on the local production of knowledge about secularism. Specifically, it examines (1) representations of *laïcité* in

discourses from *Le Monde* and (2) the power relations they may encapsulate and perpetuate. This study is therefore driven by a two-sided motivation that has both practical and theoretical relevance. On the one hand, it sets out to understand further the scope and type of tensions that permeate the concept of laïcité and their practical implications as regards representations circulating throughout and about French society today. On the other hand, this research project seeks to map out strategies used to craft cultural meanings and to cast light on the agency associated with the use of culture as a discursive resource. This study uses naturally occurring data collected from the leading national newspaper *Le Monde* and published between 2011 and 2014. Such discourse provides a relevant venue to investigate how and why the concept of culture is utilized because of the role played by newspapers as storytellers addressing and constructing an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991).

Increasing research within the field of intercultural communication is conducted with the intention of exploring *how culture is used* rather than *what culture might be* (Piller, 2012). This recent development has emerged as a critique of the essentialist views that have dominated the field since the 1980s and the proliferation of cross-cultural studies (Moon, 1996). This strand of research is informed by definitions of culture as a fixed homogenous entity used to define and delineate groups into similarly homogenous entities, typically copying national boundaries (Piller, 2011). Moving away from essentialist views of culture, critical intercultural communication uses a constructionist approach whereby culture “exists only insofar as it is performed” (Baumann, 1996, p. 11) and can therefore only be investigated by investigating discourses that mobilize it. Informed by this framework and seeking out to further develop it, the present study explores the construction of knowledge and concomitant use of culture in macro-level discourses.

A large number of studies within critical intercultural communication have explored micro-level discourses by investigating interpersonal interactions (Arasaratnam, 2015). This study however focuses on mass-media discourses from the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*. This research project thus seeks to provide complementary information about the discursive production of knowledge and power circulating throughout society and affecting individuals’ own agency and positionality. This level of inquiry also provides a relevant and innovative angle to explore representations of laïcité. Most studies on laïcité have been conducted from a theoretical viewpoint by weighing implications of the concept (Baubérot, 2009; Doyle, 2011), sometimes using cross-national comparisons (e.g. Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2011), or have focused on individuals’ experiences of laïcité, especially in relation to the veil and representations of Islam (e. g. Fernando, 2010; Raveaud, 2008). This research project therefore sets out to bridge a gap by exploring representations of laïcité in media discourse and the power relations they may encapsulate and perpetuate.

1.2 Research questions

Overall, this research project is informed by critical intercultural communication and is designed to explore “culture” without falling into the pitfalls of mainstream research driven by (neo-)essentialist views. For this purpose, eclectic theoretical and methodological frameworks are used to borrow concepts from different disciplines (i.e. critical intercultural communication, cultural studies, feminist studies, and a Foucaultian approach to discourse) that help explore issues of power, agency, and the discursive construction of knowledge.

In the light of previous research on secularisms and informed by a critical discursive approach, the present study sets out to examine:

- 1) How knowledge about laïcité is produced in recent discourses from the newspaper *Le Monde*?
- 2) What power relations are suggested by the representations of laïcité put forth in data from *Le Monde*?

Each article included in this study has its own set of research questions corresponding to the overarching aims of this research project. Article I focuses on academic discourse to (1) examine the use of culture in media studies ($N=114$) published in the past decade (2003-2013) and reflect on (2) how critical intercultural communication could contribute to media research dealing with culture. This first article lays the theoretical foundations for the entire research project by providing glimpses into the use of culture and its implications. Articles II, III, and IV present findings using data collected from the newspaper *Le Monde*.

Article II uses a selection of articles from *Le Monde* ($n=76$) dealing explicitly with issues of religion and culture and associated symbolic practices in order to understand (1) *how culture is utilized* and (2) *with which power implications regarding the concept of laïcité*. Findings provide relevant insights into the different ways to craft and deploy cultural resonance in order to validate practices and create strategic and occasional oppositions between “cultural us” and “religious them”.

Article III explores further representations of the imagined community associated with discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde*. For this purpose, this study focuses on memories evoked in relation to laïcité in a selection of articles from *Le Monde* ($n=60$) to understand (1) *what memories are utilized* and (2) *how they contribute to the discursive association of laïcité with France*. Findings indicate that older memories are prevalent in data and are powerful discursive resources to fix dominant representations of both laïcité and Frenchness.

Article IV examines representations of individuals in a wide selection of articles from *Le Monde* ($n=239$) to scrutinize (1) *identity categories used in discourses of laïcité* and understand (2) *how they are articulated within the larger*

framework of laïcité. Findings point to intersections between different discourses and values that contribute to construct a *secular* imagined community. Findings also highlight contradictions that may suggest the emergence of new discursive spaces in which to acknowledge more liquid practices.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Critical intercultural communication

In her genealogy of the concept of culture in intercultural communication, Moon (1996) pointed out the theoretical shift undergone by the field of intercultural communication. Research has moved from critical oriented work defining culture in different ways including race, gender, or nation to the heyday of cross-cultural studies in which culture was primarily defined as nation. Since the 1980s, cross-cultural research has largely dominated the field of intercultural communication and lastingly shaped its research aims and theoretical orientations. Despite essentialist views and once-pivotal works like that of Hofstede's being now widely contested (Fougère & Moulettes, 2007; McSweeney, 2002), neo-essentialist approaches (Holliday, 2011) and "Janusian discourses of interculturality" (Dervin, 2011, p. 47) still permeate the field. These approaches have been criticized for providing façade critiques of solid and reified views of culture while building on them (Dervin, 2011). Problematic outcomes of these approaches have been raised given (1) the salience of the term culture across a variety of discourses, (2) the use of the term to focus on and underline *differences*, (3) and its propensity to replace race in post-racial expressions of racism (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009; Lentin, 2004; see also Sommier & Roiha, in press). As a way of addressing and overcoming these pitfalls, critical studies within the field of intercultural communication urge scholars to conceptualize culture as a construction permeated with power (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009; Piller, 2012; Shi-xu, 2005). Baumann's (1996, p. 11) definition of culture offers a solid foundation to build on:

culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion. It does not cause behaviour, but summarizes an abstraction from it, and is thus neither normative nor predictive.

Defining the concept of culture has proven to be a challenge across disciplines and time. Critiques voiced in intercultural communication toward essentialist views echo similar evolutions in fields where culture is a central concept. Scholars from the field of anthropology have for instance raised concerns about conceptions of cultures as static separate entities that would correspond to equally static and separate practices (Hylland Eriksen, 1997). The urge to explore culture in terms of “change rather than structure” and “relations, rather than locations” (Hastrup & Olwig, 1997, pp. 8-9) correspond to wider epistemological shifts encapsulated in social-constructionism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism. Influences from these movements appear in intercultural communication through (1) the emergence of “liquid” approaches to culture and intercultural communication, and (2) the emphasis placed on power (Dervin, 2011; Holliday, 2011). Critical intercultural communication draws attention to the struggles embedded in representations of culture by examining tensions in the light of historical processes through which identity categories, practices, and cultural claims have been constructed. By bringing power and agency back at the center of intercultural communication, critical views undertake to deconstruct the assumption that:

a lot of intercultural communication has nothing to do with prejudice or issues with the Centre-West, but with ‘innocent’ unfamiliar cultural events, practices, behaviour and values (Holliday, 2011, p. 18)

Critical intercultural communication thus endeavors to move past the assumption that culture is an unproblematic source of answers and instead investigates the scope of questions it raises. This strand of research is therefore conducted with the aim of deconstructing the idea that culture, identity, and difference are *natural* and *normal* and instead tackles processes through which they are *constructed* and *normalized* (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002). These research aims can be condensed into the following overarching goal to scrutinize “[w]ho makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?” (Piller, 2011, p. 174). The theoretical orientation and main aim of critical intercultural communication highlights the relevance of using discursive approaches (Dervin & Risager, 2015).

2.1.1 Discursive approaches

Discursive approaches offer relevant tools to researchers looking to investigate *how culture is utilized* rather than *what culture is*. Examining discourses of culture enables to go beyond and deconstruct persistent ideas of culture as an a-priori entity. Focusing on the discursive production of culture also contributes to move past essentialist underpinnings and redefine the aim of intercultural communication to “shift from reified and inescapable notions of cultural difference to a focus on discourses where ‘culture’ is actually made relevant and used as a communicative resource” (Piller, 2012, p. 14).

A large number of discursive studies within intercultural communication have explored interpersonal interaction and language practices. These studies have drawn attention to the co-construction of interactions as *intercultural*, thus contradicting the premise that they automatically result from individuals' attributes such as nationality, gender, or religion (Bolden, 2014; Lahti, 2015). The notion of *intercultural moments* highlights culture as an interactional resource that individuals utilize in specific contexts for certain purposes. The selective use of culture in conversations draws attention to the way individuals re-deploy and negotiate established meanings.

The use of culture in interpersonal interactions is therefore tightly associated with the construction of culture in macro-level discourses. Dialectical approaches to intercultural communication emphasize the interplay between individuals, local, historical, political, and global levels. Such a framework reveals different levels of tensions and connections between them by examining individual actions in the light of larger discursive practices and power structures. (Martin & Nakayama, 2015). Micro-level, dialectical, and macro-level approaches are intertwined and their findings relevant to one another. They all contribute to understand the complexity of culture as a discursive resource which permeates discourses at various levels. Understanding how culture is constructed and utilized in mass discourses is a key element to apprehend how individuals reproduce and/or renegotiate those meanings. Fewer studies within the field have however been conducted at the macro-level and the present study addresses this gap by focusing on mass-mediated discourses. Within the different macro-level and socially-oriented approaches to discourse, this study is more specifically informed by a Foucaultian approach.

2.1.2 Foucaultian approach to discourse

A variety of approaches exists as regards the meaning of "discourse" as well as the extent to which it is constitutive of reality. The discursive approach chosen for this research project corresponds to the overarching aim of investigating the discursive construction of cultural realities. A Foucaultian lens seemed to be the most appropriate framework to explore data from the newspaper *Le Monde* and understand (1) how knowledge about *laïcité* was produced and (2) which power relations it suggested.

This research project draws on the premise that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Other frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) distinguish between discursive and non-discursive aspects. Fairclough's (1992) framework for instance builds on the interplay between discourses and non-discursive pre-existing structures. However, the notion of "preconstituted reality" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 60) suggests an imbalance between discursive meanings artificially produced, permeated with power and purposefully articulated, and a physical reality that would be naturally meaningful. Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 108) offer an eloquent illustration of the role played by discursive practices in constructing what is perceived as real and material:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist internally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.

Choosing a Foucaultian perspective enables to follow a similar logic and therefore explore how discourses construct, rather than interact with, realities.

Other key tenets of a Foucaultian approach were considered when choosing this framework. First, *discourse* is not understood from a strict linguistic viewpoint. Rather, discourse is understood as a *practice* through which knowledge is produced and articulated (Foucault, 1972). The discursive construction of meanings affects practices by mapping out legitimate ways of acting and thinking. The production and normalization of meanings hints at the second central aspect of a Foucaultian approach to discourse: power. Exploring the relation between knowledge and power is at the heart of Foucault's work (Foucault, 1981). Discourse is a key element to that relation since it is through discursive practices that "power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault, 1981, p. 100). Discourse and power are both understood as manifold and multi-directional practices. Discourse not only "transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (Foucault, 1981, p. 101) Power is not conceptualized as a top-down form of control that would be exerted by just one form of authority or limited to class issues. Rather, power is regarded as diffuse, unstable, and circulating in ways that are both constraining and enabling by simultaneously setting limits to what it allows. (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

In many ways, a Foucaultian approach to discourse and critical intercultural communication research can benefit from each other. Both approaches ask similar questions by addressing contingency and agency embedded in discursive practices. Foucault's work is used to examine "what can be said, by whom, and on what occasions" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 51) while critical intercultural communication explores "who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purpose" (Piller, 2011, p. 174). Both approaches also emphasize the situatedness of meanings by challenging knowledge represented as natural, normal, or universal (Foucault, 1980; Mendoza et al., 2002). The present study does not conduct a strict Foucaultian discourse analysis but is informed by this approach as this research sets out to examine (1) what knowledge about laïcité is produced in recent articles from *Le Monde* and (2) uncover the power relations suggested by the statements made about laïcité. Foucault's work has been used across disciplines and in research looking to deconstruct normalized representations and challenge status-quo. The field of Cultural Studies offers relevant illustrations of tackling culture from a Foucaultian angle, namely:

Not as a social universal (i.e. as something that is endemic to all societies, in the sense that all societies can be defined by their particular traditions, beliefs, ideas, and semiotics) nor as a particular expression of the individual (i.e. in the sense of artistic genius, creative labour and so on), but as the object and means of regulation (Oswell, 2006, p. 65)

A Foucaultian approach therefore enables to examine the use of culture in terms of agency and strategic discursive choices, instead of “readily understand[ing] culture as a social fact, as transhistorical and universal” (Oswell, 2006, p. 68). The work of Stuart Hall has drawn attention to the construction and articulation of *representations* as producing shared meanings, permeated with power, and situated (Hall, 1997a). His analysis of the discursive construction of *the West and the Rest* highlights the productive aspect of discourse, knowledge, and power as he argues:

the idea of ‘The West’, once produced, became productive in its turn. It had real effects: it enabled people to know or speak of certain things in certain ways. It produced knowledge. (Hall, 1992, p. 278)

Since the 1960s, the concept of representation has been increasingly used in media studies informed by the cultural-critical paradigm. Research informed by this framework have investigated media’s contribution to construct and convey specific meanings embedded in and constructive of power structures (Fürsich, 2010).

2.2 Media discourse

Despite changes in media landscapes, so-called “old” media like the printed press retain much of their prestige and role in deploying meanings through society (Taira, 2014). Furthermore, traditional media outlets still play a relevant part in (1) constructing “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), (2) ascribing meanings to “culture” through rituals, representations, storytelling, and the construction of collectivities (Carey, 2009; Hjarvard, 2011; Schudson, 2003), and (3) legitimating content (Bird & Dardenne, 2009).

As storytellers, media powerfully re-deploy meanings and values that are relevant to the targeted audience. Ways in which plots unfold, which characters are included, which role they are given, and which conclusion is to be drawn are key aspects of journalistic narratives (Bird & Dardenne, 2009; Carey, 2009). Those elements also emphasize media discourse as both constructed through and constructive of existing representations of culture. The embeddedness in and construction of cultural narratives by the media has also been pointed out by studies looking at the use of *culturally-resonant frames*. Such frames present information through the prism of existing representations and system of values that are familiar – and therefore more appealing – to the targeted audiences (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Schudson, 1989). By tapping into status-quo representations, culturally-resonant frames have been shown to be easily taken-

for-granted and therefore sustain dominant existing views (Olausson, 2009). Other studies have drawn attention to the normalizing power of media discourse by pointing out how audience can mistake the selected nature of media content for accurate depictions of the world. Referring to phrases such as “weapons of mass destruction” and “shock and awe” which were widely used during the Iraq War, Bird and Dardenne (2009, p. 210) underline the normalizing power of media: “The press used them so consistently that they become ‘natural’ and therefore ‘true’.” Such process is especially important to consider when looking at representations of the nation and national culture as normal and natural rather than as political constructions. Critical intercultural communication has placed a lot emphasis on deconstructing the pervasive and almost automatic association of culture with nation. Halualani, Mendoza, and Drzewiecka (2009, p. 24) pointed out that:

To accept cultures as nations as inherently and naturally truthful and accurate at a surface level would be to risk reproducing external framings of cultural groups advanced by colonialist governments, dominant nationalist parties, and ruling power interests that benefit from such “status quo” thinking.

Exploring the construction and reproduction of national representations and expected associated values, stories, and individuals is therefore extremely important to uncover existing power structures.

Anderson’s (1991) concept of *imagined communities* offers a relevant lens to examine the role played by newspapers in constructing the nation as the basic unit to think of one’s practices, values, attachment, loyalty, and apprehend similarities and differences. The concept of imagined communities draws attention to ways in which individuals are encouraged and willing to identify with people they have never met because of common media practices that provide common knowledge (Anderson, 1991). It is through the discursive construction of both *difference* and *sameness* that imagined communities, especially national ones, are constructed (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999). Particular attention has been paid to the discursive construction of differences and numerous scholars within cultural studies have drawn on Said’s (1979, 1997) work to examine processes of *othering* in the media. Studies conducted from this perspective have pointed out ways in which representations of *us* and *others* tend to sustain status-quo, reproduce stereotypes about minorities, and build on dominant and Western-centric discourses (Cottle, 2000; Fürsich, 2002, 2010). Benhabib (1996, pp. 3-4) further points out the dangerous outcomes of constructing and maintaining identities solely through oppositions to others:

Since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference. [...] What is shocking about these developments is not the inevitable dialectic of identity/difference that they display but rather the atavistic belief that identities can be maintained and secured only by eliminating difference and otherness.

The present study draws on a Foucaultian framework to explore the local production of knowledge about *laïcité* in newspaper articles. This approach

enables to cast light on the construction and normalization of knowledge, which therefore helps address representations put forth in media discourse about national culture, the values and individuals it encompasses, and those it does not. The topic of secularism in the media is relevant to address from a Foucaultian perspective because of (1) its situatedness and historical-embeddedness, and (2) the values that underpin it which (3) suggests the width of power relations that permeate this concept (Casanova, 2009; MacLure & Taylor, 2011).

2.3 Laïcité

As a political doctrine, *secularism* entails more than the separation of state and religion and touches upon numerous societal aspects (Asad, 2003). Different models and concepts of secularism exist worldwide that are embedded in different religious, political, and historical dynamics. MacLure and Taylor (2011) used the phrase *regimes of secularism* to capture the variety of models worldwide that share similar aims but rely on different tools to achieve them. Baubérot and Milot (2011) pointed out the way secularism in France is typically defined as the separation of Churches and State, even though the separation is only the means through which the key aspects of laïcité – equality and freedom of religion – are meant to be achieved. The value-laden mission of secularism suggests the nodes of power it encompasses, especially as it weaves together issues of religion, culture, diversity, and politics. In the French context, tensions related to *laïcité* have been addressed by previous studies (1) looking at the political values in which laïcité is embedded and (2) their implications for religious minorities.

The concept of laïcité is deeply rooted in the political and legal system of France. It is therefore tightly associated with the republican ideals that have progressively been asserted in France since the 1789 French Revolution. Similar to the concept of secularism, republican values can be interpreted and applied in different ways depending on historical and political trajectories. In France, the republican ideal is encapsulated in the “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” maxim. The French republican framework focuses on ensuring equality between all citizens through the levelling out of differences. Uniformity has therefore been supported through many processes such as political centralization, assimilation, linguistic harmonization, education, or laïcité (Brubaker, 1992; Freedman, 2004). Hancock (2008) suggested that the emphasis put on uniformity in France is related to recent conflicts surrounding laïcité and its application. In the same vein, Bhandar (2009, p. 326) argued that secularism, both in the United Kingdom and France, is used “to govern and manage difference that is perceived to violate dominant norms and values, defined in reference to the Christian cultural heritage of the nation state.”

Critics directed at laïcité point out discrepancies between societal transformations and the 1905 law that only mentions the four religions officially

recognized in France (i.e. Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Judaism) at that time (Saunders, 2009). Scholars have argued that French society is still largely shaped by Christian traditions which forces “observant Muslims and Jews to make a choice. They can either be good French citizens and bad Muslims or bad Jews, or vice versa.” (Auslander, 2000, p. 288). Religious identification (especially if it is with a different religion than the main one which is Catholicism) can therefore come to be associated with a rejection of French culture as a whole (Caeiro, 2004). It is however estimated¹ that about 5 million Muslims now live in France. This makes Islam the second largest religion in the country and the French Muslim population the second largest one in Europe (Hackett, 2015). Because of the prominence of *laïcité*, model of republicanism, and size of the Muslim population, numerous studies have focused on France as a laboratory to understand dynamics at play in general in Europe between Islam and dominant representations of Western culture and identities. These studies have drawn attention to the variety of misunderstandings that characterize representations of and relations towards Muslims and Islam. (Doyle, 2011; Laurence & Vaisse, 2007).

Prejudiced views of Muslims and Islam in France are intertwined with a complex web of historical, global, and local tensions. Following events such as the Salman Rushdie affair, 9/11, terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, or the publication of *The Clash of Civilizations*, the visibility and popularity of western-centric discourses deploying static and essentialized representations of Muslims have increased in Europe (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). Terrorist attacks in France since 2015 have further increased such discursive dynamic. International representations of Islam and Muslims resonate with France’s colonial past, model of secularism, and overall late awareness – and acceptance – of Islam as the second main religion (Cesari, 2002, 2005). Scholars have criticized *laïcité* for increasing misunderstandings and hostility towards Islam in France, especially through the limits put to religious expressions in public spheres (Adrian, 2009). Cesari (2005, p. 1039) draws attention to the discrepancies and associated tensions between dominant conceptions of *laïcité* and its legal definitions:

As the controversy surrounding the Muslim veil continues to show, Islam brings to light the distortion that exists between the dominant perception of *laïcité* by lay citizens and its legal definition [...] The law voted in March 2004 that bans overt religious signs from public high schools illustrates the political willingness to suppress this distortion and to make the legal content of *laïcité* coherent with its perception in the dominant French culture.

Studies have indicated contradictory results as regards the role played by *laïcité* on relations between religious groups in France. Weil (2008) argues that *laïcité* makes it possible for individuals of different faiths to have positive interactions. On the other hand, several studies (e.g. Amiraux, 2016; Bowen, 2011; Hopkins,

¹ Only estimations and not accurate statistics can be given since collecting personal data related to racial origins and political or religious opinions is forbidden in France (for discussion on the topic see e.g. Cervulle, 2014)

2015) have argued that *laïcité* can be a barrier to integration and a source of prejudice for religious minorities. The scope of opinions and findings on *laïcité* highlights the need to further examine how this notion is constructed in mass-mediated discourse and the tensions these representations may encompass.

Baubérot and Milot (2011) argued that the way France and *laïcité* are tightly intertwined in both scientific and popular literature is problematic because it sustains representations of *laïcité* as originally and exclusively French. Wishing to deconstruct such automatic and exclusive association, authors have drawn attention to models existing outside from France where it sometimes developed even earlier. Baubérot (2007, 2010) also used *laïcité* in its plural form while Baubérot and Milot (2011, p. 8, my translation) criticized the “pseudo-impossibility of translating the term *laïcité* in other languages besides French.” Throughout this research project, I chose to use the French word *laïcité* instead of its English equivalent secularism. This decision was not made because the term *laïcité* itself is understood as untranslatable but because its connotations and resonance are assumed to be. Michel (2010) listed some of the many aspects that come to one’s mind when hearing the word *laïcité*, as it brings together a whole cluster of interwoven references. Such resonance is lost when replacing *laïcité* by secularism since the latter one carries its own baggage which results from a specific history and production of meanings. I felt that using the term secularism would disconnect the concept from its context and thus contradict the approach of this study that examines the situated and discursive construction of knowledge in the light of historicized tensions.

3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

3.1 Framework and methods

This study is based on the premise that there is no truth to be discovered, no essence of phenomena or discourses to be uncovered. Such approach to research is very personal and has affected many decisions I made throughout this research project. From the topic itself to ways of investigating it and what was found in data, all aspects of this study are subjective. This research project is like any other discursive practices: constructed and situated within a larger cultural, social, and historical environment.

Conceptual framework, theories, and methodological approach were all chosen as a consequence of my outlook on research. Aspects of this research project are all related to this study's overarching aim of investigating the discursive construction of cultural realities. In this research project, I chose to combine Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) together with Foucaultian themes of analysis. Both approaches differ on some aspects such as assumptions regarding knowledge, understanding of what constitutes relevant data, how to analyze it, and research warrants. They however share several significant similarities that correspond to the overall social constructionist orientation of this research project. As Burr (2003, p. 24) argued, there are no "particular research methods that are intrinsically social constructionist". Rather, there are methods that can be more easily underpinned with social constructionist views and aims. Following the idea that pluralism can be beneficial to many aspects of qualitative research such as reflexivity, transparency, and applicability (Frost et al., 2010), I decided to use QCA and Foucaultian themes of analysis as complementary tools to thoroughly explore the multilayered construction of knowledge of *laïcité*. Such similar eclectic approaches are oftentimes used by critical and cultural scholars to tailor their methodological frameworks to the objects of their study (see e.g. Gough, 2007; Hammer, 2010; Lawless, 2014).

Data analysis in this study was conducted in two steps; the first one relies on QCA and coding to thoroughly explore data and reduce it to be able to make

sense of it. The second step builds on results from the first level of analysis by deploying Foucaultian conceptualization of knowledge, power, and discourse. Combining Foucaultian-oriented analysis and QCA was meant to enhance the transparency and rigor of data collection and analysis. More and more, researchers are expected to provide as detailed information as possible about their methods of data collection and analysis. Warrants of quality and ethics typically encompass ideas of transparency and coherence whether research is qualitatively or quantitatively oriented (for a discussion on tensions related to recent standard for research, see e.g. Cheek, 2007). Foucault did not however offer clear guidelines on how to conduct discourse analysis, which has led many scholars to use his work as theoretical orientation rather than a methodological framework. Carabine (2001, p. 268) for instance argued that “[w]hat Foucault’s genealogy offers us is a lens through which to undertake discourse analysis and with which we can read discourses.” The lack of methodological guidelines to conduct a strict Foucaultian analysis thus constitutes a challenge as regards today’s research standards. The Foucaultian approach has been criticized for not “includ[ing] discursive and linguistic analysis of real texts.” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 56). Even though Foucault talks about discursive practices, his attention is mostly put on structures of discourse rather than concrete practices or instances of discourse. Textually-oriented analyses of discourse are used to avoid the pitfall of drawing “conclusions about practice without directly analyzing real instances of it, including texts” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 57). This study uses QCA for the same purpose and in an effort to enhance the overall transparency and rigor of this research project.

3.1.1 Addressing the tensions between Foucaultian Discourse Analysis and Qualitative Content Analysis

Even though this study does not conduct a Foucaultian Discourse Analysis (FDA), it is important to discuss its underpinnings since the research project is largely influenced by Foucault’s work. FDA and QCA are embedded within different research traditions and therefore based on different epistemological assumptions. FDA is strongly influenced by poststructuralism which emphasizes knowledge as constructed, partial, and discursively produced. On the other hand, QCA has “no assumptions about reality or implicit realist assumptions” (Schreier, 2012, p. 47). Using aspects from both methodological approaches enables to combine their assets in order to examine both *what* is said and *how*. Schreier (2012) points out that QCA is used to explore what is present in data while socially-oriented discourse analysis is also used to investigate meanings that are absent. Using Foucaultian themes of analysis therefore complement well QCA by making it possible to cast the light on representations that are omitted from certain discourses. Another main difference as regards data analysis is the use of coding in QCA as a way to reduce data and handle it more easily. Through repetitive and thorough reading of data, researchers progressively identify categories that correspond to the research questions (Schreier, 2012). The systematic coding of data, which may be inherited from

the quantitative strand of content analysis, strongly differs from poststructuralist approaches to research. Coding consists of breaking data into smaller units, which tends to decontextualize data and destroy its original structure and flow. Using codes can also reduce meanings present in data by assigning extracts a single interpretation. The chopping of data “into monads of supposedly unambiguous meaning” has been pointed out as a process underpinned by positivistic assumptions (Scheurich, 1997, p. 62). Limits of coding were downplayed by constantly and repetitively navigating between the original collected materials, coded extracts, and my developing interpretations of data. Coding was used throughout this research project to systematically and rigorously explore meanings put forth in data. It also provided a strong basis on which to use Foucaultian themes of analysis.

Though FDA does not outline clear criteria to evaluate research, Hook (2001) outlined three methodological priorities of a Foucaultian analysis – reversal, discontinuity, and exteriority– which can serve as criteria to evaluate research. On the other hand, QCA is embedded within qualitative methodology and uses Lincoln and Guba (1985) research warrants of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In line with the overall approach of this research project, warrants put forth by social constructionist studies are used. The first criterion, *reflexivity*, “refers to the fact that social constructionism itself is not exempt from the critical stance it brings to bear on other theories” and must therefore “recognize itself as just as much a social construction as other ways of accounting” (Burr, 2003, p. 157). For this reason, reflexivity is also used to discuss the context in which the study was designed and that contributed to shape it, including the researcher’s personal life trajectory. This was particularly important in this research project because of the relation between the topic and myself. As a French expatriate, I see France both as home and abroad. Discourses that shape society are both highly familiar and exotic; I have grown foreign to some of them and had the opportunity to see them in a new light. This position was both an asset and a drawback as it helped me see things others would not while also hiding aspects some would have identified or explained differently. Becoming aware and critical of my own position, assumptions, and expectations was especially important throughout the research project as I investigated taken-for-granted and normative representations. Reflexivity is intertwined with the warrants of *rigor* and *transparency* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Finally, the criteria of *usefulness* and *fruitfulness* deal with the propensity of findings to “make sense of new kinds of discourse and to generate novel explanations” that can have practical relevance (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 171).

3.2 Data

Data used for this research project consist exclusively of naturally occurring texts, either from academic journals (article I) or from the national newspaper *Le*

Monde (articles II, III, IV). Table 1 below presents characteristics of the data set used for each article.

TABLE 1 Data set used for each article

Article	I	II	III	IV
Quantity	N= 114	n= 76	n= 60	n= 239
Type	Peer-reviewed articles	Data set from <i>Le Monde</i>	Data set from <i>Le Monde</i>	Data set from <i>Le Monde</i>
Time of publication	2003-2013	2011-2014	2011-2014	2011-2014
Data collection	Academic databases; search keywords (media representation; media discourse; diversity; cultur*)	Inductive (articles touching upon issues and symbolic practices explicitly addressed as “cultural” and “religious”)	Inductive & search keywords (history; historical; memory; heritage; legacy; tradition)	All articles categorized as “closely related to laïcité”

The whole data set from *Le Monde* was collected from the newspaper online database using the keyword “laïcité”. After that, all collected articles (N= 895) were read through and divided within three categories based on the following criteria:

1. Closely related to laïcité:
 - Laïcité is the main focus of the article, whether it is the only topic in the paper or is articulated with another theme.
 - Typically, laïcité is defined or discussed and not just mentioned.
2. Quite related to laïcité:
 - Laïcité is not the main focus of the article.
 - Laïcité is associated with the main topic in a significant way; or, laïcité is given significant visibility/space in the news item.
 - Laïcité can be defined or discussed or can just be mentioned.
3. Loosely related to laïcité:
 - Laïcité is briefly mentioned.
 - Laïcité is not necessarily significantly associated with the main topic(s) of the news item.
 - Typically, laïcité is not defined or discussed.

As I organized data alone, I tried to enhance consistency by reading through and categorizing again randomly selected articles after a minimum of one month. Table 2 below shows the distribution of articles per year and after data reduction.

TABLE 2 Data reduction

	Year 2011	Year 2012	Year 2013	Year 2014	Total
N=	368	240	165	122	895
Closely related	80 (21,7%)	58 (24,2%)	81 (49,1%)	20 (16,4%)	239 (26,7%)
Quite related	63 (17,1%)	46 (19,2%)	22 (13,3%)	10 (8,2%)	141 (15,7%)
Loosely related	225 (61,1%)	136 (56,7%)	62 (37,6%)	92 (75,4%)	515 (57,5%)

3.2.1 *Le Monde*

Data were collected from the French national newspaper *Le Monde*. All articles collected for analysis were published between January 2011 and December 2014. This time period was chosen to provide an analysis of recent discourses of laïcité following the widely analyzed and conflictual time period of 2003-2005, and preceding the year 2015 marked by terrorist attacks in France. The events that punctuated the 2011-2014 time period made it a relevant source of information about the discursive construction of laïcité. Several controversies appeared in relation to laïcité and to a variety of societal topics such as education, work, and the visibility of Muslim practices. In addition, laïcité was actively debated at the national level on two main occasions. First, during the national debate organized by the right-wing leading majority about “laïcité and the place of Islam in the Republic” (Cori & Auffray, 2011). Second, as a theme during the presidential campaign preceding the election in May 2012. Findings from the years 2011-2014 about laïcité and associated national representations are especially relevant given the terrorist attacks that shook France in 2015 and 2016. The timeframe used for this study therefore provides relevant insights to understand discourses circulating in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in France.

Le Monde was chosen for data collection because of its prominent status within the French media landscape, which is widely acknowledged both in France and abroad. Such position tends to give visibility to discourses emanating from *Le Monde* and enhances, at least symbolically, their prestige and power (Eveno, 2001). In addition, *Le Monde* is typically considered a symbol of editorial and intellectual press (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007) and described through its claimed editorial freedom as well as its endeavor to actively engage in public debates (Le, 2009). The emphasis put by *Le Monde* on presenting a wide scope of ideas, opinions, and on developing novel perspectives makes it a relevant venue to explore different discursive strategies and representations.

The variety of discourses that can be found within *Le Monde* was meant to counter-balance the fact that data were collected from only one source. In addition, the aim was to focus on representations crafted and emanating from *Le Monde's* specific position of power. *Le Monde* was not chosen to provide findings assumed to be generalizable to the society as a whole. Rather, it was assumed that its prominent position within the society and endeavor to contribute to debates makes it an important actor in representing the imagined community.

4 ARTICLES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

This research project sets out to explore the discursive construction of knowledge about laïcité in newspaper articles from *Le Monde*, and the power structures it suggests. Informed by critical intercultural communication, this research project pays particular attention to the creation and utilization of cultural representations. Thus, all of the articles combined in this doctoral dissertation are informed by the question put forth by Ingrid Piller (2011, p. 174) and which articulates the overarching aim of critical intercultural communication research: “Who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?” The first article explores such question within academic discourse while the three other articles use empirical data from *Le Monde*. Each article has its own set of research questions (presented in table 3 below) which corresponds to the overarching aims of this research project.

Articles were designed both inductively and deductively. Patterns and distinctive aspects noticed while reading through the whole data set from *Le Monde* served as a basis for further inquiry, and were combined with suggestions for further research made in each article. Working on the critical literature review (article I) widened my understanding of the field of intercultural communication and of the concept of culture. This helped me build the theoretical foundations for this research project, which logically led to the first empirical study (article II) in which I investigated the use of culture in a selection of article from *Le Monde*. Findings from this article highlighted the importance of the concept of “imagined community” as well as the different manners in which culture could be utilized as a discursive resource. Thus, article II focused on memories because of their role in evoking representations constructive of imagined communities and their cultural realities. Both articles II and III focused on practices and general representations associated with the imagined community. Their findings pointed to the importance of thoroughly exploring representations of individuals within (or placed outside of) the imagined community. Article IV therefore addresses the categorization of individuals in data.

In addition, Hall's (1997b, pp. 45-46) guidelines about what a study of discourse should entail helped translate the overarching aims of this research project into empirical studies corresponding to the Foucaultian approach chosen:

"1 statements about 'madness', 'punishment' or 'sexuality' which give us a certain kind of knowledge about these things;

2 the rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and exclude other ways – which govern what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about insanity, punishment or sexuality, at a particular historical moment;

3 'subjects' who in some way personify the discourse[...]; with the attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was at that time

4 how this knowledge about the topic acquires authority, a sense of embodying the 'truth' about it; constituting the 'truth of the matter' at a historical moment;

5 the practices within institutions for dealing with the subjects – medical treatment for the insane, punishment regimes for the guilty, moral discipline for the sexually deviant – whose conduct is being regulated and organized according to those ideas;

6 acknowledgment that a different discourse or *episteme* will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new *discursive formation*"

TABLE 3 Research articles included in the study and their research questions

	Article	Research Questions
I	Sommier, M. (2014). The Concept of Culture in Media Studies: A Critical Review of Academic Literature. <i>InMedia, The French Journal of Media and Media Representations in the English-Speaking World</i> , 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How has "culture" been addressed in media studies published between 2003-2013? 2. How can a critical intercultural communication framework contribute to media studies dealing with culture?
II	Sommier, M. (submitted). Strategic uses and oppositions: 'Culture' as a discursive resource in newspaper articles from <i>Le Monde</i> about secularism.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is the concept of "culture" utilized in data? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. With what implications regarding power relations?
III	Sommier, M. (submitted). Memories as a discursive strategy: Exploring representations of laïcité and Frenchness in articles from <i>Le Monde</i> .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which memories are evoked? 2. How do they contribute to the discursive association of laïcité with France?

IV	<p>Sommier, M. (2016). Representations of individuals in discourses of laïcité from <i>Le Monde</i>: Confirming or challenging the republican framework of identity? <i>Social Identities: Journal for the study of Race, Nation and Culture</i>. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2016.1179569</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which identity categories are used in discourses of laïcité? 2. How are these categories articulated within the larger framework of laïcité?
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4.1 Summaries of the articles included in the study

4.1.1 The Concept of Culture in Media Studies: A Critical Review of Academic Literature

Western scholars embraced the idea of philosophy and wrapped themselves in it as a signifier that they alone held onto reason; indeed, they alone could be reasonable. They saw philosophy as the most learned of all sciences. They spoke of philosophy only in the context of European thinking and writing. Only Europeans invented philosophy in their minds; indeed, only Europeans could be philosophers. (Asante, 2011, p. 25)

This article ties together the theoretical framework of this research project (i.e. critical intercultural communication) and its object of study (i.e. media discourse) by investigating how “culture” has been addressed in recent media studies. The article tackles the pervasive, yet often unclear, use of the concept of culture in research and proposes critical intercultural communication as a relevant framework to address recurrent pitfalls and challenges. This article was the first chance I had to fully engage with the concept of culture and to reflect on my own position within the field. It is through this work that I grew awareness of the limits of the neo-essentialist framework I had been using thus far. It however took longer than this article to fully understand the ramifications and functioning of traditional approaches to culture, for instance regarding the relation between culture and race. The last sentence of the article illustrates the hold of essentialist thinking as I conclude by reducing intercultural communication back to being “communication between cultures” and “across borders” (Sommier, 2014, para. 16).

Data were collected using the academic search engines EBSCO and Web of Science, and consisted of 114 peer-reviewed articles written in English. All articles collected dealt with issues of cultural diversity and media and were published between 2003 and 2013. For each article, short descriptions of the topic, theoretical framework, and methods were written. This served as the basis to identify recurrent themes and approaches. Figures 1 and 2 below respectively present (1) the main theoretical and methodological frameworks used, and (2) the topics addressed in the data.

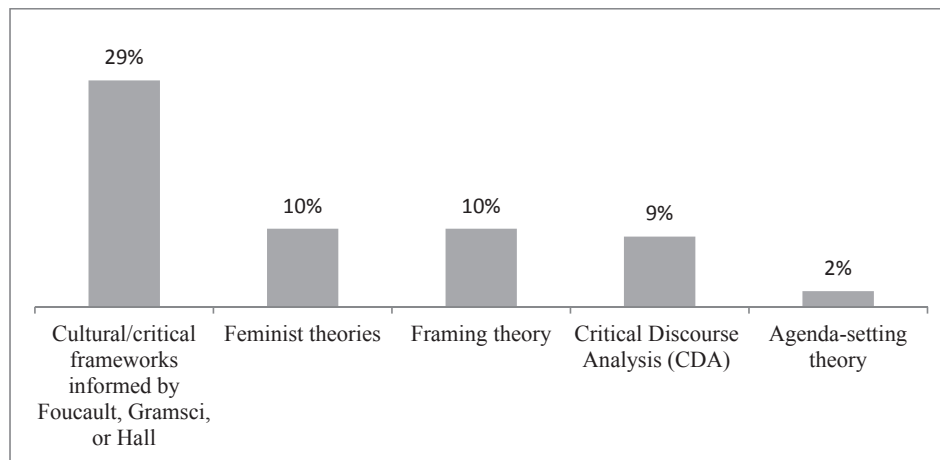


FIGURE 1 Main theoretical and methodological frameworks used in the reviewed literature

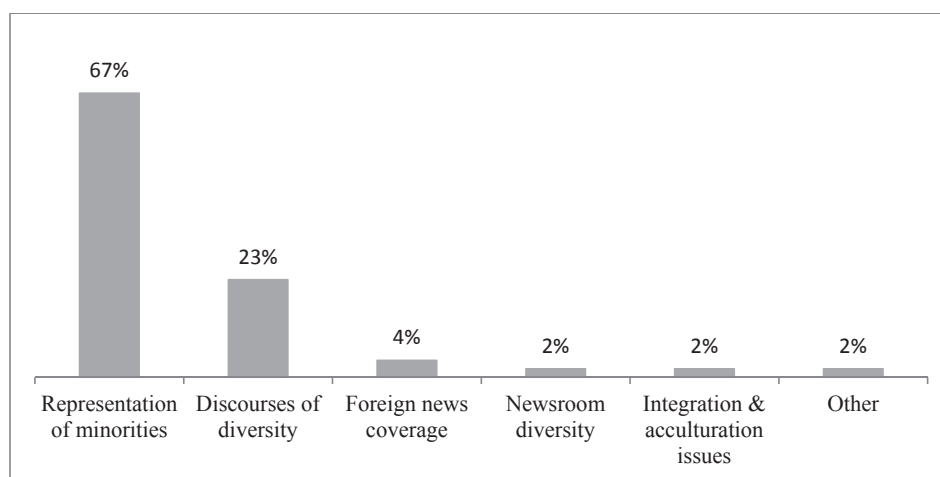


FIGURE 2 Topics addressed in the reviewed literature

Findings indicate that many articles did not clearly define their ontological and epistemological approach to the concept of culture. Furthermore, culture often seemed to be taken-for-granted, especially when (1) used as a synonym for nations, (2) associated with representations of the West, and (3) when the concepts of *race* and *ethnicity* were used.

The prevalent use of national culture across data seems to build on essentialist views of culture as a homogenous one-dimensional a-priori entity. Such views tend to dismiss the tensions embedded in the concepts of nation and culture, and to overlook associated processes of normalizations. This, in turn, maintains status-quo, hierarchy between cultural representations, and stereotypical views instead of deconstructing them. The use of national culture as a normal background for research hinted at the second limitation found in

the data: the invisibility of *our* situatedness. Results suggested that studies exploring minorities' representations addressed processes through which these were constructed and elements on which they built. However, the national cultures in which these representations circulated were not systematically discussed and could therefore pass for normal categories. Findings suggested that discrepancies between representations of majorities and minorities sustained homogenous and unproblematic views of "our" culture since examining diversity oftentimes consists of examining "them". The conceptualization of diversity as an "exception to the rule" is characteristic of neo-essentialist discourses which regard national culture as the "basic unit" to think of culture (Holliday, 2011, p. 14). Discrepancies between representations of majorities and minorities also lied in the discursive association of "us" with unproblematized national cultures, and of "them" with *race* and *ethnicity*. This underlined limitations of defining culture solely through the prism of nation and as being independent from power relations. These results also echoed previous research on Western-centricity in academic discourse (Gordon, 2007; Miike, 2007). Findings indicated that numerous studies were conducted in Europe, North-America, and Australia. The lack of diversity in research settings maintained distorted representations in which Western realities are not always acknowledged to be constructed and tend to be limited to dominant representations of national groups which stand for the invisible norm against which other groups are evaluated. Thus, minorities are individuals and groups who differ from dominant representations of "Westerners" and tend to be represented through their racial, ethnic, and religious struggles and affiliations.

This article argued that studies which do not explicitly address and define the concept of culture risk not only using neo-essentialist discourses but also reproducing them. This is especially problematic when it comes to academic literature which sets out to tackle inequalities and problematic representations. This article intended to draw attention to the tools provided by a critical intercultural communication framework as it questions the use of culture and therefore casts light on associated claims and tensions. Questioning assumptions associated with the concept of culture is especially relevant to academic discourse since it both studies and produces discourses that build on and deploy cultural claims and representations. Critical intercultural communication therefore provides researchers with tools to critically address the object of their study as well as their own situatedness.

4.1.2 Strategic uses and oppositions: 'Culture' as a discursive resource in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* about secularism.

The power differences may take the form of unequal relations between cultural discourses and discursive practices of domination, discrimination and exclusion on grounds of 'race', colour, ethnicity, language or 'culture'. To study cultural discourses - discourses about 'us' and 'them', intercultural discourses, international communication and so on - is then to study the asymmetry of power and practices of power that are constituted through discourse. (Shi-xu, 2005, p. 65)

Similar to article I, which explored how culture was utilized in academic discourse, this article investigated the use of culture in a set of articles from *Le Monde*. Directly informed by critical intercultural communication, this article sets out to understand the mechanisms and agency that underpin the use of culture (Piller, 2011). Exploring ways in which culture is made relevant provides insights into (1) its implications as a discursive resource and (2) helps map out larger power relations that permeate the use of the terms in relation to *laïcité*.

Similar to social-constructionist views of culture, scholars are increasingly approaching religion as a discursive category permeated with power, rather than an a-priori meaningful notion (McCutcheon, 1995; Taira, 2010, 2013). This approach makes it possible to scrutinize “What counts as religion and, more importantly, who gets to decide?” (McCutcheon, 1995, p. 285). Such question and its equivalent about culture are primordial to investigate the complex webs of power relations permeating the notion of secularism. Bhandar (2009) drew attention to the biases that often characterized discourses of secularism in Europe as they separate the religious and cultural realms, while culture typically encompasses Christian norms and racial bias of whiteness. The present article sets out to explore further these tensions by focusing on the production of knowledge about culture within discourses of *laïcité*.

Data used for this study were collected from the larger data set from *Le Monde* ($N= 895$). After reading through all data, articles ($n= 76$) addressing tensions or explicitly dealing with issues of religion, culture, and symbolic practices were selected. Data were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis and aspects of a Foucaultian approach to discourse. Combining both approaches enabled to (1) thoroughly and systematically scrutinize what was categorized as cultural in order to (2) reflect on the construction of knowledge related to the use of the term, and implications regarding power relations.

Results indicated that a varied set of strategies was used in data to craft and utilize cultural resonance by referring to macro- and micro-level practices, values, and representations related to the “imagined community”. Results pointed out that culture was sometimes utilized as an invisible discursive resource by being taken-for-granted and unproblematized. This contributed to dismiss the tensions it encapsulates and reproduces, and therefore enabled to utilize culturally-resonant meanings to covertly validate meanings. Results suggested double-standards regarding the distinction between culture and religion. Both terms were sometimes used with overlapping meanings but seemed to be positioned as opposite for strategic purposes. Specifically, dichotomous views of culture and religion seemed to be deployed to address conflictual issues as a way of delineating and legitimating *our* practices. Results also indicated that culture could be used to dismiss practices that were not already part of the dominant national narrative.

The strategic construction of differences between culture and religion draws attention to the agency related to the discursive use of culture. The considered mobilization of culture and difference in data echoes the notion of

“intercultural moments” (Bolden, 2014). Results indicated that culture was not a neutral and default concept but was made relevant for specific purposes in specific contexts. Findings suggested that the use of culture as a discursive resource to validate and normalize meanings may increase assumptions about culture being the default unit to measure similarities and differences. These discourses are likely to contribute to “seeing culture everywhere” (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009) and to decoupling culture from issues of politics, agency, and power. Such conceptualization of culture was reinforced by the essentialist underpinnings that punctuate its use in data.

Associating culture and nation, and representing culture as normal and unproblematic echo traditional essentialist views (Dervin, 2011). Findings suggest that such a framework enabled to use culture as a discursive strategy in order to covertly reinforce and validate dominant representations. Essentialist underpinnings were also suggested by solid understandings of practices that could and could not be incorporated into the existing national narrative. Findings suggested that the conceptualization of culture as a fixed, homogenous, and reified entity contributed to deploy strategic oppositions between “cultural us” and “religious them”. This opposition has relevant implications in the French context where the category “Muslim” tends to be more used than national and ethnic denominations (Deltombe, 2005). In addition, the opposition between “cultural us” and “religious them”, and the essentialist assumptions that inform it hint at post-racial discourses of racism. Lentin (2004, p. 99) point out that:

Thinking culturally about difference is the default for not talking about “race”, thereby avoiding the charge of racism. But the need for such a substitute obscures precisely the fact that the hierarchy put in place by racism has been maintained. It no longer exists as blatant persecution. It is more ambivalent.

The crafting and use of cultural resonance to validate and sustain specific representations draws attention to the evaluative and exclusionary roles that can be assigned to culture as a discursive resource. Findings from this article therefore have relevant theoretical and practical implications regarding the use of culture as a discursive strategy to delineate what – and who – belongs to the imagined community.

4.1.3 Memories as a discursive strategy: Exploring representations of laïcité and Frenchness in articles from *Le Monde*.

“A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” (Renan, 1990, p. 19)

Previous studies have pointed out the increasing and pervasive representation of laïcité as originally and exclusively French (Baubérot, 2007; Baubérot & Milot, 2011). This article explores further this association by focusing on memories

used to embed laïcité in a national narrative, and which one. This article focuses on memories made relevant in newspaper articles as both play a significant role in constructing and deploying national narratives. Memories contribute to national storytelling through the selection and articulation of elements from the past to construct a sense of togetherness in the present (Erlil, 2011; Mannik, 2013). Memories are frequently deployed in the media which also act as storytellers by providing narratives constructive of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991; Bird & Dardenne, 2009; Hoskins, 2001). Exploring mediated memories therefore offers relevant insights into the discursive construction of realities. Few studies within intercultural communication have examined memories despite them offering a relevant approach to investigate the discursive production of culture and identity in the light of historicized power structures (Drzewiecka, Ehrenhaus, & Owen, 2016).

Data used for analysis were selected from the *Le Monde* main data set about laïcité ($N= 895$) by inductively reading through all data and collecting articles relevant to the notion of memory. Following this first stage, a set of keywords (i.e. history (*histoire*), historical (*historique*), memory (*mémoire*), heritage (*patrimoine*), legacy (*héritage*)), was used to ensure that no relevant articles was left out. Articles selected for in-depth study ($n= 60$) were analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to examine (1) what memories were utilized as well as (2) how they contributed to the discursive association of laïcité with France.

Results indicated that memories used in data tended to be from a distant past and related to events typically associated with representations of France. The 1905 law holds a prominent status in data where it was typically addressed as the founding text of laïcité which encapsulates its essence. In addition, memories about the French Revolution, the Enlightenment period, and their associated values were evoked in data. Memories about recent events and laws were also conjured up in data and tended to be associated with the controversies they sparked. Representations of old and recent memories seemed to differ mostly as regards their purpose: old memories, especially the 1905 law, were presented as *enabling* texts while recent memories were mostly presented as *forbidding* and *prohibiting* legislations.

Findings focused on memories from a distant past which were conjured up in data. This article argues that old memories play a key role in the discursive association of laïcité with France. In the discussion part of this article, these are referred to as *imagined memories* because (1) they refer to memories that have not been experienced by individuals today and (2) evoke events and values that are widely associated with what France, and identifying with France, entails (Asad, 2003), which (3) contributes to tie laïcité together with the *imagined community*. This article argues that imagined memories are powerful discursive tools to (1) fix dominant representations and (2) normalize meanings, which can (3) contribute to produce instances of disciplinary power. Findings suggest that the power of collective imagined memories lies in their ambivalent position as both stories and historical events; having at once the legitimacy of

facts and the prestige of myths. The propensity of imagined memories to blur the line between a purposefully constructed and articulated narrative and historical facts suggests that they can be utilized to legitimate and normalize meanings and therefore help accept constructed knowledge as *truth*. The association of laïcité with key elements of the national history contributed to construct laïcité as undisputable rather than contingent. Findings suggested that this association elevates laïcité as a source of identification embedded in and constructive of Frenchness. Through these mechanisms, laïcité becomes a form of “disciplinary power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 184) which pushes individuals to conform to the “power of the norm” and fit normalized representations of the secular imagined community.

These findings highlight several zones of tensions. The imagined memories used in data tend to dismiss the plurality and fluidity of what Frenchness encompasses. Imagined memories seemed to draw on dominant status-quo representations of Frenchness informed by the secularization paradigm, essentialist views of culture (through which laïcité is represented as inherently and intrinsically French), the use of nation and culture as synonyms (which sustains homogenous and dominant views of the nation). In the light of these findings, this article argues that the combination of essentialist views and imagined memories play a critical role in constructing laïcité as something constructing by and for *us*, and endangered by *them*.

4.1.4 Representations of individuals in discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde*: Confirming or challenging the republican framework of identity?

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. ... Culture identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identifications or suture, which are made within the discourse of history and culture. (Hall, 2005, p. 446)

Both concepts of *identity* and *laïcité* have stirred polemics in recent years in France. Exploring individuals and identity categories made relevant in discourses of laïcité therefore sets out to understand intersections between power dynamics circulating throughout society. Previous studies about secularism in France and Europe have highlighted tensions associated with representations of Muslims, Islam, and the veil (e.g. Auslander, 2000; Hancock, 2008; Killian, 2007). Studies have drawn attention to the tensions related to identity and laïcité in the French context. Laïcité has been criticized for being pervasively associated with representations of France (Baubérot, 2007) and constructing national and religious identifications in opposition to one another (Auslander, 2000). Baubérot (2007) discusses the different identities with which laïcité has been associated and the oppositions it helped sustain throughout time: republicans versus monarchists, left-wing party versus right-wing party, and, since the end of the 1980s, secular French versus Muslim French.

Building on these findings and the tensions they highlight, this article focuses on the “‘subjects’ who in some way personify the discourse [...]; with the attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was at that time” (Hall, 1997b, p. 45). Specifically, this article explores (1) identity categories used in discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde* to understand (2) how they are articulated with one another and within the larger framework of laïcité. In addition to critical intercultural communication and a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this article is informed by *intersectionality*. All three frameworks provide relevant complementary lenses to critically examine identity categories made relevant in discourses of laïcité. Intersectionality and critical intercultural communication are both used to disrupt identity categories presented as normal and homogenous (Phoenix, 2013). Identity categories are therefore approached in the light of wider circulating discourses and tensions, and with the overarching aim of casting light on “‘processes of *production, naturalization, and normalization*” (Mendoza et al., 2002, p. 316, emphasis in original).

Out of the articles originally collected from *Le Monde* ($N= 895$), this article used those categorized as “‘closely related to laïcité” ($n= 239$) for in-depth analysis. Data were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) by repeatedly reading through the material in order to identify meanings, values, and topics related to identity and laïcité.

Findings indicated several zones of tensions regarding the identity categories used and their articulation within the republican framework of identity. Results suggested that intersections between different values and discourses constructed an imagined community whose attributes are those of modern secular individuals. Specifically, intersections between universal feminism and the secularization paradigm appeared in discussions about veiled Muslim women who tended to be represented as either victims (forced to wear the veil by their religion, their husbands, and/or religious male counterparts) or as enemies (by willingly wearing the veil). Results suggested that the intersection between laïcité, modernity, universal feminism, and assumptions about religion being inherently oppressive for women de-legitimized veiled Muslim women on two levels. First, the enemy representation positioned them outside of the *national imagined community* because of the assumption that they refuse to follow national values and customs. Second, discourses about the act of wearing the veil as an act of submission de-legitimized veiled Muslim women as *women* by positioning them in opposition to the expected profile of a French woman in the 21st century whose expected attributes are those of a secular, modern, and independent woman.

Findings suggested that the imagined community is assumed to be secular because of the (1) weight of the secularization paradigm, (2) the one-way use of the term “‘community” to position individuals, (3) and the voice of the majority resonating as the voice of the imagined community through the use of polls. Results showed that religion tended to be negatively connoted as it was assumed to be something of *the past*, that *jeopardizes the existing order*, that can be

scary, or that was *discussed in relation to problems affecting several spheres of society*. In contradiction with the understanding of communitarianism as a threat which permeates data, religious minorities were oftentimes described as “communities”. This highlighted the discrepancy between the republican imagined community described as universal and inclusive, and the one-sided categorization of certain groups as communities. Polls were also used in data in which only the voice of the secular majority was heard to voice opinions about the religious other.

However, findings also indicated tensions in data which could suggest that the republican framework in which identity and *laïcité* are embedded is being challenged to some extent. First, on few occasions in data, *laïcité* was pointed out as causing problems rather than offering solutions to Muslim veiled women. Shifting the debate to question the model in place may open up new discursive spaces to discuss structural changes and address religious practices from a more liquid stance. Second, compound identity categories somewhat similar to hyphenated identities were sometimes used in data. These hyphenated-like identities brought together religious and national identities (e.g. French Muslims, Muslims of France) and may be used to expand the boundaries of the imagined community. However, within a strict republican framework of identity, these compound identities could also be perceived as a way of emphasizing difference and positioning individuals outside of the imagined community. Further research is thus needed to explore who uses these hyphenated-like identities and in which context.

Findings from this study have implications regarding the notion of *difference* which seems to be mostly negatively depicted because of the republican embeddedness of discourses of *laïcité* (Brubaker, 1992). Such approach combined with negative denotations of religion pointed out by results may contribute to construct *difference* as *deviance* and as a *threat* to the majority. This becomes especially relevant in the light of prevalent representations of the *secular imagined community* suggested in data by intersections between the secularization paradigm, universal feminism, and *laïcité*. These findings echo Appadurai’s (2006, p. 11) discussion of predatory narcissisms and identities:

Minority is the symptom but difference itself is the underlying problem. Thus the elimination itself (not just the hyper-attachment to *minor* differences) is the new hallmark of today’s large-scale, *predatory narcissisms*.

This echoes Benhabib’s (1996) discussion of the problems associated with the construction of identities through differences and oppositions. However, findings also suggest tensions that may point to the emergence of new discourses that could acknowledge more liquid practices and modernities (Bauman, 2013; Dervin, 2011). Moderating the construction of difference as inherently problematic within the French republican framework seems to be a key aspect to downplay the tensions that permeate the notions of culture, religion, and *laïcité*.

5 DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

5.1 Summary of the findings

This research project investigated the construction of knowledge about laïcité in a selection of articles from the newspaper *Le Monde* in order to capture the complex relations of power that permeate this concept and their implications both in practice (regarding the use laïcité in the current French context) and theoretically (as regards the use of culture as a discursive resource). Findings from this research project can be summarized into 6 main points that will be elaborated in the following pages.

Findings echo those of previous studies (e.g. Bhandar, 2009; Hancock, 2008) that argued that the emphasis put on uniformity by laïcité and the French republican model can be detrimental. Findings are also in line with previous studies suggesting intersections between laïcité and prejudiced views of Islam and Muslims (e.g. Doyle, 2011; Hopkins, 2015). This study adds to previous research by providing a detailed picture of the meanings, denotations, and other discourses integrated in the discursive construction of laïcité in a corpus of articles from *Le Monde*. Overall, results highlight a wide range of tensions embedded in the concept of laïcité and related to its construction as a prominent national feature. Tensions also hint at post-racial logics of exclusion that are intertwined with results about the discursive use of culture and construction of laïcité as a form of disciplinary power. The key findings are presented over the following pages.

- 1) Representation of laïcité as part of the national imaginary.** Findings indicate that laïcité is tied to the imagined community in two complementary ways. First, laïcité is represented as an intrinsic element of national history and values (*article III*). Second, laïcité is presented as a significant feature with which individuals from the imagined community are assumed to identify and which is expected to define them (*article IV*). Thus, laïcité is constructed as an element of the

national imaginary by being represented as an expected attribute of both the nation and its individuals. This especially appears through the pervasive assumption that the imagined community is secular (*articles II, III, IV*). Different elements contribute to sustain this representation (i.e. intersections between *laïcité*, modernity, universal feminism, negative views of religion, and the voice of the secular majority being used as the voice of the imagined community). Results suggest discourses of *laïcité* in data are underpinned by the secularization paradigm and the corresponding assumption that being modern supposes being secular (*articles III, IV*).

- 2) **Power.** Representations of *laïcité* as undisputable rather than contingent (*article III*) and its association with both macro- and micro-level practices (*articles II, III, IV*) hint at *laïcité* being an instance of “disciplinary power” circulating throughout society (Foucault, 1977). Findings suggest that the various intersections through which knowledge about *laïcité* is constructed in data elevate *laïcité* as a potential source of regulation and identification. The parallel between *laïcité* and disciplinary power casts light on (1) the normative underpinnings of what belonging to the imagined community entails (*articles III, IV*) and indicates (2) the emphasis placed on uniformity in discourses of *laïcité*. This may contribute to construct difference as deviance (*article IV*), which creates challenges and inequalities to gain access to the homogeneous imagined community (*article II*).
- 3) **Tensions circulating throughout society.** Representations of, and associated with, *laïcité* suggest a wide range of tensions. Findings indicate occasional dichotomous views of *cultural us* and *religious them* (*article II*) as well as the representation of *laïcité* as something constructed by and for *us* and endangered by *them* (*article III*). The construction of knowledge about *laïcité* therefore seems to be intertwined with logics of inclusion and exclusion performed through different strategies (i.e. conceptualization and utilization of culture, representations of individuals, negative connotations attached to religion, unidirectional use of the term community, and selective use of the past). The combination of these different discursive strategies reveals strategic oppositions between a cultural majority (whose practices can be taken-for-granted) and religious minorities – in particular Muslim minority (whose practices tend to be represented as problematic to the current order) (*articles II, III, IV*).
- 4) **Post-racial logics of exclusion.** Occasional oppositions between *culture us* and *religious them* suggest a shift in logics of exclusion / inclusion moving from race to cultural and religious denominations. Categories of culture and religion are presented as disconnected from

race issues, which makes it possible to use them across a variety of public discourses such as *Le Monde*. Findings however suggest the use of cultural and religious categories to construct differences mirror racially-based discourses. Such racist logics relied “on difference, deviance, and threat—that entrenched white supremacy, the association of whiteness with a particular ‘ideal’ national identity and culture and the racialization of ‘brown’ people as threatening and deviant.” (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015, p. 121). Post-racism logics of exclusion used in data seemed to be constructed through and constructive of religion as different, deviant, and jeopardizing the normal secular order. These post-racial logics of exclusion articulated around culture as unproblematized and religion as problematic may pave the way for “predatory narcissism” and “predatory identities” (Appadurai, 2006) and contribute to transform horizontal disciplinary power into more explicit and vertical power relations between a *secular* imagined community and *religious* Others. These suggested dichotomous views echo the shift undergone by racist discourses revolving around culture rather than race (Lentin, 2004).

- 5) **The use of culture as a discursive resource.** Findings suggest that essentialist views permeate data (*articles II, III*). This approach to culture draws on and perpetuate (1) solid dominant representations of Frenchness, (2) views of nation and culture as synonyms, and (3) assumptions of culture being normal, taken-for-granted, and uncoupled from agency and power. Findings suggest that culture was used in data to validate meanings and codify practices because of its conceptualization as unproblematic (*article II*). Such approach makes it possible to conceal tensions, for instance related to race as well as historicized colonial logics of exclusion, by covertly validating dominant representations and associated privileges through their representations as cultural (*articles II, III*). Findings reveal that different strategies are utilized to craft cultural resonance and deploy it in specific cases, which suggests that culture is not an a-priori explanation but a selected and articulated discursive resource (*article II*). These results are used to draw a parallel with the concept of “intercultural moments” (Bolden, 2014) which argues that culture and difference are strategically deployed in interpersonal interactions to respond to specific contextual cues and individuals’ agency. The crafting and deployment of cultural resonance to validate representations casts light on the evaluative and exclusionary roles of culture as a discursive strategy (*articles II, III*). Despite the strategic deployment of culture in data, its use to validate and normalize meanings may reinforce assumptions about culture being the basic entity to attend to differences and similarities.

- 6) **Recognizing possibilities for different discourses to arise at some point.** Previous research underlined the way knowledge about laïcité had changed throughout time and mirrored representations of French national identity (Baubérot, 2007). This research project also reveals the situatedness of discourses of laïcité which echo current tensions and debates in the French society. Findings indicate both (1) the emergence of possible new discourses or discursive spaces and (2) strategies that can be used to downplay the rise of competing discourses. Findings indeed suggest that embedding laïcité in a symbolic historical national narrative contribute to sustain and reinforce dominant representations (*article III*), which limits opportunities for new discourses to visibly and successfully emerge. On the other hand, new discursive spaces are also revealed, which could allow for more liquid practices and modernities to be acknowledged within the strict republican framework in which laïcité is embedded (*article IV*).

Overall, findings from this research projects support and advance findings from previous studies on the notion of laïcité and the discursive construction of cultural realities. This research project therefore offers both theoretical and practical implications.

5.2 Evaluation of the research and limitations

This research project follows warrants typically used by social-constructionist studies. Strengths and limitations of this research project are thus discussed in terms of *reflexivity, rigor, transparency, usefulness, and fruitfulness* (Burr, 2003; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

This research project was influenced by social constructionism and post-structuralism, and aimed at exploring strategies through which knowledge about laïcité was constructed, deployed, legitimized, and the power relations it suggested. This project therefore built on the premise that knowledge is limited, situated, and articulated for specific purposes. Findings from this study are logically understood in a similar manner: they are subjective, situated within a field of study, influenced by methodological decisions that I made as well as by theoretical lenses with which I chose to work. Findings from this research project are therefore limited in ways that correspond to its epistemological and ontological foundations. Even though discourses produced by this research project are themselves situated, limited, and permeated with power, constantly reflecting on such issues helped grow awareness of my own assumptions and agency and limit, to some extent, their influence on the project.

In addition, I tried to be as transparent and rigorous as possible with the data I used and the different steps of the analysis process. Data reduction, iterative grouping and coding of data, and presenting original texts with their translations were some of the procedures used to enhance both rigor and

transparency. Using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) enabled to provide a systematic and repetitive reading of data which enhanced the overall rigor of the project by forcing me to constantly contrast developing elements of my analysis with the collected materials (Marsh & White, 2006). QCA provided a solid ground on which to build further the analysis by posing Foucaultian oriented questions about the discursive practices under examination. The combination of these methodological lenses was a different approach than that typically used in intercultural communication research and therefore enabled to propose different and novel answers. Using only QCA or only a Foucaultian approach to discourse would have considerably limited the scope of this research as well as the usefulness and fruitfulness of its findings.

Results are however limited by the type of data which was used for this project. Data were collected from the newspaper *Le Monde* and the use of this sole source limited the scope of discourses about laïcité that could be analyzed. Findings were nevertheless rich as different discursive strategies and tensions were identified in data. Following from the premise that discourses are situated, this study did not intend to analyze discourses about laïcité that could be generalized to society as a whole. On the contrary, examining discourses from *Le Monde* was meant to understand what representations of laïcité are produced from the newspaper's position of power. Findings may therefore not be generalizable to larger discourses of laïcité in France but provide insights and propositions that urge for further research. Using data from *Le Monde* was therefore meant as an opportunity to conduct a thorough in-depth analysis of its discourses, which would provide a solid basis for further comparative work with other outlets or levels of discourses.

5.3 Practical and theoretical implications

Findings about the tensions that permeate representations of laïcité used in data have numerous practical implications regarding statuses of minorities, regulations of religious expressions, and the notion of difference in the current French context. Findings also have theoretical implications regarding the conceptualization of difference in the field of intercultural communication. Finally, the design and outcomes of this research project could provide relevant insights into developing further critical discursive approaches in intercultural communication.

- 1) **Voices of the minorities are not as audible as that of the majority.** Some opinion papers in data were written by individuals identifying as minority group members and raising issues related to that status. However, findings drew attention to the way practices of minorities tended to be widely addressed and assessed by members of the majority. Minorities did not get similar chances to talk on their behalf. This may be related to the newspaper *Le Monde* and further research

should examine whether this issue can be generalized to certain types of press or media in France. Findings however suggest limitations regarding the inclusiveness of discourses from *Le Monde* which tend to reproduce existing power structures. Examining in more detail and on other topics than laïcité the scope of voices and opinions presented in *Le Monde* could help understand better who gets to talk and about what, and who does not. In addition, attention should be paid to newsroom diversity and ways in which editorial choices are made. In general, unequal opportunities of voicing opinions is a critical issue regarding (1) media's role in constructing the imagined community and (2) processes of othering (Cottle, 2000). Developing inclusive and diverse media discourse can contribute to developing inclusive and diverse representations of the imagined community. As long as minorities do not get to talk from their positions and about their experiences they will remain at the margins, othered, objects of discourses.

- 2) **Post-racial expressions of racism in traditional professional media in the French context.** Inequalities that transpire discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde* point to post-racial logics of exclusion-inclusion revolving around strategic oppositions between culture and religion. These findings have implications regarding post-racial expressions of racism in (1) traditional professional media and (2) in the French context. Color-blind and cultural racism can be more intricate to identify because of the covert ways through which they produce and normalize differences, and maintain status-quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Disguised as politically correct, color-blind and cultural racism can therefore be deployed in mainstream public discourses like that of *Le Monde*. The expression of post-racial racism in the French context goes hand in hand with the ideal of republican universalism which dismisses "race" and concomitant power relations. The polls used in data highlighted the relation, also underlined in previous studies (e.g. Jugé & Perez, 2006; Mbembe, 2006), between universalism and color-blind racism. Findings suggest that culture can be used to construct inequalities by mapping out the practices it encompasses and covertly excluding from its realm those that are not categorized as cultural. That is, culture in data seemed to be used to construct and affirm similarities, which ultimately excluded practices and individuals categorized in a different manner (e.g. as religious). In the light of the role played by traditional professional media in constructing cultural realities, post-racial expressions of racism can have significant implications in mapping and normalizing identity categories. In the current French context, this seem especially important given the suggested shift in categorizing minorities in France, from ethnic and national denominations (e.g. Algerians, Arabs, North Africans) to religious ones (e.g. Muslims)

(Deltombe, 2005; Deltombe & Rigouste, 2006; Fellag, 2014). This research project therefore adds to previous findings on cultural and post-racial expressions of racism by indicating ways in which culture can be presented as disconnected from race and strategically opposed to racialized notions such as religion.

- 3) **Reflections on the notion of *difference*** have both practical and theoretical implications. On a practical level, the assumption that difference can be synonym to deviance and constructed as a threat to current practices represented as normal, cultural, or secular raises important issues. The normative underpinnings, reinforced by occasional and strategic oppositions of *cultural us* and *religious them*, and which tie together in data Frenchness, *laïcité*, and valid behaviors suggest more one-directional (and less circular) regulations of practices. The suggested polarization of *laïcité* as an instance of disciplinary power may have practical implications concerning the expression of religiosity in public places, which has been the topic of numerous controversies in France over the past decades. Findings from this research project point out the different ways in which cultural resonance can be crafted, including references to the “society”, “public sphere” and “public domain”. Future research could examine further the use of cultural categorization in discourses of *laïcité* to represent practices as normal and unproblematic, and the ways in which “public places” are themselves categorized as normal and neutral.

On a theoretical level, this research project points to the downsides of focusing exclusively on similarities. Findings indicate a wide range of tensions related to the embeddedness of *laïcité* in republican values emphasizing uniformity. This highlights the need to consider *which* similarities are utilized to bridge gaps between individuals. Increasing emphasis is put in critical intercultural communication to focus on similarities (rather than differences) in order to build rapport in interpersonal interactions (e.g. Dervin, 2011; 2014). This research project argues that similarities can be a powerful resource when it is negotiated and not unilaterally decided upon. This study also recognizes the stereotypical representations sustained by a-priori culturalist-differentialist approaches to intercultural communication. However, findings from this research suggest that problems lie in the ways similarities and differences are conceptualized and utilized. Emphasizing and enforcing similarities in a top-down or unilateral manner may prove counter-productive because of the normative underpinnings which risk putting forth dominant ideologies, and transforming search for similarities into power exertion. Both differences and similarities have pitfalls depending on the way they are utilized and it seems important not to dismiss either one of them on the pretense that these notions would inherently be wrong. Findings therefore urge us to

reflect on the way we conceive of these notions and utilize them. Dismissing race by invalidating its biological foundations did not stop the logics of exclusion that it helped justify. Other strategies including that of cultural racism have appeared, and it seems logic enough to assume that dismissing culture on the grounds that it is a social construction will not put an end to the inequalities it produces. The underlying assumptions that difference can be nuisance, deviance, or threat seems to be a much deeper issue. This urges scholars, especially in intercultural communication, to propose more dialectical conceptualizations of similarity and difference that would embrace their complexity and situatedness rather than attempting to reduce them to two extreme opposites of inherently good and bad. This study thus agrees with Xu's (2013, p. 394) position and urges for more developments in that direction within intercultural communication:

Difference is not the problem for communication; the problem is the attitude of the interlocutor toward difference and the other-negative or positive, complaining or appreciative. The self and the other do not necessarily stand in a confronting or dichotomic relation, but in a relation of complementarity.

4) Critical intercultural communication applied to macro-level discourses. This research project grew out of my increasing understanding of the field of intercultural communication and the limits posed by traditional (neo-)essentialist approaches. This project was consequently designed to echo the main premises of a critical approach by exploring the discursive use of culture and related power implications. In addition, the project was limited to one country to go beyond and deconstruct assumptions that intercultural communication automatically supposes communication between individuals from different countries. Such views are embedded in solid approaches to culture which remain largely predominant within the field, as illustrated by the following comment from an anonymous reviewer:

I nevertheless have to point out that the article remains within the area of the concept of "culture", and does not take further steps to present how the specific phenomena analysed here will manifest in encounters between different cultures. That is, the paper is not about intercultural communication per se (anonymous reviewer)

Reified understandings of culture as entities that could "encounter" highlight the need and urgency to keep on developing critical and discursive approaches within the field of intercultural communication. This research project drew on an eclectic theoretical and methodological framework by bringing together concepts from cultural studies (e.g. representation, othering), feminist studies (e.g. intersectionality), and a Foucaultian approach to discourse. These frameworks provided relevant tools to answer questions put forth by critical intercultural communication research about construction and articulation of meanings, power and agency, and processes of

normalization. Building more interdisciplinary bridges is primordial to thoroughly investigate complex multifaceted issues and not limit our analyses to the lenses provided by one discipline. Such collaboration is especially important for critical intercultural communication studies to be able to provide relevant critiques of essentialist analytical and methodological tools that still permeate much of intercultural communication research. Design and findings of this research project can provide insights into the use of a critical discursive approach applied to analyze macro-level discourses. Exploring such discourses is an important step to gain a holistic understanding of power relations circulating throughout society and their interplay with individuals' own agency, discourses, and positioning. This study intended to bridge a gap with critical intercultural communication studies focusing on interpersonal interactions. Investigating further macro- and micro-level discourses will help gain a more detailed understanding of the scope of discursive strategies utilized to craft and mobilized cultural representations, and, ultimately, will contribute to understand the logics of power embedded in and perpetuated by the use of culture at different levels.

This research project was meant to explore culture from a different perspective than that of mainstream intercultural communication studies informed by neo-essentialist views. Findings highlighted the importance of using a critical discursive approach to investigate the construction of cultural realities and power implications within a national context. Findings also raised numerous issues for future conceptual and theoretical developments within the field of intercultural communication. Furthermore, this research project was conducted to bridge a gap by exploring the discursive construction of *laïcité* in media discourse rather than from a theoretical standpoint or through individuals' experiences. Exploring discourse of *laïcité* circulating in *Le Monde* offered relevant insights into minorities' visibility (or lack thereof) as well as post-racial expressions of racism in such a prominent professional media.

SUMMARY

Issues related to secularism go beyond organizing relations between the State and religion, and encompass a myriad of aspects related to life in society (Taylor, 2010). On a broader theoretical level, discussions about secularism point out Western-centric approaches to the concept and its implementation (Bhandar, 2009). The scope and types of tensions that characterize issues related to secularism highlight the relevance of exploring this topic from a critical intercultural communication viewpoint in order to uncover ways in which culture is mobilized in such conversations and with which power outcomes.

The present study focuses on the concept of secularism used in France, *laïcité*, in order to examine the local production of knowledge about this notion and associated power relations specific to that context and time period. Previous studies have pointed out the scope of tensions encapsulated in *laïcité* because of its pervasive association with France across discourses (Baubérot, 2007) and the Christian bias that underpins its application (Auslander, 2000). The present study explores further these issues by investigating (1) how knowledge about *laïcité* is constructed in a set of articles from the newspaper *Le Monde* and (2) with which power implications. This research therefore bridges the gap with previous studies on *laïcité* which were mostly conducted from theoretical approaches or focused on individuals' experiences in relation to representations of Islam and the veil.

Exploring newspaper discourses about *laïcité* offers relevant naturally occurring data to explore the production and normalization of meanings that are relevant to representations of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). This level of investigation provides relevant grounds to conduct research about the use of culture and cultural claims. Embedded in a critical intercultural communication framework, this research project endeavored to "shift from reified and inescapable notions of cultural difference to a focus on discourses where 'culture' is actually made relevant and used as a communicative resource." (Piller, 2012, p. 14) Thus, this research project focuses on discourses situated in France with the intention of dissecting this national referent rather than using it as a basis for analysis. Similar to recent studies breaking away from essentialist traditions that have dominated the field of intercultural communication since the 1980s (Moon, 1996), this research project uses a critical discursive approach to capture tensions and agency embedded in the discursive production of cultural realities. Exploring macro-level discourses from *Le Monde* also seeks to bridge a gap with critically-oriented interpersonal research from the field. Findings from this study can bring insights into the interplay between meanings being deployed by individuals and those emanating from prominent sources like *Le Monde*.

In addition to critical intercultural communication, this research project drew on the fields of cultural-, feminist-, and media studies, as well as a Foucaultian approach to discourse. These different analytical tools helped

attend to the multifaceted aspects of this research project articulated around the two following questions:

- 1) How knowledge about laïcité is produced in recent discourses from the newspaper *Le Monde*?
- 2) What power relations are suggested by the representations of laïcité put forth in data from *Le Monde*?

Similar to the eclectic theoretical framework used in this study, the methodological framework brings together Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and a Foucaultian approach to discourse. Combining aspects from these two methods enabled to conduct a thorough and systematic in-depth analysis of data while bringing Foucaultian themes of analysis to the forefront. Besides article I, in which the critical intercultural communication theoretical framework used in this research project was articulated in the light of results from a critical literature review on recent media studies, all three other articles used data from *Le Monde*. Data were collected using the keyword “laïcité” and subsequently reduced. Data reduction enabled to identify newspaper articles that were the most related to the topic of laïcité and to identify themes and patterns across the whole data set ($N= 895$) that could be relevant for in-depth analysis. Thus, article II ($n= 76$) used articles focusing on issues of religion, culture, and symbolic practices. Article III ($n= 60$) explored articles in which the notion of “memory” was made relevant. Article IV ($n= 239$) proposed an in-depth analysis of representation of individuals in all articles categorized as closely related to the topic of laïcité. The newspaper *Le Monde* was chosen for data collection because of its (1) prominent status, (2) editorial tradition, and (3) efforts to be a vocal actor in the public sphere (Eko & Berkowitz, 2009; Le, 2002; 2009).

Findings from this research project reveal tensions underpinning representations of laïcité as part of the national imaginary. Results point out different strategies used to tie laïcité to the imagined community and therefore construct it as an immutable aspect of the national imaginary. Such representation has strong implications regarding expectations towards individuals identifying with the imagined community. Findings suggest that the way knowledge about laïcité is constructed elevates it as not only a source of identification but also a source of regulation. That is, representations of laïcité in data tend to construct it as a “truth” affecting both macro- and micro-level practices. This study therefore argues that laïcité can be conceived of as an instance of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), which finds particular resonance since laïcité is embedded in a republican framework that emphasizes uniformity. This may reinforce the assumption that difference means deviance, and therefore complicates further accession to the homogenous imagined community.

Tensions circulating throughout society hint at strategic and occasional oppositions created in data between *cultural us* and *religious them* as well as the

underlying assumption that laïcité was created by and for *us* and endangered by *them*. These tensions have practical implications for religious minorities in France especially in the light of suggested evolutions regarding categorizations from national denominations (e.g. Algerians) to religious ones (e.g. Muslims) (Deltombe, 2005; Deltombe & Rigouste, 2006; Fellag, 2014). These tensions hint at post-racial logics of exclusions and echo larger shifts of racist discourses replacing race with the less problematized notion of culture (Lentin, 2004). Findings therefore have relevant implications regarding the use of culture as a discursive resource to strategically construct oppositions that reinforce the validity of dominant practices. The strategic crafting and mobilization of cultural resonance draws attention to culture being a discursive resource used for specific purposes and reflecting agency. These findings hint at “intercultural moments” (Bolden, 2014) in interpersonal communication when culture and difference are purposefully made relevant.

Findings however point to tensions within discourses from *Le Monde* which may suggest the emergence of new discursive spaces in which to offer a critique of laïcité – and therefore challenge its irrefutability – and acknowledge more liquid practices and performances of culture and religion. The emergence of such discursive spaces however requires further research in order to be confirmed and for their mechanisms to be understood in more detail.

This research project has practical implications for minorities – especially religious groups – in France as regards their statuses and opportunities to have a voice in societal debates. Implications also touch upon the concept of *difference* by pointing to the pitfalls of its conceptualization within the republican system in which laïcité is embedded. Findings also suggest theoretical implications regarding the notion of difference within the field of intercultural communication and the need to de-polarize views about it. The design and findings from this research project can draw attention to the benefits of combining interdisciplinary influences and the need to keep on developing critical views that counter essentialist premises and tools used in intercultural communication research.

Findings point out the need to keep on exploring ways in which culture is utilized in media discourse. The use of culture and religion to categorize individuals has dramatically resurfaced in European public discourses as refugees reach shores and cities of the old continent. Further studies are needed to understand and deconstruct the logics of exclusion, racism, and feelings of threat communicated through the use of such categories. Findings also point out the need to explore representations of laïcité across media outlets and time periods. The time frame used in this research project (2011-2014) as well as the newspaper from which data were collected (i.e. *Le Monde*) provide relevant bases for future comparisons. Recent events in France and new geopolitical dynamics also underline the importance of investigating how and why the notion of laïcité is deployed given the logics of exclusion that seem to permeate its representations. Few days after the last articles were collected from this research project, attacks in Paris on *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher superette

occurred. Following these events, laïcité was once again put to the forefront in public discourses as a key value to solve such national trauma. Further research will definitely be needed to better understand whether and how the construction of an inclusive imagined community through discourses of laïcité can be achieved.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN MEDIA STUDIES: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

by

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The Concept of Culture in Media Studies: A Critical Review of Academic Literature

- 1 Recent directions in the field of media studies have turned culture into a significant object of study. Strong emphasis has been put on representations of minorities in media¹ and their potential biases,² minority-language media³ and ethnic media.⁴ However, the increasing attention given to culture has not gone hand in hand with an overall clarification of the concept itself. Defining culture remains a difficult exercise, especially because of its multifaceted nature. The importance of the concept in media studies and its blurry theoretical grounds highlight the need to look back at how it has been used in studies. The present article is built around three main questions. First, it looks at how culture has been researched in media studies. Second, it examines possible limitations of these approaches. Third, it investigates ways in which a critical intercultural communication framework can be beneficial to media studies dealing with culture. For this purpose, this study explores recent academic discourse on media and culture by reviewing studies dealing with issues of cultural diversity, representations of culture, and discourse of culture. In addition to examining approaches to culture and their potential limitations, this article also presents ways in which critical intercultural communication can be used by researchers from different disciplines interested in culture.
- 2 This article starts by presenting some of the main arguments raised in discussing the use and conceptualization of culture. The way critical intercultural communication contributes to this discussion is presented, followed by reasons why it can be a relevant framework for media studies. This article then looks at previous reviews of academic discourse, especially focusing on the fields of communication and media. Methods for collecting data are detailed before discussing the findings and main implications of this study.

The Concept of Culture

- 3 Culture is a concept that has been discussed extensively, giving rise to multiple approaches and uses of the term across fields of study. As the concept of culture became increasingly important and pervasive, it also became increasingly questioned. Across different fields of studies, scholars discuss whether to keep, change or altogether discard the concept of culture. Brightman brought together some of the main criticisms addressed to culture.⁵ His work reveals the variety of arguments used against the concept and the lack of convergence on how to revise it or what to use instead. Sewell also goes through some of the cornerstone issues in conceptualizing culture.⁶ The first distinction he mentions, and which he argues is not always explicitly made by researchers, is the one between the use of *culture* and *cultures*. The singular use refers to the *theoretical approach* used for research while the plural use refers to the *object of study*. *Culture* is used in contrast to other academic disciplines or analytical tools (e.g. politics, economics) whereas *cultures* is used when examining different forms of culture and is therefore more concrete (e.g. regional culture, hipster culture). Another distinction which has had a strong impact on the study of culture is the understanding of *culture as practice* or *culture as a system of symbols and meanings*. Critical intercultural scholars regard culture as a discursive construction, emphasizing the role played by individuals in *performing* culture. Inherited from constructionism, this approach emphasizes culture as something people do rather than something people have.⁷ Regarding culture as practice is the dominant approach in critical intercultural communication, which tends to be used in opposition to culture as a system of symbols and meanings. This latter approach to culture is often associated with essentialist and positivist views that describe culture as an identifiable and fixed item.⁸ Essentialist views of culture have been criticized for pinpointing aspects of cultures (typically reduced to the idea of national cultures) and presenting such characteristics as truths rather than constructions.⁹

On the other hand, critical intercultural scholars argue for an approach to culture that is largely embedded within social constructionism.¹⁰ Such an approach emphasizes culture as constructed, political, intertwined with ethics¹¹ and related to power both within and between societies.¹² From that perspective, culture is understood to be situated rather than objective, and ever changing as opposed to stable.

4 As Hall stresses, culture is about meaning and as such “permeates all of society.”¹³ Representations, practices, values and identities have cultural meanings that are discursively constructed and tap into previous cultural discourses to be meaningful. Critical intercultural communication casts light on ways in which meanings echo cultural knowledge and are therefore difficult to identify and question – even for researchers themselves, hence a strong emphasis placed on reflexivity.¹⁴ The importance of “cultural resonance” has also been pointed out by scholars examining media frames.¹⁵ Rivenburgh stresses the way “media frames that reflect cultural common sense, values, or ideology are both instinctually employed by journalists and easily accepted by the public”.¹⁶ Tapping into cultural resonance may be done consciously or out of habit by journalists and editors who see their cultural environment as natural. The use of culturally resonant frames in media discourse increases their taken-for-grantedness, which enhances their power. Cultural markers create a sense of common sense because of their presence in everyday life experiences which contributes to normalizing them, making them “well-nigh impossible to recognize, question, or resist”.¹⁷ The emphasis that critical intercultural communication puts on culture as having the propensity to normalize representations and practices thus appears especially relevant to media studies.

5 Another aspect where interests of both disciplines meet is the extent to which discursive practices can be ethnocentric. To different extents, critical scholars agree on the idea that discourses construct the way societies represent themselves.¹⁸ Media discourse is probably one of the discursive practices most often cited as constitutive of people’s worldviews, representations of themselves and others. One question put forward by critical intercultural communication is the extent to which such discourses rely on ethnocentric representations. Ethnocentrism refers to people’s tendency to use the standards of their own culture to judge other cultural groups, which is concurrent with people’s tendency to regard their culture as superior to others.¹⁹ Ethnocentrism thus refers to the way cultural standards can pass as implicit norms for people identifying with that culture. As much emphasis is now put on ethnic media, cultural diversity and the effects of globalization on developing transnational media spaces, it is important not to overlook the extent to which national media discourse can still be limited and convey ethnocentric representations. The emphasis put on ethnocentrism in media has strong practical implications for professionals and audiences by encouraging them to be more critical towards news content.

Examining Academic Discourse

6 Conferences and publications are the main venues for academics to discuss the latest developments and findings from all disciplines. Nowadays, academic debate mostly takes place in journals, whose number has kept on increasing throughout the last decades.²⁰ It is through these journals that most ideas are expressed, hence the importance of examining their content. Publishing is central for scholars, not only as a way of contributing to the development of their fields of study but also to the development of their career. The notorious “publish or perish” phrase provides an efficient summary of what publications nowadays represent in the academic world.²¹ As journal articles have become the main venue for academic discourse, they have also turned into common and natural venues. Such development can be problematic if academic discourse comes to be granted too much legitimacy instead of having its status, form and content constantly challenged. Like other discursive practices, journal articles create and validate certain meanings that progressively become the norm and can, as such, easily pass as natural instead of constructed and contingent.²² Knowledge expressed in academic discourse is therefore not objective but is, like any other form of knowledge, “‘situated’ – that is, produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times”.²³

Reflexivity, a central ethical component of research, is therefore especially important when looking at academic discourse as a whole.

- 7 Recently, increasing attention has been paid to cultural bias in academic discourse. Some scholars especially criticize the general lack of attention paid to such bias. Gordon, for instance, has looked at communication theories, which he describes as an example of a Western-oriented or Eurocentric approach to research.²⁴ Gordon highlights the way communication theories have typically been elaborated by Caucasian researchers from the United States who mostly used university students as participants. Western-oriented theories have been criticized for being taken as universally valid despite being anchored in European academic traditions, especially the heritage of the Enlightenment period. In response, some scholars have suggested using different approaches. Asante has, for instance, put forth *Afrocentricity* as an ideological and methodological approach to conduct research from an African standpoint.²⁵ Similarly, Miike encourages using *Asiacentricity* to examine Asian contexts from an Asian perspective.²⁶ Miike details ways in which the concept of “communication” is defined differently by Asiatic and Eurocentric approaches, as different aspects and outcomes are emphasized.²⁷ Afrocentricity and Asiaticity illustrate ongoing efforts to diversify analytical tools that would help research human activity and capture its plurality. These approaches are meant to open up new perspectives in research by providing scholars with different outlooks on their objects of study. For some scholars, developing new approaches is also meant to create legitimate alternatives to Western theories. Back in 1983, Asante, for instance, pointed out the difficulty for some African scholars to be published in Eurocentric journals because of their different, and non-valued, academic tradition.²⁸ Shi-Xu advocates the emergence of various academic paradigms that would work “as equal but distinctive interlocutors” and help “redress this cultural imbalance”.²⁹ However, other voices among academics are more reserved when it comes to developing culture-specific approaches, fearing that it will only turn the problem around instead of solving it. Chang, Holt and Luo raise the question as they discuss Asiaticity: “If every version of a cultural writing of *other* is at the same time also the construction of *self*, might our call for an Asiatic perspective in explaining communication not fall into the same trap as the often-blamed Eurocentric perspective? Might the reversal of the situation – prioritizing Asians – encounter the same predicament?”³⁰ Supporters of culture-specific approaches, however, embrace this criticism. From their perspective, culture-specific approaches are beneficial because they are explicitly situated and do not try to reach universal validity. They point out that it is not so much Western-oriented theories being biased and situated that triggered critics as the lack of reflexivity about these limitations.³¹ Similar debates are also taking place among media scholars, with issues of “de-Westernizing” media studies being increasingly discussed.³² Critics claim that Western-oriented media theories are too limited as they are based on European and North American political, economic and media models. Looking specifically at China, Ma argues for a compromise.³³ He questions the benefits of new theories that would risk “essentializing and exoticizing the Asian experience” and proposes adjusting existing theories to fit the Chinese context.

Methods and Results

- 8 A literature review was conducted in fall 2013 using the academic search engines EBSCO and Web of Science. The keywords “media representation”, “media discourse”, “diversity”, and “cultur*” (the asterisk was used to include other possible endings in the data search) were used to collect peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2003 and 2013. Only articles dealing with issues of cultural diversity and media were included. Some articles in which culture was understood from an agricultural perspective were, for instance, left out. The search was ended once saturation was reached, that is when the same keywords used in different search engines brought up the same articles. In total, 114 articles were collected and reviewed for the purpose of this study. The literature review was conducted inductively and kept as open as possible. The search was not limited to any specific journals because the scope of topics covered by media studies on cultural diversity was expected to be very wide. One aim

of this literature review being to see what types of issues were encompassed, it would have been detrimental to limit the search to certain journals.

- 9 Short descriptions were written about each article to describe their content, which later helped identify recurrent themes, similar approaches and unusual topics. Articles were collected within a 10-year time frame in order to get an overall picture of the state of recent research. No particular evolution or trends were noticed, however, regarding approaches or topics tackled. Oftentimes, authors used eclectic theoretical and/or methodological approaches that, for instance, combined cultural studies and critical discourse analysis (CDA) or feminist theories and CDA. Among studies that explicitly presented their theoretical and/or methodological frameworks, CDA (9%), feminist theories (10%) and cultural/critical frameworks relying on Foucault's, Gramsci's or Hall's theories (29%) were recurrent approaches. As regards analytical tools from journalism or media studies, results indicated that framing theory (10%) was often used as opposed to gatekeeping or agenda-setting theory (2%). Similarly to results from previous reviews of academic discourse,³⁴ studies from this data set appeared to be mainly conducted from a Western-oriented perspective. This was the case even for strongly situated studies that focused on particular cultures and were published in specific journals. For instance, the article "Media Representations of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Their Commitment to Reconciliation"³⁵ was published in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* using CDA, and the article "The Representation of Cultural Diversity in Urdu-Language Newspapers in Pakistan: A Study of Jang and Nawaiwaqt"³⁶ was published in the *South Asia Journal of South Asian Studies* and used Hodder's approach. In comparison, articles looking at representations of women were found to use various trends of feminist theories such as standpoint theory,³⁷ postcolonial theory³⁸ and black feminism.³⁹ Similarly, articles explicitly dealing with race, for instance, used postcolonial theory⁴⁰ and Jackson's (2006) theory of scripting and media framing of black bodies.⁴¹
- 10 As regards the scope of topics tackled, results indicated that the majority of articles investigated *representation of minorities* in the media (67%), most often dealing with ethnic or religious groups. Articles within this category oftentimes raised the issue of media stereotyping and othering minorities. That is, studies investigated ways in which media discourse sometimes supports the construction of minorities as "Others", which can emphasize differences between groups and convey negative stereotypical representations.⁴² Among articles exploring representations of minorities, several studies dealt with sport and representations of athletes (8%). A significant number of studies examined *discourses of diversity* (23%), with some focusing exclusively on European discourses of diversity (3%). Other studies investigated what diversity stands for in the media and how it can be approached by newsrooms. On the other hand, some topics appeared to be scarcely tackled, which was the case of foreign-news coverage (4%), newsroom diversity (2%) or integration and acculturation issues (2%). Regarding the type of media investigated, the majority of studies examined newspapers and television (70%), while entertainment and advertisement (19%) were less considered.

Culture: Between Main Focus and Transparent Background

- 11 Despite explicitly dealing with culture, many articles did not provide a clear definition of the term. Nor did many researchers position themselves as regards the different schools of thought on culture. Instances of culture taken for granted particularly occurred in the literature when (1) culture was associated with nations or (2) the so-called Western world, or (3) when the concepts of *race* or *ethnicity* were used.
- 12 Results from the literature review conducted for this study indicate the recurrent association of culture with that of nation. However, the use of countries as cultural contexts and embodiments of cultures can be problematic for several reasons. A main pitfall is the homogeneous and reduced picture of culture that it conveys. Culture is a multilayered notion and reducing it to the single aspect of nationality can be detrimental to both the idea of nation and culture. Nations are multicultural, in the literal meaning of the word: that is, made out of multiple cultures. Studies that use nation as the unit of reference to talk about culture, language and identity tend to homogenize national cultures and therefore increase chances of being stereotypical

instead of deconstructing stereotypes. A second important drawback is the way national culture tends to be presented as normal instead of artificial. This contributes to discourses of “banal nationalism” where individuals are brought up with the idea that the world is divided between nations.⁴³ It also overlooks the fact that culture is constructed and thus intertwined with power and struggle. When culture is understood as the equivalent of nation, it typically hints at the culture of the dominant group within that nation. Such representation leaves out or even marginalizes other forms of culture within that country, therefore maintaining existing hierarchy instead of deconstructing it. Halualani, Mendoza and Drzewiecka point out the danger of blurring the lines between the concepts of culture and nation: “To accept cultures as nations as inherently and naturally truthful and accurate at a surface level would be to risk reproducing external framings of cultural groups advanced by colonialist governments, dominant nationalist parties, and ruling power interests that benefit from such ‘status quo’ thinking.”⁴⁴

13 Associating culture to nation thus tends to sustain hierarchy between cultural practices and those who practice or identify to them. By maintaining hierarchical order between cultures, the nation approach implicitly contributes to preserving the persistent dichotomy between “us” and “them”, whether within or between nations. The nation approach to culture is tightly related to essentialist views of culture in that it provides a static and homogeneous picture of culture. Essentialism regards culture as a one-dimensional concept and therefore leaves out issues of race, religion, gender, social status and larger historical and political structures. Critical intercultural communication endeavors to go beyond such limitations by taking into account the multidimensional, constructed, contingent and dynamic facets of culture. The critical intercultural communication approach does not dismiss nations as possible instances of cultures. However, it focuses on exploring which representations of culture and nation are associated, through which processes, and whether such associations vary in time or depending on the context. Critical intercultural scholars emphasize culture as raising questions rather than providing answers that would help predict people’s behaviors.⁴⁵ Through its conceptualization of culture, a critical intercultural communication framework helps focus on ways in which people construct their sense of cultural belonging and identity.⁴⁶ This approach is relevant to media studies in many ways. It is strongly related to research exploring the relation individuals make between their media consumption and their identity, or research dealing with the way media discourse is intertwined with discourses of (national) identity. The emphasis put on constructing cultural identity and belonging can also help focus on who is represented as “belonging” and who is not, which is a significant aspect of studies on minority media and cultural diversity.

14 As mentioned beforehand, results indicated that culture can be taken for granted when it is about “us”. In many cases, “our” culture is used as a background for research, making it look normal and neutral. “Our” culture also appears homogeneous because examining diversity oftentimes consists of examining the “Other”. For instance, the article entitled “Comparative Analysis of Mainstream Discourses, Media Narratives and Representations of Islam in Britain and France Prior to 9/11” examines the construction of Islam, notably referring to the switch from exoticism before 9/11 to terrorism afterwards.⁴⁷ The article, however, does not discuss the construction of “British” and “French” but uses them as taken-for-granted cultural representations. Similarly, the article “The Construction of the Image of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in two Portuguese Daily Newspapers” discusses the way “their” image is fabricated and thus artificial but does not discuss the construction of the “Portuguese” identity.⁴⁸ Of course, focusing on minorities’ identities is highly relevant, but it could be beneficial to consider both majorities’ and minorities’ identities and cultures. Such an approach could help examine diversity among “us” rather than embodied only by “them”. Examining both majority and minority could enable researchers to go beyond this dichotomous opposition and not only look at differences but also cast light on shared cultural representations, practices or identities. Looking at differences and similarities, as well as how those are negotiated, can also help examine the way cultural meanings and identities are constructed in relation to one

another. Overall, it would be a way to put all cultural practices and representations on an equal footing by explicitly defining them as constructed and contingent. This could in turn contribute to challenge taken-for-granted perceptions we have of ourselves as well as of others.

15 Findings also indicate that the concept of culture tends to be used in different ways depending on whose culture is examined. The “us” is often associated with nationality and presented as legitimate, neutral, acultural, aethnic and aracial while the “them” is often referred to in terms of religious or ethnic denominations. Oftentimes, culture is not directly problematized when the concepts of race and ethnicity are used. Eventually, this paints a picture where “we” seem to be acultural and unproblematic while “they” are described in terms of struggle, race, ethnicity or religious affiliations. The imbalance in such representations is problematic in that it reproduces stereotypical representations of minorities even though most studies intend to deconstruct them. Using alternatives to Western and Eurocentric approaches in media studies could help dismiss such a vicious circle. Enhancing geographical diversity as regards research location could also encourage study of various minority groups. Indeed, findings suggest that numerous studies are located in Europe, North America or Australia: parts of the world that embody the idea of “Western culture”. The lack of diversity in the location of research is a strong shortcoming of academic discourse, especially when it examines representation of minorities. Going through numerous articles dealing with ethnic or religious minorities living in the so-called Western world nourishes the idea that majority and dominant groups are white Europeans while struggling minorities are black, Asians or Muslims. Using a critical intercultural communication framework can discourage researchers from using or describing, even implicitly, certain groups or practices as acultural and neutral and others as only racial or ethnic. This issue has also been raised by scholars working on colorblind ideology. Browne, for instance, argues that in both the United States and France, being white is “the invisible norm against which all other cultural and racial groups are defined and subordinated”.⁴⁹ The notion of invisible norm raised by Browne is particularly relevant when it comes to seeing oneself as aracial or acultural and seeing others mostly through their skin color, religious affiliations or cultural practices. The way concepts of race and ethnicity can sometimes be used instead of the one of culture conveys the idea that they refer to different aspects. Nevertheless, race and ethnicity are forms of culture, as gender, nationality or social class can also be. Dismissing culture and using only race and ethnicity can be a drawback in that it contributes to presenting culture as unproblematic and natural, while race and ethnicity are sources of struggle. Using a critical intercultural communication framework is a way to be inclusive and critically tackle all aspects of culture. Bridging the gap between culture, race and ethnicity is also a way to bring together schools of thought (for instance, scholars from the United States and scholars from Europe) that have different stances on the concept of race itself. Examining critically the way race, ethnicity, social status, religious, sexual and gender identities are constructed and conveyed can thus enrich our understanding of culture. Generally speaking, using a critical approach to the concept of culture would help address problematic representations of minority/majority and us/them in academic discourse. Understanding culture as a construction that involves power relations and struggle contributes to include every individual, group and practice, since all aspects and members of societies are cultural. This therefore takes away the pervasive and implicit idea that some people or practices are neutral to some extent. Reflexivity is a central component in order to be able to detach oneself from ethnocentric representations and look at oneself, one’s culture, practices and values as cultural and therefore constructed and ideological. Focusing on cultural identity as constructed is also an asset in decreasing ethnocentrism or cultural bias in academic discourse. Encouraging researchers to be reflexive about their cultural backgrounds can help them problematize what they could otherwise take for granted about their own cultural identities and belongings. As Rorty points out, no one is ahistorical or acultural and therefore “everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate”.⁵⁰ The best way to overcome ethnocentric representations is to make them and the way they are constructed salient. Ethnocentrism in academic discourse is particularly problematic because research aims at being, if not entirely unbiased, at least critical towards its inherent subjectivity. Ethnocentrism as a form of bias is difficult to overcome if not addressed directly.

Researchers should therefore aim at being critical towards their personal background as well as their philosophical, theoretical and methodological heritage. Cultural baggage has to be reflected upon at the individual level, that is, in the way personal choices affect the way researchers tackle a topic or analyze data, but also at the academic level, that is, the way they can be blind to the overall schools of thought to which they belong.

Conclusion

- 16 The concept of culture is regarded by many as ambiguous, difficult to conceptualize, and even non-operational by some scholars. In spite of its difficult reputation, culture remains a prominent object of study. Influences from critical theories and social constructionism make critical intercultural communication a relevant framework for examining representations and discursive constructions of culture. The premise that culture is constructed provides a solid ground to examine ways in which certain representations seem more powerful or natural than others. It also emphasizes the fact that we live in webs of cultural discourses – some invisible to us, depending on contexts – that are intertwined with other discourses. The main aim of using a critical intercultural communication framework is not to uncover what culture really is but to uncover what representations of culture come to appear real, and through which processes. Studies therefore primarily focus on the way we navigate these webs and make sense of them, the way they are constructed, interrelated and empowered. The main asset of this framework is its emphasis on problematizing culture, which reduces risks of taking it for granted. As such, critical intercultural communication also encourages researchers to be reflexive about their academic and cultural background. This can help one be aware of the extent to which one's knowledge is situated, and therefore contributes to decreasing cultural bias in academic discourse. Generally, being aware of the representations we have of ourselves and others, as well as the reasons why these representations are constructed and conveyed, is central to developing understanding and tolerance towards others. This is especially relevant now that more and more people cross borders and that communication between cultures is faster, easier, and therefore increasingly common.

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Abstract

This study examines the way culture has been researched in media studies and suggests how critical intercultural communication could contribute to the field. A literature review was conducted and articles (N=114) published in peer-reviewed journals between 2003 and 2013 were collected. Results show that studies dealing with media and culture do not systematically define the concept of culture. Findings also indicate that culture is oftentimes taken for granted instead of being problematized and addressed as a source of struggle. Advantages of using a critical intercultural communication framework to examine culture are discussed.

Index terms

Index by keyword : critical intercultural communication, media studies, culture, academic discourse, critical/cultural studies

II

STRATEGIC USES AND OPPOSITIONS: 'CULTURE' AS A DISCURSIVE RESOURCE IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES FROM *LE MONDE* ABOUT SECULARISM

by

Mélodine Sommier

Manuscript submitted for publication.

III

MEMORIES AS A DISCURSIVE STRATEGY: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF LAÏCITÉ AND FRENCHNESS IN ARTICLES FROM *LE MONDE*

by

Mélodine Sommier

Manuscript submitted for publication.

IV

**REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIVIDUALS IN DISCOURSES OF
LAÏCITÉ FROM *LE MONDE*: CONFIRMING OR
CHALLENGING THE REPUBLICAN FRAMEWORK OF
IDENTITY?**

by

Mélodine Sommier

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Representations of individuals in discourses of *laïcité* from *Le Monde*: confirming or challenging the republican framework of identity?

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the notions of *laïcité* and *identity* have been subjects of controversy in France. The two concepts have become sufficiently co-associated since the 1990s to ensure each almost systematically entails the other. Findings from previous studies have pointed out harmful implications of this pervasive association for minorities in France, especially Muslims. This study examines further the ways *laïcité* and identity are interwoven by exploring who is represented (and how) in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* dealing with *laïcité*. Informed by critical intercultural communication scholarship, intersectionality, and a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study pays particular attention to the way identity categories are articulated with one another and in which power structures they are embedded. A selection of articles published in the leading national newspaper *Le Monde* between 2011 and 2014 was collected for in-depth analysis. Results indicate tensions as regards the use of identity categories and representations of individuals within discourses of *laïcité*. Implications concerning the overall republican framework and the concept of *laïcité* are discussed.

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Introduction

From the debate about 'national identity' organized by President Sarkozy's ruling right-wing party in 2009 (Davies, 2009) to the recent remark about France being a 'white race country' voiced by a member of the right-wing Republican Party in 2015 (Agence France Presse, 2015), 'identity' has proven to be a controversial issue in France over the past years. The concept of 'secularism' (*laïcité*) has also been a subject of polemic in recent decades, especially through the attention paid to tensions between *laïcité* and Islam. Baubérot (2007) argues that the increasing representation of Islam as an opponent to *laïcité* went hand in hand with the construction of *laïcité* as a pillar of the national identity. Previous studies have pointed out the concomitant risks for minorities to feel excluded or pushed to choose between national and religious identifications because of the pervasive association between *laïcité* and national identity (Auslander, 2000; Baubérot, 2007). The notion of identity within the French context and especially in relation to *laïcité*

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offers a relevant window to explore intersections of power dynamics circulating within society.

Drawing on critical intercultural communication scholarship, intersectionality, and using a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study sets out to understand who is represented in discourses of *laïcité* and with what implications as regards the notions of *laïcité* and identity in the French context. The critical discursive approach used in this study aims at identifying normalized identity categories and questioning the power structures they represent and in which they are embedded. For this purpose, newspaper articles ($N = 239$) published between 2011 and 2014 were selected for in-depth analysis. The newspaper *Le Monde* was used for data collection because (i) it is recognized as a quality leading newspaper in France, (ii) has a prominent status which gives its discourse visibility, and (iii) endeavors to be an active social actor (Le, 2009, 2010).

In the light of previous research on secularism in France (e.g. Auslander, 2000; Hancock, 2008; Killian, 2007), this study was conducted with the assumption that representations of Muslims and the 'expected attribute' of the veil would punctuate discourses of *laïcité*. The salience of the category 'Muslim' was confirmed through the data but results suggest tensions in the use of the category. This study discusses the ways in which these tensions can be apprehended within the republican framework in which identity categories are embedded in France.

Theoretical background

Culture: a critical discursive approach

Informed by critical intercultural communication and a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study takes a critical discursive approach to representations of identity in newspaper texts. Critical intercultural communication approaches the concept of culture as (i) a discursive construction (ii) embedded in historical, political, and economic power structures, which (iii) affects and is affected by contemporary discourses, popular practices, and interpersonal relations (Bennett, 2015; Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009; Sommier, 2014). The field of intercultural communication has been widely (mis)used to examine identity and culture from an essentialist perspective. Recent developments within the field however indicate exciting developments and interdisciplinary collaborations to generate research 'that provides information not about "cultures" but about the forces that stand behind cultural claims' (Breidenbach & Nyiri, 2009, p. 24). This type of approach offers a vibrant critique, and theoretical foundations to deconstruct, of the contemporary culturalist phase, in which the notion of culture is pervasively used to explain and classify people's practices. Problematizing the concept of culture enables to highlight the range of tension nodes it encompasses and that it can be used to cover. Previous studies have examined the use of culture in relation to, for instance, race (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2012; Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006), gender (Lengel & Martin, 2011), religion (Sommier, 2016a, 2016b), and language use (Lahti, 2013, 2015).

A discursive approach to culture casts light on the interrelatedness between discursive practices and culture by arguing that the former are culturally-situated and the latter discursively-constructed. Thus, 'To study culture, one must perforce study discourse' (Shi-xu, 2005, p. 57) in order to understand the ways in which and the reasons why culture can be

utilized as a discursive strategy (Piller, 2011). Using a selection of newspaper articles about *laïcité* published in *Le Monde* between 2011 and 2014, this study focuses on macro-level discourses and the systems of power, domination, and resistance they encompass and reproduce. This type of macro-level approach regards discourses and the knowledge they produce as historically embedded and therefore situated, contingent, partial, and infused with power (MacLure, 2003). From a Foucaultian approach, discourse is emphasized as a situated practice through which meanings are constructed and constructive of reality (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). The discourse/power/knowledge triad is central to this approach, which assumes these three aspects to be interlaced and, to some extent, mutually constitutive (Foucault, 1980). The construction of knowledge and deployment of power are regarded as complex, unstable, and multifaceted processes. Power is not conceptualized as something that can be identified, pinpointed, and isolated for study. Instead, power is regarded as circulating at various discursive levels throughout society in ways that can be both enabling and constraining (Foucault, 1977). A Foucaultian approach enables the questioning of the production of knowledge by investigating not only what is said but also what is not or cannot be said (Hook, 2001). The approach used to examine the discursive use and construction of identity categories also focuses on questioning existing representations.

Identity

Similar to the concept of culture, the notion of identity has become increasingly visible in research and various public discourses (Gilroy, 2012). Postcolonial and feminist research traditions, in particular, have shed light on the construction of identity categories which are embedded in political, social, historical, and economic struggles (Denis, 2008). Foucaultian-oriented studies have also explored ways, in which subjects are constructed through discourses which map out identities that one can – and cannot – legitimately perform (MacLure, 2003). Most intercultural communication research has focused on *cultural identity* rather than *cultural identification*, thus overlooking ‘what it means to be a member of a particular ethnic group, and how this in itself is historically and politically situated’ (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002, p. 314). Emerging critical approaches within intercultural communication are moving away from this approach by exploring ‘processes of *production, naturalization, and normalization*’ (Mendoza et al., 2002, p. 316) of social and cultural identities. Informed by a Foucaultian approach, this study explores discourses of *laïcité* to uncover ‘the subjects who in some ways personify the discourse . . . and who have the attributes we would expect these subjects to have given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed’ (Hall, 1997, p. 45). Drawing on intersectionality further helps investigate and question homogeneous categories underpinned by essentialist and universalist assumptions.

Originating from black feminism, intersectionality is utilized to disrupt positions typically represented as normal or unproblematic (such as ‘man’ or ‘white’) by regarding all categories as infused with power (Phoenix, 2013). In conceptualizing identities as fluid, relational and locally-situated constructions, intersectionality counters essentialist views (Levine-Rasky, 2011). Building on this assumption, the categories and the power structures that transpire them are understood as intertwined. Exploring how individuals are positioned across several categories in specific contexts helps map out larger societal, political,

and historical power relations (Phoenix, 2013). The understanding of categories and power structures being intertwined in complex but mutually constructive ways is at the heart of intersectionality (Bredström, 2006; Collins, 1998). Despite the commonalities between studies using intersectionality, various critiques, and different theoretical and operational viewpoints have been outlined. The present study draws on Brah and Phoenix's (2004, p. 76) definition of intersectionality:

We regard the concept of "intersectionality" as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.

Laïcité, identity, and media representations

The most commonly held source for *laïcité*, the French model of secularism, is the 1905 law that established the separation between the Churches and the State. Other interpretations argue that *laïcité* dates back to the French Revolution or refer to the 1958 Constitution, which declares 'France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic' (French Constitution, 1958). The supposed origin, meanings, applicability, and scope of *laïcité* are source of many interpretations and contestations in French public debates (Ognier, 1995). As different representations of *laïcité* have always existed, dominant discourses have changed as representations of the nation and intertwined value systems also evolved (Barthélemy & Michelat, 2007). Studies have highlighted the increasing association of *laïcité* and national identity in France as well as abroad (Baubérot, 2007; Laoukili, 2005). Such persistent representation has been problematized by Baubérot (2007, p. 131, my translation) who argues 'this representation of *laïcité* as a "French exception" . . . risks turning *laïcité* into an identity property of "real French" to which "new French" with an immigration background have to pledge allegiance to become "truly" French.'

Laïcité and identity are also intertwined through the overarching system of citizenship in France which builds on values such as republicanism and universalism, and is sustained through education and assimilation (Brubaker, 1992; Freedman, 2004). Baubérot (2007) associates the prominence of republican elements in discourses of *laïcité* with dichotomous views of *laïcité* opposed to either or both Islam and multiculturalism. Previous studies have drawn attention to the Christian bias that underpins *laïcité* and the tensions this may create for other religions. Auslander (2000, p. 288) argues:

The requirement that people bear no distinctive sign of religious belonging and yet that they inhabit an everyday life that is rhythmized by the Christian calendar forces observant Muslims and Jews to make a choice. They can be either good French citizens and bad Muslims or bad Jews, or vice versa.

Tensions between religious and national identifications echo colonial logics of domination that expected colonized to 'be white or disappear' (Fanon, 1967, p. 100). The racially-based colonial system of exclusion-inclusion is relevant to contemporary discourses in France in which 'The social construction of "otherness" does not refer only to racial identity, but also to cultural identity, and religious affiliation' (Jugé & Perez, 2006, p. 208). Intersections between race, culture, and religion in representations of *us* and *them* highlight the

relevance of exploring identity categories within discourses of *laïcité*. Anderson's (1991) powerful concept of *imagined community* provides a relevant analytical tool as it brings together notions of identity, nation, culture, and their discursive construction in traditional printed media. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of media discourse in negotiating meanings of *laïcité* by, for instance, pointing out how it tends to precede political discourse (Baubérot, 2013), how it can maintain dominant representations of *laïcité* by evoking collective national memories (Sommier, 2016a) or by using culture as a legitimation strategy (Sommier, 2016b).

Material and methods

Le Monde

The media identity of *Le Monde* has been explored in previous research that has emphasized the prominent status of the newspaper within the French landscape. In his historical account of *Le Monde*, Eveno (2001, p. 22) even argues: 'For a press historian to claim that *Le Monde* has been for more than half a century the reference newspaper for most of the French elites can pass as tautology'. *Le Monde* is often characterized through its claimed independence from political, religious or economic powers (Eveno, 2001), its editorial tradition (Eko & Berkowitz, 2009) and quality reporting (Le, 2010).

Previous findings about the newspaper's self-representation help understand its editorial stance and positioning at the national, European, and international level. Le (2009, pp. 1741–1745) argues that *Le Monde* sets out to be 'a social actor in its own name' (in contrast with 'the traditional journalistic role of news provider') and is 'not only a place where some public sphere's interactions can take place, but also that *Le Monde* is a full participant in public spheres with its values and positions.' Even though studies recognize *Le Monde*'s propensity and endeavor to deploy novel ideas (Le, 2009; Thogmartin, 1998), the newspaper's orientation and framing, have been interpreted as illustrations of the French journalistic, intellectual, and cultural tradition (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007; Thogmartin, 1998). A study of *Le Monde*'s editorials on Russia during the second Chechen war for instance indicated the role played by the newspaper as a national storyteller whose discourse is shaped by and constructive of 'the cultural common ground on which French national identity rests' (Le, 2002, p. 398).

Though other newspaper outlets in France can offer relevant insights into intersections between *laïcité* and identity (e.g. *Charlie Hebdo* from a satire perspective, regional newspapers from local viewpoints, or national newspapers with explicit political orientations such as *Le Figaro* or *Libération*), *Le Monde* was selected because of its acknowledged leading position and endeavor to be a prominent voice in public debates. Examining discourses from *Le Monde* does not – and is not meant to – offer insights generalizable to the society as a whole but is used to help uncover what discourses navigate from the position of power specific to this newspaper.

Methods

Data was collected and analyzed inductively to keep the process as open and free of assumptions as possible. Articles ($N = 895$) published between 2011 and 2014 in *Le*

Monde were collected from the online newspaper's archives using the keyword *laïcité*. The first step consisted in reducing data by reading through all of the articles collected and selecting the ones directly related to *laïcité* ($N = 239$) for in-depth analysis. Data was analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) which allows for in-depth inductive analysis (Marsh & White, 2006). The analysis was data-driven as it aimed to capture statements providing knowledge about *laïcité* and identity categories. Data was coded by the author by repeatedly reading through it and identifying meanings, values, and topics in relation to which *laïcité* and identity were tackled. This inductive and iterative process enhances the rigor of qualitative analysis by forcing researchers to reflect on their growing understanding of data (Marsh & White, 2006). The data was analyzed in the language in which it was written. Excerpts presented in this article were translated from French by the author and are systematically presented together with their translations to ensure transparency.

The time period chosen for this study follows the 2003–2005 period punctuated by much polemic on the topic of *laïcité* in France and precedes the tragic events that marked 2015. Consequently, the years 2011–2014 offer both a view into the negotiations of meanings following tensions, and information regarding the discursive grounds on which further debates in 2015 drew. Using a recent set of articles (2011–2014) from the newspaper *Le Monde*, this study poses the following questions:

- (1) Which identity categories are used in discourses of *laïcité*?
- (2) How are these categories articulated with one another and within the larger framework of *laïcité*?

Results

The use of identity categories throughout the data suggest various tensions about individuals as well as the system under which these identities are constructed. The discussion focuses initially on those cases in which the tensions surface, before raising the common elements revealed by the analysis.

Muslim veiled women: between victims and culprits

Representations of Muslim women wearing the veil offer a wide range of contradictions and tensions regarding categorization and *laïcité*. Results of this study indicate that veiled Muslim women sometimes appear as enemies whose practices need to be controlled. At other times, they are represented as victims who need to be protected. Victims of what or whom encompasses further disparities.

Previous studies have presented how discourses about the veil in France are frequently intertwined with discourses of gender equality (Selby, 2011; Thomas, 2006). This lens is often used to depict veiled Muslim women as victims of either or both their religion and husbands or religious male counterparts while presenting secularism as a way to enforce gender equality. In data, the notion of gender equality explicitly appears in relation to political arguments as in the following quote:

Se posant en défenseur de la laïcité, notamment à l'école, M. Valls a aussi insisté sur l'importance de ce principe pour garantir l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. (Le Bars, 7 July 2012)

Acting in defense of secularism, especially in school, Valls also insisted on the importance of this principle to guarantee equality between men and women.

It is also used in opinion papers embedded in a ‘universal feminist’ rhetoric:

Mais soyons clairs : dans la religion musulmane, le voile doit être porté parce que les cheveux, voire même le visage de la femme peuvent tenter l’homme et inciter au péché. Je n’ignore pas que nombre de femmes portent le voile par conviction, mode ou convention. Certaines le portent également parce qu’elles y sont obligées et que, si elles ne se soumettent pas, sont traitées de mauvaises musulmanes ou de filles dévoyées. Je pense que la loi doit protéger celles qui refusent de le porter. (Badinter, 28 March 2013)

But let’s be clear: in the Muslim religion, the veil must be worn because hair, even women’s faces, can tempt men and incite them to sin. I am aware that many women wear the veil by conviction, fashion, or convention. Some wear it also because they have to and if they do not obey are called bad Muslims or degraded girls. I think the law must protect those women who refuse to wear the veil.

Results indicate that discourses about *laïcité*, Islamic veil, and gender equality are underpinned by ‘universal feminism’ (also called ‘Western feminism’). ‘Universal feminism’ approaches ‘woman’ as a homogenous category and places Western standards of womanhood at the center, thus dismissing the plurality of needs, experiences and oppressions experienced by women of different religious, racial, and social backgrounds (Braidotti, 2008; Salem, 2013). The narrative that constructs Western experiences of womanhood as universal and therefore dominant relies on the representation of non-Western women as ‘constrained, victimized, poor, ignorant as opposed to Western women who are educated, modern, and free to make their own choices’ (Salem, 2013, para. 6).

In the data, representations of veiled Muslim women as victims build on the premise that they would not wear the veil if they had a choice. Informed by ‘universal feminism’, this assumption brings together representations of non-Western women as dependent and oppressed, and the conceptualization of religion as an inherently patriarchal form of domination (Salem, 2013). Representing the veil as constraining and oppressive justifies the need for *laïcité* and for the limits posed to wearing the veil. The coercing nature of the veil is also used to draw the line between representations of Muslim women being victims or culprits. In discourses where Muslim women are assumed to wear the veil willingly, they are positioned no longer as victims but as enemies whose apparel crystallizes value-laden societal tensions. Despite differences between victims and culprits, both representations legitimate the exclusion of the veil. On the ideological level, the veil is discursively opposed to *laïcité* and the overarching republican framework advocating universalism and equality. On the practical level, the veil is dismissed by being forbidden in specific venues. The extent to which the veil should be banned was a regular topic of discussion in data and echoed Asad’s (2005, p. 5) analysis of the veil being addressed through what the facial apparel signifies to the majority rather than how it is experienced by Muslim women. Such dynamic is illustrated in data by the use of polls such as the following:

Cette décision a fait réapparaître les fractures entre partisans d’une laïcité ‘stricte’ et ceux d’une laïcité ‘ouverte’, alors qu’un sondage BVA montre qu’une majorité de Français souhaitent l’extension de l’interdiction des signes religieux dans les lieux en contact avec des enfants. (Anonymous, 29 March 2013)

This decision made divisions between supporters of 'strict' and 'open' approaches to secularism visible again. Meanwhile, a BVA poll reveals that a majority of French people wish for the ban of religious signs to be expanded to venues with children.

Drawing on 'universal feminism', discourses in the data about the veil and gender equality hint at values such as independence and individualism, which are typically associated with representations of a modern woman in Europe (Dwyer, 1999). Intersections in the data between *laïcité*, modernity, universal feminism, and assumptions about religion being inherently oppressive for women, de-legitimize veiled Muslim women both as *members of the national imagined community* and *women*. In the data, wearing the veil can be represented as an act of submission for women as well as a refusal to adhere to national values such as *laïcité*. The intersection of overlapping values contributes to position veiled Muslim women outside of the imagined community, represented as secular, modern, and made up of independent individuals.

However, in a few instances in the data, *laïcité* is acknowledged as a potential source of problems rather than solutions for women displaying religiosity, such as:

la loi de 2004, les débats qui l'ont accompagnée, les ressentiments qu'elle a pu susciter chez une partie de la communauté musulmane ont surtout ouvert la voie à toute une série de crispations sur la visibilité du voile islamique dans la société française. Et transformé en cibles privilégiées les femmes musulmanes, premières victimes d'actes et de propos anti-musulmans, selon les associations spécialisées dans la lutte contre l'islamophobie. (Le Bars, 15 March 2014)

the 2004 law, the debates that surrounded it, the resentment it may have created among some of the Muslim community have above all opened the way to a whole series of tensions about the visibility of the Islamic veil in French society. And these factors have transformed women Muslims into favorite targets by being the first victims of anti-Muslim acts and speech according to associations specialized in fighting anti-islamophobia.

This type of argument differs from traditionally dominant discourse about *laïcité* and the veil in the data. The emergence of these commentaries may open up a discursive space for new reflections on *laïcité*, religion, and identity. Revealing potential pitfalls of the system may help discern more complex and fluid approaches to religious practices across discourses and media representations. Questioning outcomes of *laïcité* gives room to acknowledge the practice of veiling and go beyond the dichotomous views of 'modern secular' and 'archaic religious'. Tensions in the representations of veiled Muslim women and the evolutions that they may suggest, however, seem to be limited due to the persistence of the prejudiced views of religion (and religious individuals).

Religious identities and conceptions of religion

Representations of religious individuals in the data hint at larger negative conceptualizations of religion. Results indicate that religious identity can be depicted more negatively than other identity categories could. Several negative connotations are associated with representations of religion, religiosity or religious identity and expression. Religion is often assumed to be *something of the past*, as formulations about its 'return' suggests:

C'est là un indicateur supplémentaire de l'indéniable retour, qu'il soit loué ou déploré, de l'Eglise dans la société temporelle et même dans la sphère politique, au sens de la vie de la cité. (Hopquin, 7 February 2014)

This is another indication of the undeniable return, be it praised or regretted, of the Church in the temporal society and even in the political sphere, [political] understood as the life of the city.

Religion also tends to be represented as a practice that causes problems and *jeopardizes the existing order*, such as ‘the bursting of religion in day-to-day life’ (*irruption du fait religieux dans la vie quotidienne*, Le Bars, 15 July 2013). Within discourses of *laïcité*, religion is often discussed in relation to problems affecting several spheres of society, from working life (‘Conflicts because of religious motives increase in companies’ *Les conflits pour motif religieux se multiplient dans les entreprises*, Kahn, 20 March 2013), political news and events (‘a presidential campaign marked by topics about religion – especially Islam – bursting in’ *une campagne présidentielle marquée par l’irruption de sujets liés aux religions - à l’islam en particulier*, Le Bars, 4 May 2012), general atmosphere (‘The level of tension between the municipality and the Muslim community of this 50,000-inhabitant city complicated the celebration of Eid al-Fitr . . . the end of Ramadan’ *Le climat de tension entre la municipalité et la communauté musulmane de cette ville de 50 000 habitants a compliqué la célébration . . . de l’Aïd el-Fitr, la fin du ramadan*. Bourabaà, 9 August 2013). Religion can also be represented as something that can be *scary*, and ‘be based on objective worries’ (*reposer sur des inquiétudes objectives*, Le Bars, 25 January 2013). The assumption that religion as an identity category is negative also appears through the need to further define it:

l’ouverture des rencontres qui regroupent plus de 200 associations, 450 salles de prière et drainent chaque année plus de 100 000 visiteurs, souvent de *simples musulmans pratiquants, dont beaucoup de nationalité française*. (Vincent, 2 April 2013, my emphasis)

the opening of meetings which bring together more than 200 associations, 450 prayer rooms, and with over 100,000 visitors every year, often *simple practicing Muslims, many of whom have French nationality*.

The variety of negative representations associated with religion in the data may indicate a general consensus on religion being negative. Previous studies have examined the relation between connotations attached to religion and national identification (Casanova, 2009). Those findings echo this study’s results about negative overtones of religion and representations of France and French individuals as secular. The use of statistics in the data supports the portrayal of a secular imagined community:

Les années passent et la France se sécularise. Selon un recoupement d’études récentes, s’ils étaient 80% à se dire catholiques en 1966, ils ne sont plus que 51% en 2007. Aujourd’hui, peu pratiquent : à peine 5% vont régulièrement à la messe, des gens âgés. Si le protestantisme reste stable, revendiqué par 2,1% des Français, comme la religion juive, 0,6%, l’athéisme progresse. En 2012, 35% de la population et 63% des 18-24 ans se disent ‘sans religion’. (Joignot, 3 November 2012)

Years pass by and France becomes more secular. According to a grouping of recent studies, if 80% [of the population] called themselves Catholics in 1966, only 51% did so in 2007. Today, few are practicing: barely 5% regularly attend Mass, [they are] the elderly. If Protestantism remains stable, claimed by 2.1% of French people as their religion, as well as Judaism, 0.6%, atheism grows. In 2012, 35% of the population and 63% of the 18–24 age group describes themselves to be ‘without religion’.

From communities to hyphenated identities

The recurrent flagging of 'communitarianism' as a threat is embedded in the republican framework that promotes centralization and uniformity to organize life in society (Brubaker, 1992; Freedman, 2004). For religious groups to claim themselves as communities is typically presented as a step to ostracize themselves from the nation (Caeiro, 2004). The salience of this discourse clashes with recurrent representations in the data of religious minorities as communities punctuated by descriptive phrases such as 'Muslim community' (*communauté musulmane*, Le Bars, 7 July 2012), 'Jewish community' (*communauté juive*, Le Bars, 20 December 2011), 'Muslim circles' (*les milieux musulmans*, Le Bars, 2 June 2012), 'the most practicing part of the community' (*la partie la plus pratiquante de la communauté*, Le Bars, 1 April 2014).

The one-sided use of 'community' highlights the way it can place individuals outside of the majority. The naming of religious minorities as *communities* contrasts with the French secular imagined community constructed as universal and inclusive, and not named as a community. The invisibility and legitimacy of the secular imagined community over other (especially religious) communities can be maintained in the data through the use of polls that only report opinions of the 'majority':

Rarement la défiance envers l'islam aura été aussi clairement exprimée par la population française. 74% des personnes interrogées par Ipsos estiment que l'islam est une religion 'intolérante', incompatible avec les valeurs de la société française. Chiffre plus radical encore, 8 Français sur 10 jugent que la religion musulmane cherche 'à imposer son mode de fonctionnement aux autres'. Enfin, plus de la moitié pensent que les musulmans sont 'en majorité' (10%) ou 'en partie' (44%) 'intégristes', sans que l'on sache ce que recouvre ce qualificatif. (Le Bars, 25 January 2013)

Rarely has distrust towards Islam been so clearly expressed by the French population. 74% of people surveyed by Ipsos [French polling institute] argue that Islam is an 'intolerant' religion, incompatible with values of the French society. More radical number still: 8 out of 10 French people consider the Muslim religion tries to 'impose its functioning mode to others'. Finally, more than half think that Muslims are 'for most' (10%) or 'for some' (44%) 'fundamentalist', without this term being clearly defined.

Even though the newspaper discourse nuances such opinion polls, with the last sentence for instance 'without this term being clearly defined' (*sans que l'on sache ce que recouvre ce qualificatif*), it sustains representations of a secular imagined community exclusive of Muslims by maintaining the voice of the majority as the voice of the imagined community. The republican system inherently supports such imbalance when reporting opinions as it does not allow census, and therefore polls, based on religion or race (Cervulle, 2013). The a-religious and a-racial voice is therefore the only visible and legitimate one.

Despite persistent negative representations of religion; religious individuals; and religiosity, these are however sometimes recognized and problematized:

ces polémiques ont fini par instiller dans l'opinion publique, et chez nombre de responsables politiques, une certaine méfiance vis-à-vis des religions. Le culte musulman était certes le premier visé, mais l'ensemble des autres confessions semblent en avoir pâti. (Le Bars, 9 February 2012)

those polemics ended up instilling in the public opinion, and among numerous political representatives, a certain distrust towards religions. The Muslim religion was certainly the main target but the rest of the other faiths seem to have suffered from it.

Some variations can also be noticed when it comes to positioning Muslims, which may suggest evolutions as regards representations of the secular imagined community. The use of hyphenated-like identities can be seen in the data where the religious category 'Muslim' is associated with the national category 'French'. The expressions 'Muslims of France' (*Musulmans de France*, Bourabaâ, 9 August 2013) or 'French Muslims' (*Musulmans Français*, Joignot, 3 November 2012) are visible across data.

The emergence of these compound identity categories can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, they can be seen as a strategy to go beyond the universal categorization used to flatten out differences. Previous studies have highlighted universalism as a western-centric value that maintains status quo and associated white privilege, color-blind racism, and power structures inherited from historical, colonial times (Jugé & Perez, 2006). The use of hyphenated-like identity in the data may be a discursive strategy to extend the limits of the national imagined community by making visible those whom it encompasses. Using hyphenated-like identities can challenge the fixed identity framework that may not correspond to flexible multifaceted processes of identifications performed by individuals. On the other hand, within a republican universal framework of identity, the use of hyphenated-like identities can be analyzed as a way of pointing out differences in ways that exclude some individuals whose features and practices are represented in parallel to (and not intertwined with) the imagined community.

Discussion

Difference

Results indicate the persistent construction of religious identities – especially that of Muslim – as a threat, a problem, or a question. The representation of minority identities through these frames is intertwined with the emergence of what Appadurai (2006) calls 'predatory identity' and 'predatory narcissism'. Appadurai argues that the notion of *difference* is the fundamental problem which minorities embody as they remind majorities of the gap 'which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethnos' (2006, p. 8). Appadurai's argument finds a particular resonance when exploring identity categories within discourses of *laïcité* because of their embeddedness in the French republican system, which sets out to reach equality through the leveling out of differences (Brubaker, 1992). Multiple tools are available to attain such a goal, school, assimilation, and possibly, *laïcité*. Constructing (religious) minorities as a problem leads the majority to grow 'an understanding of itself as a threatened majority' which Appadurai (2006, p. 51) argues is 'the key step in turning a benign social identity into a predatory identity'. The notion of difference seems to underlie most of this study's findings. Tensions concerning identity categories highlight challenges about (i) whether to acknowledge differences in society and (ii) how to verbalize them within a strict republican framework of uniformity. 'Difference' seems to be treated as being inherently problematic, against which Xu (2013, p. 394) argues '[d]ifference is not the problem for communication; the problem is the attitude of the interlocutor toward difference and the other'. Findings however suggest that the construction of difference as inherently problematic within the French republican framework may be moderated in the data by the use of hyphenated-like identities. The use

of such emerging categories needs to be examined further by investigating where they are used, by whom, and with which connotations.

The secular imagined community

Discourses of *laïcité* in the data tend to be strongly imprinted by the secularization paradigm and the assumption that being modern encompasses being secular (Casanova, 2006). This particular assumption especially appears through the negative connotations of religion, and values of independence and individualism which underpin representations of veiled Muslim women. Intersection between values embedded in the secularization paradigm and 'universal feminism' therefore seems to be a significant aspect in the choice of identity categories and representations of individuals. However, tensions perceived in the data where *laïcité* is questioned and hyphenated-like identity categories are used may indicate a shift away from the secularization paradigm and solid understandings of culture, religion, and *laïcité*. These zones of tensions may create discursive space to introduce dynamic approaches of individuals' practices and identifications that would be more in line with the complexities of contemporary *liquid multiple modernities* defined by constant changes and transfers (Bauman, 2013; Lee, 2006). The presence of tensions in the data and their potential to open up new discursive spaces also hint at the media identity of *Le Monde* as a newspaper that endeavors to play an active role in the public sphere (Le, 2009).

This study indicates that the *secular imagined community* is constructed through intersections between positively denoted values that have national resonance such as *laïcité*, modernity, and 'universal feminism', and their opposition to negative representations of religion as a concept and identity category, as well as the one-sided use of 'community'. Intersection of these values provides information as regards the expected attributes of the secular imagined community, while informing what attributes are dismissed. Besides building significant barriers between individuals, the suggested discursive exclusion of religious individuals from the imagined community undermines *laïcité* by contradicting its mission to enforce equality between individuals regardless of their religion or absence thereof. Representations of the secular imagined community as well as notion of predatory identity only insidiously appear in the data but echo the much more vocal, explicit, and successful rhetoric of the far-right National Front party.

Conclusion

This article has examined relations between *laïcité* and identity by exploring who is represented (and how) in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* tackling *laïcité*. Findings indicate tensions as regards the use of identity categories and their relation to the notion of *laïcité* and larger republican framework. Results suggest that on several occasions in the data the republican framework that supports uniformity may be slowly challenged and re-negotiated to mirror more complex and hybrid everyday life experiences. Yet, different connotations attached to secular and religious identity categories suggest gaps between individuals, especially those who belong to the *secular imagined community* and those who are positioned outside of it. Intersections between values embedded in 'universal feminism' and the secularization paradigm may contribute to maintain representations

of an imagined community whose expected attributes are those of modern secular individuals.

Results highlight the use of hyphenated-like identities and suggest the emergence of new discursive spaces to address religious practices and identities from a more liquid stance than that allowed by the republican universal framework in which *laïcité* is embedded. These findings echo previous studies about the media identity of *Le Monde* as an active and vocal actor in the public sphere. Future research should investigate discourses emanating from media of different genres and status. Reception studies could also help clarify how tensions identified in this study are perceived by readers. Further research on the topic is especially relevant since the data used for this study stops at December 2014. That is, a few days before the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher superette in January 2015 and a few months before the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. These dramatic events heighten the need to investigate the discursive construction of identities and their interplay with the notions of culture, religion, and *laïcité*.

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