

Research Article

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Conflict Dynamics in Organizational Decision-Making. Muslim Accommodation in Swimming Pools

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Abstract: This study examines how organizational decisions affect conflicts over Muslim accommodation (burkini permissions and separate women's hours) in German swimming pools. We compare pools in similar demographic areas, representing four models of Muslim accommodation. We find that conflict dynamics and organizational management strategies differ across the cases: (1) The multicultural pool (burkini allowed, separate women's hours offered) faces disputes over special rights claims by different groups and concerns about segregation. The organizational response involves façade-building and the allocation of additional resources. (2) The universalist pool (burkini allowed, no separate hours) has the lowest level of conflict, downplays cultural differences, and ensures that the same rules apply to all users. (3) The assimilationist pool (no burkini, no separate women's hours) experiences conflicts over sharing limited resources with those perceived as different and adopts a laissez-faire response where the majority prevails. (4) The segregationist pool (no burkini but separate women's hours) experiences open conflict between the majority and minority, with organizational responses focused on disciplining and controlling Muslim users.

Keywords: minorities in organizations; organizational decision-making; swimming pools; religious accommodation; case selection

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1 Introduction

Swimming pools are public spaces where body practices are highly significant, and encounters with religious body practices – namely conservative¹ Muslim ones – can occur. These encounters often spark moral conflicts over “good” and “bad” body practices (Ezli 2014; Lenneis, Agergaard, and Evans 2022). Swimming pools, as organizations, provide a regulatory framework for negotiating the legitimacy of these practices (Scott 2009). Their rules typically favor the majority public (Brayson 2021; Haley and Sidanius 2005; Ray 2019). Over the course of the 20th century, the majority in many Western countries has developed increasingly revealing body practices.

This paper focuses on Germany, where a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling determined that Muslim schoolgirls who prefer modest body practices must still participate in mixed-gender swimming classes but may wear a burkini. Since then, German pools have faced pressure to allow burkinis, at least in school swimming lessons. While most pools now officially permit burkinis, conflict still arises when staff or other users disapprove of the minority practice. Moreover, Muslims with more conservative attitudes advocate not only for burkinis but also for separate swimming hours for (Muslim) women.

This paper explores how organizations manage these two types of claims. We investigate how variations in organizational rules affect conflicts over Muslim body practices in German pools. Using existing models of minority accommodation and citizenship rights for immigrants (Koopmans et al. 2005), we classify different organizational approaches. We examine how these rules impact conflicts between different user groups and between staff and users. We assume that majority practices are always accommodated, while accommodation of religious minorities varies, producing specific types of conflict.

The paper first details how we theorize the organizational effects on conflict, then introduces the swimming pool as an organization. The research design section explains case selection, data collection, and analysis methods. We present our empirical findings across the four models and discuss how organizational rules, and their implementation influence conflicts over Muslim body practices in German pools.

1 When referring to ‘conservative Muslim body practices’, we mean more traditional body practices that adhere to stricter rules regarding the covering of the (female) body. The distinction between “Muslim body practices” and “conservative Muslim body practices” is important because our study revealed that many German Muslims do not claim religious accommodations, as their body practices align with the (more liberal) majority scheme. In this paper, we focus on the claims made by the more conservative segment of the Muslim population in Germany, acknowledging that liberal Muslims may be among the strongest critics of these claims.

2 Theory: Organizational Impact on Conflict

What room for maneuver do individual organizations, all belonging to the same organizational type, have when regulating conflict over minority religious accommodation? To what extent can organizations influence the attitudes and behavior of their personnel and, potentially, their public? To answer these questions, we draw on longstanding sociological theories about decision-making in organizations (Cyert and March 2007 [1963]; March 1994; March and Simon 1958; Simon 1945). Organizations control key elements of their formal structure – membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne and Brunsson 2019) – and shape member behavior in multiple ways. One of the most important mechanisms for maintaining organizational order is the establishment of decision-making premises, which guide and constrain decision-making without requiring constant deliberation.

In Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann 2000), decision-making premises serve as underlying frameworks that structure how decisions are made within an organization. These premises influence personnel policies, communication structures (i.e. hierarchies), and comprise the organizational purpose and conditional program (Luhmann 2000, p. 224). By setting decision-making premises, organizational leaders can shape individual behavior, ensuring alignment with organizational goals rather than relying solely on personal discretion. Following Dobbin et al. (2011) we posit that an organization's openness to innovation can itself be a decision-making premise. Organizations that embrace innovation are more likely to adopt pro-diversity programs, such as accommodations for religious minorities. Since decision-making premises vary across organizations, they fundamentally shape all subsequent decision-making processes. Most notably, organizations can enforce these premises through sanctions or exclusion of individuals who violate key rules or resist the established framework.

This does not mean that we view individual actors within organizations as entirely constrained. Sociological research shows that while individuals in organizations generally conform to rules and membership expectations, they also engage in strategic actions that expand their room for maneuver within the organization (Friedberg 1997). In this study, we focus on how individual actions are shaped by organizational rules, decisions, and shared knowledge within the organization. By adopting a sociology of organizations perspective, we argue that organizations can influence individual attitudes and behavior. However, research in political science contradicts that population composition may explain attitudes and political behavior more effectively than "context" (i.e. institutions and organizations). Maxwell (2019), for instance, compares attitudes towards immigrants in big cities versus the rural areas in Western Europe, showing that larger cities exhibit less prejudice due to

compositional effects (see also Gallego et al. 2016; Kaufmann and Harris 2015). Similarly, a study on conflicts over burkinis in German swimming pools found that pools in areas with higher shares of right-wing populist voters or larger immigrant populations were more likely to experience conflicts over burkini accommodation (Michalowski and Behrendt 2020b). Therefore, our case selection (see Section 3) pays particular attention to potential compositional effects.

In swimming pools and other service-oriented organizations, public service is co-produced between the organization and its users, who may influence decisions (Hasenfeld 1992; Klatetzki 2010, pp. 8–16). For example, users may request that their body practices be considered. The organizations, in turn, develop strategies to manage, transform, or conceal differing norms (Brunsson 2002; Greenwood et al. 2011). A woman wearing a self-made burkini that does not meet fabric standards might trigger competing logics (Burns and Flam 1990, p. 348): some users may find these practices outrageous and invoke problems of hygiene, while other may find this practice tolerable and invoke the importance of non-discrimination of minorities. These competing logics challenge the staff's decision-making. Pools regulate access times, define user groups, and make rules on swimwear. Pool attendants enforce rules but also negotiate with users. This study explores how staff interpret and implement rules, effectively favoring certain groups over others. The paper's main aim is to explore the margin of maneuver individual organizations have in managing conflicts over Muslim accommodation.

We focus on two key conflicts: allowing women to wear burkinis and providing separate swimming times for (Muslim) women. While both claims are conservative, the burkini is a “conservative innovation” (Ezli 2014) that allows participation in mixed-gender swimming. Theories of minority claims classify these two demands differently: burkinis primarily require tolerance from other users (Koenig 2005), while separate swimming hours are more “obtrusive” (Carol and Koopmans 2013) as they require the majority to alter their habits. In practice, German pools accommodate these claims unevenly: about three-quarters of pools allow burkinis, but only 10 % offer separate swimming times for women, and even fewer explicitly reserve these times for Muslim women (Michalowski and Behrendt 2020b).

We anticipate that each set of organizational rules generates specific types of conflicts with and between users, reflecting broader organizational decision-making structures regarding minority accommodation. Drawing on classifications of citizenship rights for immigrants (Koopmans et al. 2005), we classify pools into four models: (1) ‘assimilation’: restricted individual rights (burkinis prohibited) and restricted group rights (no separate women's hours), (2) ‘universalism’: generous individual rights (burkinis allowed) and restricted group rights (no separate hours), (3) ‘multiculturalism’: generous individual rights (burkini allowed) and generous group rights (separate women's hours on offer), and (4) ‘segregationism’: restricted

individual rights (burkinis are prohibited during public swimming hours) and generous group rights (separate hours for women). In the following section, we explain our case selection using these four models.

3 Methodology

Our research design is based on careful case selection, using the models described above. We drew on a published dataset from a survey of nearly all swimming pools in Germany ($n = 338$), which provides data on organizational rules regarding the burkini and separate swimming hours for (Muslim) women, as well as staff reports on the frequency of burkini-wearing women in their pool (Michalowski and Behrendt 2020a). Most pools (67 %) follow a universalist model, allowing burkinis but not offering separate women's hours. Only 8 % follow a multiculturalist model (allowing burkinis and offering separate women's hours), while another 8 % are assimilationist (banning burkinis and separate hours). Just 1 % follow what could be called a segregationist approach by banning the burkini but offering separate hours.

Given our aim to explore how differences in Muslim accommodation impact conflict, we selected cases based on these four models. Yet, given the previously mentioned findings on compositional effects, we also considered the share of immigrants and of right-wing populist voters, which research showed is positively correlated with conflict over burkinis in German pools. Since the dataset is geo-coded, we selected pools where these compositional factors were comparable across cases. The challenge was finding 'segregationist' pools, as only 1 % of the survey sample fit this category. Ultimately, we identified one pool in this category with comparable demographic factors. Similarly, choices were limited for the multiculturalist and the assimilationist model. Given that the case selection has been much more informed than in most qualitative case studies as it was based on a mixed-methods design, we selected only one pool per category of organizational regulation, i.e. a total of four pools.

We collected data through problem-centered interviews in the four pools, focusing on staff as key actors in a hardly known field of action (Döringer 2021; Witzel and Reiter 2014). We used an interview guide with six thematic blocks, focusing on organizational conflict regulation of Muslim accommodation in swimming pools. In each pool, we interviewed the pool manager, the pool attendants and the front desk personnel. In some pools, we also interviewed trainee lifeguards, cleaning staff and the municipal bureaucrat overseeing the pool. A total of 13 individual interviews were conducted across the four pools, alongside three group discussions with 30 individuals in total. The focus group interviews aimed to observe informal group dynamics among team members when discussing rule enforcement (Hesse-Biber

and Leavy 2011, pp. 163–192). The focus groups revealed insights into how the staff, as a group, regulate conflict and make sense of religious body practices.

The interviews were conducted between fall 2019 and summer 2020. Due to COVID-19 pool closures, interviews with the universalist pool were conducted by phone. All interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2008). Using Atlas.ti, we first conducted open coding to identify initial concepts and categories, followed by axial coding to link categories and fill them with data. We then selected central themes of the research and grouped the codes according to our theoretical topics such as conflict over swimwear and conflict resolution. Additionally, we analyzed passages dealing with rule application, interaction with users, and conflict using a hermeneutic approach to detect contradictions or gaps (Bohnsack et al. 2013). For further analysis, we engaged in interpretation circles with other researchers. Selected passages (translated into English) are presented in the following section.

4 Empirical Findings

We now present the four cases, all indoor municipal pools with adjacent outdoor facilities. For each case, we outline the organizational rules for accommodating conservative Muslims and describe the population composition surrounding the pool. Next, we detail the organization's characteristics, in particular its decision-making premises and organizational structure including staff, hierarchies and decision-making structure. Second, we examine the conflicts generated by each set of decisions regarding burkinis and separate women's hours. Third, we show how the organization responds to these conflicts.

4.1 The Multicultural Decision: Burkinis and Separate Women Hours

The pool selected as the case for the multicultural model allows the burkini and offers separate hours for (Muslim) women. It is located in an affluent, cosmopolitan municipality where 35.6 % of the population has an immigrant background, and 11.2 % voted for the right-wing populist AfD in the 2017 German federal elections.

4.1.1 Organizational Characteristics: Affluent and Innovative

The pool reopened after an extended closure for reconstruction, hiring two highly qualified managers with expertise in business administration and organizational

development, along with two younger pool attendants from immigrant backgrounds. The organization follows a strict hierarchy.

Given the local population, staff are aware that the users closely monitor service quality:

What is very important to me from an operational perspective is that employees are aware of their body language and how they present themselves to guests. Many were not even aware of this change in perspective. (...) If a pool guest has a question and is perhaps in the water, if possible and without violating supervision rules, it is always appropriate to get on the same level. That relaxes the situation. (...) We try not to blow the whistle, as it is always a form of embarrassment. (Pool manager_m multiculturalism; position 52–54)

With the reopening, the city's equal opportunity officer requested that the previously existing separate women's hours be supervised only by female staff. Though the pool lacked enough female staff, Muslim communities sent interpreters to assist, and a local club provided swimming lessons for women. Although not inherently convinced of the innovation, both managers saw this as a management challenge rather than a value conflict.

And the city decided in the political committees that women's swimming should also be offered when the pool re-opened. (...) and then we also said to ourselves: "Yes, if we have the staff for it, the female staff, then we'll keep doing it." (Deputy Pool Manager_f multiculturalism; position: 6–10)

They later rationalized this decision by highlighting the need to satisfy all customers to stay competitive:

Even if we receive negative criticism that is justified, it's always an incentive to improve and that's also our goal. We simply want to be one of the best swimming pools here in the region for families and athletes. (...) We want to provide the best possible service for them and that's why we're happy when people point things out to us. (Pool manager_m multiculturalism, position: 42–44)

This approach reflects the organization's decision premise in favor of service orientation, plurality, competitiveness, and innovation. The pool management explicitly advertises separate women's hours and burkini permission through an app and also reaches out to Muslim communities and women's shelters in the region. Both managers acknowledge the burkini's emancipatory significance and the courage it takes to wear it in public. They are proud that Muslim women learn swimming in their pool. The burkini is not presented as a symbol of outdated gender roles, but as a normal element of a pluralistic and modern 21st century society.

Well, (...) because we don't live in the 19th century anymore. My goodness, we live in the 21st century and it's part of our cultural landscape. Of course, it's not something that everyone takes for granted. (Pool manager_m multiculturalism; position 482–483)

4.1.2 The Structure of Conflict: Competition Between Groups

1) *Defining and disciplining the users.* A major conflict arose with the introduction of separate hours for women – defining who could benefit from these hours and fending off other claims (e.g. from senior citizens) and complaints (e.g. from men). The pool management argues that it has been able to arrange women's hours on Sundays before the official opening hours, possible due to the municipality's affluence:

We actually set it up as additional time. Originally, the opening hours were from ten onwards, and we were really looking for a time to give women an additional opportunity without restricting public access to the pool area. That had always been a good argument in the beginning. However, we cannot expand it indefinitely. (Deputy pool manager_f multiculturalism; position: 258–265)

The introduction of all-female staff during women's hours attracted ultra-conservative Muslim communities who not only wore headscarves and gloves but also avoided eye contact with the male cashier. They demanded the removal of male attendants from the front desk, a request the management denied, leading this group to stop visiting the pool.

Thus, a key conflict for the multicultural pool is maintaining its public character without allowing a small group to monopolize it.

2) *Convincing the staff.* Several innovations reflected a clear political stance in favor of a multicultural and emancipatory approach towards conservative Muslims. While the new staff supported these changes, older staff were more reluctant:

There was criticism, even among the staff, and we had to promote understanding. Things have improved, but there are still individual people who do not fully accept it, who perform their duties responsibly, respect it, but do not accept it personally and say: "This is nonsense. (...) Personal criticism. It's just too multicultural." (Pool Manager_m multiculturalism; position 172–176)

These staff members point out that the swimming pool should remain open to all users, fearing further segmentation and complaining that the next thing to come was separate hours for 'Hindus or Buddhists'. However, the organizational hierarchy pressures them to conform, which prevents these individual attitudes from

becoming dominant. These staff members have adapted to the organization's decisions by providing rational justifications for the changes:

I was also surprised when the 14- and 15-year-olds were there, but I also said, 'Okay. It's part of the culture. All right.' I accept headscarves in schools, so I have to accept a burkini in the swimming pool. The main thing is that she comes to swim – if she can only swim with that thing on, right? I prefer that ten times over her not coming, breaking the rules, wearing a regular swimsuit, and then trying to swim and drowning. So, there's also a certain educational mission here (Pool Attendant_m multiculturalism; position: 282–284).

3) *Convincing other users.* The staff also needed to persuade the other users to accept the new rules. The other users were mostly skeptical about the separate hours for women and about the burkini.

Of course, there were questions like, 'Why are we offering this now?' Then you also hear through third parties that some people say, 'Well, on Sundays, after the women's hours, you can't go to the pool because the water is contaminated' (Deputy Pool Manager_f multiculturalism; position: 247–257)

The staff worked to depoliticize the burkini, emphasizing its functionality and the opportunities it provides for Muslim women to learn to swim. Lifeguards sometimes found that rational arguments were not enough and resorted to tactile demonstrations, showing that the burkinis were made of appropriate swim fabric:

I have to say, there were a few disapproving looks. I saw that. Then they looked over there and looked at me, as if to say: Why isn't he doing anything? Why doesn't he check? So, I went over and said: "May I touch it? All right. This is bath fabric." So that the others could see: Okay, I've checked it. (Pool Attendant_m multiculturalism; position 266–270)

In general, the staff were lenient, asking Muslim with "self-made burkinis" not made of the right fabric to wear real burkinis next time.

4.1.3 Organizational Response to Conflict: Please all Users and Build a Façade

The pool's key strategy probably is to create a façade that downplays the fact that the separate hours are mainly used by Muslim women. Although the staff estimate that 90–98 % of the women attending these hours are Muslim (a figure confirmed by our observations), the management prefers to report a lower percentage, around 60 %:

This is not exclusively for Muslim women, so that's very important to us. It's a space for various women who simply want to swim there. (...) We naturally have a certain proportion of Muslim women who come. I would estimate it to be around 60 to 70 percent who use it intensively, and then also women who just like to swim among themselves, who make use of the offer in that way (Pool Manager_m multiculturalism; position: Position: 154–157)

The cleaning also plays a role in maintaining this façade. After the women-only hours, they quickly clean the changing rooms and showers, paying special attention to the male facilities, which are used by women during the women's hours, to avoid complaints:

I'm in the service, I have to quickly check that people, the women, haven't left their swimsuits, burkinis or anything else behind, so that I quickly bring it to the cashier.... That the showers are clean, that the toilets are clean... or in the men's showers, and there I first have to make sure that I've taken the burkini out, right? (Service personnel_f multiculturalism; position: 560–577)

The pool's advertising also reflects this dual approach. While it clearly targets Muslim communities when promoting the separate hours, its public communications do not mention the all-female staff or the fact that the pool is shielded from outside view. This is different in the pool type that we will discuss next.

4.2 The Universalist Decision: Burkinis but No Separate Women Hours

The universalist pool in our sample permits the burkini but does not provide separate swimming hours for women. It is located in the same metropolitan, formerly industrial area as the "segregationist" pool. The local population has an immigrant background of 24 %, with 12 % voting for right-wing populists in the 2017 federal elections.

4.2.1 Organizational Characteristics: A Heart for Socio-Economic Inequalities

One of the organization's guiding principles is to ensure the pool remains an affordable recreational option for everyone, including refugees.

That we also offer something to the population. Not for the rich, for those who earn better. Here you can go swimming twice or three times a week and your wallet can take it, right? (Pool Manager_m universalism; position: 135–137)

The organization adopts a color-blind approach, focusing on economic rather than cultural or religious differences. Staff describe the pool as small and intimate, and do not view any immigrant groups as particularly problematic. For example, the pool manager highlights a general lack of swimming skills as an issue, rather than singling out burkini-wearing women as poor swimmers. Young people who cause disruptions are also not identified as being from immigrant backgrounds. While the pool uses a whistle to maintain order, attendants emphasize that rules apply to everyone, including the large number of refugees who arrived in the municipality in 2015.

We don't want to upset anyone. It's just that there are rules, and everyone has to follow them, regardless of which country they come from. Of course, the refugees felt attacked at first, thinking: "We're not welcome here". Of course, we as women also had difficulties at the beginning because we weren't respected as much, because a woman doesn't have that much to say. We explained: "It's just different in Germany" and if that doesn't work, we also issue swimming bans. That has nothing to do with discrimination (...). Regardless of nationality, they are given the rules here and anyone who doesn't stick to them has to leave. It's all about a lot of people in one place, safety and yes, we also want everyone to walk out on their two feet. (Pool Attendant_f universalism; position: 271–292)

The pool manager adds that individuals making racist remarks are also banned from the pool. He emphasizes the team's commitment to equality and notes that all users want to have fun. When Syrian refugees arrived in 2015, the pool manager visited local housing centers to inform them about the pool:

When all the refugees arrived, we went there and introduced ourselves, letting them know that we are nearby and have the outdoor pool, that they can get discounted admission with the CAS pass. So, we actually got along quite well. We also hung up pictures in the refugee accommodation – our opening hours and pool rules and such. (Pool Manager_m universalism; position: 439–446)

4.2.2 The Structure of Conflict: Apply the Same Rules to All

1) *Defining and disciplining the users.* A key challenge for this organization, with its universalist approach, is to maintain the pool's identity as a public space accessible to people from diverse backgrounds. Given limited municipal resources, the management must evaluate whether certain offerings attract enough users from specific groups to justify limited access to the broader public. At the time of the study, the pool reserved separate swimming times only for firefighters, police, and school classes. Although it had previously offered women-only hours for special occasions, these attracted only about 20 participants and were eventually discontinued.

The decision to allow the burkini was a response to users who often entered the water in leggings and t-shirts. To enhance safety and hygiene, the pool introduced the burkini as a requirement for all female users wishing to cover their bodies. Pictograms and signs were created to clarify pool rules for new users from Syria. The pool manager emphasized that the decision to permit the burkini was made internally, in consultation with the municipal administration, but not dictated by local politics. Enforcement of rules is strict, and unlike the multicultural pool, lifeguards at this universalist pool prohibit self-made burkinis.

2) *Convincing the staff.* Staff have not expressed any opposition to the burkini. Its allowance was not a political decision or a response to user demands; rather, it is framed as an organizational decision to address undesirable practices.

And in this context, we then talked about: “What is allowed, what is not?” And this is also stated in our pool regulations: “Only what is really suitable for swimming.” And a burkini is designed for that purpose, and is really intended for swimming, and poses no danger. So why shouldn’t we allow it? It’s just that alternatives like pajamas or tracksuits or whatever are not allowed. (Municipal Administration_f universalism; position: 281–287)

The extent to which the pool manager and attendants have internalized the organization’s commitment to universalist principles is striking and reflected in the way that they communicate the rules to the other users.

3) *Convincing other users.* Pool attendants and management acknowledge complaints from other users about the burkini. To address the concerns, the staff framed the burkini as a new “fashion” and explained that it is “real swimwear”.

Yes, there certainly are complaints because, I would say, it was a fashion that suddenly appeared and bathers were not familiar with it. When ladies went into the water completely covered up, people didn’t know how to react at first. We were approached about it. (...) [We] then of course explained that it was really swimwear and that they didn’t need to worry about it. So it was mainly the older generation that wasn’t familiar with it. But otherwise it worked well (pool attendant_f universalism; position: 204–212).

The pool manager reflects on the evolution of body practices at this facility:

Well, my boss, he was here even longer, when it actually started... the pool used to be completely divided. Women only in the morning and men only in the afternoon. (pool manager_m universalism; position: 382–289)

This perspective connects contemporary Muslim body practices to local traditions that have changed in relatively recent history.

4.2.3 Organizational Response to Conflict: “Culture-blind” Application of the Rule

The universalist model in this pool clearly emerges as the governance approach that generates the least conflict. Notably, staff members appear to fully support the rules, viewing the burkini not as a peculiar or undesirable cultural practice, but as a hygienic and safe swimwear option preferable to other coverings. The religious preferences of conservative Muslim users are acknowledged and formalized through organizational decision-making. Any potential conflicts arising from unhygienic self-made burkinis are addressed by strictly enforcing the rule that only regular burkinis may be worn by those wishing to cover their bodies.

Moreover, the absence of anti-Muslim sentiments from both management and staff fosters a “culture-blind” ethos, emphasizing that the pool should be accessible

to everyone, particularly those with lower incomes. Staff members prioritize consistency in rule enforcement to ensure no group feels preferential treatment of another group. Users who repeatedly violate rules or make racist remarks are banned from the pool. This effectively prevents users with anti-immigrant attitudes from advocating for the exclusion of immigrants. In this universalist pool, discussions did not center on whether conservative Muslims could participate, but rather on how to facilitate their inclusion. The decision-making process did not focus on accommodating religious differences, but on providing an affordable leisure activity for those with limited budgets. Even when initial resistance to the burkini arose among some users, staff's clear and unwavering support communicated that the rule was non-negotiable. When conservative Muslims fail to wear a proper burkini, staff interpret this not as willful defiance but as a lack of understanding of the requirements. They nonetheless insist on compliance:

We have the pool rules in foreign languages here in our pool, especially for foreign citizens, and then we also have pictures. Yes, it includes a picture of a burkini, and underpants are crossed out. If our foreign citizens don't understand, then we just go to the notice and show them what we pay attention to. (Pool Manager_m universalism; position 198–203)

In the universalist pool, conflicts mainly arise over the application and communication of formalized rules, contrasting with the situation in the subsequent assimilationist case.

4.3 The Assimilationist Decision: No Burkinis and No Separate Women's Hours

The idealtype of an assimilationist pool does not offer separate hours for women and does not allow the burkini. This pool was chosen for these characteristics, but during the interviews, it became evident that the pool had recently begun allowing the burkini because it felt pressurized to do so by a lawsuit against a similar ban at another facility.

We do allow the [burkini], of course, because there are now also legal rulings that permit it and we stick to them (pool manager_m assimilation; position 225–237).

The pool was kept in the set because its assimilationist character was still visible – despite the recent change in organizational rules. It is situated in an economically declining metropolitan area, with a population that has 31.6 % individuals with an immigrant background and a right-wing populist voter share of 16.3 % in the 2017 federal elections, a share significantly higher than in the other pools.

4.3.1 Organizational Characteristics: Convinced Against Their Will

The pool studied as a case of the assimilationist model is the last of three municipal indoor pools still open to the public, leading to a significant demand. The closure of the other two pools was due to a lack of funds for modernization. The recent permission to allow the burkini is not viewed as a gesture of accommodation for Muslim users but rather as a legal obligation imposed externally. An assimilationist attitude prevails among both staff and users, making the transition from a culturally assimilationist to a universalist organization conflictual.

The pool faces several challenges related to fierce competition for limited resources. This municipality is struggling financially and, like other German cities, has had to accommodate refugees from Syria. The management and staff empathize with long-time users of this pool, the only remaining indoor facility available to the public.

The water area has shrunk, and the offer is, of course, no longer what we had before (...). We are trying to keep the current pools running. That was also last night's mandate in this municipal council resolution, to guarantee the preservation of the existing pools, that is our mission. (...) The schools had to join forces here, (...) The clubs had to give up water surfaces (...). Then, public swimming is now limited to this one district pool, where everything is concentrated. (pool manager_m assimilation; position: 122–127)

Staff members sympathize with long-time users who have faced numerous negative changes. In the adjacent outdoor pool, long-time users perceive the burkini as a further threat, viewing it as a symbol of the impending loss of “their” pool and its traditional atmosphere.

So, especially in pool X (...) there was a phase where a few [in burkinis] came somehow. But that's actually all gone now. The bathers, of course, all skeptical, and there was definitely mistrust. So, the refugees were more committed to adapting than the other way around (deputy pool manager_f assimilation; position: 225–237)

Given these resource constraints, the pool management has determined that it will not allow separate hours for women, particularly since separate lanes and times slots for schools and sports clubs are unavoidable.

There are requests here to offer women-only swimming. But that failed because the pools are not so enclosed, one can see in from the outside. Then there's the fact that I don't have the staff to be able to administer only female lifeguards to such women-only swimming. So the organizational effort for something like that is so high that we can't and don't want to offer it. And if we were to do it, it would probably become a political issue again. ‘There's a shortage of spaces everywhere for the clubs and now you reserve times just for them to go.’ (pool manager_m assimilation; position: 303–314)

In summary, the organization seeks to avoid conflicts with what it perceives to be a public majority, which is relevant for the structure of conflict.

4.3.2 The Structure of Conflict: Open Conflict over Scarce Resources

1) *Defining and disciplining the users.* Conflict among users, as well as between users and staff, is pronounced in this pool. The pool attendants and the management report significant discipline issues, resorting to whistles to address rule-breaking behaviors. Although the ban on burkinis has been officially lifted, this change is not actively communicated through advertising or signage.

No, we don't do any proactive advertising for it now, because that would be held against us again. Our house and pool rules state that it is permitted, but that's all we do. So we don't advertise it now, we don't want to go that far. We will seek individual discussions when conflicts arise, but we don't want to advertise it (pool manager_m assimilation; position 284–288).

This suggests that the burkini exists more on paper than in practice and is regarded as an additional burden amid various ongoing challenges.

2) *Convincing other users.* Long-time users of the pool predominantly oppose burkinis, holding anti-Muslim sentiments that align with the higher proportion of right-wing populist voters in the area. Some users even sent a letter of complaint to the mayor, expressing their refusal to accept the presence of burkini wearers:

However, the acceptance was not there from a close-knit team of older bathers in our pool (...) and they actually sent a letter of complaint to the mayor to express their dissatisfaction, stating that they do not want to accept that now “such people”, I think that's how they even (titled) it, [are] here in the pool. (pool manager_m assimilation; position: 225–237)

The manager of this pool clearly feels that the majority of users reject the burkini. The users openly insult the burkini wearers and even called the pool attendant to assist, an act which the manager was reluctant to confront directly:

There was a situation where I was directly involved, but because they called me in. They just wanted to vent their frustration on someone from the staff and then they started to rage and became more and more offensive. I then broke off the conversation and said: “I won't continue discussing with you at this level. The conversation is over for me”, turned around and left. And then they snarled at me: “Well, I could have guessed that you'd be so stupid!” (Deputy pool manager_f assimilation, position: 273–278)

Despite these confrontations with non-immigrant users, the pool attendants and management primarily note rule-breaking among users of immigrant backgrounds:

When I had problems in the pools to the point that we had to issue a ban, then it was actually 90–95 % people with a migration background. (Pool manager_m assimilation; position: 202–209)

Thus, although the staff could easily sanction aggressive behavior toward burkini-wearing women by issuing house bans against these long-time users, they refrain from doing so to avoid escalating conflict.

But, as I said, it's ultimately up to each individual to decide whether they [burkini-wearers] want to go through with it or not. Our hands, or our supervisory staff's hands, are a bit tied in that regard. We can't do much more than respond to them, which we have done. (pool manager_m assimilation; position: 271–273)

This organizational withdrawal from conflict regulation allows the long-time users to dominate the situation.

3) *Convincing the staff.* As in other pools, staff members attempt to frame the pool rules as rational, referencing court decisions that equate burkinis to wetsuits:

Yes, as I said, because most of them come at the beginning of the season, when we open, we rarely get the water above 20° so quickly. [...] They all come in neoprene. That's nothing different. (pool attendant_m assimilation; position: 789–799)

However, staff support for the burkini is weak. The aggressive behavior of long-time users effectively discourages Muslim women from visiting the pool in burkinis, thus undermining the intention behind the rule change.

4.3.3 Organizational Responses to Conflict: Laissez-Faire an Anti-Muslim Public

The organization is caught between perceived legal pressures in favor of burkinis and the resistance from long-time users who object to them. Staff members reflect on the tranquility of the pool prior to the changes, and their limited defense of Muslim users in burkinis suggests a certain nostalgia and thus reluctance to disrupt the existing dynamics. The pool attendants have tried to explain the new pool rules to opposing non-Muslim users, mainly using external legal arguments instead of functional ones about the burkini being hygienic. The staff did not sanction the aggressive non-Muslim users, adopting a laissez-faire attitude towards conflict, allowing the majority's sentiments to shape the environment.

The underlying conflict is intensified by resource scarcity. In this constellation, a close-knit community feels entitled to dictate what practices are tolerated "in their pool". Since the staff let the established community gain the upper hand in this pool, newcomers can be excluded. Consequently, the public character of the space diminishes, making it less inclusive for diverse users. This dynamic sets the state for the next case, which exemplifies the segregationist idealtype. In such contexts,

the challenges of inclusivity and resource management become even more pronounced, raising questions about the true accessibility of public spaces.

4.4 The Segregationist Decision: No Burkinis but Separate Women's Hours

The idealtype of a segregationist pool would ban the burkini during public hours while offering separate hours for Muslim women. However, this model is likely not present in its purest form in Germany today. According to the dataset on regulations among German swimming pools (Michalowski and Behrendt 2020a), one pool banned the burkini and provided separate hours for women. Yet, during the case study, it became evident that the burkini was not completely prohibited. In fact, the staff had created a modified version of the burkini, resembling a short wetsuit, and stipulated that only this shortened and tightened garment was allowed in the pool. The pool is situated in a metropolitan, formerly industrial area with 23.7 % of individuals from immigrant background and 12 % right-wing populist voters in the 2017 federal election.

4.4.1 Organizational Characteristics: Consensus on Outright Rejection of Muslims

Most of the organization's staff have worked at the pool for many years, with only a few younger attendants recently joining the team. Staff report frequent conflicts with the users, including one incident where a female attendant was assaulted by users (not identified as Muslim). In response, the pool staff decided to participate in a de-escalation training. The staff exhibit racist attitudes towards Roma, Sinti, and Muslims:

I see the challenge in keeping the clientele that comes here, i.e. the pool peaceful. [...] so that we also get families to come here to the pool and not just (...) gypsies or even clans, proper clans, families that cause such pollution and such unrest here in the pool. (pool administration_f segregation; position: 177–188)

The attendants describe these users as disobedient to the instructions of the female staff and insulting.

When you explain to them that their swimwear is not allowed, you just get rude remarks and they literally say: "Nazi. Right-wing radicals" and other things. So they go to the lowest level. Or if they can't swim and we say: "Get out of the deep end, stay only in the non-swimmer area", "You have nothing to say to us", "You're right-wing radicals. You're Nazis" and "I hate infidels", "I hate Germany." (pool manager_m segregation; position: 1716–719)

Group boundaries are also very visible in the staff's attitudes towards the burkini. During a group discussion, one attendant declares "the burkini is shit", and others agree, asserting that people should assimilate.

Above all, what personally saddens me a lot, even 10-year-old girls come completely veiled from head to toe. What are they doing to their own children? And when I fly to these countries like Dubai, I have to adapt to the local conditions. And here, they just do whatever they want. (pool attendant_f segregation; position: 574–591)

The staff perceive the Muslim users as culturally and religiously different, rule-breaking, unfriendly, and, notably, non-swimmers.

PA 1: And I don't think [they] place as much value on swimming as we do. (...) They paddle around and tell us every time 'We can swim', right? PA 2: They've already been taught the wrong way and they keep passing it on. It's a cycle. If the parents don't know how to swim properly, the children won't learn it either. If the children... PA 1: And it's still part of our culture: swimming is important. You should learn it. (pool attendants_f, segregation; position: 615–631)

The pool is in a state of open conflict, with bright boundaries between the groups, and the staff clearly siding with the non-Muslim users. They report incidents of hostility from users, including a Muslim user calling an elderly non-Muslim a "fat pig". One attendant recounts:

Personally, at some point someone from the foreign fellow citizens literally said to me: "It really bothers me that you're a Christian and you're standing here at the edge of the pool and watching out." (...) And then I really reacted in the same spirit and said: (...) "But it also bothers me that only Muslims swim here and I have to jump in for them." (pool attendant_f segregation; position: 260–272)

The staff fail to establish a friendly relationship with Muslim users, resulting in a "discriminatory equilibrium" between the groups (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2017).

4.4.2 The Structure of Conflict: Restricting and Sanctioning Muslim Users

1) *Defining and disciplining the users.* The pool initially introduced the separate women's hours without targeting Muslim women. In fact, approximately 10 % of the swimming pools in Germany offer women's hours, often catering to older women who do not mind male staff. According to the pool manager, the women's hours were initially attended by slightly overweight women uncomfortable with their bodies. When the city's Immigrant Council pushed for the introduction of all-female staff, the demographic shifted, and young Muslim women started attending, disturbing the older women.

That's this change that you can observe well, I find, in women's hours. It has always increased: they have more and more taken over the pool, claimed this day for themselves, almost pushed out the Germans, so to speak, that they no longer want to go swimming there. (Pool attendant_f segregation; position 233–259)

Female staff eventually refused to supervise these hours, which led to the hiring of female lifeguards. The number of women attending the separate hours steadily increased to reach about 100 in a pool that was only 25 by 12 m. At this point, the number of lifeguards had to be increased to supervise the women while non-Muslim women, feeling that they were becoming a minority, withdrew from these separate hours. The pool management and staff would like to see a reduction in the number of Muslim users. They hope that the burkini restrictions and the occasional reintroduction of male pool attendants will further this goal.

“Yes, and staffing is now playing into our hands a bit, because we no longer have so many female supervisors, so we now occasionally employ a man. That reduces the ladies, the “worst” ladies in quotation marks (pool attendant_f segregation; position 665–679)

The conflict centers on the type of swimwear and swimming ability, as staff do not allow burkini-wearing women into the deeper parts of the pool.

2) *Convincing the staff.* The management and staff share anti-Muslim sentiments, viewing Muslim accommodation as dysfunctional and a safety risk. To legitimize the ban of the full burkini, pool attendants recount an incident where three women in burkini nearly drowned:

She had to jump in because the fun turned serious and the girl panicked and sank. And these expansive garments float on the surface while the person goes down. You couldn't see my colleague at all. She jumped in and was in all the turmoil. Everyone started screaming all at once, yes, the person didn't scream anymore and just silently went under. (...) We can't both jump in, but at that moment you have no overview at all. That's where we said: “This doesn't work anymore with these clothes. They just have to be tight-fitting and shorter, because otherwise there's too much fabric.” (Pool attendant_f segregation; position: 496–502)

The staff's redesigned burkini is drastically different from the original burkini and in addition it is only allowed in the non-swimmer's pool.

...without a burkini. They are ultimately allowed to cover up to the elbow and up to the knee, that's allowed, no underwear and ultimately, it should be tight-fitting, so not like a T-shirt ‘I have to hide everything now’ but it has to be tight-fitting swimwear (pool attendant_f segregation; position 319–332)

The municipality supports these rules and accepted the female staff's refusal to monitor the women's hours. Thus, the staff succeeded in convincing the municipality to cut down on Muslim accommodation.

3) *Convincing other users.* The staff does not try to convince other users of Muslim accommodation. Rather, they side with the long-time users, lamenting how the pool's atmosphere has changed for the worse and regretting the loss of a friendly familiarity in their relationship with their users. The fact that the long-time users felt driven out of women's hours by Muslim users deeply affected their relationship with them. The religious and cultural boundaries between groups and the outbreak of open conflict make it very difficult, if not impossible, to regulate conflict in interactions as is the case in the multiculturalist and the universalist pool. As a result, conflict regulation is outsourced to the municipality. Users often use citizens' hot-lines, contact the municipality, or seek help from interest groups.

4.4.3 Organizational Responses to Conflict: Formalized Cultural Exclusion

As noted, conflict resolution within the pool's interaction systems is nearly impossible. As a result, the staff have adopted a strategy of reporting any significant conflicts with users to the pool manager, ensuring he is informed in case of follow-up complaints from the city administration. Due to frequent conflicts, two female pool attendants now work in pairs, serving as witnesses for each other. They describe the difficulties of addressing individual issues when groups of women intervene:

If you say something to one of these ladies, you will have a bunch of six to eight women who don't actually know each other at all, but of course they really stick together. And that's why we had to come to an agreement at some point and say: "If there are problems like this, we need to pull the person aside so that we can talk in peace, because everyone interferes all at once." (Pool attendant_f segregation; position: 548–566)

Staff cite a few select cases where "assimilated immigrants wearing bikinis" have supported them, criticizing other Muslim users for their lack of assimilation. Additionally, the redesigned short and tight-fitting burkini has been formalized through new pictograms specific to this pool. The staff justify these changes with safety concerns, downplaying the religious significance of the burkini. They question why women wear the burkini during women-only hours, mock the argument that "Allah must not see my knee", highlight the contradictory behaviors of Muslim users, and note that some supposedly modest religious women use vulgar language. Unlike the multicultural pool, which offers swimming lessons during women's hours, this pool reinforces the fact that many of the burkini-wearing women cannot swim by relegating them to the non-swimmer area.

4.5 Comparative Summary of the Different Types of Conflicts

Although we could not fully control for population composition across cases (c.f. discussion), our study suggests that organizational decisions significantly influence the types of conflict that arise over religious accommodation for minorities. We hypothesized that decision-making premises, such as embracing or rejecting innovation and competition, shape decisions regarding Muslim accommodation. Table 1 highlights key differences across cases, particularly in terms of decision-making premises and the organization's response to conflict. As mentioned repeatedly, management decisions are crucial in shaping the organization's conflict resolution strategies and determining opportunities for conservative Muslims to participate. Conflict may be hidden behind a façade, addressed with universal rules, left unregulated in a laissez-faire approach or even be perpetuated by staff.

The comparative analysis also shows that the four cases differ in the way that the personnel draws cultural and religious boundaries (Koenig 2005; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2008). Interestingly, these differences correspond quite well to the idealtype that each case represents: in the **multiculturalist** case, Muslim users are strategically framed as “guests” whose cultural and religious differences are “part of our cultural landscape” in the 21st century. Although the staff do perceive cultural and religious differences which they do not particularly approve of, they feel bound by the management's strategic boundary blurring which does not allow them to address their Muslim guests any differently from other users: thus, differences are acknowledged, but all groups must be treated equally. In the **segregationist** case, on the contrary, cultural and religious boundaries are rendered very bright and differences are overemphasized. Conservative Muslim body practices are strongly devalued, with staff openly agreeing that “the burkini is shit.” Muslim users are depicted as culturally and religiously different, adhering to the wrong gender roles, and being rule-breaking, impolite, and aggressive. They are also seen as non-swimmers and the staff attribute this lack of swimming skills to an intergenerational pattern passed down from parents to children. This is particularly striking given that swimming pool staff are in a position to teach and break this circle. By contrasting the eternal non-swimmer with the true German for whom swimming is an essential cultural practice, yet withholding instruction, the intention to maintain separation between groups becomes evident. In the **assimilationist** case, the cultural boundaries drawn by the staff toward Muslim users are strongly influenced and legitimized by the negative attitudes of the non-Muslim users. The staff's statements about Muslim users are notably more moderate than in the segregationist case. However, the staff still assert that the vast majority of pool bans for disciplinary issues have

Table 1: Comparative overview over the four case.

	Composition of population	Relationship among staff	Decision-making premises	Response to conflict separate hours	Response to conflict burkini	Relation with users
Multicultural	Rich, educated, cosmopolitan	Professional hierarchy, follow the management	Innovation, competition	Conflict suppressed through façade, prevent other claims and loss of public character	Professional, burkini tolerated and rationalized by staff	Try to convince users of organizational decisions
Universalist	Rather poor	Hierarchy, moral leadership	Offer an affordable pastime also for the lower social classes	No separate hours for women (only for public institutions)	Tolerant consensus, burkini supported by staff as hygienic swimwear	Apply same rules to all users, regardless of cultural differences
Assimilation	Strong economic decline and rising populism	Informal group	Cultural and existential defense, anti-Muslim consensus	No claims, unthinkable to establish separate hours	Half-hearted permission, conflict resolved by majority dominance	Favor the majority, no trust towards Muslims
Segregat.	Rather poor	Informal group	Cultural defense, anti-Muslim consensus	Open conflict, not solved in interaction systems, withdrawal of non-Muslims	Open conflict: staff demonstrate power by restricting Burkinis	Discipline Muslim users

been issued to Muslim users. Finally, in the **universalist case**, Muslim users are hardly framed as such but rather as people with a small budget who – just like everyone else – like to enjoy themselves during a visit at the pool. Here, the pool management seems to explicitly adopt a color-blind and boundary-blurring approach that ensures equal treatment of all users despite potential cultural differences.

The different processes of boundary-drawing can be analyzed as strategic action in the sense that in the multicultural and the universalist cases, the management clearly uses its hierarchical power to blur the boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim users and to oblige the staff to act accordingly. This also affects the relationship with the users. In the assimilationist case, management and staff refrain from taking a clear position for fear of upsetting non-Muslim users who draw bright religious boundaries. This strategy puts pressure on the Muslim users to assimilate while keeping the relation between the staff and the non-Muslim users intact. Finally, in the segregationist case, management and staff agree on bright religious boundaries.

5 Conclusion and Discussion: Organizational Influence on Conflict Regulation

Our study aimed to assess how organizations can influence conflict over Muslim accommodation. We looked at four organizations that all belong to the same type (covered swimming pools in Germany) and that are all located in comparable environments. Pools were chosen for specific differences in organizational rules that they apply to accommodate conservative Muslim body practices. Each specific constellation of organizational rules was associated with a Weberian idealtype of minority accommodation. The phenomenon we observed is the type of conflict that emerges between staff and users and among users depending on the kind of organizational rules that have been applied. We found differences between the four idealtypes in both the nature of conflict and its management: (1) In the multicultural case, conflict arises from balancing special claims from (sub)groups while avoiding segregation. The organization does so by maintaining a façade and not taking away resources from the general public. (2) In the universalist case, conflict centers on ensuring that rules are equally respected by and applied to all users. (3) In the assimilationist case, conflict is grounded in a reluctance to share scarce resources and a strategy of conflict avoidance and *laissez-faire* that lets the majority impose its norms and *de facto* leads to a loss of control over the public good. (4) In the segregationist case, conflict focuses on the fear of Muslim users dominating the

pool, with management and staff disciplining and controlling Muslim users. This over-regulation deprives Muslim users of the co-production of the public service that is otherwise typical of public service organizations.

Our results suggest that conflict is lowest in the universalist case, where common rules are prioritized over group identities, where users are given a choice over their body practices and where tolerance for minorities is promoted through values that de-center cultural and religious differences (color-/religion-blind). The multicultural case also has a decision-making premise (Luhmann 2000) that facilitates minority inclusion. Yet, it fosters more conflict because it offers accommodation for even more conservative Muslim minorities. The assimilationist and the segregationist cases both made choices against minority accommodation, although in different ways. Conflict is highest in the segregationist case, where two groups draw religious boundaries and – confounding users and staff – openly confront each other. Thus, our findings suggests that a form of accommodation which does not ignore conservative minorities' claims but does not accommodate the claims of the most conservative minorities within the minorities might be most efficient in managing conflict over religious accommodation. Or, to phrase it differently, the results of the study suggest the hypothesis that organizational forms of Muslim accommodation that mainly require tolerance from the majority (Koenig 2005) like tolerating pool users wearing burkinis but no change of behavior that would be judged more obtrusive (Carol and Koopmans 2013) like renouncing on gender-mixed swimming during certain hours are the least conflict-ridden.

The paper also shows that beyond management, population composition plays a role in shaping the emergence and regulation of conflict. Next to the share of individuals with an immigrant background and the share of right-wing populist voters, economic resources available to the organization can impact the type of accommodation chosen and – maybe to a lesser extent – the kind of conflict that emerges. While the multicultural case can afford to accommodate minorities without taking resources away from the majority, the lack of resources seems to be an important driver of conflict in the assimilationist case. Following Koopmans' (2013) line of argumentation, one might hypothesize that the multicultural organization – if transposed to an environment characterized by severe economic decline, as in the assimilationist case – would begin to readjust its organizational decisions and become less generous in accommodating conservative minorities. Yet, the comparison of the assimilationist and the universalist case – both pools being located in a similar environment – underlines that, management decisions on minority accommodation can have a clear impact on conflict.

Obviously, attitudes cannot be dictated. Our study, however, corroborates the idea that organizations can manage them through decision-making premises (Luhmann 2000). While organizations may not transform norms, they can channel the

attitudes and behavior of staff and users through their decision-making structures. These decision-making structures for example promote universalism or segregation. Individual attitudes that favor bright religious boundaries are either attenuated or enhanced by these structures. Thus, expanding on Kalev, Dobbin et al.'s (2006) argument, the accommodation of diversity depends not only on specific diversity programs but also on underlying decision-making premises. Even when religious diversity is officially accommodated through organizational rules or programs, the underlying premises must change to support implementation. In the assimilationist case, this change failed. Although the rules were changed, anti-Muslim behavior persisted as part of the organizational culture, leading to the maintenance of previous patterns. Future research could focus on providing a more comprehensive understanding of how different types of decision-premises affect the organizational accommodation of diversity.

While our case selection worked surprisingly well (e.g. “the multicultural case” really matched its label etc.), our findings about the type and degree of conflict brought about by different kinds of accommodation obviously remain qualitative and can thus only serve as hypotheses for future research. It is also important to note that case selection occurred in a real-world setting where perfect control of variables is difficult, if not impossible. For example, economic wealth available to the organization likely is a confounding factor of conflict over minority accommodation. Future research could focus on universalist pools alone and explore whether these pools apply their rules in a more inclusive or exclusive way depending on the composition of the users in terms of immigration background, party preferences and wealth of the city.

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