

Episode 32: Tawfiq

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What does it mean to be a Saudi Arabian man growing up as a minority in Saudi Arabia, and living both in the US and Denmark? In this episode, Tawfiq shares with us the various ways he was othered due to his nationality and looks, particularly when he lived abroad. His story is about how harm towards certain communities manifests itself in various ways and on different levels.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Tawfiq.

F:

Tawfiq was born and raised in Saudi Arabia for the first 25 years of his life. Growing up as one of the minority groups in the country, he was exposed to various issues around othering from a young age, both at the interpersonal and institutional level. It was only when he left Saudi Arabia and went to the US and Denmark that he saw a different angle to the notion of othering, and more specifically, on stereotyping.

T:

I went to the US. I met so many others [people] from other different countries. And I realized that we [minorities in Saudi Arabia] were okay. Yes, there was this [perception of] "We belong to a certain label, we don't represent the majority in the country". But that happens in almost every country. There's the minorities, and there's the majorities across different domains.

So in the US, I met so many people from different countries that I had a certain stereotype about before moving there, or before meeting people from those countries. And then I realized that not only the stereotype had less truth to it, but also, the way that country is perceived by its own people is very different than what me and people from my own category or from my country believed that [was] the way it is in that country and those citizens of that country see themselves in their country. So I got to know that there is a lot of talking. People like to talk and people love to go to stereotypes right away.

The problem is, stereotypes cannot be applied at the individual level. Stereotypes apply at the country level, yes. But it's very hard – and this is supported by empirical research – that they don't apply. You cannot just bring someone and apply every stereotype. Let's say you are from country X and Country X is known to, let's say, eat so much food. You cannot bring anyone from that country by just bringing *one* person and say, "This person is most likely to be, you know, diabetic because they eat a lot of food." No, that doesn't work. It has to be a population. You bring a whole population, and then you can apply that stereotype on that population, given some statistical evidence that yes, [many people are diabetic]. So if there's statistical evidence on that, then it is as a country level stereotype. And if you do it again, if that, you know, statistical evidence is robust, it should replicate again, and you will see that stereotype manifesting at the population level.

But if you bring one person, there's randomness, right? So you might get someone, yes, within that average, but you might get someone who is extremely fit, or, you know, way far from that average score that kind of gives you the stereotype at the country level.

F:

Tawfiq shares two vivid memories from the US and Denmark where stereotypes were painfully applied to him.

T:

I went there [to the US] in 2012 or so. And as I mentioned, I come from Saudi Arabia, right? So there's that stereotype about Muslims. And that kind of got so bad in 2016 or so when Trump was the president, or before... [it was the] election time. And I know many friends who faced serious racist behaviors. I was lucky I did not face many, but I faced a few that are kind of interesting and they made me think.

For instance, one time we were going out, me and a few friends. And a few friends, they brought a new friend from a certain race. But I look like someone from the Middle East. And so the person asked me – you know, he was just getting to know me – and he asked me, "Where are you from?" So I said, "I'm from Saudi Arabia." And he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I'm... I did my studies. I did my PhD." And then he said something to me that I didn't hear. And I said, "What did you say?" And he was like, "Oh, it was too soon, right?" I laughed. And so I realized that he said something that was probably offensive to me. And I said, "No, no, I didn't hear it [what you said], please tell me what it is." And he whispered to me and said, "In flying planes? You got a PhD in flying planes?"

And I looked back, I laughed, where I said, "Fuck you." Because I had no comments to say. This is like a very intuitive, you know, gut feeling answer. And gut feeling answers are very truthful to represent... or they represent the person that you're talking with. Yes, they might later rethink it and fix it to be considerate of others. But it's kind of hard when you break it like that, it's hard to be fixed. So I was laughing in the end and I didn't care. And then... I would just... I tend to ignore situations like this. So when I hear it or see something, I just respond in a way and then I move on.

Something like that happened to me also here in Denmark. And again, I don't think these people represent the country, right. They represent themselves. This is not to say this country is bad or good as compared to the other ones, but there are these people. And one time someone, again, we were going out, someone saw me, and he wanted to say, "Hi." And the man said, "Hey, what's up? You look, you know, you're smiling all the time." And I was like, "Yeah, I smile all the time." And then he asked me, "Where are you from?" And I said, "I'm from Saudi." And this person said, "We love you so much, although you look like Osama bin Laden."

And that was very, very sharp, insincere. And I'll say it was insulting, not given what happened in the past one, two years, you're attaching, again, a stereotype to me as a person, and you don't even know what I've been through. So there are certain things when it comes to these comments that I receive. Again, I grew up belonging to a minority. And, in fact, not only this, I would say that what happened in the past with these violent terrorist attacks, they don't care who you belong to. They wanted to get what they wanted to get. So even in Saudi Arabia, many people got killed by these people. It's in the news, like if you go and look up the news, many people got killed around that time – 2012, 13 – by those same people.

Now you, like this person, is telling me that I belong to them. Well, they would kill me, [so] what the hell are you saying? So people don't know exactly the details of these major events that happened in the past, but then they just abstract ideas of a certain stereotype like this, and then they will shoot it in your face. I don't think they mean bad sometimes. But they're just revealing their, you know, it's fun, right? But yeah, it is fun, but you don't even know me. And this takes a lot of time, a lot of trust to build with someone before you are able to joke like that.

F:

Tawfiq reflects on the context in which stereotypes may or may not be used, and how he has learned to deal with them.

T:

It is very contextual. It depends on the context, how you can use a stereotype with individuals or how you can apply a stereotype on individuals. Those conditions have to be satisfied first before you can apply that stereotype. If those conditions are satisfied, most likely, it will be a laugh. You know, we're talking from a positive point of view, like I know you, you know me, or we're like a close friend, we've been together for years, and then you bring up something related to a negative stereotype about where I originated, like the country I grew up in. In that case, yeah, we will laugh.

But if those conditions were not met, like I just saw you on the street and you tell me that, that's not an okay behavior, because that shows that this is who you are, [that you think], "This is how we see, this is the lens we see you through as a human, as a person moving on the street." But that shouldn't be the lens that is being used to see me as a person. You don't know me yet. Every person has different personalities, they have different backgrounds, regardless of the way they look. This is just based on the way you look and where you come from, to see how like a judgment is made based on very simple two factors, and that's it. So if those conditions were not met, that is... I would categorize that as racism. I wouldn't die if someone said that to me. Again, I'm very loose. As I said, I'll probably respond in a way to make them think.

There are many stories that happened to me, like in 2016, I remember meeting someone, and I could tell that after I said I come from Saudi Arabia, that person was not very happy. And that person started asking questions about, you know, "Do you like your country? Do you like how it is being governed?" I responded in a *very calm* way, like, "Yeah, I'm happy. I'm just here, you know. I'm your guest here. So we love it there. We would love you to come and see it. I'll show you around."

And then the person started actually bringing some positive things, "Oh, how are the camels in the desert?" So they wanted to know more about what's in there [in the desert]. But I was very sure when I met that person, it was not a positive atmosphere. It was not good. But then he [the person] was like, getting along [with me] after. So once you know how to respond to them, they kind of get it, and then they realize that you are educated, you know how to talk, you can argue with logic and evidence... And then I think these people can be fixed that way. It's a dialogue. I cannot claim that they can be fixed by only this way, and not all of them will be fixed this way. But this is one way I would say I deal with it. So again, this is based on my personal experience. This is how I have been dealing with it.

I think also, as I mentioned before, I smile a lot, so my smile, many times, helped me with, you know, a trigger for a racist behavior, but then it switched and became a positive effect instead. And I'm personally honored to represent that in different countries. Especially here in Denmark, there are not many Saudi Arabians, probably less than 50 people are here. And I meet many people, even Arabs, and I'm the first one they meet from Saudi Arabia. So when they see someone who's smiling and happy, and just talking in a calm way and open to discussion, they kind of have now a baseline of a whole country. So they will use this after. So hopefully, you know, you do your part, I do my part, and I hope everyone else does their part regardless of where they come from. You just do your part if you go to another race – since we're talking about racism – if you meet [someone from] another race, and you show that you are in-group, not out-group [and that] you are just a human like everyone else, I think people appreciate that in general.

F:

Beyond the social component of stereotyping, Tawfiq reflects on the interaction between social norms and the law when it comes to race.

T:

A fact that is funny and not easy for us, Middle Eastern people, to understand, [is that] when I was in the US, sometimes you have to check your race when you apply for something. But we don't know if we're White, Black... there is no "Brown". But according to census, we are White. So that is kind of the conflict between what is in the law and what is in the social norms. So people would not categorize us as "White", but according to the law, it says if you're from the Middle East, choose "White". So that's according to census. So the law did not translate into the social norms. That's a funny thing to know.

That kind of makes me feel that social norms in some situations are much stronger than the law. If you're driving your car on the street on the highway, if everyone is going beyond the speed limit, a police car would probably not pull you over because everyone is driving the same speed. So you have to follow the speed of everyone else. That's kind of social norms. You know, you're against the law, but you're fine. So in some situations, social norms are much stronger than a legal statement.

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F:

Tawfiq is an assistant professor in the field of Information Systems. For those of you who have never heard of the term "information systems", it is a set of computer-based tools for collecting, storing and processing data. Tawfiq shares an incidence that took place whilst he was a PhD student, an incident that would scare him for many years to come.

T:

In our field, we have a conference called International Conference on information Systems. The abbreviation is I-C-I-S. So it used to be pronounced as "ISIS" and that was back in 2016. That is the top conference in our field. And many people have changed the way they say it, but now I guess that the "ISIS" term is kind of dead so many people are back to the old term. I personally don't feel comfortable even today when someone uses that term. But if they use it, I wouldn't care much, like yeah, whatever. If someone was super paranoid about this, the worst thing that could happen is wasting my time. They will waste my time by either thinking about it or even if someone reported you, "Oh, they're talking about this thing." But there's information asymmetry here, it's probably another factor that is important, you know, they don't know about the context of your conversation. And therefore, they might think it's something that is harmful.

So one time we were going out, and I've been... I used to go to this conference. I still got to this conference and it will happen in Copenhagen this year. So I think that was back in 2017. I was with a colleague and we were just having a good time. And one of my friends was being *funny*, and this friend went and told someone in that place we were in, that, "Oh, he [Tawfiq] went to ISIS". It was right before the election time, or it was like the early time of like, first year when Trump was president. So things were very hot in that regard.

And I was paranoid, because why would you go to a stranger *at this time* that "this guy went to ISIS"? What do you think they will understand? Do you think they will understand that, "Oh, he went to International Conference on Information Systems?" Hell no. And so I was very... I would say, upset and angry. I was so angry because as I mentioned before, they would probably kill me before they kill this other friend or whoever is there. And that is kind of what makes it very, very... I don't know what's the word... it's insulting. It's nasty to say something like that to someone without knowing what they've been through.

So to manage that situation, I went to that person and said, "This guy is not fully conscious now. Here is the conference." And well, luckily we were also at a conference when we were there. So I showed the person [a pamphlet and said], "Here, this is the conference, it's called this and that." And the friend wanted to fix this by saying, "Oh, he also won an award at 'ISIS'." I won an award at that conference. So it was, you know, we have a term in Arabic, "[بكحلها عماها]". It means like, "You want to fix it, but you will ruin it more." There are many other sayings, like "Stirring shit is not going to fix it."

So again, to manage that situation, I just told the person [with the pamphlet], "Look, this guy is not aware right now [due to excessive alcohol consumption]. This is the conference, and this is me." Because it was a serious time. I saw that person whispering to their friends, "This guy went to ISIS" and that's not... if it was me, I would do the same thing. The time was very sensitive. But luckily, nothing happened. So I kept checking Twitter because this news could go viral. And the problem is a false positive. That is a waste of time. False positives cost a lot of time, effort and money, resources.

So anyway, that ruined my night. It was a good time, again, going back to good time, and that's what happened in a good time. And then that killed the night. Not only the night. That killed me, I'll say for... maybe two years. I saw myself in that society as a threat when I was just studying. I was doing research and I'm just living my life. That incident made me see myself as a threat to anyone who looked different from me. And that was not nice, because the fact is, I didn't give a fuck about what's happening. Yes, it [the situation] was sad. And of course, I wouldn't say... I don't categorize myself as belonging to these people. And many Muslims don't actually think that these people represent Islam. They don't represent Islam at all. But then people kept using that one category to make it the majority of Muslims and that was the problem, when that category actually is attacking many other categories in the same religion, or even in the same race – we're talking like Arabs in general.

So Trump and the situation in the US, plus this [incident], kind of gave me two hard years in my life. So that is one of the experiences I had. But thankfully, I, you know, got it out my mind by talking with friends and getting social and emotional support from others. You know, you have to let it out from your system because you're the innocent here being screwed. And I think that gave me a thick skin... I think that's the word, "a thick skin", to be able to navigate situations. So when that thing happened to me here, in Denmark, I didn't care. I laughed. Actually, several times, I'll just say, "I'm going to the bathroom" if someone is talking that way. So I go to the bathroom to flush them out of the system. That's kind of what I say.

F:

Tawfiq recalls that there were discussions around changing the name of the conference and reflects upon the final decision.

T:

As far as I remember, in 2016 or 17, not sure which year it was, but there was a voting around the name of the conference. So there was a discussion in the Association for Information Systems (AIS)¹. But then the outcome was, "No, we don't change the name." So they were considering thinking about it, but I guess they had a procedure and the voting system led to this outcome. And I think the reason was, that this [ISIS phenomenon] is just something that will go away. But we, like ICIS, was founded I think in the 1980s and then, you know, you had this name way before... the argument was, this whole thing around ISIS is going to disappear, and we owned this name before.

I'm not sure if it's going to disappear in the next few years. This term was instilled in almost everyone's mind, at least in the minds of those who lived that time. So you need a few generations so that people forget about this term. Maybe this was their argument, I don't know. But if I had a choice, and I am

¹ AIS is an international, not-for-profit, professional association for scholars of information systems.

sure people from the Middle East, if they had a choice, or any Muslim, they would not continue with this name. They will most likely change the name, or at least the majority would choose to change the name. Again, I cannot speak on their behalf but I don't think I don't want to choose that name if I had a choice. But you know, organizations are bigger than individuals.

F:

Against the background of his own research, his own experiences, and a controversial paper that came out in the field of information systems, Tawfiq shares his reflections on the terms "equality" and "fairness".

T:

We know that in the past three years, specifically after the George Floyd event in the US, that became a hallmark of any, I don't know, organization, recruiter you know, "We respect diversity..." So it's like they even... the law requires organizations to have that as part of their business processes. Like if you go rent a room, you will see that they have a statement that [says], "We don't discriminate against your color or your religion. As long as you are good, following the policy we have, you should be able to rent from us."

Well, something that I don't think personally – this, again, are just my personal views – I don't think that term is the right term to use. So let's take "equality". You can make everything equal, but that does not necessarily mean the outcome will be more positive. It could be less positive than it was before. I think what's important is being *fair*. So fairness, not equal. And that requires a whole equation of understanding how to be fair to everyone. So then that gets to personalization. So giving everyone what they want and what they deserve. You need to understand who they are. And therefore, you can predict what their needs or preferences are. And this connects me to the research I do. So this is the kind of the formula. If you want to be absolutely fair to everyone, you need so many data points or attributes about individuals to be able to treat them the way they want to be treated. And at the same time being fair to everyone else.

There was a paper also in our field of information systems that I don't remember the exact wording of the paper, but the generic idea, or one of the conclusions from that research – [which] was conducted by people well-known in the field – [was] that scholars with an Indian background represent a majority of the field and therefore that is kind of a problem. Like, this shouldn't be happening. There was even an explicit statement even in the abstract. I'm not saying the exact words now, but that's kind of that idea.

That conflates quality with race. So here, now you want to be equal, so you want equal distribution of Indian race, American, Hispanic, I don't know, whatever. But then that's a trade off with quality. So whoever made it to top quality, they made an achievement and this is what the data shows. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. They climbed the ladder for years, and now this is based on more than one generation, it's not only a few people that led to this "majority" in the field. If the standards that the academic community has is objective to everyone, then be it. This is what we found after, I don't know, 60 years the field has been there for. About 60... yeah, 50 to 60 years. It's a very young field.

And that article, research paper, led to controversies in the field. And I think equality and inclusion, yes, it will affect inclusion, other communities or races or whatever, they're less included in this field. But this is not the way to fix it, to shed light on this category and say, "*They* are the problem." No, they are not the problem. The problem is *there* [another issue that is more systemic], they need to do more. So there should be a procedure to work on how do we get them to participate with the same quality and quantity. And then you will be more inclusive of other races and therefore, you're being fair to every category here [in this field].

That's kind of an example, I would say, related to the use of the term "equality". I've never agreed with this term since I was young, I would say. I'm sure I'm not the only one who believes that. There was a meme, for instance, I remember one of these from a long time ago, you know, if you're tall and I'm short, it doesn't make sense to give me the same stair to look at behind the wall. I need a taller stair or brick to look up the wall because you're taller, you'll be able to see if you get that stair but I don't, I still don't get it. So now we're applying equality, but we're not being fair.

F:

Tawfiq has the following to say regarding what he thinks people need to do to become antiracist.

T:

Awareness and education. So being aware that racism is part of us as humans and being educated in terms of how to deal with racist behavior or racist anything that is shaped by racism. So this awareness, education, and you know, both of these, they kind of let you let it go when it [something racist aimed at you] happens so it's not a big deal. Because I've seen in the US, I've seen incidents where I'm like, "Come on, what do you mean racism? This just normal behavior." Someone said something like very very minor, and I'm sorry, there are people that exaggerate the meaning of racism.

Sometimes it's... well, it is part of us. And so being aware that it exists and accepting that it's part of human behavior, communication, style, and educate myself on how I would manage situations that involve racism, take it, and then think about it after, feed into your predictive model in your brain, so in the future, when you face something like that, you can be better off dealing with it in the future. And again, I laugh. I laugh a lot when things like that happen, so that has helped me to be antiracist.

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F:

You can find more information on Tawfiq's work, as well as other articles, books and videos he recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi, and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on Nov 9!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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