Social mobility allowing for ethnic identification: reassertion of ethnicity among Moroccan and Turkish Dutch

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of middle-classes that articulate their ethnic distinctiveness leads to discomfort and bewilderment in many societies. This rejection arises from assimilationist demands and straight-line integration assumptions which dominate the integration discourse. Relying on social-psychological theories, this mixed-methods study explores the ethnic identification of university-educated second-generation Moroccan and Turkish Dutch. The findings once more underscore that ethnic and national identifications are not mutually exclusive, nor are ethnic identifications mere acts of ethnic retention. The findings suggest that social mobility shapes processes of ethnic identification in particular ways, in the sense that the belonging and self-esteem that come with achieving an advanced socio-economic status allow for (and even encourage) assertion of the ethnic-minority identity; an ethnic identity that is partially reinvented. The insights of this study can help nuance the increasingly polarizing and exclusionary integration debates.

INTRODUCTION

When in 2011 Nasrdin Dchar won the Golden Calf for best Dutch actor (the Dutch equivalent of the Oscars), in his improvised, emotion-laden speech he exclaimed:

I am Dutch!
I am proud, with Moroccan blood!
I am a Muslim!
And I won a freaking Golden Calf!!

His speech was praised by many, criticized by others. In the context of the assimilationist integration discourse currently dominant in the Netherlands (as well as in many other countries), such expressions of minority identifications are often frowned upon. At least, these expressions are not understood, particularly not when they are voiced by socially-mobile individuals, who are considered well-integrated into the structural domain. Underlying this bewilderment and distrust lie essentialist assumptions. In this assimilationist discourse, ethnic-minority identifications are understood as expressions of social segregation and cultural retention, as acts of withdrawal and of disloyalty to society, all seen as incongruent with the socio-economic achievements. This article shows that this is a misrepresentation. Based on quantitative and qualitative data, the article depicts the

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identifications of socially mobile Moroccan and Turkish Dutch, and shows that the ethnic and national dimensions are not mutually exclusive. In addition, it explores how these identifications are developed. While the identifications of lower- and higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch are similar in strength, the interviewees’ stories suggest that different mechanisms take place. Insight into the particular role that social mobility plays in processes of identification not only provides input for integration models and social identity theories, it can also help nuance the dominant integration discourses.

The focus on socially mobile minority individuals is societally relevant as, in many European countries including the Netherlands but also in the United States, second-generation immigrants with lower-class backgrounds are coming of age and climb the social ladder. Middle-class segments with ethnic (and racial) minority backgrounds are forming that increasingly articulate their minority identities. Studies on higher-educated, middle-class individuals enhance our understanding of the relation between the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimension of integration. This study focuses on the intersection of having a minority-ethnicity and a higher education level, and exposes temporal variations within individuals. The results of this study show the importance of models that pay attention to intra-group differences, looking beyond purely “ethnic” explanations, and beyond ethnic identification as self-evident.

In the last decennia, in the Netherlands, as in many other countries, the integration discourse shifted from accommodation of diversity to a demand for cultural assimilation (Hurenkamp, Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2013). For decades, the Moroccan and Turkish immigrants, who arrived in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s to work in lower-skilled jobs, were encouraged through government policies to cultivate their ethnic identities, as were their offspring. At first, the reason was the prospect that they would return to their homelands. When it became clear that they were staying in the Netherlands, the cultivation of ethnic identities was encouraged because group-cohesion was believed to enhance socioeconomic mobility (Scholten, 2011). From 2000, this changed. In reference to the relatively low socio-economic status of the immigrants and to broader social problems, the “multiculturalist” integration policy was blamed to have caused an “integration failure” (Scheffer, 2000). Cultural assimilation was presented as the solution, and criteria for belonging shifted from socioeconomic to sociocultural and emotive. Immigrants and their children and grandchildren are now explicitly required to “feel at home” in the Netherlands, and to behave, think and identify as Dutch (and only as Dutch) (Duyvendak, 2011). The citizenship discourse has become extremely polarized. Immigrants and their children are persistently labelled as outsiders and treated with disdain. They are portrayed as traditional, orthodox and unwilling to “integrate”. This discourse of cultural assimilation echoes the idea of a clash of civilizations. “Dutch culture” and identity – defined in terms of secularism and progressiveness – are considered to be under threat from immigrants and their presumed illiberal, intolerant, traditional, and non-secular cultures and religions, and from Islam in particular (Uitermark, Mepschen and Duyvendak, 2014). In a climate where what is considered “Moroccan culture” or “Turkish culture” is regarded as incompatible with “Dutch culture”, being Moroccan or Turkish is regarded as incongruent with being Dutch, and Moroccan or Turkish identification is regarded as precluding loyalty to the Netherlands and identification as Dutch (Ghorashi, 2010). In short, the assimilationist discourse is built on essentialist assumptions, in which identities and loyalties are regarded as singular, bounded, and mutually exclusive. Along the lines of classical straight-line integration models, acculturation is expected to proceed over time towards assimilation in all domains, which is why particularly the ethnic-minority identification of individuals who are socio-economically “integrated”, like Dchar, raises wonder and even distrust.

The next section discusses theories on ethnic identification. Subsequently, the context of the study is explained: the background of the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch and the methodological approach. The first empirical section presents the levels of ethnic and national identification of second-generation Moroccan and Turkish Dutch, based on quantitative data. The second empirical
section zooms in on the development of identification, as depicted by the university-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch who were interviewed. The third empirical section reflects on the relation between class, ethnic identification and belonging. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

THEORIES ON ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION

Various disciplines are concerned with ethnic identity. Where sociologists are more concerned with acculturation processes on the group level, (social) psychologists zoom in on the individual. In psychology, the development of a personal identity is seen as a common process (Erikson, 1968). One’s personal identity is described as developing through various stages, ultimately – but not necessarily – leading to a status of a well-developed “achieved identity”, which is associated with the highest levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being (Marcia, 1980). Social identity theory proposes that a person’s self-concept relies partially on social identities, and hence that individuals, in order to enhance or maintain their self-esteem, try to achieve or maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Ethnic identity can also be part of an individual’s personal identity. An “achieved ethnic identity” is described as “acceptance and internalization of one’s ethnicity” (Phinney, 1989: 38), and is generally associated with a positive self-concept, self-confidence and well-being (Phinney, 1989; Phinney and Alipuria, 1990; Phinney et al., 2001).

Ethnic identities are only studied in the context of ethnic minorities and defined in contrast to ethnic majorities. Therefore, ethnic-minority identities often have a lower status, which is clearly the case for the Moroccan and Turkish identity in the general Dutch discourse (see also Hagedoorn, 1993). The devalued image of ethnic-minority identities and the accompanying negative stereotypes mean that ethnic identities can function as a stigma and threaten a positive self-concept. In other words, the devalued social identity can amount to “identity threat”, which is expected to have negative impact on self-esteem and well-being; although this turns out to be not always the case (Major and O’Brien, 2005: 407; Phinney et al., 2001). For example, Rumbaut (1994) shows that many factors influence the self-esteem of ethnic minorities and can shield individuals from the negative effects of a devalued identity, including characteristics of the family, society and the minority group.

Many strategies and coping mechanisms exist that protect individuals from the negative effects of identity threat. Ellemers et al. (2002) summarize various strategies, which are in line with the two main strategies that Tajfel and Turner (1986: 16) mention in response to an unsatisfactory social identity. One way to strive for a positive identity is to try to avoid a negative identity, for example by “passing” – trying to leave the group and be seen as a member of another group – (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Goffman 1990), or by downplaying or rejecting the ethnic identity (Phinney et al. 2001: 494). Particularly contexts of assimilationist integration discourses induce this set of dis-identification strategies, which are associated with strongly negative effects on psychological well-being (Barreto and Ellemers, 2009). The other set of coping strategies aim to make the ethnic identity more positively distinct, which involves group affirmation and a strengthening of the ethnic identification (Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Phinney et al., 2001). This can lead to emphasis on (partially imagined) ingroup cohesiveness and uniformity, and to increased outgroup derogation. The wish for distinctiveness can even lead to the affirmation of a negative identity (Ellemers et al., 2002). As we will see in the empirical material presented in this article, another way to improve social identity is by affirming the group identity and challenging the negative stereotype by exhibiting socially valued behaviour (see also Branscombe et al., 1999; Slootman, 2014a).

Contrary to zero-sum notions of immigrant incorporation, having a strong ethnic-minority identity does not preclude strong identification with the society of residence (here referred to as
national identity’). Instead of forming two poles of one dimension, these identities form two dimensions. Consequently, there are four identity combinations, which parallel the acculturation strategies described by Berry (1997: 10). These are, in Berry’s terms: (1) assimilation (only national identification, no/weak ethnic-minority identification), (2) segregation (only ethnic-minority identification, no/weak national identification), (3) integration (dual identification), (4) and marginalization (both identifications weak or absent). Research shows that the mode of “integration” is associated with the highest levels of psychological well-being (Berry et al., 2006). The context influences which identification modes are most attainable and most conducive for psychological well-being. For example, how individuals identify depend on the (actual or perceived) acceptance in society, with discrimination, and with integration policies (Phinney et al., 2001; Rumbaut, 1994).

Ethnic and national identity in this article refers to individuals’ self-identification, or: the “label that one uses for oneself” (Phinney et al., 2001: 503). More specific, in this article – in line with the idea of an achieved identity – it partially refers to the extent to which one feels that these labels are applicable to oneself and comfortably fit one’s self-image. For some, their self-identification embraces aspects like belongingness to a specific group, commitment and solidarity, shared values or shared histories (Phinney et al., 2001: 496). It can also be an expression of one’s parental background, or express belongingness to a specific place or bonds with specific persons (Slootman, 2014a). Self-identification is separate from external identification, or labelling, but not independent from it. As explained, minority self-identifications depend on the status of the social identity. They can be a reaction to the salience of these identities in the public discourse, or to persistent external labelling (Rumbaut, 2008). Although identification with a label can go hand in hand with specific cultural norms and practices, this is not necessarily the case (Slootman, 2016). Here, I do not assume a specific sociocultural “content”, I just examine how individuals use and reflect on ethnic and national identities when speaking about themselves, and how this develops in interplay with their trajectory of social mobility.

In line with the idea of coherent acculturation as expressed by straight-line integration models, many sociologists associate an active ethnic identity with a working-class status (Phinney, 1990: 510; Waters, 1990: 58). Individuals who have shown socioeconomic mobility, which requires high levels of adaptation in various respects, are assumed to have a weaker ethnic identity. Some studies indeed show a negative effect of education level or occupational status on ethnic-minority identities (Abu-Rayya, 2009; Nesdale, 2002; Tolsma et al., 2012). This, however, does not apply to all groups (see for example Zimmerman et al., 2007), including second-generation Moroccan-Dutch (Tolsma et al., 2012).

SOCIETAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Moroccan and Turkish Dutch

The Moroccan and Turkish Dutch are not only among the most discriminated and stigmatized groups in the Netherlands (Andriessen, Fermee and Wittebrood, 2014; Huijnk and Andriessen, 2016), they also form the largest ethnic-minority groups. Five per cent of the 16 million Dutch citizens are of Moroccan- or Turkish descent; equally divided between the first and second generation (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). In some neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, this share is as much as 40 to 60 per cent of the population.

In the 1970s, many Moroccan and Turkish young men came to the Netherlands to work in low-skilled jobs (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000). Most of them came from rural areas and had low levels of formal education. The large majority was Muslim. Although everyone – including themselves – expected them to return, most stayed in the Netherlands and many had their families come
over. In the end most of them stayed in the Netherlands. Although the first generation largely remained in the lower social classes, substantial parts of the second generation show large social mobility. In the last two decennia, the share of the Moroccan and Turkish second generation who started in higher education rose from 20 to over 40 per cent (Statistics Netherlands, 2012: 85). Nevertheless, in comparison to the ethnic-Dutch, a relatively large share is enrolled in low education levels (Crul and Doomernik, 2003; Statistics Netherlands, 2012).

A mixed methods approach

The article is based upon two empirical data sources. The first is the dataset of the TIES project (The Integration of the European Second Generation), which was coordinated by the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI).1 For the Netherlands, this project was the first large-scale study that focused on second-generation (Dutch-born) children of immigrants. A structured survey was conducted face-to-face in 2006 and 2007 in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, among 1505 respondents between 18 and 35 years old. The respondents were equally divided between three ethnic categories: Moroccan-Dutch (at least one parent born in Morocco), Turkish-Dutch (at least one parent born in Turkey), and ethnic-Dutch (two Dutch-born parents). For more details of the methodology, see Crul and Heering (2008).

The qualitative data were collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews with university-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch men and women, who were born around the time of their parents’ migration to the Netherlands. All of them were enrolled in the Dutch education system from the start at age six. At the time of the interviews, the interview participants were over thirty years old and had occupations that matched their educational level. They were spread all over the Netherlands, and had jobs in various branches. In the times when they grew up, their neighbourhoods and schools (particularly at the higher levels) were still relatively “white”, and higher-educated co-ethnic role models were still lacking. They were educational pioneers in their ethnic groups. I use the terms survey “respondents” and interview “participants” to distinguish between the quantitative and the qualitative data respectively.

THERE ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTIFICATIONS

Do the more highly educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch identify with ethnic and national labels? In this section I describe the levels of ethnic and national identification of higher- and lower-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch, using the quantitative TIES data. The higher-educated respondents graduated from or were enrolled in higher vocational education levels (HBO) or university at the time of the survey.2 The survey contained the questions “To what extent do you feel Moroccan/Turkish?” and “To what extent do you feel Dutch?” The response categories ranged from “not at all/very weak” to “very strong”.

A large majority of the higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch respondents strongly identify with their ethnic label: around 80 per cent (very) strongly feels Moroccan or Turkish (see Table 1). A much smaller share strongly identifies with the Dutch label, although this share is still over 40 per cent. This resonates with other research among ethnic-minority groups. Among minority groups, ethnic identification is consistently strong, while national identification varies between groups (Phinney et al., 2001; Rumbaut, 1994). (Note that studies generally only include minority groups that are explicitly recognized as minority groups, which might be an indication of selection on the dependent variable).

These results support the idea that ethnic and national identifications are not two poles of a single dimension but form two dimensions. There is no significant correlation between ethnic and national
identification; either for the Moroccan Dutch respondents ($r = -.067, p = .497$) nor for the Turkish Dutch ($r = .153, p = .113$). A substantial share of the higher-educated respondents identifies according to the “integration” mode, and combine a strong identification as Moroccan/Turkish with a strong identification as Dutch (38 and 34 per cent) (see Table 2).

Higher-educated respondents do not significantly differ from lower-educated in their ethnic and national identifications. Of the higher-educated Moroccan-Dutch, 81 per cent strongly identify as Moroccan and 45 per cent strongly identify as Dutch. Among the lower-educated Moroccan Dutch, this is 83 and 39 per cent. For the higher-educated Turkish Dutch these shares are 77 and 41 per cent and for the lower-educated Turkish Dutch 79 and 39 per cent. The differences are small and not statistically significant.

Contrary to the straight-line assumption as expressed in the Dutch public discourse, social mobility does not lead to a fading ethnic identity. Ethnic identification of higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch is strong; equally as strong as the ethnic identification of the lower educated. Furthermore, contrary to the assimilative discourse, ethnic identification does not preclude identification as Dutch. This is confirmed not only by the presented figures but also by in-depth interviews with university-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch. The participants all strongly identify as both Moroccan/Turkish and Dutch, and do not feel these identifications to be mutually exclusive.

The similarities between lower- and higher-educated respondents seem to infer that education level does not influence their identification processes. This is why, at the outset of the qualitative phase of this research, I assumed that the higher educated presented an “extreme case” (Bryman, 2008), which is in many ways indicative for the lower educated. However, the in-depth interviews with the university-educated participants suggest that instead of being an extreme case, the higher educated present a “unique case”, as the interviews reveal mechanisms in relation to the process of ethnic identification that are particular to the obtained higher education level.
In order to understand the process of what Phinney would call “ethnic identity achievement” and the influence of the participants’ trajectories of social mobility, we first need an impression of the struggles that preceded current identifications.

The interviews clearly testified to identification struggles. For most participants it took a long time to develop an identification that felt comfortable. As children and teenagers, they felt a dire need to be seen as “normal” in their ethnic-majority environments, and they wanted to conceal or downplay their ethnicity (a strategy of dis-identification). Some participants were bullied, others felt like outsiders because their parents did not allow them to participate in extracurricular events, or because of their clothes, or because of their unusually large number of siblings. Some had internalized negative stereotypes.

This applies for example to Said. Although he was not bullied, an important theme in his childhood memories is standing out. The following quote hints toward the process which emerges step-by-step during the interview, and which Said articulates toward the end of the interview. This process is echoed in the other interviews.

Well, I think, when you look back … Yes, I think – reflecting on the period at primary school – … that you discover that you are actually different. In a negative way. Because I remember – Quite bizarre: sometimes I was not allowed to play at a friend’s house. That’s something that you don’t understand at that moment. So, then you find out you are different. That is phase one. (Said)

What complicated the participant’s search for a fitting identification, was – in the words of a participant – an “imposed mono-identity”; the pressure to identify in singular terms, which conflicted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>COMBINATIONS OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moroccan background - Higher educated (HBO+)</td>
<td>Turkish background - Higher educated (HBO+)</td>
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<tr>
<td>... with Dutch label</td>
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<tr>
<td>N=104 weak neutral strong</td>
<td>N=109 weak neutral strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>... with ethnic label</td>
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<tr>
<td>weak 2% neutral 0% strong 3%</td>
<td>weak 5% neutral 0% strong 2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>neutral 0% 10% 4% strong</td>
<td>ethnic neutral strong 4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>strong 17% 26% 38%</td>
<td>label strong 17% 26% 34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moroccan background - Lower educated</td>
<td>Turkish background - Lower educated</td>
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<td>... with Dutch label</td>
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<tr>
<td>N=225 weak neutral strong</td>
<td>N=239 weak neutral strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>... with ethnic label</td>
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<td>weak 1% neutral 0% strong 3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>neutral 0% 11% 2% strong</td>
<td>ethnic neutral strong 2%</td>
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<td>strong 21% 28% 34%</td>
<td>label strong 19% 29% 31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: ‘Weak’ includes ‘not at all’, ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’; ‘Strong’ includes ‘strong’ and ‘very strong’

Data: TIES survey for the Netherlands, 2007, NIDI and IMES (respondents with mono-ethnic backgrounds)

TOWARD AN ETHNIC IDENTITY
with their dual identification. Berkant describes this struggle between his identities (what he refers to as ‘nationalities’), which was followed by an intense relief when he managed to have a fitting, or achieved, identity.

It has been a real trajectory… When I was young, I really struggled: ‘Am I really Turkish, or am I really Dutch?’ It really helped that I lived in Turkey, for my job. There, I found balance in my life. (…) I really feel I have the best of two worlds, actually. Now, whenever I want, I can decide where I live. I’m convinced I can be happy in BOTH countries. That is – That is – That makes me feel relaxed somehow. (…) I feel… let’s say… at ‘peace’ with myself (laughs) – …that I can say I really feel I have a double nationality. (Berkant)

Other participants also describe how the development of an achieved identity was a long trajectory. See for example Nathalie’s quote:

When you find out that THAT [being Moroccans] is a reason to be excluded, you try to avoid it and to minimize it as much as you can, in order to be as NORMAL as possible. (…) Well… and after a while you ARE normal – or at least, you are accepted as normal by your surroundings – then suddenly… um… then you realize you have nice friends, and that people really LIKE you, and that everything is fine… um… But that REALLY takes time, before you’ve built some self-confidence. That’s definitely not – look, when you’ve been bullied, then… then… your self-confidence is BELOW zero! It takes some time to really GET there (…) and then… after a while… well, once you have overcome this… – I’m talking about YEARRRRS here – then you think: Well, it’s actually quite a nice story… And then – then – Only THEN you dare to be PROUD – proud of where you come from… (Nathalie)

Rather than self-esteem resulting from having an achieved ethnic identity, as is the sequence presented in literature on identity achievement, Nathalie explains that the self-esteem that resulted from her belonging – when after endless childhood years of being bullied she finally made nice friends – helped her to articulate her ethnic identity and to feel proud of her ethnic background. In a similar way, the following quotes in which Said sketches his second and third “phase” indicate that also in his case self-esteem precedes an achieved ethnic identification.

Then, let’s say, this period at high school, where you, let’s say, SEE the opportunities and seize them, and where you realize that you’re talented. You know, that you say to yourself: ‘This is GOOD for me’. It sounds weird – no, it doesn’t – that at the age of fourteen you notice the difference between you, the higher-educated pupil, and the lower-educated pupils of the school nearby. There is a huge difference, with those children smoking pot. So you notice THAT. This makes you realize: ‘I want to stand out positively, I do not want to be like them’. So, basically – you then learn about your… identity – I don’t know. But what you learn is indeed, in that secondary school period: no negative association with your own identity. That was a really fantastic period. What is important, is that – well – there I met with friends who did NOT see you as THE Moroccan, or whatever. You COULD play at their homes: sit… sleep over… you know… I enjoyed that period so much. Really great. Good memories. I did not feel different AT ALL. Of course, you realize you have a different background. But who cares?! You know: ‘Enrichment.’ Whatever… – but that wasn’t the focus. (Said)

The funny thing is – at university you find out – Yes, there I DID relate more to, well, Moroccan-Dutch students. This was kind of a change. In fact, your whole life you did not do that. There you meet soulmates [lotgenoten], higher-educated Moroccan Dutch students. That was a real revelation. For all of us. We still are in contact. But I remember the moment of revelation at that time: ‘Apparently I am not alone’ – I always felt THE exception. They were on your own wavelength, let’s describe it this way. There were incredible levels of mutual understanding. Of course, that is fabulous. We surely all were… the outsider, you know. That was a fantastic period, indeed. I
primarily related to Moroccan Dutch people. Students. They were my best friends. Look, I also participated in a normal student fraternity, so there I did interact with other [ethnic Dutch] – But when you ask me: who did you mostly relate to, then it is primarily [with Moroccan Dutch]. (Said)

About his current life, Said remarks:

I actually highlight it all the [time] – I am just PROUD of it (laughs apologetically but affirmatively). I find it important to – I WANT to show that you can be both Moroccan and successful. I want to, very deliberately, show that these two CAN be combined. (Said)

In his reflection on these developments, Said describes how the self-confidence that he developed during secondary school, based on belonging and his educational mobility, paved the way to his later developing a satisfying relationship with his Moroccan ethnicity. And indeed, self-confidence radiates from his last quote. This developing self-confidence depended partly on the awareness that he was “doing fine”; that he was on a good track and had talent and potential. This illustrates how social mobility can function as a mechanism of belonging. Social mobility can “prove” one’s worth, not least in the eyes of the beholder. In addition, Said explained that his success led to extra credit with his parents, which gave him more freedom to shape his identity in the ways he wanted, in (relative) independence of his parents’ ideas of being a “good Moroccan”. Min and Kim (2000) describe a similar development among Asian-American professionals, who shifted from dis-identification to a (gradual) development of a higher-educated minority identity.

The other crucial mechanism of Said’s story, the life-changing event of meeting co-educated co-ethnics at university, was a theme that spontaneously popped up in more of the interviews. Several of the participants recalled this in emotional terms:

Then, you suddenly ARE at the university, you ARE together with people – Well... since the second year, when I became involved in the Turkish student association – that was a PEAK experience. Suddenly, a whole new world unfolds, um – with an urgent need to share your experiences with somebody who went through the same as you did. So that was really a peak, my time at the Turkish student association. Really a peak. (Berkant)

So, when at university I did meet Moroccan students, for me that was a relief. Indeed, there was no need to explain myself anymore. About why this and why that. So, at that moment I started to explore my roots, also via my studies, as I did a research project in Morocco. And I became active in the student environment. Yes, Muslim, Moroccan, whatever, youth association as well – I have since then been very involved with the Moroccan community. I very much enjoyed it. It gave me heaps of energy, and it really made me grow as a person in that period. (Mustapha)

This mutual understanding sprang from the specific combination of having a shared ethnic background and a shared education level. It was not solely being-Moroccan/Turkish that instilled feelings of mutual understanding but being-Moroccan/Turkish as higher educated. Although their schools and neighbourhoods were largely “white”, the participants’ families had wide co-ethnic networks, and yet it was the (few) co-ethnics they met at university who triggered these feelings of belonging. Karim remembers that when he met Kamal at university, for the first time in his life he felt understood instead of prejudged. Like Karim, Kamal knew what it was to be burdened by the high expectations of his family and “the entire community”, to be “put under a microscope”, and having to live up to the high expectations. These ranged from succeeding in educational and professional terms, to behaving “as one of them” and to pray and marry. It felt as a relief to share these experiences with someone. Both Esra and Imane initially kept their distance from co-ethnic students when they entered university. They feared these students would be as conservative as the co-ethnics they had known until then. Once they finally got to meet the co-ethnic students, they felt
like fish in the water among them. The co-ethnic students appeared to be as modern, liberal and emancipated as they were themselves.

Many of the participants became a member, or even founded, student associations with ethnic-minority signatures. Considering the effect of their educational trajectory on their ethnic experiences, given the sense of belonging that they specifically feel among co-educated co-ethnics, and considering the fact that the ethnic identity is hitherto primarily attached to a low-class status (at that time almost the entire co-ethnic community in the Netherlands was lower-educated), it seems likely that together they reshape their ethnic identity to make it fit their more highly educated position (see also Slootman, 2014b), as happens elsewhere (Clerge, 2014; Lee and Cramer, 2012; Mehan, Hubbard, Villaneuva 1994; Neckerman et al., 1999; Torres 2009).

In support of these qualitative findings, the quantitative data illustrate that education level intersects with ethnicity, for example regarding gender-norms. A comparison of gender-equality attitudes shows that these norms are more affected by education level than by ethnic background (see Figure 1). Whereas on average the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch respondents are relatively conservative in comparison to the ethnic-Dutch respondents, a comparison based on education level shows that the higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch respondents are substantially more progressive than the lower-educated co-ethnics. The higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch actually have a closer resemblance to the the ethnic-Dutch higher-educated respondents than to their lower-educated co-ethnics.

The quantitative data furthermore show that also in friendships, education appears to be more relevant than ethnicity. The university-educated respondents of the TIES survey more often only have best friends with high education levels than best friends who are co-ethnic. When asked about their three best friends, 43 per cent of the Moroccan-Dutch respondents indicated having only highly educated friends, while 26 per cent only have co-ethnic friends. Of the Turkish-Dutch respondents, 40 per cent have only co-educated friends, while 20 per cent have only co-ethnic best friends.

SELF-CONFIDENCE, BELONGING AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

It appears that for the participants, self-confidence preceded ethnic identification, instead of the other way around as described in the literature. The stories suggest that the self-confidence that was partially derived from their social status instilled the courage to articulate the ethnic identity, which functions as a clear boundary in society and which for them personally has been ground for actual exclusion. Apparently, the self-esteem that comes with their educational/class identity helps overcome the identity threat in relation to their ethnic identity. The fact that with their achievements they meet all requirements for integration, at least in socioeconomic respects (what more can they do to integrate and be good citizens?), provides a ground on which they can feel or claim belonging; belonging which can no longer be denied because of their ethnic-minority background. Such belonging then opens up the space for articulation of the minority identity.
That Said, as a management consultant, highlights his ethnic identity “all the time” illustrates what emerges in many more of the interviews: there is not only the personal need, but also a broader imperative to articulate the ethnic identity. After all, precisely the educational and professional achievements make the participants the appointed persons to prove negative stereotypes wrong, and to challenge the devaluation of the ethnic identity and help reduce the identity treat for the entire group. Such a confrontation requires not only success and model-behaviour, but also the explicit articulation of the devalued identity. This strategy is broadly employed among Moroccan and Turkish Dutch in the Netherlands (De Jong, 2012; Ketner, 2010).

DISCUSSION

The empirical data indicate that socio-economic achievements strengthen feelings of belonging of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Because these achievements reduce the threat for one’s self-concept, they facilitate the articulation of an ethnic-minority identity. This explains why the level of ethnic identification of higher educated does not differ from lower educated, who strengthen their ethnic identification to compensate for a lack of positive recognition (Skrobanek, 2009: 546). Different mechanisms are at play here.

Not only does social mobility enable the ethnic identification of social climbers with ethnic-minority backgrounds, it also encourages ethnic identification. In the face of widespread negative stereotypes, the higher-educated middle-class professionals (those “who made it” according to dominant standards) are in the position to challenge these stereotypes, to prove them wrong. This however requires them to articulate their ethnic identity. This explains Dehar’s speech; his qualification as best Dutch actor provides a sound basis to claim Dutchness while affirming his distinctive ethnic and religious background, and he is in the ultimate position to show that “Moroccans” can be laudable citizens as well.

Central to the development of a fitting (or achieved) ethnic identity was when participants encountered co-educated co-ethnic peers at university. In these interactions, suddenly the meaning of their ethnic background fell into place. The combination of sharing ethnic background and educational trajectory meant that these “soulmates” had comparable experiences of being an outsider in ethnic-majority contexts, but also in co-ethnic contexts. Their social mobility had mediated their experiences in relation to their ethnic background and their relation with their ethnic identity; an example of intersectionality. This illustrates how the intersectional lens can help to avoid treating ethnic categories as bounded, homogenous groups. Other characteristics, such as education/class substantially shape experiences, affiliations and belonging.

This interplay between social mobility and ethnicity is also described elsewhere. Neckerman et al. (1999) argue that minority climbers develop cultural elements that are specific to the intersection of being middle-class and ethnic-minority. This happens in response to particular challenges in ethnic-majority settings, which are dominated by higher educated, as well as among co-ethnics, who are predominantly lower-educated. The development of these cultural elements happens in middle-class minority organizations and networks. Very likely, the Moroccan/Turkish student associations have a similar function. As argued by Neckerman et al., the emergence of ethnically or racially distinctive middle-class segments (or somewhat slightly less substantive: identities and networks) extends the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993), as they provide other destinations for second-generation immigrants to acculturate into.

Confirming the fears of proponents of assimilationist forms of integration, higher-educated Moroccan and Turkish Dutch, just like the lower-educated, strongly identify with their ethnic label. The rest of the findings, however, have the potential to alleviate fears and contribute to a more nuanced stance toward ethnic identifications, as the findings once more show that ethnic
identifications are not reflections of withdrawal into separate, homogeneous, traditionalist, social and cultural entities. In the first place, ethnic-minority identification does not preclude identification as Dutch. Nor does it preclude having an ethnically mixed social network. Secondly, there is not one single ethnic-minority identity that reflects a coherent ‘oppositional’ culture (see also Slootman, 2016). Although further research is needed, particularly on how the meaning and content of ethnic identification differs between higher and lower educated, the current findings indicate that the higher educated develop different ethnic identifications than the lower educated. This underscores the non-essentialized nature of ethnicity. Ethnic identifications are not pre-existing characteristics, but are developed and re-shaped by individuals, in interaction with the context.

This interaction between the individuals and the context reminds the proponents of assimilation of their own responsibilities. The narratives show that the assimilationist discourse hampers the development of a fitting identification. The paradoxical demand for assimilation in combination with the denial of belonging, the pressure to identify in singular ways, and the negative stereotypes hamper individuals to self-identify in ways that feel comfortable (see also Barreto and Ellemers, 2009; Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015). At the same time, the negative stereotypes stimulate the self-articulation of ethnic identity. If majority citizens, including politicians, would better acknowledge their influence on how people identify, this could lead to a more open and accepting attitude towards ethnic-minority individuals. A more polarized and exclusionary climate, however, in which minority citizens continue to be treated with distrust, will lead to deepened identification struggles and to a self-fulfilling vicious circle in which ethnic-minority citizens will identify solely as ethnic minority.

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NOTES

1. See for more details on the project the website: http://www.tiesproject.eu/ [accessed 31 October 2016]
2. Respondents with mixed ethnic backgrounds are excluded from the analysis, as it turns out that having a mixed ethnic background significantly impacts ethnic identification (Slootman, 2014a: 104; see also Rumbaut 1994). This is not surprising, as for these individuals their Moroccan or Turkish descent is only half of their ethnic story. Only a small share of the higher-educated respondents has a mixed ethnic background: 13 Moroccan and 7 Turkish Dutch respondents. (Of the lower-educated 28 and 13 have a mixed ethnic background).
3. The means in Figure 1 are based on the scores for the statements ‘Women with small children can work outside the house’, ‘It is okay if women in leading positions have authority over men’, and ‘Study and higher education are equally (or more) important for women than for men.’

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