

Chapter 8

Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility.

Wrapping up



What have we learnt from this study?

Our task is then to account for the ways in which ethnicity (...) becomes a socially meaningful and consequential category of practice. (Fox and Jones 2013, p. 393)

Now, why do these ethnic-minority climbers identify in ethnic terms, and what does their ethnicity mean to them? Responding to Bourdieu's call, this phenomenological study on the self-identification of several minority climbers with Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds contributes to our understanding of the classification strategies through which individuals modify the world and their own position in this world. In response to Song's call (2003), it attends to the agency of minority individuals and charts their ethnic options. The focus on higher-educated professionals reveals particularities of the intersection of ethnic background and class. Instead of the higher-educated second generation being an 'extreme case' (exposing mechanisms that are likely to also apply to lower-educated second generation), the particular influence of social mobility shows that they form a 'unique case' (exposing mechanisms that are particular to social climbers of the early second generation).

Section 8.1 delineates the phenomenon of ethnic identification on a more descriptive level (Sect. 8.1). Subsequently, I reflect on the conceptual issues raised in Chap. 2 and the methodological issues raised in Chap. 3 (Sect. 8.2). I conclude with a glance into the future (Sect. 8.3).

8.1 The Relevance of Ethnic Identity for Ethnic-Minority Climbers

We have seen in previous Chapters how the minority climbers articulate their identities, and how their identification depends on the context and develops over time.

Their positions are shaped by their ethnic background in combination with their education level and class. Education level, more than ethnic background, shaped their habitus. Nevertheless, the combination of sharing ethnic background and educational trajectory led to unparalleled levels of mutual understanding (through homology of the habitus). Co-educated coethnics were their real ‘soulmates’. Together, they reinvented ethnic identities that fit their high education levels. They gathered in soulmate spaces where ‘a minority culture of mobility’ developed.

The results show how the relevance of ethnicity is socially constructed and originates partly in dominant classifications that place citizens with Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds at the bottom of the social hierarchies. Widespread negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities and the intolerance of dual identifications negatively influence the position of these social climbers and hence their feelings of belonging in Dutch society. In this context, their socioeconomically advanced position functions as symbolic capital and somewhat strengthens their belonging in Dutch society. Their social mobility also creates extra virtue in the coethnic field, but at the same time it generates distance.

This study exposed a trajectory of reinvention of ethnic identification. For the participants, their ethnic identification is something that they reassert and *reshape* themselves, which they do so *in a later stage* of their lives, when they have already climbed relatively high, and which they do so together with coethnic, co-educated ‘soulmates’. During childhood and in their youth, many Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch participants tried to downplay their ethnic background because their ethnic background resulted in exclusion in their primarily ‘white’ environments. When they entered university, together with their soulmates, they rediscovered and reshaped their relation to their ethnicity, so it was better-matched with their higher education levels. In their later lives, their ethnic identifications had become important and valued parts of themselves. The participants all identify as Moroccan or Turkish, and most combine this identification with identification as Dutch. However, what identifications mean to some extent varies between individuals and between contexts.

The prevalence of ethnic identification cannot be solely explained by intrinsic factors or solely by extrinsic factors such as external labeling. For most participants, their ethnic identification is not a self-evident reflection of some cohesive set of cultural practices. Neither is their ethnic identification solely symbolic or solely reactive, nor is it solely a means to establish what Carter calls ‘ethnic authenticity’ (2003). The relevance of ethnic identity for the participants has multiple aspects, ranging from more intrinsic to more extrinsic.

First, for them the ethnic label expresses the *intrinsic personal relevance* of customs and norms they consider ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Turkish’. In part, they grew up with these customs and norms. Participants value Moroccan food, Turkish music, or ‘Turkish’ hospitality; some enjoy particular religious rituals or feel inspired by Islamic principles; some feel connected with their parents’ birth country because this is a place they feel at home, whether or not only for periodic holidays.

Second, the ethnic label further reflects the particular *influence of their ethnic and migration background on their upbringing*. For them, growing up in an immigrant family meant growing up with particular resources, expectations, and cultural norms

and practices. Their parents had relatively low levels of formal education; they came from rural areas and for a long time intended to go back; they worked hard and did not speak the Dutch language very well; they were unfamiliar with the Dutch system, including education, and needed support from their own children; they made huge sacrifices and therefore had high expectations of their children but often were unable to offer practical support. Many parents wanted their children to be socially mobile, but at the same time, they wanted to protect their children from becoming dropouts, and kept their children on a short leash. They raised their children within specific (religious) worldviews, with specific norms and values. Their ethnic backgrounds, and being a child of labor migrants, very concretely shaped their lives. From a young age the participants switched between diverging fields and dealt with a habitus mismatch.

Third, the ethnic label is also important to them because it *strengthens the connections with people* they love and respect, such as parents and other family members. Certain practices and ways of self-identification help them nurture precious social bonds with coethnic people such as parents. The cultivation of these bonds often required upholding norms and habits that are considered typically ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Turkish’, such as celebrating Ramadan, being religious (or at least identifying as such), avoiding confrontations with parents as a matter of respect, speaking their parents’ language, or emphasizing that they are ‘Moroccan’, ‘Turkish’, or Muslim. These are means to establish their ethnic authenticity.

Fourth, their ethnic background not only influenced their life through the particular conditions of the home environment, but also *through dominant discourses in society, which also shaped their experiences*. The importance that society attaches to ethnic background and ideas on ‘ethnicity’ influenced how the participants were seen and approached by other people. For some, their ethnic background affected the secondary school advice they received. In some cases, it led to bullying and discrimination. In other cases it more indirectly influenced participants’ feelings of belonging. Additionally, the dominant images influenced how participants perceived themselves and their coethnics; some internalized the idea that as ‘Moroccans’ and ‘Turks’ they were different and ‘inferior’.

Fifth, the last mechanism is also related to the dominant discourses. For the participants, their ethnic identity often appeared impossible to escape or ignore because of *external labeling*. When others label them as ‘Moroccan’, ‘Turkish’, or ‘Muslim’, this puts ethnicity on the table, and they have to deal with it in one way or another. Although ethnic labeling in inter-ethnic settings is not always with discriminatory intentions, the effect is exclusionary because the individual is labeled as ‘the Other’, which denies his/her belonging. The imposed demand that ethnic minorities identify as Dutch instead of Moroccan or Turkish does not make ethnicity less relevant. On the contrary, it seems that the identificational requirements and the zero-sum connotation of the two dimensions of identification only make ethnicity more relevant (Slootman and Duyvendak 2015).

The question of why individuals with minority backgrounds articulate their identity as they do in particular situations has myriad answers. For the participants, this articulation is partly a response to the particular social situation at hand and contains

strategic elements. The identity articulation is contextual and relational. Interactions with social others are characterized by certain levels of consonance (alignment, agreement) and dissonance (disagreement). In this study, these two terms are used in reference to behavioral preferences and labeling. As we saw in Chap. 6, dissonance forms a possible threat to one's belonging, in both coethnic and interethnic contexts. The participants' stories show that they have various options at their disposal for reacting to instances of dissonance. For example, in the face of external labeling, which can be very coercive, they not always uncritically adopt the external ascription as 'Moroccan/Turkish' nor do they accept the negative connotations. They sometimes outright *contest* the other's stance and present their own stance as 'take it or leave it'. They also sometimes avoid conflict by trying to *conceal* the source of dissonance or by trying to *convince* the other to change his/her view through explanation and negotiation. They can also *conform* to the stance of the other—out of powerlessness or weariness, or out of love or respect. This typology of 'ethnic options' is characterized by a varying balance between the individual's own preferences and the preservation of belonging at that particular moment.

The fact that they have various ethnic options at their disposal and have agency does not mean that their agency is unlimited. Ethnic options are limited, pre-shaped, and sometimes severely sanctioned. Social others influence their options for identification, either by sanctioning deviant behavior or by simply ignoring or overruling their self-identifications. Their options are also affected by the societal connotations of the various labels. Their self-identification is never independent of external categorizations, existing stereotypes, and social relations. This means that we should acknowledge the agency of minority individuals but we should by no means underestimate the influence of external social forces and place the responsibility for non-belonging and disadvantage solely with the minority individual.

Social Mobility and Ethnic Identification

It turns out that the trajectory of social mobility affects the ethnic identification of the Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch climbers in two ways. First of all, the trajectory of social mobility shapes the social contexts in which these climbers navigate. As we have read, the combination of their low-class, ethnic-minority background and their trajectory of social mobility determines the fields in which they move as well as their positions and trajectories in these fields. For many, their low-class, ethnic-minority backgrounds mean that they occupy distinctive positions in their predominantly 'white', middle-class professional field, just like they did at their predominantly 'white' secondary schools. This situation means that they sometimes feel that they do not fully belong, either because they experience a cultural gap (*habitus* mismatch) or because they feel singled out by others. The fact that they have largely internalized the Dutch progressive norm does not prevent this. At the same time, for many, their achieved social mobility means that they also occupy distinctive positions within the field of their coethnic family and local community, who are predominantly low-class (another *habitus* mismatch). It seemed that for many of the climbers, the labels 'Moroccan' or 'Turk' that were available, with the attached connotations, did not fit their socially advanced positions. It was not until they met

co-educated, coethnic peers at university, who shared their distinctive positions, that they started to reshape their relations with the ethnic labels.

Secondly, achieving socioeconomic advancement creates both the opportunity and the responsibility for many of the second-generation climbers to assert their ethnic identity. Reaching a socially advanced position feels as if one has proven oneself towards the broader society as a successful and—to use the terminology of the dominant discourse—‘integrated’ citizen. These achievements function as symbolic capital, and for many lead to increased feelings of belonging in the Netherlands, or at least to the idea that they can rightfully claim their belonging as Dutch. This creates space to assert their ethnic-minority identity without feeling insecure about whether this endangers their belonging. To some it feels as if their ‘integration’ in educational and professional respects forms a ground for belonging in the broader society that creates the opportunity to be different in another dimension: the ethnic dimension. In the perception of some, these social achievements do not only prove their worth towards the broader society but to family and other coethnics as well. The socially-advanced position can create extra leniency from the side of the parents, who are reassured that their child has turned out well even though it does not fully comply with the norms and customs, like parents might have preferred. This creates space for these second-generation climbers to somewhat re-shape traditional norms and possibly stretch the boundaries of what is accepted within the traditional framework. The socially advanced position not only creates the opportunity to more ‘safely’ assert one’s ethnic identity, but also encourages the articulation of the ethnic label. The climbers consider it as their responsibility to highlight his ethnic identity because their middle-class and professional status as social climbers equips them to refute the negative stereotypes and change the dominant classifications and hierarchies. By highlighting their ethnic-minority identity, being social climbers, they form living proof that an ethnic-minority background and an ethnic-minority identification do not stand in the way of being ‘good’ citizens who fully belong in Dutch society.

8.2 Discussion

These findings confirm the limitations of the integration literature for understanding ethnic identification. A study on ethnic identification requires a lens that attends to the multi-dimensional, variable, contextual, relational and dynamic character of ethnic identification. The findings also call for caution when studying identifications in quantitative ways. I will further reflect on this point in the next paragraph.

In this book, I identified a trajectory of incorporation that is hitherto underexposed. This trajectory of the reinvention of ethnic identification is important to notice and study further because it contributes to our understanding of the prevalence of ethnic identification for social climbers with ethnic-minority backgrounds. Furthermore, it shows that individuals enter the middle class without losing their ethnic distinctiveness. The fact that they value and highlight their ethnic identity, while nevertheless being socially engaged and fully participating citizens, points to an integration mode

beyond complete identificational assimilation and beyond mere ethnic ‘retention’. See Slootman (2018) for a follow-up study on the minority culture of mobility in the Netherlands.

The findings of this study seem expandable. For example, that the participants develop their own third space, with their soulmates, resonates with the concept of a ‘minority culture of mobility’ as presented by Neckerman et al. (1999). This resonance suggests that the trajectory of reinvention is not unique to the Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch climbers studied, but also occurs among other ethnic and racial minorities who are social climbers in other contexts. Furthermore, the range of factors that make ethnic identity relevant for the participants might very well apply to all individuals with stigmatized minority backgrounds, as these are not connected to very specific conditions, just like the developed typology of ethnic options. Additionally, parallels exist between the situations of minority climbers and social climbers with majority backgrounds, as comparisons with the literature on ethnic-Dutch climbers have revealed. It is plausible that more ethnic-majority climbers encounter similar forms of dissonance in the home field and the middle-class field, and that they have similar ways of dealing with the mismatch, and also experience a special connection with soulmates. Finally, at the most detailed level, other early second-generation Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch climbers in the Netherlands will probably recognize much of the descriptions in the book. They share many conditions with the participants: growing up in the Netherlands shortly after the moment of their family’s migration; being the first in their families and their wider surroundings to reach higher education levels, as educational pioneers; and being targeted by an increasingly exclusionary Dutch discourse.

8.3 Studying Ethnic Identity: A Relevant Social Construct

The question ‘What is ethnic identity and how can we study it?’ is complex. In Chap. 2, I explained that the apparent academic consensus to see ethnicity as a social construct is hard to follow through empirical studies because of the risk of falling into the essentialist trap, on the one hand, and into the trap of ambiguity and vagueness on the other. Moreover, I mentioned that the portrayal of a phenomenon as constructivist often leads people to regard the phenomenon as endlessly and individually malleable, which can lead to an underestimation of its social consequences. I argued that I nevertheless preferred a constructivist perspective to an objectivist perspective as a starting point because a constructivist view would not preclude my finding that a phenomenon is more universal and static; whereas starting from the assumption that a phenomenon is objectivist in nature could lead us to overlook that it is possibly multiform, dynamic and malleable. How did my approach turn out?

A Constructivist Perspective: Variations and Trends Revealed

The qualitative interpretivist data expose the multifaceted, contextual, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, revealing both the variability in ethnic identification

and broader mechanisms. Various mechanisms are discerned through which ethnic background becomes relevant to the ethnic-minority individuals in this study. The findings also show that how participants identify varies per context and is the result of an interaction with the social other and therefore contains a strategic component. The findings reveal that these minority climbers have a range of responses at their disposal for dealing with external labeling and behavioral expectations, which means that individuals have agency, although this is limited. The findings furthermore illustrate that coethnic contexts are not necessarily characterized by belonging and consonance, and that interethnic contexts are not necessarily characterized by non-belonging and dissonance. Finally, the findings expose the temporality of ethnic identification. Many of these aspects of ethnic identification would most likely have been overlooked if I had employed an objectivist and groupist perspective.

This illustrates the value of regarding ethnic identity for second-generation Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch climbers as a constructivist phenomenon. In support of the widespread argument that ethnic identity is not an essentialist phenomenon, the empirical findings confirm that ethnic identity is not a self-evident given that simply springs from the birthplace of one's parents. Also, ethnic identification does not automatically reflect an internally homogeneous, externally bounded culture, and does not preclude simultaneous national identification. These results point to the importance of distinguishing identification-with-a-label from the socio-cultural content and avoiding the conflation of the two. They raise the question about the meaning of ethnic identification for individuals.

Yet... the Concreteness of Ethnic Identity

That ethnic identity does not have a uniform and static meaning—that ethnic identity varies between segments, subsegments, individuals, contexts, and periods, and that it can be molded and negotiated—does not mean ethnic identity is a purely abstract and fictive notion that is only relevant for analytical purposes (see Bader 2001, p. 254). Ethnic identity is also not an entirely discursive phenomenon, lacking any 'existence' and structure. Nor is it endlessly flexible and individually malleable. We should not downplay or relativize how relevant and 'real' ethnic identity can be, and how concrete it is in its consequences. In Bourdieu's terms, 'ethnicity' is one of the categorizations that strongly structures society but at the same time is structured by this society. This only applies to particular ethnicities. In Dutch society, Moroccan and Turkish ethnicity are salient societal markers, contrary to, for example, Italian or American ethnicity.

This paradox of ethnic identity being both constructivist and 'real' is illustrated by this case of the Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch climbers. On the one hand, the interview participants are reflective and critical on issues such as ethnicity and ethnic identity, and they seem aware that ethnic identification can vary in content and per situation. They are aware of the individual options they have. They develop their own relations to the ethnic labels and even sometimes switch the use of the ethnic label 'on' and 'off'. On the other hand, we saw the pertinence of ethnicity and ethnic identification for these climbers. For some, their ethnic sides feel like essential parts of who they are as people. The participants are not completely in control over their

ethnic identifications, and ethnic identification often is inescapable. Some even feel they have 'ignored' a part of themselves throughout their climb.

This is a clear warning that we should not assume that a phenomenon that we view as a social construct is endlessly flexible and individually malleable. For individuals, or even for entire categories, a phenomenon such as ethnic identity can be very concrete and even inescapable. This causes ambiguities in how individuals, such as the Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch participants, speak about their ethnic identifications. The participants demonstrate awareness of the non-essentialist character of ethnicity, criticizing essentialist views on ethnic and national identifications, while moments later they themselves use essentialist formulations; this reveals a 'double discursive competence' that is also observed elsewhere (Baumann 1999).

Studying Processes of Ethnic Identification

The analytical toolkit that I used proved valuable to prevent slipping into unintentional essentialization but also for avoiding the use of concepts that are vague and ambiguous. However, throughout the discussion of the empirical data, it appeared that some tools needed to be refined and others needed to be added. The focus on *practices* of identification rather than on one's 'identity' enabled me to uncover the interactional and contextual aspects of identification. What is often overlooked, however, is the relevance of the *temporal* aspect of identification, which emerges as a main theme in my empirical data. Furthermore, the distinction between *label and content* proved indispensable for investigating the divergent meaning of identification with a certain label. In addition, the distinction between *self-identification and external identification* appeared to be crucial for unravelling mechanisms of identification. The coercive forces exerted by abstract stereotypes and concrete social others, but also the individual agency to choose and mold one's response, could not have been revealed without this analytical distinction. Without strictly separating the two concepts, their interaction cannot be studied and power inequalities remain hidden. We have seen that this conceptual tool needs to be sharpened by the consistent separation of the *individual and the collective level*. Regarding an individual as seamlessly belonging to a harmonious, consonant coethnic 'ingroup' and as standing apart from a dissonant interethnic 'outgroup', does not do justice to people's experiences. Such a view makes us overlook frictions with coethnics and alignments with people of other ethnic backgrounds. It would also make us overlook the fact that sameness is not solely, nor primarily, shaped by ethnicity, but also for example by education level. Breaking down the dichotomy between (ethnic) 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' implies that in reference to external identification, we should explicitly mention the actor, as this actor not always the ethnic Other: it can be a parent, sibling, a coethnic acquaintance or a coethnic co-educated soulmate, or it can be an ethnic-Dutch colleague, a politician, a co-educated Belgium Dutch friend, or whoever. These findings furthermore underline the importance of distinguishing between *category and group*. The presence of a social category does not necessarily mean that the members of this category all form a coherent group, all strongly identify with the label of the category, and all have the same culture. The findings warn against groupist ways of thinking and against employing an overly-ethnic lens.

An *intersectional approach* appeared to be another useful tool for avoiding and debunking ‘groupist’ views. By showing that educational mobility influences experiences that are related to one’s ethnic background and by showing how having a high education level influences one’s ethnic identification, the findings illustrate that the ethnic categories are not homogeneous. By revealing not only that, but also how experiences and worldviews are influenced by education level, even more so than by ethnic background (and most strongly even by a combination of these two characteristics), we can challenge groupist assumptions about ethnic categories. This brings intersectional thinking beyond women’s studies and beyond the intersection of race and gender.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

These nuances and complexities urge us to be careful when studying identities. We should avoid groupist ideas that presume and suggest homogeneity. When interpreting data we should be aware that identity articulations are not straightforward to interpret. What they mean can be best-explored from an interpretivist perspective, with a qualitative, open research approach that brings out the experiences, meanings, and interpretations of the individuals.

Quantitative, structured approaches, such as large-scale surveys, have some pitfalls. The most important is the substantial importance and encompassing meaning that is attached to questions about ‘identity’, as illustrated by the SCP example discussed in Chap. 5. Furthermore, the focus on broader societal trends, which forms the major benefit of quantitative approaches, simultaneously forms a major pitfall. Conclusions are often simply formulated as the presence or absence of a pattern based on statistical significance. And because conclusions are based on differences between categories (for example between Turkish Dutch and Moroccan Dutch), or on the associations between variables (for example between duration of residence and progressiveness), the results draw attention to communalities within categories. Hence, they often implicitly contribute to the portrayal of categories as homogeneous and to central variables (such as ethnic background) as explanatory characteristics. In short, the focus on patterns when using large samples and structured data bears the risk reinforcing oversimplified, groupist, essentializing views on reality.

This being said, the interpretivist and constructivist perspective does not preclude the use of quantitative data. As Bourdieu emphasized, and as I just argued, the notion of phenomena being social constructs does not make phenomena less real or make social structures and trends absent. This is illustrated by the differences between ethnic-majority and ethnic-minority categories, and differences between ethnic-minority categories such as Moroccan Dutch and Turkish Dutch. As we have seen, Turkish Dutch more than Moroccan Dutch form cohesive communities, establish coethnic organizations, and speak a non-Dutch language. Moroccan Dutch more often articulate the religious label instead of the ethnic label to negotiate their position (see also Slootman and Duyvendak 2018), while over time Moroccan student organizations, in contrast to Turkish student organizations, have changed into multi-ethnic organizations (Slootman 2018). To study the impact and breadth of social structures, quantitative research can make indispensable contributions, as long as

results are interpreted carefully and with some modesty. We should take questions—particularly less-factual ones, such as those about identifications—for what they are: responses to survey questions. And we should not take the emerging differences between categories as self-evident, but keep wondering about how these regularities come into existence. In Brubaker's words: instead of taking groupism (differences between categories) for granted, we should study how, and under what conditions, groupism does or does not develop.

The groupist and essentializing pitfall can be avoided through paying more attention to the diversity in the data. Associations are never completely one-on-one, categories are seldom uniform. Quantitative results do not necessarily strengthen simplistic, essentialist discourses; they can be used quite well to nuance or deconstruct them by explicitly bringing out these variations in the data, like I did in Chap. 5.

8.4 Looking Ahead

'The more you know, the more you realize what you don't know'. The old Socratic wisdom urges us to be modest but at the same to pursue knowledge and investigate. Like any study, this one raises questions that can provide inspiration for subsequent research. It would be interesting, for example, to further examine what happens in the co-educated, co-ethnic soulmates spaces of the ethnic-minority climbers; how mechanisms of ethnic identification differ between the higher and lower educated; and to make comparisons with minorities in the Netherlands who arrived as higher-educated knowledge migrants or who are less stigmatized.

Although this book is written for an academic audience in the first place, I hope my findings will also cause ripples in the societal domain. In these times, when societal debates on immigrant incorporation have become increasingly culturalized, when the ethnic and national dimensions are too often regarded as mutually exclusive and demands for 'successful' integration have become framed partly as polarized identificational demands, it is particularly important to realize what makes citizens with minority backgrounds articulate their minority identities. This is especially important because the middle class is becoming increasingly diverse (Crul et al. 2013; Vertovec 2007). In this book, I have shown that the articulation of a minority identity very often is not an expression of dissociation from broader society: it is a way to nurture a part of oneself instilled through early socialization; it is a way to uphold social bonds with people one loves; it is a way to give meaning to one's position and one's experiences; it is a way to challenge negative stereotypes; and, in part, it is conformism to persistent external labeling as 'Moroccan' or 'Turkish'. These insights furthermore help us to understand why ethnic-minority spaces are formed. Organizations such as ethnic-minority student associations should not be dismissed as mere expressions of supposed disassociation and segregation. However, whether ethnic-minority identifications and ethnic-minority spaces will develop as a part of mainstream Dutch society instead of forming segregated and parallel segments,

and whether they will remain combined with Dutch identifications and engaged participation, depends on the openness of society.

At least, we now better understand when minority social climbers present themselves like Dchar did at that particular moment when he won the Golden Calf.

‘I am Dutch!

I am proud, with Moroccan blood!’

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