Soulmates: Reinvention of ethnic identification among higher educated second generation Moroccan and Turkish Dutch

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Often, it is assumed that for 'successful integration' of ethnic minorities it is crucial for individuals to give up their ethnic identity. Yet, those who are seen as the most successfully integrated, the social climbers, appear to strongly identify with their ethnicity and feel connected with co-ethnics. How then does social mobility, which is usually accompanied by far-reaching incorporation into society, relate to ethnic identification?

This study explores this puzzle by focusing on social climbers with ethnic minority backgrounds in the Netherlands, in particular on university-educated adult children of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants. How strongly do they identify with the labels ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Turkish’? Does this reduce their identification as Dutch, as some people fear? In what situations do they articulate their ethnic identities, and why? How do their identifications develop over time? And in what ways is their ethnicity relevant to them?

Based on a mixed methods approach, this study reveals a trajectory of ‘reinvention of ethnic identification’ among ethnic minority climbers. Together with co-ethnic, higher educated peers, who appear to be real soulmates, they re-explore and re-assert their ethnicity in early adulthood. They reshape the ethnic identity in order to fit their higher education levels. The results help us understand the emergence of a more diverse Dutch middle class, which includes individuals who do not discard their ethnic identity.

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Marieke Slootman
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Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
For Carla and Arnold
# Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 8

1. Introduction. Winning the Golden Calf ......................................................................................... 11
   1.1 Identification and incorporation ......................................................................................... 12
   1.2 Five voices ............................................................................................................................ 14
   1.3 In the book ............................................................................................................................. 22

2. Models of incorporation. Ethnic and national identification considered ............................................ 25
   2.1 Models of incorporation ........................................................................................................ 25
   2.2 Ethnicity and identity as social constructions? .................................................................... 31
   2.3 What's in the name? .............................................................................................................. 48
   2.4 Summary and reflection ........................................................................................................ 52

3. Research design. Mixing Methods ................................................................................................. 55
   3.1 A mixed methods research design ...................................................................................... 55
   3.2 Collection and use of the survey data ................................................................................. 61
   3.3. Conduction and analysis of the in-depth interviews ......................................................... 62
   3.4 Summary .................................................................................................................................. 76

4. The Dutch integration landscape ................................................................................................. 79
   4.1 The Dutch integration context: voices and policies over time ......................................... 79
   4.2. The Moroccan and Turkish immigrants and their offspring ............................................. 89
   4.3 Summary .................................................................................................................................. 98

   5.1 Identification with the ethnic and national labels ............................................................... 103
   5.2 Label and content among the TIES respondents ............................................................... 108
   5.3 Label and content among the interview participants .......................................................... 115
   5.4 Summary and reflection ....................................................................................................... 123

6. ‘I am... who I am...’. Identifications in social contexts ................................................................. 127
   6.1 Co-ethnic sphere in youth. Parents and others ................................................................. 128
   6.2 Interethnic sphere in youth. School and neighborhood ...................................................... 135
   6.3 Co-ethnic sphere at present. Parents and the next generation ........................................... 138
Acknowledgements

‘You switched from Physics to Gender Studies??’

My background in Physics and my career start as a Management Consultant often make eyebrows raise. The knowledge that one of my early (and strong!) drivers was to prove the world my worth as a woman often softens this surprise and makes the switch to Gender Studies more understandable. It then might come as no surprise that I am driven by the question what it is like to belong to a minority group. (Or, as I would phrase it after writing an academic book: I am intrigued by what it is like to be seen as a member of what is considered to be a minority category.)

Remarkably enough, this interest has not been primarily inspired by my ethnic background. It was not until I was explained the formal Dutch categorization system, in one of my Social Science classes, that I realized I am formally one of the ‘allochtonen’ (foreigners). Until then, the fact that my dad and grandparents were from Indonesia did not mean more to me than my grandma’s lovely spring rolls and the typical water bottle beneath to the toilet. It still doesn’t. I suppose that something as ‘superficial’ as my Dutch name has been an important reason that I was never brought to question my belonging in the Netherlands, contrary to many others, whose ethnic backgrounds have a large impact on their belonging. I find this an intriguing observation...

My personal interest in minority identity has resulted in this book. I greatly enjoyed the research process and feel privileged for the opportunity to conduct this study. I am not only grateful to the University of Amsterdam (AISSR and IMES), but also to the partners who contributed to the funding of my project (Platform31, the municipalities of Almere, Amsterdam, Delft, Nijmegen, The Hague and Utrecht, and housing association Mitros). I am happy that Jean Tillie asked me for a research project in 2005 at IMES, which formed the start of my research career. I loved working with him, as well as with Frank Buijs, who sadly passed away in 2007, in the middle of one of our projects.

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Miriam van de Kamp, Elif Keskiner, Manolis Pratsinakis, Annika Smits, Yannis Tzaninis, Floris Vermeulen, Ismintha Waldring, and all colleagues I don’t mention here by name: I want you to know how great it is when people take the effort to carefully read and comment on your (often very unfinished) work, and how much I enjoyed our discussions on topics we are all passionate about. In fact, these discussions and your feedback were crucial in distilling and sharpening the argument laid out in this book. Also, thanks for making the research job (even) more fun. Froukje Demant, Nina ter Laan and Döske van der Wilk have been very special office roomies. Their day-to-day friendships, which contained a sharing of both our personal and our academic lives, have been very precious to me. Girls, you are real soulmates.

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Mum and dad, I am very thankful to both of you, not only for the countless times that I dropped Lina and Timo in your welcoming arms and immediately left for the library to work, but particularly for encouraging me to follow my heart.

Last but not least, I thank the participants of my study, who all left their personal marks on this book. Thank you for your time and for trusting me with your personal stories. Without you, this book would not have been there at all. I realize it can be a tough read, but I hope you nevertheless enjoy the reading.