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

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8 Wrapping up. Reinvention of ethnic identification among minority climbers

What have we learnt from this study? What does it contribute to current ideas on immigrant incorporation and on ethnic identification?

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: 393)

Now, why do ethnic minority climbers, such as the higher educated second generation Moroccan and Turkish Dutch in this study, identify in ethnic terms? What makes their ethnicity meaningful and consequential? How is their identification related to their social contexts and to their pathways of social mobility? What about their ethnic options?

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 to further study because it contributes to our understanding of the prevalence of ethnic identification among social climbers with ethnic minority backgrounds. It furthermore shows that individuals enter the middle class without losing their ethnic distinctiveness. The fact that they value and highlight their ethnicity, while nevertheless being socially engaged and fully participating citizens, points to an integration mode beyond complete identificational assimilation and beyond mere ethnic 'retention'.

In addition to a discussion of the social phenomenon of ethnic identification on a descriptive level (8.1), in this final chapter I also reflect on the conceptual issues raised in chapter 2 (8.2). I conclude with a small glance into the future (8.3).

8.1 The relevance of ethnicity for ethnic minority climbers

This study among social climbers of the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch second generation exposes a trajectory of reinvention of ethnic identification. 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 'co-ethnic, co-educational soulmates'. During childhood and in their youth, many Moroccan and Turkish Dutch participants tried to downplay their ethnicity because in their primarily 'white' environments, their ethnic background resulted in exclusion. When they entered university, they met students who shared both their ethnic backgrounds and their education levels, among whom they felt unprecedented levels of understanding. Together with these soulmates, they rediscovered and reshaped their relation to their ethnicity, so it better matched with their higher education levels. In their later lives, for most participants, their ethnic identifications had become important and valued parts of themselves. Nearly all identify as Moroccan or Turkish, and most combine this identification with identification as Dutch. However what identifications mean to some extent varies between people and between contexts.

The prevalence of ethnic identification cannot be solely explained by intrinsic factors or extrinsic factors, such as external labelling. In fact, as we have seen throughout the book, the relevance of ethnicity for these second generation climbers can be explained by a variety of factors, ranging from more intrinsic to more extrinsic. (1) Firstly, ethnicity can have *intrinsic personal relevance*. One might appreciate certain customs and norms, which are either or not connected to religion. Partly, these are customs and norms that one grew up with. One might value Moroccan food, Turkish music, the level of hospitality and the kind of personal bonds. One might enjoy familiar religious rituals or feel inspired by Islamic principles. One might feel connected with his parents' birth country because this is a place he feels at home, whether or not just for periodic holidays. (2) Furthermore, ethnicity is relevant because one's *ethnic (and migration) background has shaped one's experiences* in a particular way. Growing up in an immigrant family often means growing up with particular resources, expectations and cultural norms and practices. Many of the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers had parents with relatively low levels of formal education, who came from rural areas and for a long time intended to go back; their parents worked hard and did not speak the Dutch language very well; they were unfamiliar with the Dutch (education) system 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 drop outs, which meant that many parents kept their children on a short leash. They raised their children from certain (religious) worldviews, with certain norms and values. All such conditions shape one's life in specific ways. This means that ethnicity, and being a child of labor migrants, very concretely shaped the lives of the socially mobile Moroccan and Turkish Dutch. (3) Ethnicity is also important because it *strengthens connections with people* one loves and respects, such as parents and other family members.

Certain practices and ways of self-identification help nurture precious social bonds with co-ethnic people, such as parents. This might require 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 one's parents as a matter of respect, speaking your parents' language or emphasizing you are 'Moroccan', 'Turkish' or Muslim. (4) Not only one's ethnic background but also *ethnic discourses shape experiences*. Besides practical and social mechanisms, ethnicity can also affect one's life in more discursive ways. The importance that society attaches to ethnicity and ideas on ethnicity influences how one is seen and approached by other people. The place of ethnicity in society influences how one is approached and judged by others. It can lead to bullying and discrimination. It can hamper one's trajectory, for example when one's ethnic background affects secondary school advice. In addition, it can influence how one perceives oneself and his co-ethnics, for example when one internalizes the idea that one is different and 'inferior'. Such views can reduce but also enhance ambitions and might be a reason to conceal but also to assert one's ethnic background. (5) Last but not least, sometimes ethnicity is impossible to escape or ignore because of *external labeling*. When one is labeled as 'Moroccan', 'Turkish' or 'Muslim', this puts ethnicity on the table and means that one has to deal with it in one way or another. Ethnic labeling in inter-ethnic settings is not always with discriminatory intentions, but the effect is nevertheless exclusionary because the individual is labeled as 'the Other', which denies his belonging. The demand that ethnic minorities identify as Dutch instead of Moroccan or Turkish, does not make ethnicity less relevant. In fact, 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.

Clearly, the question why individuals with minority backgrounds identify as they do in particular situations has a myriad of answers. Their identification is partly a response to the particular social situation at hand and contains strategic elements. Interactions with social others are characterized by consonance (alignment, agreement) or dissonance (disagreement). As we can see in chapter 6, dissonance forms a possible threat to one's belonging, both in co-ethnic and in interethnic contexts. Individuals have various options at their disposal for reacting to instances of dissonance, instances of diverging behavioral preferences or unwanted external labeling. For example, in the face of external labeling, which can be very coercive, one does not have to uncritically adopt this external identification as 'ethnic' and its negative connotations. One can also downright *confront* the other and present one's own stance as 'take it or leave it'. One can also avoid conflict by trying to *conceal* the source of dissonance, or by trying to *convince* the other by explanation and negotiation. Or, one can indeed *conform* to the stance of the other; out of powerlessness or weariness or out of love or

respect. These choices depend on the balance between one's independent goals and one's appreciation of the social bond, and on the risk of harming the social bond.

These reasons and mechanisms for ethnic identification show that for most Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers, their ethnic identification is not solely 'symbolic', as Gans asserts (1979), as their ethnic background has very concrete consequences. For most, their ethnic identification is also not purely 'reactive', as Rumbaut describes (2008), as for them their ethnic identification is much more than a mere reaction to external labeling. Nor do these climbers only identify in ethnic terms to signal that one is an authentic member of the ethnic minority group, like Carter describes (2003). Rather, in line with the presentation of Song (2003) that ethnic minorities possess ethnic options, we see that in various situations, the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers articulate their ethnic identity in various ways, for various reasons.

The fact that individuals have agency does not mean that this agency is unlimited. Ethnic options are limited, pre-shaped and sometimes severely sanctioned. Social others influence one's options for identification, either by sanctioning deviant behavior or by simply ignoring or overruling the self-identification of the individual. One's options are also affected by the societal connotations of the various labels. One's 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.

With its particular focus on the relevance of ethnicity for minority climbers and on intra-ethnic variations and developments over time, my study adds to the dominant theories of immigrant incorporation, straight-line theory and segmented assimilation theory. The lenses that these theories provide are not entirely appropriate for understanding the relevance of ethnicity for ethnic minority climbers and how this relevance translates into ethnic identifications that vary over time and place. The fact that social climbers with low-class minority backgrounds develop their own ways of identifying and of coping with their particular positions both in their predominantly 'white' professional environments and among their predominantly lower educated co-ethnics, resonates with the concept of a 'minority culture of mobility' as presented by Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999), which I rather refer to as 'minority middle-class capital'. This resonance suggests that the trajectory of reinvention is not unique for the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers, but also occurs among other ethnic and racial minorities who are social climbers.

The findings of study also seem broader expandable. For example, the range of reasons that explain the relevance of ethnicity, might very well apply to all individuals with ethnic minority backgrounds. Furthermore, parallels exist between the situations of minority climbers and those of social climbers with majority backgrounds, as comparisons with the literature on ethnic Dutch climbers revealed. The fact that experiences of ethnic minority climbers that are attributed to ethnic differences partially overlap with experiences of ethnic majority climbers suggests that these experiences are also related to differences in class background and not solely to ethnicity. However, at the most detailed level, the case described in this book is unique for the early second generation Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers in the Netherlands. As we have seen, many elements shaped the particular stories of the research participants in crucial ways, for example: they grew up in the Netherlands shortly after the moment of their family's migration; they were educational pioneers and were the first in their families and their wider surroundings to reach higher education levels; and as young adults, they experienced a hardening of the Dutch discourses that particularly targeted their ethnicity and religion.

Social mobility and ethnic identification

It turns out that the trajectory of social mobility affects the ethnic identification of the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers in two ways. First of all, the trajectory of social mobility shapes the social contexts in which these climbers maneuver. The combination of their low-class, ethnic minority background and their trajectory of social mobility determines the fields they move in, 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 the their (still) predominantly 'white', middle-class professional field, just like they did at their (then) predominantly 'white' secondary schools. This situation means that they sometimes feel that they do not fully belong, either because they experience a cultural gap or because they feel singled out by others. The fact that they have largely adapted to the Dutch progressive norm does not entirely prevent this. At the same time, for many, their achieved social mobility means that they also occupy distinctive positions within the field of their co-ethnic family and local community, who are predominantly low-class. It seemed that for many of the climbers, the labels 'Moroccan' or 'Turk' that were available and the common zero-sum connotations of ethnic and national identifications did not fit their socially advanced positions. It was not until they met co-educational, co-ethnic 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 (in the present discourse:) 'integrated' citizen. These achievements can therefore lead to feelings of belonging in the Netherlands and to the idea that one can rightfully claim one's belonging as Dutch. This creates space to assert one's minority ethnicity without feeling insecure about whether this endangers this one's belonging. It feels to some as if their 'integration' in educational and professional respects forms a ground for acceptance by the broader society, which creates the opportunity to be different on 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 co-ethnics as well. The socially advanced position can create extra leniency from the side of parents, who are reassured that their child has ended up 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 ethnicity, but for some also instills feelings of responsibility. One might consider it as one's responsibility to highlight his ethnic identity because his middle-class and professional status as a social climber equip him (or her) to refute the negative stereotypes. By highlighting one's ethnicity as a social climber, one forms living proof that an ethnic minority background and an ethnic minority identification do not stand in the way of being a good citizen who fully belongs in Dutch society.

8.2 Studying ethnic identity: a relevant social construct

The question 'What is ethnic identity and how can we study it?' is complex. In chapter 2, I explained that the apparent academic consensus to see ethnicity as a social construct is hard to follow through in 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. I furthermore 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? What can we say about ethnic identity based on my findings?

A constructivist perspective: variations and trends revealed

My study illustrates the value of regarding ethnic identity among second generation Moroccan 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 show that ethnic identity is not a self-evident given that simply results from the birth place of one's parents. It also does not automatically reflect an internally homogeneous, externally bounded culture and does not preclude simultaneous national identification. What identification with the Moroccan or Turkish label means is not uniform. For the Turkish Dutch climbers, feeling 'Turkish' is (relatively) 'thick' as it is (moderately) connected with a broader sociocultural orientation, whereas for Moroccan Dutch, feeling 'Moroccan' does not reflect a broader sociocultural content and is therefore relatively 'thin'. Particularly for the Moroccan Dutch, and particularly for the higher educated, the meaning of ethnic identification differs per individual. This points to the importance of distinguishing identification-with-a-label from the sociocultural content and avoiding the conflation of the two.

The empirical findings expose the multifaceted, contextual and dynamic character of ethnic identification, revealing both the variability in ethnic identification and the underlying broader trends and mechanisms. Various mechanisms are discerned through which ethnic background becomes relevant to ethnic minority individuals. The findings also show that how individuals 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 individuals 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 co-ethnic 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 would have employed an objectivist and groupist perspective.

Yet... the concreteness of ethnic identity

That ethnic identity does not have a uniform and static meaning, that it varies between segments, sub-segments, individuals, contexts and periods, and that it can be molded and negotiated does not mean it is a purely abstract and fictive notion that is only relevant for analytical purposes (see Bader 2001: 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 or how concrete it is in its consequences.

This paradox of ethnic identity being both constructivist and 'real' is illustrated by the case of the Moroccan and Turkish Dutch climbers. On the one hand, they are reflexive 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'. At the same time, we saw how relevant ethnicity and ethnic identification can be for these climbers. Their ethnic sides can feel like essential parts of who they are as people, the participants are not (completely) in control over their ethnic identifications and ethnic identification can even be 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 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 for avoiding 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 *processes* 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 to unravel mechanisms of identification. The coercive forces exerted by abstract stereotypes and by 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 between the *individual and the collective level*. Regarding an individual as seamlessly belonging to a harmonious, consonant co-ethnic '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 co-ethnics and alignments with people with 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. The breaking down of 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 co-ethnic acquaintance or a co-ethnic 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 in 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 ethnicity – 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.

8.3 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, my study raises questions that can provide inspiration for subsequent studies. It would be interesting, for example, to further examine what happens in the co-educational, 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. At these times, when societal debates on immigrant incorporation have become increasingly

culturalized, when ethnic and national dimension 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, Schneider, Lelie 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 partly, it is conformism to persistent external labeling as 'Moroccan' or 'Turk'. These insights furthermore help us to understand why ethnic minority spaces are formed, also among the higher educated. These organizations, such as ethnic minority student associations, should not be disposed 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; 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!'