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Noel Clycq

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What is This?

'My daughter is a free woman, so she can't marry a Muslim': The gendering of ethno-religious boundaries

Noel Clycq
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract
Discourses often uncover underlying social boundaries related to concepts such as ethnicity, gender and religion. By applying an intersectional approach, this article shows how the gendering of ethno-religious boundaries is central in the narratives of parents of Belgian, Italian and Moroccan origin, living in Flanders, Belgium. These processes are extremely salient when discourses on partner choice are discussed, as is the focal point in the current study. The construction of boundaries and identities are deeply influenced by dominant social representations. The results show how the construction and justification of boundaries can also have restrictive consequences for individuals. Parents want to restrict daughters for their own good, and exogamy seems to be the prerogative of sons.

Keywords
Ethnicity, family, gender, power, religion

Introduction

> For me, I was able to afford it budgetary-wise to leave her [his wife] at home. Yes, she stays at home. I like it that, when I come home, everything is clean and tidy, that my dinner is ready and that the children are taken care of. I'm not really a fan of a dual income family and sending the children to a nursery. So I think it's important that the mother and father, but mainly the mother is always there for the children. […] Now, look. If she [his daughter] wants to come home with a Muslim then we'll have a talk with her. Does she know the consequences when dating or marrying a Muslim? I mean, in Egypt women have to walk five meters behind their husband.

Corresponding author:
Noel Clycq, Center for Migration and Intercultural Studies – University of Antwerp, Social Sciences, Lange Nieuwstraat 55, Antwerp 2000, Belgium
Email: noel.clycq@ua.ac.be

Look, she's ignorant of that fact. But imagine she marries an Egyptian and if she goes back to Egypt, then she has to walk five meters behind him, you know? If she, with her Western education, wants to do that, that's up to her. But she has to know what she's getting into. (Man, Belgian-Christian origin, 50 years old)

While this research project – executed in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium – started out with a focus on family socialization processes in ethnic minority and ethnic majority families, the key narrative above shows how intersections of gender, ethnicity and religion are at the core of these processes. When 'the other' is discussed, hegemonic discourses become salient and parental claims concerning, for example, freedom of choice are easily reconstructed to 'protect daughters'. This is certainly the case when the discourses on partner choice are analyzed through an intersectional lens, as is the main issue addressed in this article.

So, rather unexpectedly, the focus of this research shifted more and more towards the construction of identities, the identification of group boundaries and the gendering of these perceived group differences. Still, the question remains how, as in the interview excerpt shown above, one man can perceive himself as a person who has to protect his daughter from the oppressive Muslim man, while wanting his wife to stay at home to take care of the children. This is when the gendering of ethno-religious boundaries becomes extremely salient and (symbolic) power differences – the power to influence the representation of social reality more than other – enter the picture (Bourdieu, 1991).

To understand what mechanisms lie behind these reasonings, parental narratives concerning the construction of ethnic and gender identities are critically discussed. This entails an interpretation of concepts such as intersectionality, ethnicity, gender and culture. The following sections focus, respectively, on the theoretical framework and the methodology, methods and sample. These are followed by the discussion of the empirical results, related to these concepts.

The intersection of culture, gender and ethnicity in social reality

To fully understand mechanisms underlying social relations, research needs to focus on the perspectives of individuals (Touraine, 2000). How does a person perceive and interpret (events in) social reality and how does this effect his or her actions? Empirical research using the tools of narrative analysis enables us to gain deeper insights into how these meanings are constructed (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Yet, at the same time, social phenomena cannot be broken down to the isolated action of an individual or to the isolated interactions between specific individuals. The social context wherein this action or these perceptions occur always plays an important role. Individuals shape their lives under specific constraining conditions and elaborate (reproduce and/or transform) these existing social and cultural structures (Archer, 1998; Crossley, 2001).

To grasp the complexities present in social reality, the categorization of individuals in static dichotomies, be they based on gender, ethnicity or another social category, is increasingly abandoned in recent research (McCall, 2005). Several scholars, mainly experts in gender and feminist studies, elaborated on the intersections of crucial social divisions

such as gender, class and ethnicity (or race) (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991). One has to look for the meaning constructions individuals make of social reality without neglecting the simultaneous study of their specific location or the processes of domination due to power differences between individuals and groups present in specific social settings (Prins, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The concept culture bears in its core this idea that the social is not a neutral objective reality 'out there'. Culture can be defined as a more or less broadly shared complex of schemes of meaning, or mental structures that influence 'the way individuals perceive, interpret and act in the world, and how knowledge is acquired, stored, recalled, activated, and extended to new domains' (Brubaker et al., 2004: 41; Wacquant, 1998). As a consequence, this interpretation of culture entails that the concepts of gender and ethnicity are deeply influenced by these broadly shared cultural schemes. Identity narratives – for their 'content' strongly depending on interactions as well as the 'cultural stuff' and representations of imagined communities – are vital to understand the ways intersecting power relations operate on a group and individual level (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

The existence of these schemes does not entail that individuals have no role in their creation and continuation. The construction of culture is seen as a process emanating from and elaborated on by the actions of individuals with all its inconsistencies, variability, diversity and contradictions (Brumann, 1999). As a consequence, individuals construct a unique identity composed of sub-identities related to concepts such as gender and ethnicity. Every individual identity is therefore indissolubly connected with several social identities from which meaning and behaviour to construct one's own identity is obtained (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

Yet, although culture as a concept has (or had) the potential to replace a more rigid and prone to essentialization notion such as race, one can see how the 'culturalization' of social groups as having a specific, innate culture is becoming 'common practice' (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Açikel, 2006). This is particularly true when ethnic minorities are studied and the discourses and practices of individuals with an immigration background are being 'explained', which is often the case in multicultural societies.

Gender relations and perceptions in multicultural societies

More often than not, social divisions related to gender and ethnicity tend to be 'naturalized' in discourse and a biological destiny is constructed in these naturalizing narratives (Yuval-Davis, 1996, 2006). Some scholars therefore frame this as the 'social construction of primordiality' (Yelvington, 1991) or 'la biologisation du social' (Bourdieu, 1998), and when it comes to the centrality of religion in ethnic identity, Stallaert (2000) even developed the concept of 'biological christianity'.

Feminist scholars such as Yuval-Davis and Anthias stressed the importance of gender relations in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies.[1] Indeed, one can witness intense debates in the political field and in the media on gender and multiculturalism, but in particular on the presumed relation between Islam and gender inequality (Arnaut, et al., 2009). There is a tendency to relate gender inequalities to minority groups but, as was clearly explained by Yuval-Davis (2000) and Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), women in general have the role of culturally reproducing the collectivity as they are perceived as the primordial

intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions such as language and customs. Of course, this 'burden of ethno-cultural continuity' (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 196) also expresses itself in the distinctive ways of dressing and behaving of women as they symbolize the group's cultural identity and its boundaries (Timmerman, 2000).

This shows once more that identity construction not only concerns the ideological and perceptual level but also the level of daily action. Through actions such as speaking a specific language, adhering to a religion or spending much more time than one's partner taking care of the children, individuals develop and sustain these boundaries and social divisions (Brubaker, et al., 2004; West and Fenstermaker, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Social psychology shows a more or less inevitable cognitive human process in this construction of in-groups and out-groups (Turner and Reynolds, 2001), and the family is one social domain that has a significant influence on the construction of a child's identity (Davies, 2002; Détrez, 2002; Jenkins, 2000). Although these processes often occur unconsciously, categorizations are not meaningless and can have important influences on everyday life, as they are also interlarded with stereotypes (Brubaker et al., 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2010).

An intersectional approach is therefore revelatory to gain the broad and in-depth insights in social processes (Nash, 2008; Shields, 2008). A society is constituted of individuals who form and are part of different social groups and social categories. It is therefore necessary to pay close attention 'to the points of view of actors themselves if we are to understand how processes of social construction and negotiation work' (Jenkins, 1997: 50). Which processes and mechanisms can we single out when analysing the narratives of individuals with different features in similar social settings? How do these phenomena come about; how can they be explained or contextualized?

As a consequence, human bodies are neither meaningless nor neutral objects but are surrounded by socially constructed expectations, meanings and demands (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2002; Détrez, 2003). All these representations are representative for the systems of meaning that are dominant in a particular society (Cornille, 2005; Crespi, 2004; Komter, 1989; Lukes, 2005). Therefore, an intersectional approach towards identities cannot be limited to the study of marginalized subjects (Nash, 2008), as social identities always intersect with each other in a person and a dominant ethnic identity can go hand in hand with a dominated gender and/or class identity (Chen, 1999; Fowler, 2003). For that reason, the next paragraph gives a short, in-depth description of Flemish society in order to shed light on some of its crucial social divisions.

Power differences in Flanders, dominant ethnicities and hegemonic masculinities

Addressing the intersection of ethnicity and gender constructions in a particular society implies discussing power relations and power differences between individuals, social groups and categories. One universal observation in modern societies is that not every individual has the same amount of power and agency to change or transform social reality (Lukes, 2005). Social power is distributed unevenly across different groups (Hannerz, 1992). In many societies, there are dominant ethnicities (Lewis, 2004; Wimmer, 2004) and hegemonic masculinities (Kimmel, 2000), what leads to very specific social configurations emerging from various intersection processes.

A common feature of those in power is that their perspective and their influence on (the representation of) social reality often remain implicit and unproblematized: 'Just as a male pattern becomes the unexamined norm, so too does a white, heterosexual and middle-class pattern become the unexamined norm against which others' experience and performances are evaluated' (Kimmel, 2000: 99). Dominant groups – and their shared cultural emblems – in a specific society tend to be understudied and unproblematized (Komter, 1989; Lukes, 2005). Their perceptions of how society should be organized, their influence on policy making, their appreciation of differences and similarities between groups and communities define the outlook and *leitmotiv* of Flanders more than those of others. They have the power to identify the 'deviants' or 'pathologies' in a society (Bourdieu, 1990; Hearn, 2004; Roosens, 1998).

Important and privileged positions in most of Flanders' crucial institutions are occupied by White heterosexual higher educated men with a Belgian/Flemish and (often) Christian background. Quantitative research on gender differences in education, politics and family life and on the labour market shows that men and women are disproportionately distributed across these social domains. A vertical and a horizontal sex segregation is present in the labour market, also in the educational system similar differences become apparent, having important short- and long-term effects on the socio-economic situation of individuals (Kuppens et al., 2006). When focusing on ethnic communities, we also find important differences between 'native Belgian' individuals and, for example, individuals with a Moroccan, Turkish or Italian background: More than 50% of the Moroccan and Turkish migrants and around 20% of the Italian migrants live below the poverty line, compared to 10% of the Belgians (Van Robaeys and Perrin, 2006). A consequence of the interplay of these processes is that minority women (and men) are often more marginalized and experience more discrimination than majority women (Fowler, 2003).

At the same time, Christianity, or the Christian background and history, has a major influence on the representation of society even though a secularization process is apparent. In Flanders, there is a church in almost every village, many school holidays are organized around and linked to Christian holy days and more than 70% of the Flemish children were baptized in 2000 (Van Meerbeeck, 2001). In comparison with other religions like Islam, Christianity holds a dominant position in Flanders.

Dominant cultural emblems influence the way social reality is perceived and represented, and how people act in it. Dominated emblems – such as several minority languages or religions – often occupy subordinate positions in society. Individuals with a minority background often face more restrictive opportunities structures and have less possibility to influence the representation of social reality to their advantage.

This is, in short, the general ethno-cultural and socio-economic context characterizing Flanders. It is in this broader setting that parents construct their identities and raise their children.

Method and sample

As the narratives and perspectives of individual parents are central in this article, an interpretative phenomenological approach is crucial (Kvale, 1996) and 'this means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of,

or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3). Therefore, instead of 'neutralizing' the context by not discussing it, the context dependency of meaning construction and interpretation is the starting point (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Burawoy, 1998).

As a consequence, the interview process is not neutral as two distinct individuals with their own identities are involved (Ganga and Scott, 2006). The researcher himself or herself is part of this meaning-making process, not only afterwards when interpreting respondents' discourses but also when conducting the interview. Yet, as Yuval-Davis (2010) points out, adopting an intersectional approach also implies that as a researcher one does not automatically belong to the in- or out-group of a respondent. There are various degrees of insider–outsider statuses (Narayan, 1993), which was also the case while I conducted the interviews. As a man with a Belgian-Italian background, with a university degree and at that moment childless, each one of these aspects of my appearance and/or identity was used by respondents to incorporate me to a certain in-group or, the other way around, to differentiate themselves from me (Zavella, 1996). Depending on the context, the topic under discussion and the conversation partner, elements were used to construct a narrative where I as a man had to admit that women are better at taking care of children or that I surely would understand what it meant for Italian parents to teach their children the Italian language or traditions. Yet, in some interviews, no references were made to my ethnic identity, and no Belgian-origin respondent alluded to these elements of my identity. It was, therefore, hard to single out which elements influenced which meaning constructions, but as a general rule, one can discard the illusion that as a researcher one has no influence on these processes and thus their outcomes.

Acknowledging these research limitations, the goal of interpretative social research should be 'to discover the actor as actor, in other words as a participant in "the production of society"' (Touraine, 2000: 911). Although social research focuses on social processes and social groups, it is important to understand that groups and categories are always 'made up' of individuals who construct meaning and (re)produce and transform social reality (Brubaker, et al., 2004; Elias and Scotson, 1965). To find out how people interpret certain phenomena and give meaning to their daily life world, a qualitative research approach is relevant (Maso and Smaling, 1998). Using semi-structured, qualitative, in-depth interviews, interviewers and respondents are free to discuss the main topics of the research in the order they want (Kvale, 1996). During the course of the investigation, it is even possible to adjust the topic list in accordance with the newly found data and to include new themes that were unnoticed in the preparatory research phases (Kvale, 1996). Through the process of theoretical saturation, the researcher stops interviewing new respondents when no new substantial data are gathered (Maso and Smaling, 1998).[2]

The research data are obtained through 42 in-depth interviews with fathers and mothers of Belgian, Italian and Moroccan origin. In most cases, it was possible to interview both parents from the same family separately. The respondents have diverse backgrounds, but they all have at least one child and identify themselves as 'having' one of the three above-mentioned ethnicities.[3] To recruit these respondents, different methods were applied. Public family assistance services and specific 'ethnic' organizations were contacted, and, in combination with the method of snowball sampling, this allowed for the recruitment of a diverse research sample.

In total, 42 respondents were interviewed: 24 women and 18 men. With respect to their ethnic background, 14 Belgians (5 men and 9 women), 13 Italians (7 men and 6 women) and 15 Moroccans (6 men and 9 women) participated in the research. Of these respondents, 15 were in a partner relationship, the others were married. Concerning family composition (older and/or younger children), educational background and employment status, variation was pursued and obtained. The Italian and Moroccan parents were mostly born in Belgium or migrated to Belgium before their children were born. In each of the categories – be it gender and/or ethnicity – there were respondents who were higher or lower educated, some worked as labourers and others as clerks, teachers, researchers or social workers. The unemployed women were housewives; the two unemployed Moroccan men were looking for a job. Yet, in this sample, Belgian respondents were generally higher educated than Italian and Moroccan respondents. This sample configuration made it possible to study the research topics from a diversity of perspectives.

Mono-religious marriages, gender inequality and 'the other'

The collected narratives were rich in information concerning the intersection of gender and ethnicity. The idea of interethnic and interreligious partner relationships proved to be the critical point for parents when discussing the competences of their children to make 'the right' partner choice and lay bare some crucial group boundaries. The following two sections capture these parental representations, while in a final section, the processes that remain hidden behind these representations are discussed.

Early in the (individual) interviews, several Italian and Moroccan respondents point out that their similar migration background or their shared 'Mediterranean mentality' sets them apart from 'the Belgians'. This way they construct a more or less homogeneous group of 'southern migrants' characterized by their feelings of solidarity, hospitality and buoyancy. However, these representations and constructions are very context sensitive (Jenkins, 2008), and especially Italian respondents reconstruct their identity significantly when more intimate topics are discussed. To bring these representations of their own and other's identity to the fore, it was valuable to discuss the topic of an interethnic partner relationship, an issue raised spontaneously by several parents.

The introduction already mentioned the narrative of the Belgian man who disapproves of the idea of his daughter marrying a Moroccan. The first image that pops into his mind is the idea that in Egypt women have to walk 5 m behind their husband. In his view, Moroccans equal Egyptians because they share the same religion, Islam, which oppresses women. His 'Western' raised daughter has to know this fact before engaging in such a relationship. Yet, at the same time, this man was lucky because 'he was able to afford it to leave his wife at home' to take care of the children, the house and himself. Notwithstanding these conservative ideas and actions concerning the gender roles in his own relationship, when imaging his daughter marrying a Muslim man, he fears the conservative ideas of these men will obstruct his daughter in living a 'free and Western life'.

Several elements in this key narrative are crucial to understand how and why 'difference' is perceived and constructed (see also Haynes, 2003). Through the narratives shown below, the reasoning and processes leading up to the gendering of ethno-religious boundaries are studied in detail.

Representation of the other: the restrictive Muslim man

To start with, it is remarkable that the original group boundary between Belgians ('the Northerners') versus Italians and Moroccans ('the Southerners'), mentioned above, is easily reconstructed by the respondents and redefined into two new groups along religious boundaries between Christians (Belgians and Italians) and Muslims (Moroccans). Discussing partnerships, I never mentioned the religious backgrounds of possible partners myself but only the three ethnicities involved in this study: Belgian, Italian and Moroccan partners. It is, to begin with, a significant finding that these respondents cast aside the previously experienced ethnic differences and brought everything down to the religious affiliation of individuals.

One specific image of Muslim men is apparent throughout the interviews. As this Italian woman states, in 'Muslim families' women always have to serve their husband and that is the reason why she does not want her daughter to marry a Muslim. Christianity plays a role in the life of this woman and she follows the rituals like baptizing her child, but she does not attend church all that much. Nevertheless, it is precisely the difference in religion and not the difference in ethnic background she denounces.

> Oh, I would mind that [a relationship with a Moroccan]. Not for that [Moroccan] man, but for the Muslim thing. There we go again, men stand above women. I don't like that. It's not equal. It doesn't work. I don't think so. Or the woman has to be very submissive and then those relationships work. I would mind it very much if my daughter has to go on living and serving and obeying her husband. Because these women have to serve their husband. (Woman, Italian-Christian origin, 42 years old)

In their reasoning, Belgian and Italian parents paint very negative images of Muslims and Islam, and of Muslim men in particular. These men are supposed to be – as if it were a natural inevitable tendency – oppressive and restrictive towards (their) women. 'Christian' parents in this research hold the belief that their children and especially their daughter(s) cannot be happy in a marriage with a Muslim man also because Christians and Muslims are perceived as fundamentally different.[4] This corresponds with more general negative representations not only in Flanders and Belgium but also in Western Europe about the role of Islam and Muslims in society (Arnaut, et al., 2009; Billiet and Swyngedouw, 2009). When in a North-American context, White and Black Americans are perceived to be each other's 'fundamentally other' (Lamont, 2002; Oriol and Hily, 2002), in a European context Muslims are perceived to be the 'eternally other' of Christians (Lamont, 2002: 178–197; Snauwaert, et al. 1999: 155).

Moroccan parents too are reluctant when considering interreligious relationships. In the same way as Belgians and Italians, they refer in the first place to their daughters and do not want their daughters to marry a Christian. Yet, their reasoning is not punctuated with negative images about Christians. The following man differentiates between sons and daughters stating that if his daughter is aware of these prescriptions, she will not cross these boundaries.

> It's less of a problem when a Christian woman marries a Muslim man than the other way around. That's prohibited in Islam. And when my daughter is aware of that, and she is religious and Muslim, then she spontaneously won't do it. (Man, Moroccan-Muslim origin, 40 years old)

Representation of children: the restriction of daughters

When these phenomena are studied from the perspective of the reproductive strategies individuals develop, it becomes clear that daughters are perceived as crucial in the process of ethno-cultural continuation (see also Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). In the respondents' perceptions and interpretations of interreligious relationships, there is a strong intersection of gender and religion: parents – irrespective of their ethnic background – are in the first place reluctant to see their daughters marry someone from another religious group. Even parents who at the moment of the interview had no daughters and were not expecting (the birth of) a daughter referred to this situation. This way gender is constructed through the construction of ethnicity and vice versa. The following narrative illustrates this point:

> Parent: To my daughter I say, it doesn't matter who you bring home as long as it isn't a Turk or Moroccan […] I feel, they have the submission of women and that's not ok to me.
> Interviewer: And if the boys bring home a Turkish or Moroccan woman?
> Parent: I wouldn't have a problem with that. (Woman, Belgian-Christian origin, 47 years old)

Indeed, research shows women carry the burden of ethno-cultural continuity and endogamy (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Timmerman, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1999). They have to secure familial continuity, especially in the raising of their children (Longman, 2005: 223). This is linked to the traditional role women are ascribed to in the three dominant world religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) (Cornille, 2005: 197). The results also show that there is little or no variation in the way male and female respondents discuss these topics, characterize 'the other' or feel gender-specific restrictions are necessary. Furthermore, in their narratives these parents – presumably for the most part unconsciously – define their daughters as possessing less agency, less resiliency, less independence and less strength than their sons. The latter are perceived by their parents as strong individuals who can withstand pressure from others and who are self-reliant. Exogamy seems to be the prerogative of sons, as this narrative demonstrates:

> I think, if my son brings home a Turkish girl, then that girl won't bring any Turkish influence. But the other way around, I have my doubts. If my daughter brings a Turkish or Moroccan man, what influence will that religion have? (Man, Italian-Christian origin, 37 years old)

An important consequence is that 'Christian' parents who fear the restrictions their daughters would face marrying a Muslim man restrict their daughters themselves, even in one of the most intimate life domains: their partner choice. Thereby doing what they blame and fear in 'the other'. These gender inequalities remain hidden as they are perceived not as an injustice done by parents but as a necessary reaction following the actions of 'the other'. The invisibility of these and similar inequalities is discussed in the next section.

The pathologizing of minorities, the invisibility of the majority

What has remained largely implicit in these analyses is the dominance of Belgian ethno-cultural identity. Gender inequalities are only brought into relation with ethnic minority

or religious minority identities, and specifically not with the dominant majority population. The majority identity, or certain aspects of it, remains largely or completely invisible in the interpretations that respondents make of social reality.

For example, when Moroccan or Italian respondents are talking about gender differences in their families of origin – in particular the different restrictions for girls and boys – these respondents relate this to their 'Italian' or 'Moroccan' identity. It is because of their ethnic backgrounds. But, in contrast, when Belgian respondents talk about similar differences between boys and girls, they never relate this to their ethnic background: It is not because they are Belgian. They refer to 'the early days' when people did not know better or to men who are 'like that'.

Moreover, when respondents are talking about their own families, they construct different interpretations and explanations according to their own and their partners' ethnic background. The following narratives are key for how this situation is interpreted by respondents. Both women are of Belgian origin, they only have sons and no daughters, but one of them is married to an Italian man and the other to a Belgian man. Both discuss similar topics – their husband wanting to restrict daughters more than sons – but they relate this to different reasons. The Belgian woman married to an Italian man sees it like this:

> My husband is much more restrictive [towards daughters] because he's Italian. That's why girls have to be controlled more than boys. (Woman, Belgian-Christian origin, 37 years old)

The Belgian woman married to a Belgian man talks about her husband wanting to restrict daughters more than boys, but she does not relate his ideas to his ethnic background and thinks he feels or acts this way because he is a man. It seems her husband's Belgian background remains invisible – like in almost every interview I conducted with a Belgian respondent – and it appears to be 'obvious' that the dominant and majority ethnicity as such cannot be problematic (Bourdieu, 1990; Lewis, 2004).

> When I was pregnant – we already knew it was gonna be a boy – he was telling how he wanted to raise a daughter. Then I was really surprised because I thought it a bit old-fashioned. Much more protective towards a daughter. Because I really wanted a daughter but eventually I was glad we have a son. I wouldn't like that, it really surprised me. Maybe men have the tendency to protect girls more than boys, I don't know. (Woman, Belgian-Christian origin, 31 years old)

Although discussing a comparable situation, these respondents construct different pictures. Furthermore, not only do Belgian respondents refer to Italians and Moroccans as less gender equal but also Moroccan and Italian respondents do the same. When Italian or Moroccan women state they were prohibited to go to higher education or follow the courses they wanted to, they said it was because their parents are Italian or Moroccan. Hereby, they legitimize the dominant negative perceptions of their cultural background and internalize these hegemonic discourses (Komter, 1989; Lukes, 2005; Prins, 2006). However, when a 27-year-old Belgian woman talks about similar restrictions, she relates this overall to the traditional times she was brought up in, but never to Belgian ethnicity. The latter remains invisible or unnoticed (Lewis, 2004).

Moreover, when discussing the gender inequalities between different ethnic groups, another interesting variation is made. Belgian and Italian respondents link the perceived

gender differences between their imagined communities to the 'Italianness' of Italians and, for example, not to their (shared) Christian background. However, when Italian and Belgian respondents discuss perceived gender inequalities in Moroccan families, they explicitly state that it is not the 'Moroccanness' of these individuals but their Islamic background that is the 'cause'. Quite to the contrary, Moroccan respondents who talk about gender inequalities link it to their 'Moroccanness' but explicitly not to their Islamic background. This is similar to the way Italian respondents talk about this topic.

Several mechanisms seem to be influencing the interpretations and perceptions of the respondents. On the one hand, like Flemishness, Christianity – both central cultural elements of the majority ethnicity – seems to be invisible and hidden (Anthias, 2001). At no point in their conversations do respondents, regardless of their own ideology (Christian, Muslim or Atheist), link gender inequalities to Christianity. The shared religious background between Belgians and Italians seems to have as a consequence that another central aspect than religion has to be brought into the picture to create a boundary, namely, 'Italianness', which can account for the perceived differences. Related to this, Italian respondents never use religion to differentiate themselves from Belgians, but they use 'Italian values'. So, like Belgianness, Christianity is never problematized when talking about gender differences. The dominant position of Christianity seems to make it invisible or useless as an explanation for problematic situations (Hearn, 2004; Lewis, 2004). This reasoning makes it possible to see clear distinctions between ethnic groups without being racist or discriminatory: Drawing negative images of Moroccans is racist but being negative about Muslims is definitely not. These processes are labeled as 'culturalism' and new forms of traditional racism (Açikel, 2006). At the same time, drawing negative images of Italians is not racist as the latter are probably still perceived as belonging to the (religious) in-group and the images are never as negative as they are about Muslims.

On the other hand, there is a clear distinction in the way religion is used depending on the context and the ethnicities involved. When Italians are problematized, it is because of their Italianness, but when Moroccans are problematized (by Belgian and Italian respondents), it is because of their Islamic background and explicitly not because of their Moroccanness. Although all ethnic groups are perceived primordially as either Christian (Belgians and Italians) or Islamic (Moroccans), the ties between religion and ethnicity are loosened to some extent.

Conclusion

This article focused on some crucial intersections of gender, ethnicity and religion in everyday life. By interviewing parents from Belgian, Italian and Moroccan origin – the latter two belong to the largest minority communities in Flanders, Belgium – these intersections came to the fore in some crucial life domains.

The narratives illustrate the reluctancy of parents to see their daughter marry someone from the other religious group. A strict religious border is constructed between on the one hand Belgians and Italians (Christians) and on the other hand Moroccans (Muslims). Parents want to make this border uncrossable for their daughters but not for their sons. The former need to be protected against the restrictions Muslim men would place on them, while the latter would not suffer from these restrictions. As a consequence, parents from all ethnic origins limit their daughters in one of life's most intimate domain, the free choice of a partner.

However, these kind of restrictions are central in the justification 'Christian' parents use in their reasoning for the refusal of interreligious marriages but are perceived not as a restriction laid upon daughters by their restrictive parents but as 'good parenting' to protect naive daughters from making dramatic mistakes. Nowhere in the narratives are gender inequalities – prohibiting daughters to marry a Muslim man or to study for a 'masculine' profession – related to the dominant Belgian ethnicity or the dominant Christian group. Dominant groups – be they related to the ethnic and/or religious majority in Flanders – are comfortable with the constructed knowledge that their 'culture' is never that unequal when it comes to gender relations from the moment minority and dominated ethno-religious groups are incorporated in the equation. It is in this socio-cultural context that the narrative of the Belgian-Christian male – in the beginning of this article – has to be framed. Reality is represented in such a way that the 'norm' remains invisible and uncontested and that minorities' identities and actions are pathologized.

Funding

Notes

1. This article is primarily concerned with the construction of gender and ethnic identities in the family context. Even though it proposes an intersectional approach to these social identities, less attention will be paid to, for example, the role of social class although this information is available for each interview participant.
2. All interview data are recorded and afterwards coded and analyzed with the use of the qualitative software program Atlas-ti.
3. When respondents say they have a particular ethnicity, this does not mean they do not adopt cultural emblems from other ethnicities.
4. There was only one Belgian couple who stated that they are not at all religious, but they also held 'similar beliefs' about Muslims.

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