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The (un)importance of ethnicity in adolescents' boundary making: an analysis over a two-school year period in a super-diverse city

Imane Kostet, Gert Verschraegen & Noel Clycq

Abstract: Drawing on three rounds of in-depth interviews with Antwerp pupils aged 11 to 14, we examine how adolescents' moral boundary making shifts (or not) during the course of a two-school year period, as they talk about whom they like to hang out with (or not), the diversity in their surroundings and in their friendship groups, and the (un)importance of ethnicity in their peer relations. The results show that adolescents initially draw three subtypes of moral boundaries (based on being 'good-rebellious', 'stingy-generous' or 'decent-indecent') to emphasize so-called differences between the majority and minority groups; these boundaries, however, reportedly do not structure their friendship groups and even become disconnected from ethnicity in the latter research rounds. Moral boundaries that are set not to distinguish between ethnic majority and minority groups, but against the children of recently arrived immigrants ('established-outsider' boundaries), however, are salient in all three research rounds and are reportedly not crossed in our respondents' friendship group formation.

Keywords: Moral boundaries, ethnic boundary making, ethnic diversity, interethnic friendships, super-diversity

Introduction

There is ample research on adolescents' perceptions of ethnic diversity, on how they relate to their peers and fellow pupils, and to what extent ethnicity plays a role in peer relations, whether it be in schools or in the broader community. To give but a few examples, scholars have extensively scrutinised the ethnic prejudices of pupils (e.g., Quintana, 1998; Van Houtte et al., 2019; Vervaet et al., 2018), whether or not they prefer intra-ethnic friendships (e.g., Baerveldt et al., 2007; Bagci et al., 2014; Fortuin et al., 2014) or the ways in which the ethnic composition of schools is related to peer victimisation and bullying (e.g. Agirdag et al., 2011; Myers and Bhopal, 2017; Stark et al., 2015; Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). Research conducted in Western European super-diverse cities has shown that adolescents generally perceive diversity as unexceptional and that they mix relatively easily (Iqbal et al., 2017; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019). However, some studies have also revealed that even in diverse schools, adolescents prefer to socialise with peers from their own ethnic group and are less likely to

mix with others, pointing to the influence of perceived discrimination, parents' socialisation, social class background or other contextual factors (Hoare, 2019; Rhamie et al., 2012). By and large, although the findings point in different directions, it is widely accepted that ethnically diverse schools are supposedly key sites for young people to interact with a diverse group of pupils, to develop positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity, and to seize opportunities to make friends across ethnic lines (Iqbal et al., 2017).

In this article, we aim to tackle the lingering and complex question of how adolescents form friendship groups in super-diverse settings, using a 'de-ethnicised' research design (Wimmer, 2013). Rather than examining how particular ethnic groups relate to each other, we use a cultural sociological framework of 'boundary making' that will allow us to reveal a variety of outcomes of boundary-making processes. More concretely, we will analyse how various standards of social structuration are at play in adolescents' arguments as they explain who they see as a friend, and who not. This will also enable us to shed light on boundary-making processes among those who are from the same ethnic background, which has received less attention. Despite the extensive literature on interethnic contact and friendships among younger adolescents, research (implicitly or explicitly) building on a boundary approach remains scarce (see Cangià, 2015; Peltola, 2021; Sedano, 2012; Spyrou, 2002; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019 for some important exceptions). We empirically build on in-depth interviews with a very diverse group of adolescents aged 11 to 14, conducted in the super-diverse city of Antwerp, Belgium. Moreover, we adopt a longitudinal approach by interviewing the adolescents at three different moments over a two-school year period: in the last year of primary school, the first year of secondary and finally in the second year of secondary. As such, we also examine how adolescents' friendships and boundary making evolves over time.

In the following sections, we first clarify our theoretical starting points and contributions, and go on to describe the research context, our methods and data. Next, and prior to our conclusion, we present four broad categories of moral boundaries in adolescents' accounts and how their boundary making processes change (or not) in the course of the various research rounds.

Theoretical framework: boundary making in super-diverse settings

To grasp how groups of pupils are differentially categorised when our respondents talk about who they see as a friend, and who not, we draw on the concept of 'moral boundaries'. These are defined as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space', based on valued moral qualities such as honesty, decency, integrity, work ethic, and so on (Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168). Moral boundary making, hence, is the active construction of distinctions between individuals and groups based on these moral criteria. To further discuss the 'strength' of the boundaries adolescents draw, we also build on Alba's (2005) distinction between 'blurred' and 'bright' boundaries. 'Blurred' boundaries are ambiguous boundaries that do not clearly divide people into different groups, while 'bright' boundaries are unambiguous and make it clear which side a person is supposed to belong to (i.e., a person cannot belong to both groups). While some literature has shown that adolescents generally perceive diversity as unexceptional and that ethnic boundaries are becoming more blurred in their everyday lives (Visser and Tersteeg, 2019) so-called cultural friction and tensions also remain part of adolescents' lives, which stresses the relevance of looking at bright boundaries (Albeda et al. (2017); Çelik, 2018).

To study the moral boundaries used to distinguish ethnic groups, we depart from a 'de-ethnicised' research design. This means we do not consider the existence of ethnic groups as a natural fact, nor do we automatically assume that individuals' experiences, preferences and practices align with predefined or dominant ethnic categories (Wimmer, 2013). This article rather examines how adolescents actively position themselves vis-à-vis self-defined 'others' and the ways in which they use ethnic markers while doing so. Following Wimmer's (2013) work, we adopt a broad, all-encompassing definition of ethnicity that includes race. It might be the case for instance that adolescents use phenotypical differences such as skin colour to position themselves and others, but they can also use ethno-religious, ethnonational or ethnolinguistic categories to mark group differences.

It would be naïve, however, to suggest that predefined ethnic categories (e.g., statistical categories, governmental classifications, widely shared categorisations) should be completely omitted from sociological analysis. After all, boundaries are seldomly drawn out

of nothing, rather, social actors negotiate the clear-cut categories they are confronted with (Lamont, 1992). In the context of the United States, for instance, group differences are often described in terms of historically developed ethno-racial categories and schemes (e.g. 'whites' and 'blacks'), while in the continental Western European context, people are often strongly ascribed to demarcated ethno-religious ('Muslims' or 'Christians') or ethno-national categories ('Maroccons' or 'Belgians'), some of which are strongly stigmatised and morally devaluated (see research context). In that sense, specific groups can be 'racialised' denoting that racial meaning is extended to a "previously racially unclassified relationship or group." (Omi and Winant, 1994, 64) to enforce or reproduced existing social hierarchy. Authors such as Modood (2019) or Beaman (2017) have demonstrated how in the European context, 'Muslims' or 'North-Africans' are racialised as 'non-white'.

It is against this background that individuals' boundary making should be understood: as a 'struggle' over which ethnic categories are relevant to them (or not) in their everyday lives, and over the moral criteria used to define and distinguish ethnic groups (see (Lamont, 1992; Wimmer, 2013). This negotiation of demarcated and ascribed ethnic categories – and the moral worth attached to these – occurs both at the level of individual identifications (as discussed in another paper, see Kostet, 2023) and at the level of social group categorisations and formation, which is the focus of this article.

Such an integrated view, which recognises both the existence of imposed demarcated ethnic group classifications and individuals' agency to negotiate these, is especially relevant when conducting research in super-diverse contexts. Super-diversity refers to the highly complex nature of diversity in contemporary societies which are not only characterised by the expansion of ethnic diversification, but also by intensified differences in social class position, migration history, religious or philosophical beliefs and a wide range of social identities *between* and *within* ethnic groups (Vertovec, 2007). In superdiverse contexts, which are often urban areas, groups identify with multiple overlapping identity categories, and ethnic categories are becoming more blurred, fluid, and plural than ever, making ethnic groups even less of an easily defined category, if they ever were in the first place (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Wessendorf, 2014). This, as argued by Crul (2016: 54) 'calls for a shift of focus from fixed entities like "the ethnic group" to a dynamic interplay between different characteristics of individual members of ethnic groups […]; in other words: a shift from an "ethnic lens" to a multidimensional lens.

While it is not new to argue for such a framework, ethnic groups as a category of analysis seems nevertheless predominant in research among adolescents (e.g. Aberson and Tomolillo, 2004; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Schachner et al., 2015). As indicated, this article's focus is not on how particular ethnic groups relate to each other but on how adolescents construct self-defined 'others' and how they refer to ethnicity (or not) while doing so. This adheres to previous research that has shown that adolescents living in super-diverse cities are not necessarily concerned with others' ethnicity (Visser and Tersteeg, 2019). When adolescents share hobbies, they make friendships based on their common interests, regardless of ethnic background (Devine et al., 2008). Sedano (2012) has come to similar findings and argues that adolescents take various criteria into consideration when making friends. While the adolescents' seniority in the friendship group, their age, gender, kinship and embodied styles of communication are important in deciding who to play with, ethnicity is not highly relevant for them, although it becomes salient in contexts of conflict.

Hence, existing research clearly highlights the need for a more in-depth understanding of the basic social processes that are at play when adolescents express themselves (negatively) about others, and what ethnicity has to do with this. In what follows, we draw on in-depth interviews conducted over a period of two school years, capturing a period when the adolescents move up from primary to secondary education and often have to change schools, which may increase or decrease their exposure to diversity. While their transition to secondary school is not the main focus of our article, however, the follow-up interviews during this specific period are especially interesting, as research also suggests that while adolescents build friendships across ethnic lines in primary school, these are often disrupted once enrolled in secondary education (Bruegel, 2006; George, 2007; Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012). This design hence allows us to study how the meaning attached to moral boundaries may shift and/or change according to time, context and situation, making them more or less relevant in group formation processes (Wimmer, 2013).

Research context

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with adolescents in various Antwerp schools. Antwerp is the largest city of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. It is a particularly interesting setting for the study of ethnic boundary making because of its super-diverse character. With more than 170 nationalities, it has become a majority-minority city

(Crul, 2016), as the share of ethnic minority citizens (51.1%) has become larger than the share of the majority ethnic group (48.9%). This diversity is especially pronounced among Antwerp adolescents; about 70% of them aged below 20 are ethnic minority (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). Yet, the ethnic diversification of Antwerp has not been without tensions. Ethnic boundaries have been very bright in our research context as a result of anti-immigration and anti-Islam sentiment (Saeys et.al., 2019). During the 1990s and 2000s, the Flemish far-right gained electoral victories in the city, and today, after a few years of decline, they are gaining popularity again. Especially people of Moroccan descent, the largest ethnic minority group in Antwerp in particular and Flanders in general, have been imagined as morally different from the ethnic majority population; the latter being presented as 'victims' of the so-called alleged deviant behaviour of 'Moroccans' (de Koning and Vollebergh, 2019).

A widely used term to categorise these and other ethnic minorities, especially during the 1990s and early 2000s, is 'allochthon'. This term, commonly used in Belgium and the Netherlands, stems from a nativist understanding in which a distinction is made between the 'original' habitants of a country, the 'autochthons', and the inhabitants who are not from 'the land' and thus are 'allochthonous'. The term allochthons, despite being centred around 'nativity', is generally adopted to refer to migrants from 'non-Western' countries, their Belgian-born children and even their grandchildren who are racialised as 'non-white' (Rana, 2018; Driezen, Clycq, Verschraegen, 2023). Since the early 2000s, the attacks of 9/11 reinforced negative attitudes towards Muslims in Belgium, like in many other countries, which resulted in bright moral boundaries vis-à-vis Muslims, and a more prominent use of the racialised category 'Muslim' to classify the so-called 'non-white other'. More recently, as in other European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, the term 'migration background' has been introduced to classify minority groups (Will, 2019), also as a response to the negative connotation that became attached to the term 'allochthons'. Against the background of all these tensions and evolutions, categories such as 'Moroccans', 'Muslims', 'allochthons' or 'people with a migration background' are now used interchangeably – even though they have different connotations and valuations, and some are more racialised than others – in both the public and political discourse on ethnic diversity, as well as in ordinary people's everyday speech (de Koning and Vollebergh, 2019; Rana, 2018).

Antwerp is not only characterised by the existence of ethnic hierarchies, however, but also by continuing social class inequalities. Ethnic minority groups and families are much

more likely to live under the poverty line (Kind & Gezin, 2020). This inequality is very visible in the city's streetscape. Neighbourhoods with a large share of ethnic minority residents are socio-economically strongly disadvantaged and characterised by higher levels of unemployment (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). There is also still a significant degree of segregation in Antwerp schools, with some schools made up of mainly ethnic majority adolescents and others of mainly minority adolescents. This is often due to neighbourhood segregation, but even schools within the same neighbourhood sometimes differ strongly in the composition of their pupil population due to other mechanisms of selection, such as parents' preferences (Mahieu, 2012). Furthermore, ethnic minority adolescents are not only much more likely to live under the poverty line, they also perform less well educationally (lower test scores, more likely to repeat one or several grades, higher rates of retention and early school leaving) compared to the majority group (Kind & Gezin, 2020; OECD, 2018; Stad Antwerpen, 2020). Our respondents are hence on a daily base confronted with categorical and social class inequalities, which are strongly structured along ethnic lines.

Research approach

To reach a diverse group of pupils in the sixth grade of primary education, we selected six schools. Primary education in Flanders consists of six grades for children aged about 6 to 12. The school system consists of different networks, of which the most important and populated are 'government-provided schools', 'subsidized public schools' and 'subsidized free schools' – the latter is the largest network, organized by Catholic Education Flanders. Non-subsidized, private schools are rare in Flanders and were not included in the study. Although the different school networks have distinct philosophical orientations, at least in theory, there are quite a few differences among the schools in practice with regard to their curriculum and policies (e.g., on inclusion and diversity).

Table 1: School and pupil characteristics

* = official figures; ° = authors' categorisation

#	Network	Interviewed pupils	pupils non-Dutch home language*	Sixth-grade pupil population°	Country of descent of respondents	receiving study allowance*	mothers without secondary education*
1	Catholic	12	23%	Mixed	Belgium, Portugal, The Netherlands, Morocco, Turkey, Ghana, Congo, Lebanon, Sweden, Sierra Leone, Poland	20%	15.3%
2	Catholic	7	8%	Mixed	Belgium, Morocco, France, Brazil, Nigeria	16%	13.6%
3	Subsidized public school	11	49%	Mixed	Belgium, Afghanistan, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Ireland, Kurdistan, Tunisia	57%	49.4%
4	Catholic	8	27%	Mixed	Belgium, Guinea, Georgia, Morocco	30%	16.6%
5	Government provided school	4	78%	Only 'minority' adolescents	Turkey, Morocco, Algeria	78%	84.7%
6	Subsidized free school	5	66%	Only adolescents of Moroccan ethnic background	Morocco	68%	71.5%

The schools were selected based on their ethnic and social class mix and their location in more or less disadvantaged neighbourhoods.[i] Above table gives an overview of the most important characteristics of the six different schools. The number of interviewed pupils was based on the size of the school, hence in large schools more pupils were selected. The percentage of pupils with another home language than Dutch, who receive a study allowance and whose mothers do not have a secondary education qualification are percentages at the school level (for all six grades, and based on public administrative data) and not the numbers among our group of respondents. Study allowances are provided by the government to financially support low-income families with school-age children. The number of pupils receiving a study allowance, in combination with the percentage of mothers without secondary qualification, provides a general picture of the school populations' socio-economic vulnerability. The number of the pupils with another language than Dutch as home language is presented to give an idea of the schools' diversity (as numbers on the ethnic composition of Flemish schools are not available). Because this number captures school diversity but not the classroom diversity, we have categorised the classrooms ourselves as 'mixed' if both majority and different ethnic minority groups are

present. If classes are mainly composed of specific ethnic minorities, we explicitly mention this (e.g., pupils of classroom 6 were all from Moroccan ethnic background).

After an introductory interview with the principals or teachers, information letters and consent forms were handed out to all pupils. They received copies for both themselves and their parents. Besides providing basic information, the letters stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential. The data were collected by interviewing the adolescents at three moments in a two-school year period: once in the sixth grade of primary school (11 and 12-year-olds), once in the first year of secondary school (12 and 13-year-olds) and once in their second year (13 and 14-year-olds). After the first author had interviewed 47 sixth-grade adolescents (25 girls and 22 boys), 24 adolescents (11 girls and 13 boys) were selected to further participate in the study, based on their willingness, their social class and ethnic background, their individual story and the secondary school they attended. The pupils had moved up to about 14 different secondary schools. Flemish secondary education is a typical example of an early tracking system. When they move up from primary to secondary school, which also consists of six grades (for pupils about 12 to 18 years old) pupils are referred to the 'A-stream' (if successfully completed primary education) or the 'B-stream' (when a certificate primary education is not obtained). These 'streams' consist of a two-year preparation (first and second grade) for a specific track. The A-stream prepares mainly for the general or academic track, and to a lesser extent for the technical track. The B-track prepares for the vocational track. The B-stream is publicly perceived as 'of lower status'. Except for one pupil, all our young respondents have moved up to the A-stream of secondary education. While some went up to schools with a similar degree of ethnic mix to their primary school, others moved to a school with a greater population of pupils with a similar ethnic background or an ethnically more diverse school. Twenty-one of the 24 adolescents (10 girls and 11 boys) participated in the third and last research round.

In the first research round, where the interviews lasted between 23 and 75 minutes, we especially gauged adolescents' perceptions and experiences of diversity. The second interviews lasted between 35 and 100 minutes, and in this round, we focused more explicitly on whether adolescents' friendship groups had changed after the transition to secondary education and whether they perceive differences between their friends from different ethnic groups. In both rounds, the first author asked the adolescents to sum up their friends and to say something about their 'top five' friends in particular. In the last round, where the

interviews lasted between 30 and 82 minutes, she elaborated further on the first results and asked adolescents whether there were any changes in their friendship groups.

All interviews were conducted in Dutch. There were no language barriers or difficulties as all adolescents spoke Dutch at least intelligibly. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed by applying some general strategies of the Generic Inductive Qualitative Model (Hood, 2007; Maxwell, 2013), using the qualitative software program NVivo. First, the interviews were coded inductively, after which a coding framework was developed bringing together the different perceptions of diversity and interethnic friendships. While analysing this material thoroughly, the data were refined through a repeated coding process. Under each quote, we provide information on the adolescent's age, ethnic background, school and whether they have been enrolled in a more or less diverse secondary school.

Results

In this section, we show how adolescents primarily draw moral boundaries in their narratives, which are centred around notions of 1) 'good' versus 'rebellious' behaviour; 2) being 'stingy' versus 'generous'; 3) behaving 'decently' or not; and 4) being an 'established' member of society or a 'newcomer'. We discuss whether ethnicity emerges as an important element in boundary making, and how both boundary-making processes and the relevance of ethnicity change (or not) across the three research rounds.

Primary school (R1): an overview of the most salient moral boundaries

In the first interview round, adolescents mainly drew moral boundaries as they talked about whom they included in their friendship group and whom they did not. While these moral boundaries were set to distinguish all kinds of groups (e.g., 'fun' or 'boring' pupils, 'good' or 'bad' people, …), in some schools the boundaries drawn were often related to pupils' ethnic background. In these cases, as will become clear in the below citations, most pupils conflated different categories. They placed, for example, the 'Muslims', 'Moroccans,', classmates 'of Moroccan descent' or the 'allochthons' against the 'Belgians'. Hence, while different terms were employed to refer to the present ethnic minority groups from

predominantly Muslim or Moroccan background, their use of the category 'Belgian' remained constant throughout the interviews. All in all, irrespective of the term they adopted, the pupils used these categories to draw a distinction between particularly the majority and minority groups. These groups are described as having different moral qualities.

One of the most pertinent distinctions drawn in this vein was that between the 'good' and the 'rebellious' pupils. According to our respondents, majority pupils tend to show very good behaviour, while minorities are rather naughty and tend to misbehave. These latter adolescents, they say, display, among other things, an oppositional school culture (e.g. contradicting the teacher and bad study behaviour), and a general inattentive attitude as they quarrel and swear more often than their majority peers (cf. Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Emiel, for instance, mentioned that 'especially those of Moroccan descent dare to talk during class [when pupils are expected to be quiet]', and that they become 'very angry quickly'. This boundary allegedly influenced peer group formation as adolescents, while using ethnonyms, said they do not hang out with others from across this good-rebellious boundary. Adar, to give an example, said that he does not hang out with the ethnic majority peers because of their 'calm' behaviour, which he considered 'boring'.

A second moral boundary was drawn based on whether adolescents are perceived to be generous or rather stingy:

> Yassine: If, if… If I weren't Muslim, then I'd… not really… I mean, then I'd be much stingier because most Belgians are really stingy. (11y, R1, Tunisian descent, school 3)

Again, in this case, the adolescents used ethnonyms to establish moral boundaries. Notably, however, was that these patterns were only evident in schools with a significant social class divide between the majority and minority groups. In schools where almost all majority adolescents were from middle-class families and the minorities were from lower-class families, our participants claimed more strongly than those in the other schools that these groups have different moral qualities. The majority group was presented as good (which was considered boring) and stingy, while the minority pupils were described as rebellious and generous. In the ethnically diverse schools without such social class divide, however, our respondents did not ethnicise these moral boundaries. The clear variations between schools thus reveal that social class positions greatly impact the respondents' boundary drawing (see

Lamont, 2000). Put differently, the moral criteria that our respondents used in their speech were strongly similar along social class lines, but not along ethnic lines.

If we hence look beyond the use of their ethnonyms, it becomes clear that these young people are using the same moral criteria in their boundary drawing as when lower-class adolescents in ethnically homogeneous contexts attempt to gain value through 'rebellion' against the dominating middle-class norms in their schools (see Van Houtte et al., 2019; Willis, 1978). Research also suggests that working-class individuals cope with stigmatisation by creating moral boundaries that highlight alleged flaws in middle-class people, such as individualism, competitiveness, and greed (Lamont, 2000). Peltola (2021) further shows how Finish pupils (aged 13-15) who were in academically selective school classes viewed non-selective classes as wild and annoying. The non-selective classes' pupils felt negatively judged and responded to these boundaries by negatively evaluating the qualities of pupils in the selective classes, and they described their own group as an inclusive community. Group boundaries were thus drawn based on the 'social status' of the school classes rather than ethnicity, even though there was a strong social class divide (e.g., selective classes were predominantly populated by the ethnic majority, the non-selective classes predominantly populated by minority pupils). Our respondents' assertion that they are generous, unlike the majority group, can be viewed from this perspective, as a strategy to revalue their moral worth as a social group who care for each other, and by rejecting not so much the ethnic majority group as such but the so-called (rather individualised) middle-class moralities that come with their positions.

Yassine, for instance, reported that he is looked down upon by the ethnic majority girls in his school because he buys his clothes at Primark. However, he shared that he does not care because he is at least 'not stingy' or obsessed with money. Doha similarly reported that ethnic majority pupils may be more affluent yet do not share their wealth with others while she had learned at home to be generous. Ethnic majority pupils were also considered to be the best performing educationally, but were discursively given less status because of their 'good' but therefore also 'boring' behaviour.

A third moral boundary was based on the notion of 'decency':

> Hala: Some [Non-Muslim majority ethnic] girls, for instance, they really act like this [mimics them giggling for attention], I think that's really very strange and… Uhm, some girls want, some girls, for instance, they hug

> boys, they're always hugging boys and I think that's really strange. (…) How can I put it? Just, the behaviour, they're like dirty girls, I'd say.
> (11y, R1, Iraqi descent, school 3)

According to the respondents, these boundaries strongly structured their friendship group as they did not want to hang out with those placed in the moral 'out-group'. These boundaries were also strongly gendered in the sense that girls especially talked about how other girls dress, behave or interact with boys, while the boys' notion of decency was more related to the abovementioned good-rebellious boundaries. However, in contrast to other findings (Peltola, 2019), there was no relationship in our study between gender or masculinity and an emphasis on the moral quality of 'rebellious' behaviour. Girls drew as much good-rebellious (or stingy-generous boundaries) as boys but references to how 'decently' one dresses, behaves and interacts were clearly more present among our girl adolescents – and only when evaluating the supposed sexual morality of other girls. This could be explained by their age and girls' earlier sexual development compared to boys, and how girls' boundary making processes often involve references to gendered sexuality because of the sexual double standards in many societal contexts (Fjær et al., 2015; Miller, 2016)**.** Moreover, stronger than the other boundaries, sexual morality was related to religion and what some pupils considered religiously informed modest behaviour.

Fourth, while the above boundaries were used by the adolescents to mainly emphasise a so-called distinction between the majority and minority groups based on different moral criteria, some of our respondents also drew bright moral boundaries to emphasise so-called differences between adolescents raised in Belgium (regardless of their ethnic background) and recently immigrated adolescents (again, regardless of ethnic background). These 'established-outsider' boundaries hence did not coincide with an alleged difference between the majority and minority ethnic group and were also drawn within the same ethnic group. The notion of the 'established-outsider' boundaries is derived from Elias and Scotson's work (1994) and suggests that people define boundaries based on the length of residence in a particular environment. In line with previous research in urban contexts among adults (Albeda et.al., 2017; Wimmer, 2004), children and adolescents (Sedano, 2012), our results indeed show that 'established' groups (including minority groups) tended to distinguish themselves from recently arrived adolescents who reportedly behave differently (e.g. their speech, appearance etc.). Hala, for instance, had arrived in Belgium when she was

six years old and reported that she has few or no friends because she is not yet fluent in Dutch, and that some of her peers even insultingly call her ‘refugee’ or ‘tramp’. These ‘established-outsider’ boundaries were less present across the schools in research round 1, since at that stage most of the adolescents had not yet met children of parents who had recently immigrated. As we will see later, once some of these adolescents move up to secondary school and come across a different pupil population, more of them start to allude to such a boundary.

Boundary shifts after the transition to secondary school (R2 and R3)

Moving forward with our analysis, we will explore how adolescents make sense of the aforementioned boundaries in the later research rounds (rounds 2 and 3), and will discuss how these may remain bright, become blurry or disappear altogether in their narratives. Generally, ‘good-rebellious’ boundaries remain bright over the period of two school years. In some cases, they even become more prominent among those who initially drew them, or they are mentioned more frequently by a larger group of adolescents. Interestingly, however, this boundary shifts in various other ways compared to R1. While Sam, for instance, had expressed in the first round that he did not like to hang out with ethnic minority peers due to their bad behaviour, from the second round on, he reported preferring to spend time with these peers precisely because of their supposed bad behaviour:

> Researcher: Which classmates do you like and which do you dislike?
> Sam: Uhm, actually only the allochthons are the fun ones because they talk more and… well, the Belgians they only study. (…) They [‘allochthon girls’] dare to do a lot. (…) Being naughty in class, they secretly take their telephone or… and they dare to contradict [the teacher], they also dare to do that, I think. (…) [They’re] just not like a Belgian.
> Researcher: And how would you describe a Belgian pupil?
> Sam: Those, those who study all day (…) And if the teacher is mad at us and no longer teaches us, she [Belgian-descent pupil] starts to cry (laughs). (…) With the allochthons I can joke around more often because we do more naughty stuff and that’s fun. (12y, R2, Iranian descent, primary school 3, similar pupil population after transition)

However, despite using specific ethnonyms, these participants distinguished friendship groups on the basis of the boundary between those considered ‘good’ or ‘rebellious’ and those being ‘good’ or ‘boring’, rather than on the basis of their ethnic majority or minority background. Although some adolescents, like Sam, suggested that they only hang out with ethnic minority peers who are willing to misbehave, upon further probing, it becomes apparent that their groups of friends are often more diverse:

> Sam**:** But there are also Belgians, so real Belgians, who hang out with us but that doesn’t matter, that’s normal. They act normal (…). They act like we do
> (12y, R2, Iranian descent, primary school 3, similar pupil population after transition)

Notwithstanding their mixed friendship groups, some adolescents (like Sam) continued to categorise minority peers as rebellious and the majority ethnic as good. However, while Sam had initially framed all ethnic majority pupils as good and boring, it became apparent that the use of such ethnonyms is highly situational, and especially relevant in situations where pupils feel looked down upon by the majority group, as described in the previous section. Furthermore, the good-rebellious boundary in itself was much brighter than the connection the pupils made with ethnicity. Doha, to give an example, questioned in the last round the boundaries she used to draw between ethnic groups:

> Researcher: [You used to say in the previous rounds] that no Belgian pupil is a daredevil, whereas all Moroccans are?
> Doha: Well, that’s not true, some Belgians are. (..) That Belgian girl in class, she went on the roof of the school because her pen was there. A Moroccan girl had thrown it on the roof, she [the ‘Belgian’ girl] went on the roof. She’s really like… She’s really… I wouldn’t say *allochthonized* (i.e., that she acts like a ethnic minority pupil], but she’s… she belongs to our group.
> (14y, R3, primary school 1, Moroccan descent, more disadvantaged school after transition)

This disconnection of ethnic background and the described moral boundaries is also evidenced in the later research rounds when the participants talked about how they do not associate with ‘well-behaved’ minority peers either who are considered to be ‘boring’ as well. Also the strict equating of the ‘stingy-generous’ boundary with respectively a majority and minority position became blurred during these research rounds. Yassine, for instance, had stated in primary school that he did not like to hang out with non-Muslim pupils because of their so-called stinginess, but after entering secondary education, he became the

only Muslim boy in his friendship group. In R3, he reflected on his boundary making and said that these pupils are not stingy at all and that he is happy to have changed his perception: '*Because if I still thought that way, then it's like, then I think that's bad, then I'm saying wrong things which aren't true*.'

In R1, we also saw how adolescents had stressed the so-called differential (in)decent behaviour of majority and minority pupils. These boundaries remained present in adolescents' narratives, but, again, were now less frequently drawn to emphasise so-called differences between the majority and minority group. Hala, for instance, who had judged how 'non-Muslim' girls dress and engage with boys, reported in the last two research rounds that two of her best friends are non-Muslim and that they are not 'dirty girls'. While they became disconnected from a particular religious group, these boundaries were nevertheless still very present in most girls' narratives. Layla, for instance, had drawn gendered moral boundaries in primary school, which she linked to whether her classmates were Muslim or not. In the last two research rounds, she no longer drew these boundaries explicitly between these two groups. Rather, she indicated very clear lines between her peers, based on what she considered modest behaviour. About some other Muslim peers, she said:

> Layla: Like (…) do stuff behind the back of their parents while their parents have no clue. I don't do that kind of stuff, I'm not that kind of girl. (…) Like kissing, that's, that's… I really don't think that's acceptable. I don't even think that's acceptable for an 18-year-old! Even for that age I don't find it acceptable. (…). Yes, they do very dirty stuff and I hate… I hate it. I hate those kinds of people! (12y, R2, Belgian-Moroccan descent, primary school 4, more disadvantaged school compared to R1)

Compared to her primary school, Layla had moved up to a secondary school with a greater population of Muslim pupils. If Layla no longer draws moral boundaries against the non-Muslim majority, this is not only because she came to experience how Muslim girls may behave 'indecently' as well, but also because this group now had a position of power in the school, in the sense that they are 'popular' and supported by boys in times of conflict. In this specific school, this supposedly created a new 'majority-minority' divide that was structured by popularity rather than ethnicity or religion.

The fourth salient boundary in the first research round was the 'established-outsider' boundary. In comparison to the other three boundaries, this moral boundary did not shift noticeably across the research rounds. When we had asked Enes in this round, for instance,

which pupils he did not consider as his friends and/or does not like, he again referred to the recently arrived adolescents from 'OKAN-classes', the reception classes in his school for 'newcomer' adolescents, who speak a foreign language and receive intensive training in Dutch. Importantly, in Flemish secondary schools, differently from primary schools, OKAN-classes are organized separately from regular education, which makes interactions between 'recently arrived' and 'established' adolescents more difficult. Enes recounted several stories about conflicts he and his friend had had, especially with the 'Spanish girls', whom they liked to pick on: *'Each time when my friend sees that Spanish girl who once fought [in the playground], he says ebmemneheh [mimics Spanish] so that she gets angry.'* Although Enes repeatedly emphasised his attachment to his Turkish background, he subjected the recently arrived adolescents from Turkey to the same evaluative criteria as the Spanish girls:

> Enes: Those [Turkish adolescents] from OKAN are different from us, but they are really from Turkey, the living environment is different there.
> Researcher: How are they different?
> Enes: Let's say, they don't care about their privacy, they talk about everything very loud, what happens in their homes and that stuff… Then I think not everyone has to know, we don't have to know what happens at your place, just talk quietly to your friend… But then they talk with a very loud voice about private concerns.
> Researcher: Do you hang out with each other? Turkish adolescents who grew up in Belgium and Turkish adolescents from OKAN?
> Enes: No. (13y, R2, Turkish descent, primary school 5, similar pupil population after transition but including OKAN-classes)

Indeed, rather than drawing boundaries against pupils from a specific ethnic background as such ('Spanish' girls), Enes hinted that, again, it is not so much ethnicity that is important to him but rather adolescents' 'status' as 'newcomers', and specifically how they are perceived as not having fully 'adapted' to their new society. Furthermore, this observation highlights the significance of school class groupings, here particularly the separation of pupils based on their level of Dutch proficiency, in shaping the relationships between pupils (Peltola, 2019). As said, these established-outsider boundaries remained remarkably consistent throughout our research round, as they played an important role in whom pupils chose to interact with or not. This finding is especially relevant since most studies on boundary making primarily examine the dynamics between ethnic groups. Future research, especially in the context of super-diversity, should indeed pay more attention to how boundaries are the outcomes of

different interrelated mechanisms that cannot be understood through an ethnic lens alone (Drewski and Tuppat, 2021).

Only Hala (who is enrolled in a regular class) reported in R3 that she is not bullied anymore, but in this round, she also seemed to have a noticeably different position in her school environment. She stated that her Dutch is much more fluent now and that she is therefore no longer bullied. She implied, then, that it is not the boundary itself which had become blurred or less relevant, but that she, as it were, had 'crossed' (Zolberg and Woon, 1999) the established-outsider boundary and is now accepted as one of the 'established' adolescents (see also Serdar, 2017).

Conclusion

In this article, we used the concept of moral boundaries (Lamont, 1992) to examine how young people talk about their friendship group preferences. We showed that the respondents, particularly in schools with a significant social class division between the ethnic majority and minority groups, respondents differentiated the majority from minority groups based on qualities like stinginess or generosity, good behaviour or rebelliousness, and decent or indecent conduct. This aligns with existing research indicating that social class disparities have a strong influence on individuals' boundary making and moralities (Lamont, 2000) and the extent to which also pupils interact or do not interact (Iqbal et al., 2017). Similarly, previous literature has demonstrated moral boundary making between selective and non-selective classrooms or between students enrolled in vocational tracks and those in academic tracks (Peltola, 2021; Van Praag et al., 2015). In our research context, where social class differences and ethnicity are closely intertwined, we discovered similar boundary-making mechanism, but then between children of diverse social classes. However, the respondents did not use explicit social class categories when establishing moral boundaries or attributing moral qualities to specific social groups. Instead, they primarily employed ethnonyms.

Furthermore, while these schools had a population of pupils from many different ethnic backgrounds, occupying a minority position seemed to foster a sense of group identity, and terms like 'allochthons' or 'Muslims' were frequently used to indicate this belongingness to a specific group of 'minorities' (see also Peltola, 2021). This is, of course,

not entirely surprising Muslims in Europe have frequently been racialised as a homogeneous group, because of their religion but sometimes also because of somatic differences and the overlapping of the two (see e.g., Modood, 2019). These minority groups were in our study often positioned in opposition to the ethnic majority, with the former expressing a feeling of being looked down upon by the latter. Their shared social position as lower-class pupils among middle-class majority peers, although implicitly, may furthermore have fostered their group belonging. The social class inequality between the majority and minority groups appeared to generate certain tensions, and as Sedano (2012) demonstrates, ethnonyms become particularly relevant when young people experience tensions or conflicts.

Another important finding is that although our pupils employed many ethnonyms when describing their friendship groups and the moral values of their peers, it did not necessarily mean that they formed these friendship groups based on ethnicity. Furthermore, we demonstrated how, over the course of two school years, our respondents' boundary drawing changed. When pupils had enrolled in schools with greater social class diversity and reduced social class divisions, they revaluated their previously drawn boundaries and detached them from the ethnic background of their peers, yet, ethnonyms still persisted in their narratives. These results highlight the pervasive presence of ethnic categories in our research context, which is, again, unsurprising considering that these pupils are being raised in an urban environment where ring-wing discourses on migration and Islam are highly visible (Saeys et.al., 2019), and where minorities are consistently confronted with ethnic categories that may evolve (e.g., from 'allochthons' to 'people with a migration background') but consistently label them as 'citizen outsiders' (Beaman, 2017). This is particularly evident in the ways in which our pupils employed different (contested) terms in their language to categorise ethnic minorities, while effortlessly classifying the majority group consistently as 'Belgians'. This illustrates how '"Belgianness" has become an ethnic marker rather than a citizenship status in the context of the diverse neighbourhood' (de Koning and Vollebergh, 2019: 394). For our respondents, the category of 'Belgians' appeared to be associated with the ethnic majority middle-class and the middle-class values they attached to them. Contrastingly, they did not refer to 'nativity' or groups marked by bodily differences or phenotypical characteristics (see also Kostet, 2023). Yet, the moral qualities attached to certain categories such as 'Moroccans' (e.g., as rebellious) most likely do not only represent social class moralities (Willis, 1978) but also display public discourses on this ethnic group's

alleged 'deviant' behaviour (see de Koning and Vollebergh, 2019). We have elaborately discussed how the pupils negotiate such governmental, public and political ethnic categories elsewhere (see Kostet, 2023).

Throughout the three rounds of research, the only moral boundaries that consistently held significance were the divisions between the 'established' and the 'outsiders'. These boundaries were rarely crossed on the playground, indicating their strong influence on friendship group dynamics. While further research is necessary, there are indications that these boundaries were drawn according to a different mechanism. We argued that the first three moral boundaries discussed were primarily connected to ethnic groups as a strategy to revalue one's own position, however, the established-outsider boundaries seemed to be determined by criteria that the pupils effectively find important in their friendships. Our findings strongly align with Sedano's study (2012), which suggest that children consider five main criteria when choosing their friends: seniority in the friendship group, age, gender, kinship, and shared styles of communication. For children from recently arrived migrants, meeting these criteria proves challenging. They evidently lack seniority in the already established friendship groups; they may be of the same age but are not necessarily so (since they often start in a lower grade and are hence older), are often not related to other children, and are seen by the other pupils as exhibiting different styles of communication. According to the respondents, this is partly due to their limited proficiency in the Dutch language and their relative unfamiliarity with local customs at both the school and societal levels. Pupils can cross these boundaries once they meet these criteria, but the boundaries themselves remain persistent and so does their impact on friendship groups.

By exploring how young adolescents differently 'ethnicise' and 'de-ethnicise' moral boundaries as they talk about their friendship groups, this paper thus provides valuable insights into the contexts in which ethnicity becomes more or less relevant. This adds to the growing body of literature that examines how young people in super-diverse cities, especially those growing up as the 'first generation' in majority-minority settings (Crul, 2016), navigate the complexities of social differences in their environments (Iqbal et al., 2017; Visser & Tersteeg, 2019). Through allowing adolescents to reflect on their own moral boundary making and the connection to ethnicity over a two-year-period, we found that, in most cases, the moral criteria they employ to determine their friendship groups are much more persistent than ethnic criteria. This suggests the need for further research on the

influence of various dimensions of social division on adolescents' practices (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2017; Peltola, 2021) and calls for a shift away from relying on the 'ethnic lens' often used in research within ethnically diverse contexts (Sedano, 2012).

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