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## **A qualitative study of how exclusion processes shape friendship development among Turkish-Belgian university students**

### **Abstract**

Our knowledge of how ethnic minority students explain and make sense of their friendship preferences in a university setting remains limited, despite the significance of friendships in the adaptation of students to higher education. Drawing on findings from qualitative interviews, this article explores the friendship preferences of 20 Turkish-Belgian university students in the northern part of Belgium. An inductive thematic analysis is conducted to analyse the interviews through constant comparison. The findings demonstrate that students who preferred same-ethnic friendships valued the role of familiarity and a shared understanding. Students with predominantly interethnic friends referred to having interests and attitudes similar to those of their friends. While students' friendship preferences evolved over time throughout their educational career, the university context allowed students to strengthen or change their preferences for certain groups of friends with particular traits and/or lifestyles and hence facilitated their preferences for homophilous friendships. These friendship preferences and searches were also shaped by inclusion/exclusion processes. Nearly all participants felt excluded or othered by peers of Belgian origin during everyday interactions on campus. However, they interpreted these exclusion experiences differently based on their peer groups and used distinct coping mechanisms, resulting in distinct patterns of friendship preferences.

**Keywords:** ethnic friendships, social homophily, preference-opportunity, social exclusion, university context, Turkish-Belgian students

Universities are interesting contexts for the development of friendships during a crucial phase in the lives of students as emerging adults (Marsh, Allen, Ho, Porter, & McFarland, 2006; Nelson, Thorne, & Shapiro, 2011). The transition to higher education and changes in students' social networks require socio-psychological adjustment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2014). Friendships support the adaptation of students to higher education by increasing their sense of belonging, providing socio-psychological support and facilitating academic adjustment (Buote et al., 2007; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). This is especially important for ethnic minority students, who often encounter more adaptation difficulties in higher education than their ethnic majority counterparts. Nevertheless, due to the increased ethno-cultural diversity in universities, compared to secondary education, students enjoy more opportunities to meet friends from various ethnic backgrounds (Jacobs, Rea, Teney, Callier, & Lothaire, 2009; Thys & Van Houtte, 2016). This could imply both more interethnic contact and more separation between ethnic or religious communities on campus (Morrison, 2010; Nelson, Dickson, & Hargie, 2003).

While contact between groups was found to improve intergroup relations (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Voci, Cairns, & Hughes, 2013; Fischer, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011), it can also have negative implications for minority groups, exposing them to social exclusion or discriminatory treatment (Baysu, Phalet, & Brown, 2014). Thus, students could prefer having friends with a similar cultural or religious background to deal with social exclusion (Hopkins, 2011; Reynolds, 2007; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Apart from these preferences, institutional features such as the level of (ethnic) diversity, which impacts the possibility of establishing interethnic contact, can explain the development of friendships as well (Moody, 2001; Quillian & Campbell, 2003).

In order to understand the accommodation of ethnic minorities in a university setting, more insight is needed in students' friendship patterns within this context (Godley, 2008; Zeng & Xie, 2008). Hence, this study aims to understand: (1) how ethnic minority students make sense of and reflect on their friendship preferences on a university campus; (2) how these friendship preferences are linked to opportunities to meet ethnic in- and out-groups in a university setting; and (3) how inclusion and exclusion processes on a university campus contribute to the friendship preferences of students? The present study will focus on the development of friendship preferences of Turkish-Belgian students in a Flemish university setting. This study fills in a gap in the literature in research on friendships in Flanders, as previous studies primarily focused on the primary or secondary school context (Agirdag, Demanet, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011; Demanet, Agirdag, & Van Houtte, 2012; Van Praag, Boone, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2015).

### **Theories of friendship and intergroup contact**

#### *Friendship preferences within a university setting*

Several factors can impact ethnic friendship preferences. First of all, at the individual level, people prefer those who are similar to them, referred to as social homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Previous research found a higher attraction of individuals towards people with similar values, attitudes (Byrne, 1997) and interests (Cohen, 1983). Additionally, people sharing the same age, religion, education level and gender more easily connect with each other (McPherson et al., 2001). Having the same ethnic/racial origin is shown to be one of the strongest markers of friendship preference (Baerveldt, Zijlstra, de Wolf, Van Rossem, & Van Duijn, 2007; McPherson et al., 2001; Moody, 2001). Whereas ethnic minority groups were found to have less ethnic homogeneity in their friendship groups (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2006), this could be due to fewer opportunities to meet same-

ethnic peers, who are a numerical minority compared to majority groups (Baerveldt et al., 2007).

Contextual factors such as the level of ethnic diversity and the relative number of ethnic groups can structure the opportunities to meet people, regardless of their similarities (Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010). For instance, the concentration of ethnic minority students in a large school setting is shown to increase preferences to establish same-ethnic friendships (Bahns, Pickett, & Crandall, 2012; Moody, 2001). Related to this, people become more attracted to those they meet often, referred to as the 'propinquity effect' (Blau & Schwartz, 1984). For example, students in the USA were more likely to become friends with students they encountered most often during their first year in college (Antonio, 2004). These studies have mainly outlined the importance of contextual characteristics for the development of (interethnic) friendships (Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009).

#### *Inclusion and exclusion processes in a university context*

The development of interethnic friendships within a particular context has advantages for students, but certainly not in all situations. On the positive side, intergroup contact reduces ethnic prejudice, producing a positive change in social relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Specifically, friendships are crucial in developing positive out-group attitudes and negating stereotypes (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012). Nevertheless, contextual features and the status of groups engaged in contact determine to what extent intergroup contact yields positive effects (Kende, Phalet, Van den Noortgate, Kara, & Fischer, 2018; Tropp, Hawi, Laar, & Levin, 2012).

Interethnic contact could also have negative outcomes. Conflict theorists postulated that contact can lead to more conflicts by making threats to the group interests of individuals more salient when resources are limited and interests clash with those of the ethnic group

(Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995). Furthermore, the effects of intergroup contact can differ for majority and minority groups. For minorities, contact with majority groups can decrease their motivation to acknowledge discrimination against their groups (Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012; Tropp et al., 2012). In turn, perceived discrimination could also prevent minority group members from engaging in contact (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005), encouraging them to turn to same-ethnic friends for support (Reynolds, 2007). In conclusion, inclusion and exclusion processes are intertwined with the development of friendships and consequently can impact the establishment of interethnic friendships of ethnic minority students in a university context.

In the current study, we focus on the friendship preferences of students of Turkish-Belgian heritage. This ethnic minority group remains distinct since they grew up in Belgium, have Belgian nationality and are proficient in Dutch but are still perceived to be ‘not from Belgium’ and belonging to a different cultural community. Consequently, high levels of ethnic inequality and discrimination against ethno-religious minority groups persist in Belgium (Bail, 2008). Furthermore, due to the unequal distribution of ethnic groups across different study tracks in Flemish secondary education, the likelihood of finding same-ethnic peers in a university/course setting remains relatively smaller for ethnic minorities, compared to ethnic majority students (Jacobs et al., 2009). This group of students experiences ethnic discrimination during secondary education in teacher recommendations and inequity in school tracking (D’hondt, 2016; Teney, Devleeshouwer, & Hanquinet, 2013). This does not only lead to fewer Turkish descent students at university, but also indicates that those who make it there have likely already faced ample discrimination throughout their school career (Teney et al., 2013). These experiences of discrimination are important to explore as they could be intertwined with friendship orientations (Reynolds, 2007). Given this, we want to

examine how these ethnic minority students who suffer social exclusion and discrimination develop friendships in a university setting.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants and Procedure*

The present study was conducted in one of the largest universities in Flanders, with approximately 50,000 students. An estimated 12% of the students enrolled had a migration background in 2017–2018, including those from other European members states, while 18% of the students had a nationality other than Belgian. In this study, we focus on the friendship preferences of Turkish-Belgian students as they are a major immigrant minority group in Belgium. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Turkish-Belgian full-time students (six men, 14 women). Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years. All were born in and grew up in Belgium. Turkish immigrant communities are relatively homogeneous in terms of language, social background and settlement patterns in Belgium (Crul et al., 2012). Around 65% of the participants came from Limburg province, where their grandparents had first arrived from Turkey to work in the coal mines during the 1950s. Most of them grew up in neighbourhoods heavily populated by co-ethnics. In line with the ethnic distribution of students across class groups in the Flemish educational system (cf. Van Praag, Verhoeven, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2019), the class groups of the respondents were ethnically more mixed in primary education, but this proportion decreased in the secondary education tracks in which they were enrolled that prepared them for higher education.

The participants were contacted by adopting convenience sampling methods comprised of three distinct ways to find students with diverse patterns in terms of friendship preferences. A first group of participants was contacted by the lead researcher using a snowball technique to access students of Turkish origin from various disciplines of study. Through this sampling method we discovered events organized by a Turkish student

association on campus. This association provided students with a touch of home culture as Turkish was the preferred language of communication at the events. Turkish music was played and Turkish food and drink were served during activities. A second group of participants was contacted and selected through inquiries made with those who had previously joined or rejected invitations to become involved with this Turkish association. Finally, a third group of participants was contacted through the diversity office of the university. These participants were contacted by e-mail and were sent an online questionnaire seeking information on their personal histories and friendships. To diversify the student sample based on friendship patterns, students' responses on these questions concerning friendships, students were invited to participate in the individual interviews.

All participants were given information about the aim of the research and were assured of the confidentiality of their participation. Pseudonyms were chosen to ensure students' anonymity. Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher between January 2014 and November 2015. The average interview lasted from 120 to 180 min. The interview language was Turkish, as all participants and the lead researcher spoke fluent Turkish. The interviews were later translated into English. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on friendship preferences, everyday interactions with peers and social exclusion inside and outside the university.

#### *Data analysis*

An inductive thematic analysis using constant comparative method was applied during data collection and analysis to reflect critically on the data, compare findings systematically, adjust the interview questionnaires slightly if needed, and ensure the validity of the results of this study. Data analysis consisted of several stages. The first stage involved identifying themes in a recursive process that required moving back and forth between interview transcriptions and paying attention to the repeated meaning patterns to examine and reveal



“underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations” during data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006:84). The constant comparative technique was later used to understand different patterns in the participants’ friendships and examine factors in order to comprehend how these distinct patterns emerged. Recurring themes were identified and framed according to the different friendship patterns of the participants. In the final stage of analysis, findings were categorized based on the friendship preferences of the students, the role of the university context in explaining the friendship development of the students and finally the exclusion experiences of students in everyday interactions with ethnic majority groups. NVivo11 software (2014) was used to systematically index the themes. To reduce researcher bias and ensure the validity of the findings, three participants were asked to comment on the data analyses.

## **Results**

The findings of the study are organized into three main themes. The first theme, “seeking homophily in friendships” captures the ways students formed ethnically and/or socially homophilous friendships in the university context. Students with same-ethnic friendships underlined the role of familiarity and a common understanding. Many of them strengthened their ties by attending activities of a student association founded by students of Turkish origin or in dormitories. Students who had predominantly ethnic majority friends referred to the similarity of interests and attitudes in their friendships. This group was more likely to meet like-minded friends in classes or during campus activities predominantly attracting students of Belgian heritage. The second theme, “the importance of the university context for friendship preferences” is focused on how students made friends in distinct places of the university setting (e.g., dormitories, student houses, university courses, etc.). While students’ friendship preferences evolved over time throughout their educational career, the university

context allowed students to strengthen or change their preferences for certain groups of friends with sought-after traits and lifestyles. The third theme, “social exclusion in everyday interactions” elaborates on the ethnic minority students’ experiences of exclusion during everyday interactions on campus. Even though nearly all participants felt excluded or othered by their peers of Belgian heritage during everyday interactions on campus, they interpreted these exclusion experiences differently. This resulted in the use of different coping mechanisms and patterns of friendship preferences.

### *Seeking homophily in friendships*

Many students with same-ethnic friends preferred this due to the higher level of familiarity and a common understanding. They noted that they felt more at ease in self-disclosure with their peers due to sharing similar cultural values (Baerveldt et al., 2007). Canan (Bachelor, Medical Sciences) for instance, had friends of Belgian heritage in secondary school. She also spent most of her time with them at the university as her classmates and dormmates were all of Belgian origin. Despite seeing her Turkish-Belgian friends less often due to the pressure of academic work, Canan felt more comfortable when with same-ethnic peers:

I cannot speak about my deepest worries to a Belgian, whereas I can share my most intimate feelings with my Turkish friends at the university. Yet, my Belgian friends are very understanding too. (...) We do sports together or watch movies. But their sense of humour is quite different. (...) Something is always missing, like intimacy and warmth.

Despite having good relations with her friends of Belgian heritage, Canan chose to share her emotions with her same-ethnic peers. The conversations with students of Belgian origin were often described as superficial by these students, whereas those with same-ethnic friends were seen as more meaningful. This was partly due to the differences in family structure, religious

habits and lifestyles with ethnic majority friends, which made it more complicated to engage in in-depth discussions about their concerns and issues related to these matters. Many respondents felt that lifestyle differences with ethnic majority peers became more pronounced at university, which complicated engaging in deep conversation.

A second group of students with predominantly ethnic majority friends underlined the role of shared interests and similar attitudes in their friendships. Serkan (Bachelor, Sociology) never belonged to a group with only students of Turkish origin and distanced himself from most same-ethnic peers:

I have few Turkish friends because we have different interests. I don't like football. I like studying. They enjoy hanging around outside, I don't like it. ... You know, Turks are always talking about Turkish TV series. I like watching American series. I am not able to have conversations with Turks.

Serkan noted that there was little similarity between his interests and those of students of Turkish origin. Generalizing stereotypes about people of Turkish origin, he associated himself mainly with his peers of Belgian heritage. Most of these students had a few Turkish-Belgian friends, who, they said, were like-minded and not representative of their ethnic group. When talking about their friendships, both groups of students had the tendency to highlight the (stereotypical) differences between ethnic groups and emphasized the ethnic categories of their friends. A few students did not perceive differences in relationships between their Turkish heritage and Belgian heritage friends. Ali (Master, History), for instance, said he shared similar interests with all his friends, regardless of their ethnic background. When he had a question, though, about the Dutch language, he said he would contact his friends of Belgian heritage:

It is basic guys' conversation with both groups. Football, girls, cars, vacation and so on. I don't have any challenges finding common ground with the Flemish. If I have a

question about the language, I ask my Flemish friend, like how I can say this. How would the Turkish friends know how to say it?

Similar to Ali, only a couple of students said that what they shared with their friends depended more on their relationship rather than ethnicity.

Finally, we should note that the friendship preferences of most students were built on previous experiences in secondary school. For instance, Esra (Bachelor, Chemistry) explained how she first began to make friends with students of Belgian heritage in secondary school: *I began to spend more time with the Flemish when my friend [of Turkish origin] left the class. It was really fun, and I was like, 'Oh this is not bad at all.' Like one could become friends with them.* Esra had also made friends of Belgian heritage in her class and in her dormitory. Hence, over the course of their university career, students made friends in various places on the university campus, and these friendships evolved over time.

#### *The importance of the university context for friendship preferences*

While many students with same-ethnic peers already had a slight preference towards ethnic in-groups before coming to the university, they did not always have the opportunity to meet them. Their leaning towards same-ethnic peers in secondary school was clear in the accounts of students as they explained their interethnic friendships by referring to the absence of students of Turkish origin: Emre (Master, Engineering) reflected on this, stating: *I hung out with the Flemish in secondary school because there were only Flemish in my class, I was always alone as a Turk.* This tendency to seek same-ethnic peers whenever possible was also found in the university context. Many students who searched for same-ethnic peers on campus were seeking familiarity to avoid having to explain their non-mainstream choices for (stereotypical) student life and to deal with (subtle) othering processes. Fulya (Bachelor, Criminology) experienced feeling othered in secondary school through jokes targeting

students of Turkish origin. These previous experiences of exclusion by her peers in the form of ethnic teasing (Douglass, Mirpuri, English, & Yip, 2016) caused her to strengthen her ethnic ties when she arrived on campus: *When I first entered the class, I checked whether there were any Turks. I knew there wouldn't be, but still I checked anyway.*

Even though same-ethnic peers were difficult to find in the same class, the university context seemed to offer more options to meet them in comparison to secondary school. More importantly, the university context itself appeared to alter students' friendship preferences, since students were reminded of their 'differences' while trying to develop new friendships with ethnic majority students. Asli (Bachelor, Medical Sciences) said the ethnic composition of her group of friends changed from peers of Belgian heritage to those of Turkish heritage once she enrolled in university:

I don't become friends with anyone in the class now. Of course, I talk to them when we sit together at the same desk. I guess I'm different now because of the Turks here. I don't feel the need to become friends. I would have had a lot of Flemish friends by now if there weren't any Turks here. You get tired of explaining yourself after a while. With my old Flemish friends, I don't have to explain myself anymore, so I'm still in touch with them, things like I don't go out at night, I'm Turkish, I'm Muslim, I don't go to bars, etc. I hang out at different places with my Turkish friends.

To avoid feeling excluded due to her lifestyle and background, Asli mentioned that she increasingly chose to attend activities where she had more opportunities to meet same-ethnic friends with similar lifestyles and preferences. She underlined that she and her Turkish-Belgian friends searched for places where they could meet and feel free from the burden of explaining themselves and their lifestyles (Mellor, Merino, Saiz, & Quilaqueo, 2009).

The Turkish student association on campus became a meeting place for many students of Turkish origin who were in search of familiarity and inclusion in the company of others

similar to them. A group of students referred to the role of this association in making them feel at home on the university campus -- specifically, students who did not feel comfortable joining in campus activities and parties. They underlined that the association provided them with alternative ways of enjoying themselves. Emre (Master, Engineering) stated that preserving their Turkish identity and cultural values was important for university students of Turkish heritage:

I see Turks more frequently after coming to the student association [of the university]. It's necessary. There's not that much interaction between students at the university. They [students of Belgian origin] go to a disco to have fun, Turks do it differently, and they also need to feel at home. This place is necessary for Turks so that they don't forget their Turkish identity.

Emre noted that the association facilitated the adaptation of students of Turkish origin to university life as all student groups had their own separate student clubs on campus. Thus, the university context had changed the activities students participated in for entertainment as well as the opportunities to meet same-ethnic peers. This changing context had altered 'othering' processes. The feeling of being othered or different in particular seemed to be a motivation to, for instance, join in the activities of the Turkish student association with the goal of meeting mainly same-ethnic peers.

Although ethnic gatherings appeared to provide many students with a sense of belonging on the university campus, a few students had a negative attitude towards ethnic cliques and described the activities of the Turkish student association as "too Turkish". This was expressed by Ceren (Bachelor, Social Sciences), who said: *It did not appeal to me at all, everybody speaks Turkish, they play Turkish music and all. Also, I don't feel lonely or alienated. They said in their presentation that it was for those students.* While Ceren did not find the activities organised by the association to be interesting, other students said they felt

uncomfortable about the ways in which they thought the association participants viewed them. Ece (Master, Engineering) distanced herself from such Turkish ethnic activities as well as certain same-ethnic peer groups on campus:

The way Turks here think is not for me. (...) They can interfere a lot with people's lives. They also look down on you, criticize your clothes, the type of places you go and don't see you like a true Turk. If I don't feel comfortable, I don't see them. Why should I?

Facing ethnic conformity pressure from her same-ethnic peers on campus and feeling othered in ethnic gatherings due to her lifestyle choices, Ece sought more inclusive friendship groups (see also Van Kerckem, Van de Putte & Stevens, 2014). Similarly, Hale (Bachelor, Biomedical Sciences) referred to the lack of interest among Turkish-Belgian students in attending the kind of social activities she enjoyed:

I have been attending social activities after school since childhood. I have been taking piano and singing classes and take part in theatre clubs. I also joined the university choir, but I don't really see Turks at any of these activities. I am always the only Turk there. Of course, my parents supported me doing these things. I would like to have Turkish friends, but unfortunately there aren't many with whom I can share these things.

Hale wanted to have same-ethnic friends during her school career, but she found that *'there were not many who were as "open-minded" as herself'*. As noted by Hale, the numerical majority of students of Belgian heritage within these particular leisure activities explained the great likelihood of becoming friends with someone of Belgian origin (Zeng & Xie, 2008). Since these students spent most of their time on campus attending activities with students of Belgian heritage, their chances of being attracted to and becoming friends with them increased (Moody, 2001). Thus, students such as Ece and Hale found the university context

liberating as they encountered more opportunities to meet people with similar worldviews and lifestyles. For these students, this did not mean that they did not want to meet same-ethnic peers. Rather, the relatively small number or absence of Turkish-Belgian students with similar views and leisure activities caused them to prefer to hang out with students of Belgian heritage.

To conclude, entering the university context allowed all students to select their friends more carefully in order to establish friendships with people who had similar interests and lifestyles. As the university context provided more opportunities to meet in terms of ethnicity, lifestyle and views, it seemed that friendship preferences and patterns became more homophilous in those terms. Nevertheless, these friendship preferences were also shaped by experiences of exclusion. In the following section, we will delve deeper into the importance of these exclusion processes for friendship preferences.

#### *Social exclusion in everyday interactions*

Many students found that ‘fitting in’ with the ethnic majority group appeared to be a challenge all along, resulting in feelings and experiences of being excluded and alienated. They shared their experiences of being excluded by students of Belgian heritage in secondary school due to their ethnic background (Moffitt, Juang & Syed, 2018). These experiences also shaped their friendship preferences in the university context. For example, Yasemin (Bachelor, Economic Sciences) was laughed at by her ethnic majority peers in secondary school for not knowing about a Flemish TV program: *I said at that moment that I would no longer try to be like them. I started searching for Turks in the school. And it has continued like that. I always sought Turkish friends as I could not be myself when I was with the Flemish. I just felt better that way.* Yasemin had a group of same-ethnic friends in her dormitory and a mixed group of friends from various backgrounds in her class.



Even though only a couple of students said they were openly excluded in the university setting by ethnic majority groups, subtle forms of othering remained an everyday reality for many, as noted by Fulya (Bachelor, Criminology): *There are certain groups at the university -- they recognize you and where you come from, they don't talk to you, they ignore you. They make jokes about migrating from another country to Belgium.* Such subtle forms of exclusion and their negative impact on minority groups have been documented by studies exploring the pervasiveness of racial micro-aggressions on university campuses (Bailey, 2016; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). The focus on everyday interactions of students in particular revealed that they tried to avoid the “exhaustion” of having to explain identity-related issues and not being fully understood by their ethnic majority peers during social interactions. Salih (Master, Japanese Studies), for instance, said he avoided highlighting his ethnic Turkish identity when he was around peers of Belgian heritage:

My foreign friends are aware of my Turkish identity, but I don't really express my Turkish identity that much when I am with them. (...) You can't talk about issues regarding Turkish culture. You can talk about some things, but in a very superficial way. You can't go deeper because they don't share the same feelings and values as you. I talk to them about school, courses, social activities, Japan and Japanese people and so on.

By limiting his conversations with ethnic majority peers to certain topics around school and social activities, Salih avoided explaining issues about his background and culture (Paolini et al., 2004). Students reflected on how differences in family life practices between ethnic groups unfolded during everyday interactions with ethnic majority groups, subtly giving away their different ethnic origins. Yasemin (Bachelor, Economic Sciences), for instance, did not bring up her identity until there was a discussion about Turkey, even though she felt that even

everyday talk about family practices already revealed her ‘otherness.’ She recalled an incident where she was going home for the weekend and she was discussing the suitcases with two friends of Belgian descent and one of Moroccan descent. During this conversation, it appeared that her friends of Belgian origin got their sheets washed every week whereas in her family the sheets were not washed that often:

I was surprised and said we did not wash sheets every week. Their reactions were like: Aah. The Moroccan also said they didn’t wash them every week, either. [The Moroccan friend] talked to me later about it and said it would have been better if I had not brought it up because through such things, you slowly begin to realize that you are different.

Yasemin and her friend clearly discussed whether or not they should mention perceived cultural differences when with friends of Belgian origin. Similarly, a few students reported adopting certain strategies to reduce these apparent differences around their friends of Belgian heritage by hiding some features of their family life or ethnic identity, as noted by Kerem (Master, Social Sciences): *If my parents call me when I’m around Flemish friends and I need to speak Turkish, it creates a certain kind of discomfort. I am not changing myself because of it, but it creates uneasiness.*

In addition to feeling different, students also reflected on being exposed to stereotypical remarks and questions during interactions with ethnic majority friends. They described as burdensome having to answer stereotypical questions about their background. For many students, both being seen as an exceptional ‘good Turk’, or not being recognized as an equal Belgian by ethnic majority peers appeared to be a frustrating and painful experience. These experiences of feeling othered and excluded during everyday interactions with ethnic majorities seemed to encourage them to cultivate friendships with people who share similar experiences (Yosso et al., 2009).

The accounts of Turkish-Belgian students showed that, apart from their own friendship preferences, they encountered difficulty in being accepted and part of Belgian origin peer groups. They stated that ethnic majority groups were not interested in interactions with people outside of their ethnic groups. Consequently, participants were uncertain when approaching Belgian descent peers. Ezgi (Master, Biochemical Engineering) said that she encountered difficulties in joining peer groups in her class:

Flemish people are not very open to others. It's not easy to join their friendship groups. (...) Sometimes I even find it hard to go and eat with the group [of Flemish] I'm most familiar with. It feels like you are interrupting them as they are conversing. (...) When I ask whether I can join them, they just keep on talking. The fact that you joined them does not make any difference. I wonder if they really want me to join them.

In order to prevent these exclusionary experiences, Ezgi mentioned that she adopted specific strategies for feeling more accepted among her friends of Belgian heritage, such as pretending to have knowledge of popular culture relating to specific music or television programmes. In an effort to keep up with them during conversations, she eventually began to watch more American TV series instead of Turkish productions. Overall, participants used distinct coping strategies to deal with these felt and perceived cultural/ethnic differences between ethnic groups and prevailing (negative) stereotypes in society towards people of Turkish origin. These diverging coping strategies became more apparent in the university setting, where both groups mentioned more opportunities to meet, compared to secondary school, to find people of a similar ethnic background or with similar lifestyles and views. This way, both groups of students adopted self-protective strategies to avoid exclusion by staying away from potentially excluding social situations and friendship groups (Mellor et al., 2009).

Regardless of their friendship preferences, all students were conscious of the prevailing negative ethnic stereotypes, ethnic in and out-groups, and the differences in cultural, religious and social practices. Nonetheless, the interpretation of these exclusionary experiences differed across groups. Many students with same-ethnic friends agreed that there was discrimination against their ethnic group; half of the students with mainly ethnic majority friends either thought that there was no discrimination against their ethnic group or downplayed their experiences of discrimination by attributing such experiences to the negative characteristics of the people who discriminated against them. Nil, for instance, did not make any friends in her class because of a fear of not being understood by students of Belgian descent and spent most of her time with her same-ethnic peers whom she met in her dormitory. According to Nil (Bachelor, Psychology), there was discrimination against Muslims in Belgium:

I live in Belgium, but I don't really belong here. People here make you feel as if you're a foreigner, you can't feel like a Flemish, they alienate you. Research shows there is discrimination against Muslims; we are always second-class citizens.

Unlike Nil, students with predominantly Belgian descent friends argued that they lived in an equal society and there was no discrimination against minorities. Esra (Bachelor, Chemistry), who had mainly ethnic out-group friends, referred to several incidents which annoyed her on university campus and underlined that she would not interpret them as discriminatory:

When people treat me badly, I attribute this to their character. I would not say they're discriminating. Now on campus too, they always talk to me in English. They only see me as Flemish when I am with a Flemish friend. They are surprised that I can speak Flemish fluently. They are just ignorant.

These accounts illustrate the importance of perceived discrimination in the lives of these students that inevitably caused them to develop coping strategies to deal with such experiences.

To conclude, all students of Turkish heritage referred to experiences of discrimination and othering in society and secondary and higher education. These experiences have shaped their friendship preferences but also seemed to matter when attempting to establish intergroup contact. While participants who preferred to establish friendships with same-ethnic peers interpreted these exclusionary experiences as a signal to invest more in same-ethnic peers and to avoid such experiences, others focused more on their selective group of friends with similar lifestyle preferences and interpreted such discriminatory acts as a feature that characterizes only particular groups of people.

## **Discussion**

The present study explored the peer relationships of Turkish-Belgian students in a university context in Belgium to gain deeper insight into the development of ethnic friendship preferences in this setting. We specifically focused on the study of the ways ethnic minority students make sense of their friendship preferences on a university campus, the link between these friendship preferences and the university setting, and finally how inclusion and exclusion processes during everyday interactions with ethnic majorities shape friendship preferences. The following three conclusions can be drawn from this study.

First, many students strengthened their ethnic ties on the university campus by showing a preference for same-ethnic friendships (McPherson et al., 2001). They often referred to the cultural familiarity and similar experiences (Baerveldt et al., 2007) and sharing similar lifestyles and religious values (Seggie & Sanford, 2010) to explain their friendship preferences. At the same time, there is also a relatively large, significant group of students of

Turkish origin who had predominantly ethnic majority friends and underlined the importance of similar interests and attitudes with their friends. These students also mentioned homophily processes; however, ethnicity did not seem to be a valid or sufficient marker for friendship formation. Nonetheless, their narratives implied that they expected to find friends with shared interests and attitudes more easily among students of Belgian heritage than those of Turkish heritage. Overall, ethnic categories appeared to play a significant role in how students made sense of and explained their peer relationships.

Second, the university setting appeared to facilitate the adaptation of many students to higher education by providing them with opportunities to meet either same-ethnic peers with similar lifestyles or intergroup friends with shared interests and attitudes. In particular, students with same-ethnic friends underlined that the presence of other Turkish-Belgian students on campus increased their sense of belonging and made them feel at home on campus. As indicated by earlier studies, a positive campus climate and a strong sense of belonging is particularly crucial for academic engagement and socio-psychological adaptation of minority students (Stebbleton, Soria, Huesman, & Torres, 2014; Yosso et al., 2009). Same-ethnic friendships appeared to act as an important support mechanism for ethnic minority groups in their transition and accommodation to higher education. Similarly, for students who did not feel included in circles of same-ethnic peers, the university setting appeared to offer alternative opportunities to find like-minded friends.

Although students arrive on campus shaped by their previous experiences and socialization patterns (Park & Chang 2015), distinct meeting opportunities have led to distinct friendship formation patterns and preferences. Students with mainly same-ethnic friends showed a clear preference for same-ethnic peers despite encountering ethnic majority students more frequently during their courses and on campus (McPherson et al., 2001). Hence, the effects of homophily are further strengthened by the propinquity effect as ethnic

gatherings rarely included students from other backgrounds (Moody, 2001). For their part, most students with predominantly ethnic majority peers avoided activities organized by Turkish-Belgian students and chose to spend their time with like-minded peers of Belgian heritage. Consequently, for this second group, the increased opportunities to meet ethnic in-groups on campus did not imply a change in their friendship preferences. The findings suggest that, students with mainly intergroup friends perceived social exclusion and control from co-ethnics due to their personal lifestyle choices. Hence, their orientation towards friends of Belgian origin and avoidance from ethnic in-groups can be seen as a strategy to deal with ethnic conformity pressure and exclusion (cf. Van Kerckem et al., 2014).

Third, exclusionary processes linked to ethnic identity, religious practices, lifestyle and acceptance among ethnic majority peers strengthened the tendency of students to develop friendships with ethnic in-group members. Student accounts suggest that same-ethnic friendship preferences in the university context were partly a response to the exclusive nature of stereotypical student activities, such as drinking (Mir, 2014). As ethnic memberships in Flanders increasingly focus on and coincide with religious beliefs and practices, it is not surprising that feelings of familiarity and exclusionary practices centre around religious affiliation and related practices. Interestingly, whereas many students shared their experiences of feeling excluded, students' attitudes and responses towards discrimination differed depending on their friendship groups. Based on the self-protective strategies developed by Mellor et al. (2009), we can argue that students with same-ethnic friendships adopted an *avoidance strategy* as they remained physically distant from potentially discriminatory peer groups. Students with mainly intergroup friends, however, preferred a *minimizing strategy* as they downscored the significance of discriminatory event, albeit unintentionally. There are mainly two implications associated with the choice for these two self-protective strategies. First, having a shared understanding and attitude concerning issues of exclusion and

discrimination could contribute to the orientation of ethnic minority students towards certain groups of friends (Reynolds, 2007). Second, different kinds of contact that students develop could lead to different ways of thinking about issues of social inequality and inadvertently reinforce intergroup disparities (Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012). Overall, these findings suggest that intergroup contact experiences of ethnic minority students and the exclusion processes in the university context are intertwined with the societal context and structures of inequality (Kende et al., 2018).

Some limitations of this study need to be mentioned as well. We focused on a limited group of Turkish-Belgian students enrolled at the same university. Although the results shine an interesting light on the peer relationships of Turkish-Belgian students and suggest that they are linked to exclusion processes, they cannot be generalized to a wider Belgian context. A natural extension of this study would be to investigate friendships of minority groups in a larger number of universities with diverse contextual characteristics (e.g., in terms of size, ethnic composition). A second limitation of this study is that we did not investigate how gender and the social class background of students impacted students' friendship preferences. Female students are overrepresented in our sample, which could lead to a bias in the results of this study. We found that female and male students did not differ much in terms of their friendship preferences. However, additional in-depth insights of a more gender-balanced sample are needed to further this claim. Hence, future research should explore the intersectionality between ethnicity, gender and social class to understand how exclusion processes and homophilous processes are shaped in contexts with a limited number of ethnic in-groups present.

### **Implications and conclusions**



Some policy recommendations can be made based on the findings. Every participant described othering and discrimination, and that needs to be given greater weight on university campuses. Institutional interventions such as intercultural learning in courses, privilege walks/activities and the ethnic composition of courses and academic personnel can be implemented to create and increase sensitivity about exclusionary processes among friendship groups and the wider society. The findings demonstrate that inequity in education starts early and greater diversity throughout the education process might have a positive effect not only on ethnic density at university but also on facilitating contact between groups. Nonetheless, institutional attempts to promote intergroup contact need to recognize the implications of intergroup contact for disadvantaged groups and avoid highlighting only commonalities between groups. Instead, emphasizing the issues of both intergroup inequality and shared features during intergroup interactions can help to facilitate intergroup understanding (Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012). Creating an inclusive campus climate in which meeting opportunities are used to enhance awareness about societal inequalities and to improve intergroup understanding is crucial.

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