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Identifications, communities and connections:

Intersections of ethnicity and sexuality among diasporic gay men

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Abstract

This paper explores sexual and ethnic-cultural identifications among first and second generation gay migrants in Belgium. Based on a theoretical framework highlighting the multiple, fluid and intersectional nature of identifications, 29 in-depth interviews are used to study self-identifications and connections to different communities. Drawing on a diverse sample, three clusters of participants can be distinguished: second generation migrants, who were born in Belgium; sexual refugees, who escaped to Belgium; and voluntary migrants, who chose to move to Belgium. Ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications interact and vary between these groups of participants, but also within them as they intersect with other social positionings such as class, gender and race.

Keywords

sexual identity - ethnic-cultural identity - intersectionality - queer diaspora

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Sexual minorities such as LGBT¹ people complicate the dominant conception of contemporary migrant populations as constituted of transnational heterosexual families, primarily identifying along ethnic-cultural lines and forming tight communities in the country of residence while maintaining connections with the country of origin. For LGBT individuals, sexual identifications complicate this picture as their sexual orientation may necessitate a voluntary or forced distancing from their family and ethnic-cultural communities. They identify along multiple and sometimes conflicting lines, which can - but does not have to - lead to disconnection from their families of birth and create stronger connections to 'families of choice' (Weston, 1997).

Drawing on a set of in-depth interviews with first and second generation gay identified migrants in Belgium, this paper discusses their multiple connections to, but also disconnections and distances from, different ethnic-cultural and sexual communities. In doing so, it starts from a conception of identities as multiple and processual, best captured under the more dynamic term 'identification'. Drawing on theories of intersectionality, the analysis explores the mutual interaction of and interdependence between ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications in a diasporic context.

The queer diaspora

There is a strong tendency to conceive migration in relation to heterosexual families: nuclear families moving as a whole, or being separated and striving toward

reunification. As noted by Manalansan (2006), sexual orientation may however be a pivotal reason for migration, and migration in turn is important in creating culturally situated sexual identity categories and practices. Using the notion of the 'queer diaspora', Fortier (2002) discusses how both constituent terms refer to complicated contemporary forms of belonging, disclosing heterosexism in definitions of ethnic diaspora while urging to 'diasporize the queer' by studying transnational networks of queer cultures and communities (see also Spurlin 2001).

Research on the queer diaspora is where queer studies and diaspora studies meet, two theoretical frameworks questioning the validity of fixed identity categories. One of the main tenets of queer theory is to radically question and deconstruct sexual identity categorisations (Hall and Jagose 2013) and to conceive sexuality as discursively constructed in culturally and historically specific ways (Sullivan 2003). Instead, 'queer' is proposed as an identity that is permanently 'under construction' (Jagose 1996), or even a 'positionality' rather than an identity (Sullivan 2003). Similarly, the notion of the diaspora questions fixed national and ethnic-cultural identifications, instead referring to multiple transnational movements and positions (Brah 1996) and to a 'third space' of globalized diasporic connections (Sreberny 2000).

By focusing on the queer diaspora, this article aims to contribute to contemporary endeavours to rethink ethnic-cultural group belongings. Drawing on Barth (1969), ethnicity can be considered as the subjective and changeable definition of group boundaries based on a social process of interaction between majority and minority. However, in social debate ethnicity tends to be conceived as a set of primordial and deep-seated cultural differences, which leads to new forms of racism where ethnicity appears to be as immutable as race (Cottle 2000). Such tendencies towards essentialism are also present in diaspora studies: Wimmer and Glick Schiller

(2002) point out how, as a consequence of 'methodological nationalism' (the assumption that the nation is the natural social and political form), diaspora studies tend to relate dispersed populations to the homeland and to conceive them as homogeneous transnational communities, reifying and essentialising them while overlooking their internal divisions. Similarly, Anthias (1998) criticises homogenising tendencies in diaspora studies, while also pointing at the continued importance of ethnic attachments among diasporic populations. As an alternative to such 'groupism', Brubaker (2003) prefers to think of ethnicity in relational, processual and dynamic terms, talking about 'identification' rather than identity.

While I do hold on to the notion of the queer diaspora, which best captures the experiences discussed here, in this research I deliberately chose not to present the participants as representatives of a particular national or ethnic background, but rather to inquire after their subjective self-definition and identifications. This is not to erase the importance of their particular contexts, but to avoid 'framing' participants from the start as members of (national, cultural, ethnic) groups. Similarly, in terms of sexuality I first asked how they identified, so my account is based on self-definitions rather than on preconceived categories.

Discussing the dynamic interplay of ethnicity with other variables such as class, gender and sexuality, many authors use the concept of intersectionality. As first developed in the context of Black feminist studies by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality refers to the interaction between multiple forms of discrimination (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006). Rather than enumerating forms of discrimination, intersectionality refers to the non-additive, transformative interactivity between different forms of social subordination (Choo and Ferree 2010). Intersectionality is also a central concept in queer studies, attending to 'the ways in which various categories of

difference inflect and transform each other' (Hall and Jagose 2013, p. xvi; see also Sullivan 2003). Beside the pivotal interaction between sexuality and gender, other issues such as race, class and religion are increasingly included in queer analysis (e.g. Rahman 2010, Ferguson 2013).

While being useful as a concept, intersectionality is not without its problems. Beside the multiple, inconsistent and ambiguous ways in which the term has been used (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006), another problem concerns the difficulty to study and adequately describe the seemingly insurmountable complexity of multiple intersecting differences (Ludvig 2006). One useful model is that of small-scale, qualitative analysis based on interviews, acknowledging the constructive and narrative nature of identifications (Prins 2006). This echoes the approach proposed by Anthias (2002) to analyse ethnicity not as an identity but rather as a performative narrative of location and positionality. Similarly, in queer research interviews are often used, acknowledging the importance of language in the construction of subject and identity (Cant and Taket 2008). The queer interview highlights the constructive nature of the participants' narratives while also emphasising the importance of self-awareness and reflexivity on behalf of the interviewer (Kong, Mahoney and Plummer 2002).

Studying LGBT people in the diaspora

This paper aims to apply the insights presented above in empirical research, which entails a number of challenges, the first of which is sampling. LGBT people are a relatively 'hidden' population, many of whom are not willing to be placed in established categories or to even disclose their sexual orientation (Dewaele, Cox and Van den Berghe 2006). Research participants tend to be self-selected, with a consistent overrepresentation of white, well-educated, middle class men (Sandfort 2000, Browne and Nash 2010). In Belgian research, too, non-white and non-Western LGBT

individuals are mostly underrepresented (Dewaele et al. 2006).

While Belgium in general is one of the world's most progressive countries in relation to LGBT rights and legislation (including anti-discrimination laws, same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples; see Borghs and Eeckhout, 2009)², acceptance in society is uneven and homonegativity does remain a problem (Versmissen 2011). According to Yves Aerts, coordinator of Çavaria, the LGBT umbrella organisation in Flanders³, one of the challenges is to combat racism (for instance, gay bashing often being connected to particular ethnic communities) and to address the specific needs of ethnic-cultural minority LGBT people (personal communication, 21 August 2013).⁴

Despite these specific problems and needs, in research on sexuality in relation to non-Western cultures it is important to avoid the 'homonationalist' trap of representing the West as sexually progressive and 'others' as unfree (Puar 2007), in particular Muslims who are often represented as straight and opposed to white, Western gays (El-Tayeb 2012, Mepschen and Duyvendak 2012).⁵ Therefore, the current analysis does not want to suggest that ethnic-cultural minority LGBT people in Belgium have problems and ethnic majority LGBT people do not: homosexuality remains an issue in Belgian society at large, while homosexuality is not always a problem among ethnic-cultural minorities. Rather, the aim of this paper is, first, to offer a corrective to the predominant focus on white, ethnic majority LGBT people; and second, to explore the intersections of ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications among this 'group', acknowledging the potential tensions which arise when migrants are incorporated in Western identity models and discourses about sexuality, and/or confronted with discriminatory discourses and practices.

In this project, the aim was to make the sample as ethnically diverse as possible, not only as a counterbalance to the overall tendency for samples to be homogeneously white, but also to avoid the predominant focus in Belgian migration research on the largest non-European, Muslim groups of migrants. Participation in this project was open to any LGBT of non-Western-European origin living in Belgium. First generation (who moved to Belgium) and second generation (born in Belgium) participants were included, also welcoming diversity in terms of gender and age.⁶ Participants were recruited through a variety of channels, including e-mail and Facebook, focusing in particular on the communication platforms and meetings of (ethnic-cultural minority and other) LGBT associations. While all these calls were oriented towards men and women, a particular call for participation was launched through the male dating site GayRomeo, where people viewing the research profile were invited to participate.

Overall, 35 people were interviewed, the majority of them male (29). This partly reflects the sampling method (5 participants were found through GayRomeo) but also the more difficult and 'invisible' position of women in this group (Çavaria 2009), as equally observed by a female researcher in this field (Poelman 2011). In this paper, only the male participants are discussed as it is impossible to do justice to the specificities of both groups, which indeed were markedly different in a number of respects.⁷

As to age, there was a good variation with male participants between 22 and 49 years old. As to national and cultural background, 21 were first generation migrants, while 8 were born in Belgium from parents born abroad. They or their parents migrated from 21 different countries in North-Africa and the Middle East (11 participants), Sub-Saharan Africa (5), Eastern and Northern Europe and ex-USSR (5), Asia (5) and Latin America (3). Due to this diversity, it is impossible to deeply go into the concrete cultural and national backgrounds of each participant. However, as mentioned above

there is also a fundamental reason not to do so: the participants are not considered as representatives of these regions; rather, the aim is to use this diverse sample to explore underlying, structural similarities in their experiences and discourses, across cultural backgrounds.

As to method, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used, combining a list of topics to be addressed with openness to any ideas the participants wanted to share. The topic list was based on a preparatory literature review as well as twelve expert interviews with people working with ethnic-minority LGBT people in Belgium. Questions were asked about ethnic-cultural roots and connections, sexual identifications and coming out, and the relationship between both dimensions of identification. The interviews were fully transcribed verbatim in the language of the interview (Dutch, French or English) and subsequently coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Through an iterative process of coding and analysis, an interpretive framework was established, based on the participants' self-presentations.

As discussed above, in the queer interview (as in any interview) it is important to reflect on one's own position as a researcher. As a white, Western gay man I was partially an insider (in relation to issues of gender and sexuality) and partially an outsider (in relation to diasporic experiences). While this undoubtedly taints my views and had an impact on the interaction with the participants, it is very hard to assess how exactly. Although I share the view that interviews constitute interactive constructions of meaning, including the performative construction of identities, and although I kept a diary reflecting on the research process, this does not allow me to pinpoint the exact ways mutual perceptions played out. What I do know, in relation to sexuality, is that most participants knew I was gay and some explicitly inquired about my relationship status. In relation to ethnic-cultural identity, my degree of 'otherness' as perceived by

the participants seemed to vary according to their own background and length of stay in Belgium, so it is hard to make any general statements on this dimension.

Ethnic-cultural identifications

While it is impossible to do justice to the participants' varied cultural backgrounds in an article-length account, it is possible and useful to distinguish some shared experiences in relation to migration and ethnic-cultural identification. Analysing the interviews and using a bottom-up approach, it became apparent that responses in relation to issues of identification could be clustered according to the generation of and motivation for migration. This is not to introduce yet another essentialising categorisation, implying absolute homogeneity within each group; however, distinguishing such groups is a useful heuristic device to analyse the varied yet structured ways in which identifications intersect.

A first group of eight participants belongs to the *second generation*. They were born in Belgium from parents born elsewhere and are therefore surrounded by their family and an ethnic-cultural community, which often makes it hard for them to openly explore their sexual orientation (Hekma 2011). This is the most discussed group in relation to ethnic-cultural minority sexuality in Belgium. Often belonging to non-European Islamic cultures, their experiences are generally related to wider discourses about cultural 'clashes' between their home culture and Belgian values, in particular between their religion and secularized society (e.g. Vuylsteke 2008, De Roover, 2013). While the exclusive focus on this group and these issues may betray a homonationalist stance, there is undeniably some tension between these communities and Western models of homosexuality, as voices from within and sympathetic to the Islamic community admit (e.g. Nahas 2005). However, the close and almost exclusive connection to the Islam is

misguided. Among the second generation participants in this project, six have a background in Islamic countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey), but two others come from Asia (China). Despite the very different cultural and religious contexts of the latter two, their stories are remarkably similar.

Their parents migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Turkish and North-African migration at that time was organised and primarily economically motivated, the Belgian state inviting 'guest labourers' to work in the booming industries (CGKR, 2009). Chinese migration was more small-scale, the parents of both participants having escaped communist China for political reasons. Despite their different migration histories, all second-generation participants have a lot of family in Belgium and these families tend to be close-knit, both because family bonds are very important in their country of origin and because the family is particularly important in the diasporic context as a system of social and economic support. For instance, Fatih stresses the importance and strength of his Turkish family:

Fatih: In any case, I see my family a lot. We are a tight family. (...) We are not very traditional, but we have our culture, a very tight family. It's spontaneous, being attached to each other, also supporting each other. ⁸

Beside their family, second generation participants also tend to have large and strongly connected ethnic-cultural communities in Belgium, which for most implies a high degree of social control.

In this group, the feeling of simultaneous connection to different countries and cultures is strong. As they were born and educated in Belgium, they are very familiar with Belgian culture, while they also remain strongly connected to their 'home' culture through their families. For instance, Mehdi states he has lost contact with his country of origin, Tunisia. When asked if this means he feels more Belgian now, he answers:

No, I feel equally Belgian and Tunesian.

Q: Fifty-fifty?

Mehdi: Yes. I think that people with a double nationality, it's always a bit weird in their head: what are you, really?

Of all the participants in this project, second generation participants are most strongly integrated in Belgian society (through language, school, work etc.), but they are also most surrounded by their ethnic-cultural communities and they often travel back to their country of origin. As a result, more than the others they frequently switch between contexts where different cultural attachments become salient.

A second group of nine participants are first generation migrants. Even if they are not all refugees in terms of legal status,⁹ I will call them *sexual refugees* because all (felt they) were forced to escape their country of origin, mainly because of their sexual orientation. This group has been growing in number over the past years, partly due to the relatively high acceptance rate of LGBT asylum seekers in Belgium (while other migration 'routes' are increasingly being closed down) and partly to the increasingly homophobic legislations in Sub-Saharan Africa where most candidates come from (Çavaria 2013). For instance, when asked if sexuality was the reason why Peter, an activist and refugee, escaped Nigeria, he says:

That's 100% why I moved. I didn't move here because of economic reasons, I know a lot of people do that. But I moved because I know there's a future here for me. (...) For me, I moved because I knew there is a place like this for me, there's a place I can be able to live free as a gay person. I never lived with a man all my life, but this is the first time I'm starting to do it and I really feel happy, I feel like: ah, I think my dream is coming true.

Refugees often do not have the freedom to travel back, either because they lack the funds, because they have no passport (yet) or because it is not safe for them to travel

back as known gays. Most come from countries where homosexuality is criminalized (Burundi, Chechnya, Irak, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone), while one comes from a rural and very religious part of Brazil.

When asked about the degree to which they identify with Belgium and/or their country of origin, the sexual refugees display a wide variety of often contradictory attachments. A few feel more or even almost uniquely attached to their country of origin. While for some this is just a matter of not having been in Belgium very long, for others this also reflects the experience of having to - but not really wanting to - leave their country of origin and family. Some feel quite attached to their country of origin, but also rejected by it, because of their homosexuality. For instance Peter, when asked if he feels attached to his home culture, answers:

Absolutely, I would never leave that, I would never leave my culture, I would never leave my upbringing. I love my family, I love my country, Nigeria. But if my country doesn't accept me for being gay, there I don't love my country I'm sorry to say.

For similar reasons of rejection and exclusion, some feel more Belgian or European. On the whole, in terms of ethnic-cultural identification and compared to the second generation participants, this group is both more strongly connected to the country of origin (as they have lived there) but also (forcibly) more distanced from it, thus displaying very contradictory attachments.

A third group also responded to the call for participation: twelve first generation *voluntary migrants* who didn't have to but chose to leave their country of origin for studies, work or love. They come from all over the world ¹⁰, have various migration histories and are quite privileged in terms of economic and/or educational capital, as they are generally highly educated, employed and economically independent. Although

sexuality was not the first reason for them to leave their country of origin, most recount how it was easier to explore their sexuality elsewhere, often first in another city and then abroad. This is also the case for Mateusz from Poland:

This small town where I used to live, it was a little bit too homogeneous and conservative for me. I remember, when I was realising I was gay, more or less in my high school, I really wanted to go for studies somewhere else, really far away from home.

These voluntary migrants often have more freedom (both economic and legal) than the refugees to travel, so they can visit their country of origin and family. However, they don't necessarily travel back regularly because over the years, they tend to feel less connected to their country of origin and start to feel like 'world citizens' or 'cosmopolitans'. For instance, Radwan from Iran, who has been living in Belgium for twelve years, states: "I don't situate myself in relation to countries anymore, not at all. (...) I'm a world citizen, not a foreigner but a world citizen."

Often, this is related to the fact that they can more comfortably live and express their sexuality in Belgium. Compared to the sexual refugees, family connections tend to be less complicated for them and, at least for some, stronger and more supportive in terms of their sexual orientation. Thus, the Polish Mateusz stresses the importance of his family ties:

I don't have that much contact with them, now, but it is very important for me because.... I know that I can always count on them, every problem I have... Even if I make a lot of decisions they don't like, like coming to Belgium or becoming gay, they still support me, also financially sometimes when I need it. I also have a good connection with my mother, even when I broke up with my boyfriend the first time, I could talk to her about it. So that's why it's very important.

Like the sexual refugees, the voluntary migrant participants tend to keep a distance from

their ethnic-cultural communities in Belgium. Not only are they more internationally oriented and feel no need to 'stick together', but they also keep a distance because of social control and heteronormative expectations.

Sexual intersections

Considering the intersection of these ethnic-cultural backgrounds with sexual identifications, first of all it is useful to discuss the participants' sexual self-identification. When asked how they would describe their sexual orientation, most male participants say they are comfortable with the term 'gay'. Only a few participants are less comfortable with the term. For some, this is because it has bad connotations in their home culture, as is the case for Ahmed from Morocco, who's only out to a very limited number of (gay) people:

Q: Would you call yourself gay?

Ahmed (Morocco): No, not this term, for us it's bad.

Q: So you wouldn't use that term in Moroccan?

Ahmed: No, just a man.

As becomes clear in the rest of the interview, where he does consistently call himself gay, Ahmed's refusal of the category primarily regards its public use: it is not something he would identify with publicly, but in private this is very much how he identifies. Four other, higher educated participants don't like the term gay because they have problems with sexual labels as such, and/or don't consider themselves to be limited to their sexuality (which almost all do define as gay).

Esteban (Cuba): I'm gay in the sense that I love having sex with men, but that does not define anything in my personality or behaviour. So I prefer not to be labelled.

Despite these reservations, all participants prefer the term 'gay' over alternatives such as queer.

Discussing the interactions of this sexual identification with their cultural environment, all *second generation* participants state that they had issues with their families and communities while exploring their sexual orientation. Coming out, for them, is a carefully negotiated process, as they tend to be partly dependent on their families and communities, if not financially then at least socially and emotionally. They are attached to their families and don't want to lose that connection because of their sexual orientation. At the same time, they often feel the need at some point to stop living a double life, with mixed consequences. Quite a few participants did not explicitly come out to their tell their parents, but suspect they know. Within their ethnic-cultural community, the rule seems to be 'don't ask, don't tell'. For instance, the Turkish Orhan who is now in his forties has been living with his boyfriend for years, but only a few family members know.

Q: Are you out to your family now?

Orhan: In the restricted sense, to my parents, brother and sister. Other family members will probably also suspect or know that, because they will know that I live with my boyfriend, but that doesn't need to be said.

While Orhan prefers to keep both 'worlds' apart, some did come out to their parents, who generally reacted very negatively. For some, this led to a complete fallout and loss of contact with their parents:

Jalil (Tunisia): I did my coming out when I was 18 and half an hour later I was on the sidewalk, I was really kicked out. (...) I thought: OK, they will be hysterical, which was the case, and that's going to cool down after a couple of months, but that wasn't really the case.

Whether it is criminalised or not, homosexuality is an issue in all of their countries of

origin, as it is in their cultural communities in Belgium. Religion is a key element here, or at least: it is often used as an argument to condemn homosexuality.

Jalil (Tunisia): Many of my uncles know nightlife better than the average person in Flanders, particularly when they were younger. But still, when it was about safeguarding the codes, religion was the first thing they referred to to make their point or to restore order. In that sense they are religious, in a very functional way, not in terms of deeper meaning.

This was also the case among the two Chinese second generation participants. For instance Cheng, when asked if religion played a role in his parents' rejection of his sexual orientation, states:

I don't think it is condemned, but they use it to convince you that you're on the wrong track.

Q: As a kind of moral...

Cheng: As in: 'You can't forget that there's someone who will judge you'.

Beside religion, family values are important in their communities, the duty to procreate and to continue the family name.

Orhan (Turkey): I have always been very sad because I knew I couldn't make my parents happy. I knew that very early on: this is going to be a problem with my parents because they're making big plans for me, wedding plans and what have you.

As mentioned before, second generation participants live in quite tight, conservative communities in Belgium. Some participants describe their communities as 'like a village', where everyone worries what others will think or say, and where there is a lot of social control.

While the second generation men in this research are mostly only partially out and keep their sexual orientation relatively private, for the *sexual refugees*, their sexual

orientation is a key part of who they are. They tend to be relatively out and proud, as their sexual orientation is often the reason why they are in Belgium in the first place.

For instance, Samuel, a refugee from Sierra Leone states:

I never regretted being gay, I am still proud to be gay. Belgium gives me the opportunity to live the way I want to live my life. So that makes me feel proud, I live my life the way I want to.

Most grew up in a culture that strongly condemned and even criminalised their sexual orientation, so keeping their desires hidden was of paramount importance.

Samuel: The whole part of my adult life I had to keep things to myself. It's difficult to live that way. (...)

Q: Was it impossible to discuss this with anyone?

Samuel: No, you cannot. Never. Because it is something you cannot be proud of, in my country, not like here. Saying it to someone is like selling your soul to the devil. You cannot predict what will happen next.

For these participants, being publicly out was often not an option in their country of origin because of the legal framework and social context. Therefore, for four of them, the family doesn't know at all. Three had to immediately leave the family house and escape after being exposed as homosexuals, including Samuel:

I had to leave, because my life was in danger. My parents could not, especially my father, could not protect me. He is a very religious man and he has too much ego and he could not swallow his pride. Discovering my sexuality wasn't comfortable with him. He acted before thinking.

These participants also avoid coming out to straight people from their ethnic-cultural community in Belgium, because they are afraid of negative repercussions, including violence. For instance Maga, a refugee from Chechnya, says he has limited contact with people from his country of origin in Belgium:

Maga: Just gays. I used to have contacts, but that was getting difficult, because if they see you somewhere... If they recognise you as gay it gets really difficult.

Q: Is that such a taboo?

Maga: If they suspect it, it's OK, if there's no hard evidence. But if they can prove it, it's your last day.

So, despite the fact that they identify more strongly and publicly as 'gay' than the second generation participants, the sexual refugees also feel some degree of social control.

Turning to the *voluntary migrants*, sexual orientation tends to take a less prominent position in their self-definition than for refugees. It was not the primary reason why they moved to Belgium and it does not take centre stage in their current lives. Although most come from countries where homosexuality was not criminalized, some tell very similar stories to the other participants, about early realisations that they were attracted to men and a growing awareness that it was wrong to express or act upon these feelings. Many actually only had their first homosexual relations abroad. Nevertheless, it was generally easier for them to come out, and most are out to most of their family and friends. One of the recurring elements in these coming out stories was the need to create a distance. Many voluntary migrants moved away from home and to another city to study or work, which made it easier not only to explore their sexuality but also to come out to their family. For instance, Matteo from Rumania came out to his parents:

I told them only when I was in university, when I was studying, in my second year.
(...)

Q: You created this distance you said, was that because of your sexuality or just in general?

Matteo: I think it contributed. It was not the only one, because it was a good university, but then also the fact that being away from the family allowed me to be more independent, and also more secure, comfortable.

For similar reasons, some only came out once they were in Belgium. As among the other participants, perhaps the most heard comment was: in our culture, you don't talk about that.

Families of choice?

As discussed above, with a few exceptions the participants in this project identify as gay while they have mixed, if not contradictory, attachments to their country of origin and ethnic-cultural community in Belgium. However, this does not automatically imply that the gay community acts as a 'family of choice' for them. Among the second generation participants, only one participates in LGBT associations, and although they tend to have a lot of gay friends, most do not consider themselves as part of a gay community or scene. When I asked whether this had to do with exclusion or racism in the gay scene, most answered negatively. However, race does play a more subtle role as they refer to two, related ways in which their ethnic-cultural origins become salient. On the one hand, they often encounter sexual exoticism, which implies that their darker skin evokes erotic interest. On the other hand, they are also confronted with a lot of prejudice, Moroccan men in particular often being suspected of being prostitutes and/or thieves.

Although their sexual orientation generally occupies a more prominent position in their lives, the sexual refugees tend not to participate a lot in mainstream LGBT associations or social life either. Most are out but only participate in specific organisations oriented towards migrant LGBT people, which is probably partly due to the sampling procedure which partly worked through these organisations. Again, race seems to be at play, too: while the sexual refugees report limited experiences with outright racism, they are often confronted with their 'otherness'. The Africans, in particular, report that they prefer to hang out with Africans, as they stand out in a predominantly white society.

Peter (Nigeria): In the village, I drive on my scooter, they just go: fuck, who is this? When I started, when I moved to the village newly, I noticed that my neighbours, each morning they like to open the windows and they want to look at the 'black gentleman'. But now, I'm sure they are used to me, I live there.

Voluntary migrants tend to have a balanced mix of gay and straight friends, but like the other groups they tend to take a distance from the gay scene and they are not actively involved in LGBT associations. Most don't feel part of the gay - or any other - community.

Q: Would you say you feel part of a kind of gay community?

Mateusz (Poland): No, I wouldn't say I feel part of gay community to be honest. It's more that I have gay friends, I have some gay networks, but it doesn't feel like any kind of community.

Like the refugees, voluntary migrants also have limited experiences with outright racism. For some this is because they are white, while others are latin or oriental which they report to have positive - if sometimes exoticising - connotations:

Esteban (Cuba): It is always related with my nationality. I think xenophobia in Belgium is related with some nationalities. You say 'I'm Cuban' and people say 'I love Cuba!' (...) I have the feeling that here, there is more xenophobia against Arabs than against black people.

Some participants also refer to everyday prejudice, both in society at large and in the gay scene.

Q: Has this also happened in the gay community? Are you sometimes treated like an outsider because you're Polish?

Mateusz: Not really actually, I've never felt that. People are curious, so they always ask me where I come from. Sometimes they start to talk about Polish people in general, and they are kind of racist sometimes. Or other immigrants in general.

Overall, the participants do not report any blatant racism, but they are confronted with more subtle, everyday forms of discrimination, not particularly in the LGBT community but mostly in Belgian society at large. Indeed, despite its anti-discrimination laws Belgium continues to discriminate against people of non-Belgian origin, for instance in terms of employment, as organisations such as Minderhedenforum (www.minderhedenforum.be) and KifKif (www.kifkif.be) report. Hence, while racism is not a term the participants like to use, racial difference does seem to be a key underlying factor in their sense of exclusion.

Conclusion

This article has used the notion of intersectionality as a way to explore the interdependency of two sources of identification, the ethnic-cultural and the sexual, among a group of migrant gay identified men in Belgium. For all participants, these are elements in their lives that lead to multiple and mutually constitutive attachments to different groups. While these intersections are strongly connected to each individual's context, they are also socially structured which leads to patterns and 'groups' (however provisional) of participants.

Across the board, sexual identifications are relatively clear for all participants. Partly, this was to be expected as they chose to participate in this research, so it is important not to generalise their responses to the entire population of diasporic sexual minorities. However, despite the relatively clarity of their sexual identifications, these do not always take a prominent position in their lives. This seems to be mostly related to their generation and motivation of migration, as well as the strength of their ethnic-cultural identifications and connections.

For the sexual refugees in this research, sexuality often takes a prominent position as it is one of the reasons why they came to Belgium and had to take a distance

from their ethnic-cultural community. Belgium offers them more freedom to explore their sexuality, but they are socio-economically more vulnerable because they generally lack both the family support of second generation participants, and the educational and/or economic capital of voluntary migrants. Like the sexual refugees, the voluntary migrants have the freedom to explore their sexuality, away from their family, and they also tend to keep a distance from their ethnic-cultural community, but this is more a matter of choice than among the refugees. Contrary to both groups of first generation participants, second generation participants have to most directly negotiate both connections, their families and ethnic-cultural communities not only providing support but also social control. Of the three groups, for them it is the hardest to openly explore their sexual orientation as they keep the closest bond with their ethnic-cultural community whereas the other groups literally and figuratively speaking created a distance.

At the risk of over-simplifying, one could typify the intersection between ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications among the three groups as follows: for the sexual refugees, tensions between their sexuality and ethnic-cultural environment led them to escape and to clearly prioritize their sexuality; second generation participants generally still live in a situation of tension, where they try to combine both and maintain ethnic-cultural connections while exploring their sexuality; for the more individualistic voluntary migrants, neither the ethnic-cultural nor the sexual are very prominent nor salient sources of identification.

Other social positions intersect with these identifications, complicating the picture. First of all, class is a dimension underlying the three groups, the sexual refugees being least socio-economically privileged and the voluntary migrants most. Education and employment provide the necessary intellectual and financial freedom to negotiate

one's position in different communities. Second, gender is a key factor, as women are less free than men to take a distance from their country, community and family and to explore their sexual orientation, as became clear from the interviews with women which are not further discussed in this paper. Third, race interferes both with ethnic-cultural identifications, as many (particularly second generation) participants feel Belgian but are perceived as other, and with sexual identifications, as quite a few participants talk about exoticism and racial prejudice. Although hardly any participants admit to experiencing outright racism, race clearly is a key underlying factor explaining their sense of exclusion and discrimination in Belgium.

While all participants, to some degree, have loose or problematic connections with their ethnic-cultural community, it is important to point out that the LGBT community does not simply replace those connections. While for some (particularly refugees) LGBT associations play an important role, for most this is not the case. As mentioned in some interviews, this is partly because of their literal whiteness which makes it hard for ethnic-cultural minority LGBT individuals to blend in, but it is also partly related to the Western identity models these associations propose. As noted by many working in the field, it is important to acknowledge the specific models of sexuality and 'stigma management strategies' among ethnic-cultural minority LGBT individuals (Peumans 2011). For instance, rather than 'coming out', 'coming in' (connecting with other LGBT people) may be more appropriate in many cases (Poelman 2011).

To conclude, I hope to have demonstrated how an intersectional analysis of ethnicity and sexuality may help to better understand the workings of identification. While not necessarily leading to 'double discrimination', ethnic-cultural and sexual minority status are mutually constituted in the Belgian context. This seems to vary

primarily in relation to the participants' migration background, second generation migrants in particular having to actively negotiate these different communities and affiliations. Returning to the initial remarks on the queer diaspora, this project also illustrates how sexual minorities question the homogeneity and boundaries of diasporic communities. While all participants illustrate the internal (sexual) diversity of their respective ethnic-cultural communities, the first generation participants in particular question the primordial importance of ethnic-cultural ties as they take up a relatively isolated position outside of their respective ethnic-cultural communities. However, we have to be cautious in labelling them as 'queer': although their sexuality is relatively important to most participants, they tend to identify as 'gay' rather than queer and do not radically question the gay/straight binary. While they do negotiate 'Western' identity models, at least this group of men seems to inscribe itself primarily in established categorisations rather than radically questioning them.

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Notes

¹ In this text, 'LGBT' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) is used as an umbrella term for sexual minorities. 'Queer' is only used to refer to a specific theoretical framework. When discussing my own research, I use the term 'gay' because it most closely corresponds to the participants' self-definition (as will be discussed further on).

² For instance, Belgium ranks second on ILGA Europe's Rainbow Europe map, taking into account different aspects of LGBT rights (see <http://www.ilga-europe.org/>).

³ Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, where most of this research was effectuated.

⁴ In accordance with common usage in Belgium, I use the term 'ethnic-cultural minority' to refer to any group of non-Belgian origin living in Belgium.

⁵ For a reflection on homonationalism in Belgium, see Eeckhout 2014.

⁶ While the notion of 'generation' is helpful in describing different diasporic experiences, it is not without its problems (see e.g. Rumbaut 2004).

⁷ Perhaps most importantly, the female participants tended to be politicised and highly educated, often having studied gender and sexuality. This probably contributed to their critical attitude towards 'fixed' categories of gender and sexuality, which were much more readily accepted

by most male participants. However, because of its small and unrepresentative nature, it is dangerous to draw conclusions from this small group of female participants.

⁸ All quotes are literal transcripts from the interviews, translated into English. For the sake of anonymity, the participants' names were changed to other names in use in their country of origin.

⁹ Asking about legal status is delicate, so I only registered information they volunteered. At the time of the interview, four participants were recognised refugees, one was in the asylum procedure, one other had married a Belgian man, and three others seemed to have no residence permit.

¹⁰ Alphabetically, the countries represented are Cuba, India, Norway, Palestine, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Rumania (2), Syria, Togo and Vietnam.