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Reference:

Vandevoordt Robin, Verschraegen Gert.- Demonstrating deservingness and dignity : symbolic boundary work among Syrian refugees

Poetics: journal of empirical research on culture, the media and the arts - ISSN 0304-422X - 76(2019), UNSP 101343

Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.POETIC.2018.12.004>

To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1560870151162165141>

Demonstrating deservingness and dignity. Symbolic boundary work among Syrian refugees.

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To be cited as: Vandevordt, R., Verschraegen, G., Demonstrating deservingness and dignity. Symbolic boundary work among Syrian refugees. *Poetics*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2018.12.004>

Abstract

While the literature on boundary making has mainly documented variations in boundary work *between* groups and institutional contexts, scholars have paid less attention to boundary work in the context of unexpected dislocation of a group to a new context. This article examines how Syrian refugees in Belgium deal with a sudden loss of social status, by analysing how they draw symbolic boundaries among themselves, established immigrants and native Belgians. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews with 39 Syrian refugees as well as on-going participant observation, we describe how our respondents use ‘comparative strategies of self’ to position themselves as dignified and worthy individuals.

We present two types of moral, and two types of cultural boundary work our interlocutors engaged in. They stressed their moral worthiness by, first, distancing themselves from the bad behaviour of ‘uneducated’ refugees in reception centres, and from established immigrants in materially deprived urban neighbourhoods. Second, especially male interlocutors displayed a strong work ethic highlighting how they renegotiated their masculine worthiness in response to their loss of status and their refugee condition. In addition, they demonstrated their cultural qualities by articulating, first, their personal competences and aesthetic refinement as individuals, and, second, by highlighting the general level of education, wealth and cultural achievements of Syrian people as a whole. In sum, these four boundary-making strategies served to legitimise their presence and strengthen their position vis-à-vis other social groups such as their compatriots, established immigrants and native Belgians. In line with previous studies by Sherman (2005) and Purser (2009), we find that these moral and cultural boundaries are significant in reasserting disadvantaged individuals’ sense of dignity, whilst working against the emergence of solidarity between wider groups of immigrants in similar socio-structural positions.

Key words: symbolic boundaries; social identity; refugee studies; deservingness; Syrian refugees; stigma.

0. Introduction

Khaled was a 34-year old man who used to run a modest, family-owned shop in a small Northern-Syrian town. Like many of his compatriots, he strongly valued his economic independence and social reputation. Yet precisely that, he explained, made life in Europe so tough. "I know many Syrians that are just sitting here, studying the language, taking money from the OCMW [the governmental agency providing welfare support]. A lot of Syrians, they feel like what am I doing here. I feel like an animal."

That is why, he added:

As a refugee, or as a stranger, you need to be smart enough, respectable enough, polite enough, to know how you can contact the [local] people. It's not [the] responsibility, it's not the problem of the Belgian people because the media talks bad about strangers. For example, when I came here, the owner of the house, she was a bit defensive, she was afraid. She was suspicious of me. Because there was a refugee before me, and she had a bad experience with him. But I was respectful, very friendly to her. And after one month, she came here with her husband, and we had dinner together and we made like a small party with wine and bla bla bla. And now they always call me, [saying] 'okay we are coming. If we have time to drink tea with you, we talk...' And she called me, she said 'yeah, the girl in the second floor is going to leave so, if you know Syrian friends that need a place or something, I will give you one week, just to bring who you want.' So I called my friend and he came here.

"Okay," I said, "that's great. But I can imagine it's not always like that, for everyone. I mean, you speak English, you can communicate. Not everybody can do that.

"Yeah", he replied, unconvinced. "But it's like, you must be a messenger of your country, of your education, you know."

Through stories such as these, the Syrian men and women we spoke with tried to show us they were worthy, competent people entitled to respect. They were confronted with a dramatic loss of social status, an experience that seems to be shared by many forced migrants in the North. Those who were once full citizens in their country of departure are degraded into "semizens" with limited formal rights to

residence, health care, education and work, all the while confronting informal barriers to put these rights into practice (Nash 2009; Morris 2010). They lose the social respect they acquired through their work, their education and their social lives, forcing them to rebuild their lives from scratch. At the same time, a considerable part of their host community expects them to display modesty and gratefulness in return for the protection and support they are given (Harrell-Bond 1999; Moulin 2012; Author I 2017). Each of these changes harbours a potential to threaten their sense of dignity. How do they respond to these threats? And more precisely, how do they present their “selves”, socially, through discourse and interaction?

This article draws upon the symbolic boundary approach (Lamont & Molnar 2002; Pachucki et al 2007) to analyse how Syrian refugees in Belgium deal with these challenges through discursive acts of self-presentation. While this approach has been hailed for stimulating the rapprochement between migration studies and cultural sociology (Levitt 2005), scholars using it have paid little if any attention to the specific situation of refugees in the global North. Instead, they have focused mostly on members of the labour and middle classes (Jarness 2017; Lamont 1991, 2000) and on established ethnic and racial minorities (Bail 2008; Fleming et al 2012; Killian & Johnson 2006; Lamont & Aksartova 2002; Wimmer 2008; Author II et al 2017). We contribute to this line of research by adding a perspective on the particularities of forced migrants. Which strategies of symbolic boundary work can be seen as characteristic for this particular group, given the loss of social status many of them are faced with, and the cultural repertoires that are available to them, both from their country of origin and their place of refuge?

More concretely, we examine how Syrian refugees in Belgium deal with these challenges through what Rachel Sherman (2005) described as “comparative strategies of selves”: how do they construct a dignified, deserving position for themselves by making implicit or explicit comparisons with other refugees, established minorities and members of the white majority? We proceed by situating ourselves in the literature on symbolic boundary work, before detailing our methods and clarifying the context of our Syrian respondents and their structural position in Belgium. Next, we present two broad types of symbolic strategies they rely upon: the evidence they put forward of their individual or collective moral character and the cultural capital they possess. We conclude by sketching out both the specific types of boundary work we think refugees in the North engage in, and shortly reflect on what our case contributes to the literatures on symbolic boundary making as well as the cultural construction of ‘refugeeness’.

1. Symbolic boundaries and forced migration

People orient themselves in their social environment by distinguishing ‘people like us’ from ‘people like them’. These classifications are often imbued with normative evaluations of people’s character and behaviour. In her path breaking *Money, Morals, Manners*, Lamont (1992) describes how members of the French and American middle classes distinguish themselves from others by emphasising their socio-economic superiority (by pointing out their success in acquiring wealth and power), their cultural refinement (through matters of taste and intelligence) and their moral character (virtues like honesty, discipline, personal integrity or caring). By discursively producing such *symbolic boundaries*, Lamont argues, her respondents indirectly tried “to enforce, maintain, normalize or rationalize” more material social boundaries between the middle and the lower classes (Lamont & Molnar 2002, 186; Pachucki et al 2007). More precisely, these symbolic classifications provide them with criteria to evaluate other people’s behaviour in everyday, professional contexts including instances where they have to make decisions on who to hire and whom to befriend. In this sense, symbolic boundaries can be seen as a crucial discursive component in the competition between social groups.

Symbolic classifications can also be used to bridge social boundaries though. In recent years numerous studies have emerged on the “equalisation strategies” individuals use to bridge social boundaries, especially when their identities have been spoiled by social stigma (Killian & Johnson 2006; Lamont et al 2016; Wimmer 2008). Hence scholars have documented how members of ethnic minorities respond to discriminating or stigmatizing events (Lamont et al. 2016), for example by distancing themselves from the stigmatised aspects of their identities and aligning with the ethnic majority (Killian & Johnson 2006), whilst others have documented how members of the labour class use universalising strategies emphasising a shared sense of humanity or a broader collective identity, or particularising strategies highlighting individual social relations (Fleming et al 2012; Lamont 2000).

The particular significance of *moral* and, to a lesser extent, *cultural* boundaries has been further underscored by the ethnographic work of Rachel Sherman (2005) and Gretchen Purser (2009). They have documented, respectively, how luxury hotel staff and immigrants day labourers construct symbolic differences among themselves. Both groups of respondents emphasised the moral and cultural boundaries that distinguished them from people occupying similar, relatively disadvantaged socio-economic positions. Thus Sherman (2005) demonstrates how luxury hotel workers strategically present

themselves as superior to the staff of lesser hotels. Similarly, Purser (2009) showed how two groups of day labourers, one soliciting on the street, the other making use of a job centre, constructed themselves as more masculine, worthy and respectable than the other. In these studies, the symbolic boundary approach helps to explain why people in relatively similar, disadvantaged structural positions do not form alliances: they derive part of their dignity from the moral and cultural differences they perceive between them – however small they may appear, to us scholars, in the face of their structural similarities.

This article contributes to this literature by arguing, first, that some of the “comparative strategies of self” (Sherman 2005) our Syrian respondents use, are not only specific to their structural position as refugees and the cultural repertoires they rely upon, but also have a negative impact on the discursive alliances they engage in. On the one hand, by blurring the boundaries with high status groups in the host society and emphasising commonalities with them (‘bridging’), they put themselves in the strategically advantageous position of being “ideal refugees” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014), which legitimises their presence and the support they are given. On the other hand, by brightening the boundary with established migrant groups and other refugees, they work against establishing alliances with people in similar social positions.

Second, this article contributes to the wider literature on symbolic boundary making by detailing the strategies this particular group of forced migrants deploy. We argue that many forced migrants face an unexpected loss of social status, which leads them to engage in a particular form of symbolic boundary work that reasserts their dignity. While some of these boundary-making strategies are undoubtedly specific to the cultural repertoires and structural positions people find themselves in (e.g. as Syrian refugees in Belgium), we would nonetheless expect non-migrants experiencing a sudden loss of status (e.g. through losing a job, divorce, or trauma) to engage in analogous types of boundary work that emphasise moral worthiness and cultural refinement.

2. Methods

We draw primarily upon 26 in-depth interviews with 39 Syrian men and women who applied for asylum after January 2011.ⁱ The interviews were conducted between February 2015 and March 2016, and included respondents holding different legal statuses (asylum seekers, recognized refugees, those receiving humanitarian protection, resettled refugees, and men and women joining their partners through family reunification) as well as a wide range of socio-economic, educational, religious (Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, Druze) and ethnic (Arab, Kurdish and Armenian) backgrounds. Conversations took place either in English or in Dutch (12 out of 26 interviews), or in Arabic with an informant translating on the spot.ⁱⁱ They were designed to document Syrians overall social experiences of their lives in Belgium, using a limited "life history" or "biographical" approach beginning from their arrival in Belgium (Author I 2016; Eastmond 2007). Some of the topics discussed in the interviews were inspired by the existing scholarly literature: how respondents built either ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous social networks, how they made sense of their encounters with social services and welfare workers, where they acquired information on their legal rights and how to practice them, which aspirations they developed for the future and how they dealt with the cultural differences they perceived. In contrast to most studies in the symbolic boundaries tradition (e.g. Lamont 1992, 2000; Killian & Johnson 2006), we did not originally intend to concentrate on how respondents drew symbolic boundaries or built bridges across social boundaries. Instead, most of the boundary work they engaged in emerged rather spontaneously from their discourses. The strongly moral undertone in their accounts, was thus not consciously elicited by us.

In line with the symbolic boundary approach we assume that respondents' discourses have a certain saliency in the daily, institutional environment they live in (cf. Lamont 1992). By relying on in-depth interviews, however, we are aware that we make ourselves vulnerable to one of the most pertinent critiques that has befallen Michèle Lamont's empirical work: to grasp the actual saliency of symbolic boundaries, scholars should examine how individuals draw such boundaries in concrete, real-life, institutional situations, rather than limiting their attention to the de-contextualised discourses respondents produce in artificial interview settings (Fantasia 2001; Sherman 2005; Purser 2009; Brown 2009). Otherwise, it is impossible to adequately assess the extent to which these symbolic boundaries are more than an advantageous self-portrayal vis-à-vis the interviewer, and whether they actually occur in real life situations (Jerolmack & Kahn 2014).

From that perspective, the setting in which the interviews for this research took place, undeniably had a strong impact on the discourse respondents produced (cf. Lamont 1992). The interviews were taken by one of the authors, a young, white, male Belgian. This made the discourses Syrian refugees produced in those settings to be first and foremost a case of how they wanted to present themselves towards the (white) Belgian audience. While we do not deny this, we do think this tells us something crucial about how they symbolically present themselves in a wide range of situations where they encounter Belgian neighbours, social workers, language and civic integration instructors, lawyers, colleagues et cetera. In addition, we assume that at least some of the distinctions they draw between themselves and other minorities and refugees, do have some resonance with how they organize their social contacts with members of these groups. Hence we assume that if they go great lengths to distinguish themselves from persons with a Moroccan background, they are less likely to engage in close, informal networks with members belonging to that social category.ⁱⁱⁱ

We not only assume there are connections between the discourses produced in interview settings and actual social life, but have also drawn upon two other types of data to verify these connections. First, we complemented our in-depth interviews with (limited) fieldwork through participant observation and long-term contact with key informants. Participant observation took two forms: two years of participating in a buddy project for young refugees, and one year of participating in a civil initiative organising social and cultural activities to bring newly arrived immigrants into contact with established citizens. Both forms of long-term, in-depth contact allowed us to assess whether at least some of these symbolic boundaries actually took place in concrete social settings. Second, we conducted more than twenty interviews with street-level social workers and refugee volunteers. As we noted earlier, the data on which this article is based were collected as part of a larger inquiry of the relations between Belgians and Syrians. In this sense, at least some of moral and cultural boundaries that emerged from the interviews, were confirmed during and after the research by street-level social workers and volunteers.

3. Case

Most authors writing in the boundary-work approach argue that we need to connect the symbolic boundaries respondents use not only to the structural position in which they find themselves, but also to the cultural resources and repertoires they have at their disposal (Alba 2005; Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont & Molnar 2002). In this section, we do so by detailing some of the most important cultural resources our Syrian respondents drew upon, as well as the general socio-structural position refugees and immigrants Belgium are situated in.

Starting with the latter, we note that like most other West-European countries, Belgium's recent immigration history has been characterised by the arrival of guest labourers from Italy, Morocco and Turkey, which reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s. And as in other West-European countries, a gap has emerged in opportunities to work, education and housing between individuals with and without a migration background, the former including immigrants of first, second and third generation (OECD 2015). According to recent figures by the OECD (2015), nowhere in West-Europe has this chasm remained so deep and persistent as in Belgium. Put differently, the social segregation between immigrants and the established 'white majority' that is characteristic for Western-European countries, is particularly pronounced in Belgium. In addition, recent work by both activists with migration backgrounds and academic research, has demonstrated the continuing presence of discrimination based on racial (e.g. skin colour), religious (e.g. headscarf) and linguistic (e.g. foreign names) markers of foreign descent (Aziz 2017; Lamrabet 2017; Van der Bracht et al. 2017).

Refugees of course occupy a specific social position within the larger group of persons with a migration background. In the global North most refugees can be described as "semizens", occupying a grey zone between fully-fledged "super-citizens" entitled to the maximum of legal, political and social rights, and "denizens" denied of all but the most minimum of human rights (Nash 2009). Refugees, that is, do possess residence permits and a range of social rights, but these rights are limited both in time (they are temporary) and in substance (they decreasingly include the full range of social rights emerging from the welfare state) (Morris 2010). In addition, the last few decades discourses of neo-liberalisation have dominated citizenship regimes across Europe, which makes immigrants' formal rights increasingly conditional upon performances in terms of language proficiency, civic integration and the labour market – a trend that has been dubbed the "moralisation of citizenship" by Schinkel & Van Houdt (2010; Joppke

2007). In Belgium regulations have recently been put in place to make eligibility for social housing dependent on language proficiency, whilst family reunification has been made dependent on labour market success. Similarly, even refugees who have been granted full Belgian citizenship can still lose their status and residence permit, if immigration authorities find out that parts of his asylum story or his/her original identity turn out to be false. In this sense, too, the Belgian case can be seen as indicative for the structural position of refugees in other Western-European countries.

Apart from their socio-structural position, we need to take into account the cultural repertoires Syrian refugees draw upon in constructing symbolic boundaries. Two cultural repertoires have proven useful to understand our respondents' accounts. First, since the 1960s the ruling Ba'ath party has traditionally put a strong emphasis on education. The subsequent al-Assad regimes put in place a system obliging all minors across the country to attend high school – a feature which distinguishes Syrian refugees from, for instance, Afghan youths seeking refuge in Europe, who often grew up without access to stable education. At the same time, access to higher education was made depended on high school achievements rather than the economic resources of the household – although petty corruption continues to play a crucial role in admissions and examinations (Kabbani and Saloum 2010; Akkari 2004). The importance of education seems to be reflected further in the strong urban-rural divide that long characterised Syria – even though the planned liberalisation of the economy and recent waves of drought have pushed many farmers to rapidly growing disadvantaged neighbourhoods around the cities (Abboud 2016; Phillips 2016). As we will demonstrate later on, many of our respondents originating from the more cosmopolitan Syrian cities distinguished themselves from Syrians originating from rural areas, whom they considered “less educated” and refined (cf. Salamandra 2004). From this perspective, it makes sense that Syrians relied upon cultural criteria such as educational attainments, rather than socio-economic criteria in displaying a sense of pride.

Second, since the 1960s the Ba'ath party's socialist ideology has emphasised socio-economic equality over individual merits, both in discourse and in policy practice.^{iv} This has nurtured a cultural repertoire that emphasises other forms of distinction over individual wealth. In her ethnographic work with traders in Aleppo, Annika Rabo (2005) found they often saw the deliberate display of individual wealth as an example of bad taste. Instead, they strongly valued an ability to maintain their independence from the state and large corporations by owning a shop themselves, however modest the revenues that shop may produce. Similarly, in her ethnographic work in Damascus, Christa Salamandra (2004) found that once powerful Damascene families increasingly distinguished themselves through cultural refinement

and authenticity, rather than material wealth. While these ethnographies focus upon specific social groups, they both suggest the presence of a cultural repertoire that might help explain why our respondents generally did not call upon socio-economic boundaries to reassert their dignity

In sum, several factors stimulate Syrian refugees to engage in a strongly moral and cultural, rather than a socio-economic discourse. First, they are put in an uncertain position where they are expected to earn their citizenship through moral achievements. Second, they are confronted with professional and social loss of status, as a result of which they can no longer distinguish themselves through socio-economic boundaries. Third, they have been socialised in a country where the socialist ideology of the Ba'ath party has cultivated the ideals of socio-economic quality, thereby favouring the importance of education over wealth or, put differently, of cultural over economic capital. As a result, both the cultural resources and the socio-structural position in which these refugees find themselves, predisposes them to demonstrate their dignity through moral and cultural, rather than socio-economic (or even ethnic) criteria.

4. Moral boundaries

Many of our respondents went great lengths to emphasise their moral character. While we encountered a wide range of discursive strategies through which they did so, we will here discuss only those two that were most salient across respondents of different class^v and ethnic backgrounds. First, they distanced themselves from the bad behaviour of (non-Syrian) refugees in reception centres and from established migrant groups living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Second, especially the Syrian men emphasised the importance of a strong work ethic, both individually (by comparing themselves to other Syrians) and collectively (by comparing Syrians' work ethic with that of other nationalities, or of particular Syrian cities to others).

4.1 "They're not educated people": on good and bad behaviour

One of the most puzzling vocabularies that emerged throughout the interviews, were the references to "educated" and "uneducated" people. Rather than designating a difference in formal education, our respondents used these terms to draw *moral* distinctions between people who behaved respectfully towards others, and those that did not. While this seemed to be especially the case with higher educated male respondents (occupying jobs such as dentists, pharmacists, architects and university students), these discourses also occurred in the accounts of respondents who had simply lost a great deal of locally recognised cultural capital (e.g. truck drivers, farmers and masons). The latter too, had lost their socio-professional position as a result of migrating to Europe. In response, they emphasised their respectful, worthy behaviour.

Respondents used these moral distinctions both on an individual (distinguishing themselves from their environment) and a collective level (distinguishing Syrians from other nationalities). To begin with the former, consider Tariq a single man in his early twenties who had interrupted his studies at university to seek refuge in Europe. He told us how he had seen other Arabs throw cigarette butts on the street in front of his apartment in the outskirts of a Belgian city. He told them that "they should not do that, it is something you can do in Syria, but not here. But they told me not to [interfere] with their affairs, [that] I should not tell them what to do and what not to. They are not educated people," he said. They don't follow the rules, they just do whatever they feel like. [They have] no respect.

This type of boundary-drawing often recurred with references to the neighbourhoods our respondents were living in. In Belgium, many refugees end up living in superdiverse, disadvantaged “neighbourhoods of arrival” (Saunders 2011) that are characterised by above-average unemployment and crime rates, as well as counting a high percentage of ethnic minorities (Author II et al 2017). Several fault lines were underlying some of the negative experiences our Syrian respondents encountered here. Some of them came from a middle class background, and were not used to living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Others had been accustomed to the Syrian countryside and now found themselves in urban neighbourhoods due to the Belgian housing crisis. What interests us here, however, is that the Syrians who distinguished themselves from these neighbourhoods and its inhabitants, did not do so in terms of class or cultural capital, but rather, in terms of good and bad behaviour.

When Zaid, for instance, a twenty-year old student who had also interrupted his studies, caught me staring out the window of his apartment, onto the street in one of these deprived neighbourhoods, he commented pre-emptively: “I know, it’s not a nice street. There’s people throwing garbage on the street, just like that. And sometimes there’s people that are drinking and fighting, and then there’s police.” In Aleppo, he had lived in a rather affluent area, where, he told us, many people knew one another, and as a result thereof reacted quicker to deviant behaviour in public.

Similarly, when I asked Mahmoud, a father of two children who used to work as a farmer, whether he liked the neighbourhood he was living in now, he replied that “well it’s all Middle East and Maghreb people here. I have no contacts here. I don’t know if they are good persons or not. I say esalam alaykum, alaykum esalam [سلام عليكم,] hello hello, good morning good morning. And that’s it. That’s all. You know the big problem here is the drugs.” He had seen drugs been dealt and used openly on the street – although the problem has been significantly diminished the last decade or so, the neighbourhood he lived in still struggles with public drug use: “I’m afraid for myself and for my children for that”, he said. “I don’t want [that] they talk to these people. So I wait for my son to make friends. So if I know them, then it’s okay. [The] people [living in] my building, [there] it’s different. I trust them, I know them, they’re good people.” To be sure, he and his family were living in a house that was divided up into three apartments, one inhabited by an elderly woman, and one by an Iraqi man. While the man had established close relations to both neighbours, he remained highly suspicious of the people selling and buying drugs on the street. Both Zaid and Mahmoud thus seemed to struggle with the lack of social control in their new urban environment.

In some cases, our respondents distinguished themselves from unworthy others on a collective, rather than an individual level. Hence they aligned themselves with other Syrians who they distinguished from established migrants groups. When I asked Abdullah, a forty-year old lorry driver, what his first impression was when he came to reception centre, he responded that

they are very kind, very nice, very friendly. But they who are living with you, sometimes they're not correct. Of course they cannot kick out every person. But there was regular fighting there. There were kids from Afghanistan... in a separate building for children, where they had to close the lights at 10 'o clock. But then they escaped through the window to smoke hashish. I saw it several times.

“And okay, you have to live together in the same space”, he added later in the conversation. “You can't avoid that. But there was this African guy I shared my room. And I have no problem with African people, but that guy, he drank a lot of alcohol. And I am a clean person, a very clean person. But where I was washing my face, that guy was washing his dick. Where I wash my mouth” he repeated four or five times, his face filled with disgust.

He was always hanging around and drinking, I don't know, whisky or something. Drinking and shouting at night. Then they kicked him out. And he started to attack me, he thought it was my fault. So I avoided him, I did not want to do something. I didn't want to cause trouble.... It's difficult to live with some people... In the beginning, it's very difficult. But slowly, slowly you find out that this is normal. [That] this is my life, I have no choice. They give me that place, I have to thank them. It's better than living in the street.”

Perhaps more explicitly than others, Mahmoud engaged in a discourse that simultaneously expressed an acceptance of his loss of socio-economic status, and his desire to distinguish himself from others in the same position, through his moral character. What provided him with a sense of worthiness, then, was his ability to comply with the implicit expectations of gratefulness and obedience that his host community projected on to its refugees, through the living conditions of the asylum centre. In that sense, he presented himself as a more ideal refugee (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014; Harrel-Bond 1999), as compared to the others residing in the centre.

4.2 “Are you better than him?” On Syrian men’s work ethic

A strong work ethic was a second way through which our respondents displayed their moral character. In first instance, the emphasis they put on their motivation to find work and engage in volunteering simply seemed to reproduce neoliberal discourses on individuals’ responsibility to take care of themselves through economic performances. We do not contend this, but we do seek to complicate the view that their work ethic can be reduced to a simple reproduction of a neoliberal discourse. To our respondents, emphasising their work ethic served the purpose of erecting moral boundaries that provided them with a strong sense of (masculine) dignity. This was tied up with being a refugee, rather than an economic migrant. Hence they tapped into discourses of a global refugee regime in which “bogus” asylum seekers ought to be distinguished from “authentic” ones (Innes 2010; Kmak 2015). In this sense, our respondents presented themselves as morally “pure” refugees – using Lisa Malkki’s (1995, 1996) term – relying on a more legitimate motivation to migrate than, for instance, undocumented or economic migrants.

This discourse was especially dominant among single men, irrespective of their cultural or economic background.^{vi} *In her ethnographic work on Syrian refugees in Egypt, Magdalena Suerbaum already highlighted how displacement made it challenging for refugee men to conform to the hegemonic Syrian middle-class masculinity, which is defined by paid employment, financial security and the male status as providers for the family. Unable to fully meet these masculine standards, Syrian refugees renegotiated their masculine worthiness by distancing themselves from other refugees who were declassified as ‘lazy’ or a ‘burden on society’ (Suerbaum, 2018a; 2018b).* With our Syrian respondents, this creation of a hierarchical order among refugees often took the specific form of a negative attitude towards persons with a Maghreb background. We encountered manifold reactions of Syrians in which they expressed their astonishment with the concentration of people from Maghreb origin in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, clearly stating that they did not want to live there. “I thought I had come to Europe, but I arrived in Morocco”, one man said as I asked him about his first experiences of the urban neighbourhood he lived in. Especially in informal conversations after the interviews we encountered quite some stereotypical remarks and jokes, sometimes ironic and benign, sometimes more serious and derogatory. As one of our key informants put it: “yeah, in Syria we have this thing about Moroccans, that they are, you know, simple people. [That] they are just farmers, [that] they have no culture, no values. [That] they are thieves and things like that.”

Ali, a single man who was a university student when he fled Syria, particularly emphasised his compatriots' work ethic. He was speaking of Turkish people pretending to be Syrian, as they had lived on the border with Syria, enabling them to speak Arabic in a Syrian accent. "A lot of people are coming to Europe just for welfare benefits", he said. But Syrians are not to blame for this. "Have you ever heard anything wrong about Syria? About Syrian people, before the war?"

"No", I replied.

"I think nobody heard bad things about people in Syria. Now it's war. Too much people [have] lost their families, too much people [have] lost their houses. Too much people were forced to go out. These people must get refuge... In my city... there were bombs and the fighting was going on, but I was still going to class every day. In the next street of university there was bombing, but I had an exam, so I went to university. I didn't miss it." He stayed in his home town as long as he could. He only left when he was called to serve in the army. Hence he emphasised that he had fled only because he was forced to do so by the war.

"So, if you don't have a father here, if someone, Belgian have a father and mother were dead, [then] he has to, work, for studying, work to study... So why you came here and make the government, pay your university and, everything you want. Maybe it's because you are cheap. It's because you are cheap."

"How do you mean because you are cheap?"

"That person would be on the government forever. Why you would be on the government forever? Aren't you man [enough] to find a job? Of course you are a man, you can find a job. You can clean bathroom at the train stations. That man [that we had seen earlier when we met at the train station], he's from Turkey. He is cleaning the train station. He cleans it every day. Are you better than them? No. You can make it. You can work."

In the passage above, Ali "de-identifies" (Killian & Johnson 2006) himself and the wider category of Syrian refugees from other groups of immigrants through a moral vocabulary of "being cheap", suggesting that other migrant groups' low self-esteem enables them to maintain a low work ethic. His indifference to the type of work one does, shows us that, for him, it is not so much actual socio-economic status that matters as a criterion for judging other people's worth, as much as one's ethos, one's willingness to work. In this sense, several Syrians seemed to draw strong symbolic boundaries around their collective work ethic (cf. De Genova & Ramos-Zayas 2003; Suerbaum 2018a).

While Ali's account was exceptionally explicit and evaluative, most of the Syrian men we interviewed engaged in more moderate variants building on the same distinction between the work ethos of Syrian refugees and other groups of migrants. Hassan and Ghayath, for example, were two upper middle class brother-in-laws, both of whom were married without children. They told us about an Iraqi couple they had heard about that pretended to be divorced, so they could get close to the double amount of social benefits they were entitled. "But", he added quickly, "they are not Syrian people. They don't do this. They are new here, they don't know this. It's people from Iraq or some other people, I don't know, but I see it, I hear about. And I feel sad about it because it's like stealing. It's not your right. You take money from other people, they need it."

Syrian people do not do this, they emphasised. On the one hand, they *cannot*, because they are new and thus less likely to be aware of how to misuse the system, the brothers-in-law claimed. On the other hand, they *will not* do this because Syrian people are hard-working people. Furthermore, and as we will see later on in more detail, Syrians often made distinctions between people coming from different Syrian cities. When we asked Hassan whether he had expected the protests to break out in Syria, he responded negatively, explaining that his city, Aleppo, was relatively wealthy. "Most of the people in [my home town] are working, and they have a good life. Everybody is busy. If young people are not working there, they are no good. Because if you say you want to work you can start to work."

This seems strongly similar to the second and third generation immigrants in France that were interviewed by Killian and Johnson (2006). They too, sought to distance themselves from other groups of immigrants, emphasising the different motivations for their own immigration as well as the weak working ethos of these other groups. Both can be understood as attempts to undo the stigma that is more widely associated with their (ethnic) minority status in the hosting country.

5. Cultural boundaries

5.1 Restoring cultural class

Ever since Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), it has become common knowledge that middle class members distinguish themselves from the lower classes through subtle signs indicating their sense of refinement, aesthetic taste and cultural knowledge (Bourdieu 1984). In our encounters and conversations we regularly accounted instances where our Syrian respondents seemed to do precisely that. Young men turned up particularly well-dressed for the occasion, while others arrived at the café for an interview with a large camera hanging around their neck, possibly signalling a well-developed aesthetic view on their new environment as well as the technical capacities to put their taste to practice. And whether coincidentally or not, when we arrived at one family's home for an interview, classical music was playing loudly as we entered, immediately signalling the fact that we were dealing with someone who had been part of the Syrian arts scene. Taking into account that they were representing themselves to us, white Belgians employed by a local university, many of these instances can be interpreted as subtle communications of cultural capital.

In some interviews, our interlocutors distinguished themselves explicitly in terms of cultural class. Youssef, for instance, was a single man who used to be an accountant in the city of Homs. Talking about his current job in a Belgian warehouse, he explained that his colleagues there had received little if any form of higher education. There was a particularly bad atmosphere, with his colleagues admitting that they were the "problem group" of the enterprise. To show his good intentions and hospitable nature, he invited his direct colleagues for dinner at his place, three months after he began working there. To his surprise, most of his colleagues had never been at each other's homes, even though some of them had been working together for 12 years. When we asked him, perhaps too provokingly, whether he thought that that was something of a Belgian thing, he replied "no, I don't think it's typical for Belgians. It think it's more the people there, they are lower levels, do you understand."

It was also his first work experience in a setting that was dominated by women. "They were gossiping all the time", he laughed. "It was horrible, really horrible. They were always talking about sex, about the monthly period... about the sex they had had, the night before. And when they gave birth, and when they had pain... And I'm just there, I have to listen, I have to listen, really. I have to listen because otherwise I will be an unfriendly person", he laughed.^{vii}).

But, he explained, “I have worked there with a lower level. Because they can’t really write well. Sometimes just a few words. I can write better than them. Do you understand? It’s just transporting things [in the warehouse]. That’s not really my job.... I did this job 9 months. But now I am starting [up] my own business.”

It seemed that he wanted to recover some of the middle class status that he had lost by leaving Syria. Hence Imad emphasised that this was “not really” his job, and that he could write and read better than most of his colleagues, in spite of the fact that he was still learning the language. Stories such as these, we reckon, can therefore be understood as discursive means through which they try to symbolically recover the status they had lost.

5.2 “They are underestimating us, a lot of Belgians.” Collective cultural capital.

Respondents also referred to collective levels of cultural capital, thereby emphasising that Syrian people as a whole are well educated, skilled and intelligent, due to the quality of their national educational system. In addition, they took pride in the reputed culinary traditions and in the relative wealth of their city, region or country. They often did so in response to what they felt were negative prejudices Belgians had about Syrian people. By doing so, they used this form of cultural capital to simultaneously distinguish themselves from other groups of minorities or migrants, who were implicitly seen to have a bad reputation.

Yasmine, for instance, a single woman in her early thirties who had a degree in architecture, told of a news report she had read, from a Belgian journalist who had interviewed Syrian girls in Turkey. The journalist had spoken with a Syrian girl that had received no education after primary school. She came from a small village, and was stuck with her family in Turkey. Yasmine took issue with the fact that the journalist suggested that the girl’s story was representative for all Syrians in Turkey. “I found it sad”, she said. “He made it look like everybody was in such a situation. While there are many Syrians who are well-educated. We’re not as developed as Belgium, but for [an average country in] the Middle East, we’re pretty wealthy....Syrian people are really educated you know. I don’t have [records], but many Syrian people have university degrees. And almost everybody is educated.”

Later on she reflected about the damage the war had done in Syria. “Especially here” she said, tapping her left index finger to her temple.

“Mentally, you mean?” I asked, to which she nodded in response.

“Now Sunni and Shi’a people hate each other. The mentality is totally destroyed. Before, there was civil culture. It was there you know, a certain level... Even in some villages in Syria, the government tried people to force to educate because you know, you, have to go to school.” Increasing the level of literacy and general education among its population was indeed one of the largest achievements of the Ba’ath party since the 1960s (Abboud 2016).

Yet many Belgians think badly about Syrians, she went on. She told about her encounter with a woman on the bus. “She was surprised that I was from Syria. She said ‘I didn’t know people from Syria looked like that.’ But we don’t all ride camels and wear headscarves you know”, Yasmine laughed. “Really, they are underestimating us, a lot of Belgians. They are underestimating us. It makes me sad that they think of us like that.”

From that perspective, Yasmine seemed to distinguish the reality of Syria from the orientalist ideas and images that were projected upon them. In this sense, the reference to the headscarf can be interpreted as highly significant – as she had been staying in Belgium for a few years, she may be well aware of the national controversy on headscarves and other markers of religious identity. Combined with the emphasis she put on the general level of education and economic development in Syria, this discourse seemed to carve out an image of Syrians as capable, progressive people that should be not confused with the orientalist images projected on to establish religious minorities.

In one way or another, most of our respondents tried to debunk or compensate for the orientalist stereotypes that they felt were imposed upon them. Because they were stereotyped as helpless, idle and uneducated they felt misunderstood and underestimated. As our individual respondents lost much of their symbolic capital and status symbols, they partly reacted to such “assaults” on their worthiness by drawing on available repertoires and symbols about ‘collective worth’. These reactions emerged in a diverse range of ways which we cannot describe in full detail here (Lamont et.al. 2016), yet we do want to briefly point at two such strategies. First, they emphasised the culinary refinement of their region, their country, their city. The more some of our respondents became friends, the more we were invited for dinner. Initially, I thought it was charming instance of Mediterranean or Arabic hospitality. Yet over time it seemed like something more was going on: what they were putting on the table was a matter of national or regional pride. These were no longer instances of mere hospitality, these were live performances of Syria’s refined culinary culture. *Makloubeh* seemed a particular favourite, as it requires the cook to turn around the entire dish straight from the pan on the table, in front of the guests. It is a

spectacle that can go terribly wrong, putting shame on the host, but if it works, the scene is set for a decent night out.

The desire to share their culinary heritage was not limited to the respondents we befriended. In nearly every interview, respondents presented us with pictures of Syria's typical dishes. We could have been discussing their access to adequate legal information, the living conditions in asylum centre and their difficulties of securing housing, but it was only when the topic of food emerged that they became genuinely excited – particularly the contrast between the food regime imposed upon them in collective reception centres with the richness and refinement of the Syrian cuisine. In fact, their culinary pride was, together with the living conditions in the emergency reception centres established in the autumn of 2015, the only topic for which they engaged in elaborate criticism on its Belgian counterpart. Especially the continental-style bread-based lunches and breakfasts were widely seen as improper food of poor quality and low nutritional value (Author I 2017).

Second, in a different attempt to demonstrate the 'development' of their city, region or country, many of our interlocutors were eager to show us pictures not only of their individual but also their collective wealth. Omar, for instance, a single truck driver in his early forties, proudly showed us pictures of Kurdish landscapes, and of the parliament, theatres and museum that had been erected in Rojava in spite of the Syrian war. Two brothers, both middle aged men who were reunited with their wives and who were manual labourers in Syria, showed us pictures of their house, including a small white fountain they shared with a few neighbours, and the saloon they reserved for receiving guests. The blue and white tiles on the outside wall, they assured us, were of the highest quality, hand-made by a close friend of his. Syria was not a country in need of economic development, they seemed to say. It was a fine, cultivated and wealthy place that had been torn to pieces by a terrible conflict nobody had foreseen. In that sense, they seemed to appeal to the wealth of their country of origin to show they were well-capable, wealthy men and women, rather than emigrants from an economically underdeveloped region.

7. Conclusion and discussion: reasserting one's dignity after a sudden loss of status

This article provides two contributions to the literature on symbolic boundary-making. First, we argue that some of the strategies refugees engage in to emphasise their dignity consist of distinguishing themselves from others in similar socio-structural positions. In this sense, we provide an empirical contribution to the literature on how refugees engage in strategies of self-presentation that legitimise their presence and the respect they are entitled to (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014; Harrell-Bond 1999; Nawyn 2011). More precisely, we have shown how at least some of our respondents “de-identify” (Killian & Johnson 2006) themselves from other Syrians and established migrant groups, whilst constructing discursive alliances with the Belgian host society. Equipped with a repertoire emphasising cultural refinement and moral authenticity rather than material wealth or institutional power, they draw two types of moral, and two types of cultural boundaries. *Morally*, they contrasted, first, their good behaviour with the bad behaviour of ‘uneducated’ Syrians, established migrants in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and, occasionally, lower class Belgians. Second, especially male respondents engaged in a discourse emphasising their motivation to work, which they contrasted with the motivations of either economic immigrants or Syrians abusing European welfare arrangements. *Culturally*, our respondents reasserted their dignity on two levels: first, they displayed or stressed their individual cultural capital, distinguishing themselves from others through their aesthetic refinement, intelligence, and educational achievements. Second, they highlighted the cultural achievements of their people as a whole, drawing attention to Syria’s general level of education, wealth or its culinary heritage. In this way, our respondents aligned with other Syrians to emphasise their worthiness as a people.

These strategies complicate the formation of alliances of solidarity. As our respondents derived part of their dignity from what they present as their moral and cultural qualities, they distinguished themselves from others in relatively similar socio-structural positions – most notably established migrants and lower class Belgians. This can be understood by taking into account refugees’ more specific socio-structural position as ‘semizens’ (Nash 2009) - marked by uncertainty about their legal entitlements to residence and access to welfare, social support, housing, etc. - as well the public demands to “earn” their citizenship (Kremer 2016; Author I & Author II) and present themselves “ideal refugees” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014; Nawyn 2011). This article therefore provides further evidence to Sherman’s (2005, 155; see also Purser 2009) claim that “in their creative search for dignity,” people in disadvantaged positions may risk to “unwittingly legitimate the very social relations that disadvantage them to begin with.”

Second, we argued that Syrians' boundary work can be read as a response to a sudden loss of social status. While the literature on boundary making has mainly documented variation in symbolic boundary making *between* groups (and how this is linked to institutional context) there has been less attention for the specific boundary work caused by the sudden dislocation of a group to a new context. More attention to the dynamics of boundary work of other groups confronted with sudden dislocation or loss of status (e.g. sudden impoverishment or unemployment), could further benefit research on symbolic boundary making.

To conclude, we shortly reflect on the limitations of our findings, which need to be understood within the particular Syrian and Belgian contexts. It should be noted, first, that most of our respondents can be positioned as members of an economic and cultural middle class, in the sense that in Syria they had acquired stable, socio-professional positions and relatively high standards of education and literacy. They did not grow up in a so-called development country, nor in a protracted refugee situation that had persisted over several generations – as compared to a considerable share of the forced migrants fleeing Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan or Palestine.

Second, the socialist ideology of the ruling Ba'ath party's helped to create a cultural repertoire celebrating an egalitarian system of values in which education was more highly regarded than individual material wealth. Third, in Belgium, the socio-structural gap between established and newly arriving migrant groups on the one hand, and white majority Belgians, is particularly deep and salient as compared to other West-European countries. As this gap is smaller in other countries of refuge in the North, it is possible that the exclusion they were starting to face on the labour and the housing market, as well as the rigid socio-economic fault lines between white Belgians and established immigrant groups, fuelled our respondents' loss of status more dramatically than elsewhere. Although these different national specificities have shaped the specific patterns of boundary making we have analysed, we expect that at least some of the boundary and bridging strategies we discussed, can be found among refugees in other European countries.

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ⁱ These interviews usually took place in informal settings such as cafés, at Syrians' home, or outside the reception centre they were residing in. Due to these informal settings, interviews often took the form of long conversations in which several interlocutors participated. In addition, eight Syrians were interviewed twice, and we continued having regular, informal conversations with eleven interlocutors.

ⁱⁱ Key informants were selected partly to take into account Syria's ethnic and religious diversity. They included a Sunni Arab man, a Druze man, and a Christian woman.

ⁱⁱⁱ This assumption seems to be confirmed by our yet unpublished analysis of how Syrians developed their social networks (see Author I 2016).

^{iv} Although it should be noted that since the 1990s the Syrian government made increasing efforts to liberalise the economy, thereby creating a larger middle class as well as reducing the agricultural class. Rather than effectively liberalising the economy, however, scholars and commentators have noted that these reforms have mostly created opportunities for a small capitalistic elite with close personal ties to the regime itself (Abboud 2016; Scheller 2013). In spite of these relatively recent developments, we think it is plausible that the egalitarian socialist ideology of the Ba'ath party still has a pervasive impact on the cultural repertoire Syrians draw upon to evaluate success and worthiness.

^v As it was difficult to estimate our interlocutors' income, we think of class in terms of professional occupation. Hence our interlocutors included mostly small shop-owners (and/or), independent farmers, public servants (incl. teachers) and employees of small-scale factories.

^{vi} The gendered aspect of this discourse on work ethic can be partly explained by the differential impact of displacement on men and women. When men are expected to take responsibility for their families by providing an income, becoming financially dependent upon government agencies puts them at risk of losing their social status as breadwinners (Charsley & Liversage 2015; Jaji, 2009; Liversage 2012; Suerbaum 2018a; 2018b). For the women we interviewed, this loss of occupational status seemed to be less dramatic and sometimes even opened up opportunities for continuing (vocational) education or re-employment as a household survival strategy (cf. McSpadden and Moussa 1993). Interestingly, when some of our female respondents did experience a loss of occupational status, they did not so much emphasize their work ethic, as how institutional barriers in the Belgian labour market prevented them from turning their capacities into a skilled job.

^{vii} There is of course a crucial gender-dimension at work here. It is indeed possible, as one of the reviewers of this article suggests, that Youssef's emphasis of staying friendly can also be interpreted as a strategy to avoid being racialized as a threatening male Arab (Said 1977). As our main argument focuses on how he draws distinctions based on level of education, however, we do not develop this point here.