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'I'm a genuine Italian, but not a genuine Italian' : complex and shifting strategies of ethnic and moral boundary making in the narratives of Italian minority parents in Flanders

Title:

"I'm a genuine Italian, but not a *genuine* Italian": Complex and shifting strategies of ethnic and

moral boundary making, narratives of Italian minority parents in Flanders

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Abstract

It is well-documented in (ethnic) identity research that individuals to a large extent can construct an identity they feel comfortable with. However, this is not an easy task and one's identity is, for some more than for others, under constant pressure to be reflected upon and reconstructed. At the same time many individuals often feel that there is a core element in their (ethnic) identity that does not change and remains stable. In this paper I aim to discuss what might be a constant mechanism underlying identification processes for a specific group of individuals, namely Italian origin parents in Flanders. Based upon 13 in-depth interviews I aim to reveal what I argue is a constant underlying mechanism in identity construction: the presentation of the self as morally good and valuable. However, to be able to do this, the Italian origin participants in this study have to develop a variety of sometimes contradictory strategies. In a Flemish society where their Italian ethnicity is not questioned or problematized, the participants seem very keen to underline how ethnically different from the Flemish-Belgian majority they are. Yet, at other times they present themselves as much more similar to this majority group when discussing other minority groups, in particular Muslims. However, the most striking group reconstruction occurs when participants use the example of 'genuine Italians' to differentiate themselves from, while at the same time stressing they are genuine Italians themselves. When studying these various strategies from the perspective of presentation of the self as morally good and valuable, it becomes clear why these seemingly contradictory strategies not at all feel contradictory to the participants. The findings show how strong the need for such a recognition of the self is.

Key words

Main text

Introduction

It is well-documented in (ethnic) identity research that individuals to a large extent can construct an identity they feel comfortable with (Jenkins 2008). However, this is not an easy task and one's identity is, for some more than for others, under constant pressure to be reflected upon and reconstructed (Wimmer 2013). Therefore, rather than talking about identity as an end-result, some argue it is more accurate to use the concept of identification rather than identity as we are discussing a never-ending process on the individual level rather than at the group level (Brubaker 2015). Nevertheless, identity research is still confronted with the lingering issue of the idea of an essential and stable element in identity formation processes. Many individuals often feel that there is a core element that does not change: e.g. they identify as white, black or Italian and that does not change according to the situation or even over time (Gil-white 1999). Of course, rather than discussing the label of 'white', 'black' or 'Italian', individuals are discussing the content and meaning of the label, and this meaning is certainly more malleable and variable according to different contexts and interaction partners. However, even in these processes of changing meaning construction used to develop an identity, some patterns might emerge that seem quite stable.

In this paper I aim to discuss what might be a constant mechanism underlying identification processes for a specific group of Italian origin individuals. I aim to argue that the search for the moral high ground and the presentation of the self as morally valuable could be one of the main mechanisms driving identification processes (Stets and Carter, 2011). The analysis is based upon in-depth interviews with parents of Italian origin born and raised in Flanders, the semi-autonomous and Dutch speaking part of Belgium. More in particular, this paper discusses the various ways Italian ethnicity is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed vis à vis a variety of 'others'. In some cases these identifications processes seem to contradict each other while they seem quite 'logical' given

respondents' specific perception of social reality and their search to prove they are morally valuable (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). The interrelated research questions addressed in this paper are: (1) how do Italian origin individuals construct their ethnic identity, and how do these identifications differ (or not) according to the context and specific others? (2) how and why do respondents change and legitimize changing group boundaries? (3) What is the driving force or mechanism underlying these identity (re)constructions?

The construction of Italian ethnicity in Flanders is an interesting case as it reveals how, as will be discussed, these individuals find it necessary to explicitly construct their ethnicity even though its place in Flemish society is quite unproblematic. In discussions on multiculturalism and the challenges it raises for (sub)national identity – a hot issue in Flanders (as in most parts of Europe) – Italian ethnicity is never questioned, especially in comparison to Turkish or Moroccan ethnicity, or more recently imaginations about 'Muslims' or 'refugees' (Clycq and Levrau 2017). Yet, although rather unproblematic and quite absent in political and media debates, Italian ethnicity seems to remain quite important for Italian origin individuals living in Flanders. Thus, rather than focusing on ethnic identity construction by a societally problematized minority, this paper focuses on a minority group that is able to construct this identity 'in the shades'. Yet, the findings will show that this is not necessarily an easy task.

Italians in Flanders and Belgium, from guest workers and intruders to a 'forgotten minority'

Similar to other Western-European countries, Belgium depended heavily on the laboured provided by migrants – called guest workers at that time – to rebuild its economy and country and further develop its industries. Among the first 'sending' countries was Italy which signed an agreement with the Belgian government to send many Italian men to work, particularly in the coal mines (Beyers 2007). In 1946 the Belgian and Italian governments signed the *Accord du Charbon* (Agreement of the Coal) stipulating that Italy would receive an amount of coals for every work day of an Italian national in Belgium (Beyers

2007). However, as is often the case, new comers – even those that are 'invited' and actively recruited by the government – are met with suspicion, fear and sometimes outright hostility. For Italian guest workers, that was not different. Moreover, even before the intergovernmental agreement in 1946 there were Italians – albeit in much smaller numbers – coming to work in the coal mines and records show that they were also met with hostility. For example, the Catholic workers movement in Limburg, home to the coal mines of Flanders, already had a song in 1920 declaring the Belgian workers will fight for their jobs and freedom against the Italians, and questioning *why these Italians* are coming in taking Belgians' work and freedom (Delbroek 2008). Despite these combative songs, it was only 30 years later that a massive migration of Italians to Belgium became a reality (Martens and Moulaert 1985). It is no surprise that these later migration waves were also received with hostility. In general, Italian migrants were perceived as ill-adapted, not integrated, unwilling to learn Dutch, and – with respect to the Italian men – oppressive towards their women (Beyers 2007).

It is remarkable that, given these societal tensions Italian migrants and certainly their offspring, the second and third generation that is born and raised in Flanders, are nowadays perceived as a non-problematic and even positive presence. Indeed, in some former coalmining cities in Limburg the 'Italian' presence is quite visible in, e.g., the forms of Italian shops, restaurants, civil society organisations, and churches. In fact in a city such as Genk with around 65.000 inhabitants of whom 14% has an Italian immigration background, the most civil society organization by 2006 were founded by or related to 'Italians' (Clycq 2009). This illustrates that Italians underwent a so-called 'whitening' process turning from outsiders stealing jobs from native Belgians to insiders no longer in competition with natives (Ignatiev 1995). This was mainly triggered by the arrival of other guest workers – in particular the 'religious other' such as Moroccans and Turks that were increasingly labelled as Muslims above anything else – rather than by strong socio-economic upward mobility processes (Beyers 2007; Clycq 2009). These broader societal transformations seemed to enable individuals to construct a new and broader inclusive sense of belonging going beyond the national identity which remains for many ethnic minorities a more exclusive collective identity (Fleischmann and Phalet 2018).

This entering into the mainstream, even of Italian migrants but certainly of the second and third generation, to a large extent parallels similar patterns found in the USA and other parts of Europe (Wimmer 2013). In particular the work of Alba in the USA (2009) is insightful as he discusses the evolution of Italian migrants from an 'in-between position' as not entirely white (or probationary white), implying they were excluded in various ways but not legally excluded in similar ways as African-Americans in the first half of the 20th century, to a position included in the mainstream in the second half of the century. In the context of the USA Alba (2009) discusses various causes that can explain this transition: the finding that upward social mobility of ethnic minority individuals did not trigger downward mobility for ethnic majority individuals, the impact of residential desegregation which increased interethnic relations, and a rethinking and reimagining of the bright exclusive boundary into a more inclusive one. Yet, certainly the third cause remains somewhat ambiguous as a blurring of the social boundary does not necessarily lead to a blurring of the symbolic boundary, e.g. in the case of African-Americans (Alba and Foner 2015; Lamont 2018). In this respect, in Europe often religion rather than ethnicity is constructed as a bright symbolic boundary (Foner 2015). Taking all these findings into account – in particular whitening processes in relation to the importance and endurance of group boundaries –encourages us to apply the notion of (group) boundaries with some caution, as discussed below.

The boundary metaphor in (ethnic) identity studies

At least since the seminal work of Frederik Barth (1969) the notion of the (ethnic) boundary has become prevalent in (ethnic) identity research. He introduced the metaphor of the (imagined) boundary to illustrate how individuals manage group membership(s). In the following decades the boundary concept has become one of the most important analytical tools in identity studies. However, one of the main criticism on the boundary concept is that it easily leads to groupist thinking (Brubaker, 2015) and, related to this, that the metaphor sometimes is construed as a concrete boundary making it 'real in itself' rather than 'real in its consequences' (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, when applying the concept

of boundaries one must not forget that it are individuals that use the imagined notion of group boundaries in quite ambiguous and often quite implicit ways. Taking this criticism into account the concept of boundary-work remains useful as it shows how individuals address the idea of 'bounded groups' and how they reconstruct these ideas in everyday interaction.

An important step in the study of boundary-work is the configurational and relational approach proposed by Wimmer (2013) showing that – depending on the context – individuals can apply various strategies. Among the most important are the exclusive strategy of boundary contraction (making the in-group smaller) and the inclusive strategy of expansion (making the in-group bigger by incorporating others). An interesting case is discussed by Kosta (2018) showing how in a specific neighbourhood in the USA ethnic Albanians and Italians open-up their interethnic boundary using 'cultural similarity' but also revealing that interests ('maintaining the *Italianness* of the neighbourhood through enlarging the group') are underpinning these reconstructions. This relates to the argument of Wimmer (2013) that ethnic categorization sometimes only plays a secondary role in group formation, e.g. in the multi-ethnic state of Switzerland. However, at the same time and even though he does not label it as such, one of his key examples shows that the boundary expansion strategy of ethnic Swiss, Italians and Spaniard draws a new group boundary based upon a different ethnic boundary related to 'European descent'. Respondents in his research construct an ethnically heterogeneous 'us' – comprising ethnic Swiss, Italians and Spaniards – against non-Europeans such as Muslims and/or Turkish residents, it still shows that ethnic identity construction might be one of the main driving forces by expanding the boundary to the supranational level of European ethnicity (Wimmer 2013; see also Champagne 1993). Moreover, what is interesting to note is that on other occasions the second generation Italians did not include the ethnic Swiss in their 'us'. This to some extent shows that indeed symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them' can persist even though the socio-economic and other inequalities do not seem to be a dividing ground (Lamont 2000). Elaborating on this approach, what Wimmer (2013) argues to be a specific strategy – the challenging of the hierarchical order – is potentially not a specific boundary strategy but one of the main interests individuals pursue in (ethnic) boundary making.

Ethnic identity formation and the pursuit of interests

In recent decades the social constructivist approach to (ethnic) identity formation has clearly shown to be the most robust in grasping these processes (Jenkins 2008). While this reappraisal of individual agency in making identity is important, one cannot ignore the force and power exerted by other individuals, groups and institutions (Wimmer 2013). Moreover, to some extent individuals also seem to need a sort of stable perception of the self with certain features of their identity they feel do not change over time and provide a security when their identity is threatened (Clycq, 2015). This is captured by the concepts of 'fictive kinship' (Bentely 1987) and the 'family of origin-metaphor' (Roosens 1994), building on the 'artificial origin of the belief in common ethnicity' of Weber (2010, 20). These concepts combine the idea of social construction of primordial ethnicity in particular stressing the Thomas theorem, that if people define their ethnicity as a primordial identity this becomes real in its consequences (Jenkins 2008). It underlines the importance a grounded, deep-rooted notion of ethnicity has for individuals in navigating everyday life (Gil-White 1999), and in particular in family socialization practices (Clycq 2015).

To grasp these processes Jenkins (2008) stresses the notion of 'interest' as steering identification processes. Individuals (and groups of individuals) have certain interests to pursue or (re)construct their identity, and to give it a specific meaning according to the context and/or the other(s). However, rather than focusing on economic or practical interests, some have argued that one must not underestimate the importance of pursuing rather immaterial interests such as moral status, recognition, self-respect and feelings of belonging (Skeggs 2010; Lamont 2018; Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). Therefore, in response to the thought-provoking book of Wimmer (2013), Jenkins (2014) stresses the notion of interests to move beyond the centrality of boundary construction in (ethnic) identity formation. To Jenkins (2008) metaphorical boundaries between groups – the inclusion and

exclusion of others – are mainly the outcome of this pursuit of interests rather than the core of identity formation.

Intersecting dimensions and changing group boundaries

Identity formation thus becomes a more or less active and conscious process of position-taking vis a vis others that is contextually sensitive (Brubaker 2015). It is about how individuals (re)present themselves and what interests they have to do so (Goffman 1963). Furthermore, it stresses the importance of involving individuals, various and changing networks of ingroups and outgroups, the institutional and social context and the various resources and power individuals can apply in these processes. Crucial therefore is to acknowledge the intersectional nature of identities (Yuval-Davis 2010). The interests individuals have to identify with specific others and groups can change or the strategies to satisfy these interests can change, but in any case individuals need to adapt themselves and thus also their identity constructions. As an individual's social location can change depending on space and time, emphasis should be placed upon the changing valued dimensions of comparison and interactions with others (Reicher 2010). This comparison across group boundaries is based upon perceptions of symbolic and social differences and similarities which are always connoted with meaning (Lamont 2014). People constantly construct, renegotiate and challenge group boundaries as what it means to be a member of a group is seldom experienced in the same way by different individuals, not even by ingroup members. Therefore, an important addition is that the meaning of a group and its boundaries that is produced, does not solely proceed on the cognitive level and is far from purely rational, but is always accompanied with emotions and behaviours which do not need to be in line with the cognitions (Jenkins 2014). Some boundaries might feel bright and impermeable, while others feel and are experienced as much more blurred and more easy to cross in order to identify, and be identified, as member of the group (Alba 2005).

Thus, what I aim to study in this paper is how the participants construct and give meaning to Italian ethnicity, how these group boundaries might shift in relation to various 'others', but, ultimately, what I want to uncover is if there are patterns in the interests respondents have. I aim to argue that it might be more relevant to look at these interests rather than at the changing boundaries in order to understand why it seems so important for individuals to construct their identities as such.

Method and sample

As identity formation is to a large extent a discursive process, in-depth interviewing are an excellent method to grasp these meaning giving processes (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). However, as practicing identity in everyday life is often equally important, I tried to comprehend participants' actions by asking them to reflect on tangible real-life experiences. More in particular, I focused on the experiences of parents living in Flanders and aimed to understand how they perceive and identify themselves and their children when navigating everyday life (Clycq 2015). The broader project focuses on one's position as a parent as this often accentuates certain identity dimensions and in any case makes the issue of transmitting (or not) of specific identity features to one's children a tangible issue. Yet, in the current article, rather than primarily focusing on 'parenting', the issue of (ethnic) identity transmission was used to trigger participants in to reflecting upon their own identity/identities as well as that of their child(ren).

As mentioned, this research was part of a larger project including a total of 42 parents of Belgian, Italian and Moroccan origin. For mainly two reasons the current research only focuses on the interviews with Italian origin parents. First, the specificities of the intergroup interactions – in particular how ethnic, religious and gender identities are (re)constructed vis a vis various 'others' – are discussed in other publications (see Clycq, 2012, 2015). But, secondly and more importantly, the narratives of Italian origin respondents showed some remarkable patterns with respect to the interactions between intra- and intergroup processes, and the interests individuals pursue, that I feel

can only be adequately studied with a clearly delineated research approach. For these reasons I chose to focus solely on the narratives of Italian origin parents.

This amounts to a total of 13 interviews with, categorized by gender, 7 men and 6 women of Italian origin. In most cases it was possible to interview both parents from the same family, although every participant was interviewed individually and separately. In a sample of this size it is important to have some diversity but too much diversity on socio-demographic variables can become an obstacle for doing meaningful research. What was kept similar across these respondents was: (1) that they all identified as Italian (NOTE 1), (2) that they had at least one child, (3) that they all lived in the same geographical urban area in the province of Limburg, (4) and that they all were born in Belgium – except for two respondents (wife and husband) that migrated to Belgium in their adolescence. When the experiences of these two respondents are cited in this paper this will be explicitly indicated. However, the analysis shows that their narratives on Italian ethnicity do not seem to differ from the others – potentially because they have been living in Belgium for over 20 years. Next to these generally similar characteristics, variety was mainly obtained in terms of educational background: seven respondents had at most an upper secondary education degree, four respondents a tertiary education degree and two – the couple that migrated to Belgium – a lower secondary education degree obtained abroad.

To recruit these respondents, different methods were applied. Public family assistance services and specific 'minority' organisations were contacted and, in combination with the method of snowball sampling, this allowed for the recruitment of a diverse research sample. All interviews were executed and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a similar topic list, while at the same time leaving room for new topics to emerge. One of these topics is the ambiguous notion and construction of Italian ethnicity which was found by comparing differences and similarities emerging in the narratives using Atlas-ti.

Findings

Studying the various ways Italian ethnicity is constructed in the context of Flanders is interesting as it reveals why individuals feel the need to explicitly emphasize and construct an ethnicity that is generally perceived as quite unproblematic by the Flemish ethnic majority. To begin with, this section shows that Italian ethnicity is a very important identity dimension for Italian origin respondents. However, while it is to be expected that the meaning attached to it changes according to different 'others', some core elements are constantly reproduced in order to represent the self as valuable and morally superior (Stets and Carter, 2011). Moreover, several contradictions emerge out of the narratives, however they are not experienced as such by the respondents as they seem to be justified by the pursuit of these specific interests.

A unique Italian identity, bound by blood

As mentioned before, all respondents were parents and when asking them what they feel as important to pass on to their children, Italian ethnicity – its language, family relations, food and customs – is never far away. Respondents see it as their task to pass on what they imagine as 'typically Italian'. As they lack to a large extent the institutional support from e.g. formal Flemish educational systems and schools to pass this on, a partly ethno-cultural support system Flemish native parents heavily rely on in their socialization processes, they feel obliged to construct new strategies (Clycq 2016). They argue this is a core task they as a parent have to take up because they *are* Italians and thus their children are it (to a large extent) too. In respondents' minds, as an Italian parent you pass on Italianness as this is who 'we' are and e.g. what 'our language' is, as Irena argues: *When she [her daughter] was little, I always spoke Italian to her. Just so she could speak our language.* (42-year old Italian origin woman, secondary education, employed, married to Riccardo, daughter of 15). By speaking Italian, upholding presumed Italian traditions with respect to family and food, by not sending your children to Flemish day care centres but to the grandparents in the pre-school period, the notion of Italianness is constructed and reproduced but of course also transformed (see also Clycq 2015).

Moreover, the underlying imagination of this Italianness among the respondents, is aptly illustrated by the following quote: the perception that your ethnic identity is not something you can put aside or get rid of, even if you wanted too (for a more elaborate discussion of the impact hereof on family socialization strategies, see Clycq 2015):

I don't understand from where that feeling [Italian] comes. He [her husband] doesn't understand it either. What has Italy ever done for us? … We never lived there. We don't know anything over there. Only when we go on holiday. […] I can't explain it. The only thing I can say is that maybe your blood is Italian and you are connected to a country [Italy]. You can't escape from it. I don't think it can change by being raised here [in Belgium]. I think that everything I do, I do it in the Italian way. (Frederica: 29-year-old Italian origin woman, tertiary education, employed, married to Paolo, a son of 3)

This to a large extent reflects the inward looking ethnic identity construction, the fictive kinship metaphor of sharing the same (imagined) blood origin (Bentely 1987; Roosens 1994), or as another participant argues: *You understand each other more when you're amongst Italians. You know, like we say: Italians, we are the same pasta*. (Antonio: 45-year-old Italian man, migrated to Belgium, secondary education, employed, married to Antonella, a son of 18, a son of 13 and a son of 3).

On the one hand this seems to construct a seemingly strong and bright boundary with others who are represented as those with 'other blood'. Yet, on the other hand it is clear that such a boundary is up for discussion as there is no clear way to determine this blood relationship. Indeed, sometimes parents do state that their children will be 'less Italian' then they themselves are, using this perception in arguing that it is their task to 'make them feel Italian' and to align who their children 'are' (they are Italian) with what they 'know and can do' (speaking 'our' language). In doing so they indeed implicitly acknowledge that Italian identity construction is to a large extent a *construction*. Yet, the belief that their children might be 'less Italian' mainly refers to the idea of their children being less proficient in

the Italian language or only having limited knowledge about 'Italian traditions'. What is never argued is that their children will be 'genuine' Belgians (for more on this specific issue, see Clycq 2015).

However, even though this boundary seems bright and unchangeable because of the notion of fictive kinship, the following paragraphs show how the boundaries of Italian ethnicity not only change according to the various others, but that this is mainly done to represent the self (and the ethnic group) as good (or better) and morally valuable. I will show that various strategies discussed by Wimmer (2013) – in particular the expanding as well as the contraction of group boundaries – are applied, but often in contradictory ways. Yet, this is not felt as such by respondents encouraging us to study what the underlying mechanism is that enables them to represent themselves and their group in various ways.

From Italians to Mediterraneans united versus Belgians

What is striking in the narratives of the participants is that, as a self-evident discursive practice, they construct their Italian ethnicity first vis a vis the dominant Flemish-Belgian majority group (NOTE 2). Moreover, this is a seemingly very strong and bright boundary and almost turns Belgians into the 'ultimate other', as the following narrative illustrates:

> Belgians will always be Belgians. That's the way it is. No, I don't have anything against Belgians, but they are put together completely different [than Italians]. If a Belgian organizes a strike [at work], there is not a single Belgian that will go on strike. They rather hang upside down than that they go on strike. (Luigi: 35-year-old Italian origin man, secondary education, employed, married to Maria, daughter of 10 and a boy of 5)

Also in their role as parents they see this difference returning and argue to be very different in their parentings styles than 'Belgians' who, for example, do not mind to send their children to day care: *If I*

had to send him [her son] to a day care, I would be overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. And that is also

a huge difference between me and Belgian families (Frederica: 29-year-old Italian origin woman, tertiary education, employed, married to Paolo, a son of 3).

Moreover, this image of the cold and introvert Belgians is even used to construct a new group of Mediterraneans vis a vis the Belgians, hereby expanding the group boundaries to include a variety of ethnic and religious others (Kosta 2018; Wimmer 2013). The participants make reference to other migrants originating from the Mediterranean region such as Greeks and Turks with whom they seem to share a hospitality and customs of family life apparently very different from Belgian families:

You notice immediately when you enter a 'foreign' bar [a bar not managed by native Flemings/Belgians], to put it like that, that the atmosphere is totally different [than in a Belgian bar]. You notice it automatically. And if this is because it is a warmer [atmosphere] or something… but is different, you know. […] You can read the Gazetta dello Sport [Italian newspaper on sports]. Watch some football, drink a coffee, or water or lemonade. It doesn't have to be 5 beers as Belgians do. (Marco: 37-year old Italian origin man, secondary education, employed, married to Anne, son of 8 and a son of 2)

Some participants see clear links with how other Mediterranean families live, as shown by the following participants discussing her relation with a Turkish colleague:

You know, I have a Turkish, a male colleague at work. And that is incredible, when we start talking we can talk all day, just because you're on the same level. On family ties, on the mentality, a bit.. I'm not saying traditional mentality, but just those values and norms you have in an Italian family (Frederica: 29-year-old Italian origin woman, tertiary education, employed, married to Paolo, a son of 3)

What emerges out of these narratives is the longing for a representation of the self as having 'good' values and holding on to the good things in life: strong family ties, being warm and open towards each other, enjoying life, and so on (see also Wimmer, 2013). According to the participants, these things Belgians do not seem to care for and this creates difficulties to 'understand' each other and to feel part of the same group. However, even though the 'Mediterraneans versus Belgians' boundary seems strong – on the symbolic level of imagining the group as well as on the social level of 'cultural similarity' – these strong ties of belonging together with Turkish (and Moroccans) are easily severed when religion comes fully into play. Again, to pursue the interest of being viewed and viewing the self (and the group) as morally good, a seemingly contradictory strategy in relation to the one discussed above emerges, and former allies become 'the other' and former 'others' become 'us'.

Christians/Europeans versus Muslims/non-Europeans

Irrespective of their positive relation with Turkish and Moroccans, the Italian origin parents interviewed in this study experience no difficulties to realign with the Belgians they distanced themselves so strongly from at other points in their narratives. While they use so-called ethnic and cultural elements to construct imaginations of 'the good life' that differentiates them from Belgians, they use specific imaginations about religion as the fundament of 'the good life' to differentiate themselves from their 'former' co-Mediterranean Turkish and Moroccan equals (NOTE 3). In this sense the participants regroup under the umbrella of religion by amplifying the Christian-Muslim differences and downplaying the ethnic differences between Italians and Belgians they experienced so strongly at other times during the interviews (see also Clycq, 2015).

> The difference between the religions. They will never accept us as Catholics, and we will never accept them as Muslims. That's just the way it is. (Franco: 33-year-old Italian origin man, tertiary education, employed, married to Irena, son of 2)

However, this religious boundary between Muslims and Christians is sometimes also imagined as coinciding with a supranational boundary between Europeans and non-Europeans. In this sense European ethnicity is created and Italians regroup again with Belgians to present themselves as valuable and morally good persons (a similar pattern that seemed to be emerging in the multi-ethnic state of Switzerland as discussed by Wimmer 2013).

I: And, when you're talking about migrants (NOTE 4) in general, do you see differences between Italians,   Spaniards, Turks, Moroccans, …

R: Look, I'm not saying Europe people, not that.., but still, Turks and Moroccans, there is a difference. (Maria: 35-year-old Italian origin woman, secondary education, employed, married to Luigi, daughter of 10 and a boy of 5)

But the Turks make a huge difference. Consequently, the Belgians see less contrast with Italians. From the moment a Turk joins our group, it's us, Belgians and Italians. Also with my friends in college. When we were together and Turks joined us, it was us versus them. (Paolo: 29-year-old Italian origin man, tertiary education, employed, married to Frederica, a son of 3)

Up until know these identity formations have shown that indeed ethnicity – in this case Italian ethnicity – is experienced as an essential and stable element of their broader identity, even though the changing dimensions of comparison might vary considerably and sometimes might appear as contradictory to an outsider. However and even though it increases complexity, we need to discuss yet another way of constructing Italian ethnicity that seems even more contradictory, namely vis a vis 'genuine' Italians.

Italians versus stereotypical Italians

What really seems to be challenging imaginations about Italian ethnicity is when participants are comparing themselves to what they in apparent unison call 'genuine' Italians. The latter are not genuine Italians in the sense that they are Italians born and raised in Italy compared to the participants who are (most of them) born and raised in Belgium. They call these Italians 'genuine' because they seem to reflect the traditional, stereotypical image of Italians held by broader society, and in particular the Flemish native majority (Beyers, 2007). Again, as the returning mechanism in identity construction, in these narratives conceptions of what is 'morally good or valuable' are used to represent themselves as 'good Italians' in comparison to 'genuine' Italians who do not seem to possess these traits.

What is striking is that throughout the interviews respondents never casted any doubts that they themselves are 'genuine' Italians. This makes it all the more remarkable that when the label of 'genuine Italians' is used to construct a group of Italians that is deficient in various ways. As the following quotes show, this ranges from 'genuine Italians' that do not raise their children the way it should, that treat boys and girls differently and that are a abusing boss at work. The implicit norm that is present in these discourses is the dominant Flemish ethnic majority.

> And then I started working for an Italian. That was the worst. I will never work for an Italian again! […] Never again with him, and with Italians I'm not sure yet. I don't know. That was really a strange man. […] He is a genuine Italian, yes. He tries to suck you dry, totally [exploit you]. (Irena: 31-year-old Italian woman, tertiary education, employed, married to Franco, son of 2)

Even more strictly in line with imaginations of stereotypical Italians is the idea of a lack of gender equality in Italian families (Beyers 2007).

> I have a really bad relationship with my father. Because he was actually much too strict and much too egoistic. […] Everything was about him, he was a typical Italian. […] My father was a

genuine Italian, a son is good, and a son is a son! (Angela: 36-year old Italian woman, secondary education, employed, married to Ali, a son of 8 and a son of 10)

Yet, what is puzzling is that when participants construct the image of 'genuine' Italians this does not imply that they themselves imagine as less Italian. They too are genuine, albeit in a different and 'good' way, e.g., because they value educational success and speak proper Dutch.

You do notice that difference [with 'genuine' Italians]. When I see my nephews talking, and my children, that's a difference of day and night. And he [her husband], he doesn't care for that [speaking proper Dutch] at all. He is a genuine Italian. And also in the past in the family they said to me I was a genuine Belgian. But I mean, that is not the case, you know! […] And I notice it too with my children, they are really fan of Italy. For example my daughter, when my husband says: 'you're a Belgian', she says: 'No, no I'm a genuine, I'm an Italian'. She is just like him [her husband] you know, a *genuine* Italian. (Maria: 35-year-old Italian origin woman, secondary education, employed, married to Luigi, daughter of 10 and a boy of 5)

These quotes show that rather than contesting the stereotype of what an Italian is, as they all self-identify as Italians, they use these stereotypes to reconstruct the in-group and lift themselves up in the symbolic and social hierarchy. In doing so they reproduce these negative images of Italians, and to some extent reinforce them as they label these Italians as the 'genuine' ones. Rather than contesting this image, which could quite easily be done – as in general Flemish society Italian ethnicity is unproblematic, viewed as part of the mainstream and even romanticized - the respondents apply the strategy of distancing themselves from these 'genuine Italians' by pointing out the traits they believe are valued in broader society and thus by the dominant Flemish ethnic majority: speaking proper Dutch, striving for educational success and upholding gender equality. While the Flemish native majority in general portrays itself in these terms (not necessarily by excluding Italians from this image), it is remarkable that Italian origin respondents do not contest this old and traditional negative

stereotype of Italians, not the positive stereotypes of Flemish natives as being the most valuable group in moral terms.

Discussion

In this paper I tried to show that focusing on a so-called unproblematized but (relatively) visible ethnic minority identity in terms of specific shops, restaurants and civil society organisations can reveal some interesting underlying mechanisms in identity formation. The case of Italians in Flanders (Belgium) is such an example. What became abundantly clear based upon the narratives of Italian origin parents (most of them) born and raised in Belgium, is that their Italian ethnicity is a core and essential element of their identity. It is something they are concerned with and are constantly attributing meaning to when imagining themselves navigating Flemish (Belgian) society. Even though – or maybe precisely because – their ethnicity is unproblematized and not an issue in broader public and political debates, there is a need to accentuate it in order to confirm their existence. What I tried to uncover is if there is a specific mechanism that might explain why the participants identified the way they do, how they (re)shaped the boundaries vis a vis others, but mainly how certain contradictions emerging in their narratives might be explained. It seems that rather ambiguous notions of morality and what are valuable moral traits, seem to be driving these sometimes contradictory identity and boundary (re)constructions (Stets and Carter, 2011).

First and as expected, constructing ethnic identity is seldom a straightforward process, and the narratives studied in this paper are a good illustration thereof (Jenkins 2008). What is particularly striking is that entering the mainstream did apparently not lead to the construction of a shared collective identity between 'Belgians' or 'Flemings' and 'Italians'. Being viewed and accepted as part of the mainstream is something respondents struggle with and – in specific occasions – want to disidentify with. Foremost, the participants show how important Italian ethnicity is for them by constantly arguing that they have specific traits that makes them unique, or at least different from the

other (and in particular Belgians) they are comparing themselves to at that moment (Wimmer 2013). At some point participants see clear differences between themselves as Italians and the ethnic majority group of Belgians. They not only argue this based upon a sort of fictive kinship between Italians (Bentely 1987), but they also use the 'good' (Italian and also Mediterranean) life and values and the similarity with other Mediterraneans such as Turks and Greeks to show how strong these differences are. Yet, at another moment when comparing to Muslims, the differences with Belgians are minimalized or even disappear because as Italians they perceive themselves as having the same religious and/or European heritage as Belgians and thus similar conceptions of the 'good life': not oppressive towards women, being open-minded, and so forth. However, these identity (re)constructions become even more complex as at other times participants use of the image of 'genuine' Italians to differentiate themselves from the traditional stereotypical image of 'the Italian' in Belgian society. Moreover, rather than contesting these stereotypes, they reproduce and legitimize them to portray themselves – even though they self-identify as 'genuine' Italians too – as better than these other 'genuine Italians'. Indeed, they portray themselves as striving for the good life in the sense of valuing education, speaking proper Dutch and not being oppressive towards women as 'Belgians' do and in contradiction as to what 'genuine' Italians seem to do. Thus, throughout the narratives and even in these last examples they view themselves always as Italians, but feel a need to reconstruct boundaries to come out of the comparison as 'the good' ones with the right values.

The recurrent mechanism that emerges is that even though respondents' identity constructions might seem quite opportunistic given the many changing boundaries and sometimes contradictory regrouping strategies, the underlying mechanism points to the need to represent the self and the group as 'good' and 'morally just' (Lamont 2000; 2014). As individuals they were looking for recognition of difference but at the same time also for recognition as 'morally good persons' (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). This is not an easy task as wanting to be recognized ánd valued in your (ethnic, cultural or linguistic) difference in comparison to the dominant ethnic majority, is – certainly in a Flemish society with a strong focus on the importance of Flemish (and also Belgian) identity – often

viewed as turning away from society (Clycq and Levrau 2017). Therefore, ethnic minorities need to be able to frame their identity constructions within the broader realm of what is considered 'good' and 'valuable' by the dominant ethnic group in society. The Italian origin respondents studied in this study seem to be equipped with several imaginations and cultural repertoires they can apply to their advantage and interests (Lamont 2018).

It is precisely the pursuit of these interests that reveals why individuals do not experience specific contradictions as problematic or as a contradiction. There is no contradiction between strongly differentiating from Belgians and at other times seeing them as a moral compass to enable them as Italians to disidentify from Muslims. This is possible because it does not concern a purely or mainly rational process of identity formation, but rather an emotion-laden process of individuals looking for a morally valued identity (Jenkins 2014). Yet, at the same time it stresses the instrumental approach of identity constructions and thus also the importance of considering the agency of individuals (Wimmer 2013). It is this difficult combination between more emotionally and more rationally-instrumentally driven strategies in identity formation that emerges out of the studied narratives.

Moreover, what is particularly remarkable is how the label of 'genuine' Italian seems hijacked by the traditional stereotypical image of Italians constructed already more than sixty years ago upon the arrival of the first massive migration flows of Italians to Belgium (Beyers 2007). The participants do not discard this negative image of the 'exploitative, gender-unequal and ill-integrated' Italian but rather reproduce it to confirm their own identity as 'Italians with good values and ambitions', approved of by broader society. In this sense they legitimize a specific hegemonic discourse but are still able present themselves as genuine Italians too.

I conclude with the two main points this study shows. First it shows that focusing solely on how boundaries changes is potentially less relevant to study as it is mainly the 'outcome' of underlying interests (Jenkins 2008). Moreover, the many contradictions seem to show that identifying strategically is part of identity formation, yet this is different from identifying rationally. Group alliances can change easily and may appear to be 'irrational'. Yet, when focusing on the underlying

interests rather than the contradictory boundary work shows a recurrent need to be recognized as a morally valuable person.

Therefore, as a second main conclusion, in public, political and media debates on multiculturalism identity constructions by all ethnic minorities and majorities need to be incorporated. All too of it is assumed that in particular non-European and/or Muslim minorities and nowadays even refugees are too much concerned with holding on to their ethnic, cultural and religious identity and this hampers their successful participation in broader society. This too one-sided approach overlooks specific mechanisms in identity construction and takes a too rational approach to identity formation. Focusing on ethnic identity formation processes of Italian origin parents in Flanders, revealed some of these underlying mechanisms and shows that becoming an unproblematized ethnic minority is not necessarily an advantage as it urges individuals to develop new strategies to confirm their presence as a valuable part of society.

Acknowledgements

Notes

Note 1: It is already telling that none of the respondents with an Italian immigration background said they did not identify as Italian at all.

Note 2: In their narratives the participants use the label of Belgians rather than that of Flemings to differentiate from. In that sense the whole discussion between Flemish and Belgian ethnicity/identity is not part of their discourses at this point.

Note 3: The strategy of shifting from the ethnic label (the Turkish and Moroccan other) to the religious label (the Muslim other) to be able to exclude without being stigmatized as racist is discussed elsewhere (Clycq, 2015).

Note 4: In this question I took over the label 'migrant' used by the respondent herself to describe 'ethnic minorities' in general. The label 'migrant' is a commonly used – albeit often misused – label in everyday conversations.

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