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Waldring, Ismintha; Crul, Maurice; Ghorashi, Halleh

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The Ability to Deal With Difference: Turkish-Dutch Professionals as Go-Betweens in the Education Sector

Ismintha Waldring, Maurice Crul, Halleh Ghorashi

Abstract

Based on sixteen semi-structured interviews, this article examines how second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals experience their professional position in the ethnically homogeneous upper echelons of the Dutch education sector. The analysis shows that second-generation education professionals, being newcomers to higher-level positions in the sector, have to engage with diverse cultural repertoires at work. Instead of being stuck in-between these repertoires, second-generation education professionals actively "go-between" repertoires, employing their ability to deal with difference. In the increasingly super-diverse Dutch classrooms, this "go-between" attitude functions as a second-generation advantage and is conceptually better suited than in-betweenness to describe the position of second-generation professionals. © 2018 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

The Ability to Deal With Difference

The upward social mobility of the Turkish-Dutch "second generation"—descendants of migrants from Turkey, born and raised in the Netherlands—is receiving academic attention (e.g., Crul, Pasztor, & Lelie, 2008; Keskiner, 2013; Slootman, 2014), directed toward trajectories through the education system (Crul, 2013; Rezai, Crul, Severiens, & Keskiner, 2015; Schnell, Keskiner, & Crul, 2013), and transitions from education to employment (Crul, 2015; Keskiner, 2016; Waldring, Crul, & Ghorashi, 2014).

Building upon this work, this article focuses on second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals. As descendants of low-educated migrants, these second-generation education professionals move in professional circles new to them (Schneider & Lang, 2014). Similarly, their presence in professional circles is also a novelty to the field (Crul, Keskiner, & Lelie, 2017). As "newcomers" to the field, second-generation education professionals can experience "in-betweenness," a state of being located between social worlds and considered as a characteristic of the second generation (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008).

In-betweenness has been discussed as a negative state in which the second generation is stuck between cultures, therefore prone to occupy a marginal position in the migration society (Gans, 1992; Heath, Rothon, & Kilpi, 2008; Portes & Zhou, 1993). But in-betweenness can have advantages too (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Levitt, 2009; Said, 1994), especially in a context characterized by "unprecedented diversity" (Kasinitz et al., 2008, p. 357), as are the classrooms in the large cities in the Netherlands.

The aim of this article is to understand how in-betweenness is experienced by second-generation education professionals, and how they use their experiences with in-betweenness in the educational context of the super-diverse cities in the Netherlands, resulting in the central question: *How do second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals experience in-betweenness at work, and how do they act upon these experiences?*

Through aiming to understand how second-generation education professionals experience and use in-betweenness in the context of the education sector, this article contributes to the literature on social boundaries and agency by showing that these second-generation education professionals are not in a static state in-between cultures, but actively switch and go between the diverse cultural repertoires available to them. This go-between attitude is used as an individual career advantage, and as a broader advantage. In a super-diverse educational context, the ability of second-generation education professionals to go-between diverse cultural repertoires allows them to bridge multiple worlds, form important cultural partnerships with pupils, parents, and other education professionals, and thereby mediate the educational challenges which particularly immigrant-background pupils face (Cooper, 2014; OECD, 2012).

In-Betweenness

"In-betweenness" describes a state in which individuals are situated between cultural worlds, for instance, because they have migrated from one country to another (Said, 1994), or because they have transitioned to a higher social status as social climbers (Blau, 1956; Schneider, Crul, & van Praag, 2014), or because they are second generation and grow up between the cultures of the parental home and the migration country (Levitt, 2009). For migrants and social climbers, in-betweenness entails being unfamiliar with the rules and behaviors of the new group and therefore facing difficulties with acceptance (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Said, 1994), whereas in-betweenness for the second generation can jeopardize the feeling of belonging to any group (e.g., Gans, 1992).

Being situated "in-between" confronts individuals with the social boundaries that create and separate their various cultural worlds (Barth, 1969, 1994). These social boundaries, moreover, are considered to be "bright" in Dutch society (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2015; Waldring et al., 2014), which entails that they clearly delineate who belongs to a certain cultural world and who does not, and they ask for a zero-sum choice between cultural worlds in order to belong to any cultural world (Alba, 2005; Vasta, 2007). This enforced choice between cultural worlds, that is inherent to a societal context dominated by bright boundaries, can emphasize the dual boundaries of in-betweenness for the second generation, who would have to forfeit the connection with the social group from which they come in order to become accepted in the cultural world of the migration country (Alba, 2005). This emphasis on the dual boundaries of in-betweenness is exacerbated for the second generation of Turkish-Dutch descent, since the ethnic group from which they hail is considered the most marginalized throughout Europe (Heath et al., 2008), and the absolute and inferior "other" (Ghorashi, 2014).

The bright social boundaries that characterize Dutch society can be reflected in the workplace, since organizations are seen as extensions of society (Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Slay & Smith, 2011). This implies that second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals, who are considered to be part of a stigmatized ethnic group and are newcomers in their professional field, can experience a stigmatized professional identity (Slay & Smith, 2011, p. 86; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014), with coworkers attributing more relevance to their ethnic identity than to their professional identity (Ibid.; Ossenkop, Vinkenburg, Jansen, & Ghorashi, 2015). This focus on ethnic identity by coworkers can cause second-generation professionals to experience in-betweenness in the workplace, since to become accepted as knowledgeable professionals, they cannot be both professionals and second generation, but they have to emphasize their professional identity over their ethnic identity (Siebers, 2009; Slootman, 2014; Waldring et al., 2014).

Second-Generation Advantage

Recent studies on second-generation professionals in the workplace (e.g., Konyali, 2014; Rezai, 2017; Schneider & Lang, 2014; Slootman, 2014; Waldring et al., 2014) show that "the second generation is situated between a variety of different and often competing generational, ideological and moral reference points" (Levitt, 2009, p. 1238). This situatedness between reference points appears to signal that second-generation professionals experience the dual boundaries of in-betweenness in the workplace. Concurrently, second-generation professionals do not necessarily experience their in-between positionality as a negative state in which they are caught between the dual boundaries of in-betweenness, and they do not make a zero-sum choice between competing reference points but strike a balance (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Slootman, 2014; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014; Waldring et al., 2014).

The ability of second-generation professionals to strike a balance between reference points shows that in-betweenness allows for the creation of a new set of practices (Levitt, 2009). This is in line with how Said (1994) conceptualized in-betweenness. He argued that individuals who are "in-between" do not have the privilege to take any cultural world, and the accompanying cultural repertoires, for granted. In-between individuals are therefore required to constantly question their presumptions and position. What this constant questioning can give back is the advantage to understand the world from multiple perspectives, and move beyond the status quo to bring about creativity and change (Larruina & Ghorashi, 2016). Kasinitz et al. (2008) argue alike, stating that what they call the "second-generation advantage" results from being located "between two different social systems allowing for creative and selective combinations of the two that can be highly conducive to success" (2008, p. 354), especially in a context in which diversity has become the norm. Second-generation advantage thus follows from the second generation drawing on resources that come from being familiar with multiple cultural repertoires, and being equipped with the necessary skills to select the best of both worlds (Crul, Schneider, Keskiner, & Lelie, 2017, p. 325). This selection shows that instead of being stuck in-between the dual boundaries and not belonging anywhere, second-generation professionals are familiar with and able to switch and go-between multiple worlds. This go-between ability can be understood as a form of capital through which second-generation professionals introduce "new mixtures and hybrid positioning" (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013, p. 84) in organizations faced with an increasingly diverse professional workforce and clientele (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2013).

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection. This study involves sixteen respondents who were interviewed as part of the ELITES project, which aimed to understand how second-generation professionals with labor migrant parents from Turkey had managed to become successful professionals (Crul et al., 2017). This focus on a select group within the second generation (Crul et al., 2017, p. 322) prompted the use of purposive sampling for this study since this type of sampling is employed when a small number of respondents, that is information rich and therefore highly suitable for meeting the objectives of the research question, are considered more important than statistical representativeness (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). The sixteen respondents were partly found through "vouching figures" (Weiss, 1994) who introduced us to second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals, and partly through internet searches.

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews, since these allowed the interviewees, as occupational experts, the freedom to address points beyond the questionnaire (Gilbert, 2008). Simultaneously, having a topic list to fall back upon, offered the interviewer the opportunity to (re)connect a response to the questionnaire objectives (Ibid.).

The interviewees are six female and ten male second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals[1] within the age range of 35–55 years who occupy diverse leadership functions. We chose to interview second-generation professionals who work in the education sector, because the structural features of this sector "can either prevent or help children of immigrants to succeed" (Crul et al., 2017, p. 211), and it therefore poses an interesting context for understanding how second-generation professionals experience their position in the sector.

Coding and Analysis. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed with respondents' permission. The transcripts were coded using the data analysis program Atlas.ti. For the analysis of the interviews, we used thematic analysis, which is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This entailed that the transcripts were (re)read and initial codes were then derived from the transcripts. These initial codes were mainly theory driven, meaning that they were linked to the existing theory and related interview questions. The initial codes were analyzed in order to understand "the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes" (Ibid., pp. 89–90).

Thematic analysis elucidates how the analysis should be understood (Ibid., p. 82). For this article, the analysis was conducted by the interviewer (first author). And although she undertook "constant comparison" by rereading and recoding the interviews to ensure consistency in coding and analysis, the analysis is not an objective reflection of reality but rather

a "translation," based on the interests of the interviewer, of the stories told by the interviewees.

In-Betweenness in the Education Sector

The ethnic homogeneity in the upper echelons of the Dutch education sector forms the backdrop against which respondents try to establish themselves. Respondents are aware that they occupy a solitary position in a homogeneous work environment dominated by ethnic-Dutch coworkers[2] and that they are front-runners because of their limited numbers:

> It's not common to find a Turkish-Dutch high school principal. When I'm in a meeting with other principals from this city, I'm the only one of immigrant descent. (principal, high school, male)

> It's difficult to become a principal when you're an ethnic minority. And it's a rare sight, even in this diverse neighbourhood. I'm one of very few. (principal, primary school, male)

On top of being new to the professional field, respondents feel that their ethnic and religious background, carrying connotations of backwardness and problems in Dutch society (Heath et al., 2008; Vasta, 2007), causes uneasiness among ethnic-Dutch coworkers.

> I noticed other principals were reserved towards me, for instance in the way they communicated with me. I was the new and different guy. It took them some years to accept me. Being there never felt strange to me, but it felt strange to them. They had questions, about whether our school was secretly an Islamic school, but they wouldn't ask. I invited them to our school, so they could see for themselves. (principal, high school, male)

Ethnic-Dutch coworkers seem to struggle with generally accepted negative connotations about ethnic minorities and Islam in Dutch society (Ghorashi, 2014; Vasta, 2007), in combination with a Turkish-Dutch professional in their midst, sometimes leading a coworker to focus on a respondent's personal background instead of his professional position (Ossenkop et al., 2015; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014):

> I had a female colleague with certain ideas about me being a Muslim and how Muslim men perceive women. She told me that these ideas were inhibiting her behaviour at work. (school board director, male)

This focus on a respondent's ethnic background, combined with a general uneasiness vis-à-vis this ethnic background by ethnic-Dutch coworkers, can increase the likelihood of negative experiences with in-betweenness

for respondents. This particular respondent was required to defend himself, not because of his behaviors but because of his background. Simultaneously, the situation also asked that this respondent distanced himself from alleged behaviors deemed characteristic for the men of his ethnic and religious group. Both demands, however "subtle," expose the dual boundaries of in-betweenness in which the respondent can experience that he does not belong or is not accepted as a professional, while simultaneously having to denounce his ethnic and religious group membership.

One way in which respondents negotiate the dual boundaries of in-betweenness in the workplace, is by knowing and joining the rules of the game within their organizations and the education sector (Konyali, 2014; Ossenkop et al., 2015; Puwar, 2004; Waldring, 2017).

> I know networks in the education sector are important. Professors network by having dinner at the academic club, by being on the same boards. I realized that it's useful when I network with people with large amounts of social capital. So, I join these dinners and learn a lot. (assistant professor, male)

> In education, there's this grey and masculine culture, especially among the board of directors. Despite the fact that there is diversity policy, there are prejudices. No, not prejudices. It's more that you have to know this world and go along with the lobbying and networking. (principal, high school, male)

By cooperating with the rules, respondents meet the demands of many organizations in which assimilation to written and unwritten rules is often an unspoken requirement (Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Puwar, 2004). And despite being professional newcomers in the educational field, this cooperation with the rules of the game is not a difficult task for second-generation professionals; they have been socialized in Dutch society and therefore are not completely new to norms and codes in the workplace (Waldring et al., 2014). Moreover, our respondents are apt learners in unfamiliar situations (Rezai, 2017). This aptness comes from them being familiar with the role of the newcomer due to their second-generation background: they are used to negotiating situations, as it could be argued that "they have practiced for this for their entire lives" (Schneider et al., 2014, p. 5). This active negotiation of situations implies that respondents do not feel stuck in-between cultures, but negotiate the dual boundaries of in-betweenness through switching between the cultural repertoires available to them.

Second-Generation Advantage in the Education Sector

Switching between the dual boundaries of in-betweenness appears in most of the interviews. Second-generation education professionals do not make a zero-sum choice between cultural repertoires. They know what is expected

of them professionally, without giving up links to their ethnic background (Waldring et al., 2014):

> I worked hard to get somewhere as a second-generation woman. I involved my network to move up, but I also needed my family for my social and emotional roots. I didn't want to sacrifice this for my career. Combining the two took time and effort, but it paid off for me over time. (trainer, education advisory boards, female)

Moreover, respondents view their second-generation background primarily as an advantage. From an early age, they were triggered to move between and combine different cultures. As professionals, combining cultures has helped them to seize opportunities for a successful career (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Levitt, 2009).

> This bi-cultural thing, it makes me versatile. I was a trendsetter in setting up a business like this. Before I started, this type of business wasn't an issue. After I had set this up, they started to appear everywhere. (director, education organization, female)

Beyond a successful career, combining cultural repertoires is also used by respondents as a bridging function in the education sector:

> We have our roots in both countries. That's our bridging function. I know both cultures so well. It's only natural to bring these two worlds together, to get the most out of both. I can make that connection. I understand western society, how things work, what the rules are, how to seize opportunities. And I understand my eastern culture, departing from my identity, from my childhood and the country from which I originate. To me, it has always been a win-win situation to combine these two. (director, school board, male)

Another way in which bridging happens is when respondents apply their knowledge of religion, culture, and language to bridge information gaps with pupils and parents:

> My pupils are primarily of ethnic-minority descent. My background makes me a role model. I don't just teach Economics, but norms and values too. Things pupils can use throughout their lives. One of the first questions new pupils ask concerns calculating interest. They say: Miss, isn't interest haram [forbidden by Islamic law – IW]? To me, as an Economist, interest isn't haram and you have to be able to calculate. (teacher/team leader, secondary school, female)

> Many of my pupils have parents with a Turkish background. When I talk to these parents about their children's development, I switch to Turkish, if this is

necessary for effective communication. I don't even notice that I switch, but it enables a richer experience between the parents and me. (principal, primary school, male)

Growing up with two cultures has enabled respondents to switch between situations, making them flexible in dealing with different viewpoints and able to create their own set of practices (Levitt, 2009) toward pupils and parents. This diversity sensitivity is translated into an ability to deal with difference on a personal level with pupils and parents, but also in adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of ethnic-minority pupils and in the way respondents think about the ethnic composition of staff and pupils at school:

The pupils are mostly of Turkish descent and some lag behind in Dutch language skills, so we've adjusted our curriculum. Pupils get five hours of Dutch language classes instead of the usual three. These extra hours are necessary. (principal, high school, male)

I am a world citizen and I see this as an enrichment. This enrichment is what I try to convey here at school. Diversity among my teachers, my pupils, and in the way we treat each other. (principal, secondary school, male)

The type of agency employed by respondents toward their professional position and environment requires a combination of individual interests and the will for social improvement (Ghorashi, 2014). This link between self and others, that Stall (2010) calls "relational self-interest," is a balancing act whereby respondents perceive themselves as responsible for their own well-being, and as active citizens taking responsibility for the well-being of others. As second-generation education professionals, respondents acknowledge the ways in which educating ethnic-minority children is related to their own experiences. These respondents once faced the challenges of going through an education system unfamiliar to their parents and they had to bridge multiple cultural worlds. They understand the importance of acting as "cultural brokers" for new generations of vulnerable pupils by "providing resources for youth in bridging across their cultural worlds in ways that reduce educational inequities" (Cooper, 2014, p. 172).

Relational self-interest could be a general feature of education professionals (De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, Du Bois, Caers, & Jegers, 2007) and not a specific second-generation attribute. Yet, the ability to deal with difference and bridge across cultural worlds is considered a characteristic of the second generation in this study. Moreover, respondents feel that their agility toward dealing with differences is precisely what is missing among ethnic-Dutch coworkers:

> The intellectual elite at the university are primarily ethnic-Dutch, male and middle-aged, and generally, they have an inability to deal with difference. (assistant professor, male)

Especially in super-diverse Dutch cities, where pupils are increasingly of ethnic-minority descent (Crul et al., 2013), but teachers and school leaders remain predominantly of ethnic-Dutch descent, being unable to deal with difference is considered a problem. One respondent is providing diversity sensitivity trainings for teachers in order to address forms of shyness experienced by some teachers, mainly when dealing with Muslim pupils, as they are not sure when they accidentally come across as discriminatory. This is a shyness not shared by respondents in this study, because of their ability to deal with difference.

Conclusions

In the ethnically homogeneous upper echelons of the Dutch education sector, experiences with in-betweenness among second-generation education professionals appear to be produced by ethnic-Dutch coworkers and their inability to connect with the people from different cultures and the cultural images they bring to the workplace with a changing professional landscape.

Second-generation education professionals act upon in-betweenness experiences at work through following the professional rules of the game (Ossenkop et al., 2015; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014; Waldring et al., 2014) and their ability to understand diverse cultural repertoires. This ability to deal with difference is employed by second-generation education professionals to manage coworkers' preconceived opinions about them. Moreover, second-generation education professionals use the multiple cultural repertoires as an asset to advance their professional positions in the workplace (Konyali, 2014). Because second-generation education professionals can access diverse cultural repertoires, and have grown up practicing them (Schneider et al., 2014), they are capable of employing these repertoires. They are not in a trapped state "in-between," but pursue a dynamic attitude of "go-between," whereby they intentionally move between and use cultural repertoires at work.

The go-between attitude of second-generation education professionals is not limited to managing their professional position. The empirical examples show that, through relational self-interest (Stall, 2010), being a go-between leads to cultural brokering (Cooper, 2014) and cultural partnerships (Cooper, 2011) through connecting people from different ethnic backgrounds and at different levels in education organizations. It is visible in teacher–student interactions because of second-generation education professionals' ability to understand pupils of immigrant descent, and because pupils of immigrant descent can identify with the teacher. It also plays a role in the interaction with immigrant parents in understanding their

difficulties raising children within diverse cultural repertoires. But it is also important at the institutional level in the interactions with coworkers, bringing in expertise how to handle diversity issues in a professional context. Finally, second-generation education professionals can act as a go-between between organizations, bringing new knowledge into networks and diversifying the world of decision-makers in the education sector.

Looking at the term we coined for their position, a "go-between," as an important form of capital in the education sector flips the often dominant negative connotation of being stuck in-between structures or cultures. Contrary to Said (1994), who approached in-betweenness as a dynamic process that incorporates multiple viewpoints and thereby allows for a critical view of cultural worlds that would otherwise be seen as natural and therefore inevitable, the current connotation of being in-between in some theoretical discussions and societal discourses on migration is that it represents a static state in which one does not belong in either world. Our findings show that these second-generation education professionals are strongly engaged in both worlds. Their engagement with both worlds, moreover, is an advantage in a professional situation in which diversity has become the norm. Second-generation education professionals' ability to draw from multiple cultural repertoires and their relational self-interest, makes them cultural brokers who strengthen "the fragile bridges through multicultural nations' academic pipelines" (Cooper, 2014, p. 175).

A next step would be to research how second-generation education professionals transfer their knowledge and abilities to other education professionals. The ability to "go-between" requires constant switching between repertoires and this can be enervating, even for the second generation who have been doing it throughout their lives. Nevertheless, if the ability to be a go-between becomes an increasingly important form of capital in dealing with the challenges of super-diverse classrooms, being able to move between diverse cultural repertoires is not only a second-generation advantage, but a requirement for all education professionals.

Notes

1. In the analysis, we refer to second-generation Turkish-Dutch education professionals as "respondents."
2. Ethnic-Dutch stands for individuals who are of native Dutch descent.

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ISMINTHA WALDRING *is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the ERC Advanced project BAM. She did her Ph.D. research in the Department of Sociology at VU University Amsterdam with the ELITES: Pathways to Success Project, a comparative study in four European countries on second-generation professionals whose parents immigrated from Turkey and who work in leadership positions in education.*

MAURICE CRUL, *Professor of Sociology at the VU University Amsterdam, is the lead author of Superdiversity: A New Vision on Integration (2013); The Changing Face of World Cities (2012); and The European Second Generation Compared (2012). He coordinated the TIES and ELITES projects and currently co-ordinates the ERC Advanced project BAM.*

HALLEH GHORASHI *is Professor of Diversity and Integration in the department of Sociology at VU University Amsterdam. She is the author of Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States (2003) and co-editor of Paradoxes of Cultural Recognition: Perspectives from Northern Europe (with S. Alghasi & T. H. Eriksen; 2009) and Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging (with H. Moghissi; 2010).*