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Claiming the right to belong: de-stigmatisation strategies among Turkish-Dutch Muslims

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ABSTRACT
This article examines 'de-stigmatisation strategies' of Turkish-Dutch youth. Our in-depth interviews and observations revealed three strategies to negotiate belonging in the Netherlands, particularly to resist dominant Dutch characterisations of Turks and Muslims as backwards, disloyal and unintegrated: (1) *confronting* by asserting their right to cultural distinctiveness, (2) *convincing* by relocating cultural achievements in their heritage, and (3) *contextualising*: embracing ideological and political positions calibrated to country-specific contexts. We found that students' de-stigmatisation strategies – which are learnt, contested and first performed within secure in-group settings – mobilise multiple, context-dependent identifications. Although students are often critical of the assumptions embedded in Dutch nativist discourse, their strategies also partly reproduce them, showing the pervasiveness of nativism within current political debates on culture, identity, belonging and nationality.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2016 attempted coup against the Erdoğan government in Turkey, several hundred Turkish-Dutch[1] citizens took to the streets in the Netherlands. Some demonstrators harassed a journalist reporting on the event, telling him to 'fuck off'. Asked about this incident, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte answered:

> In response to the man who said 'fuck off', my primary reaction is for him to fuck off, I'd say piss off [pleur op] to Turkey. ... We have 460,000 Turks living in the Netherlands, Turkish-Dutchmen. We know that the vast majority are well integrated and contribute to our society. But the Netherlands Institute for Social Research recently released a report stating that 20% of them are still fully tied to Turkey. In

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other words, they are not Dutchmen, they are not Turkish-Dutchmen, they are Turks inside the Netherlands.

The prime minister thus considered Turkish-Dutch citizens only conditionally Dutch. If they 'contribute to society', they can be 'Turkish-Dutchmen' or even 'Dutchmen'. Failing this, they remain 'Turks inside the Netherlands'. Rutte's phrasing exemplifies the exclusionary turn towards ethnic minority, Muslim citizens in Western European politics over the past decades (Alba 2005; Joppke 2004). Although legally citizens, they are often not recognised as such – neither symbolically nor emotionally (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016, 1). Their experiences are particularly informative for understanding (threats to) belonging, as feelings of belonging crucially depend on recognition by others.[2]

This article examines how Turkish-Dutch students, some of whom were attending events and study groups inspired by the religio-political *Millî Görüş* movement, negotiate belonging in the Netherlands. Our study is situated in a research field that focuses on ordinary people's everyday responses to discrimination and stigma when dominant groups threaten their sense of self-respect and belonging (Essed 1991; Feagin 1991; Lamont and Fleming 2005; Slootman 2014). We particularly draw on Lamont and Mizrachi (2012, 366) notion of 'de-stigmatisation strategies' – the 'rhetorical and strategic tools deployed by individual members of stigmatised groups in reaction to perceived stigmatisation, racism and discrimination, and the boundary work that takes place within these responses'.

Our study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, while extant studies largely focus on *individual* responses to social stigma and rely on one-on-one interviews (though see Van Es 2019), we combine interviews with observations to explore how collective strategies are taught and learned within ethnic/religious minority organisations, which furnish a safe backstage (Goffman 1959) for in-groups to 'rehearse' their strategies prior to confronting members of the ethnic majority. By offering stigmatised individuals scripts that establish their worth based on Turkish or Muslim heritage, this has a *self-convincing* and *empowering* function. We add to Lamont et al. (2016) notion of 'ideal responses' by showing how de-stigmatisation strategies – what constitutes a proper response and how to best effect group-level change – are internally contested.

Second, we emphasise how positions within specific discursive contexts inform individual and collective strategies to assert belonging. In line with previous research (Duyvendak 2011; Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016), we find that such strategies are shaped by the political climate of nativism. While many studies have focused on how minorities engage in de-stigmatisation work vis-à-vis the dominant majority (Lamont et al. 2016; Branscombe et al. 1999), we find that individuals can simultaneously face

multiple and sometimes *conflicting* demands from majority and minority groups. Minority and majority group status is also fluid across situations, especially within transnational contexts. We find that stigmatised citizens adopt versatile strategies balancing recognition between contexts and audience(s), which we term *contextualising*. In sum, we seek to advance existing approaches by offering a more nuanced, dynamic, and contextual understanding of the strategies of de-stigmatisation.

Nativism and exclusion of Turkish-Dutch citizens

We approach the Netherlands as an exemplary case of the European trend to frame Muslims and ethnic minorities as cultural others. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel has addressed Turkish-Germans in similar terms: 'We expect from people of Turkish descent who have been living in Germany for a long time to develop a high level of loyalty towards our country' (*Ruhr Nachrichten*, 23 August 2016). Nativism, suspicion towards ethnic minorities, and anxiety about Islam are widespread in Western Europe (Foner and Simon 2015). In the Netherlands and some Nordic countries, the 'progressive cultural consensus' on gender, family and sexuality leaves little room for religious, particularly Muslim, minorities deemed not to share these values (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016).

As we saw in Rutte's rendering, Turkish-Dutch individuals can 'pass' as citizens but must demonstrate their compatibility with and loyalty to the Dutch nation; demonstrating against the attempted coup in Turkey signalling deficient integration. 'Integration' here delimits what the harmoniously functioning society looks like in relation to problematic, non-integrated minority groups (Schinkel 2017, 39). By arguing that ties to Turkey are incompatible with being Dutch, Rutte renders singular attachments and loyalties a requirement of citizenship. But what does 'being Dutch' entail? Rutte clarifies: 'As a society, we must set standards and ensure that the Netherlands remains the Netherlands. [...] for our achievements, our values, it's everything or nothing, it's not a cafeteria model'. Turkish-Dutch should thus assimilate by making 'our achievements, norms and values' their own. 'Our' refers to the 'native' inhabitants, whose beliefs and behaviours newcomers should emulate (Van Reekum 2016, 40). For Rutte, support for 'our values' is a litmus test for how well one is integrated. Whereas citizenship previously encompassed civil, political and social dimensions, it is increasingly seen in cultural and emotional terms – above all identification with and the performance of certain 'national' values (Geschiere 2009). In citizenship exams, questions regarding 'Dutch norms and values' dominate at the expense of questions regarding factual aspects of society and politics. The emphasis on cultural rootedness (Mudde 2007, 19) renders the Netherlands an exemplary case of the rise of nativism (Duyvendak 2011; Kešić and Duyvendak 2019).

Growing up in this culturalist, nativist, political climate complicates feelings of belonging among the second generation. Scholars (Omlo 2011; Slootman 2016) have shown that while second-generation young adults – born and raised in the country – feel they belong in the Netherlands, it is hard for them to *identify* as Dutch. In other countries with 'bright boundary drawing' (Alba 2005), like Denmark, Simonsen (2017, 134–135) has shown that acceptance encompasses recognition and feelings of embeddedness within the broader community. But members of the ethnic majority do not always confirm minority self-identification and often deem ethnic/religious minority and national identifications to be incompatible (Slootman and Duyvendak 2015, 158).

To complicate matters, the Turkish government seeks to maintain ties with 'its' diaspora (Mügge 2012, 6) and sees Turkish-European citizens residing abroad as resources to further diplomatic and political goals (Adamson 2019, 217). Countries like Germany and the Netherlands in turn perceive Ankara's efforts as unwelcome interference that undermines 'assimilation' (ibid, 227). This was evident in 2017 when the Dutch government refused entry to the Turkish Minister of Family and Social Policies to campaign in the Netherlands ahead of a constitutional referendum in Turkey, leading to a diplomatic crisis and Dutch politicians questioning Turkish-Dutch citizens' 'loyalty' and 'integration'.

Turkish-Dutch citizens thus face competing demands on their loyalty. To operationalise insecure and contested national membership, we draw on Branscombe et al. (1999, 36) taxonomy of social identity threats. They distinguish between a *categorisation threat* (being categorised against one's will), a *distinctiveness threat* (when category distinctiveness is prevented or undermined), a *value threat* (when category membership is devalued) and an *acceptance threat* (when one's perceived normal position within a group is undermined).

Negotiating identities: second generation de-stigmatisation strategies

Responses to exclusion inform changing group boundaries and the systemic inequalities attached to them (Kleinman and Hall-Clifford 2009, 1–2; Lamont et al. 2016, 37–38). How do Muslim Turkish-Dutch young adults negotiate multiple identifications in the current nativist political climate? To interpret our results, we build on and extend theoretical taxonomies of de-stigmatisation strategies (Lamont et al. 2016), strategies to cope with challenges to belonging (Slootman 2014), and social psychological insights on responses to identity threats and misrecognition (Amer 2020; Hopkins and Blackwood 2013; Hopkins 2011). Although far from exhaustive, these combined frameworks encompass the main strategies identified in the empirical literature, providing stepping-stones for further theoretical inquiry.

Lamont and colleagues distinguish between actual and 'ideal' responses. The latter – what people feel they or others *should* do – are important as they indicate how 'social change can be produced moving ahead, through individual and collective strategies aimed at social transformation' (Lamont et al. 2016, 38).

Responses to social stigmatisation fall on a spectrum ranging from avoiding or concealing minority group membership to asserting one's identity and fighting portrayals emanating from the dominant society (Slootman 2014).[3] To try to avoid 'categorisation/value threats', stigmatised individuals can *conceal* their belonging to minoritised groups (Slootman 2014, 156). White Muslims may strategically downplay their religiosity and highlight their whiteness in British non-Muslim spaces (Amer 2020, 542); immigrants in Sweden may swap their foreign-sounding names for non-stigmatised 'Swedish'-sounding ones (Bursell 2012). This is similar to Goffman 1963, 41) classic notion of *passing* as a member of the dominant group by managing 'undisclosed discrediting information about the self'. The ability to *pass* nevertheless depends on one's visibility (Goffman 1963, 48) and is constrained by one's name or symbols such as wearing the hijab in Western Europe. People can also engage in *preference falsification*: actively misrepresenting one's opinions or modifying behaviour in the face of social pressure (Kuran 1995). These strategies are tricky as sudden exposure threatens one's belonging.

A reverse response is to drop the aim of majority group membership. Slootman (2017, 155) speaks of *conforming* when citizens present themselves in ethnic rather than national terms in anticipation/avoidance of being denied national belonging. *Passing, concealing, falsifying preferences* or *conforming* mean that people surrender minority group membership to be included by (significant) others. Therefore, minoritized individuals often do not consider it an 'ideal' response to upset a marginalised position (Lamont et al. 2016, 59). People are more likely to adopt these strategies when the social consequences of expressing deviance are high: harm, exclusion or threats to social relations (Amer 2020, 542).

But people can respond in less compromising ways, eschewing cost-benefit analyses (Kuran 1995, 33). Lamont et al. (2016, 59) find that stigmatised individuals frequently consider confrontation an 'ideal' response. *Confrontational* responses range from speaking back to the aggressor to asserting multiple identities and questioning taken-for-granted identity-based boundaries and stereotypes (Hopkins 2011, 267; Lamont et al. 2016, 132). A British Muslim woman in Hopkins and Blackwood's (2013, 442) study noted that although wearing a headscarf made her an 'easy target', she felt pride in asserting her religious identity despite the possible responses from non-Muslims. Confrontation often risks belonging as overt challenges are rarely accepted by the ethnic majority.

A less risky strategy entails *persuading* or *convincing* (Branscombe et al. 1999, 37; Slootman 2017, 133–134). Stigmatised minorities can try to show, through argumentation or impression management (Goffman 1959), that the link between membership categories and the stereotypes attached to them do not hold.[4] Particularly in *convincing* responses, individuals can draw on cultural repertoires that depict a national community to interpret their experiences (Lamont et al. 2016, 53). Ethiopian and Mizrachi Jews, for example, have emphasised Israel's 'melting pot' ideology to assert belonging, while African-Americans have mobilised religion to assert their equal worth as citizens (Mizrachi and Herzog 2012, 373; Lamont and Fleming 2005, 32–34). These strategies discursively and behaviourally reframe group value or inter-group boundaries.

These taxonomies provide stepping-stones for further inquiry into the work of de-stigmatisation. First, they show that stigmatised individuals balance the desire to be recognised and to effect change against the costs of responding to stigma. Lamont et al. (2016, 128–129) refer to this conscious act of internal deliberation over *how* to respond as *management of the self*, which includes asking others about how they understand the situation and weighing the possible costs of different responses (ibid.: 134, 140). Van Es (2019) adds that stigmatised individuals also weigh the consequences of their responses for the group; by acting as 'ambassadors of Islam', Muslim women are keenly aware of how their responses can impact on how other Muslims are seen. Second, the various cultural, religious and national repertoires found in *convincing* responses highlight the importance of analysing the discursive context in which de-stigmatisation work takes place. Third, *confronting* and *convincing* strategies reveal the (strategic) reframing of group boundaries.

Methods

We draw on ethnographic research conducted in 2018 in the Netherlands, carried out by the first author and supervised by the second author. The research centred around observations in two *Milli Görüş*-inspired student- and youth groups in Amsterdam and Utrecht. *Milli Görüş* (MG, 'National Vision') is a Turkish Islamic political movement founded in 1969 by Necmettin Erbakan, who advocated national empowerment through industrial and technological development and a robust Turkish-Islamic nationalist identity (Sunier and Landman 2015, 69, 72–73). Successful in the early 2000s, Erbakan's political parties sought to re-Islamise Turkey through parliament, a project at loggerheads with the secular Kemalist military establishment which removed the Erbakan-led Welfare Party from the government (Yukleyen 2009, 299). The ruling AK Party also descends from MG although it has changed course under President Erdoğan.

Milli Görüş was particularly popular in central Anatolia. With the migration of Anatolian-Turkish workers to Europe in the 1970s, Erbakan supporters founded MG organisations in their new countries of residence (Yukleyen 2010, 446). In the Netherlands, MG has about 50 affiliated mosques. While MG organisations in Europe were initially oriented towards supporting the movement in Turkey, since the late 1990s they have turned to the needs of the diaspora, replacing their formerly anti-democratic and anti-Western tenets with an emphasis on multi-cultural/religious rights and encouraging Muslim members to participate and enrich European societies (Yukleyen 2009, 295; Sunier and Landman 2015, 75–78).

This post-migration localisation of the MG movement particularly applies to the two Northern branch organisations of MG Netherlands (Vermeulen 2005, 73), including the associations we studied. Many of their activities focus on achieving public recognition for Islam or providing space to discuss questions relevant to second-generation Muslims. Both youth groups were frequented by Turkish-Dutch Sunni Muslim young adults, nearly all descendants of labour migrants and mostly first-generation students.

The first mixed-gender and student-led association organised lectures and religious/cultural activities such as *Iftar* dinners. Its events were attended by 20 to 100 unmarried students of Turkish descent, aged between 18 and 30. The second association was a self-organised all-women group which held biweekly meetings in students' homes or in a MG-affiliated mosque to discuss Islam in relation to their everyday lives. A female teacher was invited to share Quranic insights, followed by lively discussion. Its meetings were attended by mostly unmarried women of Turkish descent, aged between 18 and 25. Students often discussed the intersecting pressures emanating from politics, parents and school.

Ethnographic observations were supplemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 student association members as well as other students and young professionals reached through snowball sampling.[5] The 12 male and 13 female vocational college or university students were aged between 19 and 30 (the median age was 23); most were unmarried. Most strongly identified in national, religious and ethnic terms; most voted for left-leaning parties or the multicultural party DENK in the Netherlands and the ruling AK Party in Turkey. Conducted in Dutch and lasting 1.5 to 2.5 hours, the interviews addressed their life histories: their experiences growing up, at school and university, religion, family history, their perceptions of Dutch and Turkish politics and society, and their feelings of (not) belonging. The ethnographer being a secular white woman without a migration background may have led participants to assume they had to debunk stereotypes associated with Turkey or Islam; regarding Turkish politics, she experienced being seen as a neutral outsider.

The interviews were transcribed, with anonymity ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the altering of information that could identify individuals. We first read the ethnographic fieldnotes and interview transcripts multiple times to familiarise ourselves with the data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1279). Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) using the coding software program ATLAS.ti then identified recurring themes, including challenges growing up, life in the Netherlands as an ethnic/religious minority, combining multiple identities, and experiences of recognition and stigmatisation. Subsequent coding focused on interviewees' constructions of identity, the sources of identity threat and stigmatisation, how they achieved recognition, and strategies for dealing with ambivalence. We focused on *how* participants narrated their identities, how they positioned themselves strategically, and the 'political work' of their narratives (Riessman 2008, 22). The responses were systematically compared and grouped into types based on similarities. We then compared these strategies to existing taxonomies (Lamont et al. 2016; Slootman 2014; Branscombe et al. 1999), seeking to extend them conceptually. The analysis revealed the contested and context-dependent nature of the three strategies – confrontation, convincing and contextualising – that we present below.

Results

Participants often reported not feeling recognised, neither as citizens of the Netherlands nor of Turkey. They described how ethnic majority members perceived them as 'Turks' or their Muslim and ethnic identities as incompatible with their Dutch identity. As Muslims, they were associated with terrorism or being oppressed (the latter mainly reported by female participants). Politicians were most frequently cited as the perpetrators of stigma, followed by the media, teachers and colleagues/bosses. Several respondents referred to Prime Minister Rutte's 'piss off' statement as an unsettling and painful incident highlighting how the exclusion of ethnic minorities had become politically mainstream. They described how members of the ethnic majority quizzed them about their loyalty to the Netherlands, sometimes prompting them to conceal their political views. Despite this, we rarely came across *conforming or concealing* responses. Nearly all participants valued identifying in multiple ways and did not dis-identify from being Dutch. In the analysis, we identified three main de-stigmatisation strategies that structure our discussion of the results.

Confronting: de-stigmatisation by claiming cultural distinctiveness

Students often portrayed themselves as culturally distinct from the ethnic majority while challenging the problematisation of this difference, arguing

that majority members should accommodate cultural differences. Students sometimes took this position when recounting their experiences from adolescence.

> Omar: In puberty, you're searching for your identity, who you are. You're constantly questioned, by politics of course, but also unconsciously, in school, by your teachers. Are you a Turk, are you Dutch? you will start thinking … what am I, I must choose. While you don't have to choose at all. … Or you could totally adjust yourself, assimilate. Then you say, yes I'm Dutch. I deny my past, my culture, my origins, my roots

Omar posits *categorisation threats* as central to his identity formation. Dutch politics and teachers repeatedly, if implicitly, told him that Dutch and Turkish identifications are incompatible. Omar refused to choose but explained how at least 15 people in his immediate social circle had sought to assimilate, and that turning their backs on their Muslim and Turkish heritage had led to depression. To illustrate, Omar mentioned what he considers religious norms about Muslim men marrying virgins.

> In the West, it's very different of course, it doesn't matter at all whether you are a virgin or not. [. . .] I've had conversations with friends who say, you know, I'm getting married. But my family is against it because she isn't a virgin and actually, I don't like that either they have adjusted themselves completely, assimilated, and then it gets tough, they have to make a choice.

Omar identifies the pressure to assimilate as the problem, which demands jettisoning 'Turkish' or 'Muslim' preferences about marriage to be recognised as Dutch. But 'assimilating' or choosing only Dutch identification comes at the expense of requirements and aspirations tied to what he conceives of as being Turkish or Muslim. Omar's story highlights the tensions between responding to the expectations of one's family and the Dutch majority as well as the psychological price of his friends' *passing* response, according to him a not-so-ideal strategy.

Not living up to 'progressive' gender and sexual norms can trigger accusations of not being Dutch. Similarly, expressing political views deemed deviant can lead to *acceptance threats* as members of the ethnic majority will likely question one's loyalty to the Netherlands. Kerem explains why he opposes assimilation:

> By assimilation, I mean that my opinions and judgements about certain issues aren't accepted. Solely because people have a different outlook on, for instance, the Armenian matter, they are dismissed [*weggezet*] as neither standing for freedoms nor for human rights, and that they don't live up to all kinds of cherished stuff, sort of. While I feel like, I only have a different opinion.

Kerem notes how recognition as being Dutch depends on him embracing 'cherished stuff' like human rights. His political stance matches the Turkish government's position, which has sought to engage the diaspora in lobbying

against the official overseas recognition of the Armenian genocide (Ünver 2013, 182). Many members of the ethnic majority, as well as some ethnic minority members, however, consider this stance deviant, which constitutes an acceptance threat. Although Kerem insists that he should be accepted regardless of his opinions, there are trade-offs: his opinions can lead him to be seen as less democratic and thus less Dutch.

Students' strategies of *claiming cultural distinctiveness* notably concerned conflicts over symbolic public space. Visible Muslim/Turkish symbols – mosques, flags, headscarves[6] – are often portrayed as trespassing on moral public space in the Netherlands (Mandel 2008, 11). In this climate, some students valued asserting distinctive, visible manifestations of identity as an ideal response. For example, a study association organised an enormous *Iftar* gathering in the city centre, welcoming students with the statement 'We, Muslims, are here in such a prominent, beautiful spot in the city. Indeed, we are also Dutch'.

The confrontational strategy of asserting cultural and religious distinctiveness did not go uncontested as 'ideal'. One instance of negotiation occurred during a lecture on Islamic architecture hosted by one of the student associations. A professor discussing Muslim architects and mosque design argued that no single Islamic architecture, but a diversity of iconographies, exists across time and space. He explained that many Dutch mosques with their iconic domes and minarets imitate Turkish mosques and recounted his involvement in a mosque construction project in Amsterdam West backed by a MG reformist (Yukleyen 2009, 300). The professor noted that the mosque's governing board wanted the community to appreciate its design – a shame since it discouraged architectural innovation. His statement sparked debate. Some students disagreed; one stated that as the community had financed the mosque, its wishes must be heeded. Another student said:

> In the city where I'm from, the first generation built a mosque. Over time, this mosque became too small for everyone who wanted to pray. It was torn down and moved to an old, more spacious school building. The older generation feels like it's a step back [*dat ze ingeleverd hebben*]. More people can pray, but it's no longer recognisable as a mosque. In this climate, in which Muslims are excluded [*weggezet worden*] all the time, a mosque is something visible that you have achieved as a community.

Another student responded: 'I'm going to be impudent here, but why do you need such a building? Isn't it more beautiful that more people pray? Our faith is a greater contribution to Europe than a building'. Another student jumped in:

> There's a story about the Taj Mahal, Gandhi and a rich American. The American wanted to buy the Taj Mahal to transport it to the US. He offered a ton of

money, but Gandhi said he would never sell the Taj Mahal. Gandhi explained that you wouldn't sell your grandmother's underwear either.

Another student added: 'Yes, this mosque is clearly identifiable as a mosque, but it also fits in with the neighbourhood's masonry. Maybe a mosque will meet with less resistance if it's not so visible'. The student who narrated the story about the torn-down building replied: 'But we're allowed to be present here as Muslims, why would we hide?'

More than architecture, the discussion centred on how Muslims in the Netherlands should present themselves, ideally countering both *distinctiveness threats* and *acceptance threats*. The discussion underlined the internal contestation over ideal strategies. Some students preferred *passing/concealing* (Goffman 1963; Slootman 2017), wishing to 'blend in with the masonry' rather than publicly asserting Islam. It could also be read as *preference falsification*, the costs (resistance from the ethnic majority) seemingly higher than the rewards (distinctiveness/ visibility). In line with Kuran (1995, 8), some students saw not asserting Muslim distinctiveness as blocking the desired social change.

As symbols like mosques are defined collectively, internal deliberation and *management of the self* (Lamont et al. 2016, 128–129) became an external, contested *management of the group*. A majority valued how the traditional image of a mosque with dome and minarets expresses heritage, the emphasis on visibility and distinctiveness aligning with the *Millî Görüş* movement's aims to achieve public recognition for Dutch Muslims. Students claimed distinctiveness by positing themselves as culturally and visibly different and argued that society should accept such differences. Informed by the nativist political context in which visible Islam is poorly received, students debated the trade-off between distinctiveness and acceptance.

Convincing: de-stigmatisation through historical incorporation

Many students were interested in the relationship between Islam and scientific progress, democracy, gender equality and sexual liberty. In this strategy, which we call *historical incorporation*, students located what are frequently considered 'Western cultural values' by the ethnic dominant majority within Islamic and Ottoman heritage. To counter the *value threats* emanating from Dutch nativist prejudice, the students positioned themselves as the carriers of esteemed values.

Both student associations organised a seminar on Islam and science during our research period. One seminar, 'Miracles in the Quran', attracted approximately 50 students. An invited lecturer discussed the compatibility of science and the Quran:

> No mistakes have yet been detected in the Quran. No contradictions in historical or scientific facts. Orientalists say there are mistakes, but they don't know

Islam's methodology. There are many examples of how scientific findings were already present in the Quran. How were the pyramids built? In the 1990s, scientists finally figured this out, but it was already in the Quran.

Students in the audience laughed. The lecturer compared passages from the Quran to scientific findings. One slide read 'clay and fire'. He explained:

The scientists observed the pyramids. They found out that people poured mud into moulds and made bricks. The Quran already stated that the pyramids were created out of clay and fire. All those English, American and Canadian scientists figured that out, but I had already read it in the Quran.

Over the next 45 minutes, the lecturer took us through a dozen examples, pointing to congruence between Quranic text and scientific finding. Following the seminar, the first author encountered Selin, an active member, who explained her interest in the subject: 'Well, we're often asked about this, not in the [lecture] hall, but outside. Then you know a little bit how to reply'.

As we interpret it, the students and lecturer were reconstructing dominant images of 'modern Dutch/Western society', generally portrayed as devoid of positive Turkish or Muslim influence, by relocating science in Islamic and Ottoman history. The lecturer thus positioned Muslims as contributors to 'modern Dutch society', mirroring *Millî Görüş* ideology (Sunier and Landman 2015, 78) by bestowing value on Turkish-Dutch students as the carriers of science. Students like Selin felt empowered vis-à-vis some members of the ethnic majority – for whom religion and science are incompatible – by resisting the *value threats* emanating from dominant understandings of science that outsiders were imagined to have. This may resemble how Du Bois (1903, 14) described the experience of being African-American as 'double consciousness', a sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of (white) others.

Selin's comment further suggested that the lecture served as backstage preparation (Goffman 1959) for students to challenge *value and acceptance threats* emanating from the ethnic majority. Goffman argues that people rehearse and prepare interactions, typically among trusted insiders, for later front stage performances, for example in the 'employee only' area in retail shops. Backstage settings entail mild 'inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts' like joking or minor disrespect (Goffman 1959, 78). Teasing Western scientists who only arrived at their conclusions 'much later' can be seen as Goffmanian secluded backstage banter.

The lecturer positions the Quran and Muslim scholars as more enlightened than 'the West' as they arrived at scientific conclusions earlier. The source of this value, however, is primarily derived from the past. One student association member reflected on the lecture:

> Muslims do not have role models . . . in 2018 for example. We don't really have anyone who is scientifically well known, who is Muslim, that we can say, look he can do it, so can we. We must go back in time 200, 300 years. That hurts me [. . .] Nowadays Islam is portrayed as something strange. Some say that Islam is depicted as violent, others that it is depicted as exotic. I think that Islam can mean something completely different, it can mean development. It can mean science, it can mean anything, but not negativity as I observe in society.

The student responded to *value threats* by claiming science and development as integral to Islam. The lecture offered students role models who empowered them in formulating an ideal de-stigmatisation response. We witnessed similar arguments in relation to democracy, human rights and feminism, often discursively tied to 'Western civilisation'. Notably female students expressed interest in the Islamic roots of feminism, countering the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' (Van Es 2019). Hopkins (2011) and Kazi (2014) similarly narrate how some British and American Muslims envision a positive-sum relationship between religious and national identity by emphasising the Muslim contribution to their adopted countries. The performance is not directly aimed towards ethnic majority others who pose acceptance and value threats, but is here rather a *self-convincing and empowering in-group strategy*. Having one's belonging in society recognised is partly a shared experience, requiring collective, backstage deliberation and preparation.

Contextualising: de-stigmatisation through country-specific positioning

The confronting and convincing strategies recounted above revealed that they can be used flexibly to balance the needs of distinctiveness and acceptance within a discursive context dominated by nativism and culturalised understandings of citizenship. We now discuss a final strategy, *contextualising*, in which individuals tailor their de-stigmatisation strategies to appeal to multiple audiences in a transnational context. Instead of choosing between distinctiveness and similarity with the ethnic majority, young adults could adapt their opinions – like their identifications – to a country-specific context. Contextual responses were sometimes deployed when facing conflicting demands to conform to two 'normative registers' – sets of aims and values that guide the 'good life' (Schielke 2015).

During a mosque lecture on prayer in Islam, Kübra brought up a conundrum: what if you have an exam during prayer time? The discussion leader, a middle-aged woman, answered that one must still pray. When Kübra stressed that exams are important and that Allah would understand, another student objected: 'You should trust that when you leave your exam to pray, Allah will help you pass'. Kübra retorted: 'School is important too. If I do well, I could serve Allah better later by contributing to

society'. The discussion leader understood but remained unmoved; the pillars of Islam must take precedence. She argued that society should take Islam into account and adapt its public sphere to the needs of Dutch Muslims, mirroring MG's ideology that Islam should be publicly accepted rather than limited to private religious belief or practice. Kübra persisted: 'Ayşe [*points*] and I went to a lecture, where we learned that our situation is different, because we live in the Netherlands, not in an Islamic country. That's a different situation and so we should behave differently as Muslims'.

In this informal, backstage discussion, internal plurality and disagreement over how to behave as Muslims in a majority non-Muslim setting again came to the fore, as Kübra and the lecturer negotiated what an ideal response would be. Kübra found the two requirements difficult to reconcile. As we interpret it, she experienced dissonance between two *acceptance and value threats* (being a good Muslim and a good student). Attempts to reduce dissonance provide clues about 'feeling rules' as 'people (want to) feel what they think they have to feel and have the right to feel' (Hochschild 1979, 565). The identifications to which the two feeling rules are attached are rigidly defined. As a student, Kübra is not supposed to leave the exam to pray, and as a Muslim, she is told that she is not allowed to postpone prayer.

By pointing to different religious contexts (we don't live in an Islamic country), Kübra counters both *value threats*, upholding both self-images of a good Muslim and a good student as expected by the *Millî Görüş* lecturer and her Dutch university. Place allows for flexibility in what being a Muslim entails.

While the localisation of religious practice is a well-known phenomenon, the negotiation of 'Islam's universal and particular aspects in the European context' (Yukleyen 2009, 291–292) takes place in a time and place where 'Islam' and 'the West' are often posited as mutually exclusive. Against this background, we turn to how some students sometimes embraced contextual strategies regarding their varied political opinions in the interviews, anticipating *acceptance and value threats* when expressing heterodox views. It is relevant to note that these conversations occurred outside of the student groups, as the organisations did not take any political stance. Below, Burak is talking about the 2017 referendum on whether to allow Dutch intelligence agencies to tap bulk data (under certain conditions). He voted against such a law as it would give too much control to the intelligence services. But although he entertained similar democratic doubts, in the 2017 Turkish referendum he voted to expand presidential powers.

> Burak: I'm a Turk born in the Netherlands, I have *mixed feelings* [in English]. Sure, there's space for improvement, but the issue isn't black and white as it's presented in the West. I understand the ideas behind it, why some things in Turkey are decided in a different, authoritative way. Like, we're going to do this,

and someone decides [*hakt de knoop door*] and that's it these cultures need that. These are cultural differences

Judith: What are those?

Burak: In the Turkish family . . . the dad decides we're going to do this and that's it, in another family, the children also have a say. In the Netherlands the situation is different, this country is way further than Turkey, so here I could have a different opinion

Burak states that he is a Turk born in the Netherlands. Understanding both cultures explains his mixed feelings. Facing multiple *distinctiveness, value and acceptance threats*, a contextual strategy grants Burak some leeway. Like Kübra, he argues that (political) values and behaviour should be understood within and adapted to national contexts rather than choosing between political positions attached to group memberships posited as conflicting. A cultural, gendered and evolutionary narrative is evident in his argument. Dutch children have a say in family matters while the Turkish father figure is authoritative. Burak explains the contrast through cultural discrepancies and temporal differentiation: 'the Netherlands is way further'. Some other students also used context-specific, culturalist or evolutionary narratives to explain different political positions.

Utcu: In the Netherlands I'm more of a classic liberal. So, I think that the state can withdraw itself more . . . the Netherlands has a certain degree of development. Look, Turkey of course doesn't have that. Turkey is a developing country. We are, well partly. One side is just like the West, highly educated to a great extent. But another part, for example the East or the Southeast, deep Southeast of the country, is less developed. So you still need an active state to connect those camps, so that people become loyal to the state. That's a different political reality it's a different culture in the first place.

Utcu calls himself a classic liberal in the Netherlands given the country's place on the developmental path. But he defends the contemporary necessity of an assimilationist, centralising state in Turkey. Like Burak, he places Turkey on an evolutionary timeline – again parallel with Dutch culturalist chauvinism. Students sometimes traced their own viewpoints to their positions straddling both societies.

Burak: I follow the Turkish news, Turkish media so I know what happens there. But I also see articles by *Nieuwsuur, NOS* [Dutch public news programs] or other big European media channels and I like to see all their coverage, how they perceive and understand it. you understand that the normal Dutch person has an entirely different perspective on democracy than the normal Turk . . .

Burak perceives his own position through the eyes of the 'normal Turk' and the 'normal Dutchman' and even imagines how they perceive each other. As he positions himself both inside and outside two political contexts, he

advances a context-specific, bird's eye view on politics. He simultaneously portrays himself as different from 'normal Dutch' and 'normal Turkish' people. While the *contextualist strategy* allows students to counter multiple *distinctiveness, acceptance and value threats*, it partly reaffirms their ascribed relative outsider status (considering themselves neither normal Turkish nor Dutch persons).

Discussion

As the nativist political climate challenges Turkish-Dutch students' sense of belonging as recognised citizens in the Netherlands, many look for ways to assert their belonging, distinctiveness and value. We found three strategies: (1) *confronting* by *claiming cultural distinctiveness*, where students countered *distinctiveness and acceptance threats* by asserting their right to be culturally different from the ethnic majority; (2) *convincing* through *historical incorporation*, where students countered *value and acceptance threats* by arguing that their Turkish and Islamic heritage has contributed to supposedly 'Western achievements'; and (3) a *contextualist* strategy, through which they countered multiple *distinctiveness, value and acceptance threats* by arguing that ideological or political positions should reflect country-specific contexts. Stigmatised minorities, individually and collectively, strategically and flexibly employed *confronting, convincing* and *contextualising* strategies to assert their right to belong.

Building on Lamont et al. (2016), we observed how different strategies arise not only through internal deliberation and one-on-one interactions with members of the ethnic majority, but are debated, learnt and performed in secure in-group settings. The *management of the self* often involves the *management of the group* as minoritized individuals debate among themselves what response would most effectively alter-stigmatised positions to effect group level change. Ethno-religious associations are found to be the settings for deliberating ideal de-stigmatising strategies, empowering individuals vis-à-vis the ethnic majority by connecting them to cultural narratives that make sense of their positions in society. Combining interviews and observations opened up insights into how strategies are taught, learnt and contested among secure in-groups in context-specific ways.

Existing dominant narratives coloured negotiations over belonging. Study participants often fell back on essentialised understandings of Dutch and Turkish norms and culture; some also invoked an evolutionary timeline of modernity and development. This is far from surprising as both Dutch liberals and some nativists share the belief that 'modern' values such as human rights and democracy are part and parcel of Dutch culture (Kešić and Duyvendak 2019), the mirror opposite of 'traditional Muslim cultures'. Although there

were significant differences between Turkish-Dutch students' strategies to assert belonging in the Netherlands, they shared this emphasis on culture, mirroring notions dominant in the Netherlands and sometimes in *Millî Görüş* and Turkish government positions.

The students' strategies suggest that individuals facing social stigma not only have to deal with singular identity threats; they must negotiate belonging vis-à-vis *multiple and changing* constellations of audiences, spanning members of majority and minority groups. Furthermore, individuals' positionality may not be stable over transnational contexts. That participants belonged to the Turkish symbolic political majority may have influenced their positioning on 'Turkish' issues, which may have led some to different positions on Dutch and Turkish politics. Falling between two worlds, their contextualising strategy went some way to avoid conflicting value threats. We propose that future research should pay greater attention to how individuals can employ diverging normative repertoires across contexts.

Students in our study do not represent 'Turkish-Dutch Muslims'. The two youth groups we studied were affiliated with the *Millî Görüş* movement, which in the Netherlands aims to advance the interests of Muslim citizens. Turkish-Dutch seculars, or those who do not support the Turkish government would presumably have different experiences with exclusion as well as strategies to assert belonging. As social climbers, students are also more likely to encounter discrimination as they move through the dominant society (Yukleyen 2009, 294). Instead, this study has attempted to provide insights in the context-specific nature of de-stigmatisation strategies.

Notes

1. We refer to Dutch citizens with one or both Turkish-born parents, following participants' self-identifications.
2. Literature suggests that ethnic minority and national identifications can co-exist (Ghorashi 2003; Hopkins and Blackwood 2011; Slootman and Duyvendak 2015). Multiple identifications are outcomes of situational processes rather than reflective of any fixed status (Brubaker 2016, 437; Hall 1990, 222; Yuval-Davis 2010, 267).
3. This recalls Hirschman's (1970) classic model of Exit, Voice and Loyalty: avoiding stigma altogether (exit: concealing/passing); vocalising dissatisfaction (voice: confronting/convincing); enduring the situation (out of loyalty, hoping for things to improve).
4. Dutch Muslims in Van Es (2019, 381) research sought to break the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype by joking and expressing confidence in interactions with non-Muslims. As 'ambassadors of Islam', they showed that being a devout Muslim is not mutually exclusive with being emancipated, independent and modern.

5. Research participants and chairs of the student groups agreed to take part in the study as part of the first authors' master's project, supervised by the second author. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio recorded. We used pseudonyms throughout the text to guarantee confidentiality.
6. In 2009, prominent nativist politician Geert Wilders called headscarves 'head rags' [*kopvodden*] and suggested levying a tax on publicly veiled women, comparing his proposal to environmental tax where 'the polluter pays'.

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Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, supporting data is not available.

Disclosure statement

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