Summary

Looking for new stories. Moroccan-Dutch young adults’ narrative constructions of identity and belonging

In the Introduction of my dissertation, I outline how since the beginning of this century, Moroccan-Dutch young adults have been involved in various incidents that sparked public discussion about both their ethnic and their religious background. I started this research project at the time of the bus incident in Gouda in 2008, which I expected would be the high point of contention around Moroccan-Dutch young adults. However, during this project, the contention surrounding the Moroccan-Dutch Muslim identity and the negative portrayal of this group in the national media have persisted. As a consequence, in the course of my research project, several participants indicated that they felt that they were not able to endure much more negativity. One participant once rhetorically asked: “How thick is my skin?” I must say that, in general, my participants’ skin proved thick, but overcoming the amount of negativity surrounding their group remained a challenge throughout the project.

Theory suggests that people are motivated to feel positive about themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Positive self-esteem is related to membership of positive social groups. In relation to my initial observations regarding the position of Moroccan-Dutch young adults in public debates about their ethnic and their religious background, I hypothesized that the Moroccan-Dutch identity constitutes a negative identity that is in dire need of improvement, or a more satisfying meaning. In this context, I discussed the function of storytelling as a device for attributing meaning to complex and troubling events. By organizing events in a coherent way – that is, attributing causality between seemingly unrelated events – people are able to apprehend their significance. Moreover, I have argued that through this exercise, people are able to grasp themselves as coherent wholes. In this way, I have argued, storytelling provides us with a unique insight into the way people construct or reconstruct their identities. My observations and these theoretical insights led me to formulate the following main research question:
“How do Moroccan-Dutch young adults use storytelling to make sense of, and reconstruct, a stigmatized collective identity?”

I have addressed this question in several ways, paying attention to the different external and internal dimensions of collective identity, the idiosyncratic remakes thereof, and the contextual aspects of storytelling, including collective storytelling.

In my methodological chapter, I explained how I set out to gather, analyze, and interpret storytelling data. I also explained how a focus on the “evaluation” section of narratives provides us with different outlooks on how identities are presented through storytelling. I argued that the presentation of an evaluation provides insight into 1) how a narrator presents him- or herself to an audience as a particular kind of person by presenting a point of view, by means of which he or she claims a particular moral ground, and 2) how a narrator establishes the boundaries of the social groups to which he or she does or does not belong by presenting recurrent attributions of good and bad characteristics to themselves and “others.”

Furthermore, I proposed in that chapter that in order to establish whether Moroccan-Dutch young adults indeed share a collective narrative that underpins a collective identity, it was necessary to study the content and the import of the experiences they had had as members of the Moroccan-Dutch group. Similar themes and evaluations of stories, I argued, give rise to a collective narrative in the form of “we are the people who....” I expected the lacuna to be filled by a record of events that captures central understandings about what it means to be Moroccan-Dutch.

In the empirical chapters that followed, I addressed the question of sense making and the reconstruction of the Moroccan-Dutch identity in different ways. In each of those chapters, I showed how Moroccan-Dutch youths at the intersection of multiple identity categories, and in relation to different audiences, tried to make sense of a stigmatized identity. I pointed out that Moroccan-Dutch young adults were sometimes able to provide this identity with more satisfying meanings, and that sometimes they were not able to. Orientations toward negative public discourses remained dominant throughout the project. Challenging the ensuing collective narrative of exclusion proved a complex task. In the various chapters of this dissertation, I have pointed out how Moroccan-Dutch young adults were engaged in the joint elaboration, negotiation, and mobilization
of the collective narrative, and how they handled these processes in different ways in relation to different audiences.

In Chapter 3, I asked whether Moroccan-Dutch young adults indeed share a collective story about what it means to be a Moroccan-Dutch young adult. I found that in the reconstruction of their experiences, these young adults dominantly oriented toward the exclusionary discourses about Moroccan-Dutch young adults, and told stories about how they experienced injustice and discrimination in their everyday lives. Not all these stories were stories of personal experience; some were more “generic” or “habitual,” referring to experiences that were deemed common and recurrent among Moroccan-Dutch young adults. I also found, however, that participants told alternative stories, through which they challenged recurrent interpretations of the collective experience. In response to the collective (more generic) experience of injustice and discrimination, Moroccan-Dutch young adults attributed stories of positive interactions they had had with native Dutch people. In this way the collective storyline was negotiated in such a way that it catered for group members’ individual positive experiences. My analysis also showed, however, that challenging the collective narrative was difficult: Sometimes discussions about the veracity of the collective storyline led to heated debates, and consensus on new storylines was not always reached.

The exploration of collective storylines based upon their topics and import was useful to establish whether indeed a collective narrative was shared among Moroccan-Dutch young adults, but it also had important shortcomings in the sense that variation in the experience of group members was overlooked, and that the context in which the stories were told was not taken into account. These issues were addressed in the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 4, I studied whether, and if so how, the combination of gender and educational level played a role in the way the collective storyline was reconstructed by Moroccan-Dutch young men and women. These groups are addressed differently in public discourses, and I expected these differences to play out in their reconstructions of experience. I found that indeed, depending on such differences in positioning, Moroccan-Dutch young adults faced different challenges in reconstructing a stigmatized identity and that they handled it in different ways. Women were less constrained by a public narrative in which Moroccan-Dutch young men were portrayed as criminal and
lazy. Interestingly, young women, irrespective of their educational level, reconstructed the collective narrative in more positive ways, and mostly referred to the collective storyline of exclusion in generic terms. Young men with a higher educational level were more sensitive to that narrative, perhaps because they thought that their educational achievements would have protected them from the episodes of exclusion they encountered in their everyday lives. Again, the analysis in this chapter showed how complex the task of reconstructing the collective narrative was: Although participants recognized the presence of a collective experience, they looked for ways in which to accommodate their particular experience brought about by their positioning on a matrix of intersecting identities.

In Chapter 5, I studied how and why the collective story was reconstructed differently in relation to different audiences. I found that different conversational settings did not always lead to alternative constructions of the collective narrative. The participants who did challenge dominant constructions of the collective narrative, did so by combining what we might think of as inconsistent stories. They told stories of the collective that emphasized their exclusion, at the same time that they told stories of their personal experiences that emphasized their inclusion. And they told different stories to different audiences. The ability to position themselves as insiders and outsiders gave them the credibility to challenge the collective story without feeling alienated from the group. Moreover, I found that inconsistent and contradictory accounts of experience allowed for a self-image of participants as members of both the Moroccan-Dutch community and Dutch society. This analysis showed that for those who seek support for their experiences as successfully integrated members of Dutch society, challenging recurrent storylines required high levels of flexibility and resourcefulness.

In Chapter 6, I studied in more detail the forms of identity and belonging that result from Moroccan-Dutch young adults’ narrative constructions and negotiations. My point of departure for this study was the argument made in recent literature that Moroccan-Dutch young adults do not identify as Dutch, but do feel they belong in the Netherlands. I have argued that both the national context in which Moroccan-Dutch young adults are positioned as outsiders, and the context of the focus group in which the Moroccan identity was salient, problematized claims to national belonging. I described how a close analysis of the subjunctive properties of narratives revealed my participants’ hopes and expectations of national belonging. I pointed out that besides contributing experiences
of local belonging to the collective narrative, Moroccan-Dutch young adults made fragile attempts to discuss their national belonging. Participants discussed their belonging to Dutch society and their underlying claims to the national identity in subtle and sophisticated ways. Through this analysis in particular, I was able to make clear the value of storytelling in dealing with controversial subjects.

From the four empirical chapters summarized here, I can draw various conclusions regarding the process of giving meaning to, and the reconstruction of, the Moroccan-Dutch identity. First, the Moroccan-Dutch young adults in this project did not always manage to provide an alternative meaning to a collective narrative that reflects their positioning as outsiders in public discourse. Here, it is worth mentioning that whereas Moroccan-Dutch young adults are referred to as the “second” generation of Moroccan-Dutch migrants, they are, in a way a first generation: They are the first generation to face the challenge of giving meaning to an identity that contains strong elements of both the Moroccan and the Dutch identity. In doing so, they find that what it means to be Moroccan-Dutch in the Netherlands, is largely defined for them. This means that rather than beginning with a blank slate, Moroccan-Dutch young adults begin their search for meaning with a narrative that is written for them rather than by them, and is written in largely negative terms.

Second, I showed how complex it is to find positive meaning from this point of departure. Whereas many of the participants in this project oriented toward public discourses in describing their experiences of exclusion, I have shown that Moroccan-Dutch young adults at the intersection of gender and educational level handled this challenge differently. But more important, perhaps, I have shown how the properties of storytelling enabled participants to include their experience of local and national inclusion in subtle and sophisticated ways. In this way, Moroccan-Dutch young adults managed to negotiate and revise parts of their collective narrative, but they were also constrained in their efforts by their desire not to alienate members of their peer group by telling stories that departed too much from the narrative of exclusion that was most familiar. As mentioned, the participants who were most successful in reconstructing the collective storyline, did so by combining inconsistent stories and stories through which existing storylines were questioned in unobtrusive and ambiguous ways.
Finally, these last observations lead me to conclude that besides being complex, reconstructing the Moroccan-Dutch identity is also a deeply creative process: Participants told stories of experiences that sometimes were and sometimes were not their own stories; they were able to construct and simultaneously deconstruct the image of their group in relation to different audiences; they were able to tell new stories and configure new realities; and they were able to imagine new realities, which were made concrete by pouring them into the form of stories. By and large, it was their flexibility and resourcefulness that made it possible for second-generation Moroccan-Dutch young adults in this project to reconstruct their identity and attribute more promising meanings to it.