CHAPTER 4

Ethnic Identity Positioning at Work: Understanding Professional Career Experiences

4.1.   Introduction

> … ABCD [the professional service firm] stays a conservative bastion of, in exaggerated
> terms, White men, eehm, therefore sometimes, diversity is hard to find, certainly in
> higher levels. (#17, dominant ethnic man)

The apparent White male dominance at higher levels in professional service firms stands
in strong contrast to the increasingly diverse workforce of such firms. Observations such as the
above fueled our interest in how diverse professionals experience their careers in a professional
service firm in the Netherlands. When conducting semi-structured interviews with ethnic and
gender diverse employees about their career experiences, the professionals' identities within the
organizational context emerged as a pivotal theme guiding our understanding. The importance of
ethnic identity (construction) at work in general, and in relation to professional career
experiences in particular, resonates in Bell, Denton, and Nkomo's (1993) observation of the
experienced stress of black professional women working in a mostly dominant ethnic and male
environment, where "circumstances often dictate that, for women of color to be successful
managers, they must adopt a new identity and abandon commitment to their old culture" (Bell et
al., 1993, pp. 118-119).

Since we see a lack of ethnic diversity especially at higher organizational levels, we
attempt to uncover, understand, and give meaning to the role of individual identities in diverse
employees' career experiences as a potential explanation for our observation. We follow Kenny
and Briner's (2007) recommendations to study ethnicity by exploring the salience of an
individual's ethnic identity through qualitative research and by focusing on career advancement
specifically within a professional context. In addition, we respond to the call for including both

minority ethnics and dominant ethnics when empirically studying differential outcomes and career experiences between these groups in the organizational context (Thomas & Alderfer, 1989; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). As such, by joining a growing tradition of qualitative approaches to the study of careers and minority ethnics (e.g. Fearfull & Kamenou, 2006; Johnston & Kyriacou, 2011; Kenny & Briner, 2007, 2010; Kirton, 2009), this study's main contribution lies in the comparison between the minority ethnics' and dominant ethnics' career experiences within the same firm. For our inductive analysis we were guided towards illuminating how processes of othering are normalized through identity construction at work, using Jenkins' framework of identity construction in relation to the individual, the interaction, and the institutional order as a sensitizing concept (Jenkins, 2004; 2008). From a non-positivistic and non-essentialist understanding of diversity and identity, we explore how context-specific processes "and the resulting understandings both reflect unequal power relations within a given context and contribute to maintaining, resisting, and/or transforming them" (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 10). We illustrate resulting consequences in terms of career experiences and thereby give a new perspective on the discussion on how to create a more inclusive organizational culture, positively stimulating career experiences and advancement.

    4.1.1. Careers in professional service firms. Professional service firms, such as law firms, management consulting firms, and financial service providers, are characterized by high knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and a professionalized workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Often described as following up-or-out career systems, professional service firms often apply specific, linear promotion processes according to strict performance measurements based on objective criteria and time frames (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008) including strong path-dependencies (Martell, Emrich, & Robison-Cox, 2012; Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012). In order to

sustain the firm's partnership structure, those not advancing to the next career level according to the given parameters are dismissed (Greenwood, Li, Prakash, & Deephouse, 2005; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Morris & Pinnington, 1998). Since being highly skilled and knowledgeable is considered a precondition for employees in professional service firms (Greenwood et al., 2005), clearly more than only occupational proficiency is needed to move up rather than out (Gilson & Mnookin, 1985). Subjective criteria held by decision makers at higher organizational levels seem to tip the scale (Gilson & Mnookin, 1985) when it comes to promotion decisions. In addition, specific attributes of diversity, such as ethnic background and/or gender, have been suggested to play a role in career advancement (see for specific examples in professional service firms Fearfull & Kamenou, 2006; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Spurr & Sueyoshi, 1994). Ethnicity, for instance, has been associated with inequalities in hiring decisions, performance ratings, job evaluations, opportunities for promotion, and (dis)advantages in salary (e.g. Bielby, 2012; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; James, 2000; Maume, 2012; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Parks-Yancy, 2006; Rivera, 2012) in favor of dominant ethnics compared to minority ethnics in managerial and professional careers.

Thus, even though professional service firms ostensibly seem to put an objective and performance-oriented career system into effect, these merit-based reward and promotion systems paradoxically seem to maintain, if not increase demographic differences in career progress in favor of the dominant ethnic male group (Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010).

4.1.2. **Diversity**. Diversity can either be defined in terms of the compositional approach or in terms of the relational approach (Guillaume, Brodbeck, & Riketta, 2011). The compositional approach focuses on the mere "*distribution of differences among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute, X*, such as tenure, ethnicity, conscientiousness, task

attitude, or pay. Diversity is a unit-level, compositional construct" (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200, original emphasis), whereas the relational approach considers " the *extent* to which an individual's demographic, or idiosyncratic attributes are shared by others in the unit" (Guillaume et al., 2011, p. 2, emphasis added by first author). As a function of an individual's relative level of dissimilarity in the unit in terms of a particular common attribute, diversity may affect work-related behavior, attitudes, processes, and outcomes for individuals differently, depending on their extent of similarity with the others in the unit (Guillaume et al., 2011). Differences due to demographic or idiosyncratic diversity become meaningful by their embeddedness in social or institutional structures, which can lead to various forms of inequality between individuals (DiTomaso, Post & Parks-Yancy, 2007).Within this study, we focus on ethnicity as the pivotal demographic attribute. We embrace the relational approach to diversity, since we are interested in the individual experience of ethnic identity construction within the organization as the focal unit.

Ethnicity has been defined as an aspect of the social relationship between groups whose members consider themselves as being culturally distinctive from other groups (Eriksen, 2002). Kenny and Briner use the term ethnicity to "denote group differences based on shared ancestry, traditions and categorizations by those within and external to the group" (2007, p. 439). We therefore understand ethnic diversity in terms of relative dissimilarities between individuals within one unit due to assigned or acclaimed group membership based on assumed similarities in culture, ancestry, traditions, and categorizations.

Located in the specific context of the Netherlands, we follow the official definition of the Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands with respect to ethnic group membership (CBS, 2012)[i] contrasting "dominant ethnics" (i.e. ethnic Dutch) to "minority ethnics" (i.e. non-western

minority ethnic). Acknowledging that "dominant" and "minority" are not exact antonyms, we nevertheless specifically choose to use this terminology to highlight the complex relationships and dependencies between ethnic groups, which do not necessarily reflect numerical representations of group members in organizations (e.g. DiTomaso, Post, & Parks-Yancy, 2007). We use the term "ethnic" both as a noun and as an adjective, always preceded by the description of either dominant or minority, because this "conveys that ethnicity is something we all possess" (Kenny & Briner, 2007, p. 439).

4.1.3. Identity. Identity, or the understanding of who we are, is "at least in principle always negotiable, [and] identity is not fixed" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 5). Thus, identity can be viewed as "a dynamic process: a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms through interactions with social contexts and within historical moments" (Ghorashi, 2003, p. 63).Adopting a relational approach to identity, we understand identity as a constant interplay between individuals and their social environment, influenced by time and context, leading to a multitude of self-definitions individuals draw from when interacting in everyday organizational life (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Jenkins, 2004; Ybema et al., 2009).

"The concept of identity appears to be at the core of understanding diversity" (Nkomo & Cox, 1996, p. 339). Treating ethnicity as a demographic variable is insufficient (Kenny & Briner, 2007), since the degree of identification with one's ethnic group can differ both across ethnic groups and across individuals (Kim & Gelfand, 2003; Phinney, 1996). Therefore, ethnic identity can be understood as "the extent to which individuals' ethnicity is a key part of how they view themselves" (Kenny & Briner, 2007, p. 447). In line with the relational approach to diversity, an individual's behavior will be influenced more or less intensely by their "ethnic identity"

depending on the degree of ethnic identity salience (Combs, Milosevic, Jeung, & Griffith, 2012; Phinney, 1996).

    4.1.4. Career experiences. The definition of career as an "unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005, p. 178) is in line with a less traditional, bureaucratic, and hierarchical, but a more holistic understanding of career, which "is constituted by the actor herself, in interaction with others, as she moves through time and space" (Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, 2004, p. 409). Particularly this description of career appeals to us, as we see features of our understanding of identity construction (Ghorashi, 2003; Jenkins, 2004, 2008) reoccuring: Similarly to identity, career is shaped through individual sensemaking, through interactions with others, and through the influence of the environment, reflected in time and space. Since individual self-knowledge and sensemaking seem to be important in career construction (Cohen & Mallon, 2001; Killeen, 1996), we consider the individuals' identity in general, and their ethnic identity (Kenny & Briner, 2007), in particular, as eminently relevant for both career construction and experiences.

    Following the holistic understanding of career (Cohen et al., 2004), we consider career experiences to include more than objective indicators of career success such as performance evaluation, promotion, and salary increase. Therefore we also regard career experiences related to professional and (inter)personal development, such as supervisory or mentor-mentee relationships, networking situations, and individuals' understanding of career related informal codes of conduct and unwritten rules (Cox & Nkomo, 1991).

    In an effort of bringing the three pillars of this empirical study together, namely diversity, identity, and career experiences in the specific context of a professional service firm, we explore one of the areas that Thomas and Alderfer's (1989) refer to as significant in understanding the

interface of race/ethnicity and career experiences. Particularly, this area concerns "how, within the career development process of minorities, race influences the internal sense of self in the world" (Thomas & Alderfer's, 1989, p. 135). As such, we explore the positioning of ethnic identity within a professional organizational context, in order to derive a deeper understanding of systematic differences in career experiences among dominant ethnic and minority ethnic professionals within the same organizational context. We specifically focus on ethnicity as the pivotal attribute of diversity, without ignoring the importance of and the interplay with other relevant identity markers, such as gender, profession, or religious affiliation.

4.2. Method

In this section, the organization, the participants and the procedure, and the data analysis will be described in more detail.

4.2.1. The organization. Due to confidentiality agreements with the organization, the descriptive information we can disclose about the organization is limited. The organization resides in more than 150 countries and employs more than 150.000 people. The vast majority of employees works as client service professionals, assisted by a considerably smaller group of administrative and support staff. The top of the organization consists of a relatively small group of "partners" (just about more than 5% of the total workforce). Since our research is grounded in the specific context of the Netherlands, we only included the Dutch subsidiaries in our study. In the end of the booking year 2010/2011, around 3.500 people (a little more than one third of whom were women) were employed by the Dutch subsidiaries. Reliable, organization-wide information concerning the distribution of the employees in terms of their ethnic backgrounds cannot be given, since the organization only registers employees' ethnic backgrounds on a voluntary basis and is not permitted to use this information for any classificatory purposes.

As many other large professional service firms, this organization applies an up-or-out career system, in which professionals progress linearly, within a given time frame. Mostly entering just after graduation with a Master-degree, if successful, the sixth and highest functional level (partner level) will be reached after 12-15 years.

4.2.2. **Participants.** For the purpose of a commissioned research project on further understanding minority ethnics' relative lack of career advancement in a professional service firm compared to dominant ethnics, 1.400 professionals (working between the second and fifth functional level) received a standard email asking if they were willing to participate in a study on diversity and career development within the organization. In total, 550 professionals responded positively, gave consent for the use of additional personal information derived from the Personnel Information System, and specified their ethnic background based on their own and their parents' and grandparents' country of birth. Subsequently, we divided the group of potential participants into dominant ethnics and minority ethnics (CBS, 2012) resulting in about 15% of all potential participants being considered minority ethnics. To ensure theoretical comparability between the experiences of potential interviewees, we "matched" each minority ethnic with a dominant ethnic in terms of gender, date of organizational entry, starting position, level of educational at organizational entry, location of employment (decreasing order of relevance). This strict matching was used for the purpose of composing similar groups of dominant ethnic and minority ethnic professionals only. When exploring the individual experiences, we considered the individual's ethnic group membership as frame of reference. For the entire project, 54 professionals were interviewed, almost equally distributed across gender and ethnic background.

To be considered relevant for this particular study, at least one professional of each "pair" had reached the forth functional level in order to guarantee sufficient tenure, thus career

experiences, within the organization. Our final sample consists of 26 interviews with 14 women and 12 men, of which 13 are considered dominant ethnics and 13 are considered minority ethnics (CBS, 2012).

4.2.3. Procedure.

Data collection. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person on the sites of different subsidiaries of the professional service firm throughout the Netherlands. All interviews were conducted in a separate room out of sight of colleagues or other potential disturbances. After assuring confidentiality and asking for permission, all interviews were recorded for future data analysis purposes. All interviews were conducted by at least one of two researchers, sometimes accompanied by a research assistant. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, since all involved were proficient in this language. The duration of the interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes. To maximize congruency between the two researchers, the first two interviews were conducted and evaluated together.

All interviews followed a topic list co-created by the researchers and organizational members (e.g., project leader, ethnic diversity network), covering careers within the organization, barriers and support, career opportunities for minority ethnics, informal networks, organizational culture, and diversity policies.

The final question asked in most of the interviews was, whether or not (and if so, to what extent) participants were aware of their gender and of their ethnic background within the organization. Except for this question, the topic of identity was not introduced explicitly. However, while conducting the interviews and after preliminary analyses of the data, ethnic identity evolved as one of the central themes within the interviews. It struck us how minority ethnics referred to their awareness of ethnic identity in various moments of everyday

organizational life more often than dominant ethnics. We believe that the inductive emergence of ethnic identity as a central theme throughout our interviews without explicitly asking for it underlines the importance of this topic in relation to career experiences. Ibarra (1999) put a similar experience in these terms: "My interests in image and identity were not fueled by a deductive logic but, rather, by the dominance of these themes in my interviews" (p. 767), which encouraged her to let her analysis be led by these themes emerging from her data.

The researchers' presence during the interviews certainly had an influence on the tenor of the interviews. Although the research team's ethnic background (one dominant ethnic, one western minority ethnic, one non-western minority ethnic) and gender (all women) were not structurally addressed in each interview, sometimes personal experiences were shared by the researchers. Usually, interviewees were willing to share more information than prior to this disclosure, presumably due to the assumption of greater mutual understanding.

Data analyses. The voice recordings of all interviews were transcribed ad verbatim by several research assistants. Only one of the authors of this paper was part of the initial research team. We used the software program Atlas.ti to facilitate the coding process of the 26 transcripts.

We started off with open coding, because the focus of our particular research interest for the purpose of this study had emerged after the interviews were conducted. By trying not to be led by preconceptions, we pursued to give the emerging focus on ethnic identity in professionals' career experiences the chance to unfold without constrain by prior assumptions. While reading each interview, we created codes and corresponding labels expressing the content of the specific passage. Once established, the codes were reused in other instances, and new codes were created and assigned in cases where previously created codes seemed to be insufficient. After the first round of coding, we ended up with a total of 57 codes.

For the second round of coding, we reread the relevant excerpts and reassigned codes where necessary to further specify their exact content. Furthermore, we made a clear distinction between experiences of dominant ethnics and minority ethnics specifically related to their individual awareness of ethnic identity and career experiences.

For the third round of coding, we engaged in a more iterative process. At this stage, we worked towards a final composition of quotes to exemplify the emergence of recurring patterns in the data. This process was guided by a sensitizing concept we found in Jenkins' (2004, 2008) framework of identity construction, which has been used as an organizing frame previously (Kirton, 2009). Jenkins (2004) introduces three orders on which identity is constructed: The individual order concerns the world as it is constructed through unique individuals and their thoughts and believes. The interaction order concerns the world as it is constructed through the interaction of individuals and the inherent reciprocity of internal and external sensemaking. The institutional order concerns the world as it is constructed through routines, regularities, and organizations and through "established-ways-of-doing-things" (Jenkins, 2004, 2008). In the following, we use these three orders as a classificatory framework, while acknowledging the interdependence between them (Jenkins, 2008, p. 40).

Throughout the coding process, we considered "identity markers", such as skin color, dress style, alcohol consumption, and wearing a headscarf as indicators of either ascribed or experienced ethnic identity. While acknowledging that some of these markers could rather be related to religious affiliation than to ethnicity, we follow other scholars (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Siebers, 2009) and we yield our interviewees, who also often used similar markers in terms of ethnicity, without making clear distinctions between religious and ethnic connotations.

All four authors of this paper substantially discussed the suitability and relevance of the identified quotes resulting in the final selection for this paper. Originally, all quotes were in Dutch. Even though also the translations of the quotes from Dutch to English were discussed by all authors, possible loss of meaning might have occurred. The original quotes may be obtained from the first author as supplementary material.

4.3. Results

In this section, the salience and importance of ethnic identity is explored in reference to the individual order, the interaction order, and the institutional order (Jenkins, 2004, 2008). Before presenting the three orders we begin with an illustration of how diversity in general is perceived at the professional service firm.

4.3.1. Diversity at a Dutch professional service firm. As illustrated by the opening quote, the interviewees' estimation of diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender is sketched as quite diverse in the lower ranks and quite homogeneous in the higher ranks, with mainly dominant ethnic, middle-aged men at the top of the organization. Next to holding the top-positions within the organization, dominant ethnic men are also described as determining "the rules":

> Eeeh, but I do think that we [make] the rules all together, eh, yes all together we make the rules. And if you have all, if there are thus thus only White men at the top with values which I just described, then they thus make the rules. […] I do believe that the [ideal] box is a White man box. But but I do not believe that all White men fit this box by definition, but I do believe that a White man fits it better. (#2, minority ethnic woman)

Making the rules according to dominant ethnic men's values leads to organizational norms reflecting a dominant ethnic masculine image within the organization. Organizational norms reflecting the dominant ethnic mindset (Siebers, 2009) lead to an image of the ideal

worker, which is not only gendered (Acker, 1990, 1992), but which also has a clearly dominant ethnic background (Essed, 2002; Prasad & Prasad, 2002).

We notice the creation of a hegemonic identity through the "establishment and dissemination of the dominant group's identity (White, middle- or upper-class) as the norm against which all others are compared", which is enacted and executes its power through "taken-for-granted beliefs and norms [which] shape the possibilities we imagine for ourselves, the scripts and roles available to us, and our daily interactions" (Drayton & Prins, 2009, p. 114). When using the term "hegemonic norm" in the following, we imply the legitimized dominant ethnic (masculine) image and corresponding behavior, which sets the standard at the professional service firm.

4.3.2. Individual order. When asked about their feelings when entering the building every morning, two interviewees replied:

> When I am in the building, then it is like... then eeh... then I don't really think anything... (#24, dominant ethnic woman)

> The moment that you are one step inside ABCD, then you know that you are more an exception with a headscarf than that it is normal... (#20, minority ethnic woman)

The dominant ethnic interviewee is not particularly aware of anything when entering the building. However, the minority ethnic interviewee, who wears a headscarf herself, seems to be particularly aware of her ethnic identity within the professional context. The minority ethnic interviewee's apparent acceptance of the organizational standard of not wearing a headscarf seems to trigger her awareness of her minority ethnic identity, resulting in a feeling of deviance from the hegemonic norm, in contrast to the dominant ethnic interviewee, who appears to experience a fit with the hegemonic norm.

(...) To me, the career advancement of women is [relevant]... (...) But I honestly need to say that I never also made the connection with the ethnic eh... because with that I myself... well, I have less experience with that. (#3, dominant ethnic woman)

And, then I think, well, I am always the one who is different compared to everyone else. And eeh, that, but this is always only understandable when you have been in this position yourself. (#13, minority ethnic woman)

These interviewees describe the importance of personally experiencing a specific identity in order to be aware of its existence and possibly its impact on career experiences. We observe that the individual positioning enables or constrains reflection on the hegemonic norm. One is not reflective about the exclusionary impact of the norm when one is not in the same marginalized position.

In summary, dominant ethnics' individual (un)awareness of their ethnic identity indicates feelings of inclusion within the context of the professional service firm, whereas minority ethnics' conscious awareness of their ethnic identity suggests feelings of alienation.

4.3.3. Interaction order. In our data, we found interaction within the ethnic in-groups and interaction between dominant ethnics and minority ethnics. We noticed different experiences and consequences of ethnic identity salience for members of both ethnic groups in each of these contexts.

Interaction order within the ethnic in-group.

(...) oh, you are from Brabant [province in the Netherlands], but this is because you are joking with your colleagues. More like this, but no, not anymore, if you are really talking about ethnicity, like are you Dutch or not Dutch, no not really aware of... (#8, dominant ethnic woman)

(...) that you you share, well, the same descent, you need a little less words to get each other. Thus, sometimes, well, you realize that you go to lunch with a colleague from uhm... Moroccan descent or you go with the two of you for a change instead of with the whole group (...) that happens pretty automatically that you find each other a little quicker, just because you have a little bit more of a click. (#9, minority ethnic man)

The dominant ethnic interviewee describes how dominant ethnics joke about what they consider their ethnic background within the boundaries of their dominant ethnic in-group. The comparison of Dutch versus non-Dutch made by the dominant ethnic interviewee manifests the dominant ethnic's categorical thinking – when categories become dichotomies (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013): Dutch equals the in-group and the hegemonic norm against which everything else is compared; everything that differs from this hegemonic norm is considered as *non*-Dutch, thus as deviating from the norm.

The minority ethnic interviewee, on the contrary, engages in in-group interaction as a means of seeking comfort through easy communication and mutual understanding based on a shared descent. Interestingly, in the case of this minority ethnic interviewee, he does not have the same ethnic background as the Moroccan colleague he refers to. However, being "non-Dutch" irrespective of the specific ethnic background seems to create a sense of connection and recognition.

Interaction order between the dominant ethnic and the minority ethnic group.

I am now, in the meantime, I am not a development manager anymore, but I still have one person of whom I am still the development manager and this is a Turkish guy ehm… yes and I did think at times, I thought: you know, if I ask you this question, am I allowed to ask you this question? Because, after all, I am a woman and then I ask you this [question], and on top of which I am a western woman also and you are quite traditional at home, you know, isn't it improper that I ask this question? (# 6, dominant ethnic woman)

The dominant ethnic interviewee refers to the minority ethnic man as "being quite traditional" at home, without mentioning a specific point of reference for this comparison, thereby implying the hegemonic norm. The interviewee describes the "Turkish guy" as being different from the hegemonic norm, whereas her own ethnic background remains as taken for granted and unchallenged. Her effort to find the adequate way of approaching the minority ethnic man is based on existing images of otherness (Prasad & Prasad, 2002) instead of personal

experiences of interactions with that particular person. The salience of the interviewee's ethnic identity is tied to this specific incident; her general awareness of herself as a person and her professional credibility are neither questioned by herself, nor by others. This shows how both the dominant ethnic position and the otherness of the minority position stay unproblematized in daily practices in the organization.

> (...) in one case, there was this specific group, which always organized these cocktail drinks. And, uh, I was not invited. And I made a joke like, because I saw this e-mail passing by via someone else: 'Nice that I am also part of it'. 'But well, you do not drink any alcohol'. But still, I am also very sociable without [alcohol], thus, they just fill in the blanks for you. (#23, minority ethnic woman)

The implication of certain images of otherness is that dominant ethnic colleagues tend to automatically "fill in the blanks" and to justify their behavior based on a simple equation, such as: No alcohol equals no cocktail party. These categorical images of the self and the other seem to work mutually exclusive for the dominant ethnic group, leaving no room for an alternative approach to the situation. Yet, for the minority ethnic interviewee, being sociable without alcohol is absolutely possible, as she told us later: She goes to pubs with friends on occasions, without drinking alcohol herself.

The previous quotes suggest that dominant ethnic interviewees often did not experience ethnicity as something they inherit and they (emotionally) relate to, but as something of "the other". Dominant ethnics only consider their ethnicity either in relation to minority ethnics (Helms, 1990) or as belonging to minority ethnics and not to themselves (Phinney, 1996). Minority ethnic interviewees, on the contrary, often experience interactions as being positioned as "the other" in comparison to the legitimized hegemonic norm. "Being the other" is not experienced in neutral or positive terms in the sense of being unique or exotic (Jensen, 2011), but in terms of depreciation and exclusion (Acker, 2006).

4.3.4. Institutional order. Having a clearly defined organizational ideal regarding the characteristics of a successful employee

> (…) is also quite a strength. But maybe, people who think differently, different types of people, get less of a chance, or they think that they need to fit too much into a specific straitjacket, and therefore they quit. Because, at the end of the day, you do need specific appreciated behavior to advance… ehm higher, I think, you need to show [this]. (#10, dominant ethnic man)

The dominant ethnic interviewee refers to an ideal organizational image of the successful employee (Acker, 1990, 1992) every organizational member is compared to. He distances himself from "people who think differently" by constantly using the personal pronoun "they", indicating that he may not consider himself to belong to this deviating group. Based on his choice of words, we can assume that he considers himself as belonging to the dominant group within the organizational context. Furthermore, he agrees with upholding "specific appreciated behavior" (in contrast to what "people who think differently" might experience as a "straitjacket"), simultaneously maintaining and reinforcing the necessity of a specific image of the ideal worker. His account is an example of how the hegemonic norm of the ideal worker is accepted and those, who deviate from it, are considered as others who are absolutely different compared to this norm (Ghorashi & Van Tilburg, 2006).

> It is also simply about how you approach it yourself. For sure, I dare to take on the discussion with a colleague, for example about a headscarf or religious affiliation or uhm… And if you have a bit of a backbone, and almost everyone here at ABCD has this. Then people will see very quickly that you are an ABCD-er and not a Muslim girl, who needs to find her way. (#20, minority ethnic woman)

The opposition of the image of the ideal "ABCD-er" and the "Muslim girl, who needs to find her way" shows how deviation from the hegemonic norm is not only recognized, but also devalued as inferior by portraying her as insecure or aimless (having to find your way). This institutionalized enactment of a particular image of an ideal worker is an act of positioning

employees, who do not comply with this idealized image, as absolute others within the organizational context.

> What I clash a lot with at the moment at my department, is… that you are forced into a template a bit. What I literally heard in my evaluation is: "You score very well on everything, hey, and it is nothing wrong with it, but try to" and I thought this was very typical "but try to stand out from the crowd a little less". (…) [then, the interviewee refers to fitting in with the organizational mold, which is also represented in the firms logo and colors] although, at the same time, we advise our clients, and call out joh…(…) diversity is good, but actually, in an evaluation meeting that really deals with it, hey, and then I also said, I am not going to do that. I cannot relate to this, I am open to feedback, ehhm, but I think authenticity is just a bit more important. (#2, minority ethnic woman)

This minority ethnic woman experiences dissonance between professional and personal through the pressure to either conform to the hegemonic norm or foster her authenticity. We see the institutional normalization of the ideal organizational image in the fact that the evaluation of the minority ethnic interviewee is argued on the basis of the "masses", who all seem to share certain characteristics: The interviewee's description of the need to fit the mold (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008), which stands for a conglomerate of different character traits, competencies, and behavior, seems to be deeply ingrained in the hegemonic norm within the professional service firm (even being reflected in the firm's logo).

> Moroccan guy, Muslim, and he is working here, I think, for eight years already (…) He gets a bottle of wine as congratulations for his graduation [professional diploma]. It is something really small, a bottle of wine and the guy accepts it. Puts it aside afterwards and hands it over to someone else, like: 'What should I do with it?' I think like, shouldn't it be nice for the guy, and I talked to him [about it] and he said like: 'Ach, [name of the interviewee], I am not used to anything else here. (#11, minority ethnic man)

This quote illustrates how general institutional practices, such as choosing a bottle of wine as a gift intended as a sign of appreciation of an individual's performance, might make ethnic identity salient for minority ethnic employees. Institutional practices like this are often based on a dominant ethnic "frame of reference" (Siebers, 2009, p. 83) and therefore reflect more the dominant ethnics' customs. The recipient's reaction suggests that this is not the first time he

is confronted with a situation like this. He seems to be used to it and therefore he goes along with it. At the same time, the organizational norm is legitimized through the recipient's reaction: He accepts the gift and thereby openly "plays along" with the hegemonic norm. Instead of challenging the norm, he finds his own way of handling the situation by giving the bottle away to a colleague, who apparently appreciates the gift as such.

These examples illustrate how these legitimized organizational processes reinforce the position of dominant ethnics at the expense of minority ethnics. When reflecting on institutionalized processes, the former do not seem to be aware of their ethnic identity, whereas the latter seem to experience ethnic identity in various practical and structural situations. These experiences go beyond personal feelings of exclusion, depreciation, and marginalization due to their ethnic background; these experiences are also reflected in objective performance appraisals and evaluations.

4.4. Discussion

We explored the role of ethnic identity in relation to career experiences of both dominant ethnic as well as minority ethnic men and women professionals working at a professional service firm in the Netherlands. We unraveled ethnic identity construction through analyzing individual sensemaking, interaction, and legitimized practices and processes in "the field upon which the individual and the collective meet and meld" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 38). Recurrent phenomena notably present in all three orders of identity construction, yet in slightly different manners, were processes of othering. The theoretical understanding of othering posited by Traustadóttir (2001) is almost inseparably intertwined with our earlier definition of identity construction: The idea that "our notion of who the Others are, what they are like, what they do, and so on, is closely

related to our notion of who we are" (Traustadóttir, 2001, p. 13). Building on several definitions of othering, Jensen (2011) defines othering as:

> … *discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribes problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate* (Jensen, 2011, p. 65, original emphasis).

In her reflection on "research with others", Traustadóttir (2001) points out that in processes positioning minority ethnics as "the other", dominant ethnics are simultaneously socially constructed as "the norm" and thereby as the privileged. Specifically in the Dutch context, Essed (2002) refers to the Dutch societal discourse on migration policies in which migrants' culture is considered as absolutely different from and migrants' competencies are considered as insufficient compared to the Dutch norm. This understanding of "the dominant norm" and "the other" is reflected in what Ghorashi and Ponzoni call "the dichotomy of the Dutch self and the migrant other" (2014, p. 7). "Being other than normal" does not only suggest to be other in terms of being different, but to be other in terms of being "inferior to the norm" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014; Prasad & Prasad, 2002). Being considered "inferior to the norm" does not only resonate in the individual's feelings and experiences of the particular situation, but it also negatively affects a potential evaluator's perception of the individual as such, for instance in terms of eligibility for career development (Özbilgin & Woodward, 2004). In reference to Ferber (1998), McDermott and Samson (2005) show how framing difference as absolute is one of the means to foster what we consider the hegemonic norm in organizations. This hegemonic norm functions as a point of reference for processes of othering, which deny "others to construct themselves in terms of their own codes and categories" and instead construct others in negative and inferior terms (Ybema, Vroemisse, & Van Marrewijk, 2012, p. 49). Throughout our study,

we have seen how processes of othering are reflected in instances of individual sensemaking, interaction, and in institutional patterns and practices.

In *individual sensemaking*, ethnic identity salience functions as a counterpart in the constant comparison with the organization's hegemonic norm reflecting dominant ethnics' habits, behaviors, and values. This hegemonic norm seems to be broadly embraced by all professionals. When doing so, dominant ethnics are often not aware of their ethnic identity (McDermott & Samson, 2005) and do not experience feelings of othering, because the hegemonic norm is created based on their example (Acker, 1990). Minority ethnics, however, embrace an ethnic identity which differs from the hegemonic norm and are more prone to experiencing ethnic identity salience and feelings of othering.

When *interacting* with minority ethnics, dominant ethnics experience their ethnic identity from their dominant position and thereby reproduce rather than challenge their privileged position. For minority ethnics, interacting with dominant ethnics often leads to the exposure of ethnic markers resulting in ethnic identity salience, together with experiences of depreciation, and exclusion (Acker, 2006) in reference to the hegemonic norm. Judgments only informed by ethnic markers deviating from the hegemonic norm go beyond solitary acts of subtle discrimination (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). These judgments can be understood as processes of othering, since they continuously challenge minority ethnics' positioning within the hegemonic context due to salient ethnic markers.

Whereas *institutional practices* are usually not noticed as practices of othering by dominant ethnics, who live with and act upon them without noticing or questioning them, minority ethnics often experience them as such. Through following the script of the hegemonic

norm, institutional practices are not sensitive to possible needs of minority ethnics thereby positioning them as the other.

As the data show, some minority ethnics choose to challenge and suggest alternatives to processes of othering, whereas others decide not to. By not recognizing and by not challenging processes of othering, both dominant ethnics and minority ethnics maintain and reinforce these mechanisms through individual sensemaking, interaction, and institutional practices.

Generally, we see how merit-based reward and promotion systems are related to the hegemonic norm reflecting the dominant ethnic group and how this is taken for granted and practiced through individual positioning, interaction between colleagues, and organizational processes. This hegemonic identity and process of othering are enacted and execute their power through their normalization in everyday interactions and legitimized practices. In this process, the privileged position of dominant ethnic men is considered not only as normal but also as the norm to evaluate others who differ from it. Thereby, both images of and expectations towards the self and the other are normalized, shaping and legitimizing unreflective positionings, interactions, and organizational culture and structures.

The resonance of the normalization of othering influences career experiences on different levels. *Individual* perceptions of inclusion or alienation resulting from conforming or deviating from the hegemonic norm, for instance in terms of dress and clothing style, can affect career opportunities and career success (Cox, 1993; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006). In *interactions*, this process becomes apparent for instance in supervisory relations and access to (in)formal networks, which appear to be crucial for career advancement (e.g., Ibarra, 1993; Janasz, Sullivan, & Whiting, 2003; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), certainly in the context of professional service firms (Ibarra, 1999, 2000; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). General

demographic dissimilarity between supervisor and protégé (e.g. McGinn & Milkman, 2013; Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002), as well as exclusion from (in)formal networks can lead to disadvantages for those positioned as the other, for instance in terms of performance evaluations (Castilla, 2011; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Turban & Jones, 1988) or instrumental resources and expressive benefits (Ibarra, 1993). *Institutional* practices and processes serve this process by maintaining an ideal image of competence. The norm of the ideal professional also entails the creation of a generally accepted image of incompetence, which is linked to penalty as much as the ideal image is linked to praise and success. Deviating from the organizational mold of the ideal professional therefore entails being positioned as the other, resonating in having to adhere to stricter rules and needing to prove more evidence of competence (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Shore et al., 2011) in order to receive similar career benefits, such as pay raise (Castilla, 2008). Furthermore, institutional practices to positively stimulate career experiences and advancement are often designed according to the needs of the dominant organizational groups (i.e. dominant ethnic men), simultaneously neglecting the needs and decreasing support and opportunities of those positioned as the other (Prasad, D'Abate, & Prasad, 2007).

Our data show this multi-layered impact of the normalization of othering, which is in line with Martell, Emrich and Robinson-Cox's (2012) elaboration of how even "little little things" (#13, minority ethnic woman) can lead to considerable segregation at the top of the organization, and how deeply ingrained segregation at the macro-level can affect professionals' everyday career experiences. Specifically addressing the seemingly palpable yet mostly unnoticed negative (career) consequences of the normalization of othering hopefully promotes its recognition and problematization.

4.5.   Conclusion

Generally, processes of normalization can be considered antipodes of problematization (Maguire & Hardy, 2013), which means that normalization diminishes skepticism as to the adequacy of certain processes: "To normalize is to represent something as being normal to the extent that audiences commonly regard such representations as fact" (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012, p. 328). Illustrating how identity differentially affects dominant and minority ethnic professionals' career experiences is our attempt to break through the normalization that sustains processes of othering in organizations as taken for granted, and set the stage for the following potential alternative.

In spite of the plurality of responses of minority ethnics to encountered processes of othering, reactions of minority ethnics choosing to challenge these practices show a general pattern. These minority ethnics see, and more or less actively claim, space not *instead of*, but literally *next* to the hegemonic norm. As we have seen, minority ethnics often relate to both the hegemonic norm and their ethnic identity and therefore strive towards spaces in which both can co-exist, without the former being fostered at the expense of the latter.

In theoretical terms, the claim for more sensitivity to "the others' perspectives" resonates in the concept of alterity, which suggests the approach of the other from the position of the other (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). "This is the necessary condition to enable connections between (cultural) positioning within discursive spaces without being subjected to the hierarchical orders of self or other imposed through the normalizing power of dominant discourses" (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013, p. 83). Following Serres, Janssens and Steyaert (2001) describe the creation of a safe space in which alterity and thereby the co-existence of different identities is facilitated as "stepping aside": Stepping aside is understood in terms of making room for one's own voice and

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the voice of the other, creating space aside and next to hegemonic norms (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). Stepping aside is important, since "each ethic system which understands the other only from the position of itself, will not be able to adequately react to the uniqueness and peculiarity of the other" (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 126; English translation by the first author).

Czarniawska's (2008, p. 52) criticism on the dominant conceptualization of "identity free of alterity" and the scarce interest in alterity could be a starting point for facilitating the process of stepping aside. Not only asking the question of "How am I similar? Whom to?" (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 61), but also asking "How am I different? Whom to?" (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 61), might help to create an alternative space in which these questions can be answered by both dominant ethnics and minority ethnics alike. Even if the hegemonic norm still functions as a default, both dominant ethnics and minority ethnics might realize that even "White men" may not perfectly fit the "White male box" (#2: minority ethnic woman). This realization could create room for alterity and might challenge the hegemonic norm in order to facilitate positive career experiences and advancement for both dominant ethnics and minority ethnics.

4.6.   Limitations and Future Research

First, our study is situated in one specific professional context, within one particular organization in the Netherlands, and all researchers were women from different ethnic backgrounds. The findings were interpreted within this particular frame of reference. Future research could address identity construction and career experiences in different contexts in general and in organizations with different career systems in particular. Another promising venue would be to apply recent conceptualizations of discursive practices in identity construction and/or identity work (McInnes & Corlett, 2012) to similar questions.

Second, in terms of career experiences, all interviewees are successful within this organization, since they are still employed by the organization. Interviews with professionals who have left the organization would provide more insights into how similar career experiences can lead to different outcomes, whether forced "out" because of not meeting performance standards or by their own initiative.

Third, we acknowledge the contradiction between our criticism of categorization, and our sampling and thereby categorizing our own interviewees in terms of being either a man or a woman, and a dominant ethnic or a minority ethnic. However, this approach enabled us to explore and compare the difference of the experience of ethnic identity and individual careers for both dominant and minority ethnics. Following Kenny and Briner (2007), we suggest that future research could refrain from this type of categorization and subsequently focus on the meaning of ethnic identity salience even more.

Fourth, in this study we specifically focused on ethnicity as the attribute of diversity. However, several other attributes of diversity appear to play a role with respect to the question at hand, such as gender or religion. Future research should also focus on the role of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), thus taking into consideration the various intersections between the different attributes of diversity.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we hope that by problematizing the "conservative bastion of White men" (#17, dominant ethnic man; opening quote) in professional service firms in this way, we will inspire both researchers and practitioners to follow our suggested path towards alterity in order to make room for ethnic identity at work and thereby facilitating positive career experiences and advancement for all professionals.

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[i] The Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands states the following standard definition (1999) of a member of the ethnic minority in the Netherlands: "According to the new definition, a person is considered a member of the ethnic minority group ("allochtoon"), if at least one parent is born abroad [meaning, outside of the Netherlands, added by first author] ". In consequence, a person whose parents were both born in the Netherlands is considered an "ethnic Dutch" ("autochtoon"). In addition, the general group of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands is further specified in western and non-western ethnic minorities, according to the following definition: "All European countries (except for Turkey), North America, Oceania, Japan, and Indonesia (including the former Dutch-Indies) are considered western countries of origin. Non-western countries of origin are Turkey and all African countries, Latin America, and Asia (excluding Japan and Indonesia). (…) If a group is very similar to the Dutch population in socio-economic or in cultural terms, it is considered to be one of the western ethnic minority groups)." (website CBS, retrieved on 14th of November 2012: http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/26785779-AAFE-4B39-AD07-59F34DCD44C8/0/index1119.pdf)