Gender Equality as 'Cultural Stuff': Ethnic Boundary Work in a Classroom in Switzerland

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Abstract:
The idea of boundary work has become a key concept in studies on ethnicity and provides new theoretical insights into the social organisation of cultural difference. People articulate ethnic boundaries in everyday interactions using conceptual distinctions to construct notions of 'us' and 'them'. This study is based on an empirical case study (ethnographic fieldwork, interviews) with young people (16-21 years old) in a Swiss vocational school. The results emphasise that the moral imperative of gender equality is the most significant category used to create boundaries between Swiss and Albanian migrants. Our study considers boundary work as relational and thus examines the strategies of both the Swiss majority and the (male) Albanian minority. Results suggest that the boundary itself is seldom contested by either Swiss or Albanians, and we argue that the visibility of the boundary ('brightness') is closely linked to larger power relations in society between those groups.

Introduction

In the course of their everyday lives, individuals engage in conceptual distinctions which join some things, objects, people or events together and separate them from others along certain boundaries. The idea of boundary work has come to play a key role in important new lines of scholarship across the social sciences (for an overview, see Pachucki et al. 2007), and it opens up new theoretical insights into the social organisation of difference. Modern societies are, by definition, places of intensified diversity and hetero-geneity, hereby producing new contexts in which 'difference' is constructed and inequa-lities are (re)produced. In short, the question of how 'differences' are socially organised is gaining new pertinence in such contexts. What are the conceptual distinctions used by individuals in everyday interactions and in discourses to construct notions of 'us' and 'them'? In other words, how can the properties of boundaries be described and by what mechanisms and dynamics are boundaries created, activated, maintained, disputed, subverted, bridged or crossed? In this article, we aim to further advance the boundary-making approach in the study of ethnicity as it was developed during the last decades (for a recent overview see Wimmer 2008b).

Based on the work of Weber, Durkheim, Barth and Bourdieu, contemporary writers have developed an idea of ethnicity which is not perceived as a result of differences between pre-defined, fixed groups with some kind of natural demarcated boundaries, but "rather as a dynamic process of constituting and re-configuring groups by defining the boundaries between them" (Wimmer 2008a: 1027). We aim to contribute to the growing

literature (Espiritu 2001; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009), first, by showing through an empirical case study that gender is the most salient category, the 'cultural stuff' in the words of Barth (1969: 15), which is mobilised to create, maintain and contest ethnic boundaries. More exactly, the idea of *gender equality between women and men* becomes the moral imperative upon which an ethnic boundary between Swiss and Albanians is legitimated and a 'we' and a culturally different 'you' is built and contested in everyday encounters among young people.

Scholars recently contributed to this debate by analysing mainly the perspective of *either the majority or the minority group*. However, ethnic boundary work is necessarily relational and a two-way process of collective self-identifications and external categorisation (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Furthermore, boundary making has to do with power relations and social inequalities between majorities and minorities. Because of this, and with the aim of contributing to the burgeoning literature, we ask how the 'stigmatised others' engage, contest and react to exclusive boundaries in the larger society. What counter strategies can the minority deploy? By what means, arguments and practices can they challenge those institutionalised ethnic boundaries?

The article is based on a qualitative case study with young people of different origins in a classroom context. In the first section, we introduce the idea of ethnicity as boundary work and relate it to gender, thereby focusing on two intersecting forces of domination and subordination. This is followed by a brief outline of the methodology. Then, the established and 'bright' boundaries (Alba 2005) between Swiss and Albanians are described based on the existing literature, because, obviously, boundary making in a classroom is not free from the wider societal context but is anchored in it. Next, we present the ethnic boundary work among the students and the ways in which it is taking place around the

moral imperative of *gender equality*. This produces a differentiation between the Swiss and the Albanians – but also a hierarchisation – while legitimising the exclusion of the latter. Then, we depict the counter strategies of the stigmatised group: the communality of those strategies is that they do not aim to call into question or blur the boundary. Instead, students of the minority take this line as granted and naturalise it in such a way that the boundary adopts almost a primordial character. However, these students develop strategies of the *excluded*. In the concluding remarks, some reflections of a more theoretical nature are developed. We argue that questions of power and domination have not yet received the full attention they deserve within the boundary-work literature. If boundaries are institutionalised through reified ideas about culture, tradition and gender relations, it is impossible for minority groups to blur or shift them.

Ethnic boundary work: relationality, forms and gendered 'cultural stuff'

The notion of boundary has been used throughout the social sciences, rendering social classifications visible across a wide variety of contexts. In general, boundaries are understood as having both *social and symbolic dimensions*; this article mainly deals with the latter. Symbolic boundaries have been defined as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people and practices. [… They] also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership'. In addition, social boundaries are 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). In daily interaction, actors are involved in struggles over social distinctions and classifications through which symbolic boundaries can shift. When symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon, however, they can take on a constraining character and they can

become social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168).

With regard to ethnicity, since the 1960s scholars have put forward the idea that ethnic groups exist solely through the creation and maintenance of their *boundaries*. It was Barth (1969) who insisted that ethnic groups must be understood as the outcome of *self-definitions* and *ascriptions offered by others*, hereby adopting an interactional and relational perspective of ethnicity. According to him, ethnic groups are maintained through relational processes of inclusion and exclusion, and different cultural elements – called 'cultural stuff' (Barth 1969: 15) – are mobilised in order to mark a difference to other groups and confirm similarities among the in-group.

For our purpose, three elements of these theoretical debates need to be further discussed as they will be of relevance for our argument: the *dialectic* and *relational* character of ethnic boundary work, the different *forms of boundaries*, and the idea of mobilising *'cultural stuff'* in order to mark communalities and differences.

Relationality

Following Jenkins (1997: 54ff.), we refer to a twin process of *group identification* and *external social categorisation* which underlies this relational and dialectic character of boundary work. On the one hand, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of similarities and shared belonging within the in-group. Such ethnic communality is a form of monopolistic social closure; it defines membership, eligibility and access. On the other hand, this internal identification process must be recognised by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. Such external categorisations are intimately bound up with power relations and relate to the capacity of one group to successfully impose its categories of ascription upon another set of people and to the resources which the categorised collectivity can draw upon to resist that imposition, if

need be. Racism, to give an example, is most typically a result of social categorisation. The power to name ethnically can be formal, where, for instance, the state designates particular criteria for ethnic classification. This way Jenkins draws an analytical distinction between *groups* and *categories*, introducing the idea of power relations.

Our article takes up this point. We examine how young people identify and define themselves in terms of groups and how they are identified and defined by others in terms of categories. We are interested in the distinctions that the majority group (Swiss) use to draw boundaries (i.e. by their identification as a group and in categorisations of out-groups). However, we also reveal the counter-strategies that the stigmatised group (Albanians) produce to affect the meaning given to them by others. This means exploring group identifications – what it means for Swiss and for Albanians to belong to their group (what defines their differences, similarities) – and how they are influenced by the external categorisation that members of the two groups hold in regard to each other.

Forms of ethnic boundary work

The boundary-making approach highlights the potential transformative character of ethnicity. Ethnicity varies in relation to social and historical contexts and from one society to another as it is understood as the momentary result of the actor's (individual, nation-state, media, etc.) struggles over classifications about 'us' and 'others'.[1] Zolberg and Woon (1999) provide a conceptual starting point for any discussion of boundary change, distinguishing three types of boundary work: boundary *crossing, blurring, and shifting*. Boundary crossing corresponds to the classic version of individual-level assimilation;

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[1] This does not mean that they would not develop persistence – especially when there are institutionalised boundaries.

someone moves from one group to the other without any real change to the boundary itself. Boundary blurring implies that the social profile of a boundary has become less distinct; the clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded, and individuals' location with respect to the boundary may appear indeterminate. Boundary shifting involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other; former outsiders are transformed into insiders. Wimmer (2008a) distinguishes five main strategies deployed by actors to transform boundaries: to redraw (shift) a boundary by either *expanding* or *limiting* the domain of people included in one's own ethnic category; to modify existing boundaries by *challenging the hierarchical ordering* of ethnic categories or by *changing one's own position* within a boundary system, or by *emphasising other*, non-ethnic forms of belonging. In this article, we are interested in the strategies and forms to transform boundaries that we find among the young people in a class. However, the capacity to transform boundaries depends on the social position individuals occupy (i.e. migrant minority or Swiss majority) and on the existing dominance schemes (here gender and ethnicity) that are widely agreed upon in society.

Gender as 'cultural stuff' used for ethnic boundary work

Any 'cultural stuff' in common can provide a basis and resource for ethnic closure: language, ritual, kinship, economic way of life, or lifestyle more generally – an idea rooted without doubt in the writings of Max Weber. He defined ethnicity as a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in a shared culture and a common ancestry (Weber 2005 [1922]: 355ff.). According to Weber, different cultural markers can be used to reinforce and maintain this sense of belonging: myths of a common historical origin, phenotypic similarities, or any cultural practices seen as typical for the community. As

a consequence, ethnic boundary making refers to meaningful differences and similarities which do not signify real confirmation.

The case study reveals that gender is highly relevant for both processes of ethnic group identification and external categorisation. We understand gender as a relational and analytical category. Accordingly, gender can be described as the social construction and production of the feminine and the masculine (a dichotomous matrix), related to identities and subjectivities but also producing systems of domination and subordination (Butler 1990: 880; Gildemeister 2001: 531). This is reflected, for example, in the division of labour, in social representations, ascriptions, behavioural expectations or in general in the social status of men and women. Gender is neither a biological characteristic nor a stable socialised identity of individuals, but an element that is actively re-produced in social practices and interactions ('doing gender') (West and Zimmermann 1987).

Scholars of intersectionality have drawn our attention to the simultaneous and interacting effects of systems of oppression on the basis of gender, 'race', religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., as categories of difference (Anthias 2002; Crenshaw 1991). This has proven to be a powerful critique of mutually exclusive categories, such as 'women' or 'foreigner', that have served to mask intersecting and interacting relations of domination and inequality. Following these ideas, in this paper we will focus mainly on two intersecting forces of domination: gender and ethnicity (and – to some extent - 'Islam') which are related to our topic of boundary work.

Gender as well as ethnicity can be described in terms of boundary work. Thorne (1993) emphasised in her study the interactional work of children in schools that continuously maintained a difference between boys and girls ('borderwork') as there was a social pressure to behave and to live up to the ideal of being a boy or a girl (for Germany, see

Kelles and Breidenstein 1998). However, we are primarily concerned here with ethnic boundary work coupled with representations about gender. Scholars have already reported from different parts of the world and based upon different empirical case studies that reified cultural differences have been linked with reified perceptions of gender relations and that those ideas have been mobilised in order to legitimate hierarchical boundaries between ethnic groups (Nader 1989; Nagel 1998). We propose that the boundary perspective can help in overcoming essentialised ideas of 'cultural difference' (critically, among others, Grillo 2003; Stolcke 1995) by showing that it is not a natural, substantivist cultural difference with regard to gender relations which is the raison d'être for the existence of groups, but that subjective mobilisation of such ideas by actors produce the groups in question. It is not the possession of so-called 'cultural characteristics' that makes social groups distinct but rather the social interactions with other groups that make the difference possible, visible, socially meaningful and recognised or confirmed by others.

The study, research methods and the classroom setting

Studying ethnic identifications and categorisations was the aim of a qualitative research project with young people of a Swiss vocational school characterised by multicultural diversity.[2] Boundary work is particularly relevant among adolescents since social belonging to groups is especially important during this period of life. While they gain independence from parents and the family,

young people have to position themselves in schools, in peer groups or even in the labour market. The importance of belonging is visible in the various classifications that young people refer to in order to differentiate groups (e.g. dress styles). However, recognition and acceptance of belonging play fundamental roles because they often depend on certain criteria and sometimes on ethno-national origin. Young people in a classroom in Switzerland are generally heterogeneous regarding ethno-national origin, religion or gender, and they are not necessarily friends but must spend some time together. Therefore, boundary work might become highly relevant among young people in the school context.

Moreover, carrying out such research in a school allows one to go beyond a particular ethnic group or immigrant community and to focus on a specific context and on the social interactions that happen between people in this context. The presence of both children of immigrants and youth from Swiss families allows the study of their dialectic involvement in ethnic boundary work (external cate-gorisations and group identifications). What must unfortunately be left out in this analysis is the role of the school.[3]

The school of this case study is situated in a town (60,000 inhabitants) in the German-speaking part of Switzerland which is characterised by the ethno-national diversity of its population: as in the rest of Switzerland, around 20 percent have a foreign nationality, coming, in particular, from the former Yugoslavia (e.g. Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia) or Germany, Portugal, Italy or Spain. Regarding the religious affiliation of the population,

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[2] The study is funded by the Swiss National Research Programme NRP 58 'Religions in Switzerland' and conducted by a research team composed of the three authors. Although this article is based on data from only one specific class, the study includes fieldwork and interviews in nine different classes in two regions of Switzerland.

[3] Such a larger perspective could allow going beyond the categorisations and group identifications among young people and enable taking into consideration the institutional context where they occur (Schiffauer et al. 2002)(for such an approach see Schiffauer et al. 2002).

Catholicism is dominant and – in comparison with other regions – the town has been Catholic for a long time.

Ethnic boundary work can be empirically studied in social interactions. For this reason, ethnographic fieldwork (observations during lessons and breaks) was carried out during four months in 2008/2009 in a class. One female researcher of the team[4] spent at least one day every week during this period with these young people. In addition, she carried out group discussions and different types of personal interviews with students as well as with teachers and directors. Interviews and observations were transcribed by the researcher and data analysis was based on the Grounded Theory research approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This allowed us to triangulate data stemming from interactions between students (observations) with interview-data gathered from conversations between the researcher and the students. In an iterative process, we developed codes and more abstract concepts from this different data. Data analysis and discussions occurred regularly in the research team in order to debate codes, concepts and theoretical ideas (peer debriefing) (Flick 2006). Gender equality was one of the main concepts we observed focusing on ethnic boundary work. However, it dominates in interview-data (compared to the observation) since our questions stimulated ethnic boundary work whereas the spontaneous situations in class were generated by the students themselves and were therefore less frequent.

The students in the class were 16 to 21 years old and had already finished secondary school. They did a manual apprenticeship, working in different small artisan companies, mostly outside the town in suburban or rural areas, where they learned the practical issues of their profession, and attended theoretical lessons one day a week in school. There were 17 pupils in class; the number in terms of men (7) and women (10) was quite balanced.

The students who took part in the interactions or interviews mentioned in this article are briefly introduced here. Cornelia and Luisa[5], both 18 years old and with Swiss parents, were best friends in the class. Sabine (20 years old) and Chiara (21 years old) also had Swiss nationality while their fathers had come originally from Portugal and Italy, respectively. There were also two second-generation migrants – Admir (16 years old) and Edi (18 years old) – with parents from Montenegro and Kosovo, respectively. While Admir was born in Switzerland, Edi arrived when he was very young. Both had the original nationality of their parents and had been granted Swiss citizenship. Admir and Edi formed a group together with Stefan (18 years old, Swiss parents), and ethnic origin was a recurring topic among them. For instance, Stefan, although being Swiss, regularly mentioned that he could also be considered a 'foreigner' like Admir and Edi since he had grown up with a lot of 'foreigners from Kosovo' and, therefore, he would be conscious of their preoccupations and values. Sabine, Chiara, Luisa and Cornelia also perceived this group of young men as the 'foreigners' as the group participated regularly in the performance of this image. Finally, there was Martin (18 years old, Swiss parents) who had no close relationship either with Admir, Edi and Stefan or with the other women.

Although our aim is to understand how students themselves mobilise their ethnic belonging to mark boundaries, we find it nevertheless important to highlight whether they are Swiss or second generation migrants in order to show what social position they hold (majority or minority from former Yugoslavia) and how their boundary work strategies could be interpreted from this perspective.

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[4] The researcher is the first author of the article.

[5] Their names have been changed for this article.

'Bright' boundaries between Swiss and Albanians – Retracing the dominant discourse

We argue that we can nowadays identify symbolic as well as social boundaries between Swiss and Albanians. Albanians in Switzerland are confronted with social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination; the boundaries between the two groups have been institutionalised, and 'folk classifications' contribute to the stereotyping of Albanians in terms of cultural difference. As it is against this background that the young people in our case study are engaged in boundary work, we have to take into account this dominant discourse which informs their categorical distinctions.

Albanian-speaking migrants are among the most important immigrant groups in Switzerland in terms of both number and public debate. Albanians have been working in Switzerland since the late 1960s, as Yugoslavia was a traditional recruitment region for so-called guest workers. These guest workers were mostly young men without families (Leuenberger and Maillard 1999). From the 1980s onward, the political and economic situation in the former Yugoslavia, and specifically in Kosovo, has deteriorated drastically, directly increasing emigration pressures. At the same time, with the shift in immigration policies in Switzerland, and specifically with the implementation of the 'three circles' model in 1991, the recruitment of workers from the former Yugoslavia was no longer possible.[6] From then on, immigration to

Switzerland was only possible by seeking asylum or through family reunification. The Swiss admission policy – as those of other countries – created different categories of migrants through a kind of 'ethno-national-sorting'. Immigrants from the former Yugoslavia were now categorised as members of the so-called 'third' circle, considered to be culturally the most distant from the Swiss people (Dahinden 2009).

Confronted with economic hardship and with increasing political unrest at home, the Albanian workers slowly abandoned their plans for returning and decided instead, whenever possible, to bring their families to Switzerland. As a consequence, since 1989 there has been a steady increase in the Albanian population in Switzerland through chain migration, and a feminisation of the migration flow has been observed. Moreover, Albanians were one of the groups hardest hit by recession in the 1990s following the economic restructuring of the labour market. Since then this group has been affected by economic marginalisation and unemployment, and their socio-economic position is low (Piguet 2005).

This 'ethno-national-sorting' of the Swiss admission policy and the ongoing public discourses have had different side effects. Until the 1980s the Yugoslav immigrants remained relatively unnoticed by the Swiss public. However, parallel to the reinforcement of 'Otherness' in Swiss immigration law through the circles model of cultural difference, the Yugoslavs have come under fire from the media and in public: drug dealing, violence, patriarchal culture and family structure, crime and high unemployment are the catchwords which are today connected with this section of the population. There has been an increasing tendency to explain the observed social exclusion of some of these immigrants by stressing their cultural peculiarities – or even their cultural 'incompatibility', as expressed by some right-wing parties (for details, see Dahinden 2005). Recent studies have shown that first- and

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[6] The first circle consists of EU/EFTA countries. The second circle includes the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The recruitment of qualified workers was – and still is – possible. The third circle concerns all other non-European countries: recruitment is and was only possible exceptionally and under condition of high qualification. Meanwhile Switzerland adopted a dual admission policy – in line with most European countries with which it has agreements of free mobility – linking it with qualification.

second-generation migrants from the former Yugoslavia are confronted with cultural stereotypes and discrimination, for instance in the labour market (Fibbi et al. 2003) and regarding access to Swiss citizenship (Fibbi et al. 2005).

Alba (2005) maintains that the precise nature of the ethnic boundary is important. Some boundaries are 'bright' – the distinction involved is unambiguous, so that individuals know at all times which side of the boundary they are on. Others are 'blurry', involving zones of self-presentation and social representation that allow for ambiguous locations with respect to the boundary. The nature of the minority-majority boundary depends on the way in which it has been institutionalised in different domains, some of them are correlated with an ethnic distinction rather than being constitutive of the distinction itself. In turn, the nature of the boundary fundamentally affects the processes by which individuals gain access to the opportunities afforded to the majority. On surveying the available literature, we argue that, in this case, we are dealing with a boundary which is 'bright' in its character, and upon which it might be difficult to do 'blurring' work. However, we do not know how individuals contribute in daily interactions and discourses to the maintenance of this boundary. Do we find the same boundaries in the classroom as in the surrounding society? Are those boundaries modified or contested by agents of the majority or the stereotyped minority? These questions are at the core of the following sections.

Ethnic boundary work: mobilising a dichotomy of gender relations and establishing a moral imperative

During fieldwork, we observed how young people trace a clear and simplistic dichotomy between two different types of gender relations. On the one hand, there exist – in their view – *hierarchical gender relations* where men have more 'authority' than women

and where men dominate women, and, on the other, they trace *equal gender relations* where we find equality between the sexes.[7]

Moreover, they *ethnicise* this dichotomy and allocate each type of gender relations to a specific ethnic group. Hierarchical gender relations are identified as typical for Albanians or for migrants from the former Yugoslavia in general. Equal ones, on the contrary, are supposed to be representative of the Swiss population. Second-generation migrants as well as the other students in class actively take part in the social construction of this 'ethnic difference'. They confirm it by identifying themselves collectively with one type of gender relations and by categorising others as agents of the opposite. Furthermore, gender equality becomes a *moral imperative* and produces a clear *hierarchic order between ethnic categories*. Accordingly, one day some students in the classroom mobilised the idea of 'cultural differences with regard to gender relations' (equality versus inequality) in order to provoke others and work on boundaries.

Establishing the boundaries: Differentiation and dichotomisation

In the afternoon, students regularly attended a practical course during which they worked individually at their desks and discussed private matters with each other. One day, while the teacher was not in the room, the researcher who was present witnessed the following scene:[8]

Admir (second-generation Montenegrin) turned around on his chair and asked Sabine (Swiss) with a little smile on his face: 'Are you

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[7] Both ideas of gender relations are submitted to a particular heteronormativity, the norm of having heterosexual relationships which perpetuates the distinction between men and women.

[8] This and the following exchanges or interviews took place in a Swiss-German classroom and were translated by the researchers.

in favour of (gender) equality?' Sabine did not answer. Instead Martin (Swiss) reacted: 'I definitely am!' The discussion continued; Admir stood up and suddenly said a phrase but I (researcher) only understood the word 'beat'. Thereupon Martin responded again: 'I don't do that.' The word 'beat' used by Admir attracted the attention of the whole class. Most of the students abruptly stopped their work, observed the scene and listened to the discussion. Then, Admir proclaimed in a loud voice that it would be important in life to find a woman to marry while still young, and Edi declared that Swiss people get divorced anyway. Some students in the class objected to Edi's statement and Cornelia (Swiss) said with a little smile: 'But your women don't dare to get divorced.' Edi answered back, also with a little smile: 'They obey us at least.' […] Suddenly Chiara (Swiss, Italian) intervened and shouted agitatedly: 'The way you treat your women. That they want to marry early in life is because of the pressure from your nation. I feel I have to defend as I am also Swiss.' […] The spontaneous discussion in class ended up of with a call from two women sitting in the back of the classroom: 'I don't want a foreigner' and two other women completed: 'Except people from Southern Europe.'

In this situation, the idea of *gender equality* was used by Admir to provoke one of the women in class (Sabine). Although he did not succeed in provoking her, he contested a normative concept regarding gender which is widely accepted in liberal democracies – gender equality – defining the rights of men and women as equal and women's emancipation as a must. He was aware that it could be a sensitive topic and therefore, he played with it as a provocation – making visible the performative nature of ethnicity. In other words, Admir is conscious of these moral ideas linked to gender relations, and he uses them consciously in order to provoke and to work on the ethnic boundary.

He had some success, as some students, in particular the other women (e.g. Cornelia, Chiara), responded to this incitement since they perceived this kind of provocation as typical of men coming from the former Yugoslavia who do not accept – in their view – equality between men and women ('But your women don't dare to get divorced' or 'The way you treat your women'). Admir and Edi were seen as representatives of a 'different culture' favouring hierarchical gender relations that are too distant from the Swiss people favouring equality between men and women. The Swiss women confirmed the ethnic boundary by categorising themselves and the 'Other', mobilising specific ideas about cultural gender differences. When it comes to the boundary, they know which side they are on, and which side the 'Other' is on.

Interestingly enough, migrants from Southern Europe (Italy, Portugal or Spain) were not perceived as a different 'Other' and have – in the classification system of these young women – crossed the ethnic boundary and now belong to 'them'. The ethnic boundary was expanded by including southern Europeans in their own ethnic category while reinforcing the boundary between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia. Luisa made that very clear in an interview:

> Well, I would say that I have a certain opposition or concern about the Albanian culture and I decided that I don't want this. Even if they have grown up here, their genes instruct them how to treat women. And I would say that even my parents wouldn't be happy, if I had an Albanian [boyfriend]. In my view, the Germans, the Italians, the Portuguese, they all would be okay.

In sum, moral imperatives about gender relations – intimately connected with ideas about power relations and domination schemes between men and women – characterise the symbolic boundary that is mutually mobilised by the students in the class to provoke each other and to articulate ethnic

differences. In this sense, members of the majority (i.e. Cornelia) as well as of the minority (i.e. Edi) confirm this symbolic boundary between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia. Cornelia mobilises the idea that 'their' women are oppressed and Edi confirms her argument by mobilising the idea that 'their own' women have to obey men. The situation shows further that group identification and categorisation mutually stimulate and reinforce each other during social interactions and that in this case everybody agrees upon the boundary – there is no blurring – *making the boundary 'bright'.*

What is interesting is that the imperative of gender inequality is not exclusively used by the two young men to mark a symbolic boundary between the Kosovar and the Swiss, but the idea is continuously confirmed by others. In fact, the category 'Albanians' serves as a counterpoint for other students to proclaim that 'Swiss people' have realised equal rights between men and women – although we know from many studies that this is far from being the case in Switzerland (Branger 2008).

Hierarchisation and segregation

This dichotomisation is also visible in an interview with Stefan. The young man said that he had many friends with a foreign nationality, in particular from Kosovo, and that is why he knows that they are really different from Swiss people:

> Simply the way of thinking, the opinion somebody has. There are, for instance, I don't know, Albanians. Albanians differ from us, from the Swiss, in the position they have towards a woman. If they get married, the woman stays at home and cooks. Among us, among Swiss people, the woman also works as the man does […] as I already said, I think it is a prejudice against women that they have to do such things. I think a woman has her own mind, she can decide on her own, what she wants to do and what she doesn't. And a man

shouldn't force a woman to do something that she doesn't want to do.

What we can read out of the quote is that Stefan is directly producing a moral hierarchy and a hierarchical order between the ethnic categories: it is obvious that the equality model is more valued and better than the women-in-the-family model. Stefan underlines his argument by describing a contrast: in his view, men and women in Switzerland are more equal because women generally have paid employment and also have the right to work. Since Albanian women do not work outside the family after marriage or do not have the right to do that – according to Stefan – they are inferior and do not hold equal positions. Stefan reifies the two ethnic categories and justifies the difference in an over-simplistic and homogenous way since he talks neither about Swiss women who do unpaid work at home nor about Albanian women who have a professional activity after marriage – both of which, obviously, exist. His argumentation refers to an egalitarian discourse which stresses women's economic independence as a precondition for equality between men and women. Stefan confirms it, arguing that this lifestyle is typical for Swiss people and ascribes himself to this group, placing himself on the 'good' and dominant side of this moral imperative. Moreover, he activates a powerful discourse against Albanians as not corresponding to this liberal principle, even if he sees himself as a friend of 'foreigners'.

He also mobilises similar strong classifications and attributions in public on the school yard which reinforces this specific representation about Albanians – and contributes to a 'brightening' of the ethnic boundary. One day, when Admir was chatting and flirting with another migrant woman from former Yugoslavia during a break, Stefan reminded him loudly that he would get in trouble with the father or brother of this girl – presuming that this woman is not allowed to have an unreserved relationship with a man

and must not enjoy sexual liberty. Albanians are confronted with such attributions about their supposed typical cultural behaviour in everyday life and they are obliged to position themselves towards these categorisations. We will show later what counter-strategies they deploy.

Legitimating exclusion

However, the ethnic boundary between Swiss and Albanians is not only based upon differences but is at the same time exclusionary. The young people also explicitly assume that unequal gender relations are 'bad' and therefore legitimise a hierarchic order of the ethnic categories producing a specific system of dominance. Different interviewed women made it clear – when asked about marriage – that they would reject a close relationship with an Albanian from Kosovo, and as Chiara put forward, she would even reject such a relationship for a future daughter of hers.

> I don't know, an Albanian perhaps, yes I would be worried about an Albanian [as boy-friend for my future daughter]. (Interviewer: And why?) I don't know, because he may mistreat her.

Luisa (Swiss), in contrast, justifies her argument in more detail and not only with ethnic but also with religious 'differences'[9] when she speaks about Albanians and thereby mobilises the category of Muslims:

> Before, I had a lot of Albanian women as friends. How they are disrespected! They don't have the right to have a date or to go out. The son is free to do everything. Among the Muslims, they are even forced to marry somebody although they say it isn't like that anymore. But a hundred percent, if they finish school and have nothing to do, they do it and

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[9] There are Catholic and Muslim Albanians from Kosovo living in Switzerland.

they push her towards somebody. And yes, I never want my children or my grand-children to grow up in such a relationship. And not only because of bad experiences with them, it is simple; they are simply completely different from a Catholic and from a Protestant.

In a similar vein to Stefan, Luisa mobilises the principle of gender equality, but she uses it in reference to a highly moralised topic, namely forced marriages. Albanian women are – according to Luisa – not free to have a date, to go out or to decide whom they want to marry. Although she is aware that (some) Albanians describe such practices as belonging to the past, she does not grant them the right to have a say about it. This example makes clear how the majority can impose a discourse about the practices of the minority. Moreover, she legitimises her arguments with her own experiences, arguing that she befriended female Albanians in the past. This exclusion is not only expressed in the interview. Luisa - after the spontaneous discussion in class - directly addressed Edi and said that she is opposed to Albanians as partners because she had had bad experiences with them.

Luisa reifies the categories 'Albanian' and 'Muslim' in a homogenous way and draws a boundary between Swiss women and Albanian women. Furthermore, she mobilises 'religious differences' between Muslims and Protestants/Catholics but does not mention different religious ideologies: rather, she uses religion as a marker to boost the ethnic boundary (Mitchell 2006). Starting in the 1990s, Muslims have been highly stigmatised in public debates in many European countries (Schneuwly Purdie et al. 2009). The wearing of a headscarf and more recently a niqab by Muslim women is presented as implicating a general subordination of women. In an earlier study, Lutz (1991) revealed that migrant women of so-called 'Islamic background' are assumed to be oppressed by male power in western representations. In particular, the idea of Islamic patriarchy often serves to assume

general male control over women's sexuality (e.g. virginity) and is thus regularly mobilised as a counterpoint to the sexuality of the liberated western woman.

Luisa re-activates such representations and enacts a power relation by accentuating supposed 'cultural differences' which serve to exclude Albanians and Muslims. In other terms, religion intersects here with ethnicity and gender and produces not only 'bright' boundaries but also interacting systems of dominance.

Counter strategies to face exclusionary boundaries

Until now we have mainly described how two dichotomised types of gender relations (one based on equality between men and women, the other based on unequal relations) are employed by students to draw a clear and bright ethnic boundary. It was shown that members of the majority as well as of the minority contribute to this boundary work by reinforcing the same boundary. This boundary is not neutral, however, as it implies a hierarchical order where people belonging to the category 'Swiss' are perceived as 'superior' to those with origin in the former Yugoslavia. We could say that the categorisations we found in the larger society were reproduced in micro-social interactions in the classroom. However, the story is more complicated. We argue that different strategies can be depicted that aim to counter the boundaries and the hierarchical order they imply.

Three different strategies adopted by actors can be identified in this specific class: First, the male members of the minority contribute to the dominant discourse by *reassessing the values associated with being a man*. Second, they *call into question the hierarchical ordering* of the boundary by proclaiming their own moral superiority with regard to gender relations. Third, some members of the majority as well as of the minority *try to blur the existing boundaries* (mostly with little success) by emphasising non-ethnic forms of belonging

or by challenging the reified nature of the boundaries.

Reassessing the value of being a man and boundary drawing against women

At first sight it seems paradoxical that members of the minority contribute to the 'brightening' of the ethnic boundary by confirming the dichotomy of the two types of gender relations, and identify themselves with the stigmatised category – stigmatised at least by the majority in class and by liberal moral principles. However, the empirical material shows that *male members* of the minority subscribe to this non-equality model of gender relations because they can use it to subvert their individual subordinate status. They do so by emphasising another boundary, the one between men and women in which they dominate, to counter the ethnic boundary that stigmatises them. The gender boundary they highlight (for instance, in their provocations about gender equality) allocates to them recognition and power within their ethnic group and compensates for their lower status in the ethnic hierarchical order.

Admir and Edi argue in the interviews that gender relations are typically hierarchical in the Balkan countries – in both Catholic and Islamic regions. Accordingly, women have, as they express it, less authority than men in their culture of origin, which contrasts with countries like Switzerland. In an interview with Edi, he says that he has more Kosovar friends than Swiss friends and explains that they do things differently:

> … [F]or instance, regarding women. Most of the women have quite a say in Switzerland. A woman says quite a lot. Among Albanians it is little. A woman has also for sure some authority, but not too much. Swiss people pay more attention to a woman, more attention than Albanians. I think that a woman is allowed to say something, of course, that's clear, but not too much.

Later he goes on to explain why women have less authority than men among Albanians:

> Women are discriminated. They are not allowed to say much, in the past they were not at all. I watched a documentary on the television where a woman was getting married. She had a sack on her head and was sitting on a horse. Then, she was brought to her husband …

Edi justifies male domination of women by mobilising the idea of 'tradition'. He mentions the exchange of women between different families as – in his view – a traditional marriage custom. In the same way, Admir claims in an interview that it is a typical tradition for the Balkan countries that 'women have to go to men' when they get married and not the other way round. He adds that he would never change his residence for a woman.

Patrilocality and arranged marriage appear in these discourses as practices that are legitimated by tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) describe how practices which are considered traditional serve to justify values or behavioural norms and enable the maintained continuity with the past or to define a community. 'Tradition' can be mobilised as 'cultural stuff' in order to subjectively produce communality and difference. Various practices, rituals or symbols – be they real or fictive – find their place within this umbrella idea of tradition and each can be mobilised.[10]

In the case of Admir and Edi, tradition is used as a discursive element to legitimise a hierarchical order between men and women. They draw a boundary between the sexes and this conceptual distinction allows them to identify with the supposed dominant male part in relationships with women from the former

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[10] Traditions, despite their initial definition, are sometimes recent re-inventions and deliberate constructions to draw boundaries.

Yugoslavia. In a situation where the ethnic criterion situates them on 'the wrong' and subordinated side of the boundary, *insisting on the moral imperative of gender inequality* gives them some power and recognition of being a man.

One day in school, when the pupils had to discuss in small groups graphics showing migration flows to Switzerland, Edi argues towards Stefan and Admir that he is an Albanian and that their women are responsible for all the housework. His father would not even touch a sock. The young men laugh about that comment and Edi tries to convince his friends that it is like that among Albanians and that it should be like that. In a personal interview with Edi, he also explains that it is of capital importance that his sister gets married. From his point of view, being responsible for a husband and a family seems to be the prime duty for an Albanian woman – despite the fact that Edi's sister will certainly also do an apprenticeship.

This strategy of emphasising their position in relation to one type of boundary (the gender boundary) over another (the ethnic boundary) may help Albanian men reassess their own value: being a dominant man is preferable to being a subordinated Albanian. However, this strategy does not question the ethnic boundary itself. Although the male members of the minority *counter their subordination* by reassessing the value of being a man, they continuously contribute to and confirm the ethnic boundary work described above.

Inverting the ethnic hierarchical ordering – proclaiming one's own moral superiority

However, the empirical findings reveal additional strategies aiming to modify the ethnic boundary. These strategies question the hierarchical ordering between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia, and the minority tries to prove their moral superior lifestyle in comparison with the Swiss. The kind of morality that is emphasised is closely linked

to women's behaviour in their relationships with men.

In the classroom debate described above (as well as in the personal interviews), Admir and Edi proclaimed that Swiss marriages mostly end up in divorce, something that – in their view – does not happen to Albanian families. The common failure of Swiss couples is implicitly attributed to women's freedom in comparison with women coming from the former Yugoslavia. This attribution is a joint construction by members of both the majority ('your women don't dare to get divorced', implying that Swiss women have the freedom to do so if they want to) and the minority ('at least they obey us', making it clear that the non-contested subordination of women to men has led, as a positive consequence, to enduring marriages). While the students of Swiss origin emphasise the value of women's freedom, the male students with immigrant parents argue that enduring marriages are an important value, even if it means less freedom for women. This is certainly also a strategy of legitimising the dominance of men over women. It gives a rational and moral motive for men to control 'their' women. By doing so, Edi and Admir aim to invert the ethnic hierarchical order that is imposed on them by the majority students of Swiss origin. They aim to show that inequality in gender relations has an important advantage, namely, to safeguard important moral values, which is not the case among Swiss families.

However, strategies aiming to change the ethnic hierarchical order of the boundary exceed the realm of family values to include sexual behaviours, in particular those of women. In class discussions as well as in interviews, Admir and Edi repeatedly argue that it is impressive when men have sexual relations with different women, but they strongly despise women acting the same way. Although this kind of discourse is widespread among youth of all origins, a new ethnic boundary is drawn around the sexuality of

women. In an interview, Admir says he does not find it right for women to 'sleep around':

> It is like that. Well, maybe for Swiss people it is normal [he laughs]. But I can't say for them. And we have been brought up differently. For instance, when we want to marry we look for a virgin.

In this quote, a 'we' (migrants from the former Yugoslavia) is constructed where morally ireproachable behaviour is expected from women, in contrast to a 'them' ('Swiss people') who do not care and find it normal that women have multiple sexual relations before they get married. The inverting of the hierarchical order is here quite clear with an attempt to change the signifier of the boundary. The dominant discourse in the classroom is about gender equality and in this field students whose parents came from the Balkan region have no chance to win the game, i.e. to be considered on top of the hierarchical order. Instead of contesting the boundary, the young men actively try to *change* the emphasis put on its *content*: moving from a gender equality ideology, they bring in a replacing ideology related to the safeguarding of women's sexual integrity and morality. Based on this new 'cultural content', these young men have the means to assert the moral superiority of their own ethnic group over the 'immoral' majority. This becomes very clear by looking at how Edi responded to Luisa when she was declaring that she had had bad experiences with Albanian men. Edi hereupon laughed and excused Albanian men with the comment: 'They don't want bitches.' The honour of women stands here as the signifier for a whole group's superiority (Alexander 1996; Espiritu 2001). In light of this, challenging the moral superiority of the Swiss people in their interactions with students in the classroom can be seen as a way for the male members of the minority[11] to

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[11] There were no Albanian women in this specific class.

gain control of their immediate environment – the classroom as a public place – and to challenge the subjugation of their ethnic category in Swiss society.

Blurring the ethnic boundary

These examples confirm the bright nature of the ethnic boundary between Albanians and Swiss. In view of this, it might be not surprising that members of the minority as well as of the majority *only tentatively* engage in 'blurring strategies'. Only occasionally do they bring up this kind of boundary work aiming to render the ethnic boundary less distinct and sharp. For instance, Luisa was interviewed together with her best friend Cornelia, the young woman who accused Albanian women of not daring to get divorced (in the interaction with Edi and Admir, see situation above). While Luisa presents a reified image about Albanians in the interview, Cornelia suddenly sets up counter-arguments against her view:

> I don't care about that. Certainly there are different countries where women are treated differently and even here in Switzerland. But there are also exceptions. And, nonetheless, I would never be together with a boyfriend I don't love and I can't love somebody who mistreats women whether he is an Albanian or whatever.

Cornelia objects to the homogenous and reified image about Albanians presented by Luisa. Despite her affirming gender equality and the importance of women's respect in the same way, she does not link a behaviour that is supposed to disrespect women to a particular ethno-religious group. She breaks up the ethnic boundary by putting weight on universal values of women and human rights – being respected as a woman. In other terms, she emphasises non-ethnic forms of belonging, namely, being a woman, a human being, to divert the focus from ethnic belonging.

Some efforts to blur the ethnic boundary can also be observed among the subordinated minority group. One day during recreation with his friends Stefan and Admir, Edi mentioned that Albanian men, on top of dominating women, also deal violently with them. Admir (and Stefan) immediately disagreed with Edi: 'Albanians don't deal violently with women. Not all Albanians.' Admir tries to blur the ethnic boundary by recalling that there are also differences within the group and by contesting the reified image of Albanians as a homogeneous ethnic category of people having hierarchical gender relations where men also wield physical power over women.

Both examples show that reified ideas about Albanians circulate and how social categorisations can change from situation to situation. It must be noted, however, that members of both the majority and the male minority groups only seldom attempt to blur the ethnic boundary. Moreover, these attempts are mostly ineffective and have little weight when confronted with the important boundary work that has been described until now, which mostly contributes to maintaining and reinforcing the boundary.

Conclusion

Against the background of an institutionalised ethnic boundary between Swiss and Albanians from the former Yugoslavia, we observe that among young adults in a vocational class the moral idea of *gender equality* is mobilised in order to work on that ethnic boundary. The moral imperative of gender equality becomes a vehicle for the ethnic majority (Swiss students) to articulate differences towards migrants from the former Yugoslavia, particularly against Albanians. It serves to assert cultural superiority over the ethnic minority and to legitimate exclusion and dominance. One conclusion is that this dominant gender discourse is powerful in defining the migrants as 'culturally different' and in putting them in a subordinated position in society.

The study highlights important theoretical elements: It demonstrates that neither the

boundary work by the majority nor the counter-strategies by the male minority aim to call into question the difference between Swiss and Albanians. Instead, students take this line for granted and naturalise it in such a way that the boundary adopts almost a primordial character. This goes along with a well established system of domination based on interacting categories of difference. Following Alba's (2005) typology, this boundary can be described as 'bright', meaning that it is clear on which side of the boundary a person is localised (migrant minority or Swiss). 'Blurred' boundaries exist when multiple identifications (e.g. on both sides of the boundary) are allowed. As we have seen, this is hardly the case in this vocational class.

When there are 'bright boundaries' towards minorities in society, visible for instance in ethno-national politics, re-affirmed in reports by the media and kept alive by political agitation of right-wing parties, blurring or crossing strategies can only occasionally occur – even among young people – because their arguments rarely find support from other social actors and institutions. Our results make clear that this specific Swiss environment has established a strong hierarchy between an underprivileged Albanian migrant minority and the Swiss privileged majority.

This also becomes visible in the kind of counter-strategies of the stigmatised group who also use ideas about gender relations to work on and to modify that boundary. On the one hand, we saw that male members of the minority invoked 'gender inequality' as a 'cultural tradition' in order to reaffirm their *self-esteem and to reassess their superior position as men*. On the other hand, these young men tried to assert *moral superiority over the dominant group* by emphasising the moral integrity of migrant women from the former Yugoslavia (in comparison with 'unrespectable' Swiss women) and the importance accorded to family and enduring marriages (in contrast to high divorce rates among Swiss couples).

The stigmatised ethnic group is faced with exclusion and there is only little room left for them to deploy counter-strategies which could shift or blur the boundary and convince others that they are not 'culturally' different. Instead, they engage in counter-strategies that finally contribute to 'brightening' the boundary even further and which valorises and reinforces their 'cultural difference' at the same time. One might argue that those strategies are the only two remaining options to react toward the hierarchy and to keep a kind of dignity and self-respect.

However, these strategies reinforce an ideology of male superiority over women and have important consequences for Albanian women who are simultaneously subjected to two interacting systems of oppression: an ethnic one (being Albanian) and the gender one (being an Albanian woman). In theoretical terms, the male members of the minority mobilise a specific axis of domination (gender) in order to respond to the subordination they experience in the ethnic axis of oppression (Klinger and Knapp 2007).

We argue that our study shows that power relations and intersecting systems of dominance have not yet received the full attention they deserve within the burgeoning boundary-work literature. There have been a number of studies – also in classrooms – focusing on the identity and boundary performances of young people (for Germany see Weissköppel 2001). However, such micro-centred analyses are seldom related to the wider societal context in which they are anchored. We argue that if symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon and institutionalised through reified ideas about culture, nations, tradition and gender relations, then minority groups have to deal with social boundaries that assume a kind of natural and objectified character. This in turn renders it impossible to blur, cross or shift the boundaries.

However, our findings were gathered in a specific context of one class where ethnic

boundary work took place between *the male members of the minority* and mainly *the female members of the majority*. It would be interesting to look closely at the strategies that Albanian women deploy in their boundary work. Further investigation is needed, for instance, by comparing these findings to boundary work in other classrooms, to find out about the strategies adopted specifically by female members of the minority, as well as those additionally deployed by the other students in general.

Furthermore, we emphasise that the results – although our analysis was mainly concerned with ethnic boundary work – confirm and contribute to studies about gendered 'borderwork'. All of these strategies by young people not only manifest an ethnic boundary, but continuously perpetuate a difference between the feminine and the masculine, amplifying heteronormativity and fostering ideologies about the place of man and woman in society.

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