# Between the devil and the deep blue sea: Exploring the hybrid identity narratives of ethnic minority professionals

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**Summary**    Drawing on a narrative approach to identity, this paper explores how ethnic minority employees attempt to craft coherent self-narratives while faced with the challenge of reconciling their work experiences in organizations dominated by the ethnic majority with their non-work affiliations, experiences and audiences. Our findings show that, in dealing with this challenge, individuals construct hybrid identities combining different cultural traditions, yet continue to experience identity tensions because of others' contestation of their identity claims. This highlights how social and political processes, through maintaining traditional notions of difference, can limit the ability of hybrid identities to allow individuals to successfully reconcile different affiliations, roles and audiences. Our study further has implications for the diversity literature's understanding of ethnic identities.

## Introduction

Diversity research continues to show how, throughout their working lives, ethnic minority employees are confronted with prejudice, discrimination and pressures to assimilate to ethnic majority workplace norms (Brief, Butz, & Deitch, 2005; Nkomo, 2008; Siebers, 2009). While research has until now mainly documented how these dynamics negatively impact individuals' career opportunities (Brief et al., 2005; Nkomo,

2008; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010), we expect they also pose important identity challenges for ethnic minorities. Confrontation with pressures to assimilate and with stereotypes signal important incongruities between, on the one hand, the way individuals see themselves and, on the other hand, the way they are expected to behave or seen by others. Although the identity literature has argued (e.g. Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Belova, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) that such identity challenges trigger important identity tensions and subsequent attempts to (re)construct stable and coherent identities, the literature on ethnicity and diversity in organizations has mainly adopted a relatively static understanding of identity and paid less attention to the way ethnic minority employees engage in processes of identity construction (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Roberts, 2005; Siebers, 2009).

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The aim of this paper is to explore how ethnic minority employees construct identities while faced with the challenge of working in organizations dominated by the ethnic majority. In this, we pay particular attention to the way ethnic minority employees negotiate their workplace experiences with their affiliations, experiences and audiences in the non-work sphere. This allows us to not only answer calls for more research contextualizing ethnic minorities' workplace experiences in their non-work lives (Calás & Smircich, 2011; Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007), but also to critically examine the diversity literature's implicit assumptions on the connection between identities in the work and non-work spheres. Following the suggestion in both the diversity (e.g. Nkomo & Cox, 1996) and the identity literature (e.g. Belova, 2010) to adopt a complex, dynamic and multi-voiced understanding of identities in diversity research, we draw inspiration from the narrative approach to identity. As this approach emphasizes how narratives of the self are crafted in dialog with different, possibly competing, voices (Belova, 2010; Ezzy, 1998; Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001; McAdams, 1996) it is particularly suitable to understand ethnic minority employees' identity constructions while faced with the challenge of reconciling their work experiences in organizations dominated by the ethnic majority with their non-work affiliations, experiences and audiences.

Drawing on interviews with second-generation minority professionals of Turkish or Maghrebi descent working in Belgium, this article shows how ethnic minority employees construct hybrid identities as they navigate their different cultural spheres. However, we also highlight how, because of social and political processes, they remain unable to resolve their identity tensions. We further point to a number of implications of our hybrid understanding of ethnic identities for the diversity literature.

## Theoretical orientation

### The precarious position of ethnic minorities in organizations

Over the last decades, the literature on diversity and ethnicity in organizations has shown that the position of ethnic minorities in organizations dominated by the ethnic majority continues to be highly problematic (for an overview, see Brief et al., 2005). Their precarious position tends to be mainly understood in terms of two processes: marginalization and assimilation (cf. Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013). First, like in society at large (Ahmed, 2000; Gullestad, 2002; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; van Nieuwkerk, 2004), ethnic minority employees are in organizations confronted with the construction of ethnic boundaries. In this, they become recognized as ethnic others and seen as (essentially) different in relation to the majority, which causes them to be marginalized, and exposed to different forms of discrimination (Brief et al., 2005; Nkomo, 2008; Siebers & Dennissen, 2012). This process of marginalization in the workplace is inherently linked to broader societal dynamics which permeate the boundaries of the organization. For example, studies have shown how the negative discourse on Islam in Europe impacts the way ethnic minority individuals are seen and treated by their ethnic majority colleagues in work settings (Siebers, 2009; Siebers & Dennissen, 2012; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011).

Second, ethnic minority employees are confronted with the pressure to assimilate. Most organizations continue to be dominated by 'whiteness' and have the ethnic majority, and their ways of life and habits, as the unspoken norm. Employees deviating from these norms are less likely to be seen as 'good employees,' which forces ethnic minority employees to assimilate to these dominant cultural traditions and suppress specific elements of their (ethnic) identities (Cox, 1991; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Siebers, 2009; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). A small set of studies have further shown how this pressure to assimilate can cause ethnic minority employees to experience particular challenges in negotiating the work and the non-work domains. For instance, Bell (1990) shows how career-oriented African-American women often experience having to balance a 'white' work sphere and 'black' non-work sphere, causing them to create strong boundaries between who they are in these two settings. Similarly, Kamenou (2008) highlights that ethnic minority women in the UK have to negotiate cultural demands in their non-work life with a pressure to 'act white' in the workplace, causing them to construct a boundary between their work and non-work selves. Despite these continued pressures for assimilation, recent business case approaches to diversity do encourage ethnic minority employees to bring economically relevant non-work elements to the work sphere. In this, it is argued that ethnic minorities' specific cultural knowledge and perspectives can improve the creativity and problem-solving capacity of multicultural teams (Cox & Blake, 1991; Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander, & Maznevski, 2010).

While these studies on diversity and ethnicity in organizations (sometimes implicitly) make important claims about ethnic minorities' identities, it has been noted that there is a continued need of in-depth explorations of the way identities are constructed by ethnic minority employees themselves (cf. Roberts, 2005; Siebers, 2009). Moreover, despite some progress, there has still been relatively little attention to the way ethnic minority individuals actually negotiate their workplace experiences with their broader identities and non-work experiences (Özbilgin et al., 2011). The few studies that focus on this link (e.g. Bell, 1990; Kamenou, 2008) have mainly stressed how this process involves the creation of strong boundaries between the selves individuals adopt in the two domains. However, as individuals rarely adopt completely separate selves in different spheres (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009), there is a need to further explore the identity processes involved.

### A narrative approach to the construction of identities

Whereas much of the literature on diversity and ethnicity in organizations understands identities as stable and unchanging essences (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Zanoni et al., 2010), this study adopts a narrative approach to identity. Such an approach challenges the traditional view of identities as fixed entities and rather understands them to be narratively constructed as individuals try to answer the question: 'who am I?' In this, individuals emplot their lived experiences into a story connecting them to past and future events, thereby