

# One nation, one audience? Ethnic diversity on and in front of Flemish TV

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## Abstract

This paper discusses representations of ethnic diversity in TV fiction and their reception by ethnic majority and minority audiences in everyday life. Focusing on the case of Flanders (Belgium), twelve focus groups with young viewers from six different ethnic backgrounds are used to investigate oppositions between 'us' and 'them'. The findings disclose strong similarities between ethnic majority and minority groups as well as differences within them. American fiction is generally preferred, also regarding the representation of ethnic diversity which is less self-evident in Flemish fiction. Overall, this research confirms the need to deconstruct the notion of one homogeneous Flemish nation and its sharp opposition to ethnic others.

In Western Europe, there is a long tradition of thinking about television as a national medium. In particular, public broadcasting is often conceived as uniting viewers into one 'imagined community' (Scannell 1992). However, the assumption of a homogeneous and shared cultural space is questioned in the age of multichannel global TV, leading to fragmented and niche audiences within nations and to international and diasporic audiences across nations. Nevertheless, European broadcast television still often addresses a national audience, a notion that may have been theoretically deconstructed but that is alive and kicking in everyday broadcasting practice and parlance. Legal and language borders remain important, leading to television that is still generally conceived along national lines (Waisbord 2004).

This paper addresses the question of diversity within such nationally conceived television programming, taking a closer look at Flemish television. Flanders is a Dutch-language Belgian region where broadcasting has always been conceived from a strongly Flemish point of view. Like the French community in Belgium, Flanders has its own media system, including public and commercial television, addressing only one (sub)national community. Is there room, in such a constellation, for ethnic diversity on screen? And are ethnic minority viewers part of the (sub)national viewing community? These are pressing questions, as the social

debate on the multi-ethnic society in Belgium is getting more and more polarised, opposing 'us' (imagined as the white, ethnically Belgian population) to 'them' (mostly Muslims). The opposition is built into the very terms of the debate, opposing 'autochthonous' (born here) and 'allochthonous' (born abroad). Ethnic minorities are 'othered' and unified by the very vocabulary used, even by those sympathetic to their cause.

This paper aims to intervene in this social debate by exploring the assumed ethnic homogeneity of the nation on and off screen, focusing in particular on TV fiction, one of the prime sources of everyday entertainment. Moving on from an overview of existing literature, this paper presents the results of an original, Flemish research project, based on a combination of textual analysis and audience research. First, a week of television fiction is analysed, in order to answer the first research question: how is ethnic diversity represented in prime time fiction on Flemish television? Then, focus groups are used to answer the second research question: how do ethnic majority and minority viewers evaluate these representations? In this way, this research hopes to make an empirically based intervention in contemporary (Flemish) debates about ethnicity and diversity.

## Theoretical framework

Ethnicity is not measured in official Belgian statistics, but about fifteen percent of the population is of foreign origin and many of those are European (data for 2004 in *Algemene Directie Werkgelegenheid en Arbeidsmarkt* 2008). Many non-European ethnic minority members are second-generation children of labour migrants. For long, at least their parents have thought about their migration as a temporary state, which partly explains their limited integration into Belgian society. Of course, part of the story is also the ethnocentrism and latent racism in Belgian society, which overall was less than welcoming towards non-European immigrants, despite the official politics of multiculturalism (Loobuyck and Jacobs 2006). The Moroccan and Turkish communities are mostly singled out as problem groups in terms of social and economic integration: they form strong, geographically concentrated communities with high unemployment and poverty. Culturally and religiously, since 9/11 the Islam is also perceived as a divisive force, although the international events have also had a positive effect in drastically pulling attention to the problems of ethnic minorities.

During the past decade, ethnic minority media use has been increasingly studied in the 'Low Countries', Belgium and the Netherlands. For instance, Devroe, Driesen and Saeys (2005) studied media ownership and use among youngsters of Moroccan and Turkish descent, the largest non-European ethnic groups in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> They concluded that these have equal access to television as Flemish youth, so media ownership is not a factor of social inequality between ethnic majority and minorities. Devroe et al. (*ibid.*) did note differences between both

ethnic minority groups, e.g. the Turkish more often preferring their 'own' (Turkish) media, but overall other socio-demographic variables such as gender and level of education have a larger impact than cultural differences. d'Haenens et al. (2004) also found differences between Dutch and Flemish youngsters of Turkish and Moroccan descent, distinguishing between 'homelanders', 'adapters' and 'omnivores', depending on the preference for Turkish/Moroccan media, Dutch-language media, or both. For television viewing, they found that a majority (61%) of Turkish youngsters are omnivores, whereas Moroccans are often adapters (47%). Finally, Sinardet and Mortelmans (2006) conducted a large-scale survey on the media use of ethnic minority (Turkish and Moroccan) youth, concluding that the level and type of education was more influential than ethnicity towards channel preference. Overall, they found little interest in 'ethnic' media, with the exception – again – of Turkish viewers.

While laudable in its attention to an important factor of social division, this quantitative research on ethnic minorities illustrates a number of problems within the field. Most frequently, research only considers the largest groups of non-European migrants (Turkish and/or Moroccan), which reduces the spectrum of ethnic diversity. Moreover, although most research finds differences between viewers of Turkish and Moroccan descent, there is a tendency to lump them together under the overarching term 'allochthonous'. Finally, the division in ethnic groups assumes a homogeneity within these groups, which tends to essentialise ethnicity and cultural identity. In her qualitative interview-based research on Turkish media use in the Netherlands, Ogan (2001) warns against this tendency, noting how diasporic identities are varied and in constant flux.

Protest against strong boundaries between fixed and unified communities is also the general tendency in recent international research on ethnic minority and diasporic media use. The belief in primordial ethnicity is criticised as a new form of racism (Cottle 2000, 5) and a model of 'intersectionality' (Lind 2004a) of multiple subject positions and complex, multi-layered reading positions is proposed (Cottle 2000, 26; see also Harindranath 2000; Tufté 2001). Researchers comment on the diversity of diasporic experiences and the fluidity of ethnic identities (Ross and Playdon 2001), warning against reification of ethnic communities and considering ethnicity not as a property but as a process (Tsagarousianou 2001). Most recent research starts from the assumption of multiple axes of identification, among others ethnicity, which can be activated in certain contexts (Gillespie 2007). The challenge for empirical research, then, is to study ethnic diversity while not fixing or essentialising it, thus replicating or even magnifying existing binary oppositions.

Another drawback of current Flemish research is the limited attention to TV entertainment, in particular fiction, even though this is a key genre in the everyday media use of audiences. While there is some interest in representations of ethnicity in fiction (see below), audience responses of different ethnic groups are

hardly studied. Internationally, this field gets more attention, for instance in the literature on the cross-cultural reception of TV fiction. In their seminal study on Dallas, using focus groups representing different ethnicities Liebes and Katz (1990) did find different readings— although, with Harindranath (2005) we can question the assumed homogeneity and fixity within these ethnic groups. Gillespie's (1995) in-depth ethnographic study among young Punjabi Londoners is more attuned to the subtleties of ethnic identity formation and hybridity. Even though she avoids ethnic determinism, she has to conclude that ethnicity is a key factor in these young peoples' engagement with popular media texts such as *Neighbours*. While these studies focus on differences linked to ethnicity, it is important also to note similarities. For instance, across nations and ethnic groups, audiences share 'global' (often American) popular culture. For young audiences, this is often an important shared point of reference, more so than any local culture, as found among immigrants in Israel (Elias and Lemish 2008), Denmark (Tuftte 2001) and Belgium (Dhoest 2009).

While imported fiction is often a shared point of reference, domestic fiction is generally more popular, certainly for ethnic majority audiences. Straubhaar (1991, 2007) introduced the notion of 'cultural proximity' as a factor explaining the preference for television that is 'nearer' to one's own everyday world, be that local, national, regional or cultural-linguistic. American fiction is generally a shared second, but at least across Europe domestic fiction generally performs much better (Silj 1988; Biltereyst 1992; Buonanno 2008). Comparing the reception of American and Flemish fiction, Biltereyst (1991) found a stronger referential involvement of Flemish viewers with domestic fiction, which they more strongly linked to their own world and thus became more personally involved with. Extending the analysis to include race and ethnicity, in South-Africa Larry Strelitz (2002) found a higher preference for local drama among black students as opposed to white students who preferred imported fiction. This makes one wonder how ethnic minority viewers in Flanders would look upon the generally preferred 'domestic' material.

Internationally, some research has been done in this area, mostly with young viewers. The overall claim of this research concerns the importance of TV fiction, in particular soaps, in the formation of identities. Soaps constitute a frame of reference for the active formation of complex, hybrid identities. At the same time, ethnic minority youngsters are generally dissatisfied with the representation of their ethnic groups in domestic fiction, commenting above all on their marginal and racialised roles (Barker 1999, 118-30; Ross 2001; de Bruin 2005; de Leeuw 2005). Bauwens (1996) studied the reception of a Flemish sitcom by Turkish women and found they primarily read it referentially, comparing it to their own world. They often distanced themselves from it, but they could also identify with fundamental commonalities. This finding, again, cautions against one-sided attention to differences in reading between ethnic communities.

While in Europe, ethnic minority viewers generally do not have access to their 'own' mainstream media, in the US popular culture is more mixed, TV fiction offering many black characters and even all-black series. Research shows that black viewers tend to prefer these programs, searching characters which support their social identity (Edwards 2001; Abrams and Giles 2007). In line with the abovementioned model of multiple intersectional identities becoming salient in certain contexts, black identity becomes more salient in the confrontation with representations of blacks, also making these viewers more alert to and critical of negative portrayals (Fujioka 2005). Similarly, Lind (2004b) comments on the importance of 'relevance' in the interpretation of images resonating with the cultural and racial experiences of audiences. As indicated by social psychologist Simon (2004, 101), members of minorities are generally more likely to base their self-interpretation on minority membership, which becomes more easily salient.

Building on these insights, this article hopes to make a relevant contribution to the field in two crucial respects. First, by questioning ethnic essentialism and using a model of multiple intersectional identities, this paper hopes to enrich the current insights into Flemish ethnic minority media use and reception. Second, by studying fiction (both domestic and imported) and by looking at its reception by both ethnic majority and minority viewers, this paper hopes to contribute to Flemish studies on media and ethnicity, also entering into dialogue with the international insights mentioned above, in particular Straubhaar's notion of cultural proximity.

## **Analysing the representation of ethnic diversity**

Before we move on to our reception research, we will briefly analyse the representation of ethnic diversity on Flemish television. Until recently, the representation of ethnic diversity was hardly discussed in Flanders, but awareness of the importance of ethnic minority representations has grown immensely in the 21st century. In particular public broadcaster VRT makes an effort to ascertain a steady and balanced ethnic minority presence on screen, in line with the public service ethos. In 2003, a Diversity Cell was established and a Diversity Charter was signed, aiming for a fair representation of ethnic minorities both on and behind the screen (VRT 2003). In 2004 and 2007, a Diversity Monitor was used to 'measure' the ethnic minority presence on screen (VRT 2004 and 2007). Both reports find a higher ethnic minority presence on public television in non-fiction, whereas commercial channels do better in fiction. For instance, in 2007 14.1% of all persons on the main public channel Eén are 'coloured' – in non-fiction 17.4% and in fiction only 6% (as opposed to 13.9% on commercial channel VT4). The relatively low presence of ethnic minorities in fiction is surprising, considering the public broadcaster makes a conscious effort at representing ethnic diversity in all genres. However, commercial channels (in particular the smaller ones, with

lower budgets) import more American fiction, which often has ethnically mixed casts. Ironically, the channels making less effort at representing cultural diversity do a better job – although they hardly represent Flanders, to viewers a crucial distinction which we will return to.

The above account indicates that there is a problem of under-representation in domestic TV fiction in comparison to non-fiction. Before the 1990s, hardly any ethnic minority characters were represented. This is related to a predilection for historical drama based on literary sources (Dhoest 2004). Even though there was a clear intention to define Flemish cultural identity, this was pursued mostly by means of emphasising internal homogeneity rather than contrasting with internal or external ‘others’. From the 1990s, the move to contemporary genres initiated more diversity. While sitcoms, with their fixed ensemble of core characters, remained predominantly white, soaps and crime drama opened up to ethnic minority characters. In police serials, the urban setting and the weekly changing guest roles enabled the realistic inclusion of ethnic minority characters, the producers looking for a good balance between representations as criminals and as victims. Soaps are inherently best suited for the inclusion of ethnic minority characters, because of their large casts of regular characters and their elaborate storylines allowing for balanced and complex portrayals. Indeed, most ethnic minority characters on Flemish television have appeared in soaps.

In order to answer the first research question on the representation of ethnic diversity, we screened all prime-time fiction in a constructed week (one day from seven consecutive weeks in January and February 2007). We focused on the main public channel (Eén), the main commercial channel (VTM) and its main competitor (VT4). To start, there is a clear distinction between public and commercial broadcasters: Eén scheduled only domestic fiction in prime time (plus one Dutch serial), VTM also scheduled some imported fiction, while the smaller VT4 only scheduled imported (American) fiction. Domestic fiction generally has much higher ratings but is also more expensive, so those who can afford it always schedule it in prime time. Both Eén and VTM schedule daily domestic soaps (*Thuis* and *Familie*), Eén (at the time of research) adding the domestic telenovela *Emma* and VTM a bi-weekly soap, *Wittekerke*. Taken together, these soaps represent about half of all the fiction scheduled in prime time, which confirms its centrality as a genre. *Thuis* performs best at representing diversity, with four long-standing ethnic minority characters: Mo, a kind-hearted Moroccan plumber with a heavy accent, his daughter Aïsha, a well-integrated law student, Waldek, an extremely nice and integrated Polish character, and Moroccan medicine student Youssef. More generally, *Thuis* is clearly preoccupied with the representation of diversity in terms of gender (the credits portray nine male and nine female protagonists), class, and sexuality (introducing a lesbian couple). This contrasts with the all-white casts of the commercial soaps, as well as the all-white comedy and crime drama broadcast on public television in this period.

Two other domestic dramas on public broadcasting include ethnic minority characters. *Kinderen van Dewindt* is a partly government-funded program about a family business, including a central lesbian couple, and secretary Sumaya, whose foreign origins are hardly mentioned. In contrast, *Emma* explicitly deals with the cultural roots of the Turkish Birsen, one of the two protagonists in this telenovela about equal opportunities funded by Flemish government. Although laudable in principle, partly because of the overly educational tone this telenovela failed to attract an audience. Like the (few) other main ethnic minority characters, Birsen is very positively portrayed, but the degree of attention to her ethnic origins is exceptional. In the terms used by Geraghty (1991, 141-4), she is a ‘singleton’, a black character introduced in storylines about black issues, as opposed to the general politics of ‘incorporation’, where ethnic minority characters are represented as part of the community. However, as they are often alone (with the exception of *Thuis*), ethnic minority characters tend to carry a heavy burden of representation because they are supposed to but never quite manage to represent a whole community. The main problem is not stereotypical representation (as stereotypes are often consciously contradicted), but rather under-representation, so the few characters are not able to evoke any sense of diversity across and within ethnic minority communities.

The American fiction broadcast on commercial channels VTM and (particularly) VT4 presents a very different picture. While the sitcoms (in particular the daily reruns of *Friends*) show a predominantly white US, crime dramas such as *CSI* and *LA Dragnet* have a self-evidently ethnically mixed cast, both in the main and in the supporting roles – even though the lead roles tend to be played by white actors. Clearly, the academic and public critiques have had some effect, as not only black, but also Latin and Asian characters are included. *ER*, broadcast on VTM, is another example of such self-evident diversity both in the main and supporting parts, reflecting the fine-tuned American sensibility on such matters. All in all, American fiction gives a relatively diverse and ‘multi-ethnic’ representation of society. On the level of representation, it clearly performs better than Flemish fiction, which is mostly ‘white’. However, the few Flemish programs with ethnic minority characters portray them in an overwhelmingly positive manner, consciously trying to avoid stereotyping, which makes us wonder if audiences are equally positive.

## **Analysing the reception by ethnic majority and minority viewers**

Having studied the representation of ethnicity in fiction on Flemish channels, we will now move on to the second research question and analyse how diverse groups of ethnic majority and minority viewers respond to Flemish and American fiction, focusing on their appreciation of ethnic minority portrayals. We used qualitative research to complement the existing Flemish quantitative research, espe-



cially because this allows us to limit the essentialist overtones of ethnic categorisations and to search for differences within and similarities across ethnic groups. Complementing earlier in-depth interviews (Dhoest 2009), we used focus groups for this research in order to witness the social character of viewing and to tease out in-group similarities and differences. Twelve focus group interviews of five to six members were conducted with six different ethnic groups in Flanders (a total of 63 respondents). To cover potential gender differences and to prevent possible uneasiness in mixed groups, a homogeneous male and a female group were interviewed for each ethnicity. All participants were between eighteen and twenty years old, an important period in the search for identity. Each interview was moderated by two young student-researchers, in order to keep the power distance as small as possible.<sup>2</sup> Moderating was mostly non-directive, starting with some introductory questions on television viewing and preferences and then moving on to a discussion of eight clips, taken from the programs broadcast in the constructed week mentioned above. Clips were used to provoke more spontaneous responses and to more closely approximate normal processes of television viewing than would have been the case in a traditional interview. The clips were selected to include different kinds of portrayal of ethnic minorities, both in Flemish and in American fiction. After the spontaneous reactions to these clips, more specific questions were asked about the representation of ethnicity.

As mentioned above, this research attempts to break loose of the binary opposition built into so much research on ethnic minorities, which opposes majority and minority viewers explicitly or implicitly (by only looking at ethnic minorities and thus assuming a special reading position). While still researching ethnicity (and therefore adopting existing group divisions), this article aims to question and qualify the notion of one 'allochthonous' group by including many variations of ethnic and cultural diversity. Beside two Flemish focus groups, Moroccan and Turkish groups were interviewed, the two largest non-European groups of migrants (23% and 7% of all foreigners) in the province of Antwerp where the research took place. Less usual was the inclusion of Dutch youngsters living in Belgium, our closest neighbours speaking the same language but coming from a different cultural background. In fact, the Dutch form the largest group (32%) of foreigners in the province of Antwerp (Provincie Antwerpen 2002). Our research also included two groups of Jews, a large community in Antwerp, although not strictly speaking an ethnic but rather a religious minority. Finally, we also included two groups of Africans, youngsters coming from diverse countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as the former Belgian colony of Congo. For the sake of simplicity, these groups will be referred to as Flemish, Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch, Jewish and African, although many ethnic minority interviewees have the Belgian nationality and all could be called Flemish considering they were raised – and often even born – here. In fact, apart from three African interviewees who were adopted by Belgians, none of the interviewees are 'first generation' immigrants,



which is important as particularly first-generation non-European migrants tend to be less culturally and linguistically integrated into Belgian society.

Because of the limited amount of interviewees, generalisation to entire ethnic groups is not possible, but as mentioned above this is also not advisable since this would presuppose homogeneity within each group. The major aim, therefore, is to get a better view on dimensions of diversity, looking at similarities between ethnic groups and differences within the category of 'allochtones'. In the process, our hope is to question the persistent binary opposition of 'us' (autochthonous, ethnic majority) and them (allochthonous, ethnic minority). We are well aware of the limitations of this research, e.g. the small groups not allowing to fully grasp differences within ethnic communities, but we do believe that it provides a valuable exploration of the field.

### TV preferences

A first finding worth mentioning is that television does remain an important everyday medium and shared experience in the age of internet, all participants living in multi-set households and often having their own set in their rooms. Cable TV is widespread in Belgium, which explains why no Flemish or Dutch participants have access to satellite television, as opposed to most ethnic minority viewers who do. As indicated by earlier research (e.g. Devroe et al. 2005) and confirmed in our focus groups, Turks in particular use it to watch channels from their country of origin. The Moroccan respondents are less interested in satellite TV, in part because Berber is often the native tongue of their parents and they do not have sufficient knowledge of Arabic. It is mostly their parents who watch satellite TV for language reasons or to keep in touch with the country of origin, as do Jewish parents with Israeli TV. The African interviewees are generally more firmly integrated in Belgium and do not belong to a clear diasporic community, so they less often take recourse to satellite TV.

Clearly, in terms of viewing habits, 'allochtones' are not as homogeneous as is often assumed. Language skills and the strength of the connections to the country of origin cause varied patterns of media use. Despite this variation, when asked about their favourite channel, most respondents refer to the same Flemish channels, such as the youth-oriented commercial channels VT4 and Kanaal2 (now 2Be) and music channels such as TMF. Only Turkish respondents consistently watch channels from their country of origin, which is also reflected in their program preferences. They are the only ethnic group to rate their 'native' fiction equally high as American fiction, whereas almost all other respondents have a preference for American fiction. Across all groups, favourite programs include American action series such as *Prison Break*, *CSI* and *Lost*, and comedies such as *Friends* and *My wife and kids*. This makes for a striking similarity in the overall viewing patterns of these groups, who share more 'global' cultural reference

points than is often assumed. This is consistent with findings of earlier research on ethnic minorities (e.g. Elias and Lemish 2008; Tufte 2001; Dhoest 2009) and with the often observed orientation of younger generations towards global culture (Straubhaar 2007, 205). The focus on entertainment and fiction in this research seems justified, as it is an important source of shared culture among youngsters of different ethnic backgrounds.

Although Flemish channels are preferred, Flemish programs are not. While more popular in the overall population, Flemish fiction does not seem to appeal to these young viewers. Overall, they think American fiction is better because it has higher production values, better (more realistic) performances, more professionalism etc. Most participants think Flemish fiction is boring while American fiction is funnier or more action-packed: quicker, bigger, more spectacular etc. Flemish fiction is often oriented on everyday life, which appeals less to many viewers:

Thomas: 'In America it is more about murder, sex, drugs. Looking at it that way, I think I prefer American to Flemish [series] because these [the latter] are too much about daily life.' (Flemish boys)<sup>3</sup>

Because of its focus on action and spectacle, American fiction is often regarded as less realistic than Flemish fiction, but the participants do not mind: they want to be entertained, which is consistent with our findings in earlier research on Flemish, Moroccan and Turkish youngsters (Dhoest 2009). For instance, after having watched a clip from CSI, the Turkish boys explain why they think this is so much better than Flemish fiction:

Mehmet: 'Because it's so thrilling. Take the bit we just saw, that camera movement, those locations, those police uniforms, it all looks more real and exciting.'

Murat: 'I wouldn't really call it more real. It's much better TV, and you can watch it for 40 minutes, but it's not more realistic I think.'

Mehmet: 'OK, that's true, but it doesn't really matter, right? You don't watch TV to see how boring life can be; you just want to see the exciting or hilarious things. That's much better in American series.'

What is interesting, so far, is that similar responses keep appearing in the different groups, so ethnicity is not a distinctive or salient factor in many respects.

Upon first view, the fact that Flemish fiction does not appeal to ethnic minority viewers could be attributed to its limited representation of ethnic minorities, but it doesn't appeal to young Flemish viewers either. Based on the broader literature on domestic fiction, we could expect that recognition (because of cultural proximity) would be important (e.g. Straubhaar 2007), but at least for this age group

this is hardly an issue. The ‘cultural discount’ of American fiction seems to be minimal, which to Buonanno (2008) is due to its great familiarity or ‘domesticated otherness’.

For these youngsters, watching fiction is all about entertainment and even escape from the drudgery of everyday life. Only the Turkish groups form a clear exception, since they like Turkish fiction because it is more recognisable to them and they feel more connected to it:

Ahmet: ‘You just don’t watch Belgian series because they are boring and don’t come across as real. Turkish series are good because you feel connected to them and because they are less boring, and American series are OK because they are not boring at all, they contain enough action to keep it interesting.’ (Turkish boys)

Language is also part of the equation, whereas it is not for Flemish viewers:

Q: ‘Why do you watch more Turkish television?’

Elif: ‘For example, because that’s our own language.’

Hadise: ‘So we feel more at home.’

Elif: ‘You also recognise more, all the things that happen there. In Turkish series you see yourself more, as in “oh yes, that also happened to me”.’ (Turkish girls)

The viewers of Turkish origin are the only group with such a strong connection to the country and culture of origin, as they admit themselves, even calling themselves ‘nationalists’. For them, cultural proximity is important, but other ethnic minority groups comment less on recognition. This may indicate that ethnicity is less central to their identity but might very well be due in part to the fact that they do not have as much access to fiction from their own culture. The Flemish viewers, on the contrary, do have access to a lot of ‘own’ fiction, but their ethnicity is so self-evident that it does not seem to be much of an issue either.

### **Assessing the amount of ethnic minority characters**

This leads us to the core of this research, the representation of ethnic minorities on Flemish TV. As expected, this is the topic on which opinions start to diverge more clearly, based upon the different positions and experiences of each ethnic group. To start, the Flemish and Dutch generally think there are enough portrayals of ethnic minorities in Flemish TV fiction. They see an effort is being made to include ethnic minorities, which they think is positive but also comes across as somewhat ‘forced’, i.e. as less self-evident than in American fiction:

Elke: 'I think they accentuate it much more in Flemish and Dutch series, while it doesn't draw that much attention in American series because they are also more integrated in society. Here, that's still ongoing, and therefore they accentuate it more.'

Ineke: 'That's what I also think, that they get more attention.'

Elke: 'In Belgium they really take care to represent them well, so people get a positive image in contrast to all the negative messages in the papers.'

Ineke: 'In American series they just act like all the rest, they don't do anything special.' (Flemish girls)

The African respondents agree that there are enough portrayals of ethnic minorities, but they think their own community is underrepresented: 'If you see a foreigner on TV most of the time it's a Turk or a Moroccan' (Rose, African girl). They also complain about the homogenisation of the whole of Africa:

Jan: 'On TV they always give the impression that the culture is the same in all of Africa and that isn't the case, like the culture in Poland is different from that in Spain. On TV it's as if Africa is one country and that every culture is identical and that's ridiculous, really.' (African boys)

In the three other groups there is more disagreement, some thinking there are not enough ethnic minorities and others thinking there are enough. The discussion among the Jewish boys is telling:

Q: 'Do you think there are enough allochthonous people on TV here?'

Beau: 'No, not enough, otherwise it wouldn't draw our attention when there is one in it. Many programs try to remedy that but because we're not used to it, it's quite difficult to change that.'

Dino: 'Well, I think they are on TV often enough. A bit like in real life, so it's realistic.'

In contrast, the Turkish girls are very critical:

Q: 'Do you think there are enough allochthonous people on TV?'

All: 'No, certainly not.'

Q: 'I mean, as a representation of reality.'

Hadise: 'Reality? (laughs) In our street you can hardly find ten Belgians, it's all Moroccans and Turks and such. But on TV, it's just as if there's only one.'

Like the Flemish and many other groups, the Turkish boys comment on the stronger ethnic minority presence on American TV, which they link to the stron-

ger social integration. When asked if they think there are enough ethnic minorities on Flemish TV, it transpires that they do not really care all that much:

Murat: 'To be honest, I never pay attention to that... That's not on your mind when you just want to watch a show.'

A similar answer arises among the Moroccan girls:

Q: 'Do you think it is important that allochthonous people participate in a series?'

Dina: 'It doesn't really matter to me.'

Bonnita: 'To me neither.'

Nadia: 'As long as it's thrilling.'

The Moroccan boys would also like more ethnic minority characters, but they do not really care very much either. Overall, it seems that most groups have gotten used to the scarce presence of ethnic minorities. Entertainment, rather than representation, is on their mind when watching fiction.

### **Evaluating ethnic minority representations**

When moving on to the evaluation of these portrayals, several clips were used to get the discussion started. As we cannot discuss every group's discussion of each clip, we will limit this account to the overall patterns and the most salient findings. To start, it is worth noting that the focus groups were not introduced as being 'about' ethnic minorities. Although the clips were chosen to illustrate different portrayals of ethnic minorities in Flemish and American fiction, many respondents did not pick up on that. In the discussion after each clip, most groups did not spontaneously comment on this issue, which confirms the point made above: to many, it is not much of an issue when watching fiction. Methodologically, this suggests that much research on the reception of images relating to ethnic minorities may unwittingly attune the viewers to this issue in the first place. We should be careful not to push ethnic minority respondents towards critical responses by one-sidedly focusing on problems in representation.

Commenting on a clip showing the sympathetic Moroccan Mo and the Polish Waldek fooling around while doing a paint job, most groups agree that this is a positive and realistic portrayal. They discern the program maker's attempt to breach negative images and both Flemish groups even comment it would be good to occasionally have a less positive character:

Ineke: 'Yes, it's sometimes too good, so in the end it's not realistic anymore.'

Heleen: 'Yes, they don't dare to represent them negatively.' (Flemish girls)

Overall, the Dutch and Flemish respondents think characters from ethnic minorities are portrayed positively and realistically. The ethnic minority respondents are also generally satisfied with Mo and Waldek, situating them against a backdrop of negative and stereotypical portrayals. Commenting on Mo's blue-collar job, the Moroccan girls comment:

Amal: 'A job is a job.'

Bonnita: 'It doesn't matter.'

Nadia: 'At least he's not just sitting at home, so at least they can't say he's taking advantage of unemployment benefits.' (Moroccan girls)

The Turkish boys generally agree, thinking Mo and Waldek are realistically represented as quite normal and cool guys:

Mehmet: 'I thought it was good that Mo didn't stab anyone. (laughs) They were just both working like normal people, making a bit of fun, fooling around. I liked that, mostly foreigners are still the baddies on TV, right?'

There are also more critical voices, for instance from the group of Turkish girls who comment on the stereotypical menial job.

Overall, ethnic minority respondents are more sensitive to stereotypes, which also becomes apparent in the clip from *Thuis* with the Moroccan student of medicine Youssef, who recounts the police immediately suspected him of stealing when in fact he was getting something from his car. While most respondents think this is a realistic situation of everyday racism, and appreciate the way in which it is criticised, some consider this as a negative and stereotypical representation because Youssef is linked to crime. This illustrates how hard it is for fiction – however well-intended – to get it right in a context where few alternative representations of ethnic minorities are available. The burden of representation is heavy and can only be lightened through increased diversity on screen.

A similar tension arises around the clips from equal opportunities telenovela *Emma*. The program reflects on gender roles and one clip shows how Birsén's husband Veli is very jealous, while another one shows how he takes care of the household while she is out working. The Flemish and Dutch groups mostly state that jealousy is not linked to ethnicity and comment on the positive, progressive gender portrayal. Ethnic minority groups are more mixed. For instance, the Turkish groups state that jealousy is quite typical of Turkish men.

Hadise: 'Yes, that's typical. That does happen with us.' (...)

Emina: 'Yes, Turkish guys are generally really jealous. But I don't mind that much, [because] then you know they really love you because they are worried about you.' (Turkish girls)

The Moroccan girls agree that in their culture too, men are generally jealous, but they still think it is quite a stereotypical portrayal, as do the Turkish boys. Similarly, the Turkish and Moroccan groups think that the portrayal of ‘new man’ Veli is not realistic.

Elif: ‘That’s not realistic, really. It’s just not that way in our culture. OK, there are differences between older and younger Turks, we are more modern, but the woman working and the man not working, that’s really impossible.’ (Turkish girls)

All the same, some think that the portrayal of Veli’s traditional friend Osman is too stereotypical and old-fashioned. Again, it becomes clear how hard it is to get it right: while more traditional portrayals may be considered as stereotypical, progressive and politically correct representations may be considered as unrealistic by members of the group that is portrayed.

## Conclusion

Reviewing the findings, a fine-grained pattern of similarities and differences arises. First of all, as to the general attitude towards TV fiction, one is struck by the similarities between ‘Flemish’ and ‘other’ viewers, which fundamentally questions the notion of one ethnically homogeneous nation and the binary divide between ‘autochthones’ (‘us’) and ‘allochthones’ (‘them’) that is still current in Flanders. The focus group participants share many similarities, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. For all, television is an important ‘everyday’ medium and they belong to the same (interpretive) viewing community, although this may be more related to age than to nationality. American fiction is preferred by most, while Flemish fiction does not appeal much, not even to Flemish interviewees. Only respondents of Turkish origin clearly appreciate their ‘own’, native fiction, commenting above all on the higher degree of recognition. This indicates important differences within the supposedly unified category of ‘allochthones’; ethnic groups displaying different levels of identification, with the ‘home’ culture and ethnicity occupying varying positions in their self-identities. Therefore, instead of a binary division, there is a continuum of gradual differences between members of the ethnic majority and different ethnic minority groups. By singling out comparisons between on the one hand Flemish and on the other Moroccan and Turkish media users, scientific research may actually be broadening the gap whilst simultaneously measuring it.

To illustrate the varied position of ethnicity in intersectional self-identities, at the end of the interview respondents were asked whether they considered themselves to be ‘allochthones’. As could be expected, the Dutch do not: although they



are often regarded as 'different', they are similar enough to the Belgians. The Jews consider themselves truly Belgian, stressing they do not belong to the strict Chasidic community which takes up a more isolated position. Moreover, the Jewish participants 'look' Belgian, as opposed to the African respondents, a majority of which feel Belgian but some of whom consider themselves 'allochthones' because of the colour of their skin and the ensuing treatment as 'blacks'. A similar response arises among Moroccan respondents, most of whom feel Belgian but are often treated as different. In contrast, the Turkish respondents do consider themselves to be allochthones, also because they are treated as such: 'If you're always called an allochthone, you also become one' (Murat). Having access to mainstream Turkish television, it is understandable that Turkish respondents identify more strongly with Turkish fiction. Of all the groups that were interviewed, they most clearly constitute a diasporic community, maintaining strong ties to their home culture through the use of media.

The most notable difference between the Flemish/Dutch respondents and the others arises in the discussion around the various representations of ethnic minorities. Theoretically, we can link this to the greater relevance of such images to ethnic minorities (Lind 2004b) and the greater salience of their ethnic identity (Simon 2004), particularly when dealing with images of the own group (Fujioka 2005). Overall, ethnic minority groups are more sensitive to negative portrayals and stereotyping, although we can hardly speak of one shared point of view. While the Flemish and Dutch are generally pleased with the portrayal of ethnic minorities, the opinions in most other groups are mixed: some think there are enough ethnic minority characters in Flemish fiction, some do not; some think these images are realistic, others disagree. Clearly, belonging to the same ethnic group does not make for one unified reading position. More surprisingly, many seem to be little bothered by (the lack of) such images, but rather than concluding that representations of ethnic diversity hardly matter, the point is that their absence in Flemish fiction has become normalised and therefore scarcely noticeable, even to viewers from ethnic minorities.

As mentioned above, the representation of ethnicity on TV seems to bother those represented less than most research on this topic in the past has found. This is interesting on a methodological level, since our research was not presented as research 'about' ethnic minority representations, which suggests that at least part of the unease with representations of ethnic minorities often found earlier may be due to a research context focusing on them. The lack of interest this topic generates may also be specific to the generation (in terms of both age and migratory background); being born in Belgium and sharing a love for 'global' (American) culture with Belgian contemporaries. This throws up questions about the alleged universal importance of cultural proximity, but is in line with Straubhaar's (2007, 196-200) recent addition that other forces, such as genre proximity, influence the preference for certain programs. It is no coincidence that respon-

dents often mention action series as their preferred programs, as this genre is too expensive to produce locally and therefore is closely associated with American TV. Echoing the model of 'intersectional' identities mentioned above, Straubhaar (2007, 221-8) also mentions that viewers have multilayered identities, where specific levels of identity only become more apparent in specific contexts. This is why in the focus groups age is the dominant shared context, with ethnicity only emerging among ethnic minority groups and when ethnicity is explicitly addressed.

In conclusion, it seems necessary to further explore similarities across the ethnic 'us' and 'them' as well as differences within the discursively homogenised 'them'. It is necessary to deconstruct such discursive divisions while acknowledging their actual existence, their occurrence in daily entertainment and their power. Instead of focusing on the contrast between 'black' and 'white', we need to be attentive to the intermediate shades of grey, both on and in front of the screen. Above all, further research is needed to investigate differences in appreciation and intersecting identifications (gender, class etc.) within ethnic groups, a dimension that has not been fully developed in this research.

## Notes

1. There were 80,602 Moroccans and 39,664 Turks on a population of 10,511,382 Belgians in 2004; Algemene Directie Werkgelegenheid en Arbeidsmarkt, 2008.
2. We would like to thank the students of the 2007 research seminar 'Colour on and off screen' for their help with the interviews.
3. All quotes are literal translations by the authors. The names are nicknames chosen by the participants to ensure anonymity.

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