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Interethnic relations at work: Examining ethnic minority and majority members' experiences in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative methods, this study explored ethnic minority and majority members' perceptions of the interethnic relations in their work unit. A total of 219 ethnic minority and majority employees and managers were interviewed, divided over 15 Dutch organizations. It was found that interethnic relations were less harmonious when ethnic differences were perceived to affect people's sense of achievement (e.g., work goals), their sense of belonging (e.g., unity of the group), and their sense of equality (e.g., procedural justice). Such problems were reported more often when ethnic differences were associated with other types of diversity, such as information diversity and value diversity. Less harmonious interethnic relations were reported by ethnic majority group members and in low-skill settings where actual ethnic differences were large. The findings suggest that ethnic differences per se do not necessarily affect interethnic relations in a work setting, but do so only when they are meaningful to individuals or within a particular context.

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1. Introduction

As a result of demographic changes, many organizations around the world are becoming more ethnically diverse. This has created an impetus for a relatively large number of studies on the effects of diversity in work groups. A great deal of this research has explored, often in laboratory settings, how work group diversity affects work group outcomes such as performance and creativity (e.g., McLeod & Lobel, 1992; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Van der Zee, Atsma, & Brodbeck, 2004). A considerably smaller number of studies have assessed interethnic relations and interactions in the workplace. These studies have generally yielded mixed results. While some demonstrate that diversity can have negative effects on group cohesion, give rise to communication difficulties, and result in dysfunctional conflict (for overviews, see: Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), others show that such problems need not occur (e.g., De Vries, 1992; De Vries & Pettigrew, 1998; Dinsbach, 2005).

To date, however, limited attention has been paid to why interethnic relations may be more harmonious in some work settings, and more problematic in others (Jackson et al., 2003; Milliken & Martins, 1996). Generally, relations between workers with different ethnic backgrounds have only been explored as potential mediators of the effects of diversity on work group outcomes. As a result, little is known about how ethnic minority and majority employees and managers experience working in a diverse setting, and under what conditions they are more positive or negative about working with people from different ethnic groups. This study seeks to fill this gap by trying to understand possible barriers to establishing positive interethnic relations at work from the insiders' point of view. How do they evaluate the interethnic relations in their work setting and, if they encounter any difficulties, what do they see as the causes of these difficulties? Do ethnic minority and

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majority members differ in this regard? In what kind of settings do people report on more positive or more problematic interethnic relations? To answer these questions, qualitative data were collected among ethnic minority and majority employees and managers in 15 organizations in The Netherlands.

This paper starts off with a section on ethnic minorities in The Netherlands. Here, more background information is given on their labor market position and on current interethnic relations in Dutch society. Next, a brief review is given of theory and research on interethnic contact in general, and in organizations in particular. This work suggests that, although workplace contact may provide ethnic minority and majority members with an opportunity to establish positive relationships with each other, research on how and when this occurs remains inconclusive. Subsequently, the qualitative study that was used to gain more insight into ethnic minority and majority members' interpretations of the interethnic relations in their work unit is described. Finally, key conclusions are presented and the implications of these findings for research on interethnic relations in organizations are discussed.

2. Ethnic minorities in The Netherlands: socio-economic and socio-cultural integration

In many European countries, issues of cultural diversity are of a relatively recent date. For example, although The Netherlands has a long history of immigration, it has become much more culturally diverse since the Second World War. Since then, three large groups have entered the country. A first group arrived in the 1950s and 1960s and consisted of people from the former Dutch colonies (Indonesia, Surinam, and the Dutch Antilles). A second group arrived in the 1960s and 1970s and was made up of temporary workers from different Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Greece, and Morocco. A third group consists of political and religious refugees. These have increased in number since the mid 1980s and they come from a large number of countries, including former Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan, for instance.

Questions about the integration of different ethnic groups are a source of considerable debate in The Netherlands. Initially, these discussions centered around the socio-economic integration of ethnic minorities. For example, compared to other European countries such as Germany, France, and the UK, the labor market position of non-western minority members in The Netherlands is relatively unfavorable (Koopmans, 2003). Although employment among ethnic minorities has increased over the past few years, the average unemployment levels among the four main ethnic groups are still 3–5 times higher and the net participation rates are lower than among the Dutch native population. Furthermore, long-term unemployment is relatively high among non-western minority members and they occupy, on average, lower job levels (CBS, 2007; SCP, 2003). By and large, this can be explained by factors at the level of the different ethnic groups themselves (e.g., their lower average educational level, their often one-sided work experience, their smaller social networks), at the level of the labor market (e.g., the transition from an industrial to a service-oriented economy), and by so-called institutional factors (e.g., conscious or unconscious discrimination by employers) (e.g., SCP, 2003; Veenman, 2001).

More recently, however, discussions on ethnic minorities focus much more on their social and cultural integration. As a result of international and national events (e.g., 9–11, the electoral success of the right-wing List Pim Fortuyn,¹ the murder on filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Muslim extremist) people have become increasingly concerned about cultural and religious differences between the majority population and ethnic minority groups (Turks and Moroccans in particular), minority members' orientation toward their ethnic ingroup and their Dutch language skills. In public debates, the integration of ethnic minorities into Dutch society has been described as a failure and it has been argued that the multicultural approach in The Netherlands, which the Dutch government adopted in the 1980s, is largely to blame for this. It is often claimed that, compared to other countries with a multicultural policy (e.g., Sweden, The United States), The Netherlands initially put too little effort into assimilating immigrants as active citizens. For example, it attributed multicultural rights to ethnic minorities (e.g., mother tongue instruction at primary schools) and did not actively promote Dutch language training. According to several authors (e.g., Koopmans, 2003; Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, & Passy, 2005) this negatively affected ethnic minority members' cultural and social capital, reinforced their image as a problematic and low-skilled group, and eventually provided a basis for social disadvantage and discrimination as well (e.g., in employment).

The different events abroad and at home seem to have negatively affected the interethnic relations in The Netherlands. Surveys show that the attitudes of native Dutch toward ethnic minorities have become more negative in recent years and that a considerable part of them believes that they make too little effort to adapt. At the same time, ethnic minority members seem to feel that they are not fully accepted in The Netherlands (e.g., Gijsberts, 2004; SCP, 2003; Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006). Moreover, the social distance between ethnic minority and majority group members is relatively large and seems to have been increasing over the past few years (e.g., SCP, 2003). For example, only one in three native Dutch maintain contacts with ethnic minority members in their free time. Conversely, a large majority of Turks and Moroccans (about two out of three) tend to mainly interact with ethnic ingroup members (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005). In addition, they tend to find interactions with Dutch natives less positive than intraethnic interactions (Schaafsma, Nezelek, Krejtz, & Safron, 2007). More

¹ Pim Fortuyn was a charismatic Dutch politician who participated in the Dutch elections in 2002 with the List Pim Fortuyn party. Fortuyn was the centre of several controversies for his views about immigrants and Islam. He rejected the idea of multiculturalism and wanted to reduce significantly the number of immigrants and asylumseekers who arrive in The Netherlands each year. Furthermore, he held a strongly negative position on Islam, which he called a back-warded religion. With his views, Fortuyn gained great popularity among Dutch voters. Nine days before the elections of 15 May, however, he was murdered.

importantly, since the mid 1990s, second-generation minority group members seem to have much more contact with ethnic ingroup members than with majority group members (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005).

These developments make a study on interethnic relations at work all the more warranted. In the workplace, people may have to interact with members of ethnic outgroups whom they would perhaps avoid in their private lives. This may result in tensions, but the workplace may also provide a context in which people can get to know each other and develop more positive attitudes toward each other. Data on interethnic relations in Dutch organizations are scarce, however, and existing research provides a somewhat mixed picture. It shows that minority members are less socially integrated at work and may experience discrimination, but also seem to have more positive attitudes toward their job than majority members (e.g., De Vries, 1992; Dinsbach, 2005; Dinsbach, Feij, & De Vries, 2007). The current study seeks to explore what contributes to more positive or more negative experiences in this regard.

3. Interethnic relations at work: an overview of theory and research

Existing theory and research yields conflicting views on the quality of interethnic relations in workgroups. On the one hand, there is reason to believe that workers in ethnically diverse settings will have difficulty establishing positive relationships with each other. For example, the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) predicts that similarity in attitudes, values or demographic characteristics increases interpersonal attraction and liking, and considerable research has supported this prediction (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986). In contrast, dissimilarity – and ethnic dissimilarity in particular – may lower attraction as it may threaten people's values and norms, negatively affect their self-concept, and make them uncertain and anxious (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 1985). This anxiety may lead people to either avoid interethnic contact (e.g., Plant & Devine, 2003; Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2003) or to respond negatively to such interactions (e.g., Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). In addition, dissimilarity may lead to ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1982), individuals use similarities and differences as a basis for categorizing themselves and others into in- and outgroups and, to maintain a positive self-regard, evaluate ingroup members more positively than outgroup members. Such processes may express themselves in discriminatory acts, which may lead to deteriorating interethnic relations at work.

Several studies have shown that diversity may indeed negatively affect workgroup relations and result in dysfunctional conflict. For example, Pelled, Ledford, and Mohrman (1999) found in a study among ethnic minority and majority employees in the United States that ethnic minority members felt more uncomfortable, and experienced less collegiality and more communication difficulties in their work environment than majority members. In The Netherlands, De Vries (1992) found that, although both ethnic majority and minority employees were neutral or positive about working in a diverse setting, they also reported language problems and cultural differences. These were said to cause misunderstandings and irritation among majority and minority officers. Also, more than half of the informants reported discriminatory remarks directed at themselves or at minority colleagues. More recently, Dinsbach et al. (2007) found that ethnic minority members seemed to encounter difficulties in maintaining personal relations at work. In another Dutch study, Luijters, Van der Zee, and Otten (2008) found that ethnic minority members identify less with their work team than majority group members. Moreover, they found that people who perceived more dissimilarity in cultural values with their colleagues, identified less with the organization and the work team.

On the other hand, however, there is reason to believe that workplace contact may provide ethnic minority and majority members with an opportunity to establish positive relationships with each other. For example, according to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969), contact between in- and outgroup members may lead to more positive intergroup attitudes. This is expected to occur in situations in which there are supportive egalitarian norms and in which people have common goals and equal status, cooperate with each other, have the opportunity to get to know each other, and interact voluntarily (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). One may argue that the workplace is likely to meet many of these conditions. In such a setting, people with diverse backgrounds may become more aware of what they have in common and develop a common ingroup identity (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996). As a result, they may develop more positive feelings toward each other, which may make their interactions easier and more enjoyable.

Nevertheless, although many studies have been performed on the optimal conditions of interethnic contact (for an overview, see: Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), most of these studies have been performed in laboratory settings with artificial groups in low levels of tension or conflict (Dovidio & Esses, 2001). Limited attention has been paid to how ethnic minority and majority members actually experience their everyday encounters in a specific context such as the work place, and how the characteristics of such a setting affect their experiences. For instance, some authors (e.g., Dinsbach, 2005) have suggested that in a relatively diverse environment, majority members may feel more threatened by the presence of ethnic minorities and, as a result, treat minority colleagues less favorably. Others (e.g., Larkey, 1996), however, have suggested that such processes are more likely to occur in ethnically less diverse workgroups because majority group members in such settings will have less experience in dealing with ethnic differences. Yet, it is also possible that this depends on the average job level in an organization. For instance, in The Netherlands first-generation migrant workers (particularly Moroccans and Turks) with a relatively poor command of the Dutch language and a strong orientation toward their culture of origin, are often employed at lower job levels. At the same time, majority group members working at these levels may show greater ethnic distance as well (e.g., Ederveen et al., 2005; Hello, Scheepers, & Slegers, 2006). Under such circumstances, it may be more

difficult for ethnic majority and minority workers to communicate and cooperate with each other (e.g., Brassé & Sikking, 1986; De Vries, 1992).

Workers in the same setting may hold differing perceptions of the quality of the interethnic relations, however. In this regard, some studies suggest that majority members are less sensitive to negative ethnicity-related events than minority members. For instance, in a study by De Vries (1992) majority employees reported fewer incidents of discrimination against minority colleagues than minority employees did. In addition, Dinsbach (2005) found that minority workers were more aware of unequal treatment of ethnic minorities than their Dutch majority colleagues. She proposes that majority members may ignore unequal treatment of minority colleagues so that they do not have to deal with it. Nevertheless, given that few studies have systematically examined both minority and majority members' perceptions of the interethnic relations in their work setting, there is still little insight into how and why their experiences may differ.

In light of the above findings, this paper aims to answer the following three questions:

- RQ1. How do ethnic minority and majority workers and managers evaluate the interethnic relations in their work setting? Specifically, if they encounter any difficulties, what kind of barriers do they perceive?
- RQ2. In what kind of settings do ethnic minority and majority members report on more positive or more negative interethnic relations?
- RQ3. Do ethnic minority and majority members differ in how they evaluate the interethnic relations in their work setting? If so, in what way?

In the following sections, the study that was used to provide answers to these questions is described. This study was conducted in 2001–2002 and involved interview data gathered from ethnic minority and majority members working in different organizations in The Netherlands.

4. Methods

4.1. Organizations and participants

A total of 15 organizations participated in this study. Most of these organizations were manufacturing or distribution industries (with mainly low-skill work and relatively high task-interdependence) or public service organizations (with mainly medium- or high-skill work). The largest firm employed approximately 68,400 employees; the smallest employed 90 people. The percentage of minority staff in these organizations ranged from 3% to 78% ($M = 23.9$, $S.D. = 18.2$). More background information about the organizations is given in Table 1.

Within each department or team, an attempt was made to select an equal number of ethnic minority and majority employees with comparable function levels, plus a manager and, when possible, a human resources manager. In this way, a triangulation of perspectives was acquired. The total sample consisted of 219 participants: 80 ethnic minority employees, 81 majority employees, 52 majority managers and 6 minority managers. The number of ethnic informants in the total sample is considerably smaller than the number of ethnic majority informants because in all organizations, ethnic minority members were underrepresented in positions of authority. A relatively large part of the participants (71.2%) were male (both in executive and in managerial positions), which is consistent with the situation in most organizations in this study. Especially in manufacturing firms, women were underrepresented in the total workforce.

Table 1
Descriptives of organizations in sample

	Type	Average job level	Size ^a	No. of departments in study	Minority staff ^b (%)	Majority informants	Minority informants
1	Retail	Low–medium	53,000	5	7–15	16	7
2	Public service	Medium–high	227	2	16–19	10	8
3	Health service	Medium	773	5	3–78	12	6
4	Health care	High	90	2	8–13	5	3
5	Retail	Low–medium	9,500	1	9	2	3
6	Manufacturing	Low	750	1	42	10	6
7	Manufacturing	Low	68,400	2	13–36	11	9
8	Distribution	Low	540	1	61	14	5
9	Manufacturing	Low	1,200	2	17–22	13	12
10	Manufacturing	Low	410	1	20	8	5
11	Manufacturing	Low	144	1	31	2	1
12	Public service	High	2,150	2	10–12	6	5
13	Public service	High	4,500	2	9–12	6	5
14	Distribution	Low	332	1	60	8	6
15	Public service	Medium	49,400	2	15–17	10	5

^a Total number of employees in organization.

^b Minimum and maximum percentages in the different departments included in this study. Percentages are estimates, based on organizational reports and on oral information given by managers and human resources officers.

Table 2
Descriptives of interview sample

	Minority informants	Majority informants
Sex (male)	70.9%	72.6%
Tenure	83.7%	95.5%
Full-time contract	82.5%	85.2%
Mean Age (min. 19 to max. 65)	35.6 (S.D. = 8.5)	38.4 (S.D. = 10.6)
Educational level (min. 1 to max. 4)	2.3 (S.D. = 1.0)	2.8 (S.D. = 0.9)
Function level (min. 1 to max. 4)	2.4 (S.D. = 0.8)	2.3 (S.D. = 0.7)

The ethnic minority participants constituted a relatively diverse group. The larger part (28) originally came from Turkey, 25 were from Morocco, 22 from Surinam, and 11 from The Netherlands Antilles. More than half (44) belonged to the first generation, 33 minority informants were intermediate generation and 9 were second-generation.² On average, the sample of ethnic minority and majority employees was comparable in terms of function level and educational level. Significantly more ethnic minority than majority workers (16.3% versus 4.5%), however, held untenured positions ($\phi = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$). In Table 2, an overview is given of the main background characteristics of the participants.

4.2. Interviews

Data were collected from August 2001 until October 2002. All interviews were conducted in Dutch and on site, in separate rooms where no other people were present. For practical reasons, all interviews were conducted by the main researcher (native Dutch woman).³ Prior to the interview, participants were guaranteed complete anonymity and were asked permission to tape-record the interview. In total, 83% of the interviews were taped. During each interview, the interviewer also took notes. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 h.

A semi-structured interview was developed which included a series of questions that revolved around three major themes: (1) the integration of ethnic minority and majority employees at work (e.g., clique formation, exclusion of colleagues); (2) interethnic interaction processes (e.g., communication difficulties, tensions and conflicts), and (3) (un)equal treatment (e.g., discrimination). Participants were asked to indicate whether specific events occurred (e.g., “Does it happen that colleagues here at work are discriminated against, or that they say they are being discriminated against?”). They were also asked how often these events occurred, why they thought they occurred, and how they felt about them personally. In addition, they were asked about any personal experiences in this regard (e.g., “Have you ever felt discriminated against in this organization or not?”). Furthermore, informants were asked to indicate what they found most annoying and most pleasant about working in an ethnically diverse setting. In addition, they were asked whether they noticed any differences between ethnic minority and majority colleagues in how they performed their work and interacted with colleagues and managers (e.g., “In your experience, do ethnic minority and majority colleagues differ in terms of their work pace or not?”). They were subsequently asked to describe the dissimilarities they observed, and to reflect on possible causes. The content validity and appropriateness of the questions was established in a pilot study among 29 ethnic minority and majority employees.

During the interviews, a funnel-sequence approach was used whereby more general questions (e.g., about tensions and conflicts among employees in general) were asked first, followed by more specific ones (e.g., about tensions among ethnic minority and majority employees). Moreover, questions that were relatively easy to answer (e.g., on ethnic clique formation) were addressed before more sensitive topics like discrimination and preferential treatment were broached. Similarly, questions dealing with evaluations of ethnic outgroup members were always preceded by similar questions on ethnic ingroup members. Furthermore, questions assessing negative experiences with ethnic outgroup members were generally preceded by a more positively charged question (e.g., a question on what people found most annoying about working with ethnic outgroup colleagues would be preceded by a question on what they found most pleasant about working with them). During each interview, the style of “probing” was kept as non-intrusive as possible (e.g., by formulating “why” questions as “how” questions, by taking informants’ previous statements and turning these into a question, by asking for examples).

² Persons belonging to the first generation of migrants came to The Netherlands after their 18th birthday. The “intermediate” generation consists of persons who came to The Netherlands between their 6th and 18th birthdays. People who belong to the second generation came to The Netherlands before their 6th birthday or were born here.

³ In many organizations, it was uncertain who could be interviewed on what day or at what time of the day as this depended on, among other things, the production cycle. It would have been costly to send interviewers from different ethnic groups to these organizations, with the risk of them not being able to interview any ethnic ingroup employees at all. Of course, it would have been possible to use interviewers and not match them with the ethnic background of the interviewees. Yet, on the basis of previous experiences, the surplus value of this approach for this study was questioned. Using interviewers can have several drawbacks (e.g., lack of motivation, poor interpersonal skills, failure to meet appointments; cf. Leeflang, 2002). Given that, when data collection started, it was still unclear how many organizations and how many participants would take part, it was decided to avoid the risk of obtaining interviews of poor quality.

4.3. Interview analysis

All interviews were typed out as literally as possible, using both the tapes and the notes that were made during each interview. The interviews were not transcribed in as much detail as is often done in, for instance, conversational analysis. While hesitations, repetitions and false starts were transcribed, details such as intonation and timing were not included. Responses were filed according to the topic or the issue addressed, and they were filed separately for ethnic minority employees, majority employees and managers. The coding procedure was also carried out separately for these groups although most of the time, joint categories were constructed afterwards because many of the topics that they introduced were similar. In total, 5475 speech segments were analyzed.

The responses were analyzed thematically and coded in several phases, using an emergent coding process (Creswell, 1998). During the whole coding process, themes and coding decisions were verified through discussions with two other researchers. First, a liberal coding procedure was employed with the aim of developing as many codes as possible. During this phase, emergent themes were identified on the basis of the following foci:

- (a) Whether or not people were aware of any interethnic problems.
- (b) The kind of interethnic problems that occurred and how often these occurred.
- (c) What, in the view of participants, the causes were of these problems.
- (d) Whether there was any pattern between the themes that were found and the background characteristics of the organizations and participants.

These analyses revealed that people most often reported communication problems because of language barriers or cultural differences in social norms (e.g., self-disclosure, verbal and non-verbal expressions, jokes), tensions because ethnic minority members spoke in their native tongue prejudice, ethnic clique formation, ethnic jokes and discriminatory remarks, and the preferential treatment of ethnic minority or majority workers by managers. To a lesser extent, they reported problems because of cultural habits interfering with the work process (e.g., praying during working hours, Muslim workers refusing to follow instructions from a woman or to touch pork) and because of differences in work norms (e.g., work pace, work method, work mentality).

Second, data were elevated to a higher level of abstraction. In this phase, the level one codes were closely examined with the aim of finding trends in the interethnic barriers that were reported. It was found that interethnic problems could roughly be classified according to whether they affected work goals (e.g., miscommunication), interaction processes (e.g., ethnic clique formation), and organizational procedures (e.g., preferential treatment). More generally, causes of interethnic barriers were also divided into categories that were related to ethnic differences (e.g., language, culture, prejudice), and categories that were not related to ethnicity per se (e.g., personality, division of tasks, organizational structure). This paper will primarily focus on causes related to ethnic differences.

To determine the reliability of the coding, two independent raters coded a randomly chosen 5% of the interviews. The percent agreement was 89%. The level one and level two codes were recorded in SPSS, to allow for rudimentary quantitative analyses. In a third phase, the level one and two codes were analyzed on the basis of current academic knowledge (e.g., Glaser, 1978). In particular, attention was paid to whether the problems mentioned by participants reflected dimensions of the contact hypothesis and social identity theory. On the basis of this analysis, three different themes were identified that seemed to explain why diversity would sometimes distract from effective work group functioning in some settings, and not in other settings. In the following sections, these themes will be discussed in more detail. In Table 3, an overview is given of the main themes that were identified during each coding phase.⁴

5. Results

The interviews revealed that most ethnic minority and majority members (73.7% and 71.8%, respectively) found it relatively easy to interact with each other at work. They often made it clear that at work, colleagues need not be similar to each other in cultural or ethnic attributes. What was more important to them were similarities in goals, with employees needing each other to fulfill their tasks. Some participants explicitly reported that this took away people's fear to interact with each other. As one human resources manager put it:

Because the initial reaction you notice with employees is: "We are afraid to say something". But then eventually, the work at hand makes them talk to each other because otherwise, you know, otherwise you won't be able to get things done. (*55-year-old man of Dutch origin, higher professional education, human resource manager in a manufacturing firm*)

In this respect, the achievements and skills needed to reach common goals were often considered more essential than ethnic background, as the following quote illustrates:

Look, it's like I say, here it doesn't matter whether you're a minority or a majority member. You come together, you come here to work, you have the same goals in mind. I just think that it's important to be professional, we are not here

⁴ More detailed information about the coding process is available upon request from the author.

Table 3
Summary of main interethnic barriers at work

Phase III codes: problems affecting people's	Phase II codes: type of problems	Phase I codes: most frequently mentioned interethnic problems	Where or when
Sense of achievement	Work goals are threatened	Language barriers; cultural customs interfering with work process; (perceived) cultural differences in work norms	Low skill units; $\geq 20\%$ minority staff; first generation minority staff; no Dutch language proficiency criteria; no language training; high task interdependency
Sense of belonging	People have difficulty forming individual impression of each other Ethnic subgroups are visible	Language barriers; lack of informal contacts; ethnic clique formation; minority members talk in native language; (perceived) cultural differences in social norms (e.g., norms about self-disclosure); negative attitudes and prejudice	Low skill units; $\geq 20\%$ minority staff; first generation minority staff; unbalanced ethnic composition of teams; lay-out work room or canteen (e.g., separate units or tables); noisy work environment; management too indifferent (not intervening) or too active (e.g., diversity courses focusing too much on cultural differences instead of similarities)
Sense of equality	Unequal norms and treatment	Preferential treatment (by management); discrimination (by colleagues or management)	Low, medium- and high-skill units; either strong focus on diversity (e.g., affirmative action policies, group-based rights) or not enough

for fun. Well, and that often works well. (32-year-old man of Moroccan origin, second generation, professional worker in a public service organization)

Moreover, people were generally more aware of interethnic similarities than differences, especially with regard to work performance and work mentality (the percentages of informants noticing differences ranged from 19% to 37.3%). Interethnic differences were noticed more often during informal contacts at work. The next quote is a good example:

No, I think it's all the same. Only, you see, when you are having a conversation with them and talk about private things, you notice these other things. Then you see like, well, that their culture is just very different. With regard to going out and things like that. No beer, no smoking. And then you see that they are different from us. They can have four or five women, you know. Yeah, that doesn't have anything to do with their actual work but I mean, at home it is all very different. (25-year-old woman of Dutch origin, senior secondary vocational education, manual worker in a distribution company)

Nevertheless, differences between colleagues generally seemed to be acceptable for both minority and majority workers, as long as they did not threaten the unity of the group or interfere with the work at hand. As the previously quoted Moroccan informant put it:

And of course there are some moments when you think: "Oh yeah of course I have to be prepared for things like this" or "That's a bit different" but these are just small things. It's not like, how should I put it, it's not like it interferes with the work.

This, however, does not mean that no problems were reported. Both majority and minority informants observed or personally experienced a variety of interethnic difficulties, either on a structural or on a more incidental basis. In-depth analysis of the interviews conducted reveals that most negative experiences were reported when ethnic differences were perceived to affect people's (1) sense of achievement (e.g., work goals), (2) sense of belonging (e.g., unity of the group), (3) sense of equality (e.g., procedural justice). In Table 3, a summary is presented of these problems and where or when they occurred. Below, these barriers are discussed in more detail.

5.1. Differences affecting people's sense of achievement

The interview data show that people were sensitive to whether ethnic differences affected work group functioning and work goals. For example, in units with more negative interethnic work relations, participants (24.8%, majority members in particular) claimed that cultural or religious prescriptions or convictions (e.g., praying during working hours, Muslim workers refusing to follow instructions from a woman) sometimes conflicted with work norms or interfered with the work process. This was most often reported in departments with low-skilled work and relatively many first-generation minority members.

Much more often than cultural differences, however, language barriers were reported to negatively affect the work process and to interfere with the work goals. This was perceived as one of the main threats (at least among majority members) to a positive interethnic work climate. As one native Dutch manager commented: "It all comes down to

communication in the end. That in itself has nothing to do with these people. You want to accomplish something together, so you need to understand each other”.

Although the majority of the informants (86.6%) confirmed that language barriers regularly (i.e., on a daily to monthly basis) got in the way of effective communication, the most severe communication problems were reported in organizations which, because of the relatively low task complexity, maintained relatively low Dutch language proficiency requirements and did not consider investing in language training. In these settings, Dutch majority participants indicated that it was more time-consuming and complicated to explain work instructions to minority colleagues or to receive work instructions from them. Moreover, work instructions were sometimes misinterpreted by minority workers, causing errors in the work process, such as the use of incorrect (operating) procedures, the discontinuation of a non-stop production process, and, on a number of occasions, (near) accidents or physical injuries. This was reported to contribute, among other things, to an atmosphere of distrust. The following quote from an employee in a manufacturing firm illustrates this situation:

For example, when you are standing there behind a machine, and you say something and he says that he understands and you nearly lose your fingers, then that doesn't really make you happy. That is something that really pisses you off. It is very difficult to build up trust under such conditions, but you often have no choice. (46-year-old man of Dutch origin, pre-vocational secondary education, skilled manual worker in a manufacturing firm)

To a lesser extent, minority employees and managers also underlined that, as a result of language barriers, minority workers less often participated in discussions about work progress and procedures. This not only undermined their influence in decision-making but also made their contribution to the achievement of common goals less visible.

5.2. Differences affecting people's sense of belonging

The data also show that people were sensitive to whether ethnic differences provided a basis for us-versus-them distinctions and as such challenged the unity of the group. In settings where people reported more positive interethnic experiences, ethnic subgroups were hardly visible or not at all, and colleagues with diverse backgrounds seemed to have sufficient opportunities to become better acquainted with each other, either during informal contacts or under working time. This allowed them to compare their (stereotypical) images with day-to-day reality and to form a more personal impression of ethnic outgroup members, which seemed to reduce their fear and distrust in communicating with them. As one native Dutch participant explained, while expressing her aversion of certain ethnic outgroups:

There are certain races I don't like very much. [...] But then I am at work here, and there are plenty of them around and with some of them I can work very well, I don't have any difficulties with them. [...] Well you know what it is, you have known these people for such a long time, you know. I think it has something to do with that as well. You get to know each other. You see, and in the beginning, you are exploring and all, and then you have a certain image of someone and then afterwards it turns out to be wrong because they turn out to be very nice, or maybe not so nice. (42-year-old woman of Dutch origin, manual worker in a distribution company)

In units where people were less positive about the interethnic relations, however, ethnic subgroups were clearly visible and minority and majority group members seemed to have much less of an opportunity to get know each other better. Here, minority employees were reported to take part less in informal social activities, and during lunch and coffee breaks, cliques would be formed along ethnic lines (reported by 34.9% of the minority and 42.4% of the majority informants; $V = 0.16$, $p < 0.10$). The data suggest that this could contribute to or reinforce feelings of cultural and social threat among ethnic minority and majority members. For example, Dutch majority members often interpreted ethnic clique formation as a sign that minority members were unwilling to integrate and rejected Dutch standards. Furthermore, it sometimes seemed to give both minority and majority members the feeling that certain interethnic differences were insurmountable, or would ultimately lead to the social disintegration of their work group. Among native Dutch employees, this feeling was sometimes reinforced when minority members spoke in their native tongue (particularly in departments with relatively many first-generation minority members). They strongly disapproved of this, because it made them feel excluded and was seen as a deliberate rejection of Dutch norms and values. As one interviewee commented: “I am strongly opposed to it; I think it is rude and impolite; it makes me feel like I am being discriminated against as well”.

It was generally believed that language barriers and cultural differences lead to ethnic clique formation and got in the way of people forming a more individual impression of each other. For example, first-generation minority members were reported as having difficulties and themselves reported to have difficulties adjusting to communicative norms. They did not always understand or appreciate jokes or know how to respond to them effectively. Moreover, they seemed reluctant to disclose information about their personal life. As one Turkish-Dutch employee said: “We Turks are not as open as Dutch people. When we talk, we do not talk a lot about personal things, but Dutch people talk about their family and their home.” As a result, they would often find task-related interactions easier than more informal interactions. As another Turkish-Dutch employee explained:

Sometimes it's really difficult. And then I've got to say to them: “I don't understand what you're saying, I really can't follow you”. (I. In what respect, for example?) Well, actually dealing with . . . that waffle and I just. . . When it comes to work I can get along with them very well but when we're amongst ourselves I sometimes really don't understand them

and I think: I am not sure whether you're serious or not. (28-year-old man of Turkish origin, first generation, skilled manual worker in a service organization)

The data also suggest, however, that it is not only differences in cultural norms per se, but also people's assumptions about these cultural norms that made it more difficult for them to form a more individual impression of ethnic outgroup colleagues. For example, majority members sometimes reported that they were reluctant to ask their minority colleagues more personal questions, because they assumed that this would violate their cultural norms. In contrast, minority members sometimes reported that they did not want to disclose too much to their majority colleagues, because they expected these would not understand their cultural background and react negatively.

Moreover, the organizational setting seems to play a role as well. Ethnic boundaries seemed more visible in low-skill settings with a relatively high percentage (> 20%) of (unskilled) first-generation minority staff. In these settings, actual ethnic differences were probably larger than in other settings. Moreover, the structural characteristics of these settings, such as the type of work (e.g., machine work), the work environment (e.g., noisy) and the layout of the workroom (e.g., separate tables) were reported to reduce the opportunities for workers to talk and exchange information during working hours. Some of these settings also seemed much less receptive of diversity than more high-skill settings. This was the case particularly in departments where employees felt that the number of minority staff was too high. In these settings, majority employees were afraid that minority members would outnumber them, or that a more diverse workforce would cause group boundaries to be more clearly marked and reduce workgroup cohesion. For example, one native Dutch employee explained: "Well, it is a fact that people from the same ethnic group are more attracted to each other. That is human. But in a company, that is bad for people's ability to cooperate and communicate". These feelings were sometimes reported to have resulted in hostile attitudes and behaviors towards minority members, and also seemed to seriously reduce their chances to function properly or to stay in the organization. For example, a manager in a production company reported:

So, the moment a minority member enters here then well, he will have to be really good to be able to survive here in the first place. (I. What do you mean by: "to be able to survive"?). Well, that given half a chance, they would try to get rid of him by pestering him. (I. Does that happen?). Yes. (I. In what way for example?). Well, really stupid things like hiding overalls, nasty remarks in the canteen, breaking timecards, little things like that to harass him. (45-year-old man of Dutch origin, manager in a production company)

In this regard, the role of managers is also worth mentioning. The data showed that they could encourage interethnic contacts and make ethnic subgroups less visible by taking relatively simple structural measures (such as changing the layout of the canteen or the ethnic composition of teams). Nevertheless, it was also reported that both a very passive approach (e.g., not interfering) and a very active approach (e.g., organizing diversity courses, trying to make people aware of and respect differences) had sometimes had adverse effects (e.g., giving minority members the feeling that they were being stigmatized, and majority members that they were discriminated against). As one human resources officer explained:

They made everybody go to a meeting [...] on diversity. And this was compulsory. As a result, the whole topic attracted a lot of attention and was put in the spotlights. This has had negative consequences as well, and still has, I think. (I. Why did it have negative consequences?) Well, if you put something in the spotlights and you then take certain decisions that are seen as positive for one particular group, then people think of it as reverse discrimination. (32-year-old woman of Dutch origin, human resources manager in a public service organization)

5.3. Differences affecting people's sense of equality

The previous quote touches upon a third factor that was found to affect interethnic relations at work: whether people believed that the same rules applied to both ethnic in- and outgroup members. For informants who reported on more positive interethnic experiences, egalitarian norms, similarity in task requirements, and equal rights, seemed to make it easier for them to deal with colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds. Particularly in departments with a less diverse staff, people expressed confidence in the fairness of organizational procedures (for instance, trusting that the best candidate would be selected regardless of his or her ethnic background, and that everybody would receive a fair evaluation).

Yet, one of the main complaints of people who reported less positive interethnic relations was that ethnic ingroup members were treated unfairly or that other ethnic groups received preferential treatment. Although minority workers more often felt discriminated against than majority workers (32.5% versus 2.5%, respectively), a nearly equal proportion of minority and majority employees (32.0% and 28.4%, respectively) occasionally had the impression that ethnic outgroups received preferential treatment at work. Minority employees sometimes felt discriminated against when generalizing remarks or jokes were made about their ethnic background. To a lesser extent, they referred to more covert or subtle attitudes or behaviors that had made them feel discriminated against. For example, a Moroccan-origin worker in a manufacturing firm reported: "It is not direct discrimination, but I do feel that I am not welcome here. Sometimes, they do not want to say hello to me or help me". In addition, both minority and majority employees were concerned that decisions were not always made according to fair processes. For instance, minority employees sometimes believed that they had less of a chance to obtain higher-level positions. Majority members, on the other hand, referred to special policies directed at the hiring, promotion or education of minority members, or to examples such as minority colleagues being allowed an extended

leave to visit their home country or being granted permission to take extra hours off during Ramadan. This evoked very strong and negative reactions, as the following quote illustrates:

Here at work, there is a bunch of them who go on vacation for six or seven weeks in a row but if I say: "I want to have four weeks off", they say: "You can forget about your four weeks". And then I say: "And what about them then?". "Well, they have to visit their family". I say: "What are they going to do there? Why don't they just return to live with their family? I did not bring them here." And then they say: "You are discriminating", so then you get that thrown at you. Well, okay. (43-year-old man of Dutch origin, pre-vocational secondary education, skilled manual worker in manufacturing firm)

Minority members tended to voice their objections less openly than majority members when they experienced unequal treatment. Although nearly half of them reported to actively defend themselves whenever they felt discriminated against (e.g., by voicing their objections or by reporting it to a manager), nearly half of them also claimed to withdraw from such situations, for example by avoiding or ignoring certain colleagues or by going on sick leave. Thus, the feeling that one is being treated unequally, whether it be in the form of institutional discrimination, remarks or ethnic jokes, appears to seriously undermine workplace morale and have a negative impact on the relations between workers with diverse backgrounds.

6. Conclusions and discussion

Theory and research on the effects of ethnic diversity in work groups is mixed in that it suggests that it may provide ethnic minority and majority members with an opportunity to establish positive relationships with each other, but that it may also result in dysfunctional conflict and tensions. The aim of this study was to examine minority and majority members' perceptions and interpretations of the interethnic relations in their work setting.

A first question was how ethnic minority and majority members evaluate the interethnic relations in their work setting and what kind of problems they experience. In line with previous studies (e.g., De Vries, 1992), the results of this study suggest that ethnic minority and majority members generally were relatively neutral or positive about working in an ethnically diverse setting. They tended to be more aware of ethnic similarities than differences (especially with regard to work performance and work norms) or they assumed that ethnic differences had become more or less invisible or irrelevant due to the specific job requirements and common work goals that bind people together. As such, similarity in work-related values or skills seems to create an important basis for positive interethnic relations at work.

The findings suggest that ethnic differences per se do not necessarily affect interethnic relations in work settings, but do so only when they threaten people's sense of achievement, sense of belonging, and sense of equality. In line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), it was found that interethnic relations were perceived to be less harmonious when differences hampered the attainment of common goals, got in the way of people forming a more personal impression of each other, or were believed to lead to unequal treatment (i.e., preferential treatment or discrimination) of ethnic minority or majority members. This created or reinforced us-versus-them distinctions and contributed to feelings of distrust, competition, and threat among both minority and majority members.

The data also suggest that this is more likely to happen when ethnic diversity (i.e., social category diversity) is closely linked to other types of diversity such as informational diversity (e.g., differences in educational and linguistic background) and value diversity (e.g., different communicative norms) (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). For example, language barriers were reported to prevent people from performing their tasks or from establishing closer relationships with each other. Language barriers sometimes also provided a basis for us-versus-them distinctions, for instance when ethnic minorities spoke in their native tongue. Moreover, differences in communicative norms and (assumptions about) cultural differences seemed to inhibit the development of strong affective ties among minority and majority group members. The data suggest that in future studies on the optimal conditions for interethnic contact, more attention should be paid to the role of actual differences between groups in values, knowledge and skills, since they are likely to elicit social categorization processes. Moreover, the data suggest that, to establish a positive interethnic climate in organizations, it will not suffice to learn organizational members to value and respect differences, as has been suggested by several researchers (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001; Luijters et al., 2008), but that employers also need to invest in the communicative skills of their employees. In this regard, governments should invest in majority language instruction for immigrants as well, so as to facilitate their integration at work.

Future studies on interethnic contact at work should also incorporate perceptions of inequity and injustice among both minority and majority group members. Previous studies on work floor diversity have mainly focused on whether ethnic minority members felt treated unequally on the basis of their ethnic background (e.g., De Vries, 1992; Dinsbach, 2005). In this study, however, it was found that both minority and majority members experienced such feelings. Regardless of whether such feelings are accurate, they can be very powerful and can polarize group members into ingroups and outgroups. For example, it was found that ethnic majority group members tended to openly voice their discontent when they felt they were being treated unfairly. In contrast, ethnic minority members tended to favor more passive strategies, such as avoiding certain colleagues or taking sick leave. This is in line with previous Dutch studies (e.g., Dinsbach, 2005) showing a positive relationship between perceived discrimination and turnover intentions. More insight, however, is needed in what causes such feelings, and how they affect both minority and majority group members.

A second question that was addressed in this study is in what kind of settings ethnic minority and majority members experience more positive or negative interethnic relations. It was found that the type of difficulties that were experienced and the extent to which they affected people were clearly related to the work context. For example, informants from departments with high-skilled professional work and a relatively small percentage of minority staff, reported a relatively small number of serious problems, none of which were structural. In these units, participants were either neutral or positive about working in a diverse setting. More negative interethnic relations were reported in low-skill units. Most likely, this is because ethnic differences were relatively large in these units. For example, they employed relatively large numbers of first-generation minority members with a generally relatively limited command of the Dutch language, and a possibly strong orientation toward their heritage culture. Possibly also, ethnic differences were more meaningful or more noticeable in these settings, because people more often worked together in teams and were more dependent on each other for their day-to-day tasks (e.g., [Jehn et al., 1999](#)).

At the same time, more structural characteristics of settings with low skill work, such as the layout of the workroom, reduced workers' opportunities to talk and exchange information during working hours and to form a more individual impression of each other. In addition, the climate in these settings seemed less receptive of diversity. For example, in these units, majority employees sometimes felt threatened by the presence of large numbers of minority group members and feared that minority members would eventually predominate or "have a bigger say than Dutch people" at work. As a result of these feelings, interethnic relations may have been tenser and minority members may have been treated less well (e.g., [Dijker, 1987](#); [Dinsbach, 2005](#); [Smith, 1993](#)). The findings also suggest that managers can contribute to such feelings by either ignoring tensions, or by focusing too much on ethnic differences per se, which may make people more anxious and interethnic boundaries more rigid.

A third question that this study set out to explore was whether ethnic minority and majority members differ in their evaluation of the interethnic relations in their work setting. The data suggest that they tended to mention similar interethnic barriers, but that they sometimes differed in how meaningful these barriers were to them. For example, majority members more often reported interethnic problems than minority members and they also seemed to react more strongly to certain ethnicity-related events (e.g., clique formation along ethnic lines, use of minority languages, preferential treatment). This contrasts with previous research in which ethnic minority members seemed more sensitive to ethnicity-related events such as unequal treatment or discrimination (e.g., [De Vries, 1992](#); [Dinsbach, 2005](#)). Possibly, different results were found in this study because a relatively broad range of topics was covered in the interviews, dealing not only with discrimination, but also with other behaviors and events (e.g., clique formation, conflicts, language barriers) which are likely to be equally or even more threatening to majority members. Besides, the questions dealing with discrimination and preferential treatment focused on minority as well as majority members.

It is also possible that certain interethnic barriers (e.g., language problems) were more meaningful for majority group members because they fit within their cognitive frame of reference, such as their stereotypes or beliefs ([Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 1996](#)). Furthermore, status differences may have played a role. For example, previous research indicates that members of high-status groups identify more strongly with the ingroup and show more ingroup bias and than do members of low status groups (e.g., [Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992](#); [Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992](#)). Ethnic minority members may also have been more aware of their relative standing in the status structure (e.g., [Ellemers et al., 1992](#)), and have been more reluctant to share negative experiences with the interviewer than majority group members. In this respect, the fact that the interviews took place in a period (2001–2002) in which national and international events (such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and the electoral success of the List Pim Fortuyn) negatively impacted the relations between ethnic minority and majority group members in The Netherlands, may also have played a role. Whereas before that period, public debates rarely contained explicit negative references to ethnic minorities, anti-immigrant sentiments were now openly expressed ([Koopmans et al., 2005](#)). This may have made it easier for majority group members to talk about interethnic problems during the interviews.

The fact that a native Dutch woman conducted all the interviews may have affected the results as well. Obviously, using only one interviewer creates the risk of introducing a bias in the results due to personal appearance and other interviewer effects. Perhaps more important, however, is that the ethnic background of interviewer and participants did not always match. Yet, not all social scientists agree whether matching the ethnic background of interviewer and participants yields more reliable data. On the one hand, some researchers (e.g., [Meloan & Veenman, 1990](#)) have warned against a "racial difference bias" that can occur when the interviewer belongs to the dominant group in society and the participants belong to lower status minority groups. In this case, minority members may fear negative consequences and give more socially desirable responses. On the other hand, other authors (e.g., [De Vries, 1992](#)) have suggested that minority members may fear the evaluation of ethnic ingroup members, which may also lead to social desirability. Or, they may assume that an ethnic ingroup interviewer is familiar with certain experiences, and thus fail to mention them or not describe them in detail.

In this study, both ethnic minority and majority group members generally seemed at ease during the interviews and willing to discuss sensitive issues, although first-generation minority informants sometimes tended to be somewhat reluctant to speak up, in particular at the beginning of the interview. Yet, this also depended on the organizational context. For example, in one organization where several ethnic minority employees were bullied, some of them seemed more hesitant to talk about negative experiences. By and large, however, most ethnic minority and majority informants seemed to appreciate being given the opportunity to tell about their own ideas and experiences. Moreover, there were no differences in the extent to which they talked about some of the more sensitive issues, such as personal conflicts with colleagues. Also, the

findings from this study do not seem to deviate meaningfully from findings from earlier studies in which ethnic minority interviewers were used (e.g., De Vries, 1992). Nevertheless, the possibility that informants' responses were affected by the ethnic background of the interviewer can not be ruled out completely.

Despite this limitation, this study provides a number of valuable insights. It shows that, although national and international events negatively impacted the relations between ethnic minority and majority members in The Netherlands at the time the study was conducted, relations between workers with different ethnic backgrounds were not necessarily negative. Moreover, the findings suggest that the workplace may provide ethnic minority and majority members with an opportunity to establish positive relationships with each other. For this to happen, however, ethnic differences should not get in the way of people effectively performing their tasks and developing closer ties with each other, or be used as a basis for the differential treatment of ethnic minority and majority group members.

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