



‘Some Others are more Other than Others’

- A Comparison of the Social Dynamics in Two French Course Groups at a Sociocultural Activity Centre for Immigrant Women in Brussels



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In memory of my loving grandmother, who passed away as I was beginning this writing process. Through her life accomplishments she epitomised that women can achieve anything despite sometimes having limited opportunities.

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1. INTRODUCTION: Intercultural Encounters

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 My Way into the Field

My fieldwork took place from January until mid-June 2007 at the *Espace Couleurs Femmes* (ECF), a sociocultural activity centre for women of all nationalities – mainly foreign – from the ‘popular strata’¹ in Brussels, Belgium.

I would like to commence explicating why and how I ended up in Brussels and my motivation for conducting this fieldwork. For years I have been concerned with justice and equality, particularly with respect to gender. Furthermore, I have gradually developed an interest in the integration of immigrants in ‘the West’, especially Norway, where integration policies – in my assessment – appear to be rather unsuccessful. At some point, I began reflecting on *why* successful interaction between the majority and newcomers proved so difficult to achieve. Linking immigration issues with a gender perspective, immigrant women became a focus, and I found that these women were frequently portrayed in a biased and patronising manner.

Moreover, I have spent shorter and longer periods of time abroad in both industrialised and so-called ‘developing’ countries around the world; several times in the form of study trips with an explicit educational purpose. I myself have struggled with foreign languages, incomprehensible customs, and feelings of estrangement and frustration. On the other hand, I have found friends of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, enjoying the rich experience of intercultural encounters when all differences were forgotten and replaced by the sheer happiness of good company. I am still utterly intrigued by intercultural encounters – why do they sometimes ‘work’ smoothly; whilst at times everything appears to go wrong, leaving actors feeling awkward and frustrated? What mechanisms are at work to influence whether an intercultural encounter succeeds or fails? These questions may be seen as my general point of departure.

The thought of going to Brussels came to me during a one-year exchange in Montreal in the final year of my Bachelor’s degree. Planning to take a year off, I wanted to participate in an EU work-exchange program where young people can work abroad for a certain period of time. Given that I wished to keep up my French, I searched for integration-related social work, preferably with women, in French-speaking countries. In Brussels I discovered and contacted two sociocultural activity centres run by a feminist association. I got a reply from one of them, but unfortunately I was told that they would stop receiving volunteers. However, when starting my master’s in the autumn of 2006, I thought once again about the centres in Brussels; they appeared

¹ My translation of *milieux populaires*, a term used by the association behind the centre, the *Vie Féminine*, to describe the centre’s target group. In this thesis, all ECF terminology and quotes made by my informants have been translated by me, unless otherwise stated.

to me a very tempting fieldwork location. I contacted the centres yet again, and finally Julia Mendez², the coordinator at the *Espace Couleurs Femmes*, welcomed me to do my fieldwork there.

While being happy about this, I was struggling to specify the problematics of my project proposal. I was still preoccupied with the encounter between the women and conveying their diversity, in order to contest the stereotypical representation of immigrant women, e.g. in the media. Nevertheless, I ended up with a project proposal focusing on the encounter between the volunteers and the visiting women. During the course of my fieldwork, my focus of attention changed yet again as I discovered that I did not get enough data on my chosen topic. On the one hand, such alterations can be seen as a methodological weakness since I might not have paid sufficient attention to all issues related to my current matter of study and thus may have missed relevant data. However, this is not unique to my fieldwork, and Blumer emphasises the significance of research adjustment: ‘Whatever be the case, the form of the social interaction is a matter for empirical discovery and not a matter to be fixed in advance.’ (1969:54). The result of my research modification was returning to my initial focus: the women themselves and the way they interacted. My analysis will focus on *a comparison of the premises for identification³ and communication among immigrant women in two French course groups at the Espace Couleurs Femmes*.

I will now give an outline of the overall ethnographic context of my fieldwork.

1.1.2 Belgium: A History of Immigration

Belgium is a small Western European country of 10.4 million people, living on only 30.000 square kilometres (CIA World Factbook website). The country is culturally sharply divided, and since 1993 it has been a federal state comprising three regions: the Flemish Flanders; the French Wallonia; and the bilingual Brussels, where the majority speak French (Europa World Online). Legal immigrants with foreign citizenship and their offspring comprise 8.8 percent of the Belgian population (Migration Information Source [MIS] website). According to the *CIRÉ*, a coalition of associations working for the rights of refugees and foreigners in Belgium, there are about 100.000 illegal immigrants in the country⁴.

After the World Wars, Walloon industries started recruiting workers from e.g. neighbouring countries, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Turkey. At the end of the 1960s, the EC Treaty of Rome was implemented, dividing immigrants into two categories: Europeans enjoying many legal rights and so-called ‘third-country nationals from non-EU countries’ facing ‘various

² To protect the identity of my informants, all names have been changed.

³ I here refer to Richard Jenkins’ concept of identification, on which I will elaborate in chapter two. Briefly, it can be described as the way individuals and collectivities are distinguished from one another in social relations (2004:79).

⁴ This number was presented by a representative of the *CIRÉ* on a workshop organised by the association *Vie Féminine*.

forms of legal discrimination' (MIS website). This was followed by liberal family unification policies, to make workers stay and counter demographic stagnation in Belgium. Since the 1974 immigration stop more immigrants come from within the EU; the number of asylum seekers, undocumented workers, and foreign students has increased; and generally, immigrants have a higher level of education. From the 1980s onwards, there have been problems of racism and discrimination⁵.

The immigration policies of Belgium are closely connected to those of the EU. State policies aim to integrate immigrants, and since the year 2000 any foreigner with legal residence has been able to obtain Belgian citizenship. However, this has been accompanied by policies restricting immigration. The regions and the Flemish, the French, and the German-speaking communities⁶ are responsible for integration policies (Gsir, Martiniello, Meireman, and Wets 2005). Since the various bodies have dissimilar approaches, there is no unitary Belgian integration model. In addition to public agencies, many NGOs are also involved in integration issues.

In 2006 registered foreigners constituted 274.000 out of the total Brussels population of about 1 million (FPS Economy Directorate-General Statistics Belgium). My informants have given me the impression that many immigrants coming to the Brussels Capital Region suffer due to the bilingualism (Flemish and French) criteria of employment: you have to master the two languages to get (declared) work in the public sector in Brussels. This poses a great challenge particularly to immigrants, many of whom do not speak either of the two languages at arrival. Thus, many are unemployed and those who are working often do this undeclared.

1.1.3 The *Espace Couleurs Femmes* (ECF)

Brussels – bringing together Flemings and Walloons, housing important institutions like the EU and NATO headquarters, as well as being the home of nearly a third of Belgium's immigrants – is called the Capital of Europe, and both culture and *cuisine* reflect the city's international character. The centre *Espace Couleurs Femmes* (ECF) is situated in Ixelles, one of Brussels' 19 *communes* (municipalities). In Ixelles, about 31.000 out of 78.000 inhabitants are foreigners, i.e. a noteworthy 40 percent, and the rate is increasing (official Ixelles 2006 statistics). There are 173 different nationalities in Ixelles; the largest groups of people coming from neighbouring countries, the Mediter-

⁵ E.g. the right-wing political party Flemish Interest has gained increasingly more support due to its hostility towards immigration, the fear of terror has increased, and Muslims are forbidden to wear headscarves in public schools (*Time* magazine February 28th 2005).

⁶ Belgium has a highly complex political system, which it is outside the scope of my thesis to describe in depth, but briefly, the regions are political bodies based on territory while the communities are units based on language and culture (*La Communauté Française de Belgique*).

ranean, Western Europe, and Morocco. There is also an African community/neighbourhood dominated by Congolese coming after former colony Congo's 1960 independence from Belgium.

The ECF has existed since 1997, as one among several so-called *espaces femmes* provided by the feminist association *Vie Féminine* (*Vie Féminine* website). The centre is a non-profit organisation without any regular funding except for remuneration of the coordinator, receiving financial support from the Ixelles municipality and the Brussels region for specific projects⁷. During my stay the ECF comprised 24 volunteers (including me), one full-time employed coordinator, and until mid-March there was a part-time employee working one and a half day per week. 16 volunteers work during the day and eight in the evening, but most of them are only present at the time of their own courses, after which they leave. The volunteers come from among others Belgium, France, Morocco, Denmark, Colombia, and Vietnam, and thus constitute an intercultural collectivity themselves.

There is only one male daytime volunteer, while there are more men in charge of the evening courses. Julia, the coordinator, says that the *espaces femmes* are supposed to be a women-only environment, as this makes female visitors – often vulnerable due to a difficult life situation – feel more secure. The women experience problems of seclusion; marriage and divorce issues; lack of access to training and decent employment; difficulties of finding proper, affordable accommodation; physical and mental health problems; and struggles for the right to asylum. At daytime there are mostly North African Arab (especially Moroccan) and some Latina⁸, Asian, and African women. In the evening, groups are more mixed with regards to nationality and sex. As many of the visitors have problems communicating in French, it is practical that the coordinator is Spanish and thus easily communicates with the many Latina women.

According to Julia, there are normally about 150 visitors attending each week, but I would estimate this number to be lower during my stay, due to a lack of regular attendance. There are 11 courses in total at daytime each week, and four French evening courses. The day courses include Alpha 1 and 2 reading and writing – literacy courses for those who are illiterate in their native language; beginner, intermediate, and advanced French; English; beginner and advanced sewing; gym; dancing; and computer lessons. The ECF also offers a range of activities like health and citizenship workshops and cultural visits. Information on the centre and its services is generally spread by word of mouth. Subscription to courses costs 20 euros each term.

⁷ Personal communication with the coordinator on November 7th and 8th, and December 10th 2006.

⁸ The Latina category usually refers to Latin American women and perhaps Spanish-speakers in particular, but I choose also to include Portuguese-speaking Brazilians and those from Spain when using this term.

1.1.4 Ideology, Methodology, and Priorities

The ECF was founded by a Belgian, Christian, feminist women's rights organisation, *Vie Féminine* (VF). The VF sees the world as a patriarchal system with one sex dominating the other, and is promoting economic, political, and sociocultural equality between the sexes (*Vie Féminine* website). According to the ECF, immigration is enriching to Belgian daily life, and Julia is encouraging the public to be conscious of the sociocultural diversity of the community, e.g. through events presenting ECF activities (Mendez 2006). Moreover, the ideology of the centre assumes that all women share some universal values⁹ and experiences despite any social and cultural differences. The ECF is attempting to develop bonds of solidarity between and provide immigrant women with the opportunity to express and make sense of these experiences, discuss their problems, and make plans for the future.

VF and ECF activities are based on the principle of *éducation permanente* (EP). EP methodology has got four principles: knowing oneself, developing one's personal talents, and perceiving what is going on in one's social and political surroundings as well as achieving the ability to collectively change these (*Espace Couleurs Femmes* 2005). Julia describes EP as a kind of philosophy invented by a priest, taking people's lives as its point of departure. The idea is that a group of people in a school, neighbourhood, etc. come together to discuss and find solutions to their own problems. Similarly, women of different cultural backgrounds can meet at the ECF and talk about and solve their problems together. The objective is to make the women 'complete citizens'¹⁰ (ECF 2005). For the time period 2007-2008 the main priority of the ECF is women's rights, and the aim is to heighten the women's awareness and knowledge of this topic. This is one of the concrete manifestations of EP, and it is supposed to be implemented through workshops based on the women's own wishes – a process that started during my fieldwork.

1.2 Methodological Considerations

1.2.1 My Tasks

Arriving at the ECF, I became surprised when I was asked to be an *animatrice*¹¹ in the intermediate French class for one of their two weekly courses. Albeit I did not feel sufficiently competent for the task, I accepted, feeling obliged to pay back some of the generosity the centre had showed by

⁹ By this Julia implied 'solidarity, friendship, peace, a wish to learn together'.

¹⁰ The ECF employs the expression *citoyennes de part entière*.

¹¹ According to Lexilogos Français the term implies 'she who, by means of her temper, qualities, or activity (often professional) towards a group or a public causes emulation, interest, or increase of activity' (my translation). The term is generally used to describe anyone in charge of a group, seminar, etc. In the VF and at the ECF, *animatrice* is preferred over teacher to stress dissimilarity with schools; the ECF is supposed to provide its visitors with notions of citizenship and rights, in addition to the 'teaching' of the courses.

letting me come. Besides, this would be a perfect opportunity to conduct participant observation, increasing my understanding of the women's interaction.

After I had settled in at the ECF, my week would look more or less like this: I spent two lessons and lunch with the advanced French group, taught one lesson in the intermediate group, occasionally I taught some 'private lessons' for a Colombian girl who needed extra attention since she started her French course later than her co-students, and I attended the gym lesson and the intercultural dance organised by the ECF. I also went to various meetings with the coordinator, helped her with different kinds of practical tasks, and sometimes I replaced her at the office. Moreover, it proved advantageous for my communication with some of the women that I speak Spanish and English, and occasionally I mediated as an English translator, since Julia does not speak English. Usually I was at the ECF three days a week, sometimes more, from nine in the morning until sometime in the afternoon. I often left when classes were finished and I had completed my other tasks, going home to get some peace and quiet for typing my field notes¹². However, at times I also participated in meetings, rehearsals, preparations, etc. that took place in the late afternoon or early evening.

At the ECF, I felt free to do more or less as I pleased and I was able to run my own day. Still, being an *animatrice* gave me responsibilities that limited my access in certain situations. E.g., sometimes I could not be together with the women in the advanced group even though I knew they were discussing interesting topics like women's roles – potentially disclosing differences between my informants – since I had to assist the coordinator or some of the other volunteers. Moreover, taking field notes while teaching proved to be quite challenging; I rarely had the opportunity to get precise quotes from the women and I had to rely on my memory when taking notes after class, something that of course affected the accuracy of my data. However, I made some keywords during class to help memorising important matters.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I frequented many different courses to get acquainted with the ECF activities, but I soon realised that I had to concentrate on only a few. More or less by chance, I ended up focusing on two groups: the intermediate French group and the advanced French one. The intermediate group was a 'natural' choice to make, since I 'had' to be in that group anyway. I also had spent a lot of time with and liked being in the advanced group, so I decided to make it my other group of study. Besides, it made sense to select two language course groups, thinking they would make a better comparison than one French and one activity-based (gym, computer, etc.) group, which in the end proved too complicated in terms of getting comparable data. Finally, I was interested in what I early on perceived as rather important differences in

¹² I lived in a house with other young Europeans in the neighbouring *commune*, a thirty-five minute walk from the ECF.

the social dynamics of the two groups. Since I spent twice as much time with the advanced group as with the intermediate, I also have much more data on the former. This implies that the advanced group will play a more central part in my analysis, but I intend to use data retrieved from this group to make comparisons disclosing significant differences in the social dynamics of the two groups.

1.2.2 My Role

The Two Groups

As I have indicated, and as subsequent chapters of my thesis will make clear, the differences in social dynamics of the two groups will almost certainly have influenced my ‘professional’ and social relations with them in different ways. In the intermediate group I was actively participating through my ‘position’ as *animatrice* with all its corresponding authority. The women, most of whom had previously been to other language courses, called and perceived me as a ‘teacher’. I tried to counter this by stating that I was in fact no teacher and that I made linguistic mistakes like them. Furthermore, I think my status as foreigner – unlike my Belgian co-*animatrice* – might to some extent have diminished the social distance between us. Still, they addressed me with the polite form of you, *vous*¹³, and called me *Madame*, something that bothered me – partly because the great majority of the women were much older than me. In short, despite my wishes, I remained the *professeur* (teacher), retaining an involuntary formal distance to the women.

The contrast to my role in the advanced group could not have been much greater. There I was a more ‘invisible’ assistant who occasionally helped out, trying to answer the women’s questions on grammar, and once substituting one of the *animatrices*. Usually I was just observing what was going on, taking notes. My role was much more informal and I got into much closer contact with these women. There are several reasons for this, the first being that I felt more at home in this group, where the women frequently discussed politics and other topics with which I am familiar. In addition, I spent more time with them – two classes and lunch every week. One should definitely not underestimate the importance of such informal settings as lunch, where I got to see a whole different side of the women, chatting on in a relaxed way. They were very hospitable, inviting volunteers and anyone else present to join them for a snack or a meal. I also think it rather important that I never gained the same kind of authority in the advanced group as I did in the intermediate, playing a more secluded role with my quiet field note writing and thus appearing more approachable. Finally, the women in the advanced group participated in other ECF courses and activities; accordingly I could observe them in other settings too.

¹³ I, on the other hand, used the informal *tu* as did the rest of the volunteers, something that has been common in most of the French and Spanish courses I have attended around the world.

Individuals

I think the obvious differences in my relation to the two groups were both due to their differing linguistic competence and their perception of my role. A similar difference can be found in my relation to the various women as individuals: some kept a distance towards me while others confided in me, and I too approached some of them more easily than others. The reason why some informants become more important than others who might perhaps have been just as interesting, is closely linked to the personal attributes of ethnographers and their informants, as well as personal chemistry between the parties.

For instance, during my fieldwork, Togolese Ayaovi appeared to be an interesting character with whom I would have liked to get better acquainted. Having been through some rough times, she was independent, respected and admired by the others, and stayed determined to accomplish her aims in life. However, towards me Ayaovi was reticent and she was rather unwilling to answer certain questions when I interviewed her, not understanding their purpose and protecting her privacy. My general point is that I, like all ethnographers, saw some of my informants more from the outside than others, individuals and groups being more or less inclusive and exclusive. This obviously affects the 'objectivity' in my descriptions of both groups and individuals. However, this does not necessarily pose great problems as long as one is aware of it when interpreting data during the writing process.

Type of Fieldwork

One obvious limitation with my fieldwork is that I have almost exclusively observed the women of any group in the setting of the centre. Thus I have only seen them perform a limited set of roles, and most of the information obtained on extra-centre activities stems from the women themselves. This weakness is more prevalent in the advanced group than in the intermediate. In the latter, the women hardly ever socialise outside the centre, so what I observed was what they saw too – they did not bring with them to the ECF any baggage in terms of internal interaction; while in the former, several of the women met outside classes and I was only able to distinguish parts of what participants brought with them into the encounter with one another. Furthermore, in such a small field the ethnographer becomes extremely visible, and possibilities of integrating depend on which roles one takes and is given.

Given these limitations, I argue that such a 'bounded entity' study can be justified by my objective being simply to observe encounters between the women *at* the centre. In W. F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1955), a study of an urban local community, he demonstrates that an analysis of the social structure of various groups provides insight into the social dynamics of the local

community. The objective of my study is much less comprehensive in scope; yet, I argue, of general interest: I seek to outline the forms of communication taking place between a variety of immigrant women, and thus a centre like the ECF situated in the multicultural municipality of Ixelles seemed a pertinent location for my study.

1.2.3 Ethics and Positioning

Information, Comprehension, and Consent

One of the most difficult ethical dilemmas with respect to conducting fieldwork at the ECF concerned making sure that my informants were well aware of both the confidential nature of my fieldwork and my reason for conducting it, and that they actually consented to disclosing relevant information for this explicit purpose. I presume this is a common challenge for all ethnographers working with people who are in some ways ‘underprivileged’. Albeit some of the women were used to students coming by to collect information from time to time (Ayaovi actually expressed her annoyance about this), my long-term study must have been fairly difficult to comprehend. I told them that I was going to write a thesis focusing on the intercultural aspect of communication among immigrant women, based on my observation in class. I also said that I would like to ask them about their personal backgrounds and their motivation for attending the ECF.

I repeatedly explained what I was doing and why, and the women confirmed that they understood. Yet, when doing the interviews, I realised that several of them had in fact not understood at all. This applied particularly to the intermediate group, and I think it can be linked to the level of linguistic competence and perhaps also to the level of education and general knowledge, both of which seemed to be lower in the intermediate group. Furthermore, although I stressed that participation in my study was completely voluntary, I could not help feeling that it would be hard for the women – especially the intermediate group – to refuse the *animatrice* (me), after all possessing a position of authority. Still, all consented and some of the advanced group participants even showed enthusiasm for and interest in my project, inviting me to pose questions.

Language

I think that language can be considered both as a limitation and an asset in my fieldwork experience. As my subsequent analysis will indicate, the Arabs in my two groups of study tended to switch to Arabic on several occasions. Since I do not speak or understand Arabic, I had no idea as to what they were discussing unless they translated it. Hence, I found myself in the same position of incomprehension as the other non-Arab women, who regularly complained about the speaking of Arabic. If I had spoken the language, I might have gotten an even better understand-

ing of the relations between the Arab and non-Arab women. However, my lack of such linguistic competence also facilitated empathy with the non-Arabs' feeling of being excluded, something that might have been easier to miss had I not experienced it myself. Furthermore, it would have been more difficult for the non-Arabs of my group to approach and give me their opinions on this matter; instead I think they felt that they could more easily confide in me. As this usually happened after class, I don't think it was acknowledged by the Arabs or created any distance between them and me.

Ideology and Representation

Before coming to the ECF, I was prepared that being a feminist who sympathised with the project and aim of the centre would prove a challenge during fieldwork. At times it was definitely so, e.g. when I was supposed to be in charge of talking to the intermediate group about women's rights. I had to be very careful about not imposing my own views on the women, while simultaneously I was obliged to provide them with some new perspectives. I tried to present some facts about women's issues, asking them to give their own opinion on the matter. However, this proved to be quite difficult. Either they did not understand all my questions due to linguistic or cultural barriers of some sort, or they were not used to being asked to take a stance on something themselves – perhaps both. Sometimes I succeeded in creating discussions, but I kept feeling that there might be a cultural barrier impeding mutual comprehension.

Once I invited the women to discuss the value of work in a gender perspective, and generally they seemed to agree that women's work is just as valuable as men's work. Moroccan Fatma, however, justified men's higher wages stating that they are paid more precisely because they have a (house-)wife and family for whom to provide, their higher salary comprising an indirect payment of the wife. I, on the other hand, tried to point out that this logic legitimised women's economic dependency on their husbands' income. Besides, it does not explain wage differences between men and women doing the exact same work. Fatma actually agreed with this last point, but she still seemed completely resigned. Of course, our difference of opinion might have been a result of ideological differences, but Fatma's age (about 50) and background (a Moroccan housewife with five children and a disabled husband) must also be taken into account.

In general, handling diversity was a great challenge both during fieldwork and during the writing process. As previously indicated, to some extent every ethnographer, despite her efforts to get in close touch with her informants, remains an outsider. As an outsider, one risks making categorisations instead of really listening to and trying to make sense of the informants' own experiences and perceptions. Preventing this to happen becomes particularly vital in a fieldwork

focusing on matters like identification and communication. To view everything from the majority's point of view instead of the women's – as in the example of Fatma – would have been a serious mistake to make. In my discussion, I must never stop asking myself from which perspective I am representing various actors. I imagine that my status as a non-francophone foreigner might have modified this bias somewhat, since I shared some experiences with the women.

The Conflict

The last four-five weeks of my fieldwork, there was a conflict going on in the advanced group, the content on which I will elaborate in my later analysis. However, it seems pertinent to mention some more practical and ethical questions related to this conflict now. Briefly, several minor occurrences escalated into a rather fierce conflict not long before I was leaving the field. At first, I must admit that I found it quite interesting and intellectually enriching, given all the data the event generated. However, as the conflict evolved, I was sad to see people I had come to know and care about in an argument that I thought had been blown out of all proportion.

On the one hand, I experienced that various actors tried to persuade me that they were right and the others wrong, making an effort to 'win' me over to their side. This was interesting but also uncomfortable, as I – having my personal opinion – preferred to stay 'neutral' instead of taking sides. On the other hand, I could not bear the thought of leaving them whilst they were still quarrelling. So, my last day at the ECF, also being the last lesson before the summer holidays, I did what is perhaps the last thing an ethnographer should do; I meddled. Beforehand, *animatrice* Geneviève had told me that she intended to invite everyone to briefly present their point of view to try to solve the conflict. I looked forward to this, and was rather disappointed when she – without any explanation – declared that she would not be doing it after all. That was when I decided to make my little 'speech' to the women. I will not go in depths on what I said but will return to this point later. The fact that I did interfere in the first place was definitely not unproblematic, but as I waited until the very end of my stay before doing it at least I do not think it affected my data or my relationship with my informants in any direct way.

As I have tried to show, my personal interest and ideology may in some ways have been problematic in my interaction with the women, but Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz nuance this somewhat, acknowledging that 'Ethnographers of communication have the difficult task of experiencing in order to uncover the practical strategies of others while at the same time becoming so involved that they themselves become one of the main focuses of their own inquiries.' (1982:10). A rather high degree of personal involvement is thus required to conduct a fieldwork

like mine; the challenge is to balance involvement and ‘neutrality’ (if any such exists), and I think most of the time I managed this reasonably well.

1.2.4 Data Sources and Methods

My data sources stem from observation; participation through teaching and other activities; ECF participants’ personal files¹⁴; conversations; and informal, semi-structured interviews where most of the questions were prepared beforehand but with room for improvisation. Throughout my entire stay I did several very informal interviews with the coordinator, whom I gradually considered more as a friend than a boss. Since these ‘interviews’ were conducted in such a friendly manner, I prefer to call them conversations, and I mainly used them to obtain facts and information about the centre.

With respect to more sensitive subject matters, sometimes it is easier for informants to be ‘true’ and express their genuine opinions in conversations and interviews with an outsider than in their interaction with other informants. Yet, as with Ayaovi, the value of conversations and interviews depends on the relationship between the ethnographer and the interviewee. Moreover, certain sensitive questions may only be answered indirectly through observing the informants’ interaction and communication, as they might feel awkward talking about them openly.

Practical Implementation

Interviews were conducted with three volunteers and all the more or less ‘regular’ members of the two groups. I interviewed six participants in the intermediate group, eight women from the advanced, one who changed from the former to the latter, and one who participated in both groups; totally three volunteers and 16 visitors. The interviews generally lasted from 30-90 minutes, usually 30-45 with the visitors and sometimes a bit longer with the volunteers. I did not use a tape recorder, as the one I had did not function despite my repeated efforts of making it work. This is obviously disadvantageous in that I have to rely solely on my memory, might have forgotten some things, and I do not have as many direct quotes from the interviewees as I would have liked. Still, my notes are quite extensive and I am fortunately blessed with a good memory.

Interviews were conducted after I had gotten acquainted with my informants, from the beginning of May until my departure in June. The majority of them took place at the ECF outside class hours. However, for practical reasons, some of the interviews were carried out during a lunchtime party at *animatrice* Françoise’s house. In one instance I conducted an interview in the

¹⁴ The type of information varied with each individual, but generally consisted of name, contact information, origin/citizenship, length of stay in Belgium, family relations, education, linguistic competence, and employment/economic status (working, unemployed, on benefits, etc.).

home of a former visitor from the intermediate group, since we had agreed on doing an interview but she had stopped coming to class by that time. During all the interviews, except one, I was the only person present in addition to the interviewee. The exception was the interview with Maryam, an Iraqi in the intermediate group, when my co-animatrice Jeanne was present too. I had long wanted to be present in one of Jeanne's lessons to be able to observe interaction as she was teaching and make more detailed field notes. On that particular day, however, Maryam was the only one who turned up, and I decided that it would be the perfect opportunity to interview her. Maryam was among those struggling the most with the language, and as she often missed class due to illness I imagined it might be difficult to arrange an interview outside class hours. Jeanne helped me to clarify certain things when Maryam did not understand my questions, something which happened repeatedly.

Challenges Faced

This brings me to another point regarding the interviews: their reliability. I did not encounter specific problems in my interviews with the advanced group members, while I do acknowledge that the inability of comprehension among the intermediate participants may have led to some misunderstandings. I do not think this have resulted in erroneous facts but rather I consider the obtained information to be less accurate and precise than might have been the case if the women's linguistic competence had been higher.

As mentioned, I felt some ambivalence with respect to interviewing the intermediate group women, fearing that they did not realise to what they were consenting. This especially concerned Fatma, who at first declined being interviewed. I was both surprised and disappointed by this, as I had considered her to be an interesting informant and would like to know her story. She excused herself saying that she did not have the time but, knowing her, I found that very unlikely. Fatma's French was not that good, and I suspected that she said no because she did not understand what an interview was, or because she feared the embarrassment of not being able to answer my questions.

Initially, I accepted her refusal but later I recounted the situation to Nour, an Algerian in the advanced group. I asked her if she would mind explaining to Fatma – in Arabic – how she herself had perceived being interviewed, and she agreed. After talking to Fatma, she first said that I had better forget about the whole thing, but after further explanations Fatma agreed to do the interview. While being happy about this, I could neither tell what had made her change her mind (as the session was in Arabic) nor decide if it had been a result of pressure or persuasion on my part (I sincerely do not believe that Nour pushed her). This made me feel a bit uneasy, but in the

end I used the interview as an occasion to compliment Fatma on her presence and achievement. She seemed very content afterwards, and this took away most of my uneasiness about the affair.

The exact questions posed during the interviews can be found in the appendix section, but I will comment briefly on the content. I rarely asked my informants about religion and ethnicity, albeit these are highly relevant factors in my study. The reason for this is that I found less intimidating sources for discovering this information. In my assessment, it was more advantageous retrieving such data through observation of interaction and conversations between my informants. Thus I found out that Maryam was a Catholic, not Muslim like the other Arabs. What is more, I perceived ethnicity to be a rather sensitive subject – particularly among the Moroccans, divided into Arabs and one Berber. I believe that posing direct questions on such apparently delicate matters might have further distanced me from my informants in the intermediate group. By and large, I think I discovered the variables of identification that the women made relevant during communication and interaction, which is – after all – the most important thing.

Having outlined the background as well as methodological considerations of my study, the following chapter will provide an account of my conceptual framework and theoretical approach.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH: 'Us' and 'Them'

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Otherisation

Ever more immigrants are finding their way to Western Europe, placing issues of integration higher up on the political agenda. This brings about at times heated debates about cultural differences, 'us' and 'them', and possibilities and difficulties of integration. We frequently see immigrants cluster in 'designated' areas or ghettos, living secluded from the majority population. Lack of communication and knowledge entails that many misleading perceptions about the character of 'the Other' exist between various groups of people, e.g. majority and minority. The concept of the Other is probably one of very few universal and cross-cultural social phenomena. Consequently, one may find it everywhere, also in groups of minorities, and I am interested in perceptions of otherness *within* minority groups.

I have borrowed the title of my thesis, 'Some Others are more Other than Others', from Arjun Appadurai (1986:357), and I would like to begin by presenting some general reflections on his statement. Every person has got a whole range of people whom she refers to as 'Others'. Such differentiation can have positive, negative, and more neutral connotations; it is a way of organising one's cognitions through placing people in various categories (Lehtonen 2005). Whenever social interaction takes place, humans tend to categorise one another. Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman employ the term 'otherization' 'to describe the process that we undertake in ascribing identity to the 'Self' through the often negative attribution of characteristics to the 'other'.' (2004:159)¹⁵. Otherisation is deemed 'to be problematic (...) in that it does not allow for the agency of other people to be a factor in their identity construction' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it 'is based on the assumption that the cultural Other is not as complex or as sophisticated as the cultural Self, so that s/he legitimately can be depicted in an essentialist way (*ibid.*:191).

Otherisation entails a negative removal of the Self from someone *because* of the latter's alleged otherness, thus making the Other precisely 'more Other than Others' through exclusion/placing the person in an out-group. Whom one considers to be an Other is not something given but depends on numerous factors like time, place, which actors are involved, etc.; it is *situational* and changeable. Thus, which otherisation criteria are being made relevant will vary according to the situation; ethnicity might be of little or no importance when you are getting along with

¹⁵ Otherisation is reminiscent of the social science concept known as 'othering'. According to Pickering, othering can be both positive and negative, people 'idealising upwards' or 'denigrating downwards' in their encounters with and characterisation of others (2001:71). I here define and employ the term otherisation as the purely negative aspect of othering. My preference for otherisation also situates the social processes I want to describe in relation 'comparable' phenomena like colonisation, orientalisation, etc. For the sake of orthographic consistency, I have chosen to spell otherisation with an s, like in 'generalisation'.

someone, but the minute there is an argument it could be brought up as ammunition and made relevant. Consequently, the process of otherisation and the state of otherness are not constant but dynamic and changing.

Employment of stereotypes is one very common way to create Others/‘perform’ otherisation. Stereotypes are used by all of us, all the time – often without us being aware of it (Lehtonen 2005). Whether such conceptions are ‘correct’ or not they still play a part in social interaction. In the media, immigrants are often presented as belonging to a homogeneous group, and this image is often taken up by the public, giving rise to racist attitudes and misconceptions¹⁶. E.g., Western Europeans have a tendency of thinking that immigrant men are ‘like this’ (read: sexist, lazy, criminal) and immigrant *women* ‘like that’ (read: subordinate and passive), without necessarily having much evidence to substantiate their case.

At the time of my fieldwork, one of my Danish flatmates asked me what the women at the centre were like. Recognising that in Denmark immigration policies have become ever stricter the last years and that the immigration issue is a controversial political topic, I had not thought of her as anything but liberal. Therefore, her questions astonished me: ‘Are all the women veiled? Do they talk at all?’ Her comments really epitomise a stereotypical view on immigrant women as suppressed and inactive, while simultaneously proving that perceivers of stereotypes do not necessarily mean any harm using them. Through the use of stereotypes, ‘we’ tend to suggest that the Others perform certain acts and behave in a particular way *because* they have this or that cultural/ethnic/religious background.

2.1.2 Types of Otherisation

Otherisation may be manifested in numerous ways, and ethnicity is one of its means. Ethnicity can be seen as an identity marker employed both in self-ascription and ascription of identity (Barth 1969). Barth stresses that ethnicity is employed to define boundaries between different groups of people. Thus, ethnic signs and symbols can be the point of departure for prejudices and the employment of stereotypes in people’s encounters with one another. However, ethnicity is assumed to be variable and contextual and not primordial and constant; it is used and interpreted differently in different contexts, and sometimes it might not be relevant at all while in other instances it appears to be all that matters. During fieldwork, I observed that some of my informants came from various countries sharing the same ethnicity, whilst others came from the

¹⁶ In my thesis, I am not focusing on theories on immigrants as a group, my main concern being the intercultural encounter. The way a collectivity of immigrants is perceived in society at large will presumably also influence their internal relations, but rather than having this as my main focus I choose to see it more as a regulating framework. E.g., the media image of immigrants is conveyed to and thereby influences the general public. This in turn has *consequences* for the immigrants themselves, frequently in the form of otherisation.

same country but claimed dissimilar ethnic affiliations. I intend to examine how this affected identification and communication among them.

Another means for otherisation is gender, which is sometimes used in combination with other variables. Pickering relates the gender aspect to that of race and religion, stating that ‘Black or Jewish women have (...) been doubly othered, in racist and sexist terms...’ (2001:63). He writes about ‘stereotypical feminisation’ (*ibid.*:163), and is inspired by Simone de Beauvoir who wrote of women as Others in terms of being the second sex. According to her, man is the subject and woman the object (*ibid.*:62). Pickering’s ‘stereotypical feminisation’ is also applicable to discourses on the integration of immigrants. Majority populations tend to view immigrants as Others, while immigrant women – who are often publicly less visible than immigrant men – may potentially be seen as more Other than the Others, or ‘doubly othered’, in Pickering’s terms.

Having established that there are many types of otherisation, this phenomenon may well be present also among immigrant women. One can imagine situations where some of the women become a majority dominating Others, thereby creating a minority who is more Other than the Others. In real life, immigrant women may be just as prejudiced towards one another as an average Westerner would be towards them. The mechanisms at play are generically the same, but I find social interaction between immigrants of different ethnic background perhaps even more intriguing, and certainly no less complex, since there are so many variables influencing it.

For some of the women at the ECF, racism was a frequent subject matter. Racism¹⁷ is clearly an extremely negative form of otherisation, and its ideology and practise comprise a whole range of stereotypes, something to which the women reacted. Many of them repeatedly mentioned how they experienced discrimination with respect to access to employment and housing, e.g. because of wearing headscarves, or simply in daily social intercourse with their neighbours. Yet, they did not see that they themselves resorted to the use of stereotypes in social interaction with one another. Hence, Others are not as homogeneous as we (any given ‘us’) like to think and they too experience otherisation processes that we might initially be tempted to describe as ‘internal’, except that they are actually *generic*. My point is that what ‘we’ perceive as a cohesive ‘group’ might be nothing but more or less arbitrary categorisations of a diverse ensemble of people without very much in common. This may seem obvious, but in real life that is not necessarily the case, something that I aim to demonstrate throughout this thesis. The major variables differentiating the women at the ECF are nationality; ethnicity; religion; language competence; age; family, marital, and economic status; education; and length of stay in Belgium and at the ECF. I

¹⁷ Racism has got numerous definitions, but I follow the one of Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (online): ‘the belief that some races of people are better than others’ and ‘the unfair treatment of people who belong to a different race; violent behaviour towards them’.

am interested in exploring at least some of these variables with respect to the women's categorisation of one another.

The line between 'us' and 'them' is commonly drawn between the East and the West, but otherisation comprises much more than that. In line with Pickering, who convincingly demonstrates the complexity of otherisation, I suggest that this demarcation line is criss-crossing East-West distinctions as well as those of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, age and so forth. I assert that otherisation is not merely about political and ideological macro divisions, but also is manifest on the micro level, in common everyday practice taking place between ordinary people, who are more or less different from one another. The very purpose of otherisation on any level is to create and reinforce even small differences between the Self and the Other with the aim of accentuating distance towards the latter. Simultaneously, it is a paradox that otherisation is a means for self-ascription of identity, entailing that the Self is in fact *dependent* on the Other from which it is distancing itself. This might suggest why otherisation is generic, and perhaps also indicate reasons for its significance in intercultural settings, where questions of identity may be particularly prevalent.

I employ the title 'Some Others are more Other than Others' somewhat ironically, my aims being: 1) to show that those considered Other are in fact *just like* 'others', meaning you and me; and 2) to display that it is in everyday social encounters that otherisation takes place and that it is indeed situational. Accordingly, I argue that otherisation is a profoundly generic human process and that the act of stereotyping not only occurs between a Western 'us' and non-Western 'them', but also includes more subtle processes of categorisation within groups of non-Western immigrants. In other words, otherisation is a relative concept that in this thesis will be applied mainly to catch micro interactions, while macro structures constitute a regulating framework.

2.2 Theoretical Considerations

2.2.1 Identity and Identification

Turning to the more theoretical considerations of my material, I find Jenkins' (2004) theorisation on social identity pertinent and interesting. According to Jenkins, Barth (1969) describes ethnic and other identities as rather fluid, constantly negotiable, and 'situationally contingent' (2004:22). Jenkins focuses on such a dynamic aspect of identity – identification: 'identity can *only* be understood as process, as 'being' or 'becoming'. (...) who we are is always singular *and* plural – [and] never a final or settled matter' (*ibid.*:5). Obviously, this does not imply that our identity changes entirely every time we meet a different person, but rather our roles may do.

Jenkins defines identification as the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. He claims that ‘...one of the things that *we* have in common is our difference from *others*.’ (*ibid.*:79). Thus, otherisation is just as much about self-definition as about identifying Others. Selfhood is a ‘...synthesis of (internal) self-definition and (external) definitions of oneself offered by others’, and the self is ‘constituted *vis-à-vis* others in terms of similarity and difference’ (*ibid.*:18, 27). In practise, otherisation can be said to occur through the exaggeration of what Jenkins calls external differences and internal similarities (*ibid.*:89). He argues that ‘People must have something significant in common – no matter how vague, apparently unimportant or apparently illusory – before we can talk about their membership of a collectivity (...) *inclusion* entails *exclusion*, if only by default.’ (*ibid.*:79).

Jenkins draws inspiration from Marx’s distinction between a ‘class for itself’ and ‘in itself’, transferring it to a group *for* itself and a category *in* itself respectively (*ibid.*:21). Jenkins labels these *group identification* and *categorisation*. The former implies that people themselves experience having something in common, while the latter is an outsider’s classification of a group sharing something without the people in question necessarily agreeing to this (*ibid.*:86). Based on Anthony Cohen, Jenkins writes that group identification ‘is characteristically constructed across the group boundary, in interaction with others.’ (2004:22).

Even though a collectivity is perceived as a group, it does not follow that the members experience having anything in common, and we might in fact be talking about a category. Categorisation is particularly prevalent in organisations and bureaucracies, and I intend to examine the significance of both group identification and categorisation to the women at the ECF.

2.2.2 Ethnic Organisation and Situational Ethnicity

Handelman discusses similar matters concerning ethnic organisation. Ethnicity is one of the ‘multiple ways and opportunities [people have] to assign social identities to one another’, and all these ways comprise a ‘categorical set of identities’ (1977:188). Handelman describes various dimensions of how ethnicity can be organised, and I will concentrate on that of the ethnic category. According to this definition, ethnicity is

a category of membership; that is, an ascribed or self-ascribed device that socially locates an individual with reference to the social ascriptions of other persons (...) Category membership attributes to members some expectations as to how they are to behave, the resources (linguistic, customary) they are expected to introduce into their behaviors, and the patterns of activity that they will engage in. (*ibid.*:189-190)

Handelman describes a membership category as 'a "set" of categories that belong together' and stand in contrast to one another (*ibid.*). The membership categories in a set 'appear to be arranged in some hierarchy of inclusiveness/exclusiveness which moves from finer discriminations to more general contrasts', indicating social distance between categories and one category's knowledge of the attributes of another in the set. '[M]embers tend to know more about their own and adjacent categories, and less about those more socially distant and/or much lower in the status hierarchy.' (*ibid.*).

Ethnic sets can be organised 'laterally' or 'hierarchically', depending on time and place. A lateral arrangement entails that 'the same person can be categorized according to different criteria of relevance in different situations' (*ibid.*:192). This also implies that people's categorical affiliations are chosen by and for them. Contrarily, in a hierarchical arrangement, a person risks to be categorised solely according to a given category, so that all her attributes and compartments 'are understood, for example, in terms of "ethnicity"...' (*ibid.*:193). The lateral feature is often related to internal relations within minority groups, while the hierarchical one is associated with the relations between different ethnic groups.

In his review on situational ethnicity, Jonathan Okamura discusses the classical structure/agency or society/individual dichotomies with regard to ethnicity. According to Okamura, the concept of 'situational ethnicity' may revoke this antagonism by incorporating both structural aspects of ethnicity providing an 'overall framework of social relations', and cognitive aspects where '...concern is on the different courses of action actors may (...) pursue according to their understanding of their personal circumstances within this framework.' (1981:453). Okamura calls these perspectives 'objective' and 'subjective', referring to more material conditions and the actor's viewpoint respectively.

The cognitive dimension of situational ethnicity is 'concerned with the actor's understandings of cultural symbols or signs and the meanings which are imputed to these elements' following categorical ascription and self-ascription of ethnic identity 'for purposes of interaction'. (*ibid.*:454). Self-ascription depends 'on the actor's option of affirming various ethnic and other social identities which he holds' and considerations of what significance ethnicity is deemed to have in each situation. Thus, the actor may also choose to downplay ethnic affiliations, focusing more on other social statuses. Sometimes, however, choice is limited or constrained because 'the opposite party or group to the relation may be in a position of relative power so that it need not accord the first party or group the particular ethnic identity or claim it has advanced and can thus 'define the situation' (Thomas, 1928: 42) as it pleases.' (*ibid.*:455).

Principally, situational ethnicity emphasises the relevance of ethnicity as something changeable, depending on the context in question:

It may be that in some situations ethnicity is a relevant factor which influences the interaction of the parties, while in other situations the relationship proceeds according to other attributes of the parties such as class, religion, occupation, sex, personality, etc. The structural dimension of situational ethnicity thus points to the essentially variable significance of ethnicity as an organizing principle of social relations. (*ibid.*:454).

On the one hand, the structure of ethnic group relations has great influence on and potentially constrains the ethnic ascription of actors in various social situations; on the other, structure is not completely determining. Situational ethnicity also implies that inconsistency in the affirmation of ethnic identity may depend on the actor's cognitive perception of the immediate social situation (*ibid.*). At the ECF, I observed a difference in how ethnicity was made relevant, and in subsequent chapters I will explore how this may be connected to the importance of other factors.

2.2.3 Language

Language appeared to be one of the most significant signs for the ECF women's articulation of identity. Indeed, Jupp, Roberts and Cook-Gumperz recognise that

Language as speaking practice creates and identifies social group membership. Through shared communicative conventions, individuals treat each other as part of their own social group. It is this that enables them to acquire knowledge and experience which reinforce the social group and sharedness. (1982:239)

Holliday and Hyde *et al.* characterise language as a 'bridge between people' but simultaneously as 'a wall that divides people' (2004:184). Through language, its users are identified 'as belonging to particular cultural groups' and in cases where only the users understand it, language may function in an exclusive manner. Moreover, '[a]s soon as people use language they are judged by the people who hear them as belonging to certain social groups, and the images and stereotypes that are attached to these groups may be conjured up and applied to them.' This way language can be a symbol of social and cultural affiliation, signalling to others where individuals belong. However, sometimes this may be misleading, as signs have multiple significations and thus can be interpreted in numerous ways.

Pickering claims that language is the prime 'location of the Other': 'Conceptions of the Other and the structures of difference and similarity which they mobilise do not exist in any natural form at all.' (2001:71). Instead, '[i]t is through language that selves and others are mediated and represented. The symbolically constructed Other and the patterns of social exclusion

and incorporation entailed by it are distributed in sign and language, discourse and representation.’ (*ibid.*). We use language for cognitive structuring, identification, classification, and articulation. Roberts stresses Pickering’s point further when stating that

...a common language does not iron out differences and may, indeed, cause further misunderstandings that do not come to light in a supposedly neutral code. Speakers bring their social identities and their learned ways of using the lingua franca to any intercultural encounter; they do not bring a neutral tool. For this reason, whatever the purpose of language learning may be, the cultural and social dimensions are an essential part. (2000:7-8)

Keeping in mind that language is an expression of cultural and social knowledge as well as playing such a vital role in categorisation and otherisation, makes an intercultural language-learning setting like the ECF particularly interesting to study.

2.2.4 Stereotypes

Pickering (2001) makes a distinction between stereotypes and categories. Lehtonen depicts stereotypes as ‘beliefs about the characteristics of members of a certain group’ (2005:67-68). Generalisations are made about e.g. ‘gender, certain professions, life-style groups, inhabitants of a given area, ethnic groups, cultures, and nations’, and ‘assume that the members of a group share certain values, certain personality traits’ (*ibid.*:63). Lehtonen comments that the number of group labels are infinite and that people are often unconscious both of possessing them and of the role they play in forming our opinions (*ibid.*:63-64). In terms with this, ‘we see what we are taught to see, and our observations at the same time also confirm the stereotype’ (*ibid.*:73), although it may not be grounded in ‘reality’ at all. Pickering asserts that stereotypes are naturalised, ‘taken for granted and left unquestioned’, their efficiency relying on their remaining unrecognised (2001:70). Stereotypes can be positive or negative; however, in everyday life they generally reflect negative attitudes, conveying ‘social prejudice and discrimination’ (*ibid.*:11). Most importantly, although they are parts of ‘cultural practices and processes’ incorporating specific ‘ideological views and values’, stereotypes ‘are not necessarily integral to our perceptual and cognitive organisation of the social worlds we live in’ (*ibid.*:3).

In contrast, Pickering asserts that ‘Thinking in relation to categories is a necessary way of organising the world in our minds, (...) negotiating our ways through it in our everyday social relations and interactions.’ (*ibid.*:2). Categories are flexible, do not possess ‘hard or fixed boundaries between them’, and ‘should not be regarded as *the* elemental structure of thought.’ (*ibid.*:29, 3). Even though we might need categories as an organising device, Pickering warns against exag-

gerating their significance. With respect to the difference between stereotypes and categories, Pickering states that ‘Stereotyping may operate as a way of imposing a sense of order on the social world in the same way as categories’, but it denies flexibility in order to reinforce ‘the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed’ (*ibid.*:3).

Stereotyping can be perceived as ‘a process for maintaining and reproducing the norms and conventions of behaviour, identity and value’ (*ibid.*:5). It ‘function[s] as a form of social control’ by ‘attempt[ing] to establish an attributed characteristic as natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates (*ibid.*). Maintaining and stabilising this system may provide a feeling of security or superiority, something that can perhaps explain the prevalence of such inaccurate and uncritical categorisations. Basically, it establishes existing power relations as definite and permanent, while the objects of stereotyping become marginalised and subordinated. Accordingly, stereotypes are judgements about difference expressing power ‘even among the relatively powerless, since the norms which are reinforced by stereotyping emanate from established structures of social dominance’ (*ibid.*:5).

Ultimately, Pickering affirms power and the lack of flexibility as what separates stereotypes from categories. I think his incorporation of the power perspective is crucial when discussing stereotypes in relation to otherisation. Pickering also stresses the interactive aspect of stereotypes, depicting the constant struggle over the meanings of cultural representations where reality and ‘truth’ are negotiated and interpreted (2001:15). This is in fact what occurs when different groups employ stereotypes; it is all about defining reality in a way beneficial to oneself or one’s own group – in other words: it is about power¹⁸.

Stereotypes and Otherisation

Holliday and Hyde *et al.* remark that ‘stereotypes are often infected by prejudice, which in turn leads to otherization’ (2004:23). Social actors employ stereotypes to idealise their own group, while creating distance towards the less valued and more homogeneous Other/s. Cultural stereotypes, i.e. those employed to compare us with others in intercultural contexts, are often characterised by and closely connected to ethnocentricity (Lehtonen 2005:62). ‘We’ are ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, representing ‘universally valid’ ethics and morals, while the Others are ‘usually valued negatively in comparison with “us” and our culture’ (*ibid.*). Holliday and Hyde *et al.* have a strikingly similar description of otherisation: ‘imagining someone as alien and different to ‘us’ in such a way that ‘they’ are excluded from ‘our’ ‘normal’, ‘superior’ and ‘civilized’ group. Indeed, it is by imagining a foreign Other that ‘our’ group can become more confident and exclusive.’ (2004:3).

¹⁸ I will return to the concept of power at the end of this chapter.

Pickering emphasises that the us/them relation is ‘inherently unstable’, and otherisation (Pickering’s ‘othering’) seeks to make this relation stable, ‘to give it a static and durable shape and temporally to fast-freeze the configurations of difference and similarity it constructs’ (*ibid.*:72). This is a continuous and consequently rather paradoxical process; it must be repeated constantly to appear permanent, although it is in fact nothing but a social construct:

The name, type-description and perception of the Other is the Other, and that is all there is. You cannot go beyond or inside it to find something prior to its construction. The stereotyped Other does not consist of the misrepresentation of some real or hidden essence – the ‘real woman’ behind the stereotypical attributes, for instance – and is not a simplification because it falsely represents an already existing reality. (*ibid.*:72)

Stereotypes can be ‘used as ways of making distinctions between forms and modes of ‘otherness’ ’ (Pickering 2001:36). This is in terms with Appadurai’s statement that ‘Some Others are more Other than Others’; there are degrees of otherisation and stereotypes will vary according to how remote one judges the Other to be. Likewise, otherness is not necessarily reciprocal, as Pickering writes with reference to Frantz Fanon: ‘...in the colonial context the black is Other to the white, but not the reverse. White is white; white is not ‘not-black’.’ (*ibid.*:67).

Pickering describes how stereotyping is not only damaging to its objects, but also to the beholder because stereotypes ‘create barriers across their social interactions and relations, over both time and space. Stereotyping is a boundary-maintaining move inwards, rather than an emancipatory movement outwards.’ (*ibid.*:48-49). Pickering sees ‘The translation of difference into Otherness [a]s a denial of dialogue, interaction and change’ and asserts that studying stereotyping through the perspective of otherisation ‘allows us to understand more fully how it is implicated in identification as a field of cultural encounter and interaction’ (*ibid.*:49, 69). If, as Lehtonen (2005) depicts it, the way we view and categorise Others often is based exclusively on how we perceive the group to which they belong, otherisation entails reducing individuals to their group membership. A negative image of a given group will be transferred to the individual, creating distance and thus impeding any attempt to become acquainted with the person and in the last instance encumbers any successful communication in the encounter.

Stereotypes in Intercultural Settings

Lehtonen emphasises that stereotypes of Self and Others ‘are essential constituents of collective identity, what we are and what we are not’, expressing our expectations about the personalities, intentions, and motives of both one’s own in-group and of the out-group (*ibid.*:82). Collective identities become even more significant than usual in settings where people do not master the

cultural code. Immigrants, having left their country of origin and all that is familiar behind, may feel that their identity is ‘threatened’ and experience feelings of insecurity. In such situations, I imagine that seeking towards something familiar – like a group – may serve as a great comfort. As group identification implies accentuating differences towards another group, these settings may aggravate otherisation.

Lehtonen accounts for the employment of stereotypes in intercultural contexts, calling these *cultural stereotypes* (2005:69). In intercultural settings the aim is often to get acquainted with the Other/s, and cultural stereotypes comprise applying both evidence and one’s existing beliefs about the Other to achieve this aim. Lehtonen names stereotypes made about an Other hetero-stereotypes, whilst stereotypes concerning oneself or one’s own group are called auto-stereotypes. Furthermore, ‘members of a given group may also hold common conceptions about the other party’s stereotypical assumptions about themselves – or about the respective other party’ (*ibid.*). Lehtonen names these projected stereotypes, since the person in question is projecting her own prejudices onto the Other/s. We are thus left with four kinds of stereotypes: 1) *simple auto*: what we think that *we* are; 2) *projected auto*: what we think that *they* think *we* are; 3) *projected hetero*: what we think that *they* think that *they* are; and 4) *simple hetero*: what we think that *they* are.

Ethnic Stereotypes

Tambs-Lyche gives an account of ethnic stereotypes, defined as more or less complete cultural constructs giving contextual meaning to signs and symbols interpreted as ethnic (n.d.:2). According to him, stereotypes consist of signs reflecting a selection of ‘attributes taken from the group’s arsenal of characteristics’¹⁹ (*ibid.*:8). However, group members select the signs they deem appropriate, and in self-ascription positive signs are preferred to negative or neutral ones, creating an ideal type (*ibid.*:14).

Tambs-Lyche argues that stereotypes are dichotomous and that only signs constituting binary oppositions are ethnic. Although I do not fully agree with this contention, I view the model as more of an ideal type from which some useful points can be made. The author’s first dichotomy may be described as A – not-A or have – have-nots (*ibid.*:7). This implies that not-A is lacking something A has got. The second dichotomy is A – B, making a contrast between equals/comparable units, e.g. Christian-Muslim. This requires the existence of a common category, in this case religion. Finally, the third category is allegedly found mainly in hierarchical societies: A > B, the two of which are ranked beforehand. Tambs-Lyche states that such stereotypes are not necessarily common to the parties of an ethnic relationship. He suggests that A > B

¹⁹ My translation.

expresses leading groups' view and like A – B is about competition for rank, whilst A – not-A is employed as arguments downwards in the system. (*ibid.*:11). My empirical findings were not quite in terms with Tambs-Lyche's assertions, and this I will return to in my analysis.

2.2.5 Forms of Interaction

Wadel (1999:56) refers to Altman and Taylor's 1973 *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*, which outlines four phases in the development of communicative roles that I find pertinent to my analysis. The first one is *orientation of interaction* and describes the point when actors are starting to become acquainted with one another. At this stage stereotypes are common. The second stage, *exploratory affective exchange*, implies that the actors know each other more, the atmosphere is more friendly and relaxed, and their mutual obligations are limited in time and scope. Thirdly, there is *affective exchange*, allowing for spontaneous communicative interaction, the actors disclosing their personalities further and acting like friends. The final phase is the one of *stable exchange* between close friends entailing an even higher level of confidence.

The first two phases may be related to Goffman's (1987) term frontstage, while the last two can be linked to what he conceptualises as backstage. Both concepts are inspired by his analysis of human life as a drama being performed on and off a stage. While we are on stage, or frontstage, we play a part and try to convey a certain image of ourselves to those watching. Backstage, on the other hand, we remove the mask, are more open and honest, and reveal who we 'really' are. Goffman gives an example, suggesting that backstage, a group without an audience can patronise others and talk about them in a way that is inconsistent with how they treat the same persons during interaction, frontstage (*ibid.*:168). In terms with how people use frontstage and backstage according to Goffman, they seem to move up and down the communication role scale revealing more of their inner feelings to those they know well and much less to those they know less.

I consider two more of Goffman's concepts as relevant to this discussion; over-communication and under-communication. The former implies really accentuating certain traits/roles of one's self/status, whereas the latter entails downplaying selected characteristics. E.g., in a family where the wife is beat by her husband she may over-communicate how great her husband is, while simultaneously under-communicating his bad character. Although the two practises may appear at the same time, this is not a requirement. I will examine the role of these phenomena at the ECF.

2.2.6 Communication in Encounters

I now want to take a look at the nature of communication in the *encounter*. According to Wadel, we internalise our ideas about how others feel toward us, and these ideas strongly influence what we ourselves feel (1999:69). Blumer emphasises that action is always *constructed* by actors, and is not merely *caused* by other factors such as motives, attitudes, values, etc.:

Human group life is a vast process of such defining to others what to do and of interpreting their definitions; through this process people come to fit their activities to one another and to form their own individual conduct. Both such joint activity and individual conduct are formed *in and through* this ongoing process; they are not mere expressions or products of what people bring to their interaction or of conditions that are antecedent to their interaction. (1969:10)

While Blumer provides a general description of social interaction, Holliday and Hyde *et al.* focus on intercultural encounters in particular. They use the term ‘middle culture of dealing’ (MCD) to depict an encounter and the interaction occurring between people of different cultural backgrounds (2004:26). The MCD and the parties’ view on each other are influenced by the actors’ ‘complexes of cultural baggage’. As a result of otherisation, what they see in one another ‘may be very different to what they think they see’ (*ibid.*). In short, what we see in someone from a different cultural background during an MCD encounter is influenced by our own cultural resources projected onto the other person. Furthermore, our cultural baggage very often comprises stereotypes arising ‘from our own discourses about the Other’. Initially, this conceptualisation – mostly emphasising what is brought *into* the encounter – may seem to contradict Blumer’s. However, the term MCD does contain the word *dealing*, easily associated with ‘negotiating’ and is definitely expressing action. What differentiates an intercultural encounter from any other, however, is precisely the actors’ cultural baggage and the fundamental part it plays in forming interaction.

Goffman (1987) says that actors must have some sense of shared experience and accept to be able to communicate. However, this does not necessarily exist in the first place, and Goffman suggests that it can be ‘created’ by the actors’ concealment of their true feelings, paying ‘lip-service’ to the situation. This implies that together, actors ‘contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement’ to avoid open conflicts and maintain the definition of the situation (1987:20-21, 24). Goffman calls this level of agreement *working consensus*, and it entails that preventive practises are constantly being carried out to avoid ‘definitional disruptions’, while corrective practises are employed to compensate for the former when they cannot be prevented (*ibid.*).

2.2.7 The Power of Definition

In my outline of stereotypes, I demonstrated the importance of power in people's categorisations of one another. This concerns not only the labelling of the people themselves but also of the situations in which they meet.

Grønhaug asserts, in his work on 'foreign workers' in Norway in the 1970s, that their knowledge and competences were deemed invalid in encounters with the Norwegian majority (2001:907-8). Possibilities of defining interactive situations²⁰ in a certain way were unequally distributed in favour of the ethnic majority. Interactive situations imply a struggle about the opportunity to employ one's own social competence and mobilise support for one's own interpretation; each party seeking to play by her own rules, to which the other is incapable of responding. However, Grønhaug stresses that the unequal distribution of power was *not* due to individual attitudes, e.g. intolerance on part of the Norwegians, but rather the outcome of communication in social processes. He argues that attitudes are generated by the disproportion between (common) rules and (individual) competences. According to Grønhaug, the 'winner' of the game is the one who is able to mobilise the most support for her/his rules; usually the one who can employ the same rules in different situations, and gather resources that can be beneficial in various situations (*ibid.*). Obviously, the one who is in the majority has greater possibilities of managing this.

In order to analyse power one must first define the concept. Fisher states that '...power is exercised through the strategic manipulation of the options of the other. Power is thus less a confrontation between two adversaries than it is a question of government, in which to govern is to structure the field of possible actions of others (Ferguson 1990)' (1997:458). I consider that structuring 'the field of possible actions of others' is at the core of situational definitions. When actors struggle for recognition of their own definition of a social situation, they influence other people's responses. I am not convinced that strategy is an intrinsic aspect of all power relations, as power may well be exercised without being intentional, but otherwise Fisher's definition seems pertinent to my empirical evidence. I would like to examine the character of power relations, particularly with respect to defining situations, as I believe these may give some indications of the state of minority-majority relations at the ECF.

2.3 Research Questions

In this chapter I have attempted to indicate what theoretical angles I presume to be useful with respect to examining the premises for identification and communication among the women in the two ECF French course groups. I have sought to use the concept of otherisation (Holliday

²⁰ My translation of Grønhaug's concept *sambandingsituasjon*.

and Hyde *et al.*) to illustrate the many challenges that social interaction faces, particularly in intercultural contexts. Jenkins' distinction between group identification and categorisation will play an important part in my analysis, and I will try to display the complex reality behind the two concepts. This is directly tied to exposing otherisation, showing its generic character as a situational everyday phenomenon. Ethnic variability and diversity indicate how problematic strict categorisation can be, as ethnic and other identities are not fixed, but rather negotiated in encounters with others. Generally, demonstrating the women's diversity is central, as this is one way of detecting potential discrepancies between ascription and self-ascription. I thus intend to explore the impact and meaning of the similarities and differences between the women.

Language is one of the most significant means of communication, and it is also strongly related to Jenkins' concepts and to otherisation. Otherisation may occur by means of linguistically expressed stereotypes. Through the employment of stereotypes individuals are deprived of their individuality, and I would like to examine how this may be manifested empirically, e.g. through using the models of Lehtonen (hetero- and auto-stereotypes) and Tambs-Lyche (ethnic stereotypes). It is also imperative to know more about the women's backgrounds to be able to discern what is occurring in interaction and how they are managing differences and similarities. The degree of social contact and confidence between the women indicates what kind of communicative roles they have towards one another, and may reveal whether they are under- or over-communicating certain aspects of their identity. Finally, investigating the role of working consensus (Goffman) and power in defining situations (Grønhaug) will be an important task.

The next chapter will provide an elaboration on the ethnographic context of my fieldwork.

3. ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: Women Only

3.1.1 The *Vie Féminine* (VF)

The precursor of the *Vie Féminine* (VF), the Christian Labour Women's Leagues, was founded around 1920 (*75 ans de Vie féminine* 1995). The background and role of the VF is inextricably entangled with the rather complex structures of Belgian society, explained by the coordinator in the following fashion: 'Here in Belgium, everything is organised by 'family' (socialist, Christian...) – social security funds, unions, voluntary associations...' She used the metaphor 'hat', the equivalent of an umbrella, when describing the historical demarcation lines based on political, religious, and professional distinctions: socialist, Christian, liberal, neutral, and several professional ones. Today these distinctions have decreased in importance, but nevertheless they emphasise some of the divisions by which Belgian society is characterised.

According to Julia, the Christian labour movement started in the 1920-30s in Belgium. The VF was born as a part of this movement. It started out as 'a Christian movement for cultural and social action', becoming a women's association focusing on charity and social work. In 1987, the VF created its first centre offering nourishment consultations for mothers, getting into closer contact with the people of the popular strata. Immigrants constituted a significant share of the clients, and in these encounters volunteer workers identified the mothers' language problems as very important. Thus, the VF decided to start offering language courses.

Nearly ten years ago, the VF made what appears to have been an ideological about-turn, abandoning its Christian heritage to become a 'feminist and intercultural movement'. This happened at about the same time as the *espaces femmes* (women's spaces) were created. These were autonomously run units administrated by VF-remunerated coordinators and volunteers, while obviously adhering to VF ideology. At the time, the women's spaces focused solely on an exchange of knowledge between the women; today, this approach has developed significantly.

3.1.2 A Women's Space

The name *Espace Couleurs Femmes* signifies 'space, colours, women' and the idea behind the choice of the wording is obviously very important. The *raison d'être* of the *espaces femmes* is to provide women with a space where they are free to express themselves without any concern; a place where they can discuss their problems, find strategies for managing, and finally become more independent and autonomous. When Julia started working at the ECF, she and some other VF volunteers tried to analyse the needs of the women of the *quartier* (quarter), concluding that they suffered from isolation and lacking linguistic abilities. They considered the solution to lie in meeting other women of similar circumstances. According to Julia, 'it is easier to express oneself be-

tween women', as women allegedly have common experiences based on their position in the public and private sphere. The ECF organises workshops with the explicit aim of *donner la parole*²¹ to the women. In these workshops, *citoyenneté*, citizenship, is a central concept. Julia defines citizenship as an 'awakening of what happens around you', e.g. about consciousness-raising and subsequent action; 'an attitude and work, obviously of every day...'

I have found no specific explanation for the supplement part of the name, *couleurs*, but choose to interpret it as a symbol of the diversity of the centre's target group: women from all over the world bringing with them their national, ethnic, cultural, social, religious and other differences into the exchanges taking place at the ECF. This interpretation matches the centre's emphasis on the *intercultural*, i.e. the social aspect of the space and the encounter *between* the women.

3.1.3 Physical Space

The ECF is situated in a lively street with grocery stores, bakeries, butchers, and various other retail establishments, all or most with owners of non-Belgian origin. The centre itself is located on the second and third (top) floor of a white concrete building. On the ground floor there is a union, while on the first floor there did not seem to be much activity during my fieldwork.

The stairway up to the ECF is covered with signs indicating its whereabouts as well as posters on women's rights. On the second floor, there is a small hallway, straight left from the entrance is a classroom, on the far left another classroom, in front of the hallway is the office of the coordinator, to the far right a tiny bathroom, and straight to the right there are stairs leading up to the top floor. In the hallway, there is a rack with brochures and leaflets providing information on among others the ECF and the VF, youth activities and services, women's health, violence against women, women entrepreneurship, employment, female illegal immigrants, the prohibition against wearing headscarves in schools, the environment, political activism, cultural activities, and practical information for newly-arrived immigrants.

The first classroom is about 15m²; has a window facing the backyard; and contains several desks, chairs, a whiteboard, and a cupboard with dictionaries in several languages. There are also ten computers with Internet access. On the walls, there is a phone connected to the ECF's calling system, sheets with French grammar, and posters made by women at the centre. This room is used for French and data processing courses, and it is where the intermediate group comes for classes. The classroom next door is used for language and sewing courses, as well as being a 'documentation centre'. This is the classroom of the advanced French group. The room is about

²¹ This expression literally means 'give word', i.e. let women speak out.

the same size as the other classroom, contains more desks and chairs, a small and a larger closet, a whiteboard, a globe, equipment for sewing courses including machines and a dress form, and it has a window facing the street. The walls are covered with various colourful posters on women's rights, a world map, a mirror, and a couple of bookshelves. The latter makes the room qualify as a documentation centre, comprising e.g. reports and literature on themes like pedagogy, politics, geography, sociology, and the environment; various remedies for teaching and learning; and information about Ixelles and the VF.

The coordinator's office is the place where people present themselves, whether they are regular or new visitors enquiring about personal, social, economic, and legal issues; *animatrices* wishing to talk to Julia or fetch teaching materials; or any other people external to the ECF, like representatives of the VF or any other association. The office is about 12m², contains a telephone, computer with Internet access, a combined fax/printer, two cupboards, a large L-shaped desk, the coordinator's chair behind the desk and another two for visitors on the opposite side of it, an archive, and a large window facing the street. On the walls there are some pictures, a board with notes and messages, and the time schedules of the various courses. The cupboards contain written and audio teaching materials, stationery, and folders for each course including lists of the participants and their personal files.

The top floor has a small hallway, a bathroom on the right, an office that was used by the part-time employee the time she was there, a kitchen to the far left, and a classroom straight to the left. This classroom – the largest at the ECF – contains plenty of desks and chairs, a whiteboard, a small shelf, and a television and video set on wheels. On the walls, there is another calling system phone, and like in the other two classrooms there are posters made by the women at the centre. The window is up in the ceiling. The kitchen contains a table and some chairs; cupboards with cups, glasses, plates, bowls, etc.; a sink; a stove with an oven; a refrigerator; and a bin. In the small office there is a desk; a telephone; a computer with Internet access; a photocopier; and a cupboard with stationery, foods, and beverages.

Generally speaking, the ECF is a course-centre, implying that it is not usually a place where the visitors can come simply to meet whenever they want. With the exception of the advanced group, the women mostly arrive in time for – or, frequently, just after the beginning of – the classes and workshops, and leave once they are finished. The women have access to the kitchen, bathrooms, and their respective classrooms; provided with a key they may borrow the photocopier; and when they require assistance they may enter the coordinator's office. The coordinator and the volunteers have full access to all rooms including the main office, although Julia

is of course in charge of her office when she is present. However, most volunteers have keys for this office, where they can find the key to the upstairs office with the photocopier.

3.1.4 The Coordinator

Although everyone does not necessarily know her name, all those attending the ECF know Julia by sight, since she is usually the first person they meet when entering the centre for the first time. Julia is a neat woman in her late forties, with spectacles and black, curly hair reaching beneath her shoulders. She nearly always wears a headband, and she likes ‘dressing up’ without there being any special occasions, wearing bright makeup, sparkling jewellery, and colourful clothes. She comes from Spain, and she speaks French with a strong Spanish accent, e.g. rolling her r’s.

Julia was in school until she was about thirteen years old. She went on to work in a factory for some time, before engaging in an international Christian youth organisation²². This eventually led her to move to Brussels, where she worked for the association for some years, and met her Flemish husband-to-be. She later studied political science three-four years in an adult educational program, worked at several youth institutions, and eventually decided to stay in Belgium. Around the year 2000, she started working at a VF women’s centre in the Brussels region. After about three years, she applied to be transferred to the ECF as it is situated only a few minutes walk away from her house, significantly reducing her time of travel to work. When I left the field, she had spent nearly 20 years in Belgium, and worked four years at the ECF.

Julia is extremely dedicated to her work – working constantly, she hardly has a social life outside work. She is engaged in performing an ‘intercultural work’, the purpose of which she defines as learning how to live together. Julia speaks enthusiastically about the enrichment of cultural difference and the importance of creating women’s autonomy, without being ‘authoritarian’ or imposing ideas, which can of course be a great challenge at a centre like the ECF.

According to Julia herself, she is the one who built up the ECF as it is today. When she arrived, there was ‘nothing’ – hardly any visitors, the people living in Ixelles did not know about the centre’s existence, there were few volunteers, a lack of materials and technological equipment, and the former coordinator had left the ECF in a state of crisis. Through her year-long experience from various NGOs, Julia had learnt a lot about how to get funding. Although she succeeded in receiving financial support to buy everything from stationery to computers, she still spends a great deal of time admitting funding applications and writing reports to be able to initiate and perform new activities. Julia considers her workload to be massive, and complains that there is too much administrative work. She states that she is always ‘running’, and she spends a

²² However, according to Julia herself she is not religious; she is simply interested in social issues.

lot of time working outside work hours. Julia would have liked to delegate the administrative work to a secretary in order to concentrate on working more closely with the women. Despite these constraints, Julia is available to the visitors, ringing them outside work hours to help them solve social problems, contacting public administration offices on their behalf, and making attestations of course attendance in order that the social services may refund their expenses, etc.

The coordinator identifies absenteeism, drop-outs, and lack of continuity of participants to be the greatest problems affecting the courses at the ECF. Hence, she spends a lot of time ringing absentees, trying to solve the problem. Moreover, Julia frequently shows great flexibility and makes an effort to adjust to individual needs. E.g., Brazilian Ana Maria is allowed to alternate between attending the intermediate group once a week and the advanced group twice a week, as she is unable to attend the intermediate lessons on Tuesdays.

Julia has got a lot of power with respect to the content and form of the ECF's activities. Within the financial limits and the guidelines of VF ideology, she is free to do more or less as she pleases. Thus, ECF ideology and practise cannot easily be separated from those of Julia. The positive aspect of this is that she takes a lot of initiative in creating new projects. On the other hand, it can be difficult for alternative voices and opinions to come through.

Julia is a very strong woman who is never afraid to speak her own will. She is a demanding leader, expecting dedication and hard work on the part of the volunteers. Julia can be very direct, and if someone – a course participant, a volunteer, a VF representative, or anyone else – fails to fulfil her expectations, this sometimes leads to confrontations and conflicts. A labour conflict with her employer *Vie Féminine*, illness, surgery, and too much work left Julia quite tense at the time of my fieldwork. However, albeit stressed, she is usually smiling, sharing her joys and sorrows with visitors and volunteers, and working for what she assumes to be the best interests of the ECF.

3.1.5 Volunteers

Most of the ECF volunteers are women who have taken early retirement, and these are also the most stable ones. In addition, there are some young job applicants, students, and one qualified teacher who is employed and remunerated by the NGO *Lire et Ecrire* promoting literacy. According to Julia, compared to the other VF centres the ECF has a higher rate of young people staying only a year or even a few months. They tend to leave when they find employment, and thus the turnover of volunteers is proportionally higher than elsewhere.

When volunteers arrive for the first time, Julia provides them with information on the VF and the ECF. In principle, she is supposed to give them a folder with various documents, e.g. on

éducation permanente (EP). However, she does not always have time for this (I never got one), and during my interviews with three selected volunteers I got the impression that the meaning of EP appeared to be quite unclear to them. The volunteers can participate in VF-organised workshops to learn about EP, intercultural work, immigration and integration issues, feminism, etc.

The coordinator does not demand any formal qualifications of the volunteers. In fact, she says that she has experienced quite a few problems with some of those who are retired teachers, as they are reproducing a school teaching mentality instead of adapting to EP. Julia frequently stresses that the ECF is not about *teaching*, it is not a school; instead it has ‘a different approach’, seeking to integrate women’s lives in its methodology. She requires that volunteers possess a ‘sensitivity of the mix of cultures’, are motivated, open-minded, willing to invest some time in their work, and able to participate in the team and meetings of the volunteers. Julia states that being a feminist is not a prerequisite, as long as they are not antifeminist.

Julia says that she seeks to have some multicultural staff, emphasising that volunteers must perceive the importance of ‘the richness of cultural differences, how to make women’s autonomy emerge’ while avoiding ‘authoritarianism and imposition of ideas’. To exemplify this, she mentioned an incident with the *animatrice* Khadija, a 35-year-old Moroccan student in charge of the alpha 2 group. Khadija had brought a book on Moroccan Islamic laws, suggesting that they could discuss and interpret these in her group, where the majority, but not all, of the women were Muslims. However, Julia did not think that appropriate, as she considers religion to be a private matter. If ever she suspects that there is a problem with a volunteer, like in this case, she tries to solve the matter by talking to the person in question – provided she has the time.

Three Volunteers

Françoise is one of the three *animatrices* in charge of the advanced French group. She is a 65-year-old retired secondary school teacher from France; a real lady with shoulder-long, dyed auburn hair, wearing jewellery and make-up, clearly being anxious about her looks. Françoise has lived more than half of her life in Montreal, in addition to spending extended periods of time in the US and Mexico. She came to the ECF in the spring of 2006, and started as the assistant of Marie, a former *animatrice* in the advanced group. Françoise replaced her in September 2006, when Julia decided that Marie should quit as she came into conflict with most of the women in the group.

Although Françoise is very preoccupied with cooking, recipes, and losing weight; and most of the texts she uses in class stem from women’s magazines, she declares herself a feminist. In connection with International Women’s Day, she brought a newspaper clipping with a calligram in the shape of a woman’s body containing a message of the various ways in which women

are suppressed and objectified by society and by men in particular. Simultaneously, she makes some comments that are very ‘traditional’ in terms of gender roles, e.g. that push-ups are for boys and not for girls, and that she preferred the machos of the old days, because women nowadays have lost many ‘women privileges’ and have to do the heavy jobs themselves. On the other hand, Françoise is accessible to the women, e.g. she once received one of them in her own home, trying to help her deal with her problems with the social services. The women appear to be very satisfied with Françoise, although according to Julia she is too much of a teacher. However, Françoise rarely teaches much grammar and chooses to promote conversations about social issues and matters that interest her and might potentially interest the women.

Geneviève, the other advanced group *animatrice*, is 70 years old (the oldest of the volunteers), has got short, greyish hair, wears glasses, occasionally bears a plain necklace, and prefers the casual or sportive look without make-up. She has been a VF volunteer for 20 years and worked part-time at Julia’s former workplace, joining her when she started working at the ECF. Geneviève was educated as a teacher, but only worked one year before she had children and became a housewife due to the lack of kindergartens. She started working again in the 80s, mostly as a volunteer, and finally ended up with the VF. Many of her former volunteer colleagues were teaching advanced French in a very standard way, and when she was asked to take charge of the advanced group at the ECF, she wanted to do it differently.

When asked, Geneviève said that she is not a feminist, but that she is ‘a humanist and pro equality’. According to her, the VF movement wants to respond to the women’s needs and help them learn French, while on the other hand it seeks to impose on them feminism and knowledge about women’s rights. Geneviève implies that the women are more in need of practical means to improve their daily lives than of being exposed to feminist ideology.

Geneviève has an assistant in her sixties, Louise, who prefers to play a supporting role after damaging her voice chords in an accident some years ago. She has got short, blond hair, wears glasses, and with her jewellery, make-up, and elegant clothes she is more of a ‘fine lady’ than Geneviève. Louise used to be a secretary, came to the ECF two years prior to my fieldwork, and had been struggling with a French evening class before Julia had made her the assistant of Geneviève. She is not afraid of stating her opinion, sometimes appearing fairly ethnocentric, entering into fierce debates with the women, while Geneviève is more of a diplomat.

With respect to their group, Geneviève exclaims: ‘This one is extraordinary. Such friendship, solidarity outside the *Espace*²³...’ She is very experienced and has a lot of knowledge on various matters, which she gladly shares with the women. In her classes Geneviève talks about

²³ Instead of saying *Espace Couleurs Femmes*, most of the volunteers used the word *Espace* when talking about the ECF.

social, political, and economic issues like patriarchy, female politicians, the environment, the EU, etc. Often she brings up news for discussion. These lessons are slightly more structured than those of Françoise, and the two volunteers regularly give the women grammatical exercises for homework. Geneviève and Louise took the initiative to make a day-trip to Antwerp in May, and although I did not participate myself, the women and the volunteers seemed to be very content.

3.1.6 Visitors²⁴

Most of the visitors are ‘recruited’ to the ECF through friends and acquaintances, while others have seen people entering the building or found folders at the local bakery. Some are directed to the ECF via NGOs like *Lire et Ecrire*, or by the social services, expecting them to learn French in order to qualify for professional insertion. In this latter group there is of course variation with respect to motivation. Some of the visitors have just arrived in Belgium, while others have been there for more than 40 years. There are more newcomers in the evening, and the novices usually attend literacy or beginner French courses. All the visitors at the ECF are more than 18 years old, and I would estimate the eldest ones to be about 70.

The ECF is one of only three institutions offering language courses also for illegal immigrants (the so-called ‘paperless’) in the area. Many paperless work undeclared during the day and can only attend evening courses. Frequently their attendance is rather irregular, as their priority is to earn a living. Since many of the visitors are in a precarious economic situation, they may attend a few classes to see if it suits them before paying. The coordinator may also make individual arrangements on when to pay the rest. Visitors may get a discount when they attend several courses.

Many of the courses are affected negatively by a lack of continuity and structure due to irregular attendance, late-coming, and drop-outs. The ECF has a fairly high turnover of visitors, implying that they arrive and leave throughout the whole year, many not staying for long. The coordinator argues that many of the women have problems adjusting as they are not accustomed to following any time schedules. This is most apparent among the alpha group participants, who have never gone to school. Many of these are elderly, and may find it hard to learn new habits late in life.

Generally, I consider that this lack of continuity contributes to an inefficient culture of learning in many of the courses²⁵. This contention is substantiated by the fact that there is a low degree of advancement of visitors from lower to higher level courses; none of the current mem-

²⁴ Here I choose to use the word ‘visitors’ instead of the commonly used ‘women’ (*Jes femmes*), since the former term also comprises the evening groups, which are mixed.

²⁵ This is primarily based on my personal experiences in the intermediate group and one of the alpha groups, but it is also a general impression derived from my presence at the ECF and my conversations with the coordinator.

bers of the advanced group are ‘recruited’ from lower levels, while only one in the intermediate group has advanced from the beginner course. However, it must be taken into account that many of the visitors hardly speak any French outside their two weekly courses, and this is far from sufficient if one expects rapid advancement. Another important factor is that the ECF is *not* a school where the pupils accomplish grade by grade and then graduate after completing a given number of years; instead the centre seeks to provide its visitors with more than merely linguistic knowledge, and the latter may sometimes have to recede for the benefit of the sociocultural aspects of the ECF’s enterprise.

3.1.7 Groups of Study²⁶

The Advanced Group

The advanced group initially began as a fortnightly reading workshop headed by Geneviève about three years before the time of my fieldwork. Julia was very content with the workshop, wanted it to take place more regularly, and thus the advanced group gradually came into being. At least three of my key informants have attended this group since its incipient start as a workshop. According to Julia, for the last two years the advanced group has been the most cohesive one at the ECF. In many ways she is right, although this cohesiveness should not be exaggerated. The women in this group have been in Belgium from two to 40 years, most of them a rather long time, and many have also attended the ECF for two or three years, while others have just arrived. The majority of the women are in their thirties and forties.

The group is dominated by Arabs/Muslims, but there are also some Latinas, the previously mentioned Togolese, and occasionally an Asian. During the course of my fieldwork, I gradually perceived that the group was not as harmonious as it had been depicted both by members and volunteers. I noticed tendencies of a creation of sub-groups, especially by the Arabs/Muslims, being the most numerous, and to a lesser extent by the Latinas. The Arab/Muslim dominance appeared very subtle at first, and was therefore difficult to detect. Language appeared to be the major means of exclusion.

Occasionally the Latinas would speak Spanish, and as Geneviève speaks some Spanish and Françoise speaks it fluently, they could communicate with them also in this language. However, it was not often that I heard Spanish in class, while the speaking of Arabic occurred recurrently. The Arabs/Muslims were particularly prone to start speaking Arabic when the *animatrices* were walking around talking to the individual women to correct the texts that they had written, and no one was demanding their immediate attention. I noticed that especially Brazilian Ana

²⁶ It is important to note that when I refer to my ‘groups’ of study, I mean ‘group’ in the everyday, non-scientific sense, which must be distinguished from Jenkins’ (2004) concepts of group versus category.

Maria, whose French was not that good, felt excluded. Once, three of the Arabs/Muslims were discussing something eagerly in Arabic. Suddenly they seemed to discover that I was among them and did not understand a word, while completely disregarding that Ana Maria – as uneducated in Arabic as me – was there too.

Unlike the situation in the intermediate group, speaking another language than French was seldom penalised in any way by the *animatrices*, except if discussions became too loud. Françoise even stated that she did not mind the speaking of other languages as long as it enhanced the women's learning. My observations seem to confirm that that she was right in her assessment that the women may work as assistants to the *animatrice* when speaking their mother tongue. On the other hand, speaking another language might also entail a withdrawal from the group both socially and with respect to the purpose of the course; learning. The *animatrices* were capable of 'supervising' whether the Latinas were actually helping one another with linguistic matters when speaking Spanish, but the same did not apply to the Arabs/Muslims as none of the volunteers speak Arabic.

There was increased tension between the Arab/Muslim and Latina groups throughout my fieldwork. At times this tension would intensify simply because one group spoke in their own language, even though they did not necessarily malign the other party. Exclusion through incomprehension created suspicion and distance. This latent tension finally escalated into the conflict mentioned in the introduction. I will return to this matter at the end of chapter four.

Every lesson in the advanced group is followed by a common lunch organised by the women themselves. Françoise always stays for lunch while Geneviève does this less frequently. Usually the Arabs/Muslims bring their traditional foods, while often some of the others leave. At lunchtime, as well as breaks during classes (occurring as a result of the *animatrices*' individual corrections of the women's texts), the otherwise formal 'teaching' situation is broken. This makes it possible to observe informal social interaction between the women. In such informal settings, people's choice of interlocutors is rarely coincidental; in all probability, most prefer to converse with those to whom they feel closest rather than with more remote acquaintances. Hence, these situations may provide valuable data concerning patterns of inclusion and exclusion, thereby indicating which criteria of identification (ethnicity, religion, etc.) in fact constitute the lines of demarcation with respect to otherisation.

The women's main reason for coming to the ECF is to improve especially their written French – partly to be able to help their own children doing their homework. Very few of the women mentioned enhanced employment prospects as a motivational factor for improving their French skills. This is perhaps because most of them have accepted their situation as housewives,

channelling all their energy into ensuring the future success of their children. Other stated positive aspects of the ECF are its being a women's space where they can discuss women's problems, the (good) atmosphere, and workshops where they can learn about their rights. Furthermore, they see the ECF as providing an opportunity to get out of the house, and they appreciate being able to learn from women having different cultural backgrounds. Many of them know each other rather well, socialise outside the ECF, and are quite active in class; discussing eagerly and partly loudly, sometimes making the *animatrices* calm them. The atmosphere in class is usually relaxed and good, and the women make jokes among each other and with the volunteers. The topics of conversation range from politics and news to family, sex, and culture.

Geneviève stresses the importance of the informal character of the classes, 'permit[ting] a lot of liberty'. The *animatrice* Marie was much more formal, going into details about literature, etc., and Geneviève says that this was problematic; an ECF course is not meant to be akin to a university course²⁷. If the 'frames [are] too strict (...) you kill the desire [to learn]', she argues. Still, Julia claims that although the women in the advanced group speak well, there are 'few women who have an ambition of working'. Compared to many of the other groups at the centre, however, it is my impression that the participants in the advanced group are putting quite a lot of effort into e.g. doing homework, although of course it cannot measure up to a regular school class.

The women in this group are the most regular in class attendance – normally there are at least ten women present – in addition to being the most active participants in the centres' sociocultural activities and workshops. Thus, among all the visitors at the ECF, those in this group are those most capable of utilising the very activities distinguishing it from a school, and they also appear to regard it as much more than that. Nearly all of the women in this group are housewives, and the few with irregular attendance, most of whom are Latinas, are usually working – undeclared. Although they all have their troubles, generally the women in the advanced group are not in a state of 'absolute precariousness', as Julia expressed it.

The Intermediate Group

Obviously, my view on the intermediate group will be unique, as I was in charge of it myself. I will try not to enter into auto-anthropology, but my analysis will of course reflect my role in the group and the fieldwork challenge of trying to respond to the women's diverging needs, expectations, and wishes while simultaneously collecting data.

Most of the women in the intermediate group are middle-aged, while some are a bit younger. They have been in Belgium from three to more than 20 years. Several of the women

²⁷ Several of my interlocutors have told me that many of the group participants stopped attending classes because of the way Marie run the course, and that was why Julia chose to replace her.

speak fairly well, but have problems with respect to grammar, writing, and spelling; while others have difficulties expressing themselves orally as well. Iraqi Maryam is the only one who has attended the ECF for several years, while the rest have come since the summer of 2006. The majority of the women are housewives and appear to rely on the social services for their income. Many of them are in a state of what Julia identified as ‘absolute precariousness’, experiencing problems related to linguistic difficulties in the encounter with public agencies, illegality/asylum applications, undeclared work, health problems due to war traumas, a difficult family situation, sick children, etc.

The intermediate group is very unstable both when it comes to participants’ attendance and teacher turnover. The absence rates were quite high during my stay, and frequently there were only three or four participants present. I once asked Julia if the frequent teacher turnover might contribute to irregular attendance, knowing that the two *animatrices* whom Jeanne and I replaced in January 2007 had arrived only a few months earlier. Julia agreed that this played a role but claimed it was not determining. Still, the group agreed with Moroccan Hanan who explicitly mentioned that this was problematic.

The intermediate group has a very strong Arab/Muslim dominance in terms of numbers and conduct, and during my fieldwork the non-Arabs/Muslims were most prominent among those absent and quitting²⁸. The most stable ones were a Senegalese who arrived only a few weeks before I left the field, thus not being a key informant, and Ana Maria. My study therefore lacks adequate data on many of the non-Arabs; consequently, Ana Maria and Ecuadorian Esperanza are the only ones playing a more important role in my thesis.

In class, the women did not easily fulfil the tasks I gave them, and hardly any of them did their homework; hence in the end I stopped giving them homework. They were generally most active and dedicated when I did not guide their conversation, but some interference on my part proved necessary in order to let everyone speak. One of the main challenges in this group was that the Arab/Muslim women tended to stop speaking French and switch to Arabic, thereby excluding the few non-Arab/Muslim participants and the *animatrice* from their conversation. I often experienced the speaking of Arabic as very disturbing when I was at the board trying to explain something to the whole group. Moreover, when I asked one participant to read aloud, one or more of the Arab/Muslim women would read slightly ‘ahead’ of the one I had asked to read, disturbing the reader so that she did not get the chance to figure it out for herself. Even

²⁸ This might of course have been coincidental, although it seems somewhat peculiar. There was a Chinese moving to another town, a young Ivoirian who worked a lot and almost fell asleep during classes on the occasions she was there, a Brazilian quitting after just a couple of classes as she was pregnant, and Esperanza, an Ecuadorian who quit a couple of months into my fieldwork.

though these reading-ahead incidents are hard to justify, the speaking of Arabic is not necessarily entirely negative.

Once when Moroccan Fatma interrupted the reading she expressed that she just wanted to help explain something, as she likes people to 'lend her a hand' when she is struggling (which she is frequently). My impression is that often when the women speak Arabic, their purpose is to work as mediators translating for the one who does not understand. Still, it is conspicuous that none of the women take much initiative in other instances. Nevertheless, every time someone (regardless of ethnic origin) is struggling with pronunciation or expressing personal problems, the others – especially the Arabs/Muslims – act in a very supportive way. This support may be due to a mutually recognised precariousness; however, this is apparently quite superficial, confined to the given situation, and does not extend beyond the classroom walls.

The women in this group were not very content with their course. When I asked about their motivation for attending classes, the majority of the women focused on linguistic learning²⁹ and not on the social aspects. Nevertheless, I perceived this to be somewhat ambiguous, since the women also expressed their interest in going on excursions of various kinds, like they had done in language courses elsewhere. Contrary to this wish stand the facts that 1) none of them participated in other, sociocultural activities at the ECF; and 2) they did not show up for most of the workshops even though they were repeatedly informed in advance and had confirmed their presence. Six of them said they would attend a workshop on women's health, but none of them came, except from Esperanza who had not signed up. Likewise, when I organised a museum trip at the end of the year, only three showed up.

When *animatrice* Camille wanted to have a social gathering in class to say goodbye before she was leaving, the majority of the women seemed more interested in getting home – although initially they had welcomed her suggestion. The group indirectly appears to place the entire responsibility for their dissatisfaction with the content of the course upon the *animatrices*, despite the latter's efforts to propose and organise activities. In another instance, Hanan brought Syrian and Moroccan cookies for the group; I think she had been inspired by and was trying to imitate the advanced group after having spent a lesson with them. However, she almost had to beg the others to take more than one; it was as if they did not really appreciate her effort, and they brought the cookies with them when they left instead of sitting down to eat together. The cookies did not become the start of any lunchtime gatherings akin to those in the advanced group.

²⁹ The women referred to the ECF as a 'school' similar to other language schools they had attended previously. Some of them did not know that the *animatrices* are volunteers and thus doing unpaid work. Several of the women intended to find new 'schools' to improve on their French, as apparently they were not satisfied with their own progress.

Consequently, I suspect that there is something in the very disposition of this group which prevents it from achieving the good social atmosphere the women appear to miss and desire. By and large, the women rarely take initiative or act *as* a group, and I perceive them as individuals who happen to be placed together on the basis of linguistic competence criteria. Although this applies to all ECF groups, in the intermediate group even language can be questioned as a basis for group belonging, as the participants' language skills are relatively diverging. In my opinion, the intermediate group suffers from being a residual category. By this I imply that the participants do not have much in common except from *not* fitting linguistically in either the beginner or the advanced French groups. This entails a negative criterion of group belonging, the reasons for which I will explore in my subsequent analysis.

3.1.8 A Typical Day

It is hard to describe a 'typical' day at the ECF, since the content varies quite a lot depending on which courses are taking place. However, I will try my best to convey an image of a typical day, based on real incidents.

The morning classes start at 09.30 and last until 11.30 a.m., while the afternoon ones take place between 1.30 and 3.30 p.m. I arrive at the centre between 09 and 09.15 a.m. Julia tells me what to do during the day; type a volunteer meeting report, give a message to some of the women, etc. Let's say that I'm with the advanced group on this specific day, and that Françoise is the one in charge. I start making photocopies from *Elle*, and these are handed out to the women – usually by Nour, a leading figure of the group. This day's text deals with the adoption of a kidnapped Peruvian child. As usual, reading the text and explaining difficult words and phrases takes some time, and Françoise always spends quite a lot of time telling stories to stress the meaning of any given expression. Afterwards they discuss the topic of the text; adoption. Françoise talks about her feelings towards her adopted son from Vietnam. Ayaovi, the Togolese, says that children are lucky to be adopted from a poor country, where they have few prospects for the future, to a rich country. Françoise says that generally she agrees, but she still cannot decide on which is worse: to be poor in one's country of origin; or possibly enjoy high material standards in a foreign country, but still feel that one doesn't belong and always miss one's family... Françoise has been an immigrant most of her life, and she says that she would have stayed home if she could choose all over again. Spanish Sylvia and Françoise agree that immigrants are 'divided' after the migration experience. Françoise is chatting on about various matters, sharing her extensive knowledge of other countries, religions, etc.

Even though the ambiance is quite relaxed during classes, it is more spontaneous at lunchtime. The women discuss their families; Amina's sick three-year-old son about to have surgery, Nawal's unemployed 25-year-old daughter trying to find work, and Nour's authoritarian, strict mother-in-law in Algeria demanding luxurious presents... Safia, a Moroccan, wants me to help her make some photocopies for her job application. She does not have a diploma, and thus seeks unskilled work like cleaning. Julia asks her if she has a CV; Safia does not know what a CV is, and Julia replies that she will ask Geneviève to teach them how to make one.

Nawal, one of only two non-veiled Muslims of both groups, says that her husband would never let her work late in a hotel. Julia asks her why, and Nawal replies that he would be jealous. Julia exclaims her surprise, saying that Nawal's husband is one of the most liberal she knows³⁰ (I presume she is comparing him to the other ECF women's husbands). Julia makes a comment on how in 'Arab culture' women belong to men, and the women present express their agreement, although – based on other statements they have made – I think they disagree with this practise.

After lunch, Julia is off to a meeting regarding the situation of illegal immigrants in Belgium. I am in charge of the office, trying to interpret and type the not-so-intelligibly handwritten report from the last volunteer meeting, while answering the phone when it rings and helping those having queries about courses, inscriptions, or any other matters of concern. An Asian woman asks me if I speak English, and is relieved when confirm that I do, while I am partly able to communicate in Spanish with a Portuguese-speaking Brazilian.

Danish Anne, a very enthusiastic and dedicated retired teacher of about 60, stops by the office to give Julia a message, and we have a chat about the challenges of being an *animatrice*. Anne puts great effort into preparing her classes, spending several hours making her own material to fit her group, of which she is very fond. She recounts how hard it is for the women to express themselves, whether it is verbally or through drawings. Anne asks me how my group is doing, and I tell her that the persisting irregular attendance makes it hard for me to plan the lessons, never knowing who and how many of the women will turn up. Also, I feel completely powerless against the women speaking Arabic, as they continue doing it despite my explicit instructions not to. On the other hand, every lesson I manage to create some interest and discussion makes me feel that I am doing something useful and that it is indeed worthwhile. Anne replies that it sure isn't easy, but that we just have to keep going. After our little chat, at about 3-3.30 p.m., it is time to get home and start typing today's field notes. I leave a message for Julia about queries she has to follow up and what I have been doing during her absence, lock up, and I am off.

The next chapter will portray some of my key informants in the two groups.

³⁰ Julia, Nawal, and their husbands sometimes socialise outside the ECF.

4. PORTRAITS: *La différence fait la richesse*³¹

This chapter aims at conveying an impression of the lives and concerns of some of the women in my two groups of study. I seek to recount their social biographies as narrated by the women in my interviews with them, and to provide a presentation of the women with respect to e.g. signs of identity, language competence, and how they relate to one another. This presentation is based on my observation of the women's frontstage appearance in class as well as their backstage accounts comprising comments on the other members of the group.

The reasons for devoting an entire chapter to portray my interlocutors are connected to my general objectives to 1) show the women's diversity by exposing their differences as well as their similarities; and 2) explore the character – and potential success or failure – of intercultural encounters. To accomplish the latter, one must first know what 'baggage' (cultural, social, personal, etc.) the women are bringing with them into the encounters – i.e. their biographies, as this will influence the outcome (see Holliday and Hyde *et al.* 2004). Cohen stresses that people 'may use collective forms to assert their identities, but we should not mistake these for *uniformities* of identity', as 'the self is not passive (...); it has agency, is active, proactive and creative' (1994:178, 115). In reality, 'the explanation of *collective* behaviour is to be sought among its *individual* participants'; '[p]eople's attachment to collectivities is mediated by their *personal* experience.' (*ibid.*:148, 177). I anticipate that the portraits will help illustrate Cohen's point.

4.1 The Advanced Group

Nour

40-year-old Algerian Nour has a very strong character emphasised by her dark eyebrows and crooked nose, and when she is present she simply cannot be overlooked. Her distinct voice and straight posture radiate self-confidence, decisiveness, and authority. Being a devout Muslim, she wears a headscarf tightly tied around her head and neck, careful not to show her hair. Nour takes a leading position in the group, and she is respected – if not liked – by most and feared by some. It is most beneficial to stay friends with her, as Nour is not merciful to those whom she perceives as adversaries in one way or another. She may seem brusque, but underneath her rough appearance there is also a lot of warmth.

Nour's husband is a diplomat stationed in Brussels for three years, and the couple returned to Algeria with their 14-year-old son and six-year-old daughter one month after the end of my fieldwork. In Algeria, Nour completed a four-year Bachelor's degree in Arab literature quali-

³¹ Nour made this statement, referring to the cultural and national diversity of the advanced group, when I interviewed her. It may be translated roughly as 'difference constitutes richness'.

finding her for work at an upper secondary school, but she only found work at a lower secondary school. She married when she was 25 years old and worked for one year before becoming a housewife, as her husband does not like her to work and she must take care of their children.

Nour's relationship to her husband is complicated, and she complains about a 'lack of confidence' on his part; he has worked all his life but fails to recognise that she has helped him³². Nevertheless, she is not afraid to state her opinion or argue with him if she disagrees, and at least sometimes she appears to have her will. She states that 'of course I would like to work. Honestly... being independent.' Nour strongly opposes what she calls North African women's economic dependence on men. In Belgium, women work, are able to divorce, etc., but the economic aspect is essential in this respect. Nour says that 'it is very humiliating' for her constantly having to ask her husband for money: 'You have to fight for yourself... [Thus,] you're frowned upon, you're mean... [as a woman]'. There are so many prohibitions for women, but she thinks that things will have to change now that we are in the 21st century. Nour says that 'My dreams are completely based on my children', especially her daughter: 'I would very much like her to realise everything that I haven't been able to realise.'

With respect to Belgians, she states that they are not very sociable, and she has experienced racism from her neighbours reacting to her being veiled. Although she describes herself as adaptable, she is looking forward to her return to Algeria. In Belgium 'I always feel foreign. I have never felt at home. Even if I stayed an eternity', she says. She claims to have many acquaintances, and she describes herself as being 'sociable'. Nour does not have many Algerian friends outside the ECF, as she is more interested in meeting people of other nationalities. Being the wife of a diplomat she does not have the right to work, thus when she arrived she decided that she wanted to do something interesting and different. Nour started frequenting the reading workshop at the ECF in the autumn of 2004. She went to the dance course as well, but quit as soon as she realised that they would have to perform in public. She also likes the theatre, but is impeded from going as she must stay in and take care of the children in the evening.

At the ECF Nour seeks to expand her vocabulary. She speaks French fluently and is more preoccupied with 'the human relations': she has 'made acquaintances of marvellous people', finding friends. About the advanced group, she says that 'I don't think that there is anyone better than us [in all of the association. It is] more dynamic (...) because we don't have the linguistic problems... We get along well despite the cultural differences [and] I think that difference constitutes richness...' She states that 'There is a great understanding between us; there is a bond between us – like friendship, like family.' In the other groups people come for classes and then

³² When he had an operation, she stayed home and nursed him for weeks, and did not attend the ECF. However, later, when she became pregnant, her husband was being very considerate with her.

leave; the advanced is the only group that has taken the initiative to bring food. Nour admits that the women have different ways of thinking, adding ‘That is normal. Everyone has her opinion.’

In class, Nour is practically working as an assistant to the *animatrices*, handing out photocopies for everyone, helping them correct grammar, and sometimes translating into Arabic. She also makes jokes with Françoise and members of the group. Nour is a very articulate woman, and she demonstrates a high level of general knowledge on politics, world affairs, foreign countries, language, history, etc. This implies that she is very active in class, always prepared to answer the *animatrices*’ questions – sometimes being hushed for talking or being too eager. Nour herself says that in discussions, ‘[g]enerally, I follow the group’, trying to explain her point of view while respecting any difference of opinion, but she admits that ‘When I am convinced [about something], I insist...’ She is very temperamental, becomes sulky if she does not accomplish her aims, and Geneviève comments that she does not really listen to others³³. Nour is particularly sensitive with respect to criticism of anything Muslim or Arab, and is easily angered by what she perceives as prejudices and injustice made towards Muslims and Arabs. She says that generally, all Muslims are being perceived as terrorists, while she as a Muslim woman does not know whether to laugh or cry when people are amazed learning that she has in fact attended school.

Nawal

Nawal is in her mid-forties, and a Belgian citizen of Moroccan origin. She is one of Nour’s closest friends, and her complete opposite in every way. Nawal looks younger than her age, is a rather slim woman with soft features, radiating amiability and inspiring confidence. She is one of two non-veiled Arabs in the group, wearing trousers and casual clothes more often than many of the others, but sometimes she dresses up, wearing jewellery and make-up. Françoise points to her incredible ‘softness’, recounting Nawal’s participation in a theatre group performing at a party the year before my fieldwork. Nawal was supposed to be angry, but although her words implicated anger her voice was so soft it was apparent she was not angry at all, Françoise said. Male friends of the *animatrice* seeing photos of Nawal have commented on how beautiful she is.

In Morocco, Nawal had six years of primary schooling. She thus belongs to the first generation that has gone to school. When she was 14 years old and her father died, she went to live with her grandparents. There she had private sewing lessons for two years. Nawal married when she was 17 and in 1979 she arrived in Brussels to join her husband, who had spent 10 years there working as a bus driver. They have got two children; a 22-year-old son and a 26-year-old daugh-

³³ At the end of my fieldwork Nour told me that she was pregnant. This of course should be taken into consideration, as hormones may indeed affect her temper and conduct negatively. She was content with the pregnancy, but according to Geneviève she was also anxious due to her bad health and previous miscarriages.

ter. Nawal admits that the first time period in Belgium was difficult; she did not know how things worked in her new country, the weather was bad, she stayed home, and people were racist unlike the Western tourists she had met as a little girl in Agadir. However, she no longer misses Morocco, claiming it was a dictatorship of 'ignorant' and 'naïve' people not possessing knowledge about the rest of the world. Through her husband she met 'cultivated people' and in Belgium she learnt to question what had previously seemed evident. 'I am much better treated here [in Belgium] as a foreigner than in my [own] country', she states.

On the other hand, her politically active husband was busy participating in meetings, leaving Nawal bored and lonely. Although her husband did not want to, she decided that she would like to have a child. She skipped the pill without telling him, and became pregnant. He was angry for a day or two; then he was happy. Once, Nawal discovered that her husband had been advised not to let her work, as she would then start to 'understand'³⁴. She argues that men will not give women too many liberties, fearing that they might demand more. 'In Morocco, the Muslim world, you see, the man... it is he who is the boss.' She says that if the husband forbids something, his wife must not do it: 'We haven't won our freedom. We are still someone's slave.' Many of Nawal's friends are not allowed to go where they want to go and do what they want to do. 'One mustn't generalise', she says; it all depends on the character of the man – some are open, others not. Her husband is alright albeit he does not like her going alone to the cinema, but she still does it from time to time without telling him. She smiles when mentioning an expression stating that although the man is the boss, the woman gets her will anyway.

Nawal has got 'a whole mixture' of friends coming from all over the world. They go to the market together; meet regularly at each other's houses for food and drink in the afternoons; and go to the theatre, cinema, and museums. However, 'many women don't like to go out in the evening'³⁵, thus she only does this with Spanish Sylvia and Belgian Adèle (both from the ECF). At the centre, she participates in the dance and gym courses, without ever having danced before: 'Thanks to the VF I've started to move.' She is very active in the activities organised by the ECF, e.g. participating in a writing workshop resulting in Nawal and five other women making a book on the immigrant experience. Later she starred in a TV programme related to the promotion of the book. She also goes to film screenings, and went to a 'women's parliament' event on March 8th 2007.

Nawal came to the ECF to participate in the reading workshop in 2003. Her main motivation was to learn to write properly, and she became inspired by the *animatrices*. Now she comes because 'I feel good, I share things', she says. She can ask the *animatrices* about politics and issues

³⁴ Nawal did not elaborate on this, but I presume she was talking about gaining economic independence.

³⁵ I got the impression that she was referring to her Arab/Muslim friends.

she hears about in the media, learning a lot. Nawal states that she would never go to a class with Moroccans only; indicating that one is likely to wear blinkers³⁶ when there is only one nationality present. The mixture of the advanced group is ‘richer’: she talks enthusiastically about how they exchange recipes and learn to cook all sorts of food: Algerian, Mexican, Spanish...

Nawal also recognises their differences and diverging opinions, but says that they respect one another. She acknowledges having some things in common with the other Arabs, and says that she knows how they think. However, after all these years in Belgium she also claims to know European mentality. Whenever there are problems, Nawal tries to solve them, acting as a mediator. She tells me about an incident recounted by Nour: Algerian Aïcha and Moroccan Safia – the ‘two new’ in the group – were hurt because *animatrice* Louise had said that she would accompany Nawal, but not them, to make lunch at Françoise’s place. They inferred that Louise did not want to be seen with them since they are veiled. Nawal had talked to them afterwards, trying to explain that it was a misunderstanding (although she did not know the facts). She told them it was for practical reasons, i.e. who was carrying which groceries. In addition, she appears to view it as her special responsibility to calm down Nour when she becomes too agitated. Generally, Nawal is an extremely dutiful woman, liked by most. She often volunteers for writing at the board in class, gives people presents, has taken Françoise to the market, etc.

Nawal comments that Julia proposes all sorts of ideas but usually she has already decided on the matter when presenting it. E.g., Julia wanted Nawal to participate in performing a song even though Nawal did not really want to do it. Yet, she ended up performing the song on two occasions – persuaded by Julia, who sometimes tends to impose her own ideas. However, as I have already demonstrated, there is resistance in Nawal. When Julia disclosed that she might be relocated to another VF centre, Nawal was among those arguing that she must fight, saying she would support her. Another interesting incident occurred one evening when we were rehearsing the above-mentioned song at Julia’s place. Julia offered us some wine, and Nawal replied that she had never tasted it before. She commented that her husband likes wine but probably he would not be too pleased with her drinking it. However, it would be even worse in the advanced group, as the atmosphere has changed slightly after the entry of strict women like Safia, who would definitely not approve. After recounting this, Nawal gladly accepted a glass of white wine.

Nawal’s dreams mainly regard her children’s success in terms of employment, family, and health. However, she was looking forward to her husband getting an early retirement at the end of 2007, seeing it as an opportunity to travel.

³⁶ She does not actually say but rather shows this, holding her hands at both sides of her face so that she cannot see to either side.

Sylvia

67-year-old Spanish Sylvia is the oldest participant in the group. This short, plump woman is a very close friend of Nawal, and also a friend of Nour. In Spain, Sylvia had six years of primary school after which she was obliged to help her aunt take care of her children, before working as a saleswoman. She and two of her brothers came to Belgium from Franco's harsh regime in 1966. Sylvia did not expect to stay, but then she married a Belgian two years later, and had three boys. Her Flemish husband had two businesses; a laundry and a take-away restaurant, and for 27 years Sylvia worked with him in the restaurant. Sylvia comments that with work and three children 'I didn't have time for myself.' However, she was raised to believe this was how it was supposed to be, and was used to it.

The first years in Belgium she had many Spanish friends, but the majority of them left when the Franco regime fell and Spain started developing. Now she has Belgian friends, and at the ECF she has found friends of all nationalities. Sylvia has spent two years there, and her reasons for coming are many. She explains that her retired husband has got Parkinson, entailing that he cannot go out much, in addition to being 'very possessive'. Sylvia says that the good ambiance at the ECF makes her feel free compared to at home; 'with my husband I have to fight all the time' – '[i]t is only now that he is starting to let me breathe...'. At the ECF, she found activities in which she could participate. Sylvia used to attend the dance course but now she is impeded due to her back problems. Also, she very much enjoyed being a part of the theatre group performing at a party in 2006. Generally, she likes going to museums, the theatre, and the cinema (often with Nawal), but as she lives far away and her husband does not like her going out late, it occurs infrequently. She attends ECF film screenings, and twice she has been to the annual VF congress. In the advanced group she says that they 'discuss problems that concern women... defending women...'. They also learn about 'rights, pensions, means of revenue...'

Sylvia is usually active in class, participating in discussions and chatting with the others. She is dyslectic and has difficulties spelling, and consequently struggles with a feeling of inferiority and low self-confidence. Sylvia has a *very* heavy Spanish accent, and it is not always obvious to me that she is speaking French and not Spanish. Albeit she might struggle with the grammar and pronunciation, she is simply brilliant when it comes to vocabulary. Sylvia cares about other people and is usually quite cheerful but she also has a strong temper, which came to the surface during the conflict.

Paula

Paula is a white, slim woman with short, black, curly hair and glasses. She, her husband, and their son were political refugees coming to Belgium from Chile in 1978. Paula completed secondary school in Chile, married when she was 18, and she and her husband became activists against the military regime. Today she is fifty years old, has two children, and is divorced from her husband, who has returned to Chile. She has not been employed for many years now, but previously she worked in a kitchen, in the hotel business, as a cleaning lady, and finally as a governess. Currently she is seeking employment, but her age makes it difficult to find any work.

Paula says that it was hard coming to Belgium. As she was a quota refugee, she could not decide where to go, and had to accept whatever she was offered. She struggled with the language, and told me she wanted to return – in spite of Pinochet. However, there were several special arrangements made for Chilean political refugees, e.g. Belgian citizenship granted to children of Chilean parents, and the offering of French courses. Paula's family received a residence permit, and gradually they got accommodation, health insurance, etc. She claims that she has never experienced any racism, and states that Chileans generally adapt very quickly.

Paula distinguishes between immigrants and refugees, leaving their country of origin for economic and political reasons respectively. According to her, many immigrants become greedy when they arrive in Belgium and are granted certain rights; they suddenly start demanding what they did not have and will never have in their own country. She is annoyed with immigrants who are ungrateful, considering that 'Belgians' (I do not know whether she refers to origin or citizenship) should have more rights than immigrants. Paula is now a Belgian citizen, her sons feel at home in Belgium, and she says that '...now, I could not leave Belgium'. In her new home country she is 'able to do what I want... Indeed, here in Belgium, I am free...' Paula continually states that if she could be born again, she would rather have been born a boy, as she thinks that men from childhood enjoy many more rights than women. As a little she could not go anywhere without the company of an elder brother etc., while her brothers were free to go wherever they liked. She is still affected by this, preferring to go out with her friends rather than alone.

Paula first came to the ECF in September 2005 to learn how to spell and write correctly. She had been absent for six months when she returned at the end of February 2007 after a visit to her sister in Canada. Paula thinks she learns much more than French at the ECF. Before her trip to Canada, the women were given the opportunity to write their own stories, they made a theatre piece, they had a party, and she attended computer lessons, something she intends to resume. In May 2007 she became acquainted with the sewing teacher, and started attending her course. Paula's French is excellent, and I would consider her presence in the group to be impor-

tant, although her position is quiet and retired. She is a rather anonymous helper, handing out papers in class, making coffee, and assisting in the preparations of various events. Paula also made herself available for interviews by students doing a study on unemployment among middle-aged immigrant women. Moreover, she supported Ana Maria who was very nervous when the advanced group was preparing a presentation for the end-of-the-year party.

Paula thinks that the advanced group is marked by inequality because the Muslim women are in a majority. Every woman has got her own opinions, every culture its ways – and this cannot be changed, she claims. However, she states that ‘I respect their opinions but I do not accept them’, as ‘accept’ to her means converting to Islam, accepting polygamy, etc. Paula also says that ‘they, the Muslims’ neither accept nor respect ‘us’ (non-Muslims?) while ‘we’ have to accept and respect them. She exemplifies this saying that apparently it is accepted to wear a veil while one should not wear a miniskirt in class. Paula argues that ‘Since they are in the majority it is they who decide everything.’ However, she adds that it is an individual matter; she likes Nour and Aïcha – who also happen to be two of the most devoted Muslims in the group.

When I ask Paula whether she has anything in common with the other women, she replies ‘not at all’, and she declines any existence of solidarity between them. She states that the women want to be kind and helpful, but that they are talking behind her back; ‘[t]hat’s women, I tell you’. She gives an example: a woman with family troubles chooses to confide in someone in the group because she thinks that another woman will understand. Soon after, she discovers that the whole group knows about it. Paula declares that she has experienced this herself, without wishing to elaborate on the matter. She also complains that the women attending the ECF do not have any plans for the future, lack aspirations on their own behalf, and are merely making time pass – in her opinion. Nevertheless, she says that ‘Sometimes, I ask myself why I have come’, replying ‘...because... I’ve got nothing to do’. Hence, she is not as happy at the ECF as she used to be, and she too seeks to make time pass. Still, Paula has aspirations: ‘I would very much like to travel, know other cultures...’ Furthermore, ‘I would really like to learn to write [about] what I’ve experienced.’

Ana Maria

Brazilian Ana Maria is about 40 years old, thin, and has got long, brown hair. She came to Belgium with her husband, who is from India, in 1998. They had been living together for years but married before leaving Brazil, enabling her to follow him as he was being relocated. He works for an enterprise based in Belgium and is relocated regularly, thus Ana Maria does not know how long she will stay in Belgium. In Brazil she completed secondary school, before working as a

saleswoman, a secretary, and finally writing patient records. Ana Maria stopped working because she did not have enough time for doing housework. Besides, her husband wanted her to quit, saying she did not need to work – yet, she herself regretted it.

Ana Maria was looking forward to going to Belgium and she had heard it was easy to become acquainted with people, but she is disappointed about her new social life. In Brazil she led a good life, meeting politicians, ambassadors, etc., while in Belgium it is a whole different world. Ana Maria cries when telling me that she had a depression. She feels better now, but she misses friends to talk to and is feeling lonely. It is my impression that several people have disappointed and even exploited her rather than offering real friendship. Her husband is travelling a lot, and she misses affection (*cariño*). Ana Maria is content with her marriage and considers her husband to be her best friend, but she would have preferred staying unmarried if they had not been forced to for bureaucratic reasons. She states that ‘a woman should be like a man’; seek intellectual, mental, and spiritual stimulation, see the world, and *then* get married.

Ana Maria came to the ECF at the end of 2006, after an acquaintance suggested that she should go to school since she was feeling sad. She has attended English and French language schools, but she prefers the women-only environment of the ECF. Her motivation is to learn grammar as well as speaking and writing. Ana Maria struggles with the talking, and it is not always easy to understand what she is trying to say. She herself thinks that Belgians do not even make an effort to understand her, and has experienced language-related discrimination. It is challenging to live in a bilingual city, and she considers language a necessary tool to find both work and friends.

At the ECF, Ana Maria appreciates gaining ‘knowledge about life in other countries’. She realises that life must be hard for women who are not free to do what they want, and this makes her feel fortunate. Ana Maria is content with the *animatrices* but would have liked them to focus more on politics and places worth visiting, as well as practical chores like writing letters; and perhaps less on children and cooking. Ana Maria stresses the importance of opening one’s eyes to the world and what is happening in other countries, commenting that ‘It isn’t money that makes people rich, it is knowledge.’ She suggests that she is more open than the others.

On her own initiative, Ana Maria identifies the existence of a sub-group of Moroccans and Muslims. She describes them as reserved, their minds being ‘closed’, not leaving any opening for others/non-Muslims. E.g., she does not dress the way she wants to because she tries to respect ‘the others’. Furthermore, she stopped going to the dance course as she feared that her Brazilian way of dancing might shock the others. In the advanced group the Muslims are speak-

ing and correcting one another in Arabic; completely preoccupied with their country and religion. Yet, she acknowledges that there are some exceptions: Nour and Amina, who are ‘educated’³⁷.

In class, Ana Maria plays a very modest role; she talks very little and leans on other Portuguese- or Spanish-speakers for help. She became gradually more active during my fieldwork; speaking more and in an improved way, going to a film screening, and participating in several workshops. Still, at times she said ‘I don’t understand anything’ (of what they were doing) and appealed to me for support; or looked bored, as if she withdrew from the group because the Arabs/Muslims were speaking Arabic or possibly discussing subjects that did not interest her.

In the light of Ana Maria’s comments on the group, I found it quite interesting that great many of them – Latinas and Arabs/Muslims alike – explicitly mentioned Ana Maria as being a nice person, and several commented that they knew she was struggling. When she returned after a few weeks of holidays in Brazil, the others seemed happy to see her and said she was looking good. Ana Maria is a very gentle, generous, and amiable person, and obviously her fellow group members recognised this to a much higher extent than she herself was aware of.

Since she is also a member of the intermediate group, her comments on the latter will serve as a transition to the presentation of the members of that group. Ana Maria was one of those declaring her frustration with regards to the intermediate group, complaining that some of the women were talking all the time. According to her, they showed lack of respect for the *animatrice* when failing to pay attention in class. She said that coming from multicultural Brazil she is not a racist, but she acknowledged that those disturbing were the Arabic-speakers. They were chatting and behaving in an excluding manner when the rest wanted to pay attention and learn.

In her opinion, the women in this group are acting as individuals, and they are ‘even more reserved’ than those in the advanced group, making her ‘feel a bit lost’. Ana Maria appears annoyed and does not comprehend why they do not know simple, ‘everyday things’, whether related to pronunciation or other matters. She suggests it may have something to do with their low level of education, describing them as ‘a bit more primitive – in thought, opinions...’ In class, she often became irritated with Fatma, e.g., at Fatma’s surprise that Ana Maria has got a driver’s licence. Women ‘everywhere’ know how to drive, Ana Maria said, and Fatma’s comments appeared particularly peculiar since she herself has a licence although she no longer drives. Ana Maria exclaimed that she loves driving, as it gives her a feeling of freedom from all of life’s rules.

With respect to the future, Ana Maria would like to help others – perhaps do volunteer work for children, women, or sick people. For the time being she is concentrating on learning

³⁷ This statement provides two interesting points: first, Ana Maria seems to have a rather ‘Western’ view on the ‘developing’ effects of education; secondly, it is striking that she mentions Nour as an exception, as I would say she is the most prominent and eager defender of Muslim/Arabic culture. Louise even said Nour was an ‘Islamist’.

French. Ana Maria also has learnt a lot from visiting 25 countries, thus she would have loved to travel around the world for the rest of her life.

4.2 The Intermediate Group

Esperanza³⁸

Esperanza left the ECF two months after my arrival, but I have chosen to tell her story as she contributes to representing some of the diversity of the group, in addition to providing some interesting comments on her co-participants. She comes from Ecuador, and is a short woman in the beginning of her thirties, with short, black hair and brown eyes. Esperanza has been in Belgium about five years, and when leaving Ecuador, she also left two children behind; her now 14-year-old girl and nine-year-old boy. She is divorced from their father, and her children are safe staying with her mother, but ‘Naturally I suffer much since I cannot see my children’, she says.

Esperanza left her country for economic reasons, receiving some money from her mother and borrowing from her sister to pay for the ticket. She was supposed to be taken care of by a friend, but instead she ended up all alone and penniless in a country she did not know with a language she did not speak. For a short while she worked as a social companion for an elderly, handicapped man, but she left immediately when he started to harass her sexually. Esperanza moved in with José, an Ecuadorian acquaintance she had recently made, and his friends. Unfamiliar with how to get contraception in Belgium she became pregnant with José’s child. He did not want the baby, but Esperanza’s Catholic grandmother had always said that abortion was murder, so she decided to have the baby. Esperanza broke up with José, but in lack of alternatives she continued to live with him. She found work as a housekeeper, but in fear of losing her new job she did not tell her employer about the pregnancy.

Medical tests showed signs foetal abnormality, and she was recommended having an abortion, but refused: ‘In Ecuador we think that what God gives, we receive, and what comes, comes.’ Despite numerous tests, they did not find out what was wrong with the baby. As she was working, she ignored their advice to go to the emergency unit. Esperanza became ill, and ended up having a Caesarean at the emergency unit. Her son was born prematurely, and he had to stay in an incubator for three months. She says that ‘I was afraid to touch him... I just cried and cried; he was so small.’ Esperanza was told that her son had problems with his brain and could not walk, thus she must bring him to physiotherapy and hospital examinations regularly. When he was 18 months old he still acted like a baby, and Esperanza wanted him to learn something. After

³⁸ The interview with Esperanza was conducted in Spanish, in her flat. In her own language she speaks freely without hesitation, while in French she stutters and hardly dares to speak at all.

a long time she discovered that he was a Belgian citizen, as Belgium grants citizenship to all those born on Belgian soil. This gave him many rights. Now he is three years old and Esperanza happily recounts that he attends a special school for handicapped children.

His brain is getting steadily better and will recover, he understands everything, and knows both French and Spanish. However, his legs are 80 percent handicapped, thus he has a wheel chair and wears a plastic corset. An evangelical church and a friend help Esperanza take care of him. Still, she is exhausted from bringing him to school, hospital, etc., in addition to visiting the social services, lawyers, and other public agencies on a regular basis. She is cleaning (undeclared) about 16 hours a week, but it is difficult to find work when she has so many appointments to attend. Her body hurts and it is vital to be active to avoid going crazy, she says; '[i]t is very hard... I have a psychologist that I see. I want to die...'. She feels lonely, has few friends, and finds new acquaintances tiring because they always ask questions (about her son), giving her a headache; she does not want to go through it again.

Esperanza came to the ECF in June 2006 to ameliorate her French, sent by her social assistant. In class she said she was happy about the lessons, whilst when I asked her again in the interview, she said they were a waste of time. She commented that 'there was no discipline'; 'I didn't feel content due to the Moroccan persons'. She and Ana Maria approached me once or twice after the classes to complain about the Arabs³⁹. Esperanza said that it is imperative for her to pay attention in class, as she does not have anyone to help her with the French at home, like many of the Arab women do (their children). She has to do the learning in class, but gets disturbed by people chatting all the time. Esperanza needs to learn more in order to advance and find a job, thus she left the ECF and started attending another French course with a friend.

While she was still in class, she often arrived late due to all her appointments. Esperanza made an effort to do her homework and was usually very quiet, but several times asked how to pose a particular question. She was the only one in the group attending a workshop on handling stress. Characteristically, Esperanza started by saying 'I don't speak French very well', but still she posed some questions during the session. Generally, she has an air of being lost, but she is clearly very determined to accomplish her aims. Her first objective is to receive legal papers in order to work and study. Moreover, 'I now want to learn French. I would like to become a nurse, to help people... Also, if something happens to my son, I must be able to help him.' Esperanza plans to learn how to drive and buy a car, in order that she may work and drive her son around. She says that she does not want 'to live from what the social services are giving me. I don't want that. I want to get a job and do as I please... get the children here... travel... What I want to do is work.'

³⁹ A Chinese woman who stayed only a short while before leaving agreed with them on this.

Fatma

Moroccan Fatma is a stout woman wearing skirts and dresses, her head and neck covered by a headscarf. This 50-year-old woman has an air of gravity about her, but usually a smile is waiting behind the surface of her serious appearance. She has never been to school, for several years she worked as a maid at a hotel in Morocco, and she also worked at a battery factory. Fatma married in 1981, and four years later she joined her husband who worked with cleaning and construction in Brussels. However, he was hospitalised due to a fall shortly after her arrival, and now he is on disability benefit. Fatma has got five children between six and 20 – one boy and four girls. She has not been working after she came to Belgium. Fatma says that when she arrived, everything was nice and calm, whilst now there are people without legal papers, and she has experienced racism in public places. She claims that unlike before, she is scared by the ‘many thieves; it’s because of that that there’s racism’. Still, she is happy in Belgium; she only has Moroccan friends in Brussels, and does not want to return to Morocco.

Fatma came to the ECF in September 2006. Previously, she used to attend a language school elsewhere but she was dissatisfied and thus changed to the ECF, saying ‘I am content here’. Nonetheless, former *animatrice* Camille, my co-*animatrice* Jeanne, and I all perceived that Fatma was struggling with a low level of self-confidence due to her lack of schooling. Camille told Fatma that she should not feel inferior; people lead different lives, and she can be pleased that her five children are getting an education. Although Fatma is talking a lot, her French is not very good – she struggles with the grammar, her reading is slow, and writing dictations takes a long time. Even though very few of the women did their homework, I started giving them short texts to prepare at home before doing dictations on the texts in class. Fatma’s results improved considerably when she had prepared beforehand. Moreover, I gradually discovered that she actually knows a bit of Spanish and English, and told her that there are many people around the world who do not even speak two languages. My comment made her beam.

To the extent anyone can be characterised as ‘integrated’ in this group, Fatma would be one of them. Despite her lack of self-confidence she is not afraid of making mistakes. She likes to talk and is active in class, being among those that Ana Maria and Esperanza think are disturbing the teaching. Fatma may read ‘ahead’ of the others and talk when the *animatrice* is explaining something, but probably it is quite challenging for her adjusting to a formal teaching setting. Fatma has also proved helpful, translating between Maryam (Arabic) and me (French) once when they were the only two present. She even excused herself repeatedly when talking to Maryam, clearly understanding that I preferred French to be the *lingua franca*.

Fatma's reasons for coming to the ECF are to improve her reading and writing; partly to be able to help her children, and partly to learn practical vocabulary that can be useful when going to the doctor, etc. Moreover, she likes talking to the other women, whom she describes as nice. Even though Azohra and Hanan are Moroccan too, she does not experience having anything in common with them. Fatma says that the women in the group are different, e.g. Maryam is a Christian. She does not have any problems with other cultures or religions; 'everyone is free to do what he wants' – '[i]t's not the same culture, that's all'.

Fatma attended a couple of workshops, and she said that she was content and had learnt something from them. She also joined the advanced group on their trip to Antwerp, and she enjoyed that very much. Fatma participated in the excursion to the museum in Tervuren, and said she was happy finally seeing it, as she had spent all these years in Belgium without visiting. When she was invited to the end-of-the-year party, she excused herself saying that she had 'too much work', but at the end of the day she surprised us all when she showed up (although late) with three of her children. She had brought food, and she seemed to have a good time. Fatma does not attend any other ECF courses due to lack of time, but would like to start computer lessons and gym.

With respect to the future, she does not envision going back to Morocco. She has become accustomed to Belgium, her children do not want to leave, and she even says that 'Now I understand things here better than I do in Morocco.' Her dream for the future is that her girls will have good husbands, and generally that her children find work and succeed. For her, she says, 'it is too late now': she goes to 'school' to learn, but it is too late to work.

Azohra

23-year-old Azohra is one of the youngest members of the group. She is short, slim, and wears a headscarf. Although she may seem shy, she is very friendly when one is alone with her. Azohra comes from Morocco and is a Berber⁴⁰. She got married in 2003, and then came to Brussels to join her husband, who has Moroccan parents (who are relatives of her family) but was raised and educated in Belgium. He now works at a restaurant. Azohra has had five years of schooling, and she has never worked. She learnt some Arabic in Morocco, in addition to some French and Spanish. Most of her family lives in Spain, while a sister and a brother are still in Morocco. She misses her family, and would like to visit them more often, but at least in Brussels she has got her three-

⁴⁰ The autonym of this group is Imazighen, but Azohra called herself 'Berber'. According to Wikipedia, 'The Berbers have lived in North Africa between western Egypt and the Atlantic Ocean for as far back as records of the area go.' The majority live in Algeria and in Morocco, the latter in which they constitute 30 percent of the population. Apparently, there have been political tensions in part over linguistic and cultural issues between Berber groups and North African governments, e.g. in Morocco, where it became prohibited giving children Berber names.

year-old son. In class, she expressed that the first year she was sad, and I got the impression that the rest of the women really sympathised with her. She says she has been lucky with her husband, who is good; '[t]he Moroccans here are nice – not like in Morocco.' She feels free to do whatever she wants, and she has found friends within her family-in-law.

Azohra came to the ECF in September 2006, and initially she went to the beginner French course. However, Anne – the Danish *animatrice* – 'forced' her to change to the intermediate group, as she was too good for the beginner one. Azohra attends the course primarily for linguistic reasons, but also views it as an opportunity to get out. She is nearly always late for class, but otherwise she is an exemplary 'student'. At the volunteer evaluation, my co-*animatrice* Jeanne recounted that she asked Azohra to copy a text at home, discovering that all her words were phonetically written. Jeanne had pointed this out to her, and subsequently her writing improved considerably.

Azohra is undoubtedly a clever girl, she is generally very quiet, talking or reading only when asked to, and Anne described her as 'sweet'. Therefore I was somewhat surprised when she said that the intermediate group was alright for studying, but that she did not really like the other participants. She describes them as 'old', and feels different from them, being Berber; '...because Arabs, they don't like Berbers. All Arabs are like that.' She adds: 'It's culture, how you think... Not all Moroccans think [in the same way]'.

Azohra is not very active participating in activities, but she did attend the first aid workshop taking place during class hours. She also says that she intends to start doing the sewing course next year, and she was one of the three members of the group coming to the museum in Tervuren. Azohra seemed a bit bored in some parts of the museum but her interest seemed to grow, and she was glad to get out and see something else. The museum is in a park, and she said that she liked the greenness and silence – a stark contrast to the much noisier Brussels.

Azohra misses Morocco but still she does not want to go back. Once Anne asked her about the future, Azohra had replied that she would like to work in a kindergarten. The most important thing is that her son gets an education and a job, and is able to lead a good life. Moreover, Azohra told me she was looking forward to having all her papers in order in 2008 when she would become a Belgian citizen.

Hanan

Moroccan Hanan is 35 years old, slim, and wears make-up, skirts, and a headscarf. In many aspects her story is clearly distinct from those of her fellow Moroccans. In 1999 she came alone on holiday to visit her sister and niece in Belgium, and when her sister asked her to stay, Hanan ful-

filled her wish. It proved difficult to get residence and work permits, and thus she had problems finding work, but at last she found a job at a clothing warehouse. The work, starting at 7 a.m. and lasting until 5.30 p.m., was heavy, and she only earned €25 a day.

Hanan tells me that she comes from Casablanca, where the women are wearing whatever clothes they want (skirts, tops, etc.), and apparently this makes the Berbers – ‘the real Moroccans’ – call them whores. At the warehouse there were many Syrian workers, and among them she found her husband. The Syrians did not like Hanan’s clothes and suggested that she should veil herself. She tried it for Ramadan, disliked it, and thus removed the headscarf. However, she soon realised that she did not feel comfortable without and had grown accustomed to the hijab, thus she put it back on.

Hanan had eight years of schooling, and then did sewing for two years before going to Belgium. The rest of her family lives in Morocco and Italy. She misses them and would willingly return to Morocco, disagreeing with the many Moroccans saying that everything is so much better in Belgium. Hanan has a four-year-old daughter, and she began to work in a shop six months after her daughter was born. However, her daughter was ill so often that the doctor suggested she should stay home with her. Now she sometimes cleans for people besides cooking regularly for a friend who has a theatre. Hanan does not have many friends, but being blessed with a cheerful personality she says that she is not lonely and that she does not mind. Generally, she prefers Belgian to Moroccan people, as – according to her – Arabs visit one another and then talk behind each other’s backs, thinking they are better than others and looking down upon them.

Hanan learnt French while she was in Morocco but she had forgotten most of it since she did not practise it and she now wants to learn more. She came to the ECF in September 2006 and currently she is content with doing only French but she wishes to do computer lessons later. When I ask her about the intermediate group, she says that she has got nothing in common with the others. She states that ‘There are people who don’t like to work, but I have a need to do that.’ Hanan needs people who are more advanced than her to learn, something to strive for, and is discontent with the others whom she claims are unmotivated and fed up. However, she comments that she likes Amna; ‘she is kind’.

Hanan speaks very understandably, but during the interview session I was surprised as she obviously comprehended less than I had imagined. However, she understood when I rephrased my questions. In class, she is fairly active, and like Fatma she is not only talking when requested, implying that she is sometimes interrupting the teaching. She repeatedly begins to read before I have asked anyone in particular, and she also starts talking about matters unrelated to the text we are reading. Once, I brought Hanan and some of the others into the advanced group. She

was very eager and a bit loud, evoking some attention from the others – yet mainly in a positive way, in my assessment – due to her smiling and laughter.

Hanan's husband lived in Spain for many years and has got Spanish legal documents. She, however, is still waiting for hers and only has a working permit: 'I've been waiting for five years, and I'm fed up with it!' She has not told anyone else – except Julia – about her lack of papers, as she says that the Arabs would talk behind her back if they knew. She imagines that it will be much easier to get her papers in Spain, and she says that probably she will move there with her husband and daughter in a few months. Her husband has an uncle and two cousins there, one of whom one is going to open a restaurant. The idea is that he will cook Syrian and she will make Moroccan food. She comments that in Belgium there are so many people depending on the social services, but this means they will not receive any pension. Hanan does not receive any benefits from the social services since she does not have papers, and she wants to work in Spain in order to get a pension. Another reason that she would like to work is to fulfil her dream of buying a house. She also wishes to learn English.

Amna

Iraqi Amna is 50 years old and has been in Belgium for seven years. She is veiled and wears quite casual clothes. Amna has completed high school, specialising in commerce, as well as doing two years of administration at some institute in Iraq. She also used to participate in football and basket tournaments. Amna worked five years as a stewardess and 17 years at a diplomat hotel with her husband, to whom she has been married for 22 years. He was educated in Switzerland and speaks both French and English. Her husband suddenly disappeared (in Iraq) after having witnessed a crime, and Amna was warned that she should leave the country immediately. Hence, she travelled to Belgium via Turkey in a truck with her two sons, who are now 16 and 21 years old. They spent three months in a refugee centre before they were permitted to stay and got an apartment. She thanks God for Belgium; '[t]hey have helped me a lot', while simultaneously declaring that 'We are all alone here, right; it's life, it's not easy'.

Amna does not have any news about her husband, and apparently she cannot talk to her family-in-law, as they do not like her. However, she says that he is not so important to her; she is more preoccupied with her sons, one who is doing vocational shop training while the other has an internship at the European Commission: 'I live here with my sons, and I am content.' Amna has got family in Russia and England, while three of her siblings are left in Iraq. She worries a lot about their well-being, and tells me she is crying every day, thinking about her sister's accounts of bomb explosions killing people. Amna would like to send them money, but without a job this is

difficult. She is depending on the social services for her income. Amna has problems with her bones, says that she hurts all over, and therefore she has given up the thought of working⁴¹. She also complains about racism resulting from Belgians' negative reactions towards veiled women, creating difficulties for her and her youngest son when they were looking for an apartment.

Amna claims that Arabs are different from Europeans; in Belgium people do not visit each other as much as they do in Iraq. Still, she has many friends of all nationalities, Belgians included; '[a]ll people are equal' – independently of their religion, nationality, or skin colour. Amna and her friends visit one another, making food. She goes to church and takes her Christian friends to the mosque. In Iraq she only had Catholic friends, she says, and when she was pregnant with her first child she prayed to 'Santa Maria' to have a boy.

Amna has been at the ECF since September 2006. She has done many language courses elsewhere, and says these were cheaper as well as being more varied and interesting than the ECF course. However, she also had a bad experience with a male teacher who touched them and was negative towards Arabs, thus she prefers female teachers and she is content with there being only women in the group. She hopes to improve her French in order that she may help her son with his homework.

Amna was absent for periods of time, saying that in Belgium you always have to attend all sorts of meetings (I assume she was referring to various government agencies). Usually, she would let me know if she could not come to class, writing me a text message or telling me beforehand. She never attended any other activities although she spoke enthusiastically about my suggestion of going to the museum in Tervuren.

Amna recognises that 'all strangers need the French language'. She also speaks Dutch and English, thus she knows four languages⁴². Amna told me that when they are speaking Arabic they are telling secrets, but I was not able to say if this was meant as a joke or not. She is among those talking quite a lot, but like Hanan she says 'We are here to study, not to chat...'. She describes the group as 'okay' and says that the women cooperate. Indeed, Amna is acting very supportively towards her co-participants when they are struggling and expressing insecurity. She declares that it is especially good for married women with children to get out (coming to the ECF), although many husbands are apparently critical and do not like it since children and housework are women's first responsibility. Amna thinks it is better to come to class than staying home. The women are able to let things out; some people bring their problems to the group, and these be-

⁴¹ At the beginning of my fieldwork she talked about finding work, but it seems that she gave up on this.

⁴² During the interview she used a lot of English words instead of French ones, knowing that I understood English and clearly feeling more comfortable using the English word instead of demonstrating her lack of vocabulary by searching for the French one. I repeatedly became surprised because she did not understand my questions, and I discovered that her French was not as good as I had thought.

come easier to handle when one can talk about it. Once she said that every day in Iraq is more difficult than the previous, and this made Fatma express her sympathy.

Amna says that she 'would like to go ten years back in time', when she used to be strong rather than sad and in a difficult economic situation. She says that she does not want to return to Iraq, as there are only few family members left, no social services, no houses; nothing... When she talks to others she says that 'Iraq is dead', but to me she admits that 'indeed, it is my country', pointing to her heart. Her brother works for the Americans; this could be very dangerous if someone finds out, and Amna's dream is to get her family from Iraq to Belgium.

Maryam⁴³

Maryam comes from Iraq too, but being a Catholic she does not wear a headscarf, her long, dark brown hair falling beneath her shoulders. She seems preoccupied with her looks, wearing quite a lot of make-up and dressing smart and formally⁴⁴. Maryam is 40 years old, married, and has got a nine-year-old daughter. The family came to Belgium as political refugees in 2001. Maryam has completed secondary school and has a 6-months course of psychology. She was best in class, worked as a secretary, was a saleswoman in a bookshop, and then became a hairdresser in her sister's salon. When she married she did not need to work as she belonged to the middle class; her husband, who was a businessman, supported her.

When she lived in Iraq they were wealthy, had a big house, and she used to travel abroad; while in Belgium she says they have nothing. Her husband is unemployed because of his lacking language competences, and except from some (undeclared) odd jobs, they are relying on the social services for their income. The family left Iraq as the condition of Catholics deteriorated after September 11th 2001. Naturally, Maryam is frustrated with the situation in Iraq, saying that it is dangerous and that the people there are frightened.

Maryam came to the ECF three-four years before my fieldwork. She is the only one who has advanced from the beginner to the intermediate group. Improving her French appears to be her motivation for coming to class, as she has severe difficulties expressing herself. In my assessment, Maryam should still be in the beginner course, as the intermediate is too difficult for her. Generally, I have major problems understanding what she is saying, making it hard to help her. I can see that she gets frustrated but fortunately she does not give up. Maryam is also absent for longer periods of time, making progress difficult to achieve. The social services pay for her

⁴³ As previously mentioned, Jeanne was present during this interview. Like in class, Maryam's sentences were incomplete, she did not conjugate the verbs, and she mixed French with some Arabic and English words, trying her best to make us understand.

⁴⁴ Once she brought two skin creams that she had gotten from her sister in Norway, wanting me to translate from Norwegian how and when to apply them.

courses – thus she is obliged to attend – possibly as a step in a strategy to integrate her into the labour market. Maryam speaks very little, her pronunciation is not very understandable, she reads very slowly, and frequently she is skipping words, making me wonder if she might be dyslectic. She is interested in discussing matters that concern her everyday life: fixing meetings, doing the groceries, etc.

One lesson she posed many questions on the body and women's health. She told the group that she had had a miscarriage one month before, without seeming to wish any further 'discussion' on the matter – perhaps partly due to linguistic limitations. In another instance, Hanan told us that she had met Maryam at the hospital; she had strong stomach pains, and she clearly struggles with health problems. Maryam herself complained about an impolite nurse at the hospital, speaking very loudly and fast, not taking foreigners' linguistic problems into consideration at all. Maryam is home all day and she seems to be suffering, having various problems that she does not know how to handle. Her low level of French makes her troubles even more challenging. She does not participate in any other ECF courses or activities, except from attending the first aid workshop during class hours. However, she has talked to Julia about participating in gym or computer lessons after first having worked more to improve her French.

During our interview, Maryam emphasises that she thinks the other Arabs do not like her since she is a Catholic. She claims that Muslims in Belgium do not like Catholics and she feels that they are talking behind her back, but she is accustomed and appears resigned to the matter. According to her, they do not talk to her but only to each other and to the *animatrice*⁴⁵. She has known Amna for four-five years, meeting her at Maryam's sister's house as their children are at school together. She says that Amna is talking behind her back, expressing that she does not like Catholics. Maryam states that the Muslims are constantly talking about shame and sin. Conversely, she herself has no problems with other religions and nationalities. In Brussels she has friends from the Catholic Church serving Iraqis, Syrians, Jordanians, and Belgians, and they meet for coffee in the church.

At the end of the term, Maryam finally had some good news: she would soon be granted Belgian citizenship, and this made her very happy. It meant that she would be able to go abroad, e.g. visit her two sisters and mother living in Norway. She also said that 'I've searched for work because I don't like to stay at home', although it is hard to find employment. Her dream is to reunite the whole family in one place, in addition to provide her daughter with an education of her own choice; it is not up to Maryam to decide this.

⁴⁵ I was actually positively surprised at how Fatma helped her translating, but of course there might have been other instances when I was preoccupied with the teaching and did not necessarily notice that Maryam was being excluded.

4.3 Parallels and Contrasts

This chapter reflects my interlocutors' articulation abilities both in terms of linguistic competence and talking gusto, as well as the degree of confidence between the women and me. Of course, it would be unfair to compare Esperanza with Maryam, the former whom undoubtedly would have struggled as much expressing herself in the interview as the latter if I had not known Spanish. Undeniably, language is one of the most significant variables for distinguishing the women as individuals in addition to categorising them. I will return to the competence aspect of language in the next chapter.

As previously mentioned, language functions both as a 'bridge' and as a 'wall' symbolising individuals' social and cultural group affiliation (Holliday and Hyde *et al.* 2004:184). This particularly applies to the Arabic-speakers in both groups, being categorised as Muslims or Moroccans by the other women even though these categorisations were not necessarily correct. Such categorisations seem to be based on a combination of signs communicating identity and distinguishing Arabic-speakers from others: clothes (mainly headscarves, associated with Islam), language (Arabic), and interaction (communicating in Arabic, discussing topics concerning Muslims and Arabs, and bringing food from Algeria and Morocco – the latter in the advanced group). I will consider the character of the 'Arab groups' later; for the time being suffice it to say that they were less homogeneous and unified than the others were able to perceive.

When talking about their respective groups during interviews, many of the women evoked concepts of cultural difference. Generally they seem preoccupied with *difference*, and apparently all they share is the feeling of *not* having anything in common, but the reality is more complex. Members of both groups but especially the intermediate group share a wish and need for learning practicalities making their everyday lives easier. Furthermore, albeit discussions in the advanced group indicate a higher level of general knowledge than what is found in the intermediate group, family relations and personal problems are recurrent topics in both groups.

I believe that this fact might help to illuminate the 'chatting problem' described by Esperanza and Ana Maria. In all social encounters there are people who talk a lot and people who talk less. This is not solely depending on their personality, but is also related to linguistic competence as well as the extent to which they feel comfortable with the situation (particularly the Latinas talked a lot more outside classes). In both groups, predominantly in the intermediate, Arabic-speakers were perceived to exercise some kind of dominance through disturbing the teaching with their chat. I think that this might partly be associated with the women's need to talk about personal matters. Sometimes this need might become stronger than the wish to learn, stimulating

chats in the women's first language, the latter which is devoid of any distance that may be present when discussing such issues in a foreign language.

Personally, I have witnessed an Algerian family in Norway constantly switching between Arabic and French, and I have also seen the same phenomenon in a television documentary from Algeria. Hence I am inclined to believe that this may be a common practise in some Arab countries where French is a spoken language. Accordingly, those ECF women who have an elevated level of French might not always be aware of the fact that they are switching languages. However, this only applies to a minority of the Arabic-speaking women, and the phenomenon is confined to the advanced group.

I also suspect the chatting might be connected to the women's disparate aspirations for the future. The majority of the Arabs/Muslims have come to Belgium to join their husbands, while most of the Latinas have come – sometimes on their own – to improve their economic situation, possessing clear ambitions. The reason for their migration obviously influences the women's motivation for accomplishing things. Many of the Arabs/Muslims were completely resigned with respect to their own self-actualisation, thus they seemed to prefer making the most of the present (chatting) rather than investing in the future (learning). Others wished to work and improve their lives, and it is noteworthy that these were mainly the Latinas (except Sylvia), constituting the strongest opponents of what they perceived as the Muslims' dominance. Also Moroccan Hanan appeared to envisage a brighter future through employment opportunities in Spain, and she too complained about the lack of ambition in her class. Paradoxically, she was also among those disturbing the teaching. Hanan's case was in many ways more akin to the Latinas' than to the other Muslims': she came to Belgium on her own – without being a refugee like Amna – lacking legal papers. She came from 'modern' Casablanca and appeared more ambitious than most of her Muslim 'sisters', but her eagerness, very cheerful character, and strong inclinations to chat may provide an explanation for why she appeared to act in contradiction to her own aims⁴⁶.

Despite the above-mentioned differences there are also similarities between the women, even though these do not necessarily create any unity. The majority of the women in both groups are housewives and generally those working dropped out after some time of irregular attendance. Many of the women worked before they got married – independently of their national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds – but quit because their husbands preferred them to and/or because they had to stay home with the children. This is but one of their numerous personal experiences of discrimination against women; virtually all of them express frustration with their lack of eco-

⁴⁶ I will continue my discussion of the impact of language in the next chapter.

conomic and personal dependence, relations to men in general or their husbands in particular, and lack of opportunities in terms of accommodation, education, and employment. Many, particularly in the intermediate group, also appreciate the feeling of security stemming from the 'women only' policy of the ECF, although Paula told me that she prefers the simplicity of male company. In spite of the women's recognition of and reference to their experiences of discrimination as women, their appreciation of the centre as a women's space, and women's rights being the ECF 2007-2008 priority, apparently few of the women are explicitly adhering to the ECF's feminist ideology asserting female unity based on universal values. By and large, their common experiences as women remain unacknowledged as such, instead of providing a mutual point of departure either to claim rights or to transcend ethnic, religious, and other differences.

In the next chapter, I will conduct a more elaborate analysis on how the women manage their diversity, attempting to draw parallels between my empirical evidence and the conceptual and theoretical framework outlined in chapter two.

5. SOME OTHERS ARE MORE OTHER THAN OTHERS

5.1 Levels of Otherisation

Many immigrants experience that the social and cultural capital they have brought with them from their country of origin is not worth the same abroad. Such capital may comprise e.g. customs, (the extent and nature of) social networks, language, values, and norms. It seems reasonable to assume that the degree to which immigrants' social and cultural capital coincides with or differs from that of their country of residence may influence their feeling of belonging and extent of integration into the new society. Discrepancy in the social and cultural capital between immigrants and the host population may stimulate the development of otherisation.

In chapter two I argued that otherisation is a multi-level phenomenon. Even though my fieldwork was limited to the ECF setting, I assume my interlocutors to be more or less influenced by leading their everyday lives in the kingdom of Belgium. The country was once a strong colonial power, and today there are sharp cultural and linguistic divisions, chiefly between the Flemings and the Walloons. Thus immigrants must relate to two majorities, particularly those living in bilingual Brussels. Few immigrants learn both French and Flemish, and their 'choice' of language (although this may be arbitrary or imposed) determines which population group they come to 'join'.

Belgium is a very multicultural society housing immigrants from all over the world. Since the 1980s racism has increased, particularly in Flanders, epitomised by the growing support for the right-wing party Flemish Interest. Thus it appears reasonable to deduce that immigrants constitute Others to the Belgians. As mentioned, in public discourse immigrant women are easily perceived as more Other than the Others. I think this is being substantiated by my empirical evidence; e.g. the immigrant women in Ixelles are suffering from isolation, and this is manifested in the experiences of my interlocutors at the ECF.

The degree to which these women had experienced racism varied considerably. One of the reasons for this is that otherisation in any version is stimulated by the reading of signs. All humans identify themselves and are in turn identified by others through a selection and interpretation of signs. Some of these signs can be manipulated by people themselves through choices of dress, etc. while others – physical features and skin colour – cannot easily be escaped. Through the banning on headscarves in public schools the Belgian authorities send a strong political signal as to which signs are publicly acceptable. Thereby they also attach a stigma to certain symbols, evidently influencing people's thoughts and actions in their encounters with veiled women. White, Chilean Paula speaking French fluently was more concerned about discrimination against women than against immigrants, most probably due to her own personal experiences. Those

women having a darker skin colour, wearing headscarves, and struggling with the language, complained about an additional burden of racist discrimination. The extent to which people under- or over-communicate various signs to emphasise individuality or group belonging differs.

Frequently presented in public discourse as a homogeneous group, immigrant women constitute a diverse collectivity distinguished by ethnicity, nationality, religion, educational background, family and professional status, etc. The women at the ECF used various signs to articulate their identity, and they interpreted and responded differently to these – sometimes to the extent that it activated otherisation. This occurred in multiple ways in my groups of study, as I intend to show in this chapter. I will begin by depicting the previously mentioned conflict in the advanced group, providing an extended case study which reveals the subtle dynamics of otherisation in this group, as well as offering a point of departure for comparison with the intermediate group.

5.2 The Advanced Group Conflict

5.2.1 The Paella

On the 3rd of May the advanced group met at Françoise's house to have lunch together. Julia, Geneviève, Louise, and I were invited to join them. The women were going to make paella, with Spanish Sylvia as the head cook. The following women were present: Ayaovi, Safia, Aïcha, Paula, Nawal, Nour, Moroccan Salima⁴⁷, and Ecuadorian Cristina, the latter who had found work and no longer came to the ECF. The women were eager, chattering and smiling when cooking. Most of them were in the kitchen with Sylvia, some were in the living room, while others enjoyed the sun in the garden. Albeit I did not think of it as remarkable at the time, in retrospect I recollect Paula being all by herself in the garden, in charge of a large pan of paella on the barbeque.

The house was old and charming, and had a nice garden. It was a beautiful day, the atmosphere was good, and we sat eating and chatting in the sun. I remember Nour pointing out that Julia, Cristina, Sylvia, and Paula were talking in Spanish, while they always complained whenever the Arabs/Muslims spoke Arabic, but she did not seem annoyed. After lunch, everyone was dancing in the living-room – first Arab, then a mixture of Arab and Spanish, and finally Spanish. They were making jokes, and some women were wearing big Mexican *sombreros*. The whole event lasted for nearly six hours, and I could tell that the women had a great time. Outside the setting of the centre they appeared much freer, simply relaxing and enjoying themselves in good company. The ambiance was exceptionally warm and good on a day of smiles, laughter, chatting,

⁴⁷ Salima had changed from the intermediate to the advanced group, after Jeanne's and my suggestion.

food, music, and dancing. I do not think that anyone could have imagined that this pleasant event would be the catalyst of such a bitter conflict that later evolved.

5.2.2 The Eruption

Before the paella event, the women had estimated that everyone would pay five euros to cover the costs of the food. But when they did the accounts one week after the meal, it turned out that it was only three euros each. Hence, Nawal had suggested that the volunteers should be exempted from paying because they (we) were doing so much for the women without being paid. However, this decision was taken without consulting everyone. I was only made aware of the disagreement because of a brief discussion between the women prior to a workshop where I was present.

Nour and Sylvia had agreed with Nawal's suggestion but Paula objected, arguing that the *animatrices* had more means to pay than the women and that these decisions should be made collectively, both of which sounded reasonable⁴⁸. Subsequently, Paula had persuaded Sylvia who then started arguing with Nawal and Nour. Apparently, Sylvia thought Nour had made the decision, but Nour asked to be left out of the matter, saying it concerned three persons only (Paula, Sylvia, and Nawal?). Nour claimed that she was being targeted because she is always speaking her mind.

Later Nour talked about the difference between the Arabs and Paula and Sylvia: 'We, Arab women, we think more with our feelings, while they think with their minds (...) with logic, with their brains.' She said it was all a misunderstanding based on lack of communication; '[w]e ought to have explained our point of view.' Sylvia too told me that the disagreement was about 'different points of view, cultural differences'. Decisions must be made in collectivity, she said. Also, when she makes a mistake, she thinks about it, while Nour 'is always right': 'she is like *that* [holding her flat hands together as if she were praying]'. Moreover, Sylvia 'wanted to make this paella for the group', knowing that many of the women did not have much money. E.g., Ayaovi 'is in a very difficult situation', thus every euro matters.

After lunch one day, Nour explained the background of the conflict to Aïcha, in the presence of Nawal and me. According to her, it all began when Nawal had asked Louise if she had tasted Nour's couscous; she had not. Nour invited the two of them to dinner at her place. She did not want to exclude anyone as that would be shameful, but she did not have a big enough table for the entire group. Someone proposed making the meal at the ECF, and suddenly it was decided that Sylvia was going to make the paella. Nour had thought 'fine' – she would not make

⁴⁸ I later learnt that Paula was supposedly short of money at the time.

any trouble, although she was clearly disappointed and hurt. She added that she had not liked the paella at all, having vomited afterwards. However, as far as I can recollect she was quite happy at the time; in all probability her criticism was a result of the conflict and not necessarily how she felt the day of the paella.

5.2.3 Failed Attempts of Mediation: The Explosion

About one week after the eruption of the conflict, Julia decided that she would try to mediate. Amina, Aïcha, Safia, Salima, Ayaovi, Sylvia, Nour, and Nawal were present in class, and there was a real argument, especially between the three latter. Everyone was shouting at the same time, and Julia was not very successful in taking charge. Nour did not want to discuss the case then, but Julia insisted on talking about making group decisions. She said that everyone was partly responsible for the disagreement, that one should agree on the rules before organising an event, and she emphasised the importance of listening to each other's points of view. Julia revoked the ECF's universal values principle, arguing that the things uniting the group were more important than those dividing it. Nour was constantly interrupting her, and Julia remarked that she did not know how they do things in Nour's country, but 'here' they let people talk without interrupting. This clearly provoked Nour, who snapped at Julia, shouting: 'Leave my country out of this!' Throughout the session, Nawal tried in vain to calm down Nour. Julia uttered that she would try to be as neutral as possible if anyone wanted to discuss the matter with her later on.

At lunchtime, Nour repeated that she was not involved in making the decision, stating that Sylvia ought to check the facts before making accusations. She actually said that it was not a good time to discuss the case, as she might say something that would hurt Sylvia; then she exploded and headed for the door. Françoise stopped her, and Nour returned. Aïcha tried to calm her, exclaiming 'God is great'. Sylvia and Nour, situated at either side of the long table, were shouting at the same time, Nour with tears in her eyes. I was quite astonished by the fierceness of their argument. Sylvia yelled at Nour 'You're an idiot!', and I could tell that this really hurt Nour although she apparently 'agreed' with Sylvia, repeating 'I'm a liar, I'm an idiot...' Simultaneously, the other women – e.g. Safia and Nawal – were smiling and laughing from time to time, showing that they were somewhat resigned and thought the whole conflict was rather silly⁴⁹.

Nour was finally allowed to tell her side of the story to Julia, who listened to her somewhat impatiently. She later said that the women seemed more interested in being right and finding the 'guilty' one than in resolving the conflict. Julia started to interrupt Nour but Nawal came

⁴⁹ In retrospect I find it interesting that Nawal and particularly Paula were seemingly out of the picture, making the others fight the battle. Paula was absent for several lessons during this period, thus I was unfortunately unable to get her side of the story. Nawal's role was decidedly more active than Paula's, but Nawal was affected by her inclination towards shunning conflicts. I will return to this matter.

to her rescue, telling Julia ‘Let her finish’. Yet, when Nawal tried to explain her side of the story she was interrupted by Nour, who was told to be quiet by Julia.

Aïcha expressed that she did not understand what all the fuss was about. She admitted that it is important to make collective decisions when dealing with important issues or larger amounts of money, but this was not the case. Nour felt injustice had been done to her, and she was clearly very frustrated about them not believing her. She kept repeating that the meal was ‘for pleasure, not about money’. Aïcha replied that she thought it was a shame that the long-lasting friendship between Nour, Nawal, and Sylvia should be ruined by such a trifle. At last, Sylvia was crying, and Nour said she would never return, regretting it very much as she did not want to leave with bad memories (Julia later compared her to a child telling her parents that she would never come home again). Still, Nour returned after Nawal had persuaded her, saying that she considered pursuing Julia for racism due to her inappropriate comment on Nour’s country.

Generally, Nour was irreconcilable and despite her resistance against participating in the conflict, she gradually seemed to become obsessed with the matter, and thus helped to maintain it. Many of her co-participants – even some of her friends – simply assumed that she was the driving force behind the conflict. I suspect that her strong personality and prominent role in the advanced group might have contributed to involving her, making her a scapegoat. Nour was both the target (from various members of the group) and the perceiver of what Greenberg and Baron (1997:76ff) defined as the fundamental attribution error; ‘people’s tendency to explain another’s actions in terms of his or her traits instead of finding the explanation in the situation and environment.’ (in Lehtonen 2005:71). The fundamental attribution error made the women oblivious to what was really happening, and instead made them seek the cause of the conflict in each other’s characters.

5.2.4 Nawal’s Story

During the conflict, I recurrently heard of past events that I interpreted as being related to the conflict. I participated in the gym course with Nawal, and once when we were taking a walk I seized the opportunity to talk to her⁵⁰. She seemed both angry and frustrated, and said that she thought Paula’s conduct must have something to do with last year’s events. Nawal recounted that *animatrice* Marie had invited them to write their own personal stories. However, Nawal had to rewrite hers about four times since Marie was never satisfied. Finally, Nawal was fed up and told Geneviève about it. Nawal said that Paula accused her of always ‘licking up’ to Geneviève and Julia, and she felt that Paula and Marie were out to get her.

⁵⁰ As we were walking and had a very informal conversation it was inconvenient and seemed inappropriate to make field notes, thus I had to wait until I got home one hour later before writing down the account based on my memory.

She also told me about last year's VF Congress at which Ayaovi, Sylvia, Nawal, Paula, and Marie had participated. Paula and Marie had been avoiding the others, and allegedly they had told Sylvia that they did this because of Nawal. After this, Nawal had not spoken a lot to Paula, and she thought that Paula noticed this. Nevertheless, recently when Françoise and Paula had admired Nawal's sandals, she had offered to post an order for them. She paid for and received them, but because of the conflict she no longer felt like giving Paula anything. Nawal also said that she thought the relationship between Nour and Paula was quite good, indicating that Nour had in fact persuaded Paula to come back to the ECF after she returned from her trip to Canada.

Nawal had visited Sylvia, asking her why she had yelled at them in front of everyone before the workshop. She had replied that she was fed up with Nawal always making all the decisions, e.g. with respect to their visits to the theatre, cinema, etc. Sylvia had been sorry about insulting Nour, but she had not offered any excuse for exploding at the workshop. This annoyed Nawal, and she said that now she was the one having problems with Sylvia. Finally, Nawal mentioned that last year, Sylvia had been annoyed with Julia because she had spent a lot of time fighting for the rights of the paperless and thus frequently been absent from the centre without anyone being there to substitute her. Sylvia had talked to Nawal about this, but she did not want to meddle with things that did not concern her⁵¹. Nawal finished by saying that she doubted Nour would pursue Julia for racism, but that as the one in charge Julia should think more carefully about what she is saying.

5.2.5 Continuous Conflict: The Women's Comments and Actions

Geneviève tried to talk to the women about group dynamics. Paula, Safia, Sylvia, Nawal, Nour, Ana Maria, Ayaovi, and Aïcha were present. In all groups there is always something that does not reach the surface, Geneviève said. Group members communicate through speaking – *not* behind each other's back. She added that 'One cannot live by oneself – nowhere. One must always try to listen to what the other [wishes to say]'. Geneviève referred to some talk about non-Muslims or non-Arabs feeling left out: 'Some have said 'We don't dare to speak, we fear judgements?'

Subsequently, the women were going to prepare a presentation on prominent women having made an impact during their lifetime. They would choose one person each to be presented at the end-of-the-year party. Nour was very hostile during the entire lesson, sitting with closed eyes and her head resting in one of her hands as Sylvia rehearsed her presentation. Nour commented that she was almost falling asleep and that she had a headache. I was sitting next to her,

⁵¹ Another time, Nour told me that she too had been approached by Sylvia. Nour had told her to talk to Julia directly, and to me she commented that people frequently talk behind each other's backs.

and I think I was the only one who could hear her mutter ‘Despite everything, Paula, you are here’⁵².

Once after lunch I sat listening to Nour, Aïcha, and Nawal talking. Nour commented that Nawal does not like conflicts, and Nawal herself said that she does not like to hurt people or that people are hurting her. ‘We wanted to create a familial atmosphere (...) Paula is the devil itself, followed by a *bête*⁵³ [Sylvia]’, Nour said. She added that ‘they take our kindness as a weakness.’ She used an egg metaphor to describe the situation: when an egg has broken, there is no way to repair it.

According to Nour there had been a conflict coming all year. Once, Nawal and Nour had bought groceries together, put them in a bag, and in class they discussed who would take the bag. Sylvia had thought they were giving each other presents, and became jealous. Nour said she had thought Sylvia was her friend but she did not think so anymore. During one lesson I had observed Sylvia stroking Nour’s back, and Nour had been appalled, saying she thought Sylvia was mocking her. I, on the other hand, interpreted it as a peace offering. Nour was not willing to forgive her yet, considering that Sylvia deliberately called her an idiot – otherwise she would not have done it.

Aïcha and Nour talked a lot about giving gifts for the sake of friendship; that was the idea behind the paella and the food they were bringing to class. However, when Nour returned after one month’s absence, she was told that she *had* to bring food with her, although it was supposed to be voluntary. Nour said that once she had met Amina while she was out shopping some bread for the group. She asked Amina why she did that, knowing that her husband was unemployed and that she had three children to feed. Amina replied that Paula had told her everyone must bring something⁵⁴. However, Nour said Paula had been complaining about their bringing sweet stuff like cakes and cookies instead of ‘proper’ food. Still, Paula herself brought her private sandwich and was thus not contributing⁵⁵.

I remember one of the last lessons, when Paula was greeted rather coolly and without the customary Belgian *bison* (kiss). After the lesson, Nour invited me to the kitchen, saying that she would like to share with us leftovers from yesterday’s couscous dinner. Nour, Nawal, Aïcha, Françoise, Ayaovi, and I were there, while Paula and Safia stayed downstairs. The meal was deli-

⁵² Many of the women were quite nervous when discussing the presentations for the end-of-the-year party, and I was surprised at Paula’s comment that last year was the first time she had spoken in public, having succeeded with the help of Nour. Consequently, I am unsure whether she actually perceived Nour’s negative feelings towards her.

⁵³ Defined by the French version of Wiktionary as ‘a person who is stupid or who has only little or no intellectual capacity or common sense.’ (my translation).

⁵⁴ This is quite interesting, as one of Paula’s chief arguments in the conflict was that some of the women were short of money, but obviously she did not know that this applied to Amina, too.

⁵⁵ Nour was exaggerating; I remember Paula bringing food at least once, but mainly it was Sylvia and the Arabs who brought food.

cious, but too late I realised that I was – through my participation in the meal – taking part in the exclusion of two members of the group, and I obviously regretted this very much.

I did not expect the conflict to be solved before the term ended and I must leave the field, as divisions were still deep. Sylvia had stopped coming when the conflict erupted, experiencing classes as so unpleasant that she preferred to stay home, but she returned after the *animatrices* and Julia persuaded her to come back. Nour was irreconcilable as ever, and after Françoise sat next to Nour and Nawal during a workshop Paula had gotten the (correct) impression that she was siding with them. Consequently, she left before the workshop began, taking Ana Maria (who was not at the paella) with her. The very last lesson the atmosphere was far from good when they started talking about eating after class; Françoise had brought a cake, but apparently Geneviève had prohibited any eating. Nour said she felt bad, and Ana Maria approached and kissed her on the cheek. Nour was actually crying, and Françoise gave her a big hug.

As it was the last lesson and Geneviève's 70th birthday, gifts were exchanged and some speeches made. Those present were Aïcha, Ana Maria, Safia, Nawal, Nour, Ayaovi, Paula, Louise, Françoise, Julia, and a trainee. Geneviève had brought cakes, thus there was eating after all. The atmosphere had changed completely and was by then very good, thus I made my short speech. Nour tried to interrupt me, but I insisted on finishing⁵⁶. I talked about misunderstandings, minor disagreements evolving into conflicts if left unmediated, the importance of differentiating between a person and her actions – everyone can commit bad actions without *being* bad, and finally I thanked them for the paella day and my stay.

5.2.6 The *Animatrices'* Comments

As Julia and the volunteers were implicated in and had interesting reflections on the conflict, I choose to include these. In our interview⁵⁷, Françoise said that the conflict made the women 'fish (...) for old stuff', i.e. returning to past events that had been left unmediated. It seemed that Sylvia found herself in the middle of this – between Paula and the rest. This year there had not been any conflicts until Paula came back. Apparently there was some tension last year, as Paula got along really well with Marie and the others did not. Françoise suggested the reason might be that the two of them were Jews; this I did not know. She also said that Paula was 'very possessive' and that she wanted to 'take the teacher away from the others'. She had unsuccessfully tried this with

⁵⁶ Geneviève later told me that a crying Nour had approached her after my little speech, admitting her wrongs.

⁵⁷ We did our interview before the very last lesson and as some women came in before we had finished, Françoise switched to English (with a strong French accent) so that they would not understand.

Françoise⁵⁸. When Paula returned from Canada she ‘wanted to assume the same position; it was a catastrophe.’ Françoise also remarked that she was ‘as strong as Nour’.

Geneviève and Julia commented that both Nour and Paula attach themselves to people and want to keep them to themselves, Geneviève adding that Paula does this in a more subtle way. Julia said that Nour is no saint, e.g. last year she tried to persuade the Muslim women in the dance course that they must refrain from dancing at the party, as they should not dance in front of men. However, after all the women had been consulted it became apparent that they did not have any objections and everything went as planned. Julia said that Nour is dominating and manipulating the others, particularly Nawal. When I interviewed Nour after one of the lessons, I noticed that she asked Nawal to wait for her, but finally Nawal went home. Julia suggested that there was some sort of competition between Sylvia and Nour, both seeking Nawal’s company and friendship. According to Geneviève, Nawal and Sylvia became very close after they participated in the theatre group in 2006. Julia thinks that Nour cannot handle Nawal being friends with Sylvia, though I had the impression that they were all quite good friends until the conflict. Nawal once told me that she did not like to go to class when Nour was nursing her husband and Sylvia was absent too, hence she seemed to rely very much on both of them.

5.2.7 The Study of Conflicts

Comaroff and Roberts (1981:2, 249) argue that ‘...anthropologists should study disputes and invocations of rules for what they reveal about systemic processes’, as ‘the dispute process may provide an essential key to the disclosure of the socio-cultural order at large’ (quoted in Caplan 1995:1-2). Geneviève described the paella conflict ‘as a volcano, a revealing moment [of] something indigested’, suggesting that it was indeed disclosing important aspects of the dynamics of the group. According to Caplan, disputes are about material goods, rights to make decisions, and social relations (*ibid.*). All of these appear to fit more or less with the paella conflict. Money and injustice may be seen as the principal contents (and material aspect) of the conflict, but in my opinion these served as an excuse to release latent tension rooted in the structure of the group. Holliday and Hyde *et al.* state that

All communication, apart from being about the ‘what’ that is said, is also about the negotiation of interpersonal relationships; of the signalling of the status of each interactant, of the power relationship between the interactants, of the social distance between them or the solidarity they may offer each other. (2004:184)

⁵⁸ Paula had asked Françoise if she may clean her house but Françoise said no, telling me that she would *never* have any women from the group do that. However, she admitted that she had agreed to Cristina, the Ecuadorian who had stopped attending the group a couple of months before, doing it, as she needed it ‘badly’.

I argue that the ‘what’ in this case was in fact precisely about negotiation, status, power, and social distance.

Caplan stresses that ‘disputes are ways of grouping people together’, but ‘they are also an obvious mechanism for keeping people apart’, and they ‘may highlight important differences between the parties’ (1995:3). My interlocutors frequently evoked their difference from one another, particularly during the conflict. Both parties mentioned lack of communication and cultural differences as the reason why the conflict broke out. Albeit some were discontent because a decision had been made by a (Muslim) minority, the payment issue was in fact a trifle, and it would not have evolved into such a major dispute if there was not already a lot of frustration within the group. Besides, Geneviève indicated that some of the women felt excluded by others. Starr and Yngvesson ‘argued [that] ‘many disputes are only one event in a series of events which make up a relationship’ (1975:560).’ (Gaetz 1995:181). All the episodes prior to the paella conflict supports this notion. Gaetz pursues this argument, stating that disputes are cyclical, not linear, events. By this he implies that when disputes are not resolved in a manner that is satisfactory to all the parties, disagreements persist and new disputes will arise.

5.2.8 Comparative Ethnography

Gaetz’ fieldwork at an Irish youth centre provides some interesting perspectives on disputes. Despite significant differences, there are several parallels in the situation of the male teenagers at the youth centre and the women at the ECF. At the youth centre there was a continuous battle between the middle class staff and the working class users over power and decision-making, and ‘Both had different understandings of their own and each other’s roles...’ (1995:182). Many of the youths were early school-leavers, they were burdened by a lack of skills and resources, and they had a high unemployment rate. Consequently, they had a lot of spare-time but not many activities with which to fill it. The boys were also excluded in their own parish, and they were associated with criminal activities. The youth centre became very important in their lives ‘because it was the one community-based service where they were made to feel welcome’ (*ibid.*:185). The centre provided activities, a place to meet friends, as well as an ‘opportunity to develop skills and participate in decision-making’. It followed an ideology of empowerment and encouraged decision-making among its users, but there appeared to be a contradiction between rhetoric and reality. This caused frustration, minor disputes, and vandalism. Disagreements could be resolved in different ways, one of them being that ‘the staff used their power and authority in order to impose a solution to a disagreement.’ (*ibid.*:186). Albeit the staff possessed the formal power, the boys exercised informal power with their protests.

At the ECF, the dispute was not between staff and users, but between the women themselves. Like the youths, many of them were in some ways excluded from the rest of society, and the ECF provided a place of ‘social refuge’. Due to lack of alternatives, the boys kept coming to the centre despite being dissatisfied with their lack of influence, and similarly the women in the advanced group obviously valued the ECF enough to keep attending in spite of the conflict. The classes were important enough to make some of them challenge the situational definition. Though there were asymmetrical relations between them, there was no *formal* distribution of power as all the women were ‘users’. The power was connected to the making of decisions, which according to the non-Arabs/Muslims were in the hands of the Arabs/Muslims. The unequal power balance was perceived only by those lacking in power, and they made their protests – although not as directly and violently as Gaetz’ young informants.

Considering that the paella cooking event headed by Sylvia was originally intended to be a couscous meal made by Nour, the paella may be viewed as Sylvia’s protest against dominance. Nour, on her part, got revenge when she selected a few of us to share some couscous leftovers with her. Furthermore, when Nour was away, Paula apparently tried to alter the habits connected to bringing food – suddenly everyone had to bring something, and it should (ideally) match *her* definition of ‘proper’ food. As all the protests were directed against the food arrangements, it seems reasonable to assume that these were somewhat controlled by the Arabs/Muslims.

Indeed, it was the Arabs/Muslims who started bringing food, and they and Sylvia were in charge of this ‘custom’. It appears paradoxical that food, ostensibly epitomising the social and intercultural success of the advanced group, would eventually create divisions and be the trigger of a major conflict. Accordingly, I interpret food as being the most fundamental symbol of the Arabs’/Muslims’ power. The food in itself was not that important, although the women appreciated exchanging recipes; what mattered was the role of meals as a social meeting point. Thus control over food arrangements also entailed *social* control, strengthening the Arabs’ existing social influence during classes. I will elaborate more closely on the implications of the conflict later in this chapter.

5.3 Theories Revisited

5.3.1 The Role of the Arabs/Muslims

In chapter four I established that the Arabs/Muslims in the two groups are perceived as groups in Jenkins’ (2001) sense because they are distinguished from the others through language (Arabic), clothes (veil and a slightly more conservative style), and interaction (bringing food and frequently chatting in Arabic). They also have a common religion (Islam), and according to Nour

and Nawal they share the same ways of thinking. However, this rigid categorisation does not fit all the women; Azohra is a non-Arab Muslim who speaks very little Arabic, Salima and Nawal do not wear headscarves, and Maryam neither wears a headscarf nor adheres to Islam. Yet, as long as one or more signs are affiliated with the Arab/Muslim collectivity I doubt any 'internal' differences are perceived or at least deemed as significant by the others; it is my overall impression that they identify and categorise all the Arabs/Muslims as a group. This happens despite all the 'exceptions' contradicting such categorisation.

Perhaps even more importantly, very few of the women in the two groups recognise having anything in common with anyone else – Arabs/Muslims included. Accordingly, there appears to be a discrepancy between the Arabs'/Muslims' rhetoric and their actions. To a large extent the Arabs/Muslims act as a group, but obviously they are not conscious about this anymore than they are aware of their alleged majority dominance; when Geneviève mentioned that they were being perceived as dominant and excluding, they rejected this instantly. Evidently, their common conduct was the major reason for their being viewed as dominant.

Yet, there are striking differences between the Arabs/Muslims in the intermediate and advanced groups. In the former, Fatma, Amna, and Hanan are clearly chatting a lot and often in Arabic, making the others perceive them as dominant, while Azohra and Maryam are quite anonymous. Generally, the diversity of religion, ethnicity, and language appear to have been disadvantageous to the unity of this sub-group.

In the advanced group, the Arabs/Muslims are decidedly more cohesive; they all come from neighbouring countries Morocco and Algeria (the Maghreb), they are both Arab and Muslim, and they have initiated the custom of bringing food and snacks for social gatherings at lunchtime. This does not imply that they are all friends and socialise outside the ECF; particularly Safia and Aïcha were deemed as conservative by Nawal, while Nour did not approve of Safia. Among the Arabs/Muslims it was only Nour and Nawal who were close friends, while the rest limited their social interaction to the ECF setting. There was indisputably 'internal' variation in this 'sub-group' – with respect to their opinions, interpretation of Muslim identity, and moral principles. Yet they were bound together, as another factor was apparently more important, and contributed to bridging their differences: food.

The reason that food was such a potent symbol was that it represented some sort of Arab/Muslim 'culinary community', a neutral ground for interaction where the women's 'common' identity could be expressed. Without being an expert on Maghreb food traditions, I can imagine that the women from Algeria and Morocco had quite a lot of common or at least similar dishes. There are also many cultural connotations tied to food, providing a basis for mutual rec-

ognition. Religion, language, and food thus appear to be the main pillars for the Arabs/Muslims acting as a group.

Consequently, the Arabs/Muslims in both the advanced and intermediate groups may be seen to act as a group, but if one is to follow Jenkins' concepts of group identification they do not constitute a group since they do not identify as one. Jenkins would rather describe them as a category because others classify them in a manner they do not recognise themselves.

Returning to the concept of otherisation, it is obvious that the non-Arabs/Muslims' description of the Arabs/Muslims is not very favourable. The characteristics ascribed to them – reserved; closed; excluding; undisciplined; primitive; non-educated; lacking respect; always chatting; and being preoccupied with their country, religion, and food – are indisputably biased. By employing these group attributes the perceivers are not taking the Arabs'/Muslims' individuality into consideration. The non-Arabs/Muslims recognise that all are not 'like that', but they see these as exceptions to the rule rather than actually allowing for individual difference. Their categorisations are generalising and stereotyped, and constitute otherisation based upon group belonging. Simultaneously, such otherisation is understandable in view of the dominance the Arabs/Muslims are believed to exercise as a majority.

Again, let me reiterate the differences between the intermediate and the advanced group: in the former, the Arabs/Muslims are dominating lessons when they speak in Arabic and disturb through chatting, thus excluding non-Arabic-speakers from their conversation. Besides this, they are also vulnerable individuals without very much in common, and they do not socialise outside the ECF. In the advanced group, the Arabs/Muslims are more in charge, but seemingly in a positive way. They are taking initiative to organise events; they are sociable; and although they dominate the talking, they speak Arabic less frequently than their Arabic-speaking sisters in the intermediate group. Still, particularly Paula and Ana Maria feel the Arabs/Muslims are dominating, and during the conflict Sylvia too shared this opinion.

It is perfectly possible for a majority to be dominating without being the least aware of it and without explicitly or intentionally seeking to dominate. Indeed, the Arabs/Muslims in the advanced group rejected claims of their dominance. Grønhaug (2001) emphasised that dominance is not a result of individual attitudes but in fact an outcome of communication in social processes. In interactive situations – especially in intercultural settings – actors struggle to win support for their rules, using their social competence to define the situation. According to Grønhaug, this is less demanding for a majority, who may have a larger crowd from which to mobilise support, and is able to apply its rules to different situations.

As I have already showed, the Arabs/Muslims in the advanced group transferred their social 'control' of the lessons to the lunchtime gatherings, thus applying their 'rules' to another situation and expanding their power. However, Sylvia supported their rules and was a part of this too for a while, although she was not one of them. Her role was based on her close personal bond especially to Nawal and also to Nour. They spent time together outside the ECF, and hence were able to plan practical food arrangements as well as developing their amity and increasing their knowledge of each others' 'ways' (social competence). Yet, in the end – perhaps partly because she was jealous of Nawal and Nour being so close – she protested against the Arab/Muslim dominance, jeopardising her friendship with Nawal. I very much doubt she would have risked this if she had not considered the case to be very important. Furthermore, if jealousy had been her only motive, she would not have stressed that Nawal was the one taking all the decisions when the two of them were going out together.

Albeit the Arabs/Muslims in the intermediate group were never directly confronted with accusations of dominance, I presume they would dismiss it just as easily as those in the advanced group. As they could not rely on any outside socialisation, their dominance was also weaker than that in the advanced group. Still, many of the same mechanisms applied; they shared the same kind of social competence and applied their own rules and interpretations to maintain the *status quo*, frequently through the medium of their common language. This shows the exclusive as well as the inclusive potential of language. Non-Arabs/Muslims in both groups lacked the social competence the Arabs/Muslims acquired through speaking the same language. Most likely cultural competence tied to the linguistic competence played an important role, particularly for the Maghreb women who supposedly shared a great deal of sociocultural knowledge.

5.3.2 Comparison of the Social Dynamics of My Groups of Study

Evidently, there was discontent with the perceived Arab/Muslim dominance in both the intermediate and advanced groups. Returning to Goffman's concepts, up until the conflict the groups – particularly the intermediate one – seem to have been in a state of working consensus. This implies that all the actors helped maintain the situation despite their dissatisfaction. Working consensus occurs through the under-communication of disagreements frontstage (in class) to avoid disrupting the situation. Jenkins, inspired by Goffman, helps elucidating this when he states that 'two motivations inspire conforming behaviour: the desire to be correct, and the desire to remain in the good graces of others.' (2004:125). The former constitutes 'back-stage private decision-making', the latter entails 'front-stage public behaviour', and both are connected to a 'desire to

belong' (*ibid.*). In my groups of study, any complaints were articulated backstage, e.g. to me; as Ana Maria said, they did not want to offend the Arabs, and by this they maintained the situation.

The question is why there was no open conflict in the intermediate group akin to that in the advanced group. Some of the explanation can be found in the differing social dynamics of the two groups. Blumer emphasises that the continuity of 'established patterns of group life' depends 'on recurrent affirmative definition. Let the interpretations that sustain them be undermined or disrupted by changed definitions from others and the patterns can quickly collapse.' (1969:67). Blumer claims that 'Such redefinition is very common in adversary relations...' (*ibid.*). Obviously, the scale of dominance was more visible in the advanced group where the Arabs/Muslims were more unified, opposed to the divided Arab/Muslim sub-group in the intermediate group. Still, this does not provide an adequate explanation.

One obvious difference between the groups is language and the possibility of articulating potential opposition. The linguistic level in the advanced group was overall high in terms of speaking, while in the intermediate group even the oral competence was divergent. This made the women feel more insecure and in turn less likely to speak out. In the advanced group, all the women (except Ana Maria) mastered the language rather well, and the most verbal of them also were the ones most involved in the conflict. Related to this is the character of the non-Arabs in the two groups. Sylvia and Paula are two very strong women who are not afraid to speak their will or protest against what they experience as unfair. On the other hand, Ana Maria and the other non-Arabs in the intermediate group are much less resourceful, confident, and capable of standing up to the others – although Ana Maria gradually started to mount opposition.

Another conspicuous difference is that in the advanced group all opposition was completely 'internal', i.e. between the women (except from some disagreements with Julia on the part of Nour and Sylvia). Conversely, in the intermediate group latent frustration was turned partly against the Arabs/Muslims. However, the Arabs/Muslims directed *their* dissatisfaction both towards each other and towards the *animatrices*. I see this in connection with what I previously described as 'something' in the disposition of the intermediate group preventing bonds of solidarity from developing between the women, a point to which I will now turn.

In this group, there was a rather frequent turnover of participants, and thus the women never really became well acquainted to one another. They stayed at the first and second levels of Altman and Taylor's scale of development of communicative roles; *orientation of interaction*, where the degree of intimacy is low while stereotypes are common, and *exploratory affective exchange*, where the women have limited obligations towards each other although they are better acquainted (Wadel 1999). Another reason that the women in this group never advanced beyond the lower

levels is that they did not appear to have anything but *negative* factors in common. For various reasons the women had many worries and found themselves in a vulnerable position. Their attendance was irregular, they seldom participated in activities, and they were struggling with the language. Ana Maria, Maryam, and Amna were very resourceful materially as well as socially in their country of origin, but seemed to experience downwards social mobility in Belgium.

Finally, albeit all the women had linguistic problems, they were not actually on the same level – their only common denominator was that they were too good for the beginner group and too weak for the advanced group; in Jenkins' words: '...one of the things that *we* have in common is our difference from *others*.' (2004:79). None of the above-mentioned features stimulated unity between the women. Even though they may find some temporary comfort in sharing problems, this is not a basis for expanding networks or creating friendship and lasting relations. Instead all the negative features function in a fragmenting manner, making the women appear as 'helpless' individuals. By and large their group belonging is negative, as there are more things that divide than unite them. As Jenkins states, '...the less stuff people have in common with each other, the more problematic collective cohesion becomes.' (2004:108).

In contrast, many of the women in the advanced group were on Altman and Taylor's level three, *affective exchange*, where actors are spontaneous and acting like friends; and four, *stable exchange* taking place between close friends, entailing an even higher level of confidence (Wadel 1999). I think this is one of the factors that can help explain why working consensus was followed by a conflict in the advanced group. The relatively high level of personal acquaintance may be said to have stimulated the practical 'implementation' of the conflict; in the intermediate group the women would never have dared to yell at each other the way they did in the advanced group. Such explicit hostility as I witnessed in that group demanded a minimum level of security with respect to social relations. Thus, for Paula – who was more distant from the Arabs/Muslims than any of the others were – it would not be very effective to mount any strong opposition; such an act would be considered strange and possibly not even taken seriously by the others. Hence, it was very convenient to use Sylvia who knew them very well.

Paula was not the *cause* of the conflict, but she was its catalyst; without her goading on Sylvia, the latter would not have taken the matter any further and Nour would not have been so provoked. It seems obvious that Paula's acts were motivated by a genuine wish to expose and put an end to what she perceived as actual inequality between the Muslims and the rest. However, the *animatrices* described her as subtly possessive in her relations to other people, and she might have sought to challenge the Muslims in order to ameliorate her own position within the group. She was evidently not successful, as Sylvia and Ana Maria were the only ones she seemed to interact

with and really trust at the end of the year. Another possible motive for her influential part in the conflict was her friendship with *animatrice* Marie. They apparently got along very well, and Paula must have disapproved of Marie being dismissed. I suspect Paula might have held Nawal responsible for this, as she had voiced her frustration with Marie to both Geneviève and Julia. Thus Paula's interference may also be interpreted as revenge on behalf of Marie; when the opportunity arose to make a legitimately founded protest, she seized it. Considering that Paula told me that she liked Nour, I imagine she must have been surprised at and probably regretted Nour coming to play such a vital role in the conflict. Although Nawal was probably Paula's target, this failed because Nawal shuns conflict. Consequently, Nawal withdrew, preferring to work behind the scenes, i.e. backstage, rather than confronting people directly in class.

There is yet another aspect to the advanced group's developed level of social interaction. While the intermediate group proved to have mostly negative features in common, the opposite applies to the advanced group. To summarise, the members of this group shared interests (talking a lot about cooking and their families), they were active participating in various activities, they were among the less precarious and more resourceful women, they spoke French well, they explicitly mentioned the social aspect as their main purpose for attending the lessons, and the Arab/Muslim sub-group was much less diverse and more cohesive than the one in the intermediate group. The reason that I choose to accentuate this point is that the women obviously had some valuable interests and experiences in common. Accordingly, they also had something worth fighting for. Many of the women described their group as 'a family', and one does not easily renounce one's family. This stands in stark contrast to the intermediate group, which never developed bonds of solidarity to the extent that the women would risk any personal prestige to fight for the interests of the group.

In Goffman's words: '...when people are on formal terms, much energy may be spent in ensuring that events do not occur which might effectively carry an improper expression.' In contrast, when they 'are on familiar terms and feel that they need not stand on ceremony with one another, then inattentiveness and interruptions are likely to become rife...' (1967:40).

5.3.3 Ethnic and Other Identities

...ethnicity emerges as a significant category in social relationships in response to a specific social situation. There is nothing inherent in characteristics of customs, beliefs, and languages which make them socially significant. (...) [A] migrant is usually unaware of the peculiarity of the specific sets of beliefs, customs, and language he has until he is thrown into juxtaposition with others whose customs, beliefs, and languages are dissimilar, and these differences become the basis of determining in what way people should react to one another.' (Mitchell 1987:271)

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this thesis, there is great ethnic diversity among the women at the ECF. However, the extent to which ethnicity is expressed varies considerably. Mitchell's (*ibid.*) and Okamura's (1981) writings on the situational character of ethnicity may help explain such findings. Okamura stated that there is a cognitive and a structural dimension of ethnicity. The cognitive dimension is about the interpretation of the meaning of signs and symbols connected to ethnic identity. I suggest that at the ECF, physical features, clothes, language, and food were symbols with an 'ethnic potential', i.e. forming the basis upon which the women could ascribe identity to themselves and to Others. However, ethnicity is not the only possible status that the women may rely on; identity aspects such as religion, class, and personality were also relevant at the centre, and this 'variable significance of ethnicity as an organizing principle of social relations' is what Okamura describes as the structural dimension of situational ethnicity (*ibid.*:454). This implies that ethnic and other identities may be affirmed or downplayed by choice or constraint, depending amongst others on the relative distribution of power between the actors. In instances where ethnicity is downplayed, its subtlety may make it empirically hard to grasp. Furthermore, it may sometimes be hard to distinguish ethnic and other identity aspects as they may be intertwined, e.g. ethnicity and religion.

In the intermediate group, Azohra was seemingly downplaying and under-communicating her ethnic affiliation – at least she was not emphasising it. This was both because she did not have anyone to 'share' her ethnicity with, thus not being able to 'perform' it in any way (e.g. through language); and because she felt uncomfortable as a Berber among Arabs. Meanwhile, Maryam was in no need to deemphasise her Arab identity; instead she perceived her Catholic identity as vulnerable. Her Catholic faith was in discordance with the stereotypical conception that all Arabs are Muslims, and she felt like an outsider in the company of the Muslims. Those who were both Arab and Muslim seemed to neither accentuate nor downplay their ethnic or religious identities consciously, something to which I will return shortly.

The young black Ivoirian in the intermediate group was referred to as 'Fatima' by the others although her name was only slightly reminiscent of this Arab name. I once asked her about this in class and she commented that her 'Arab friends' were the ones calling her Fatima. According to the CIA World Factbook, Côte d'Ivoire is an ethnically very heterogeneous state. Though I do not know to which group the girl belonged, I do not think she was a Muslim and she said that she prefers her real name. She had a brief dispute with Fatma, who argued that the names were 'the same'. This episode illustrates the group's power balance, which was in the Ivoirian's disfavour. She was not even able to define her own name, symbolising her ethnic identity, but had to be content with the Arab name she was ascribed. Esperanza, on the other hand, was

mainly identified by the others as a Spanish-speaker. Almost every lesson, Fatma would utter a few words of greeting in Spanish when Esperanza arrived; *Hola, amiga*. No specific ethnic label was being imputed to Ana Maria, but she herself was obviously very proud of her Brazilian background, and talked a lot about the greatness of Brazilian culture.

In the advanced group – like in the intermediate – the Latinas were neither classified as a group, nor was their identity categorised according to ethnicity. Although some of them might have shared some Latin American cultural conventions, language was the only manifest identity marker they had in common. However, as they were quite few, they seldom used language either as a bridge or as a wall in the sense of Holliday and Hyde *et al.* (2004). Even after the conflict erupted, they were – as the representatives of the criticism against the Arabs/Muslims – not classified by ethnicity.

With respect to the Arabs/Muslims, Barth suggests that ‘In the Middle East, as among Muslims throughout the world, the dominant discourse on identity is indeed increasingly cast in terms of religion, not ethnicity.’ (1994:27). He asserts that Muslims previously experienced their identity in terms of belonging to an ethnic group in an overall Muslim world, whilst today Muslims are often regarded as ‘second-rate persons’ in a world of non-Muslim domination (*ibid.*:28). The situation of Muslims worldwide has hardly improved since Barth wrote this in 1994, and relations have considerably deteriorated after the events of September 11th 2001. Though my data affirms that generally the Muslim ECF women did not emphasise their ethnic identity, they did not appear to favour religious identity in preference to ethnic identity either.

In terms with my statements on stigma and interpretation of signs in the introduction to this chapter, one can imagine that Arabs/Muslims feel more different (Other) in Brussels than do many of the other ECF women. Muslim women are the objects of many restrictions and control based on gender relations rooted in Arab culture and the religion of Islam, and this fact is well known among non-Muslims. To the latter, Muslim women’s prohibitions are often represented through symbols like the hijab, and in Belgium the authorities have chosen to ‘solve’ this ‘problem’ through banning the use of headscarves in schools. This may be interpreted as public otherisation. Such massive macro level otherisation may be manifested on the micro level too, and one can also imagine that it will facilitate some kind of micro level solidarity between the Arabs/Muslims.

The Arab/Muslim ECF women’s sense of ethnic belonging is to a large extent generated outside the ECF, e.g. through ethnic family networks playing an important part in their social lives. This does not apply to *all*, but to many of the Arabs/Muslims – particularly in the advanced group, where the great majority followed their husbands to Belgium shortly after they had mar-

ried. Often their husbands were already well established in Brussels, where they had a wider family and/or ethnic network on which they could rely. Although other such ethnically based networks exist, few or none of the non-Arabs/Muslims at the ECF appeared to take part in these. On the other hand, such networks are not necessarily only a blessing; they may entail a system of familial ‘supervision’.

Hence, the ECF may serve as some sort of ‘sanctuary’ for the Arabs/Muslims, many of whom discussed their frustration with the lack of gender equality within their families or ‘communities’. In the advanced group, where frustration was most articulate, these discussions usually took place in the presence of other Arabs/Muslims and the *animatrices* only – during informal chats at or after lunchtime. They would not want to emphasise negative aspects of their own religion or culture in front of the others, in fear of confirming the stereotypical notions of Muslim women as suppressed (like Nour depicted). The Arabs’ ethnic background provided them with a common world of experience, but as their ethnic identity was so frequently (involuntarily) emphasised outside the ECF, often in terms of otherisation, they probably did not feel the need to accentuate it at the centre.

During fieldwork I was puzzled by the Arabs/Muslims’ non-articulation of their common ethnic identity, but the reason may be found in their pragmatic approach to the matter. As previously indicated, they would not acknowledge being a group as defined by Jenkins, but yet in many ways they acted like one – probably quite unconsciously – e.g. by speaking Arabic. Accordingly, the ECF may be seen to provide these women with a double backstage for communication: firstly as an escape from their families, who cannot ‘control’ them there; secondly through the creation of their own space through speaking Arabic, thus ‘immobilising’ the other women at the centre.

My empirical evidence confirms that the Arabs/Muslims were almost solely categorised according to their nationality and religion, mainly the latter. No distinction was made between religion and culture (implicitly: ethnicity); these were rather perceived as intertwined. Such categorisation of a person or a group according to only one criterion of identification is the equivalent of what Handelman (1977) called a hierarchical organisation of ethnicity. This was unique to the Arab/Muslim sub-group, and I think that may be partly attributed to the fact that there exist more stereotypical perceptions of this group than of any of the other groups represented at the centre, making its ‘representatives’ easier to label.

Moreover, Handelman stated that relations between different ethnic groups are characterised by hierarchical ethnic sets, and that this is related to power relations. His statement is in line with Pickering (2001), who assumed that there was a connection between otherisation and power.

I have already established that the Arabs/Muslims in both groups exercised some sort of dominance. However, at the ECF hierarchical categorisations and otherisation did not take the form I had anticipated. I will return to this point in my discussion of stereotyping and otherisation.

The opposite of a hierarchical ethnic organisation is the lateral one, typical of internal ethnic minority relations. Handelman stated that the lateral organisation is allowing a person or group to be categorised in different ways depending on the situation (cf. Okamura 1981). In my experience, this was how the non-Arabs/Muslims at the ECF were organised; obviously their ethnic identities were present, but only latently, as they were seldom or never made relevant.

5.3.4 Groups of Study: Groups or Categories?

I will now return to Jenkins' (2004) distinction between group and category with respect to my two groups of study. Having already discussed whether the Arab/Muslim collectivity in my two groups of study constitutes a group or a category, I will not make an equally extensive discussion with respect to the advanced and intermediate groups. My previous comparison makes it reasonable to deduce that neither of them were 'groups' in the strict sense of Jenkins' concept. I have established that the intermediate group comprised a very diverse, even divided, Arab/Muslim sub-group, while the others were simply acting as individuals. In Salima's words, the women in this group were 'Very nice, but they all have their problems, they are not grouped; they come for the classes – that's all'. The intermediate group thus fulfils the criteria of a category.

Also the advanced group, though comprising a more coherent Arab/Muslim sub-group, was characterised by divisions. Despite being presented as a successful story of intercultural co-existence by the *animatrices*, coordinator, and (some) participants alike, the conflict revealed a much less harmonious collectivity than was evident at first sight. Nevertheless, where the intermediate group, characterised by its negative group belonging, undoubtedly matches Jenkins' definition of an externally defined category; the advanced group – up until the conflict – may be perceived as a group in a wider sense. Jenkins himself supports this assertion when he writes that 'People may or may not think the same, but there must be *some* reciprocal and consistent similarity, even if not uniformity, in what co-members *do*. Identification is a practical matter...' (2004:125). This implies that even though a collectivity does not necessarily consciously identify as being a group, it may – like indeed the Arabs/Muslims in the advanced group did – *act* as a group. In many ways this applies to the advanced group as a whole; they started the lunchtime gatherings, organised the paella, and went to Antwerp together, thus acting as a group. My conclusion matches Jenkins' own: group identification and categorisation are changeable and they

may even be present at the same time; accordingly, the concepts are less clear-cut than they might appear, and the advanced group at least partly corresponds to Jenkins' concept of 'group'.

5.3.5 Stereotyping and Otherisation at the ECF

I will now take a look at how stereotyping and otherisation are manifested empirically at the ECF. Considering that several theorists link stereotypes with power, I previously suggested that stereotypes are a means for performing otherisation. At the ECF, the extent and way of using stereotypes varied significantly: in the advanced group, the employment of stereotypes was infrequent, while in the intermediate group it seemed to be almost ubiquitous. Albeit the interpretation of my data forces me to reconsider the relationship between stereotypes and otherisation, I still contend that stereotypes disclose important aspects of power relations. This will be demonstrated through the employment of Lehtonen's and Tambs-Lyche's models.

Latina Paula and Ana Maria could in some cases be regarded as 'representatives' of the West, maintaining a typically Western discourse that Muslim women are ignorant and suppressed. They thereby disallowed any agency in the Arabs'/Muslims' self-ascription, something that is central in Holliday and Hyde *et al.*'s definition of otherisation (2004:159). The Latinas thus symbolised the very majority discourse that the Arabs/Muslims probably hoped to escape by attending the ECF. E.g., Nour confided to me that she had become very insulted when Paula asked her if she knew what 'democracy' was, as if Muslims could not possibly possess such knowledge. In reality, Nour is the one holding a university degree while Paula has only completed secondary school. Simultaneously, Ana Maria and Paula both mentioned exceptions to the 'rule', e.g. Ana Maria acknowledged that Nour and Amina were educated and thus not like the rest. According to Lehtonen stereotypes typically ignore facts that falsify them (2005:72). Paula and Ana Maria's statements illustrate Tambs-Lyche's (n.d.:7) first ethnic dichotomy, A – not-A, entailing that A has got something not-A lacks, i.e. the Latinas allegedly possess knowledge and liberty that the Muslims are lacking.

Nour's declaration that Muslims think with their sentiments while Paula and Sylvia are thinking with their minds constitutes Tambs-Lyche's A – B dichotomy (*ibid.*). The latter makes up a contrast between two groups (although the Latinas were not referred to as belonging to a specific group) sharing a common category – in this case the somewhat vague 'ways of thinking'. Tambs-Lyche asserts that his third dichotomy, A > B, is about a competition for rank and expresses the view of leading groups (*ibid.*:7, 11). Empirically, I found that Berber Azohra and Arab Hanan kept a distance from one another and talked about the other group's (Arab and Berber respectively) air of superiority towards their own group. I did not find any examples of A > B

expressing leading groups' view; instead it was the other way around, and I will use Lehtonen's model of (cultural) auto- and hetero-stereotypes to clarify this.

Hanan's and Azohra's stereotypes of each other's group represent what Lehtonen calls *projected auto-stereotypes*, what we imagine 'they' think about 'us' (2005:69). Nour's frustration with all Muslims being judged as terrorists was not directed towards anyone in particular (at the ECF), but rather towards an unspecified Other (Western society?). Still, her strong reaction to Julia's comment on Nour's country and her extreme sensitivity towards criticism of Arabs and Muslims seem close to auto projection. The same applies to Maryam's comments on Muslims who allegedly do not like Catholics; I never heard any of the Muslims utter negative remarks about Catholics, thus if any such existed they must have been under-communicated in my presence (or performed in Arabic). Maryam also stated that Muslims constantly talk about sin and shame, and this – together with Nour's statement on the Latinas' ways of thinking – constitutes Lehtonen's *simple hetero-stereotype* – what 'we' think about 'them'. Ana Maria reiterated that Brazilians are generally open, tolerant, and educated, while Paula was praising the exceptional adaptability of Chileans when it comes to settling in a new country. Both of these are statements about one's own group – *simple auto-stereotypes*. The only example I found of *projected hetero-stereotypes* – what we assume that they think they are – was when Hanan said that Arabs think they are better than others and look down upon them, while being Arab herself. In this instance, she spoke of her own group as an Other.

In the advanced group, stereotyping was almost solely directed towards the Arabs/Muslims and thus followed the demarcation line of the conflict. In the intermediate group stereotyping occurred 'within' the heterogeneous Arabs/Muslims sub-group as well as being inflicted upon the latter by the Latinas. The Arabs/Muslims on their part described themselves as tolerant and free from prejudice, and their idealisation almost resembled simple auto-stereotypes. Generally, many of the stereotypes were not employed on behalf of present sub-groups, but rather of an absent, larger collectivity. E.g., Azohra had no other Berbers to mobilise for support within the intermediate group, Nour was unspecific in her auto projection of those judging Muslims, and Paula and Ana Maria made claims about Chileans and Brazilians respectively that could not be verified since they were the only Chilean/Brazilian present. In practise, this entails that in their stereotyping the women made relevant groups and experiences external to the ECF. This suggests that to a considerable extent their frames of reference and basis for identification lie outside the centre.

Abstractness is a salient feature of stereotyping in the intermediate and advanced groups. Except from not necessarily being associated with present groups, stereotyping was seldom un-

equivocally tied to specific signs and symbols of identification like dress and language. Often, the women's stereotyping did not legitimise its existence by expressing any obvious argument giving reasons for its purpose. Instead stereotypes appeared to be simple statements, e.g. of Muslims' ignorance, dislike against Catholics, and preoccupation with sin and shame; or mutual prejudices between Arabs and a Berber. Most likely these stereotypes were part of discourses that originate and find their articulation outside the ECF, e.g. the relations between Catholics and Muslims in Iraq or tensions between Berbers and Arabs in Morocco. In other instances stereotypes were more articulated and explanatory; Nour identified the cause of the conflict about the paella payment to be Arabs' and others' different ways of thinking – without saying that one approach was better than the other. Stereotypes typically function as contrasting dichotomies to emphasise one's own good qualities as opposed to others' less favourable, and it is striking that the women at the ECF hardly ever seemed to use stereotypes in this way. E.g., though Ana Maria described Brazilians as open and tolerant and Muslims as closed and reserved, this occurred at different times and she never made any direct comparison.

Generally, auto projection of stereotypes seemed to be the most prevalent at the ECF, especially in the intermediate group. This might partly be a way to avoid confrontation and sustain the state of working consensus. Moreover, Lehtonen writes that 'Such projected prejudices often assume 'the worst'; they are typically more negative than the others' real hetero-stereotypes about the country or culture in question (Lehtonen 1994b).' (2005:70). Lehtonen leans on theories suggesting that the activation of stereotypes is related to the self-confidence of the perceiver: 'According to these theories a subject who experiences his self-esteem as threatened uses stereotypes as a means of making him or herself feel better through downward social comparison (Hilton&Appel 1996:239).' (*ibid.*:80). Consequently, auto projection 'serves as a kind of collective ego protection. The threat to the social self resulting from the incongruity between what one is and what one wishes to be, is brought under control by creating exaggeratedly negative assumptions about oneself as seen by others.' (*ibid.*:82). Since these stereotypes are reflecting the Self or in-group's inferiority, I think they may be regarded as passive or defensive. In fact, it seems that auto projection implies attributing power to the Other/s while simultaneously disempowering the Self – at least rhetorically.

Most of the divided intermediate group Arabs'/Muslims' 'internal' stereotyping occurred in the form of auto projection, supporting my suggestion that it operated as a self-protecting device. It is important to note that stereotyping mainly stemmed from the two most marginalised members of the 'group' – Azohra and Maryam, who failed to completely fulfil the 'group' criteria by not being Arab and Muslim respectively. Stereotypes appear to have served as a protest or

resistance against dominance to them as well as to the Latinas in both groups. I would not contend that stereotyping actually strengthened their sense of self, but it seems reasonable to assume that it contributed to differentiating between Self and Other. Thereby it may have encumbered the Self from being weakened by the threat of the Other's dominance.

In chapter two I referred to theories supporting my hypothesis about the connection between stereotypes and otherisation and hence also with power relations and social control (Pickering 2001). My empirical evidence confirms the existence of such a connection, but in a manner different from what I had imagined. Whereas the theories imply that stereotypes are employed as a means for otherisation by the power holders against the more powerless, at the ECF it appears to be the other way around: stereotypes are used by the powerless against those perceived to be dominating, mostly the Arabs/Muslims. This is in terms with Pickering's contention that perceptions of otherness are not automatically reciprocal (2001:67). In the cases where otherisation *was* reciprocal – between the Arabs/Muslims in the intermediate group, it was undercommunicated frontstage.

The Arabs/Muslims in both groups were excluding the non-Arabs/Muslims, but exclusion is not automatically the equivalent of otherisation, although it *may* be. In my assessment, the Arabs/Muslims were simply ignoring the others when they acted together as a group, but their conduct did not comprise otherisation in the way Holliday and Hyde *et al.* defined it – ascribing identity to the Self or in-group through the negative attribution of characteristics to the Other (2004:159). While otherisation focuses explicitly on the Other as opposed to the Self, the Arabs were quite oblivious to the non-Arabs as such. Of course, this did not stop the non-Arabs/Muslims from *feeling* that they were being otherised; indeed, exclusion may reinforce the feeling of otherisation. What distinguishes otherisation and exclusion is that the former is inevitably intentional whilst the latter is not necessarily deliberate. In this case it seems to be nothing but an unconscious *practise*, without any ideology attached. The Arabs/Muslims contributed to confirming and reinforcing the 'us' and 'them' distinction; set the premises for interaction; and defined the situation through their 'unity' based on religion, language, and food.

This must be seen in connection with Grønhaug's (2001) assertion that ethnic majority dominance is not necessarily caused by intolerant attitudes, but has to do with gaining the power to define situations through using the same set of rules in different situation. His theory seems to apply to majority dominance at the ECF, as there was no strong tendency of otherisation or stereotyping by the Arabs/Muslims towards the non-Arabs/Muslims. Pickering (2001) argued that otherisation is about stabilising the us/them relation in order to maintain power. Instead, at the ECF otherisation through the means of stereotyping was performed to challenge the prevail-

ing distribution of power; it was a strategy of resistance by the powerless non-Arabs/Muslims. Secondly, otherisation constituted auto-protection for the divided Arab/Muslim majority in the intermediate group.

As otherisation usually occurred backstage and the objects of stereotyping were often those in power, they did not necessarily recognise that it was taking place and they were rarely marginalised. Remaining unacknowledged by the Others, otherisation neither appeared particularly effective in terms of shifting the power balance, nor did it present any solution with respect to settling the differences between the actors. The Arabs/Muslims in the advanced group only became aware of otherisation during the conflict. The problem of the non-Arabs/Muslims was that they did not have access to the exclusionary mechanisms of the Arabs/Muslims – religion, food, and language – and food was the only factor they had any chance of influencing. They succeeded in challenging the Arab/Muslim monopoly of defining the situation, but it led to nothing but deteriorating social relations. Principally, otherisation and stereotyping merely serve to impede communication and openness in social encounters, reducing individuals to representative of their ‘group’.

5.3.6 Similarity and Difference

To conclude this chapter, I have decided to focus on Jenkins’ (2004) statement that identification is about distinguishing oneself from others through the exaggeration of internal similarities (Self or in-group) and external differences (Other/s or out-group). Admittedly, this assertion has baffled me throughout the analysis of my material, as my interlocutors seemed to accentuate difference rather than similarity. When discussing how some of them were preoccupied with attributing characteristics to others, I was struck by their general lack of comparison between in-groups and out-groups. They very seldom made contrasting evaluations between Self and Others, and when this occurred it was generally indirect. I suggest that the reason for this may be related to aspects of group identification and categorisation, namely to the women’s lacking recognition of having anything in common – despite sharing many challenges and concerns as immigrant women. Objectively speaking, the women found themselves in similar circumstances; living in a country different from their country of origin, they more or less shared the same practical challenges of everyday life regarding family, education, and employment matters, as well as expressing concerns about morality, identity, equality, and discrimination. Nonetheless, to a great extent this remained unacknowledged by the women themselves.

I believe the preference of emphasising difference to similarity is connected to the fact that the women’s frames of reference and basis of identification are located outside the ECF;

largely, that is where they find their peers. It is more difficult to accentuate one's similarity with a group of people that is absent than with one that is present, especially if the absent group is not known to all of those present. E.g., probably it would not make much sense for an Ecuadorian to emphasise her Ecuadorianness in the company of a Chinese who knows nothing about Ecuador and Ecuadorians; rather it might prove advantageous to focus on one's difference from any other present nationalities. Evidently, this implies a comparison between the Self and the Other, and comparisons comprise both similarity and difference. However, the similarity aspect of the comparison remains inarticulate, while difference is accentuated – precisely like in my empirical evidence, where the women's comparison is subtle and indirect. Similarity and difference are thereby interlinked as a conceptual pair, and although both are not always visible, one cannot exist without the other.

At the end of the day, this is all related to otherisation – 'imagining someone as alien and different to 'us' in such a way that 'they' are excluded from 'our' 'normal', 'superior' and 'civilized' group. Indeed, it is by imagining a foreign Other that 'our' group can become more confident and exclusive.' (Holliday and Hyde *et al.* 2004:3). Otherisation can be seen as a phenomenon that stimulates the exaggeration of similarity and difference between people, i.e. comprising Jenkins' (2004) concepts of group identification and categorisation. In the last instance, this contributes to impeding close contact between people who are not necessarily that different from one another. Otherisation made Paula and Ana Maria so preoccupied with pitying the suppressed and ignorant Arab/Muslim women that they failed to recognise that they were all experiencing the same kind of discrimination as women with regard to e.g. the freedom of movement and the freedom to work: Paula was still affected by not being allowed to go out unaccompanied as a young girl in Chile, while Ana Maria stopped working because her husband wanted her to. Both of these experiences were familiar to the Arab/Muslim women at the ECF, but otherisation ensured that it never became a common ground for identification.

Having recounted the paella conflict and analysed my empirical evidence by means of the conceptual and theoretical framework indicated in chapter two, I will now turn to the very last part of my thesis; the conclusion.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Premises for Identification and Communication

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out to compare the premises for identification and communication among the women in the intermediate and advanced French groups at the ECF. My general objective was to study the variable success of intercultural encounters. This proved to be a challenging task, as the processes of identification and communication were influenced by multiple factors, and – particularly identification – often occurred in very subtle and implicit ways. Nonetheless, I will attempt to indicate some of the manners in which these phenomena may be manifested.

Let me start with the external dynamics, i.e. what the actors bring with them into the encounters. The women's nationality, religion, social/ethnic network, and cultural baggage are obviously playing an important part in their interaction with one another. Some of these are obvious, whereas others may be more subtle. Even though such external factors will always influence actors in different situations, I consider their importance to be particularly salient in intercultural encounters – especially the more implicit aspects like cultural baggage. The reason for this is that cultural conventions like norms and values may have great impact on the actors' actions and adjustment, frequently without them being the least aware of it and without necessarily being evident to those with whom they are interacting.

E.g., most of the Latinas at the ECF came to Belgium on their own as political or economic refugees, whilst the Arabs/Muslim in the advanced group followed their husbands who already worked or were about to start working there. On the other hand, the Arabs/Muslims in the intermediate group comprised women following their husbands, war refugees, and one who came on holiday and eventually decided to stay. Such important variation in the motivation for coming to Belgium may entail different modes of adjusting to Belgian society, and this in turn may affect the women's interaction and level of integration at the ECF.

People's cultural baggage also comprises stereotypes and prejudices, and these may be stimulated by signs symbolising ethnicity, religion, etc. Such signs may convey images of the Self to Others, attempting to control their interpretations of the Self; or they might signify a particular meaning to the Other, completely independent of the Self.

Language is obviously the most evident *means* of communication, but it is also a symbol of cultural and ethnic affiliation, helping individuals to identify each other. In an intercultural language learning setting it is important to examine what languages are being spoken and the actors' level of competence in the various languages. In my analysis, I concluded – in terms with Holliday and Hyde *et al.* (2004) that language may operate both as an exclusionary and inclusive

device. An episode during the term's last lesson in the intermediate group epitomises this perspective. By sheer coincidence it was disclosed that Azohra knows some Spanish. When Ana Maria realised this, she – for once sitting next to Azohra – began to translate words from French, chatting along with her in Spanish. The discovery clearly tore down a barrier for Ana Maria, stimulating her to approach someone she had hardly talked to previously, whereas the same did not apply to Fatma's relationship with Esperanza. This variability may be explained by factors like personal chemistry and personality; Ana Maria apparently had no objections to approaching Azohra, while Fatma – probably a lot due to her low self-confidence – could not imagine engaging in longer conversations with Esperanza even though she knew some Spanish. It must be added that it is always easier for the one mastering a language to approach others speaking it less well, as in Ana Maria's case. This incident demonstrates the importance of the actors' linguistic competences, personality, and their internal social relations.

I will now turn to another main point in my analysis; power. There can be no doubt that the internal power balance between actors will influence both their views on and the manners in which they act towards one another. This is in terms with Jenkins' statement that 'Identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations. Identification is something *over* which struggles take place...' (2004:23). Power relations are an intrinsic component of human group life, and they are no less present in intercultural encounters, although they may be implicit. Grønhaug (2001) showed that dominance was not necessarily *intentional*, but rather generated through communication in social processes. This was the case at the ECF, where I found that the Arab/Muslim majority in the advanced group was unaware of the extent to which they controlled social interaction; it was only the minority that perceived this. In the intermediate group, power relations were even more complex, as the Arab/Muslim majority was a much divided collectivity comprising individuals in a state of considerable precariousness. This created divisions cross-cutting ethnic and religious lines of demarcation.

Finally, my two groups of study were both characterised by working consensus. This entails taking on different roles in different situations, under-communicating certain opinions and aspects of one's identity in some (frontstage) settings, to avoid creating conflicts. I have shown how unresolved past disagreements eventually led to a conflict replacing working consensus in the advanced group, whilst no such thing occurred in the intermediate group. Thus similar situations may develop in completely opposite directions because actors interpret situations in different ways, acting accordingly.

If working consensus implies defining situations, otherisation is about the powerful process of defining Others in negative and essentialist terms in order to ascribe identity to a culturally

more elevated Self (Holliday and Hyde *et al.* 2004:191)). In other words, otherisation concerns the *communication* of one's own and Others' *identity*, and is thus located at the heart of my discussion. Processes of otherisation may be constituted and/or influenced by states of working consensus, power relations, the actors' personality, the role of language in the given context, the display and interpretation of signs, and the significance of external factors like cultural baggage. This wide range of different factors exposes the situational character of otherisation, a point to which I will return.

6.2 The Challenge of Diversity

One of the aims with my thesis has been to demonstrate that otherisation is not confined to great political and ideological battles on the macro level, but also takes place in everyday micro-level social encounters. Indeed, Barth indicates that '...ethnic relations and boundary constructions in most plural societies are not about strangers, but about adjacent and familiar 'others'.' (1994:13). Furthermore, I have aimed at showing the relativity of the concept of the Other. Though some Others are presented and treated as more Other than Others, '[t]he name, type-description and perception of the Other is the Other, and that is all there is. You cannot go beyond or inside it to find something prior to its construction...', as Pickering phrased it (2001:72). The purpose of otherisation is to alienate the perceived Other, and thus it is vital that s/he is presented as a distant figure. In practise, this may occur through the means of categorisation, presenting the Other as member of a group – while in reality it is a category. Consequently, otherisation may be seen as a mystifying process, where the aim is to conceal rather than reveal. Disclosure is the task of the anthropologist, and in my case the object of 'revelation' has been immigrant women.

In Western media, immigrant women are usually presented in a stereotypical way as either suppressed and ignorant or, less frequently, as colourful and exotic women. I have sought to nuance this picture by showing that they are people like you and me, with their assets and imperfections. My point is that although immigrant women are displayed as being bound by cultural conventions and not having much freedom to make their own choices, in reality they are both constrained by *and* able to act in discordance with influential factors like culture, ethnicity, nationality, religion etc. – just like 'everyone else'.

Barth states that '...to grasp what a particular ethnic identity is about, the anthropologist must attend to the *experiences* through which it is formed' (1994:14). I believe this may apply equally well to national, religious, gender, and other aspects of identity. However, the main importance of Barth's statement lies in his focus on experience. During my encounters with the women at the ECF, I was just as interested in getting their life stories as I was observing their

interaction, in order to have a more complete picture of their character and background. I have attempted to convey these impressions in the portrait chapter. Even though this thesis might not have fulfilled my desire to dispel the many myths about immigrant women, I hope that the portraits have at least contributed to displaying the women's diversity and individuality, thus challenging stereotypical notions of immigrant women as a homogeneous group. Albeit diversity – or culture difference, as Nour said – is enriching, it also entails a challenge for the anthropologist, who must try to make generalisations without missing important details that illustrate the uniqueness of the context in question. Moreover, though the women in the advanced group expressed their appreciation of the group's cultural diversity, women in both groups simultaneously pointed to cultural difference as problematic, and many identified cultural difference as the cause of the paella conflict. This fully demonstrates the challenge of diversity – and thus also the challenge of intercultural encounters.

The women's diversity was not only apparent in the women's own accounts of their lives, but was also expressed in their social interaction at the ECF. Holliday and Hyde *et al.* (2004) described interaction in intercultural encounters as a middle culture of dealing. People are influenced by and bring with them into these encounters cultural resources and stereotypes stemming from discourses on the Other. On the one hand, cultural baggage may provide individuals with the minimum of self-confidence required in order to handle the situation. On the other hand, cultural components like stereotypes may stimulate otherisation, consequently engendering social distance and encumbering successful communication (Pickering 2001; Lehtonen 2005). I believe Pickering hit the nail on the head when he stated that 'The translation of difference into Otherness is a denial of dialogue, interaction and change.' (2001:49). Cultural difference is not a problem as such; it only becomes problematic when it is translated into otherness. There are no simple means of preventing this from happening, but dialogue may be a first step.

Intercultural encounters are about the interpretation and negotiation of cultural difference, i.e. about managing diversity. The form and content of such encounters are never given beforehand; they are depending on *the situation*. Consequently, the actors' cultural baggage and other significant elements are combined into a unique compound varying according to the situation. Jenkins uses ethnicity as an example of this: 'Ethnicity, when it matters to people, *really* matters. The circumstances under which it matters are relevant, however.' (2004:65). Likewise, Okamura's (1981) cognitive and structural aspects of ethnicity are not exclusively tied to ethnicity, but rather constitute conceptual tools that may be applied to analyse social relations in general. All human interaction is structured by some kind of regulating framework, but at the same time actors are individuals blessed with a free will and may choose between different courses of action

based on their perception of any given situation. Thus the middle culture of dealing is conditioned by structural and cognitive constraints and possibilities. This applies both to the definition of the situation, to the actors' ascription and self-ascription of identity, and to their communication.

Situationality intrinsically entails some degree of unpredictability; one never knows what is going to happen next. In my empirical evidence, the prime example of this is the role of food in the advanced group. The bringing of food, which was initially a positive effort of socialisation, became the symbol of the Arabs/Muslims' power, spawning the conflict. Thus, various actors fought a battle over food in different situations, negotiating and trying to improve their own positions. The outcome of such negotiations are difficult, if not impossible, to predict because there are so many variables – structural as well as cognitive – coming into play.

As a more general example, I would like to highlight two of my most central theoretical concepts, stereotyping and otherisation. Before I started to conduct my analysis, I imagined that those performing stereotyping and otherisation were those in power, as suggested in the theoretical framework of my thesis. However, *empirically* these phenomena manifested themselves as defensive rather than offensive practises. Admittedly, I found stereotyping and otherisation where I did not expect them to be – among the Latinas (and the marginalised Arabs/Muslims in the intermediate group). I confess that to me, the Arabs/Muslims as a collectivity appeared more Other than the Latinas. I have spent long periods of time in Latin America, speak Spanish, and regard Latin American culture as more familiar than the Arab/Muslim one, although I have visited Arab/Muslim parts of the world as well. In many ways, Latin American culture is probably closer to West European culture than is Arab culture. When I started to perceive the Arab/Muslim dominance, it was easy for me to sympathise with those excluded – the Latinas. Still, there were both 'dominating' Arabs/Muslims and Latinas among those I came to know best. This example of the unexpected courses of otherisation emphasises the situational aspect of social interaction; one may attempt to predict certain outcomes, but in this case the empirical evidence turned out to be the opposite of what the theories predicted, and also of what I had expected.

Identifying the variables influencing whether an intercultural encounter succeeds or fails is indeed an extremely challenging assignment. Though I think I have managed to discover some of the relevant factors, I must confess that I have difficulties separating dependent from independent variables. However, at least some of the reason for this may be attributed to the very situational character of social interaction between the women at the ECF. When – in addition – the actors have such tremendously diverse backgrounds, and much of their basis of identification

is located outside the centre, the outcome of social encounters becomes very difficult to forecast. Variables also have a mutual impact on each other, making it difficult to discern which factor is the independent one. One might expect that a common status as ‘immigrant women’ would constitute the independent variable, but I have revealed that this status conceals what Jenkins (2004) called an externally defined category instead of an internally defined group, thus not really constituting a common point of departure. I.e. empirically, immigrant women – albeit sharing certain features – should be seen as a category and not as a group. Furthermore, many of the variables – e.g. ethnicity and religion – appear to be intertwined and are therefore hard to distinguish. Ultimately, preoccupation with independent and dependent variables might not prove particularly fruitful in terms of increasing understanding in the analysis of social interaction. Instead one should employ a processual perspective grounded in informants’ perception of their own and others’ roles in the situation.

My conclusion can perhaps best be described as inconclusive: there does not seem to be any single formula prescribing the potential success or failure of intercultural encounters. As anthropologists we can only do our best to try to understand some aspects of the premises for social interaction. But of one thing I am certain: some Others are not necessarily more Other than Others, but they are unquestionably presented as such, in order that people may differentiate, promote, or protect themselves from – others.

APPENDIX

Here is a list of the main questions posed to the visitors and volunteers respectively during my interviews with them. The questions were not always presented in the same order as here, and obviously they have been translated from French. Generally, my questions for the visitors were more carefully prepared and standardised in order that they would all understand, and also to provide similar grounds for comparison. However, I did ask the women to elaborate on particularly relevant or interesting matters. When speaking to the *animatrices*, I was seeking to obtain a framework for increasing my understanding of the ECF in general and the groups and individuals in particular. The volunteers (and the informal conversations with the coordinator) provided me with an alternative point of view which was useful in the interpretation of my material.

Interview Questions

Visitors

1) Questions concerning the women's personal and immigration background

- When did you arrive, how, why did you come, and together with whom?
- How was your meeting with Belgium when you arrived and how do you feel about Belgium now?
- Education: have you been at school/how long; have you studied/what?
- Family relations: are you married, when did you marry, do you have children/how old are they, how many family members do you have and are they here or abroad/where?
- Other social relations: do you have other friends or acquaintances with whom you socialise outside the ECF? Who are they, what nationality, etc.? When/in what kinds of settings do you meet?
- Employment: did you work in your country of origin/what kind of work? Do you work now/with what? If not, why did you stop working?
- What does liberty mean to you, and do you feel free? Why/why not?
- What plans, dreams, and expectations do you have for the future? What thoughts do you have concerning the future of your children?

2) Questions concerning the ECF and the group they were placed in

- How long have you been attending classes at the ECF?
- Why do you want to learn French? What are your motivations/expectations for the course?
- Do you think that you're learning something other than language? What might that be?

- What do you think is the best way for *you* to learn?
- Do you think that you have any liberty to decide or influence the contents of the class?
- What are your relations with the teacher/s?⁵⁹
- What are your relations with the other visitors? Do you socialise with any of them outside classes? Do you feel that you have anything in common/(based on) what?
- Are you participating in other ECF activities – courses, workshops, events...? Why/why not?
- Do you have any knowledge of the organisation *Vie Féminine*?

Volunteers

1) Personal background

- Family background: could you tell me about your family situation?
- Education: what kind of formal qualifications do you have?
- Work life/situation: what did you do/where did you work before you came to the ECF?

2) Motivation

- Why did you come to the ECF?
- What is your view on the VF and its ideology?
- Are you a feminist /do you have ideological reasons for doing voluntary work?
- In what aspects do you think that the ECF functions or doesn't function according to its intention?
- How do you get along with the coordinator and the other volunteers?
- How do you view the group you're in charge of – your and the women's roles, the group dynamics, etc.?
- Do you socialise with the visitors outside classes?

3) *Education permanente*/the VF/ECF methodology

- What do you know about *éducation permanente* (EP)?
- What do you think of EP?
- (How) Do you practise it?

⁵⁹ I generally used the word 'teacher' when talking to the women, as this was the word they seemed most familiar with and tended to use themselves.

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