Building bridges

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On reconciling diversity and identity

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Sabine Otten

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Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van Hoogleraar Intergroepsrelaties en Sociale Integratie aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Groningen, 15 november 2011

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Mijnheer de rector, lieve collega's, familieleden, vrienden en andere toehoorders,

Liebe Familienmitglieder und Freunde aus Deutschland,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Before I will start to introduce myself as a "professor of intergroup relations and social integration" let me briefly comment on my choice to give this lecture in English. I assume some of my Dutch colleagues were surprised about this choice:*"Maar Sabine redt zich toch uitstekend in het Nederlands!" -- En, ja, het had gekund, en het was een leuk signaal geweest dat ik me thuis voel in Nederland en bij de RUG.*

Nonetheless I eventually chose for English. Most importantly, because this choice fits nicely today's issues of "building bridges" and "reconciling diversity and identity". By addressing you all in English, the chances are much better that – irrespective of mother tongue and nationality – all guests in this audience will feel included.

In addition, I have the opportunity to use even a fourth language during this presentation: A group of very talented women and their teacher Tineke Demmer did some artwork for me during the last weeks. They created some impressive paintings inspired by the topic of building bridges, and reconciling diversity and identity. I hope you will enjoy this artwork as much as I do[1].

Most of this inaugural speech will focus on the **integration of employees from different cultural backgrounds**. And in fact, being born, raised, and educated in Germany, my own integration here at the University already provides as a single-case study on this issue:

When I started to work here, nearly exactly 9 years ago, I was pretty naïve. I had smoothly communicated with Dutch colleagues on many international

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[1] In this written version of the inaugural speech, only two of these paintings are included.

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conferences, and from these experiences, I simply projected on how it might be to live and work in the Netherlands. *A priori* I was neither very aware of, nor concerned about the differences that I might be confronting, - be it in terms of language, be it in terms of daily functioning (like the opening times of bakeries!), or be it in terms of administration, teaching and organizing research. Not surprisingly, I soon realized that there *were* differences, indeed, and that in some respects I would have to learn and adapt to feel fully at home.

Yet, at the same time, I have always gotten reliable signals of being welcome and appreciated. Most obviously from the colleagues I have been closely collaborating with. Such as Karen, who just gave such a flattering "laudatio", and Ernestine, who helped me an awful lot to find my way in the beginning phase of my "Dutch adventure". – Altogether, my conditions for integrating at the RUG, were optimal. Not just for me, personally, but also – as you will soon realize – in the light of recent theoretical and empirical evidence. And I thank all who contributed to these perfect conditions.

Building bridges

When I started to think about what to present during this inaugural speech, the topic of "Building bridges" quite quickly appealed to me. In many respects this metaphor touches upon relevant aspects in my past and current research:

- First, it relates to my general interest in **understanding intergroup relations.** The bridge signals contact and tolerance rather than discrimination between groups. My passion for understanding the conditions under which such bridge can be built dates back to my very first class in Social Psychology taught by Amélie Mummendey, more than 30 years ago.
- Second, the picture of a bridge is also implicit in my research on the **basic determinants of group identification and ingroup favoritism.** - Becoming and appreciating to be a group member implies that there is a solid link

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between the self and the group. But *how* is this bridge built? And on from which side of the shore do we start building it? – I will return to this issue later in this speech.

- Finally, my recent work has dealt with the question *"When does diversity work?"* I am involved in investigating the conditions under which the inclusion of cultural minority members in organizations may result in positive rather than negative work outcomes. When an organization starts changing from a homogeneous system to one that allows for diversity, this may be depicted as having built and set open a bridge. In first instance, this bridge allows minority members to get in. But, as signaled in the title of this speech, this will be only the beginning. Integration, whether at work or elsewhere, is not realized on the spot, but **will take time and effort**. Building bridges is nearly inevitably the starting point for **change** on either side of the bridge. And change is often, at least on the short run, associated with feelings of **uncertainty or threat**.

In the case of workplace integration, **minority group members** might feel threatened by the possibility to be misunderstood or even rejected by their majority colleagues. But **majority members** may also experience threat due to increasing diversity in their organization. For example, the inclusion of minority members might imply changes in the way work is organized, or might hamper communication, thereby eliciting uncertainty and unease.

Altogether, I therefore argue that allowing employees from cultural minorities to get access to Dutch organizations creates a **necessary** but **not sufficient** condition to make this a **positive** experience for all parties involved. As the German philosopher Hans Magnus Enzensberger recently stated in an interview with the Volkskrant: "Immigratie vergt aanpassing van beide kanten; dat is een proces die enige tijd vergt" (de Volkskrant, 29 Oktober 2011).

But in the Netherlands, immigration is not a new phenomenon; the Netherlands has a colonial history and it is a trading country. Moreover, especially in the 1960ies and -70ies many 'guest workers' were recruited to work in booming

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industries in this country. In our own studies, we often have a comparable number of 1st and 2nd generation immigrants. Soon there will be an increasing number of 3rd generation immigrants, whose grandparents already came to the Netherlands as "gastarbeiter". As a consequence, workplace integration should, in many organizations, be in a more advanced stage. To many, working together with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds should feel 'normal' rather than threatening. Yet, in the relatively recent public debate it has been quite popular to state that "the multicultural society is a complete failure" (e.g., Maxime Verhagen, Algemeen Dagblad, February 15, 2011). This inconsistency formed the starting point for investigating cultural integration in current Dutch organizations.

Werkt diversiteit? – Does diversity work?

Werkt diversiteit? – This is the title of a broader research program financed by the Dutch "Stichting Instituut GAK". Since spring 2009, researchers from the Institute for Integration and Social Efficacy, and from Utrecht University, are investigating both shortcomings and potentials of workplace integration.

In my own research within this program, my first goal was to get an idea about the current state-of-the-arts in culturally diverse Dutch organizations (Otten & van der Zee, 2010; 2011). To this end, I did online surveys with a representative sample of minority and majority employees. Moreover, I collected data in a couple of larger Dutch organizations. In total, more than 2000 employees took part in this investigation; about 30 percent of them were 1st or 2nd generation immigrants.
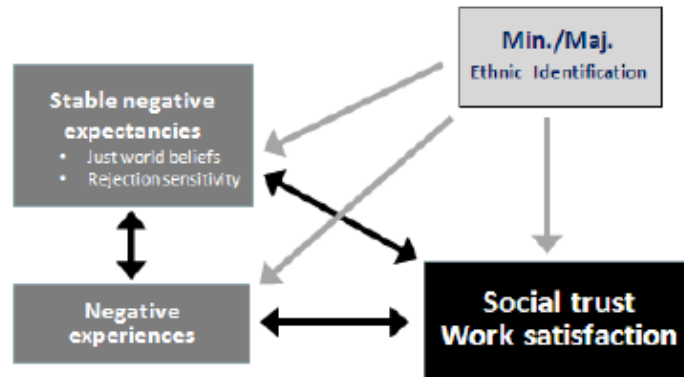
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Figure 1: Research model

In figure 1, you see the main concepts that were relevant in this research. First of all, we wanted to know how often employees would feel unfairly treated or excluded at work, and how this would feed into work satisfaction and social trust. Moreover, we were interested in the role of negative expectations. Possibly, already the mere expectancy to be unfairly treated might hamper work outcomes (see figure 1).

To properly compare minority and majority members, our measures of negative **experiences** did not explicitly refer to disadvantage based on cultural background. Rather, we first asked more generally about experiences of exclusion and unfair treatment. With respect to **expectancies**, we were interested in generalized and relatively stable concepts, such as people's belief in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978), or their expectations to be rejected ("rejection sensitivity"; e.g., Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002) in a sample of typical, but per definition not culture-specific situations at work: For example asking the team-leader to get a day off on a very short notice.

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I assumed that both actual experiences of unfair treatment and the mere expectation to be treated unfairly would be associated with lower levels of work satisfaction and social trust. This was indeed what we found in all samples: The more negative experiences and the more general negative expectations, the lower employees' work satisfaction and social trust. Importantly, even though actual experiences and expectations are highly correlated, they also have **independent** effects on trust and work satisfaction. This is relevant as it implies that challenging negative expectations might already be a starting point for interventions.

For all measured variables, we investigated **differences between minority and majority employees.** However, the surprising finding was that such differences were either small or fully absent. The overall level of trust in the organization, colleagues and superiors was high or very high in both groups. Moreover, like the native Dutch majority, minority employees indicated to only rarely confront unfair treatment at work. Only when estimating the chances to be discriminated **based on ethnicity**, not surprisingly minority members scored higher. In addition, with regard to stable expectations, we repeatedly find that – compared to their indigenous Dutch colleagues - employees from cultural minorities are somewhat less optimistic about being fairly treated.

Cultural maintenance at work

In line with the topic of reconciling diversity and identity, I was also curious whether minority employees who strongly identify with their cultural background would run a higher risk to experience social exclusion and disadvantage. Or, to phrase it differently, the question was whether minorities at the workplace are well advised to fully assimilate and only focus on the majority culture. After all, this would be in line with the majority's acculturation preference (van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998; Verkuyten, 2005), and, thus, might reduce conflicts at work. This idea, however, is *not* supported by the present data: minority employees who strongly identify with their cultural background do *not* report more instances of social exclusion or other sorts of unfair treatment. And high identifiers do even score *better* with regards to social

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