



LA CIRCULATION DES PERSONNES  
**GENDER EQUALITY AS 'CULTURAL STUFF':  
ETHNIC BOUNDARY WORK  
IN A CLASSROOM IN SWITZERLAND**

Kerstin Duemmler, Janine Dahinden, Joëlle Moret

## Authors

Kerstin Duemmler is a research fellow at the MAPS at the University of Neuchâtel. She has worked and published on different issues related to young adults (e.g. health, civic education, violence) and is currently working on ethnic and religious boundary work among youths in her doctoral thesis (see also <http://www2.unine.ch/maps-chaire/page26697.html>).

kerstin.duemmler@unine.ch

Janine Dahinden is professor of Transnational Studies at the University of Neuchâtel. Her research interests cover topics regarding mobility, migration, ethnicity, transnationalism, social networks, gender and culture. Her research is transdisciplinary and combines qualitative and quantitative methods (see also [www.unine.ch/janine.dahinden](http://www.unine.ch/janine.dahinden)).

janine.dahinden@unine.ch

Joëlle Moret is a research associate at the MAPS at the University of Neuchâtel. Her publications and research areas include migration, mobility, transnationalism, and gender. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on gendered mobility practices and transnational space among Somali men and women in Europe (see also <http://www2.unine.ch/maps-chaire/page26700.html>).

joelle.moret@unine.ch

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### Contact:

MAPS - Maison d'analyse des processus sociaux  
Faubourg de l'Hôpital 27  
CH - 2000 Neuchâtel  
Tél. +41 32 718 39 34  
[www2.unine.ch/maps](http://www2.unine.ch/maps)  
[maps.info@unine.ch](mailto:maps.info@unine.ch)

## Abstract

The idea of boundary work has become a key concept in studies on ethnicity and provides new theoretical insights into the social organisation of cultural difference. People articulate ethnic boundaries in everyday interactions using conceptual distinctions to construct notions of 'us' and 'them'. This study is based on an empirical case study (ethnographic fieldwork, interviews) with young people (16-21 years old) in a Swiss vocational school. The results emphasize how gender relations and the moral imperative of gender equality are the most significant categories to create boundaries between Swiss and Albanian migrants. Our study considers boundary work as relational and thus examines the strategies of both the Swiss majority and the (male) Albanian minority. Results suggest that the boundary itself is seldom contested by either Swiss or Albanians, and we argue that the visibility of the boundary ('brightness') is closely linked to larger power relations in society between those groups.

## Keywords:

Ethnicity, boundary work, gender equality, Albanians, youth

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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In a classroom of a Swiss vocational school (Berufsschule), Edi [a second-generation Albanian from Kosovo, 18 years old] one day declares in order to provoke other students in class: “Swiss people get divorced anyway”. Other students immediately object to Edi’s statement, and Cornelia [Swiss, 18 years old] says with a little smile: “But your women don’t dare to get divorced”. Edi answers back, also with a little simile: “At least, they obey us.”

In the course of their everyday lives individuals engage in conceptual distinctions which join some things, objects, people or events together and separate them from others along certain boundaries. What kind of conceptual distinctions in terms of self-identifications and external categorisations can we read out of the above quote? The students in this vocational class not only draw in their debate an ethnic boundary producing two seemingly ‘naturally’ and clearly demarcated groups – Swiss and Albanians<sup>1</sup> – but they also make this boundary concretely by mobilising specific distinctions about gender – ‘you’ (Swiss) get divorced anyway; ‘your’ women (Albanians) do not dare to get divorced; ‘our’ (Albanian) women do at least obey us. In other terms, women and gender relations are the signifiers for the ethnic boundary between the Swiss and the Albanians from the former Yugoslavia.

The idea of boundary work has come to play a key role in important new lines of scholarship across the social sciences (for an overview see Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007; Lamont and Molnar 2002), and it opens up new theoretical insights into the organisation of social difference. Modern societies are, by definition, places of intensified diversity and heterogeneity. The question of how social differences are organised is gaining new pertinence in such contexts. What are the conceptual distinctions used by individuals in everyday interactions and in discourses to construct notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’? In other words, how can the properties of boundaries, under condition of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007), be described and by what mechanisms and dynamics are boundaries created, activated, maintained, disputed, subverted, bridged or crossed? In this article, we aim to further advance the boundary-making approach in the study of ethnicity as it was developed during the last decades (for a recent overview see Wimmer 2008).

Based on the work of Weber, Durkheim, Barth and Bourdieu, contemporary writers have developed an idea of ethnicity which is not perceived as a result of differences between pre-defined, fixed groups with some kind of natural demarcated boundaries but “rather as a dynamic process of constituting and re-configuring groups by defining the boundaries between them” (Wimmer 2008: 1027). We aim at contributing to the growing literature, first, by showing the ways in which gender is used in ethnic boundary drawing (Espiritu 2001; Korteweg and Yudakul 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> We opted for using the generic term ‘Albanians’ in reference to people speaking Albanian originating from different regions of the former Yugoslavia (mainly Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia). This choice is prompted by the common use of this term by both members of the majority group in Switzerland and by Albanians themselves.

We will show through an empirical case study that gender is the most salient category, the 'cultural stuff' in the words of Barth (1969: 15) which is mobilised to create, maintain and contest ethnic boundaries between Swiss and 'foreigners', or more concretely, between Swiss and Albanians. More exactly, it is the normative idea of gender equality between women and men which is put forward in everyday encounters by young people to mark boundaries. Gender equality becomes the moral imperative upon which the ethnic boundary is legitimated and upon which a dichotomisation and hierarchisation between 'we' and a culturally different 'you' is built and contested.

Scholars contributed recently to this debate by analysing mainly the perspective of either the majority or the minority group. However, ethnic boundary work is necessarily relational, dialectic and a two-way-process of collective self-identifications and external categorisation (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Furthermore, boundary making has to do with power relations and social inequalities between majorities and minorities, and of course not all actors have an equal chance of having the boundaries they champion accepted by others. Because of this, as our second way of contributing to the literature, we ask how the 'stigmatised others' engage, contest and react upon exclusive boundaries. What counter strategies do the minority deploy? By what means, arguments and practices do they challenge those institutionalised ethnic boundaries?

In the first section, we introduce the idea of ethnicity as boundary work and relate it with gender. Afterwards, the methodology is briefly outlined. The article is based on a qualitative case study with young people (16-21 years old) of different origins in a classroom context. In the next section, the established and 'bright' boundaries between Swiss and Albanians from the former Yugoslavia are described based on the existing literature – because, obviously, boundary making in a classroom is not free from the wider context but is anchored in it. Next, we present the ethnic boundary work among the students and the ways it is taking place around this moral imperative of gender equality. Discourses about the role of women and men are the signifier for ethnic boundaries, producing a differentiation between Swiss and Albanians – but also a hierarchisation of the two ethnic categories – while legitimising the exclusion of the latter. Then, we depict the counter strategies of the stigmatised group: the communality of those counter strategies is that they do not aim at putting into question or blurring the boundaries between the Swiss and the Albanians. Instead, students of the minority take this line as granted and naturalise it in such a way that the boundary adopts almost a primordial character. However, they develop strategies of the excluded. Besides, members of the minority as well as of the majority only tentatively adopt strategies aimed at blurring the ethnic boundary. In the concluding remarks, some reflections of a more theoretical nature are developed. We argue that questions of power have not yet received the full attention they deserve within the boundary-work literature. If boundaries are institutionalised through reified ideas about culture, tradition and gender relations, minority groups have to deal with social boundaries which get a kind of natural character. This in turn renders it impossible to blur or shift the boundaries.

## 2. ETHNIC BOUNDARY WORK: RELATIONALITY, FORMS AND GENDERED 'CULTURAL STUFF'

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The notion of boundary has been used all over social science, rendering social classifications visible across a wide variety of contexts. In general, boundaries are understood as having both social and symbolic dimensions; this article mainly deals with the latter. Symbolic boundaries have been defined as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people and practices. They are the tools by which people are separated into groups generating feelings of membership” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). In addition, social boundaries are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). In daily interaction actors are involved in struggles over social distinctions and classifications through which symbolic boundaries can shift. When symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon, however, they can take on a constraining character and they can become social boundaries (ibid: 168).

With regard to ethnicity scholars have put forward since the 1960s the idea that ethnic groups exist solely upon the creation and maintenance of their boundaries. It was Barth (1969) who insisted that ethnic groups must be understood as the outcome of self-definitions and ascriptions offered by others, adopting hereby an interactional and relational perspective of ethnicity. According to him, ethnic groups are maintained through relational processes of inclusion and exclusion, and different cultural elements – called ‘cultural stuff’ – are mobilised in order to mark a difference to other groups and confirm similarities among the in-group.

For our purpose, three elements of these theoretical debates need to be further discussed as they will be of relevance for our argument: the dialectic and relational character of ethnic boundary work, the different forms of boundaries, and the idea of mobilising ‘cultural stuff’ in order to mark communalities and differences.

### 2.1 Relationality

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Following Jenkins (1997), we refer to a twin process of group identification and external social categorisation which underlies this relational and dialectic character of boundary work. On the one hand, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of similarities and shared belonging within the in-group. Such ethnic communality is a form of monopolistic social closure; it defines membership, eligibility and access. On the other hand, this internal identification process must be recognised by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. Such external categorisations are intimately bound up with power relations and relate to the capacity of one group to successfully impose its categories of ascription upon another set of people and to the resources which the categorised collectivity can draw upon to resist, if need be, that imposition. Racism, to give an example, is most typically a result of social categorisation. The power to name ethnically can be formal, where, for instance, the state designates particular criteria for ethnic classification. This way Jenkins draws an analytical distinction between groups and categories, introducing the idea of power relations.

Our article takes up this point. We examine how young people identify and define themselves in terms of groups and how they are identified and defined by others in terms of categories. We are interested in the distinctions that the majority group (Swiss) use to draw boundaries (i.e., by their identification as a group and in categorisations of out-groups). However, we also reveal the counter-strategies that the stigmatised group (Albanians) produce to affect the meaning given to their group by the others. This means exploring group identifications – what it means for Swiss and for Albanians to belong to their group (what defines their differences, similarities) – and how they are influenced by external categorisation that members of the two groups hold toward each other.

## 2.2 Forms of boundary work

The boundary-making approach highlights the potential transformative character of ethnicity. Ethnicity varies in relation to social and historical contexts and from one society to another as it is understood as the momentary result of the actor's (individual, nation-state, media, etc.) struggles over classifications about 'us' and 'others'.<sup>2</sup> Zolberg and Long (1999) provide a conceptual starting point for any discussion of boundary change, distinguishing three types of boundary work: boundary crossing, blurring, and shifting. Boundary crossing corresponds to the classic version of individual-level assimilation; someone moves from one group to the other without any real change to the boundary itself. Boundary blurring implies that the social profile of a boundary has become less distinct; the clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded, and individuals' location with respect to the boundary may appear indeterminate. Boundary shifting involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other; former outsiders are transformed into insiders. Wimmer (2008) distinguishes five main strategies deployed by actors to transform boundaries: to redraw a boundary by either expanding or limiting the domain of people included in one's own ethnic category; to modify existing boundaries by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories or by changing one's own position within a boundary system, or by emphasising other, non-ethnic forms of belonging. In this article, we are interested in the strategies and forms to transform boundaries that we find among the young people in a class.

## 2.3 Gender as 'cultural stuff'

Any 'cultural stuff' in common can provide a basis and resource for ethnic closure: language, ritual, kinship, economic way of life, or lifestyle more generally – an idea having its roots without doubt in the writings of Max Weber. He defined ethnicity as a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in a shared culture and a common ancestry (Weber 2005 [1922]: 355ff.). According to Weber, different cultural markers can be subjectively used to reinforce and maintain this sense of belonging: myths of a common historical origin, phenotypic similarities, or any cultural practices seen as typical for the community. As a consequence, ethnic boundary making refers to

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that they would not develop persistence – especially when there are institutionalized boundaries.

meaningful differences and similarities which do not signify real confirmation.

The case study reveals that gender is highly relevant for both processes of group identification and external categorisation. More specifically, the idea of gender equality gains hegemonic status and is a salient marker for boundaries. Perceived 'cultural differences' in gender relations between Swiss and second-generation migrants from the former Yugoslavia in the classroom is the 'stuff' which is mobilised to draw an ethnic boundary, to create a hierarchy among the ethnic categories and to react upon this boundary. Scholars have already reported from different parts of the world and upon different empirical case studies that reified cultural differences have been linked with normative gender ideas and that those ideas have been mobilised in order to legitimate hierarchic boundaries between ethnic groups (Nader 1989; Nagel 1998).

We propose that the boundary perspective can help in overcoming essentialised ideas of 'cultural difference' (among others Grillo 2003; Stolcke 1995) by showing that it is not a natural, substantivist cultural difference with regard to gender relations which is the *raison d'être* for the existence of groups, but that subjective mobilisation of such ideas by actors produce the groups in question. It is not the possession of so-called 'cultural characteristics' that makes social groups distinct but rather the social interactions with other groups that make the difference possible, visible, socially meaningful and recognised or confirmed by others.

### 3. THE STUDY, RESEARCH METHODS AND THE CLASSROOM SETTING

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Studying ethnic identifications and categorisations was the aim of a qualitative research with young people of a Swiss vocational school characterised by multicultural diversity.<sup>3</sup>

Boundary work is particularly relevant among adolescents since social belonging to groups is especially important in this period of life. While they gain independence from parents and the family, young people have to position themselves in schools, in peer groups or even on the labour market. The importance of belonging is visible in various classifications young people refer to in order to differentiate groups (e.g., music or dress styles). However, recognition and acceptance of belonging play fundamental roles because they often depend on certain criteria and sometimes on ethno-national origin. Young people in a classroom are generally heterogeneous regarding ethno-national origin, religion or gender, and they are not necessarily friends but must spend some time together. Therefore, boundary work might become highly relevant among young people in the school context.

Moreover, realising such a research in a school allows one to go beyond a particular ethnic group or immigrant community and to focus on a specific context and on the social interactions that happen between people in this context. The presence of both children of immigrants and youth

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<sup>3</sup> Although this article is based on data from a specific class, the study includes fieldwork and interviews in nine different classes in two regions of Switzerland.



from Swiss families allows the study of their dialectic involvement in ethnic boundary work (external categorisations and group identifications).

The school of this case study is situated in a town (60.000 inhabitants) of the German-speaking part of Switzerland which is characterised by the ethno-national diversity of its population: as in the rest of Switzerland, around 20% have a foreign nationality, coming in particular from the former Yugoslavia (e.g., Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia) or Germany, Portugal, Italy or Spain. Regarding religious affiliation of the population, Catholicism is dominant and – in comparison with other regions – the town has been Catholic for a long time.

Ethnic boundary work can be empirically studied in social interactions. For this reason, ethnographic fieldwork (observations during lessons and breaks) was realised during four months in 2008/2009 in the class. We spent at least a day every week during this period with those young people. In addition, group discussions and different types of personal interviews with students as well as with teachers and directors were carried out. Data gathering and data analysis were based on the Grounded Theory research approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The students in the class were 16 to 21 years old and had already finished secondary school. They did a manual apprenticeship and attended theoretical lessons one day a week in school. The other days, they worked in different small artisan companies mostly outside the town in suburban or rural areas where they learned the practical issues of their profession. At the time of the study most of the students were still living with their parents, usually in the suburbs or in the small towns and villages around. There were 17 pupils in class; the number in terms of men (7) and women (10) was quite balanced.

To show how ethnic boundary work takes place in the classroom context, a short description of the class is needed. As most of the students lived in different regions around the town, they favoured friendships established long before the beginning of their apprenticeship and rarely extended friendships in the class to their life outside the school. However, they had formed several small groups of two to four persons in the class who spent breaks together and sat next to each other during lessons. There was a lot of verbal exchange between these groups during the day. The students who took part in the interactions or interviews mentioned in this article are briefly introduced here. Cornelia and Luisa<sup>4</sup>, both 18 years old and with Swiss parents, were best friends in class. Sabine (20 years) and Chiara (21 years) also had Swiss nationality while their fathers had come originally from Portugal and Italy, respectively. There were also two second-generation migrants – Admir (16 years) and Edi (18 years) – with parents from Montenegro and Kosovo, respectively. While Admir was born in Switzerland, Edi arrived when he was very young. Both had the original nationality of their parents and had been granted Swiss citizenship. Admir and Edi formed a group together with Stefan (18 years, Swiss parents), and ethnic origin was a recurring topic among them. For instance, Stefan, although being Swiss, mentioned regularly that he could also be accounted as a ‘foreigner’ like Admir and Edi since he had grown up with a lot of ‘foreigners from Kosovo’ and therefore, he would be conscious of their preoccupations and values. Sabine, Chiara, Luisa and Cornelia also perceived this group of young men as the ‘foreigners’ as

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<sup>4</sup> Their names have been changed for this article.

the group participated regularly in the performance of this image. Finally, there was Martin (18 years, Swiss parents) who had no close relationship either with Admir, Edi and Stefan or with the other women.

#### 4. 'BRIGHT' BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SWISS AND ALBANIANS – RETRACING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

We argue that we can nowadays identify symbolic as well as social boundaries between Swiss and Albanians. Albanians are confronted with social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination. The boundaries between the two groups have been institutionalised, and 'folk classifications' contribute to the stereotyping of Albanians in terms of cultural difference. As it is against this background that the young people in our case study are engaged in boundary work, we have to take into account this dominant discourse which informs their categorical distinctions.

Albanian-speaking migrants are among the most important immigrant groups in Switzerland in terms of both number and public debate. Albanians have been working in Switzerland since the late 1960s, as Yugoslavia was a traditional recruitment region for so-called guest workers. These guest workers were mostly young men without families. From the 1980s onward, the political and economic situation in the former Yugoslavia, and specifically in Kosovo, has deteriorated drastically, directly increasing emigration pressures. At the same time, with the shift in immigration policies in Switzerland, and specifically with the implementation of the 'three circles' model in 1991, the recruitment of workers from the former Yugoslavia was no longer possible<sup>5</sup>. From then on, immigration to Switzerland was only possible by seeking asylum or through family reunification. The Swiss admission policy – as those of other countries – created different categories of migrants through a kind of 'ethno-national-sorting' (Dahinden 2009). Immigrants from the former Yugoslavia were now categorised as members of the so-called 'third' circle, considered as being culturally the most distanced to the Swiss people.

Confronted with economic hardship and with increasing political unrest at home, the Albanian workers slowly abandoned their plans for returning and decided instead, whenever possible, to bring their families to Switzerland. As a consequence, since 1989 there has been a steady increase in the Albanian population in Switzerland through chain migration, and a feminisation of the migration flow has been observed. Moreover, Albanians were one of the groups hardest hit by recession in the 1990s following the economic restructuring of the labour market. Since then this group has been affected by economic marginalisation and unemployment, and their socioeconomic

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<sup>5</sup> The first circle is made of EU/EFTA countries. The second circle concerns the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The recruitment of qualified workers was – and still is – possible. The third circle concerns all other non-European countries: recruitment is and was only possible exceptionally and under condition of high qualification. Meanwhile Switzerland adopted a dual admission policy – in line with most European countries with which it has agreements of free mobility – linking it with qualification.

position is low.

This 'ethno-national-sorting' of the Swiss admission policy and the ongoing public discourses have had different side effects. Up to the 1980s the Yugoslav immigrants remained relatively unnoticed by the Swiss public. However, in parallel to the reinforcement of 'otherness' in Swiss Immigration law through the model of circles of cultural difference, the Yugoslavs have come under fire from the media and in public: drug dealing, violence, patriarchal culture and family structure, crime and high unemployment are the catchwords, which are today connected with this section of the population. There has been an increasing tendency to explain the observed social exclusion of some of those immigrants by stressing their cultural peculiarities – or even their cultural 'incompatibility' as done some right wing parties (for details see Dahinden 2005).

Recent studies have shown that first- and second-generation migrants from the former Yugoslavia are confronted with cultural stereotypes and discrimination, for instance in the labour market (Fibbi, Kaya, and Piguet 2003) and regarding access to Swiss citizenship (Fibbi, Lerch, and Wanner 2005).

Alba (2005) maintains that the precise nature of the ethnic boundary is important. Some boundaries are 'bright' – the distinction involved is unambiguous, so that individuals know at all times on which side of the boundary they are. Others are 'blurry', involving zones of self-presentation and social representation that allow for ambiguous locations with respect to the boundary. The nature of the minority-majority boundary depends on the way in which it has been institutionalised in different domains, some of them correlated with an ethnic distinction rather than constitutive of the distinction itself. In turn, the nature of the boundary affects fundamentally the processes by which individuals gain access to the opportunities afforded the majority. Upon the available literature we argue that we deal in this case with a boundary which is 'bright' in its character and upon which it might be difficult to do 'blurring' work. However, we do not know how individuals contribute in daily interactions and discourses to the maintenance of this boundary. Do we find the same boundaries in the classroom? Are those boundaries modified or contested by the majority or the stereotyped minority? These questions are at the core of the next sections.

## 5. DOING ETHNICITY BY MOBILISING A DICHOTOMY OF GENDER RELATIONS AND ESTABLISHING A MORAL IMPERATIVE

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During fieldwork, we observed how young people trace a clear and simplistic dichotomy between two different types of gender relations. On the one hand, there exist – in their view – hierarchical gender relations where men have more 'authority' than women and where men dominate women, and, on the other, they trace equal gender relations where we find equality between the sexes. Moreover, they ethnicize this dichotomy and allocate each type of gender relations to a specific ethnic group. Hierarchical gender relations are identified as typical for Albanians or for migrants from the former Yugoslavia in general. Equal ones, on the contrary, are supposed to be

representative for the Swiss population. Second-generation migrants as well as the other students in class actively take part in the social construction of this 'ethnic difference'. They confirm it by identifying themselves collectively with one type of gender relations and by categorising others as agents of the opposite. Furthermore, gender relations – in particular gender equality – become a moral imperative and produce a clear hierarchic order between ethnic categories. Accordingly, some students in the classroom discussion mentioned in the introduction mobilised the idea of 'cultural differences with regard to gender relations' (equality versus inequality) in order to provoke others and to work on boundaries.

## 5.1 Establishing the boundaries: Differentiation and dichotomisation

In the afternoon, students regularly attended a practical course during which they worked individually at their desks and discussed private matters with each other. While the teacher was not in the room the researcher who was present witnessed one day the following scene:

Admir (second-generation Montenegrin) turned round on his chair and asked Sabine (Swiss) with a little smile on his face: "Are you in favour of (gender) equality?" Sabine didn't answer. Instead Martin (Swiss) reacted: "For sure I am!" The discussion continued, Admir stood up and suddenly said a phrase but I (researcher) only understood the word "beat". Thereupon Martin responded again: "I don't do that." The word 'beat' used by Admir attracted the attention of the whole class. Most of the students stopped abruptly their work, observed the scene and listened to the discussion. Then, Admir proclaimed in a loud voice that it would be important in life to find a woman to marry while being young and Edi declared that Swiss people get divorced anyway. Some students in the class objected to Edi's statement and Cornelia (Swiss) said with a little smile: "But your women don't dare to get divorced". Edi answered back, also with a little smile: "They obey us at least." [...] Suddenly Chiara (Swiss, Italian) intervened and shouted agitated: "The way you treat your women. That they want to marry early in life is because of the pressure from your nation. I feel I have to defend as I am also Swiss." [...] The spontaneous discussion in class ended up of with a call from two women sitting in the back of the classroom: "I don't want a foreigner" and two other women completed: "Except people from Southern Europe."

In this situation, the idea of gender equality was used by Admir to provoke one of the women in class. He was not just teasing any woman; rather, his comment was well directed towards a specific woman whom he knew was sensitive to this topic. Sabine told the researcher in a personal interview that she was in favour of equality between the sexes and that she was bothered by men thinking they were the bosses.

Although Admir did not succeed in provoking her, he contested a normative concept regarding gender which is well dispersed in liberal democracies – gender equality – defining the rights of men and women as equal and women's emancipation as a must. He was aware that it could be a sensitive topic and therefore, he played with it as a provocation – making visible the performative nature of ethnicity. In other terms, Admir is conscious of these moral ideas linked to gender

relations, and he uses them consciously in order to provoke and to work on the ethnic boundary. And he had some success, as some students, in particular the women (e.g., Cornelia, Chiara), responded to this incitement since they perceived this kind of provocation as typical of men coming from the former Yugoslavia who do not accept – in their view – equality between men and women (“But your women don’t dare to get divorced” or “The way you treat your women.”). Admir and Edi were seen as representatives of a ‘different culture’ favouring hierarchical gender relations that are too far to the Swiss people and their ideas about gender favouring equality between men and women. The Swiss women confirm in the interaction the ethnic boundary by categorising themselves and the ‘others’, mobilising specific ideas about cultural gender differences. They know on which side of the boundary they – and the others – are.

Interestingly enough, migrants from South Europe (Italy, Portugal or Spain) were not perceived as different ‘others’ and have – in the classification system of these young women – crossed the ethnic boundary and belong now to ‘them’. The ethnic boundary was expanded by including Southerners in their own ethnic category while reinforcing the boundary between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia.

In sum, moral imperatives about gender relations – ideas about power relations between men and women – characterise the symbolic boundary that is mutually mobilised by the students in the class to provoke each other and to articulate ethnic differences. In this sense, members of the majority (i.e., Cornelia) as well as of the minority (i.e., Edi) confirm this symbolic boundary between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia. Cornelia mobilises the idea that ‘their’ women are oppressed and Edi confirms her argument by mobilising the idea that ‘their own’ women have to obey men. The situation shows further that group identification and categorisation mutually stimulate and reinforce each other during social interactions and that in this case everybody agrees upon the boundary – there is no blurring – making the boundary ‘bright’.

However, we have to be aware that these discourses cannot be taken as a fact of reality. It does not mean that within a given ethnic collectivity such kind of subordination of women would be the case for everybody. First, such hierarchical gender relations in the sense of a general normative ideology that legitimates the subordination of women to men is not an exclusively specific pattern for the countries of the former Yugoslavia – we find it also among the Swiss, and they are in each society different and sometimes contrasting gender relations. Second, the described situation in the classroom above has already shown that other students stimulated such constructions by Admir and Edi. The imperative of gender inequality is not exclusively used by the two young men to mark a symbolic boundary between the Kosovar and the Swiss. The idea is continuously confirmed by others. In fact, the category ‘Albanians’ serves as a counterpoint for other students to proclaim that ‘Swiss people’ have realised equal rights between men and women – although we know from many studies that this is far from being the case in Switzerland. Branger (2008), for example, showed that important wage differences exist between men and women, and that women are responsible for most of the unpaid household-related tasks.

## 5.2 Hierarchisation and segregation

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This dichotomisation is also visible in an interview with Stefan. The young man said that he had many friends with a foreign nationality, in particular from Kosovo, and that is why he knows that they are really different from Swiss people:

“Simply the way of thinking, the opinion somebody has. There are for instance, I don’t know, Albanians. Albanians differ from us, from the Swiss, in the position they have towards a woman. If they get married, the woman stays at home and cooks. Among us, among Swiss people, the woman also works as the man does [...] as I already said, I think it is a prejudice against women that they have to do such things. I think a woman has her own mind, she can decide on her own, what she wants to do and what she doesn’t. And a man shouldn’t force a woman to do something that she doesn’t want to do.”

What we can read out of the quote is that Stefan is directly producing a moral hierarchy and a hierarchical order between the ethnic categories: it is obvious that the equality model is more valued and better than the women-in-the-family model. Stefan underlines his argument by describing a contrast: in his view, men and women in Switzerland are more equal because women generally have paid employment and also have the right to do so. Since Albanian women do not work outside the family after marriage or don’t have the right to do that – according to Stefan – they are inferior and do not hold equal positions. Stefan reifies the two ethnic categories and justifies the difference in an over-simplistic and homogenous way since he talks neither about Swiss women who do unpaid work at home nor about Albanian women who have a professional activity after marriage – both of which, obviously, exist. His argumentation refers to an egalitarian discourse which stresses women’s economic independence as a precondition for equality between men and women. Stefan confirms it, arguing that this lifestyle is typical for Swiss people and attributes himself to this group, placing him on the ‘good side’ of this moral imperative. Moreover, he activates a powerful discourse against Albanians not corresponding to this liberal principle even if he sees himself as a friend of ‘foreigners’. He also mobilises these strong classifications and attributions in public, for instance on the school yard, which reinforces the image about Albanians – and contributes to a ‘brightening’ of the ethnic boundary. Albanians are in everyday life confronted with such attributions about their supposed typical behaviour and they are obliged to position themselves towards these categorisations. We will show later what counter-strategies they deploy.

## 5.3 Legitimizing exclusion

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However, the ethnic boundary between Swiss and Albanians is not only based upon differences. The young people also explicitly assume that unequal gender relations are ‘bad’ and do therefore legitimise a hierarchic order of the ethnic categories. Different interviewed women made it clear – when asked about marriage – that they would reject a close relationship with an Albanian from Kosovo. Luisa (Swiss), for instance, justifies her argument not only with ethnic but also with

religious 'differences'<sup>6</sup> as this time she speaks about Albanians mobilising the category of Muslims:

"Before, I had a lot of Albanian women as friends. How they are disrespected! They don't have the right to have a date or to go out. The son is free to do everything. Among the Muslims, they are even forced to marry somebody although they say it isn't anymore like that. But hundred per cent, if they finish school and have nothing to do, they do it and they push her towards somebody. And yes, I never want my children or my grand-children to grow up in such a relation. And not only because of bad experiences with them, it is simple; they are simply completely different from a Catholic and from a Protestant."

In a similar vein to Stefan, Luisa mobilises the principle of gender equality, but she uses it in reference to a highly moralised topic, namely forced marriages. Albanian women are – according to Luisa – not free to have a date, to go out or to decide whom they want to marry. Although she is aware that (some) Albanians describe such practices as past, she does not grant them the right to have a say about it. This example makes clear how the majority can impose a discourse about the practices of the minority. Moreover, she legitimises her arguments with her own experiences, arguing that she befriended female Albanians in the past. Luisa reifies the categories 'Albanian' and 'Muslim' also in a homogenous way and draws a boundary between Swiss women and Albanian women.

Furthermore, she mobilises 'religious differences' between Muslims and Protestants/ Catholics but does not mention different religious ideologies: rather, she uses religion as a marker to boost the ethnic boundary (Mitchell 2006). Already since the 1990s, Muslims have been highly stigmatised in public debates in many European countries. The wearing of a headscarf and more recently a Burqa by Muslim women is presented as implicating a general subordination of women. Already Lutz (1991) revealed that migrant women of so-called "Islamic background" are supposed to be oppressed by male power in western representations. In particular the idea of Islamic patriarchy often serves to assume general male control over women's sexuality (e.g., virginity) and is thus regularly mobilised as a counterpoint to the sexuality of the liberated western woman. Luisa re-activates such representations and she enacts a power relation by accentuating supposed 'cultural differences' which serve to exclude Albanians and Muslims.

## 6. COUNTER STRATEGIES TO FACE EXCLUSIONARY BOUNDARIES

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Until now we have mainly described how two dichotomised types of gender relations (one based on equality between men and women, the other based on unequal relations) are mobilised by students to draw a clear and bright boundary. It was shown that members of the majority as well as

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<sup>6</sup> Catholic and Muslim Albanians from Kosovo are living in Switzerland.

of the minority contribute to this boundary work by reinforcing the same boundary. This boundary is not neutral, however, as it implies a hierarchical order where people belonging to the category 'Swiss' are perceived as 'superior' to those with origin in the former Yugoslavia. We argue that different strategies can be depicted that aim at countering the boundaries and the hierarchical order they imply.

Three different strategies adopted by actors can be identified in this specific class: First, the male members of the minority contribute to the dominant discourse by reassessing the values associated with being a man. Second, they put into question the hierarchical ordering of the boundary by proclaiming their own moral superiority with regard to gender relations. Third, some members of the majority as well as of the minority try to blur the existing boundaries (mostly with little success) by emphasising non-ethnic forms of belonging or by challenging the reified nature of the boundaries.

### 6.1 Reassessing the value of being a man and boundary drawing against women

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It seems at first sight paradoxical that members of the minority contribute to the 'brightening' of the ethnic boundary by confirming the dichotomy of the two types of gender relations, and identify themselves with the stigmatised category – stigmatised at least by the majority in class and by liberal moral principles.

However, the empirical material shows that male members of the minority subscribe to this non-equality model of gender relation because they can use it to question their individual subordinate status. They do so by emphasising a new boundary (the one between men and women in which they dominate) to counter the ethnic boundary that stigmatises them. The gender boundary they highlight (for instance, in their provocations about gender equality) allocates to them recognition and power within their ethnic group and compensates for their lower status in the ethnic hierarchical order.

Admir and Edi argue in the interviews that gender relations are typically hierarchical in the Balkan countries – in both Catholic and Islamic regions. Accordingly, women have, like they express it, less authority than men in their culture of origin, which contrasts with countries like Switzerland. In an interview with Edi, he says that he has more Kosovar friends than Swiss friends and explains that they do things differently:

"... for instance regarding women. Most of the women have quite a say in Switzerland. A woman says quite a lot. Among Albanians it is little. A woman has also for sure some authority, but not too much. Swiss people pay more attention to a woman, more attention than Albanians. I think that a woman has something to say, of course, that's clear, but not too much." Later he goes on to explain why women have less authority than men among Albanians: "Women are discriminated. They are not allowed to say much, in the past they were not at all. I watched a documentary on the television where a woman was getting married. She had a sack on her head and was sitting on a horse. Then, she was brought to her husband ..."



Edi justifies male domination of women by mobilising the idea of 'tradition'. He mentions the exchange of women between different families as – in his view – a traditional marriage custom. In the same way, Admir claims in an interview that it is a typical tradition for the Balkan countries that “women have to go to men” when they get married and not the other way round. He adds that he would never change his residence for a woman.

Patrilocality and arranged marriage appear in these discourses as practices that are legitimated by tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) describe how practices which are considered traditional serve to justify values or behavioural norms and enable to maintain continuity with the past or to define a community. 'Tradition' can be mobilised as 'cultural stuff' in order to subjectively produce communality and difference. Various practices, rituals or symbols – be they real or fictive – find their place within this umbrella idea of tradition and each can be mobilised. It must be added that traditions, despite their initial definition, are sometimes recent re-inventions and deliberate constructions to draw boundaries.

In the case of Admir and Edi, tradition is used to legitimise a hierarchical order between men and women. They draw a boundary between the sexes and this conceptual distinction allows them to identify with the supposed dominant male part in relationships to women from the former Yugoslavia. In a situation where the ethnic criterion situates them on 'the wrong side' of the boundary, insisting on the moral imperative of gender inequality gives them some power and recognition of being a man.

This strategy of emphasising their position in one type of boundary (the gender boundary) over another (the ethnic boundary) may help Albanian men reassess their own value: being a dominant man is preferable to being a subordinated Albanian. However, this strategy does not question the ethnic boundary itself. Although the male members of the minority counter their subordination by reassessing the value of being a man, they continuously contribute to and confirm the ethnic boundary work described above.

## 6.2 Inverting the ethnic hierarchical ordering – proclaiming one's own moral superiority

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However, the empirical findings reveal additional strategies aimed at modifying the ethnic boundary. These strategies question the hierarchical ordering between Swiss and migrants from the former Yugoslavia, and the minority tries to prove their moral superior lifestyle in comparison with the Swiss. The kind of morality that is emphasised is closely linked to women's behaviour in their relationships to men.

In the debate in the classroom described above (as well as in the personal interviews), Admir and Edi proclaimed that Swiss marriages mostly end up in divorce, something that – in their view – does not happen to Albanian families. The common failure of Swiss couples is implicitly attributed to women's freedom in comparison with women coming from the former Yugoslavia. This attribution is a joint construction by members of both the majority (“your women don't dare to get divorced”, implying that Swiss women have the freedom to do so if they want to) and the minority

("at least they obey us", making it clear that the non-contested subordination of women to men has led, as a positive consequence, to enduring marriages). While the students of Swiss origin emphasise the value of women's freedom, the male students with immigrant parents argue that strong marriages are an important value, even if it means less freedom for women. This is for sure also a strategy of legitimising the power of men over women. It gives a rational and moral motive for men to control 'their' women. By doing so, Edi and Admir aim at inverting the ethnic hierarchical order that is imposed on them by the majority students of Swiss origin. They aim to show that inequality in gender relations has an important advantage, namely, to safeguard moral values, which is not the case among Swiss families.

However, strategies aimed at changing the ethnic hierarchical order of the boundary exceed the realm of family values to include sexual behaviours, in particular those of women. In class discussions as well as in interviews, Admir and Edi repeatedly argue that it is impressive when men have sexual relations with different women, but they strongly despise women acting the same way. Although this kind of discourse is widespread among youth of all origins, a new ethnic boundary is drawn around the sexuality of women. In an interview, Admir says he does not find it right for women to "sleep around":

"It is like that. Well, maybe for Swiss people it is normal [he laughs]. But I can't say for them. And we have been brought up differently. For instance when we want to marry we look for a virgin".

In this quote, as well as in other discourses, a 'we' (migrants from the former Yugoslavia) is constructed where morally irreproachable behaviour is expected from women, in contrast to a 'them' ('Swiss people') who do not care and find it normal that women have multiple sexual relations before they get married. The inverting of the hierarchical order is here quite clear with an attempt to change the signifier of the boundary. The dominant discourse in the class is about gender equality and in this field students whose parents came from the Balkan region have no chance to win the game, i.e., to be considered on top of the hierarchical order. Instead of contesting the boundary, the young men actively try to change the emphasis put on its content: moving from a gender equality ideology, they bring in a replacing ideology related to the safeguarding of women's sexual integrity and morality. Based on this new 'cultural content' these young men have the means to assert the moral superiority of their own ethnic group over the 'immoral' majority. In this counter strategy, as well as in those described until now, the boundary work involves strong mechanisms of differentiation and the establishment of a hierarchical ethnic order – albeit different. This contributes to reinforcing the brightness of the boundaries that take a quasi-impermeable nature.

Devaluing women 'of the ethnic other' in order to challenge one's own marginal position is a strategy that has been already described by other scholars. Alexander (1996), for instance, mentioned in an ethnographic study with a peer group of black Britons in London that ideologies on the relationship to white women were characterised by connotations of women's sexual availability, their (sexual) exploitation or their weakness. In contrast, black women were described as legitimate wives. The enactment of this kind of masculinity and control in interactions with white women were

important for them in order to subvert dominant definitions of power in society.

However, the strategy deployed by Admir and Edi does not aim at reversing the hierarchical order regarding only Swiss women. When it comes to women's sexual freedom, it is inextricably linked to men's control over women. By reversing the hierarchical order, those Albanian males assert their superiority not only to Swiss women (who freely 'sleep around') but also to Swiss men who supposedly do not find women's morality important and/or cannot control the women of their own ethnic category (who do not 'obey' them). The honour of women stands here as the signifier for a whole group's superiority (Espiritu 2001).

In light of this, challenging the moral superiority of the Swiss people (men and women) in their interactions with students in the class can be seen as a way for the male members of the minority to gain control of their immediate environment – the class as a public place – and to challenge the subjugation of their ethnic category in Swiss society.

### 6.3 Blurring the ethnic boundary

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These examples confirm the bright nature of the ethnic boundary between Albanians and Swiss. In view of this, it might be not surprising that members of the minority as well as of the majority only tentatively engage in 'blurring strategies'. Only occasionally do they bring up this kind of boundary work aiming at rendering the ethnic boundary less distinct and sharp.

For instance, Luisa was interviewed together with her best friend Cornelia, the young woman who accused Albanian women of not daring to get divorced (in the interaction with Edi and Admir, see situation above). While Luisa presents a reified image about Albanians in the interview, Cornelia suddenly sets up counter-arguments against her view:

"I don't care about that. For sure, there are different countries where women are treated differently and even here in Switzerland. But there are also exceptions. And even though, I would never be together with a boyfriend I don't love and I can't love somebody who mistreat women whether he is an Albanian or whatever."

Cornelia objects to the homogenous and reified image about Albanians presented by Luisa.

Despite her affirming gender equality and the importance of women's respect in the same way, she does not link a behaviour that is supposed to disrespect women to a particular ethno-religious group. She breaks up the ethnic boundary by putting weight on universal values – being a woman and being respected as a woman. In other terms, she emphasises non-ethnic forms of belonging, namely, being a woman, to divert the focus from ethnic belonging.

Some efforts to blur the ethnic boundary can also be observed among the subordinated minority group. One day during recreation with his friends Stefan and Admir, Edi mentioned that Albanian men, on top of dominating women, also deal violently with them. Admir (and Stefan) immediately disagreed with Edi: "Albanians don't deal violently with women. Not all Albanians." Admir tries to blur the ethnic boundary by recalling that there are also differences within the group and by contesting the reified image about Albanians as a homogeneous ethnic category of people having

hierarchical gender relations where men wield also physical power over women.

Both examples show that reified ideas about Albanians circulate and how social categorisations can change from situation to situation. It must be noted, however, that members of both the majority and the minority groups only seldom attempt to blur the ethnic boundary. Moreover, these attempts are mostly ineffective and have little weight when confronted with the important boundary work that has been described until now, which mostly contributes to maintaining and reinforcing the boundary.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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Against the background of an institutionalised ethnic boundary between Swiss and Albanians from the former Yugoslavia, we observe that among young adults in a vocational class the moral idea of gender equality is mobilised in order to work on the ethnic boundary, to confirm the segregation and hierarchic order of the ethnic categories.

We examined in our empirical case study how gender and the moral imperative of gender equality becomes a vehicle for the ethnic majority (Swiss students) to articulate differences towards migrants from the former Yugoslavia, particularly against Albanians. It serves to assert cultural superiority over the ethnic minority and to legitimate exclusion.

Various studies have already stressed the relevance of gender relations as a potential signifier for ethnic identities and boundaries for either ethnic minority or majority groups (Espiritu 2001; Lutz 1991; Nader 1989). Our findings contribute to this literature and additionally build on the idea that boundary work is relational. The type of study we opted for allowed us to observe interactions between groups that had not been pre-defined by the research design and to examine the dialectic game between ethnic group identifications and external categorisations. Ethnic boundaries were drawn interactively by all the young people reacting upon a series of 'cultural stuff' related to ideas about gender relations. As a consequence, all students contribute to the (re)production of a symbolic boundary between Swiss natives and migrants from the former Yugoslavia or their children.

We also depicted the counter-strategies of the stigmatised group who also use ideas about gender relations to work on and to modify that boundary. On one hand, we saw that male members of the minority invoked 'gender inequality' as a 'cultural tradition' to reaffirm their self-esteem and to reassess their superior position as men over the female members of their ethnic minority. On the other hand, these young men tried to assert moral superiority over the dominant group by emphasising the moral integrity of migrant women from the former Yugoslavia (in comparison with 'unrespectable' Swiss women) and the importance accorded to family and enduring marriages (in contrast to high divorce rates among Swiss couples).

The case study reveals that neither the boundary work by the majority nor the counter-strategies by the male minority aim at putting into question the boundaries between Swiss and Albanians. Instead, students take this line as rather granted and naturalise it in such a way that the boundary

adopts almost a primordial character. According to Alba (2005), this boundary can be described as 'bright', meaning that it is clear on which side of the boundary a person is localised (migrant minority or Swiss). 'Blurred' boundaries exist when multiple identifications (e.g., on both sides of the boundary) are allowed. As we have seen, this is hardly the case in this class: consequently, blurring strategies only occasionally occurred in our case study.

We argue further that this ethnic boundary work is closely linked to power relations, a question that has not yet received the full attention it deserves within the boundary-work literature. Ethnic categorisations and hierarchical ordering deployed by the Swiss women (and men) in class against migrants from the former Yugoslavia are underpinned by a dominant gender discourse widespread in liberal democracies favouring the gender equality model. It provides a legitimated discourse to define those migrants as 'culturally different'. The stigmatised ethnic groups are faced with this categorisation and the 'brightness' of the boundary, and there is only little room left for them to deploy counter-strategies. Accordingly, we observed little efforts to blur the boundary as this effort is known to be useless. Instead, they engage in counter-strategies that finally contribute to 'brightening' even further the boundary. If symbolic boundaries are institutionalised through reified ideas about culture, tradition and gender relations, then minority groups have to deal with social boundaries that get a kind of primordial and natural character. This in turn renders it impossible to blur or shift the boundaries.

Experiences of being categorised by others often reinforce group identities (Jenkins 1997). In our study, we observed that this process mostly takes place through an emphasis on the ideology of gender inequality among Albanians. Members of the majority perceive this unequal conception of gender relations as typical for Albanians anyway. Albanian males may as well make the best of it and emphasise it further to their advantage, be it by legitimising it (through 'tradition' for instance) or by reasserting its moral benefits. However, these strategies of reinforcing an ideology of male superiority over women have important consequences for Albanian women who suffer from a double oppression: an ethnic one (being Albanian) and the gender one (being women).

However, our findings were gathered in a specific context of one class where ethnic boundary work took place between the male members of the minority and mainly the female members of the majority. It would be interesting to look closely at the strategies that Albanian women deploy in their boundary work. One might argue that their strategies have aims other than the brightening of the boundaries. Further investigation is needed, for instance, by comparing these findings to boundary work in other classrooms, to find out about the strategies adopted specifically by female members of the minority, as well as those additionally deployed by the other students in general. Finally, what has been left out in this analysis is the role of the school. Other studies have shown that schools as institutions operate with specific concepts regarding the management of diversity. This is reflected, for instance, in official guidelines about how ethno-national diversity should be dealt with (Schiffauer et al. 2002). Such a larger perspective would allow going beyond the categorisations and group identifications among young people and enable taking into consideration the institutional context where they occur.

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