Summary (I’m not that kind of Moroccan)

In this study, I have analysed the identity-forming process of Moroccan undergraduates, looking at the three fields in which they are frequently active: minority politics, the ethnic community and higher professional education. In each of these fields these students are confronted with images, rules and expected behaviour they have to deal with. This implies that each of these fields involves a struggle to define self-identity in relation to rules of the respective fields within a given balance of power. Each student chooses his/her own position within the parameters of each field. It is not only this struggle, but also knowledge and application of the rules that influence the positions that these students take. Possessing knowledge of the rules and successfully mastering the rules in one field do not necessarily guarantee that the same approach will be equally well received in another field. Moroccan undergraduates primarily endeavour to maintain their individuality and their position within the different fields. Their identity-forming process can be described as a never-ending quest.

Moroccan undergraduates are under constant pressure during the process of forming their identity. The various logic structures prevalent in each field, the resulting disciplines, and the balances of power within and between the fields ensure that loyalties are constantly competing for primacy. At the same time, the students remain aware of their own intended goals. In order to realise these goals, they try to make as many connections as possible between the various fields through which they navigate, as well as creating connections with other actors operating in those fields. This process of self-definition is therefore not only conditioned by the fields, but also takes on new content as a result of the acts carried out by the students. This yields an impression of goal-oriented young people who are constantly forced to shift between different loyalties.

Chapter 2 contains a theoretical introduction of the terms ‘field’ and ‘identity’. By connecting Bourdieu’s field theory with a constructivist approach to identity, I aimed to make the role of the actors more central to the study than is customarily possible using a field approach. This dynamic approach becomes visible in the stories and experiences of the Moroccan undergraduates and the way in which I describe their positions in the three fields referred to above, each of which has its own prevalent logic and shifting balances of power. The question of ‘who’ these students ‘are’, and where they belong, is primarily determined situationally. By navigating within and between different fields, Moroccan undergraduates are not only exposed to the disciplinary influences of those different fields, each with its
own (sometimes) conflicting rules; room is also created for them to have a certain degree of freedom to act. Bourdieu’s terms ‘doxa’ and ‘habitus’ primarily emphasise continuity. By combining these terms with identity – as a process – a focus on dynamics and change is also created. Furthermore, this research also shows that doxa and habitus work less effectively as reproduction mechanisms than Bourdieu sometimes seems to suggest.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the field of research. The study is based on research that I conducted between September 2005 and December 2009 amongst Moroccan undergraduates at a Dutch university college. This long-term research mainly focused on a core group of forty Moroccan undergraduates, as well as their families, friends and acquaintances. By the end of the study, a total of over 100 Moroccan undergraduates had been involved in the research. The research method used can be described as a combination of various qualitative methods. It involved one-on-one interviews, focus groups and participational observation. This chapter specifically focuses on the changing relationship between me as a researcher/lecturer at the university and the Moroccan students in this study.

In Chapter 4, I argue that in this study, the focus within the field of minority politics is on the debate regarding integration of migrants into Dutch society. Various actors take part in this debate, including representatives from politics, civil society organisations and the media. There are considerable differences in the power that these actors possess, and not all actors have sufficient social capital to promote his/her own vision on integration. Furthermore, the dominant discourse about integration has a highly normalising effect, which results in less room for ‘deviating’ visions to be heard. Within the field, the actors fight for their positions in the public domain in order to achieve acceptance of their vision for the process of migrant integration into Dutch society.

Moroccan undergraduates are actors in this field, but do not feel that they are active participants. They feel that people in this field are debating about them and on their behalf, and that they themselves have limited room to manoeuvre and limited resources (or as Bourdieu puts it, they lack ‘capital’) to change the negative image that ‘the Dutch’ have about ‘Moroccans’. The students feel that they are not represented in the political decision-making process, do not have access to relevant media, and that they do not have networks at their disposal that can change this (social capital). They also lack economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (education) and symbolic capital (prestige based e.g. on religion has less value in the field of minority politics than in, for example, the field of the ethnic community). With so little capital of any type, it is not surprising that the students see themselves as weak and vulnerable players in the field.

The way in which the integration debate is conducted in the Netherlands is shown to be a major influence on the identity-forming process of Moroccan undergraduates. The realisation that after 11 September 2001, they were no longer
seen as ‘Dutch’ but were reduced to ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Muslim’ resulted in a growing feeling of frustration and powerlessness. Furthermore, it has become apparent that the integration debate also involves two separate obligations that are almost impossible to combine. The students are expected to integrate (assimilate) into Dutch society (to ‘be like us’!). At the same time, that selfsame society has branded them as fundamentally ‘different’, based both on their ethnic background (Moroccan) and their religion (Islam). In addition, many students have inherited a strong ‘them-and-us’ mentality from their parents. As a result of recent events and experiences in the public space, this ‘them-and-us’ mentality has been further reinforced.

Chapter 5 portrays the field of the ethnic community. The students regard their own ethnic community as the most important field. It provides the anchor, as it were, from which the students can approach the other fields. Within the field of the ethnic community, the main focus is on their own family, although the ties to other Moroccans (neighbours, relatives) are also important. This broad ethnic group has a great deal of influence on the way in which the students define their identities. Strong social control within the ethnic groups plays a major role here.

Fulfilling the standard of acceptance as a fully fledged player within the field of the ethnic community, means being both successful and demonstrating evidence of that success (good education, good job, social status). In addition, it means that individuals cannot deviate too far from the generally held views of ‘good Moroccans’. This indicates that social success is not the only factor here, and that complying with the demands of ‘the’ Moroccan community, such as fulfilling an important role in the family, giving religion a place in everyday life, honouring and being respectful to others and respecting ‘male’ and ‘female’ codes of conduct. As a result, it can be concluded that economic, cultural, social and symbolic factors all play a role in the development of important forms of capital within the field of the ethnic community.

The Moroccan undergraduates have conflicting feelings with regard to the field of the ethnic community. On the one hand, there is a desire to comply with existing behavioural patterns within the field, stemming from respect for their parents, the desire to maintain cultural traditions (as a result of social pressure from within the community itself), fear of repression or the desire to maintain positions of power. On the other hand, particularly amongst female students, there is a great desire to change and modernise existing behavioural patterns.

In the students’ quest to define themselves, it would appear that ‘the’ Moroccan community does in fact have a real and compelling influence, but despite the restrictions placed on them, the students still feel like active players. The dominant field logic and the sometimes tense relationships that they maintain with others in the field do not hinder them from creating freedom for themselves. Sometimes this is done without the knowledge of their parents, although it occurs more often by
means of open discussion. A trump card often played by female Moroccan students in this context is religion. They refer to the Koran, where it is written that self-development is important, e.g. through education and work. Furthermore, they emphasise the equality that men and women have to create equal opportunities for development and to increase their room to manoeuvre. In addition, they are perfectly capable of reflecting on their own behaviour and that of others. They clearly recognise that although both their desire for individual development and their desire to comply with the dominant views within the field of the ethnic community create obstacles for them, they also offer safety and warmth.

Chapter 6 addresses the field of higher education. The dynamics within the education sector and higher education in particular, including the increasing intake of students from ethnic minorities, make this field extremely interesting. Education has long been considered a critical access road into Dutch society via emancipation and participation. The assumption that education offers opportunities for social success is widely held. However, it is apparent that inhibiting factors still present obstacles to this process. Firstly, there is the assumption that learning deficits are prevalent amongst ethnic minorities. This assumption of a disadvantaged background has been shown to lower academic performance amongst ethnic minorities in the Dutch education system, including higher education. Secondly, the disciplinary and reproductive function of the education system also leads to a certain dynamic that creates obstacles for specific students taking part in the field of education, e.g. students from lower socio-economic classes and ethnic minorities.

Moroccan students, and Moroccan women in particular, are currently exhibiting an increase in overall level of education. However, for many Moroccan students, success within the field of education is far from guaranteed. They have fewer resources crucial to academic success, such as economic capital (financial resources to buy study materials), social capital (relationships and networks that include lecturers/fellow students), cultural capital (study skills) and symbolic capital (lack of prestige, lecturers have lower expectations that they will succeed). The lack of expectations in particular is felt very strongly by students. They feel that society’s negative view of Moroccans has seeped into the field of education, negatively affecting their academic careers. In turn, this experience conflicts with the high expectations that many Moroccan parents have for their children’s academic performance. They put great pressure on their children to perform, yet they provide little or no support (or may be unable to do so). In addition, the educational channels prior to entering higher education provide Moroccan students with only limited preparation to take part in higher education. All of these obstacles create a vulnerable and complicated position for Moroccan students in the field of education, and higher education in particular.

As a result of negative experiences with tutors and/or fellow students, many Moroccan students come to identify themselves as ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Muslim’ in the
field of higher education, also taking on all of the negative aspects associated with them. Just as is the case in the field of minority politics, they experience these negative connotations as an externally imposed identity that they want to shake off, but are only able to do so with great difficulty. In the relationship with native-Dutch students and tutors, they try to draw as little attention as possible to their ethnic and religious identities, precisely because they want to be seen in this field as ‘normal’ students and treated based on their academic performance alone.

Finally, Chapter 7 answers the research question. The intersectional approach to the fields as used in this study shows that Moroccan undergraduates ‘play’ with the components of their identity within the various fields. It also allows room to demonstrate that their identity is multifaceted, situational and ambiguous. While their ethnic and religious identity is of central importance to them in the field of the ethnic community because it creates room for personal development and generates freedom, they do not emphasise these partial identities in their dealings with native-Dutch people in either of the other fields. The negative connotation that their ethnic and religious identities has taken on in Dutch society is an important explanation for this de-emphasis. The students also have a strong desire to ‘truly belong’ within Dutch society and they do not want to be seen as being different from ‘normal’ Dutch people. The students realise that by accentuating their ethnic and religious identities, they limit their room to manoeuvre in relation to Dutch society and Dutch people. There is a fundamental conflict between the fields here: what is seen as a uniting factor in one field (the field of the ethnic community), is seen as a divisive factor in the others (the field of minority politics and the field of higher education).

It is evident that the desire of Moroccan students to find their place within the different fields plays a huge role in the development of their identity. This indicates that Moroccan undergraduates want to be accepted in every aspect of their lives, in all of the different fields that they encounter. Although they want to make their own choices, they also do not want to deviate excessively from the norms and values prevalent within the separate fields. In essence, this is an expression of their longing for a socially accepted identity that they feel accurately reflects who they are. This will give them a social position that enables them to achieve their ambitions for the future whilst staying true to their original roots.

This study has shown that young Moroccans possess a great deal of resilience and ambition, and strive to achieve success and recognition in every field. Moroccan undergraduates also display a great deal of self-confidence, which is not deterred by the fact that their social reality is sometimes strained and evokes ambivalent emotions. They are convinced that their wish to be respected as a Moroccan, as a Muslim and as a Dutch person will come true when they get their bachelor’s degree, regarding that moment as an important step in achieving their ‘new’ Moroccan-Dutch identity.