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EDITORIAL

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Navigating Social Boundaries and Belonging: People Without Migration Background in Majority–Minority Cities

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the articles in this thematic issue, which revolves around the ERC Advanced research project Becoming *a* Minority (B*a*M), carried out between 2018 and 2023. The aim of the project was to understand how people without a migration background think about and live in diversity. Through this aim, the B*a*M project has tried to advance our thinking about the concept of integration.

Keywords

belonging; ethnic diversity; in- and exclusion; majority–minority; social boundaries; symbolic boundaries

1. Introduction

This thematic issue revolves around the ERC Advanced research project Becoming *a* Minority (B*a*M). The B*a*M project was carried out between 2018 and 2023, and focused on people without a migration background living in six majority–minority cities in Europe: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Malmö, Rotterdam, and Vienna. The aim of the project was to understand how people without a migration background think about and live in diversity (Crul et al., 2023). Through this aim, the B*a*M project has tried to advance our thinking about the concept of integration. Whereas integration of people with a migration background has been widely researched within the European context (e.g., Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Pulinx & Van Avermaet, 2015; Sezgin, 2019), far fewer studies have taken it upon themselves to include people without a migration background into research on integration. Yet, there is consensus among migration scholars that integration should be studied as a two-way process (cf. Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016; Martinović, 2013), whereby people without a migration background have a role to play in integration outcomes.

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We will empirically expatiate how people without a migration background think about and behave in the majority–minority neighborhoods and cities in which they live. What characterizes these neighborhoods and cities is that they are comprised of only ethnic minority groups, including the group of people without a migration background having become a numerical minority. Specifically, what this issue aims to uncover is the interplay between symbolic and social boundary-making, and feelings of belonging in majority–minority neighborhoods, in order to understand practices of in- and exclusion in majority–minority contexts in Europe.

Through the articles run themes such as how national discourses in Europe resonate on the local, majority–minority level. Another theme in the articles is the function of space and positionality, and how neighborhood spaces—such as shops, schools, parks, and streets—and the formalized roles that residents may play in these spaces can gain a strategic function for neighborhood residents to interact across ethnic boundaries.

2. Conceptual Overview

There's a substantial body of work done on symbolic and social boundaries in relation to identity and ethnic boundary-making (e.g., Alba, 2005; Barth, 1994; Lamont et al., 2015; Wimmer, 2008). Lamont et al. (2015) define symbolic boundaries as "the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others" (p. 850). This defining aspect of symbolic boundaries not only pertains to how people identify others, but inherently also to how they self-identify. This process of drawing up symbolic boundaries between self and others is related to attitudes about various social (ethnic) groups in society. And these attitudes can spill over into the drawing up of social boundaries (see for example Edgell et al., 2019), which represent concrete and material consequences, which can amount to in- and exclusionary practices between groups of people in society.

The in- and exclusionary practices between groups of people can affect feelings of belonging. Belonging to a place can be seen as entailing "a profound emotional connection to one's home and neighborhood" (Mohseni et al., 2024) and this emotional connection can be felt with multiple places simultaneously, and at multiple levels, such as feeling a sense of belonging on a national and local level (Pinkster, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The importance of the local, or neighborhood level, has become more profound due to globalization, which instead of eroding local identities, has added to the importance of the neighborhood with regard to the construction of local identities, attachments, and belonging (Savage et al., 2005, p. 204).

3. Methodology of the B*a*M Project

The B*a*M project focused on people without a migration background, between the age of 25 to 45, living in a majority–minority neighborhood in one of the six European cities. We define people without a migration background as people born in the country of residence, also having two parents who were born in the country of residence. This implies that our respondents have at least for two generations lived in the country. We understand that this definition can capture people who have grandparents from abroad, but as "the administrative data systems in Europe do not make distinctions based on skin color" (Crul & Lelie, 2023, p. 25), neither on country of birth of grandparents, we opted to adhere to the way in which the administrative data has been created (see also Crul & Lelie, 2023; Crul et al., 2023).

The project included a survey and semi-structured interviews. The articles in this issue revolve around the interviews, with the exception of the article by Crul et al. (2024), which departs from the survey data but adds interview excerpts to the analysis. Another exception is the article by Keskiner et al. (2024), which includes additional interviews from Amsterdam and Tilburg, a middle-sized Dutch city.

The qualitative fieldwork amounted to around 20 respondents without a migration background per city. The collection of these semi-structured interviews was done by the B*a*M project PhDs and research assistants in the case of Belgium, Sweden, and the Netherlands. The data was collected in 2019 and 2020. Residents who at first sight seemed to fit the B*a*M profile were approached in the neighborhood, screened if they belonged to our target group, and asked whether they would like to participate in a study about living in a diverse neighborhood.

4. Overview of the Articles

In this issue, there are six empirical articles based on the B*a*M data, and two commentaries. Here we present a short overview of the articles.

The article by Crul et al. (2024) addresses the discrepancies between attitudes and actual behaviors of people without a migration background living in majority–minority neighborhoods. They focus on people with positive attitudes about diversity who hardly engage with diversity in their own social circle, labeling this the "diversity paradox." In looking for an explanation for this commonly found paradox among B*a*M respondents, the authors argue that respondents can experience "belonging uncertainty" in spaces where they are—in an obvious way—the numerical minority. Respondents can overcome this belonging uncertainty by having a clear, formalized, and designated role in a diverse space.

Kraus et al. (2024) further build upon understanding belonging uncertainty by delving deeper into the practices of people without a migration background in Vienna. The authors point to the social boundaries that people experience when becoming aware of their numerical minority position in the neighborhood. Whereas some residents without a migration background decide to avoid these spaces, drawing clear social boundaries for themselves within the neighborhood and self-segregating, other residents who experience belonging uncertainty try to cross boundaries by consciously and repeatedly exposing themselves to spaces in which they form a numerical minority, trying to gain a sense of belonging in the neighborhood.

Knipprath's article (2024) moves away from how individual behaviors contribute to practices of in- and exclusion in majority–minority neighborhoods, to focus more on societal structures. He argues that state policies deliberately attempt to have middle-class residents move into a majority–minority neighborhood in Hamburg under the banner of introducing more social mixing among different groups of people. Yet, the introduction of the middle class in the neighborhood creates a new social divide and drives longer-established low-income residents and people with a migration background to the social margins of the neighborhood.

Lazëri et al. (2024) address both the individual and the state level in understanding how residents experience their position in a majority–minority neighborhood in Malmö. The authors argue that national discourses on ethnic boundaries continue to play a role in how residents without a migration background in a

majority–minority neighborhood define their ethnic identity on both the national and local level. They show how national discourses create symbolic boundaries around Swedishness and belonging in Sweden, and how these symbolic boundaries are maintained by residents without a migration background living in a majority–minority neighborhood. Simultaneously, the majority–minority setting does seem to make residents without a migration background more aware of their whiteness and the privilege around whiteness.

Privilege also features in the article by Schut and Crul (2024), who focus on middle-class parents without a migration background who opted to send their children to a mixed primary school in their majority–minority neighborhood in Amsterdam. The authors describe how this choice for a mixed neighborhood school aligns with the progressive, liberal norms and values that these middle-class parents embrace. These parents value ethnic diversity and aim to be open to difference. Yet, this openness is challenged when it comes to Dutch norms and values around sexuality and sex education in primary schools. Middle-class parents without a migration background are faced with the paradox of wanting to be open to ethnic diversity on the one hand, while simultaneously expecting parents with a migration background—who form the numerical majority within the school setting—to adhere to dominant Dutch progressive norms around sexuality, even when the latter refuse to.

In the article by Keskiner et al. (2024), the authors pose the question of whether to understand the behaviors of parents without a migration background in majority–minority settings in terms of ethnicity or in terms of class background. These authors use a comparative angle in their analysis to show how mothers without a migration background in two majority–minority primary schools reflect and act upon the ethnic diversity within the schools. They show how the attitudes and behaviors of the mothers do not always align, and how the mothers without a migration background who have grown up in diversity manage to avoid drawing social boundaries to engage with ethnic diversity within the school setting.

The commentary by Warikoo (2024) delves deeper into the articles that focus on the school context within majority–minority neighborhoods. Warikoo argues that both articles push further our understanding of the consequences of school choice in relation to diversity and the differences in convictions between parents with and without a migration background that can come to the fore in the profoundly personal context of a primary school. The author calls for a more critical power perspective into further understanding of how parental choices might cascade into larger social changes.

The commentary by Jiménez (2024) also calls for future research to pay attention to how individual-level changes might spill over into societal changes. His commentary focuses specifically on the article by Crul et al. (2024), which includes the analysis of the B*a*M survey data. What Jiménez argues is that the article offers an explanation for the “diversity paradox,” but that future research should try to better understand where the paradox originates. Jiménez in his commentary makes a first attempt by bringing together his analyses from the US context and the European data from B*a*M, bringing in political orientation not as a mere “set of attitudes about issues,” but rather as a “deeply felt social identity” (Jiménez, 2024, p. 3) allowing for a “critical white racial identity” which is highly appreciative of diversity without necessarily living in or engaging with diversity.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Ismintha Waldring holds a joint PhD in sociology from the VU University Amsterdam and the University of Antwerp and worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the B*a*M project. Her doctoral dissertation traced back the pathways to success and labor-market experiences of highly educated second-generation professionals of Turkish descent in four European countries. She currently works as an assistant professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research interests include boundary strategies, subtle mechanisms of exclusion in organizational settings (the education sector in particular), and the role of education professionals in majority–minority city contexts in Europe.

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