

# "I don't discriminate, but..."

## Dutch Stories about Ethnic Minorities

*Eva E. Abraham-Van der Mark*

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In the working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam, a study was conducted into how the original residents experienced living side by side with the numerous newcomers in their immediate environment, and how they put it into words. More than a third of the people in the neighbourhood are Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and members of other ethnic minorities. Attention is devoted to stories told by the older residents of the neighbourhood about their experiences with the ethnic minorities. These stories provide insight into the image the neighbourhood's original residents develop of the newcomers, and how it is related to their self-image of people who live in a "degenerate" neighbourhood and whose status in Dutch society is low.

Although the power differences between the "outsiders" and the "established" in the neighbourhood are negligible, the older residents tend to emphasize their own superiority. It is not based on their social position or high status in society, but on the belief in the value of being "born and bred" in the Netherlands, of being a "real" Dutchman. The purpose of the stories is to exaggerate the power difference between themselves and the ethnic minorities. The desire to dissociate themselves from the minorities "they are not our kind of people and we want to make sure everyone realizes that" and the demand for assimilation "they have to conform to our way of doing things" are both designed to preserve the little that is left of their own identity and way of life.

*Dr. Eva Abraham-Van der Mark, 71 van Breestraat, 1071 ZH Amsterdam, Netherlands.*

"People were gazing at the scene unfolding before their eyes and trying to puzzle out a story, a story with a meaning, with a beginning and an end, as you do here below if you want to know where you are amidst the chaos of men's destinies."

Simone Schwartz-Barth: *The bridge of Beyond*.

### Introduction

Until the 1960's the Netherlands had a racially and ethnically homogeneous population. In the sixties and seventies, however, various ethnic groups have come in, especially from Mediterranean countries and the former colonies, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles. Today,

these groups amount to a half million people, on a total population of 14 million.

Research was carried out on the way the autochthonous population of a working-class section of Amsterdam perceives the many newcomers in its community.

The study took place in a particular section of Amsterdam known as the "African" or, alternatively, the "Transvaal" neighbourhood. In this neighbourhood more than one third of the population consists of Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese and other ethnic groups.

Investigators<sup>1</sup> and students conducted fifty open interviews with members of the Dutch autochthonous population. These interviews have been recorded on tapes. Further, investigators spoke with people in the neighbourhood social center, doctors and social workers, and

observed contacts between the autochthonous and the allochthonous populations.

In the following pages I will present an analysis of a particular portion of the interviews: the stories told by the older inhabitants (older in terms of having lived longer in the neighbourhood) about the ethnic groups. These tales say more about the Dutch tellers than about the minorities, for a story is a unique, personal reflection of some event in which the teller or someone known to him was present. Unlike a report, in which an attempt is made to stay as close as possible to the exact description of events, a story presents a completely personal vision or interpretation of what has taken place.<sup>2</sup>

There are various narrative techniques available to a storyteller such as emphasis and repetition, to show what he considers most important. His or her aim is to make the listener understand the *point* of the story, make him share the feelings of the teller and make him/her endorse the story's moral (see Polanyi, 1979). Thus the telling of a story is a unique form of communication in which the teller tries to ensure the listeners' agreement with his message through remarks such as "ain't that the truth", "don't you agree?", "Am I right?". Some stories carry the message that "what happened to me may also happen to you!" (see Stimson and Webb, 95). Thus, at the end of one of his stories an interviewee warned: "Madam, I tell you this – in a few years we will have nothing to say here, and neither will you".

The number of sociological publications that deal with stories is limited.<sup>3</sup> The authors, notwithstanding the differences among them, represent a symbolic interactionist frame of reference. Those among them who present an explicit analysis of stories, Stimson and Webb, Dingwall, and Baruch, deal with the way in which storytellers give a retrospective interpretation of their experiences with people from other groups, how they always attempt to present themselves in a favourable light, use stereotypes and prejudices in the description of "others", and indicate who belong to their own group and whom they want to exclude.

Moreover, Stimson and Webb point out that people with little power try to compensate for

the inequalities in power with which they are confronted by means of the stories they tell about those in power. They do this by presenting the powerful as incompetent, insensitive and ludicrous.

After a short description of the neighbourhood in which the research was carried out, I will present the findings of the research and compare them with those of the authors mentioned. In addition, I want to point out the conflict that emerges from the fact that the stories which we collected have dual goals: to air one's grievances about the ethnic minorities and to present a favourable picture of oneself. Finally, I hope to establish that it can be fruitful to add a structural and historical approach to the symbolic interactionist perspective.

## The African or Transvaal neighbourhood

The area that is officially called the African neighbourhood, but commonly known as the Transvaal neighbourhood, was built up between 1910 and 1930. Originally it had been surrounded on three sides by railroad tracks, which caused an isolation that was broken only at the end of the '30's. What took place here was an experiment in early twentieth-century social housing. The housing associations were becoming popular, and through the Housing Law of 1901, built for those with low incomes. They, as well as the City of Amsterdam, put up blocs of worker's houses in the Transvaal neighbourhood. But providing decent housing was not their only goal, they also aimed at the consciousness raising of the workers, to "uplift" or elevate them spiritually and culturally.

The first inhabitants have been described as being enthusiastic and idealistic: "mostly younger, enterprising people who strove to attain a better life, more spacious and healthier living space, better education and their share of "high" culture, ideals that were common coin among those in the workers' movement at that time" (Weber, 170). The leftist wing political parties played an important role in the neighbourhood. Although some were members of the





Example of the “Amsterdam School” in architecture.

communist party, most of the inhabitants felt ties with the socialist party. The neighbourhood was known as the “red fort” or “red bulwark”, and the ideals of the socialist movement were spread vigorously. Political parties, housing associations, unions, and a variety of other associations all worked together on this.

The neighbourhood hardly ever experienced peaceful times. In 1911, when the city declared the worst dwellings of the old Jewish quarter unfit for habitation, it was the job of the Friends of the Craftworkers’ Circle, a Jewish organization, to resettle the inhabitants in the Transvaal neighbourhood. Moreover, it was stated clearly over and over again, these people who were described as “pariahs” and “the wretched” had to be “build up to human beings”. It was not easy to integrate the newcomers and make them adjust to the existing life-style but after all it worked out well and it seems that even their cultural standards were raised as some of the former slum dwellers

sang Handel’s “*Eccequomodo moritur*” as members of an all male choir at the funeral of the most important advocate of this early example of relocation (Ottens, 150).

During the Depression of the thirties unemployment had increased sharply and when not only wages but also unemployment benefits were reduced, there was a great deal of unrest. Police patrols in the neighbourhood were regularly reinforced.

The Second World War proved to be an exceptionally traumatic period. The Jews comprised 46% of the population in 1940, while by 1946 they were less than 1%. Their dwellings were taken over by new settlers from various sections of the city.

Many of the original inhabitants, especially those having somewhat higher incomes, moved to new housing areas that were built up in the sixties. The Transvaal neighbourhood became more heterogeneous, the former cohesion and solidarity were lost and a process of individualization and decreasing involvement with one’s neighbours had set in. There was a sharp increase of those whom social workers labelled as “problem families” (Tiel, 1967).<sup>4</sup> The neighbourhood became associated with disorder and violence. At the time of the research certain streets were terrorized by juvenile gangs, such as the “East Babies” and because of these activities some older people hardly dared venture onto the streets after dark.

Large groups of Surinamese, Turks and Moroccans settled here in the seventies. Problems evolved, especially with the Surinamese, who did not hesitate to squat in apartments that were unoccupied. There were fights and in newspapers from the early seventies the neighbourhood is described as an “anvil” of race riots (Van Amerongen, 1972). Despite this, conflicts were restricted to isolated disturbances with the police and arguments between neighbours which were sometimes fought out on the street.

Today, the buildings in the area are 50 to 70 years old. Most of them fail to comply with present-day standards. Walls and floors are poor and not insulated against sound; moreover, according to statistics from the seventies, 66% of the apartments have neither shower

nor bath. A municipal renovation plan has led to a considerable degree of discontent and confusion. There is a decrease in the population of the area: in 1960 there were 18.000; in 1982, 11.462 inhabitants who were officially registered and an unknown number of squatters, people temporarily assigned by the Relocation and Student Housing Offices, and illegal foreigners.

From among those inhabitants who were officially registered in 1982, 33% belonged to the ethnic minorities. This concentration is increasing through natural increase and family reunification.

Among the autochthonous population, over half have finished only six or fewer years of elementary education. They belong to the lower income categories. One civil servant from the Office of Social Affairs estimated that in 1981 at least 50% of the inhabitants lived on welfare unemployment benefits. It goes without saying that these people are extremely vulnerable in the present period of economic recession. This area still votes overwhelmingly for the left-wing parties, but in the 1982 elections for the Second Chamber, the Center Party, a definitely racist party, obtained 5.3% of the votes (the average for the city of Amsterdam was 2.8%).

### “Atrocity Stories”

The collected stories dealing with the ethnic minorities reflect the tensions and irritations that occur among people having different cultures and life styles who are forced to live close together and depend on each other.

This is a brief summary of the interviews: For its inhabitants, the Transvaal neighbourhood used to be a pleasant, *ordinary* Amsterdam neighbourhood. They feel that, since the minorities settled here, a great deal changed and not for the better. They are unhappy and frustrated but see no solution for the many problems they are confronted with. They feel powerless, and believe that the authorities do not care and even stand up for the ethnic groups.

The stories contain concrete illustrations of

this situation. A typical example is the following:

“Let me tell you something. Over there, either a Moroccan or a Turk, or whatever, lives – I don’t know what he is. Anyway first my neighbour, the woman who lives upstairs, comes into this street. By car. Then along comes he with his car, from the other side of the street. So, my neighbour had to stop, although she was further into the street than he was. So she tells him to back up. But, you see, she’s only a woman; she can’t fight him, so *she* has to back up. Then in come I with my husband. Now my husband isn’t going to budge for anyone, he is a real butcher, you know. There he stands, half-way down the street – and along comes that guy. You see, there was room on the side, so my husband says to him he should go in there. No, he says, I’m not moving. So, my husband says, then stand there until tomorrow morning for all I care. It was the very same guy. I mean, this kind of thing happens in your own country, on your own street! You know, they have..., they, they don’t know anything about traffic laws. That guy had no right at all to drive like that. My husband was already half-way down the street, that Turk should have waited at the corner till it was clear. Not him, he comes right down the street and says bold as you please to my husband: *you* have to go back. And my husband was halfway down already! And to top it off the guy could have gone to the side. No, says he, I can’t. So if he can’t park a car, he shouldn’t be driving a car. In the end he sure did go back. My husband says: I’m not budging one inch for him, even if I have to stay here till tomorrow morning. I just can’t understand it, when someone does something like that? Well, let me tell you, you run into that kind of thing very often nowadays. Just like the Turks opposite: they took over the empty apartments here. So whenever I go to the beauty parlor in the mornings now, my heart skips a beat. It’s even happened that one of them just kept staring at me. So when I came into the beauty parlor with my heart beating like anything the hairdresser said to me: What’s with you? Did you run so fast? I tell him to forget the whole thing. Things like that



just didn't used to happen. There was no problem when you walked down the street in the morning. You just can't walk anywhere and feel safe anymore. You look behind you ten times as you walk down the street. That's why it's not safe in the neighbourhood anymore. It didn't used to be like that – no sir – you could just go shopping without any problem. Even my husband won't go out to mail a letter in the evening now. Not any more."

Of course, not all the stories about ethnic groups are pejorative, but those in which they play a favourable role are few in number. This is not surprising because stories are more likely to be generated by ambiguous circumstances than by those that are clear cut. Stimson and Webb's thesis (111) "Stories are a vehicle for complaints" may not be true of all types of stories, it certainly is true for those dealing with minorities. In most of these tales something has gone wrong, something that is unexpected occurs in ordinary situations and disturbs the normal course of events. Stimson and Webb have introduced the term "atrocities stories" for this type of tale, a term which Dingwall as well as Baruch have adopted from them. Dingwall says

"The use of the term atrocity story should not mislead us into thinking that some disaster must necessarily lie at the heart of the story. The choice of a dramatic term reflects the dramatic character of the account by which a straightforward complaint or slight is transformed into a moral tale inviting all right-thinking persons (the audience) to testify to the worth of the teller as against the failings of the other characters in the story" (p. 393).

Dingwall postulates that such stories occur when a group feels that a different group is attempting to dominate certain aspects of its way of life and experiences such domination as threatening and illegitimate (376). The primary function of the stories would then be "to defend rationality under threat."

The feeling that the Dutch autochthonous group has that it is threatened by the ethnic groups and neglected by the authorities does

indeed permeate the interviews and makes them laden with affect. I will return to this idea.

A current method of linguistic analysis dealing with the structure of stories is that of dividing them in the following categories (see Labov, Quasthoff): the setting (the situation or circumstances under which the event takes place), the complication (an incident, an extraordinary and unexpected event) the evaluation of the event (various forms of commentary on what took place which set forth the tone or "moral" of the story), and the solution that rounds off the story.<sup>5</sup>

For most of the stories dealing with ethnic groups the *setting* is the neighbourhood, often the teller's home or that of his neighbours – 'above', 'next door on this landing', in front of the house, on the street, or in the shops. A few stories are set on the tram, in a hospital, at the Welfare Agency, or at work. There is some *complication* in these ordinary, every-day situations: that is, the presence of one or more members of an ethnic group who behave in an odd or unusual way. Such behaviour is often attributed to their ethnic identity, making any specific explanation of it unnecessary. This implies that such stories contain a wealth of stereotypical images and generalizations.

Sometimes members of ethnic groups are responsible for disturbing their neighbours, by strong cooking odours, noise, a stopped up drain. There are also stories about stolen bicycles, a man who beat up the local grocer, boys with knives, and even a rape. But the complications in most of the stories are trivial: A Moroccan eats chicken with his hands rather than using a knife and fork, one Turkish father of a newborn baby buys flowers for the doctor rather than for his wife, people wear clothing from their native land. What is remarkable is that the irritation and even the anger expressed by the tellers is no less, even though these stories deal with trivialities. The feelings of anger are directed at the foreign culture and way of life. Even in cases where there really is a disturbance, what is emphasized is the strangeness of the other culture. Thus a story about Surinamese who play music until early in the morning ends with the remark that it

would have been less intolerable if it had been “just *ordinary* music”.

There is seldom any *solution* to the problem described in the story. The tellers, who feel totally impotent, see no immediate end to the difficulties which they experience with the ethnic groups. Some of the stories contain a practical solution: there is the butcher who will not budge until he gets right of way; he defends his rights and the Turk has to give in. In another story a drain is unplugged and the police appear to give the guilty party a reprimand. But there is nevertheless no true, lasting solution. The butcher remains afraid to go out in the evening to mail a letter, and the general dissatisfaction with the situation in the neighbourhood remains.

Characteristic of the stories are the extensive *evaluations* of the ethnic groups and of one's own reactions and emotions during confrontations with them. The older inhabitants comment on ethnic traits like language, clothing, and food, as well as what they refer to as mentality, point of view, attitudes and temperament.

The ethnic neighbours are often portrayed as loud, wild, violent, and temperamental:

“Well, they just have a different outlook than we do, they get excited much quicker, and so, well, you know, they are just more aggressive...”

“O.K., you know that with the Surinamese, it's (interviewee breathes deeply), it's ... well, it's their temperament. They're just a different kind of people, we know that...”

“What do you think, that black woman just hit the policeman, she just beat him up. So there he lay, on the street...”

The next story is about a “wild” Moroccan family:

“Over there they really make a lot of noise. And so you have it, the whole bathtub came through the ceiling. And wouldn't you know it, there that woman (the neighbour who lives underneath) had just finished doing up the new baby's room – she was expecting. And what they did was several of the kids – for all I

know, several of the kids – went into the bathtub all together. So the whole tub sank through the floor. You see, things like that never used to happen, did they? That woman downstairs must have had quite a surprise. Anyhow, she ended up moving, she went away. That's what happens. You see, they're just much wilder people than we are...”

What lies at the root of these stories is the low level of civilization of the ethnic groups and the superiority of the Dutch. As for those who don't actively seem to want to adjust or integrate, they are judged by the saying “Whoever isn't with me, is against me”.

What matters in the neighbourhood is to act “normal”, not to distinguish oneself, to fit in, adjust and assimilate. “Our kind of people” are ordinary, “normal”, one can depend on them, and they are predictable. Descriptions such as “the Surinamese nextdoor is married to an *ordinary* Dutch woman” and “upstairs two perfectly *ordinary* Christian people live” are quite characteristic of this attitude. “Our sort of people” contrast with those who are deviant: “Here, opposite lives a man who is an invalid, and above him one who is black...”.

Whenever members of ethnic groups wear native dress or refuse Dutch food, many of the older inhabitants react very strongly, for this is interpreted as showing a need to distinguish oneself. It is perceived as a rejection of the Dutch culture and way of life. One man even projected his anger about this onto his dog:

“So then I saw that kind of veil hanging there – that's what I call it. He had a kind of long dress on, you know, that guy. So that really drove the dog wild, and naturally it barked at him ...”

The next story deals with a friendly relationship that was impossible to maintain, as well as an attempt to “place” people on the basis of their dress.

“Here on the third floor a Moroccan couple moved in, a young couple. Terribly nice, can you imagine how Western they were? they wore black leather jackets ... Then their first baby was born, it was born at night, and my



Turkish family  
shopping.



husband was present all the time. So you can imagine how Western they were. There we were all night long – calling everybody: the hospital, the midwife, everyone. That took all night, and we did it gladly. My husband also helped them to paint the apartment, paper the walls, closing up the mouseholes, he installed cabinets, with my son, together. We were never too busy to help. So what happened just this past summer? What do they do now? Now you only see them running around with those long wrappings, those long robes, so they've gone back to their Moslem ways actually, and what's here is just taboo to them ..."

Good contacts often begin with the parties offering food to each other, and rejecting such a gesture is regarded by just about everyone as a personal rebuff:

"...and they absolutely wouldn't eat what didn't please them. No. Sometimes they had to work overtime, and then I made sandwiches here for the men, but no sir, they wouldn't eat from the Dutch – oh, no – they didn't eat it."

"So I think, as a Dutchman, that if they want to stay here and they bring their wife over, then they also have to understand that they have to intrigue in Holland. That once in a while they have to adopt the mentality, the uh, Dutch mentality, and not live any old way, not

live without God in the world. Because, believe me, I was in the hospital, and next to me was a Moroccan. You see, it was the OLV Hospital and the food was perfectly good. Let me tell you that if anyone is fussy about what he eats, it's me, because *she* (points to wife) can make a great meal from absolutely anything. Let me put it this way, they do the same in the hospital, because I could eat everything there. But that Moroccan man, he wanted none of it. And then they sent – and then his wife visited him, and she was only allowed to stand by his feet and then she could shake his hand. And then he sat eating the chicken with his hands – just like that to eat the chicken. My! That's just too much – it's simply scandalous. They do want to be in Holland, don't they?" (yelling)

Many of the stories contain a negative evaluation of the position of Islamic women and the way their children are brought up.

"God, the oldest daughter just got married this past summer. That was also very strange. They're – how should I put it – they're still children and already they get married, 18, 19 years old. (One of the family members present says that the daughter was not yet 16.) And you never saw a boyfriend hanging around her, so – how should I say it – they bring them in from Morocco. And when they get back



home from vacation, damn if you don't say, "Where's your daughter?" Oh, she got married, she got married over there. Well, that's really an arranged marriage (the family laughs). Maybe he got three camels for her, I don't know ..."

"And what does she know about bringing children up? She just smiles at the kids and cuddles them and gives them food and that's the end of it."

"That was on this street, further down the street. Probably one of the boys misbehaved, so pa got all decked out in his ritual clothing, and went down the street with a stick, chasing after the kid, because he was sure going to get it! That kid, he ran away just scared for his life. But, you know how it is, he came back, of course. But pa didn't let him back in before he got his hiding."

"But she, in the hospital, when she had her last baby, when she was in the hospital ... I think: since I'm going shopping anyway ... I'll just have a peep in the hospital. You could just walk in there – O.K., there were regular visiting hours. So I had already brought a bottle to put the flowers in. I brought flowers for her, and then I see she didn't get any from her husband. Mine were the first flowers she'd got. But what had her husband done? He'd brought flowers for the doctor, not for his wife. Now, we're not used to that kind of treatment ..."

Although slaughtering animals at home happens only rarely today, a tale dealing with this is part of the classical repertory of stories on ethnic groups.

"Now I'm going to tell you something funny. You know that slaughtering sheep is pretty grisly. O.K., anyway, here, around the corner lives a family of Turks. They've always had a pretty daughter, and the construction workers always whistled at her. But her mother insisted and her father insisted, and finally a husband had to be found for her. But one day their downstairs neighbour comes to me and says "do you know where Giel is?" Giel, my buddy, was the foreman. Well, he's sitting in the shop. "Well", she says, "I need him for a minute." I say, "O.K., just come with me." And

we find him and I say, "Giel, the neighbour wants to talk to you.?" Then he says, "O.K., what can I do for you?" And she says, "It smells awful on the staircase." So I say, "Let's have a look". And she says, "The drain from the sink is stopped up." O.K., we look at the sink, but by then we had already seen, half hidden, hanging in secret from the balcony, the hide of a sheep. You see, they illegally slaughtered a sheep in the shower.

Wife: You see, it was Ramadan.

Husband: You get it? Ramadan, and what they could not get rid of from the sheep they just stuffed down that tiny pipe.

Wife: Down the drain.

Husband: Down the drain. Of course, it got all stopped up.

We opened it up, the police came. Look here, who does that kind of thing?

Wife: Yes, the police came in.

Husband: You're not allowed to slaughter a sheep in your own house! Everyone knows that!

Wife: And not only that, but I'd like to know who's going to pay for it.

Husband: Sure ... you can't do a thing like that. Whoever has the nerve to do something like that? You wouldn't go ahead and slaughter a chicken in your room now, would you?...

Thus the stories show what in the neighbourhood is considered as (im)proper behaviour and they defend the norms, values and way of life of the older inhabitants. In some stories autochthonous Dutch who are guilty of discriminatory behaviour are shown up, and the tellers condemn such reprehensible action; however, in most instances, the rather 'odd' – to say the least – behaviour of the ethnic groups provides the central theme. Their improper and irrational behaviour is opposed to the correct and rational actions of the storytellers. The latter explain how they kept their composure, often under quite difficult circumstances, and when they do relate how angry or frightened they were, it becomes clear that given the situation in which they found themselves, such feelings are entirely normal (see Dingwall, 389, Stimson and Webb, 99–100).

The stories have few heroes; often the pro-

tagonists become victims of the malevolence and insensitivity of the ethnic groups under conditions in which they have no fair chance: What can a decent woman do to defend herself against a "foreigner" with a knife? What can an old and sick man do against three Surinamese who give him the choice to leave their apartment either via the stairs or the balcony?

Stimson and Webb have pointed out the importance of what is omitted from the stories, that what is taken for granted and needs no explanation, the 'background assumptions' which the teller must have in common with his listeners if the story is to come across.

What is omitted from the stories about ethnic groups is their underlying assumption: the superiority of Dutch culture and way of life. The tellers sketch pictures of the way of life of the "others" which they then evaluate with remarks like, "we're not used to that type of thing", "you just don't do that", "that just isn't usual, is it?" What they are used to and what is seen to be "usual" is, in most instances, omitted.

The Dutch listener is assumed to understand this. Thus, there is little content to just what Dutch culture really is in the stories, it seems to exist mainly as a medium for excluding those who have a different culture.

My thesis is that, sociologically, the main function of the stories is to indicate the differences between the older inhabitants and the newcomers. In the stories the tellers keep "the others" at a distance, they draw boundaries and classify groups in clear, that is as far as possible exclusive categories. This agrees with Dingwall and Baruch's conclusions, even though they use different concepts. Baruch shows how two different realities are represented in the stories, two different worlds. The one of the we-group that is characterized by rationality, sense, and efficacy, is threatened by the other that lacks these qualities altogether.

Dingwall emphasizes problems of recognition and identification, inclusion and exclusion. He points to the human need "to identify the persons with whom we are dealing" (373).

But in the Transvaal neighbourhood the

proper identification of one's neighbours is problematical. This is brought out by remarks like: "I simply can't tell whether he's a Turk or a Moroccan", and when one of the inhabitants was considering whether or not to lodge a complaint with the police, he mused: "Yes, but against *who*? Against some black boy? There are a hundred thousand black boys here."

In the stories the older inhabitants distinguish themselves from the ethnic groups by showing how "different" they are, as well as by making it clear that they neither have nor wish to have any contact with them.

"Those people have their own life."

"I don't mix with them at all. No sir, not at all, with none of them. We're too old for that anyway. We prefer to keep nicely to ourselves. And we don't have any interest in what they do. Anyway, I wouldn't want to mix in because those people have a different culture than we do."

"I tell you, I don't associate with any of them."

"O.K., well, I never meddle with them. I always keep my door closed, and even if they were to kill one another, it wouldn't bother me."

In fact, the number of ordinary, uncomplicated relations between members of the different groups is much larger than can be gleaned from the stories. Many of those who had denied having any contact with the newcomers in the neighbourhood later told lively stories that showed the opposite to be true (see Abraham-Van der Mark, 1984, 37-43). Actually, many of them do have regular contacts with one or more members of the ethnic groups whom they described in the interviews as especially sympathetic, "clean and proper", and "well adjusted".

But that does not imply that they are willing to accept large numbers of them. Good relations with a few members of a group seem to have little influence on one's general attitude towards the group as a whole.



## The presentation of self

Stimson and Webb, Dingwall, and Baruch agree that the teller of a story always attempts to present a favourable image of himself. This is also evidenced in the collected stories about ethnic minorities; it comes forth very clearly when people tell how they helped and acted as saviours in difficult circumstances. Thus, one man explained how he had brought his Turkish neighbour to the hospital, had taken care of her children, and finally took her home again. The evaluation of this story went: "That's what this neighbourhood is like, that's how it should be, actually. You don't need to run and visit the neighbours all the time, I really prefer being by myself, but when we need each other: *to help*. But there are people here, that even if you dropped down dead, they wouldn't do a thing

...".

In this evaluation the teller is confirming traditional norms with regard to neighbours helping one another. He shows that, unlike those who act in total disregard of these norms, he maintains them.

In a different story, the teller explains that while his income has decreased considerably since the economic recession, some of his neighbours take undue advantage of the welfare benefits by receiving triple what they should get. Enraged by so much injustice he had just decided to turn these people in to the authorities when, as he expressed it, his sense of good neighbourliness triumphed over his standards of righteousness. This accords with Dingwall's thesis (389): "The teller appears as rational and other parties as fundamentally irrational." Baruch, too, points out (276): "The significance of our respondents' stories lies in the way they establish the rationality of their actions and also their own rational and moral character. This is accomplished by appeals to standards of the everyday world which they assume are shared by the interviewer."

The stories that have been collected express the inner conflict that arises from people's efforts to present a favourable image of themselves, while at the same time they feel a need to complain about the problems they experi-

ence with the ethnic groups and to get it off their chest.

Van der Wurff (1983) points to the conflict between the very strong Dutch value on everybody being treated alike and being entitled to the same rights in a democratic society – which condemns discrimination as evil – and the expression of negative feelings about minorities.

In a sense, telling a story affords some kind of solution to this, for, as Den Uyl states (1983): "Stories are much safer and less subject to attack than substantive arguments." And indeed, many of those interviewed preferred to tell a denigrating story about the ethnic groups rather than to express their viewpoint in the form of an argument. Den Uyl shows how the tellers apply negation, repression, and rationalization in the stories. Negation and repression serve to deny or at least minimize the fact that one has negative feelings. Rationalization, on the other hand, justifies such feelings by clearly setting forth that one has, indeed, ample reasons to complain and feel bitter about the presence of the new neighbours. It is evident that this leads to contradictions.

One woman stated: "I can't really say outright, God, I hate these people, since I really don't ..." and only a few moments later, in the evaluation of a story: "Wouldn't that just make you hate these people?" In stories, however, the tellers present themselves in such a way that they cannot easily be criticized, for they set forth their personal experience and emotions. It is much harder to argue with those than with a substantive argument. What is being justified is not a specific opinion but diffuse negative affects.

It is rather common for the sections containing negation and rationalization in the stories to begin like: "I don't discriminate, *but* ..." whereupon the teller relates an incident from which it becomes obvious that the ethnic groups behave in such a way that it is entirely comprehensible that some people do discriminate against them.

"I don't discriminate, no, it is *we* who are discriminated against, and we just simply have to accept it. Now it's not quite 4 o'clock, but just wait, when it is 4, the Turkish children that





live upstairs come home. Don't get me wrong, I'm willing to help them in any way. They ask: How are you supposed to work this? What is this? What is that? What is the other thing? Whenever they have mail, they come to me too. And I'll help them in any way. But when I'm in my own garden, and if I look up – what do I see – I have to look out for wet laundry that's dripping – because they just dunk it in water and hang it right out. And then I get the dirty water dripping down my neck. And I have to watch out when I sit in the garden that my glasses won't get hit by a big marble, or my head – and also orange peels, banana peels, apple peels with cores, and other stuff like that. And then when you go upstairs to tell them about it, they say (imitating a foreign accent) "AAAch, is joost a leetle cheild". And I have told her twenty times, close the front door. I have always worked with my hands, I'm not swanky, but it looks so shabby, it doesn't look right to have all those doors open onto the street ..."

A vicious circle evolves as the stories that are told with the intention of denying or cloaking the negative feelings of the tellers, do spread these feelings to others.

Quite common is the topos "that is not done in Holland", or variants of it, as: "I say, we're

not accustomed to that type of conduct, I tell you, we are not used to that type of behaviour".

This common coin is taken as an unshakeable truth. The rejection of a different way of life implied by these statements is taken for granted; moreover, the pronoun *we* allows the speaker to hide behind the collectivity. In this way, he can avoid any direct personal pejorative statement (see de Sitter, 1983).

Still another way in which people try to cover themselves is quoting members of the ethnic groups who are represented as supporting their statements. It is not at all uncommon to find this among people who present a range of negative feelings in their interviews.

Mrs. T. who runs the coffeebar in the neighbourhood social center, told a story about a Dutch language course set up for older Moroccans that had been discontinued because of disturbances by a group of younger Moroccans. She then presented a story in which she introduced a neighbour who supported her feelings:

"Believe me, the older men are o.k. But the problems come from the second generation. There was an nice older Moroccan here, he came by every day on his way home. Very nicely he came to the bar to drink a cup of coffee. And whenever I met him in the street, he always had a "hello" for me. But then he

stopped coming here and when I did see him again in the street, I said to him, "But neighbour, you always came for your nice cup of coffee ...". And he says to me, "Nooo, I'm ashamed of those people, they're my fellow countrymen, but I'm ashamed of them."<sup>6</sup>

## Power differences

Stimson and Webb show how patients in stories portrayed the doctors on whom they were dependent as incompetent, insensitive and ridiculous. Moreover, they presented themselves as much more assertive than they actually were in their interaction with the doctors. In these ways, they sought to compensate for the inequality in the relationship and tried to make this appear smaller than it really was.

In the stories dealing with ethnic minorities, on the other hand, the tellers stress their own superiority. This superiority is not based on power, high status or social position, but rather on a belief in the superior value of those who were born and raised in Holland, the "true" Dutch. The main object of their stories is to portray the inequality between themselves and the minorities as greater than it actually is.

I believe that this observation gets more substance when attention is paid to the structural and historical context of the stories. In order to attain this, I made use of Norbert Elias' established-outsidersmodel, that proved to be relevant for the understanding of the figuration of older inhabitants and ethnic groups in the Transvaal neighbourhood, particularly for the way in which the former construct an image of the latter and the way this relates to their self-image, that of inhabitants of a spoilt neighbourhood, and people who have little status and respect in Dutch society.

In *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965, theoretical introduction to Dutch translation 1976), based on a study done in England, Elias and Scotson describe how the original inhabitants of a neighbourhood (the established) kept themselves as a closed front opposed to a group of newcomers in a bordering neighbourhood, even though both groups were English, white, and working class. The established experi-

enced the arrival of the newcomers as a threat to their way of life and saw their fellow countrymen as inferior; they shut them out and stigmatized them.

The group of older inhabitants was better organized, had more cohesion and social control over its members. The newcomers, on the other hand, were internally divided, had no cohesion and social control, and could not close their ranks to fight back.

On the basis of this study Elias has developed an "empirical paradigm" that he considers valid for all configurations of interdependent and, in terms of power, unequal groups, as well on a macro-level (e.g. states) as on a micro-level. If applied to the Dutch situation, it is clear that in the total figuration of the autochthonous Dutch population and the ethnic minorities, the former are the established and the latter the outsiders, and despite their poverty and low status, the older inhabitants of the Transvaal neighbourhood belong to the established. But nevertheless, they feel marginal and powerless within Dutch society, a fact that becomes evident from the interviews and from the stories in particular.

They are backward, socially and economically lagging behind, and they have also remained behind in a neighbourhood from which the stronger, those with more options in society, have largely moved away. True, not all the older inhabitants can be characterized as "backward", but this term does express what is characteristic for the group as a whole.

The reputation of the neighbourhood is spoilt, not only for the presence of the ethnic groups, but even previous to that by the presence of the many "problem families", the violence and the poverty. Moreover, the earlier working-class culture with its feelings of solidarity has largely vanished. Because of all this, the inhabitant's self-image has deteriorated, has been deflated. When they, in the interviews, present themselves as a we-group, as residents of the neighbourhood, it is primarily to set themselves off from the others, the ethnic groups, as well as from the residents of wealthier neighbourhoods, politicians, and various other authorities and social institutions.

The conflicts between the older residents and the ethnic groups are embodied in individuals: there is no question of solid blocs of opposed groups. The older residents as well as the ethnic minorities are internally divided, they do not form cohesive groups, have no social control, and are characterized by a lack of organization.

Nevertheless, in the stories what is emphasized are the differences between the groups. For the older residents the minorities fulfill the role of underdog. I quote: "they are even lower than we are".

By describing them as less civilized, threatening ("They're starting to run things", "They want *us* to change and take over their way of life, they're fanatics") and aggressive (stories about young men carrying knives), the tellers try to indicate how much they differ from such brutal creatures, and that it is wise to keep these creatures at a distance and subordinate.

Anecdotes about slaughtering goats, "ritual dress", the marrying-off of women, and jokes about camels are funny stories to the tellers. They deal with typical and exclusive cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups; they show how strangely these people live; the boundaries between them and ordinary Dutch people are absolutely clear. Some of these stories close with the triumphant exclamation "whoever does such a thing?". The obvious response to this is "No one!" – that is to say, no one from the autochthonous group. Here the group boundaries are clear.

However, things are more complex. The ethnic groups are considered as less civilized and more impulsive, and so they form a threat to the defense mechanisms of the older inhabitants against violations of existing norms and taboos (see Elias, 16). Thus, much of what is ascribed to the ethnic groups is a confrontation with one's own repressed impulses. While the reprovals are specifically addressed towards the minorities, many interviewees add that Dutch people, too, sometimes act in such a way: they make noise, throw garbage on the street, are aggressive, etc. It is here that the division between those who are guilty of this type of behaviour and the decent people cuts across the different groups.

Improper behaviour and poverty are often associated, for many outsiders not only come from a different culture, they also have a lower standard of living and/or a different pattern of spending. This, too, generates feelings of discomfort among the autochthonous population:

"those people simply don't know how to live. They eat shit ...".

"They have much lower standards than we do. When you come into their house they have nailed a bench along the wall, and that's enough for them. Now, we just couldn't live like that, eight people, or even ten people together, that's eight kids and two parents, and their place is just as big as mine, but they simply lie down on the floor or on the benches. They just nail up benches all around – no real furniture. They don't even feel they need it. They probably never even had those things in Morocco. So when it's bedtime, they all go to sleep together, kids and adults. And they get up at the same time too. See here, we used to always say that 7 o'clock that was when the kids went to bed. Kids just have to go to bed early, but with them ... they don't feel that way."

The confrontation with the poverty and particular characteristics of the way of life of the outsiders is especially painful, because some of the "differences" are also familiar: to live together with many other people in a room without any privacy, to sleep on the floor, to let food simmer all day long, the beating of children, keeping children home from school, etc. All this is associated with the life of Dutch working-class families of the not so distant past. This evokes a fear of contagion and deep anxiety about one's status, an anxiety that one will be drawn even lower in the social scale by the ethnic groups.

The "civilizing process" (see Elias, 1939, American edition 1978) of the Dutch workers and the recent prosperity of the Netherlands have resulted in higher standards of living, even in the Transvaal neighbourhood. There are now more conveniences, privacy and better hygiene, "modern" methods for preparing food, better education, and smaller families than be-



fore. The presence of the ethnic minorities is seen by many as a threat to all that has been achieved, to lose the gains over the standards of the recent past and fall back to pauperism. The economic recession increases this fear.

Nevertheless one should not draw the conclusion from this that the older residents would be satisfied if the ethnic groups would have a higher standard of living. That would only evoke feelings of envy and be a threat to their self-image. The stereotype of the "foreigner" who drives a big car and "lives like a prince" on the child allowance is an old one. Because it is characteristic of prejudice that it causes one to look at people from a distorted perspective: whatever the object of one's prejudice does is considered wrong and interpreted unfavourably.

The moral of the stories was fixed from the very start, and as they are told it is reinforced. They are based on common, previously held stereotypes of the ethnic groups, which they in turn propagate. It is hardly necessary to state that stories can be self-fulfilling. "The presentation of a history of strained relations may lead a group to be suspicious of another group who in turn reciprocates such suspicion" (Dingwall, 383).

## The dilemma of the older residents

Blok (1981) has started that it is precisely when the power inequality between two groups is only slight that the group with most power will fear intensely to be lumped together with the other group and will make strong efforts to keep its distance and distinguish itself. This is evidenced in the Transvaal neighbourhood. Many of the older inhabitants claim that they have no contact whatsoever with the ethnic groups – nor do they wish to have any.

But alongside the effort to maintain distance there is also a desire – often stated as a demand – that the ethnic groups, the outsiders, should adjust to "Dutch manners and customs". Both keeping one's distance and demanding acculturation are meant to maintain what little is left of the former feelings of identity and way of life in the neighbourhood.

The older residents reject granting the eth-

nic groups equal value and equal rights. They try to maintain the belief in their own superior worth by emphasizing the superiority of Dutch culture and way of life as opposed to the deviancy of the outsiders. But this does not provide a solution, for despite the fact that the older residents belong to the established, a category which altogether has much more power and prestige than the ethnic groups, this does not afford them much fulfillment or sense of self respect. Because within this category they have very low status, as people who have fallen behind in a socio-economic sense and as inhabitants of a spoilt neighbourhood.

Many of the other established regard them as "less civilized" and accuse them of being racist and prejudiced. They react to this by projecting their problems onto the ethnic groups. They accuse *them* of lacking civilization and emphasize that amongst themselves the ethnic groups are also guilty of discrimination. They also reproach those of the established who occupy positions of power for neglecting them. Still worse, they believe that the policymakers stand up for the ethnic groups and relegate the autochthonous population to an inferior position.

The presence of the ethnic groups in the neighbourhood leads to the common complaint that they are not present in the more wealthy parts of town, "*we* have to live with them". Thus they state that they find themselves in a disadvantageous position compared to most other established, as well as compared to the ethnic groups. They take it for granted that as "true" Dutchmen they are entitled to more rights than the ethnic groups, "foreigners", whose acculturation they demand while rejecting their emancipation.

When they experience that the ethnic groups are indeed given equal rights – for example when they are given apartments that the older residents claim, in short, when they sense that they are not viewed as superior and do not receive preferential treatment – they feel deprived. This is expressed in the complaint: "We are discriminated against!"

In the Transvaal neighbourhood the term "discrimination" is part of the everyday vocabulary of both adults and children. Many of

them perceive that they are pushed aside for various reasons: sex, age, and simply "for being Dutch". The expression "I am discriminated against" has become a defense mechanism in this heterogeneous neighbourhood, and the feeling that one is treated unfairly causes the older inhabitants to experience the many problems they are confronted with as even more difficult to face.

## Notes

1. This study is part of a project on which Teun van Dijk, Rob Rombouts, Adri van der Wurff and Martijn den Uyl also worked. It was financed by ZWO.
2. Livia Polanyi states (1983:3): "Although all stories are narratives, not all narratives are stories. Plans, the simultaneous reporting of what is happening in an ongoing situation (radio sportscasting, for example) and descriptions of wished for but yet unrealized occurrences are all expressed as non-story narratives. "Generic descriptions of what used to be the case in the past or what is normally the case in the present are not 'stories' either. 'Stories' and 'reports', which belong to a closely related narrative genre, concern *specific events which occurred at specific times in the past relative to the time of narration*. Close examination of the discourses one would intuitively call a *story* rather than a *plan or description about the way it used to be* support this definition which is empirically, not theoretically derived" (1982:12). "One tells a story to make a point, to transmit a message, often with some sort of moral, about the world which one shares with the other people present. One gives a report, on the other hand, to give a picture of what went on during a particular period. In American police thrillers and courtroom dramas the difference between reports and stories is often made explicit. When a witness becomes excited or very involved in what has gone on, he is often exhorted to 'stick to the facts. Give us the facts. Just the facts'. However, this testifying, objective norm is sometimes directly addressed and overruled and the witness is encouraged to 'tell the story of what happened in your own words'. In the one case, police, judge or jury are to infer the meaning of the events from the report, and in the other case, the witness is permitted to draw conclusions himself about the goings on in the narrative world and make the 'point' of those goings on explicit in his telling."
3. Baruch, Roth, Stimson & Webb, and Strauss deal with stories patients tell about doctors. Dingwall presents tales that one paramedical group tells about another, while Gold deals with plumbers' stories and Becker with those of jazz musicians.
4. I was not able to obtain a clear picture of these

"problem" families. The following definition of such families was used by Tiel in his survey for the Municipal Bureau of Juvenile Affairs (1976, 14): "A family that is registered as having had four or more contacts with the Welfare Agency, with at least one of these contacts not of a monetary nature but dealing with matters of social work, child care and protection." It is clear that financial problems are very important in this definition. It emerged from conversations that there were many cases of alcoholism among these 'problem families', but also that single women (either unmarried or divorced/separated) with children also were likely to be categorized as 'problem' families.

5. Stimson and Webb give the following description of the structure of the stories they studied: "The scene is given, the characters are introduced, the problem explained, as the plot unfolds one sees the major areas of conflict between the participants, the bias of the story becomes clear as the 'right' and 'wrongs' are defined, frequent repetition and stress of the main points are made so the audience cannot fail to agree with the sentiments being expressed, the ending of finale is often an exclamation" (92).
6. The tape recorder indoubtedly acts as a damper to some extent so that people tend to modify their speech and contain "rough" comments. Thus, when the tape recorder was turned off, the teller of the story quoted here said: "as for me, they can drown the whole second generation. I wouldn't mind at all."

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