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Feelings of injustice and conspiracy theory. Representations of adolescents from an African migrant background (Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Brussels

Translation: Jane Corrigan

Following a field survey in neighbourhoods and schools in the poor area of Brussels among adolescents from an African migrant background (Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa), this article examines young people's attempts to rationalise the discrimination and injustice they experience. As well as their direct effects in terms of social success in particular, institutional discrimination and violence have repercussions on representations of oneself and of the world. The accumulation of experiences of discrimination and xenophobia – in particular when carried out by institutions – is interpreted by certain adolescents as being a conspiracy resulting in a reinforcement of 'them/us' stratifications and logics of mistrust.

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1. Emic interpretations of discrimination and xenophobic experiences

1. This article is based on a field survey entitled '*Adolescences en exil*' [Jamoulle & Mazzocchi, 2011] regarding the experiences and representations of adolescents from a migrant background in Brussels.¹ Within the framework of this collective research, for approximately three years, I conducted a survey in Brussels neighbourhoods and schools among young migrants and sons/daughters of migrants aged 12 to 20, from Africa (Morocco as well as ten or so countries in sub-Saharan Africa) and who live in disadvantaged environments. The empirical data used explicitly within the framework of this article were gathered during participant observations, group interviews in schools, interviews with professionals concerned (teachers, social assistants, educators, clinicians, etc.) and from personal stories, more specifically in Brussels-City in the Marolles neighbourhood, as well as in Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Evere.

2. While many authors have illustrated the dynamics of segregation and relegation which exist in the neighbourhoods of the poor area of Brussels [Réa et al., 2009], our study [Jamoulle & Mazzocchi, 2011] – which gives priority to the stories told by adolescents about themselves and the world they live in – above all emphasises the difficulties and resources of these young people, their strategies of resistance as well as their interpretations of the obstacles encountered and their attempts to rationalise the discrimination and injustice they experience. This last aspect will be discussed in particular in this article. The article focuses on the emic interpretations of discrimination and xenophobic experiences rather than on the materiality of events – which is well es-

tablished in the literature – and analyses the discourses and remarks made by young people with respect to their experiences [Olivier de Sardan, 1998: 158]. The stories gathered allow an understanding of how these adolescents interpret the social situations which they are confronted with and allow an analysis of how these interpretations are built based on their experiences [Guillebert, 2007: 17]. The challenge here is to identify patterns of interpretation which are widespread among these young people and to observe their repercussions in terms of self-construction and relationship to the world.²

2. Ethnicisation of living spaces, discrimination and second-rate schools

3. In Belgium, the first waves of immigration from outside Europe came from Maghreb – Morocco in particular – and from Turkey. They were made up of peasantry who generally had a low level of education and – beginning in the 1960s – were recruited within the framework of bilateral agreements. Despite the links established during the colonial period, these agreements did not concern sub-Saharan Africans. Although their presence in Belgium had been established for many years and became significant in the 1960s, it in fact only started to grow in the 1990s [Schoumaker & Schoonvaere, 2012]. Although the Belgian state toughened its migration policy in 1974, the number of foreigners who enter the country has continued to increase. Along with Antwerp, Brussels constitutes one of the two poles which has received the most immigrants these past years. On 1 January 2011, there were 1,119,088 people in Brussels according to the population census. In 2008, a quarter of the inhabitants of Brussels were of a foreign nationality and

¹ This collective research, which has been published in the form of a book (Jamoulle & Mazzocchi, 2011), is the fruit of a collaboration between UCL and the *Centre de Santé Mentale Le Méridien*. The interdisciplinary team for research supervision was composed of UCL professors Jean-Luc Brackelaire, Jean De Munck and Pierre-Joseph Laurent, and for the *Centre de Santé Mentale Le Méridien*, Dr Charles Burquel, Joëlle Conrotte, Dr Isabelle Ramallo and Barbara Santana. The research was conducted with the financial support of INNOVIRIS (*Institut Bruxellois pour la Recherche et l'Innovation*) and COCOF.

² In reference to the analyses of the notion of the term 'emic' by J.-P. Olivier De Sardan and his recommendations regarding its use in anthropology, in this article it refers to the discourses and remarks made by the subjects in the 'register of expression', and to the representations of subjects, i.e. 'configurations or patterns of interpretation shared' by the subjects in the 'register of the expressible' [Olivier de Sardan, 1998: 158]. These two related levels 'together define the register of expressed or expressible *local interpretations*': 'the hermeneutics of stakeholders' [Olivier De Sardan, 1998: 159].

almost half were of foreign origin, the majority being nationals of the European Union [Schoonvaere & Perrin, 2008]. However, the mapping of indicators regarding the territory of the Brussels Region shows a relative homogeneity of neighbourhoods in terms of socioeconomic status and the origin of inhabitants [Willaerts & Deboosere, 2005]. The former working-class neighbourhoods which make up and surround the city centre form an area of poverty [Mistiaen, Meert & Kesteloot, 1995]. As the result of a process of aggregation and segregation, combining city and housing policies and the 'typical effect of chain immigration' [Deboosere et al., 2009], the poor area is mainly inhabited by migrants or people from a migrant background outside the European Union.

4. In line with what Wacquant [2006] states regarding the French context in comparison with the situation in the United States, in Belgium there is no 'ghetto' as such. The history of relationships between ethnic communities is very different. Apart from events during the colonial period situated outside the territory of the city, racial conflicts have never been as explicit, institutionalised and violent as those in the United States. In Belgium, the logic of segregation and abandonment on behalf of public institutions has not reached the same level either. Nevertheless, as underlined by Lapeyronnie [2008] regarding France – despite significant differences which I shall discuss later – there are dynamics of ghettoisation at work in certain neighbourhoods of Brussels. In the poor area, this process of ghettoisation is the result of the confinement of immigrants and their descendents to certain neighbourhoods via the housing market as well as discrimination encountered at school and on the job market. But it is also an autonomous movement originating within these neighbourhoods where marginalised stakeholders gather together for reasons of ethnic solidarity [Bastienier, 2004].

5. The living space of young people who grow up in these neighbourhoods is sometimes limited to a few streets. Their idea of the city and its inhabitants is greatly affected by the many dimensions of the confinement in which they are socialised. One of the neighbourhoods where part of the survey was carried out for one year, is a particularly good example of the logic of relegation and fragmentation which is at once spatial, ethnic and symbolic. The Marolles is a working-class neighbourhood located at the heart of the city, between the South Sta-

tion and the Central Station, and has always been a temporary location for immigrants who arrive in Brussels. The young people who live there view the neighbourhood as being divided into sub-neighbourhoods, i.e. the upper and lower parts, with each of the parts being split in half according to social housing estates and their football pitches. In addition to these divisions into sub-neighbourhoods, certain conflicts are based on nationality, sometimes in connection with history and politics, which young people do not know much about. The divisions and tensions are also based on the new migrations and arrivals in the neighbourhood, in particular between young people whose families are from Maghreb and those from sub-Saharan Africa.

6. The schools attended by the young people interviewed are also caught in processes of relegation and fragmentation. As has already been well established [Janssens et al., 2009], Belgium and Brussels are characterised by particularly pronounced forms of school segregation in which the dualisation between 'elite schools' and 'ghetto schools' occurs to the detriment of young people from a non-European immigrant background. With a 'two-tier education system', Belgium has the biggest performance gap in Europe between students of foreign origin and others [Jacob et al., 2009]. The absence of social mix as well as the ethnic homogeneity of schools penalise students of foreign origin in particular [Verhoeven et al., 2007].

7. Young people from these neighbourhoods and schools have very fragmented views and experiences of the city. As the neighbourhood studied is a ten-minute walk from two major train stations in Brussels and barely fifteen minutes from the Grand-Place, one may hardly speak of a 'French-style' spatial banishment of social housing, which in this case is located at the heart of the city. These young people are, however, separated from the actual centre with its tourist attractions. They speak of an experience of confinement to their neighbourhood: not daring to move from one block to another, from one sub-neighbourhood to another, from the neighbourhood, etc. Their representations of the city are riveted to those of their neighbourhood:

Médi (Belgian/Moroccan, aged 20, casual conversation, 2008): Until recently, I thought that Brussels was like this everywhere – that it was dirty and had no gardens or detached houses.

8. The renovations of the shopping streets which go through the neighbourhood are seen as a farce and infuriate these young people:

Médi: We wonder whether they are improving the streets for us or for themselves. They make new infrastructures to mask the true problems within. What they should do is renovate the social housing and the schools. There are thirty students per class beginning in the first year of primary school – there's something wrong with that. We feel that the institutions exclude us. Honestly, it's depressing to live in spaces like that.

9. Certain young people from the neighbourhood participated in the July 2008 riots in Anderlecht. Médi was not there, but he understands what drove these young people, some of whom are friends of his:

Médi: All of this is taking on more and more of an ethnic character because we are experiencing more and more racism. The violence must be expressed and our anger must be vented. Conflicts will only be revived.

10. Young people who grow up with the strong feeling that there is no room for them in Brussels, in Belgium or in Europe, outside the space which they create for themselves in the few rundown and ever so familiar streets in their neighbourhood. These experiences of relegation in their main living spaces, neighbourhoods and schools, in addition to their impacts in terms of material possibilities for success (diploma, understanding of codes, stigma associated with certain neighbourhoods and schools, etc.), have effects on self-construction and on the dynamics of living together. They give rise to feelings of anger, frustration, withdrawal and disinvestment. As discussed below, these obstacles to success and this banishment [Agier, 2002] create feelings of injustice and sustain a paranoid and fatalistic understanding [Marlière, 2008]: visions of the world which are most often translated into shame, feelings of inferiority and humiliation and/or dynamics of possibly violent revenge [Mazzocchi, 2011].

3. Explicit institutional violence and lack of recognition

11. The young people interviewed – whose physical appearance clearly indicates that they are of foreign origin – all speak of their experience of being reminded of their 'skin colour', their 'religion' (in the case of Muslims in particular) and their 'origins' in a disparaging way. They are aware that their name, their physical appearance, their neighbourhood of residence and the lower quality schools they attend are against them as regards access to upward social mobility. In addition to these experiences of 'collective discrimination' [Réa, Nagels & Christiaens, 2009] and the daily racist incidents, there are critical events in which tacit rejection becomes explicit, and the suspicion of a deliberate act becomes a direct confrontation. For some, these events only have meaning in terms of a conspiracy theory aimed at the rejection of foreigners by the population and the maintenance of social and ethnic gaps. The images conveyed by the media regarding adolescents in exile and their confrontations with the police are two particularly important points which illustrate the materialisation of implicit discriminatory feelings.

3.1. Media and stigmatisation

12. Young people express a lot of anger with respect to news items and the language used by the media to speak about them or their neighbourhood. Young people of sub-Saharan origin in particular are shocked by the images of Africa conveyed (wars, famines, ethnic violence, etc.), as well as by the images associated with African migrations in Europe (illegal migrations, urban gangs, etc.). These dark images depicting violence or inciting pity, confine them to simplistic and deeply biased representations.

Dido (aged 19, Belgian, born in DR Congo, arrived in Belgium at age 7, life story, 2008): In the media, they speak about us like that on purpose. They play on fear and therefore everybody is afraid of black people. They do this to create a division, so that people feel that they can trust some people but not others. They do this to create a feeling of fear.

Jacinthe: Why do you think a state would want to create divisions?

Dido: So that the population supports its security and immigration policies. They warm the population up and then create a law which people support more readily.

For the young Muslims interviewed – mainly Belgian/Moroccans – they must constantly defend themselves against the link established between their religion and extremist practices or terrorist acts. 9/11 and the way this event was dealt with by the media and world political leaders fed people's imagination and crystallised their fears. Since then, people's views have changed. For these young people, the media are clearly biased in the way they present events.

Sofian (aged 17, Belgian/Moroccan, group interview conducted at school, 2009): As soon as they see a Muslim or somebody wearing a headscarf, they think they're a terrorist. First of all, people should know the truth about 9/11 and all that. Everything started on that day. Since 9/11, it's over. And anyway, who committed that terrorist attack? I'd stake my life on it that it wasn't Muslims. It was all part of a plot with Bush. They were working together. It's proven.

Ikoi (aged 17, Belgian/Moroccan³): A month before it happened, workers placed things behind the radiators. They made a film about it.

13. In reference to this interview, Aidan – a religious studies teacher who has worked with me on these group interviews – said to me: 'The question regarding the "powerful ones" is very important to them. Who are the "powerful ones"? They suspect an international scheme.' Due to a feeling of being pointed out and belittled, with no possibilities for positive identification both in reference to the past (colonisation, import of labour, etc.) and the present, some of them develop a world view whereby everything is interpreted in terms of humiliation and discrimination. This position of inferiority which these young people are confined to oppresses them, and – due to a lack of knowledge of the past and a lack of recognition in the present – they cannot escape it or help their ancestors or parents to break away from it. The recurrence of these discourses expressing feelings of injustice and conspiracy, with no prompting on behalf of researchers and in very different contexts, was significant enough to achieve data saturation.⁴ Therefore, in this case, these are not just anecdotes, but representations of the world which are shared by young people in Brussels with respect to the scope 'left' to them in Belgian society.

14. Dido, Sofian, Ikoi and many others denounce the media's participation in their confinement to an irreducible otherness, which, moreover, has a negative connotation. The media are described as being tools in the state's plot against them. For them, the media and politicians manipulate public opinion and contribute to accentuating the mistrust of people of foreign origin. The supposed objective is the maintenance of racism and the support of border closure policies. These stigmatisations and their analyses in terms of a conspiracy add to the anger of young people and participate in a vicious circle of increasing violent acts and uncivil remarks, which are interpreted in the cultural

³ While the emic interpretations related to imagined conspiracy have been told by male subjects, these representations are not entirely absent from the discourses of the young women interviewed, in particular young Muslim women such as Ikoi (see above). These young women have to face specific types of discrimination which are not necessarily the same as that faced by young men and which also make use of remarkable forms of resistance. The length of this article does not allow this aspect of the question to be developed, as it requires a specific investigation and analysis. See in particular: Alaoui, 2011.

⁴ In the qualitative survey approach, the principle of saturation is an important methodological guarantee. This principle is based on the diversification of sources of data, and allows researchers to be open to the possibility that they may be confronted with divergent or contradictory data. It also defers the end of the research, which concludes with a theme or a sub-theme, when the researcher can no longer gather new data on the theme or sub-theme [Olivier de Sardan, 2008].

register, in particular as an impossibility to 'integrate', rather than in the register of social confrontations.

3.2. *Confrontations with the police*

15. Through humiliating identity checks in some of the neighbourhoods studied, young people must face encounters with the police on a permanent basis. These checks come in addition to the dynamics of relegation, discrimination, ordinary racism and the stereotypical images conveyed by certain media. They have an impact on self-construction influenced by feelings of injustice and conspiracy theory. These young people have grown up with the idea and the experience that in case of need, the police would not be there to protect them or their family. They often underline an explicit link between this lack of protection on behalf of law enforcement officials such as judicial authorities, and the need to find other types of protection, by demonstrating their power in order to incite fear. Young people and police officers – set up in enemy groups – are caught in a spiral whereby the excessive identity checks lead to an increase in criminal forms of expression [Bailleau, 2009]. These excessive checks, the harsher punishment incurred more easily and the imprisonment of peers gives substance to the experiences of xenophobia.⁵ They are combined with racist acts in the street, at school and in the employment sector. They are echoed in the relationship which these young people have to institutions. These confrontations also nourish the gradual awareness of their supposed exteriority with respect to Belgian society, although most of them were born in the country.

Yacine (aged 20, Belgian, son of Algerian parents, life story, 2009): We were going home after the theatre and got stopped by the police along the way. They searched us immediately, insulted us and beat us up, and then we were taken to the police station where they continued what they had started.

Jacinthe: Why do you think the identity check got out of hand?

Yacine: They were looking for guilty people. An old woman was attacked and we were in the area. They didn't try to find out why.

Jacinthe: You say that since the assault your relationship to Belgium has changed.

Yacine: Yes, because they said something which left a deep impression on me. They said that Arabs don't go to the theatre – they are thieves. I still remember what they said, and something has changed.

Jacinthe: What has changed?

Yacine: From that moment on, I became more interested in my parents' roots, and in particular those of my father.

Jacinthe: And what is the link between the two?

Yacine: There was a break between feeling Belgian and my roots. For them, despite the fact that I was born here, I'm not Belgian. There is my culture, my skin colour and my origins. For them, I didn't belong here. That's what I felt.

16. In the case of Yacine, in addition to his story, that of his older brother who had accompanied him as well as that of the social worker who had done the follow-up of the complaint lodged against the police, make his story completely plausible. It is of concern that a large number of similar stories have been told by young people who – on the one hand – gloss over the facts or keep them quiet out of fear of not being taken seriously and – on the other hand – build up anger and resentment at not being considered Belgian in their own right or equal to others. As a methodological tool, the expression of these critical biographical events makes it possible to 'communicate the unspeakable, suffering' and the 'chaos of disturbing experiences', as well as to have an understanding of the individual and/or collective meanings given to them [Leclerc-Olive, 1997: 146 cited by Veith, 2004]. In the same way as the degrading remarks about them made by the media, the excessive identity checks as well as discrimination at legal level are inter-

⁵ Different works have shown that young migrants or descendants of migrants – in particular from the African continent – are subjected to a process of criminalisation: as they undergo more identity checks and legal action is resorted to more often over their dubious behaviour, they have harsher punishment which is handed out more quickly, especially if they have little support and/or knowledge of the workings of justice [Brion et al., 2000].

preted by certain young people in terms of a conspiracy. For them, in addition to certain cases of abuse, police surveillance centred on certain neighbourhoods has the effect of focusing the population's attention on petty crime and on young people who cause fear. They explain that these political choices 'anaesthetise' the population and divert them from fundamental questions which go well beyond petty crime and local authorities, while the 'powerful ones' and the 'world mafias' – to use their words – act with no qualms.

Conclusion

17. While the dynamics of segregation, relegation and discrimination have already received much attention, the ethnographic approach developed here shifts the focus towards the effects in terms of the resulting self-construction and relationship to the world. By interpreting their banishment (neighbourhoods, schools, jobs, etc.) as well as the symbolic, moral and physical violence experienced in the register of injustice and conspiracy, these young people give meaning to the past (the silence surrounding colonial and migratory history) as well as to their experience of xenophobia and contemporary discrimination, in particular within institutions (administration, school, etc., as well as the police and the media). These visions of the world have contrasting effects. They create paranoid attitudes and reinforce the processes of mistrust (them/us), feelings of inferiority and of being a victim. In addition to discriminatory and xenophobic events, these representations contribute to the spirals of failure which these young people are often caught in. They undermine capacities to build oneself and to trust others. They propose an isolated apprehension about the world, where the same violence and injustice is repeated throughout the centuries and decades. This fatality causes anger and despair.

18. Thus said, although it may seem paradoxical, this apprehension about the world in terms of a conspiracy theory is also a way to grasp events and make them coherent and acceptable, and therefore to get out of the position of victim by becoming a creator of meaning. In a position akin to 'imaginative sociology' [Comaroff, 2010 ; Tonda, 2011], their analyses attempt to provide meaning to how they perceive an ac-

cumulation of events, and above all past and present violence – felt to be omnipresent yet ignored and even insoluble – in their daily lives. By describing their experience of exile – this 'exterior place' [Benslama, 2004] resulting from a daily life of confinement to neighbourhoods and second-rate schools, as well as from media discourse and police attitudes towards them – the young people interviewed propose a sort of 'heterotopology' [Foucault, 2009], i.e. a view of exclusion from the inside, which tells of the impossibility to imagine and build a common world which transcends media discourse and political decisions. Their interpretations reveal one of the 'secondary' effects – in addition to socioeconomic inequalities – of the shortcomings of public policy in the area of social inclusion and the fight against discrimination: the reinforcement of divided and stereotypical representations of the cultural and social diversity of populations in Brussels.

19. These processes at work in Brussels are not unique. As part of a more global movement of rejection in the west – sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit and sometimes unconscious – of part of the population, or at least of some of their supposed and reified cultural traits, they are nevertheless urgent. Although the degree of violence in terms of institutional attacks and the reactions of young people is lower than in the United States or France and therefore seems manageable, nothing good will come of the tensions and anger witnessed in the city's schools and neighbourhoods. Given the demography of Brussels – a young and pluriethnic city – the degrading atmosphere in some of its neighbourhoods, and the muted anger of a growing number of its youth, it is important to act quickly with respect to socioeconomic discrimination and education and housing policies, as well as to begin in-depth consideration of the possibilities offered to these young people to be Belgian and at the same time have dark skin and/or be Muslims. The challenges must be clear and must be met. It must be borne in mind that discrimination is both social and ethnic, with gender-related features as well. We must acknowledge and put an end to the dynamics which confine these young people to an irreducible otherness; these *outsiders* who are assumed to threaten Belgian, European and western identity and are thus excluded [Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006]. The role of their ancestors and parents in building Europe, Belgium and Brussels must be re-established in an inclusive history, which would call to mind

the legitimacy of their presence and grant these young people with full citizenship, recognising them and their parents as an integral part of the nation and not as outsiders. Europe is also what it is today from an economic and cultural point of view because it is the product of colonisations and migrations [Hine, Keaton & Small, 2009].

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