



# The ethnic identity complexity of transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands

Clementine J. Degener<sup>a,\*</sup>, Diana D. van Bergen<sup>b</sup>, Hans W.E. Grietens<sup>c,d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Work, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Department of Pedagogics, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Special Education Research Unit, KU Leuven, Belgium

<sup>d</sup> Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the ethnic identity of transculturally placed adolescent foster youth with ethnic minority backgrounds in The Netherlands. We conducted qualitative interviews to provide insight into the lifeworlds of twenty foster youth. We found that constructing an ethnic identity was complex for these ethnic minority foster youth. The foster youth showed ethnic identity ambivalence, and contradictory messages about ethnicity by birth parents, foster parents, peers, and strangers contributed to this process. The foster youth also sometimes distanced themselves from their ethnic minority background whereby the intersection of their ethnic minority background and the background of being a foster child could play a role. Additionally, some foster youth told stories of longing for and belonging to their ethnic minority background, especially when birth parents and foster parents cooperated in ethnic socialization. Overall, contradictory and intersecting messages provided by birth parents, foster parents, and peers influenced the extent to which they experienced their ethnic identity as complex. Therefore, future studies should be conducted to provide more insight into these processes, so foster care agencies and foster parents can be trained to fulfill a more guiding role in the ethnic identity development of transculturally placed foster youth.

## 1. Introduction

During adolescence, identity formation is a major developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012; Verschuere, Rassart, Claes, & Luyckx, 2017) and among youth, the formation of a strong identity is positively related to their psychological development and well-being (Crocetti, 2018). For foster youth, developing a firm sense of identity may be complex because they are vulnerable and face problems in their cognitive, adaptive, and behavioral functioning (Crocetti, 2018; Goemans, Van Geel, Van Beem, & Vedder, 2016). Youth in foster care experience feelings of loss because of disconnection from their families and social contexts, and they often grieve these losses (Mitchell, 2016, 2017). When they enter a foster home, youth must become accustomed to a new way of life (Singer, Uzozie, & Zeijlmans, 2012). According to Mitchell (2016), foster youth need to “acculturate” to the foster care system, which means they are likely to (re)appraise their existing beliefs and assumptions upon their arrival at the new home. Furthermore, foster youth may be stigmatized, especially by their peers, about being in foster care and being

“different” (Kools, 1997; Madigan, Quayle, Cossar, & Paton, 2013), which may cause them to wish not to be recognized as being in foster care or may lead to a “devaluation of self” (Kools, 1997). This acculturation process and potential devaluation of self may become more complex when foster youth have an ethnic minority background, are placed transculturally, and experience differences between the ethnocultural backgrounds of their birth family and those of their foster family (Thoburn, Norford, & Parvez Rashid, 2000; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). A transcultural placement is likely to impact the ethnic identity of transculturally placed youth (Barn, 2013). Because the strength of one's ethnic identity is related to youth's well-being (Sam & Berry, 2010), and youth in foster care experience challenges in their psychosocial functioning (Goemans et al., 2016), the development of a strong ethnic identity may be particularly beneficial for the healthy adjustment of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth.

### 1.1. Transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, children with ethnic

\* Corresponding author at: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Museumpark 40, 3015 CX Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

E-mail address: [c.j.degener@hr.nl](mailto:c.j.degener@hr.nl) (C.J. Degener).

minority backgrounds are overrepresented in foster care and rarely align with those of their caretakers (Day & Bellaart, 2015; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Thoburn et al., 2000; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). In 2013, 36% of Dutch foster youth had an ethnic minority background (Day & Bellaart, 2015), while 23% of Dutch youth had an ethnic minority background (Gilsing, Pels, Bellaart, & Tierolf, 2015). Surinamese and Antillean youth are highly represented in Dutch foster care. Possible reasons for this are low income and low education rates, and relatively high instability of family networks (Gilsing et al., 2015).

Dutch ethnic minority youth face societal challenges. Youth of Moroccan (4%), Turkish (3%), Surinamese (2%), and Antillean (1%) descent comprise the largest ethnic minority groups among the Dutch youth population. The socioeconomic position of these four groups is worse than that of ethnic Dutch youth (Huijnk & Andriessen, 2016). Relatedly, in the last decennia, the political climate in the Netherlands has changed from one in which tolerance is shown toward ethnic minority groups to a situation in which assimilation is encouraged, especially by right-wing parties. This impacts ethnic minorities and their ethnic identities (Verkuyten, 2018), and therefore, this may also impact the ethnic identities of ethnic minority foster youth.

### 1.2. The ethnic identity of foster youth

Ethnic identity is an important aspect of the social identity of individuals in ethnically diverse societies (Williams, Tolan, Durkee, Francois, & Anderson, 2012) and focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture in which people share the same ethnic background (Phinney, 1990). Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) argued that the development of ethnic identity occurs during a maturation process in which ethnic minority individuals explore their ethnic identity (exploration) and/or decide where and to whom they belong (i.e., commitment). Ethnic identity formation is a dynamic process that is developed through a reciprocal relationship between an individual and his or her social and/or school context (Bubritzki, van Tubergen, Weesie, & Smith, 2018; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney et al., 2007). The socialization messages that parents give to their children (whether directly or indirectly) regarding both the majority and minority ethnicity and culture (i.e., ethnic-cultural socialization) are important in the process of ethnic identity formation (Hughes et al., 2008; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Rivas-Drake, Umaña-Taylor, & Medina, 2017). This is also the case for transculturally placed ethnic minorities (Barn, 2010; DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996; Hrapczynski & Leslie, 2018; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell, Marcelo, Trang, & Yates, 2019; White et al., 2008).

Acculturation theory (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) illustrates how ethnic minority individuals who are exposed to different cultures acculturate themselves to society. They may identify with their ethnic minority or ethnic majority background (respectively, separation and assimilation) or with both backgrounds (i.e., integration), or they may not identify with their ethnic minority nor ethnic majority background (i.e., marginalization). Some studies conducted in the field of foster care have shown ethnic identity outcomes of foster youth that can be related to the acculturation strategies of Berry et al. (2006). White et al. (2008) found transculturally placed foster youth of African American and Latin American backgrounds who developed a strong ethnic identity. They seemed to have become aware of their ethnic backgrounds because they daily faced confrontations with members of their foster families due to their ethnic differences, which could have lead to a segregation strategy of foster youth. Other studies show that ethnic identity losses are experienced by transculturally placed foster youth (Barn, 2010; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell et al., 2019). Tyrell et al. (2019) found a relationship between ethnic loss and childhood maltreatment and placement disruption. Barn (2010) referred to "identity stripping," whereby foster youth from different ethnic backgrounds were confused about the ethnic or racial group to which they belonged (i.e., marginalization). Assimilation was an

outcome of a study by Nuttgens (2013), which showed that foster youth with native Canadian backgrounds had distanced themselves from their ethnic roots and adjusted to their foster parents' ethnic backgrounds.

Little evidence regarding foster youth who can identify with both ethnic backgrounds (i.e., integration) seems to exist. Integration might be a possible acculturation strategy because many transculturally placed foster youth are exposed to the majority culture in their ethnic majority foster homes while also maintaining ethnic and cultural ties with their ethnic minority backgrounds through members of their birth families (Daniel, 2011). Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) show, for example, how by passing knowledge about hair care to their children of African American descent, birth parents contributed to the positive ethnic identity development of transculturally placed foster youth. Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) draw attention to birth parents, but especially when parents and foster parents play a role in the lives of foster youth and make efforts toward ethnic socialization, minority foster youth may develop a dual ethnic identity (Verkuyten, 2018) or bicultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005) that is, two ethnic or cultural backgrounds are combined in one's ethnic or cultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005; Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martinez, 2014; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; Verkuyten, 2018).

Youth in foster care are vulnerable and face challenges in constructing their identity (Goemans et al., 2016; Kools, 1997; Mitchell, 2016, 2017), and when they have an ethnic minority background and are transculturally placed, this may include their ethnic identity. Having a strong ethnic identity is important for the psychosocial well-being of ethnic minority youth (Sam & Berry, 2010), and studies indicate that foster youth can experience ethnic identity losses but can also develop a strong ethnic identity (Barn, 2010; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell et al., 2019; White et al., 2008). However, to the best of our knowledge, no scientific research has been conducted thus far about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands. It is, therefore, important to examine how transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands develop an ethnic identity; how this relates to their foster parents' ethnic majority backgrounds, as well as to their birth parents' ethnic minority backgrounds; and the role that foster parents, birth parents, and peers play in the ethnic identity formation process. To gain insight into these processes, we conducted a qualitative study to address the following question: How do transcultural placements in foster care influence the ethnic identity of foster youth with an ethnic minority background during adolescence?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design

This study is based on a qualitative research design because we examined complex themes concerning the ethnic identity of youth who are a part of two or more cultural contexts in everyday reality (Flick, 2014; Mortelmans, 2009).

### 2.2. Participants

We searched for foster youth in early and late adolescence who were transculturally placed in non-kinship, long-term foster care; had lived for more than six months in their current foster families; and had an ethnic minority background. We included 20 foster youth, aged 11 to 19, who belonged to 20 foster families with a Dutch/European background (Table 1). The ethnic minority backgrounds of foster youth were defined by their parents' or grandparents' countries of birth. Their ages at the time of their placement in the foster families where they lived at the time of the interview varied from two weeks to 12 years old.

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of transracially placed foster children who participated in a qualitative interview study in the Netherlands, 2018.

Characteristics of participants
Gender
10 boys, 10 girls
Ethnic background(s)
Moroccan and Dutch (1), Turkish and Dutch (1), Caribbean and Dutch (1), Surinamese and Turkish (1), Moroccan (4), Surinamese (1), Caribbean (5), East-African (5), Brazilian (1)
Living in a monocultural neighborhood
19
Attending a school with other ethnic minority students
19
Contacts with (one of) their birth parents
16

### 2.2.1. Recruitment

Foster youth were recruited and selected from the databases of nine foster care agencies with a geographical spread over the Netherlands (rural and urban areas). Foster care workers were asked to inform foster families via personal information letters addressed to the foster youth, foster parents, and birth parents. As a result, 12 families (approximately one out of nine selected families) signed up for participation. The reasons for nonparticipation were the foster youth's emotional or behavioral difficulties and lack of time or motivation to participate. In addition, 8 foster families were recruited using snowball sampling (6), as well as via a call put out on social media (1) and on websites for foster parents (1).

### 2.3. Research procedure

The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee Pedagogical and Educational Sciences of the University of Groningen in fall 2016.

#### 2.3.1. Instruments

Through a process of reading, discussion, and reflection with members of the research team, foster parents, foster care workers, and a care leaver, we developed a photo-elicitation manual (Harper, 2002) and an interview topic list (Flick, 2014; Mortelmans, 2009), which consisted of questions about ethnic and cultural socialization (Hughes et al., 2008) and ethnic identity (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney et al., 2007). The following are examples of the questions that were included: "What makes you proud when you think about your cultural background?" and "How do your foster parents acknowledge your cultural background?" We piloted the instruments with two foster families.

#### 2.3.2. Interview procedure

When we received the foster families' contact information, an appointment was made to introduce the research. During this meeting, we explained our study, and the foster youth signed letters of informed consent. The legal guardians for children under 16 years old signed letters of informed consent via email. The foster youth were asked to use their cellular phones to take pictures of people and objects that were emotionally close to them. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage talk, bridge cultural differences, and gain insight into their lifeworlds during the interviews (Collier, 1967; Harper, 2002).

The interviews were conducted two weeks after the first meetings. The foster youth showed their pictures, and the interviewer asked questions such as "Can you tell me why this picture is important to you?" Most pictures had no direct relation to ethnic identity but led to a conversation about foster youth's ethnic identity, probed by the interviewer. For example, a picture of a cellular phone led to a conversation about the youth's connection with his or her friends, the ethnic

backgrounds of these friends, and ethnic belonging. The interviews took approximately one hour to conduct, depending on the foster youth's attention span. The foster youth kept copyrights of their pictures. To safeguard anonymity, we chose not to show the pictures in the articles. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To increase reliability, a summary of each interview was sent to the foster youth, who, for the most part, responded positively or added information, which we then included in our analysis (Mortelmans, 2009).

### 2.4. Analysis

We conducted a semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from a constructionist viewpoint (Flick, 2014). Although we had previously reflected on theoretical insights, we initiated our analyses with an inductive approach and constructed codes and themes that were strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by typing and (re)reading the transcripts. We then conducted open coding using Atlas.ti (Friese, 2014). To increase the credibility of this process (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), the first three interviews were coded by two researchers. After coding eight interviews, we started to reach a saturation point (Mortelmans, 2009). Only a few new codes were introduced in the interviews that followed. The researchers compared outcomes and discussed differences in codes and themes while abiding by the practice of investigator triangulation (Flick, 2014). For example, the foster youth mentioned social exclusion frequently. While reading and rereading selected fragments, we discussed whether social exclusion centered on being a foster child, being an ethnic minority (discrimination), or both (intersection). This led to a consensus on two codes: "discrimination" and "intersection."

Then, the codes were grouped into clusters, we made memos of each cluster and searched for possible themes (Friese, 2014). All steps were reported in an audit trail (Mortelmans, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017). We constructed a network of themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001) showing one global theme—"ethnic identity complexity"—and three main themes—"contradictory messages," "the intersection of foster youth and ethnic minority identity," and "connection and reconnection with roots" (Fig. 1). Regarding the results, we used pseudonyms in the quotes to preserve anonymity (Flick, 2014).

### 3. Results

Three main themes related to the ethnic identity of foster youth were identified. The first consisted of contradictory messages about ethnicity from birth parents versus foster parents and/or versus peers and how this could lead to ethnic identity ambivalence. The second was how ethnic minority identity could intersect with foster youth's identity and influence them to distance themselves from their ethnic minority background. The third theme was how foster parents and birth parents could establish connections between foster youth and their ethnic minority background and how this related to these youth's longing for and belonging to their ethnic minority background. All themes occurred in the foster youth's stories, but most narratives centered on one or two themes.

#### 3.1. Contradictory messages about discrimination and ethnic belonging

The foster youth received messages from individuals in their social contexts and/or society regarding situations related to discrimination and ethnic belonging; these messages contradicted one another and, to some extent, their own views. First, the foster youth discussed discrimination by ethnic majority people in regard to their skin color or ethnic minority background; they experienced this at school, in the streets, and/or via social media. However, discrimination appeared to be a subject that they did not discuss regularly with their foster parents. When they did, their foster parents disapproved of ethnic

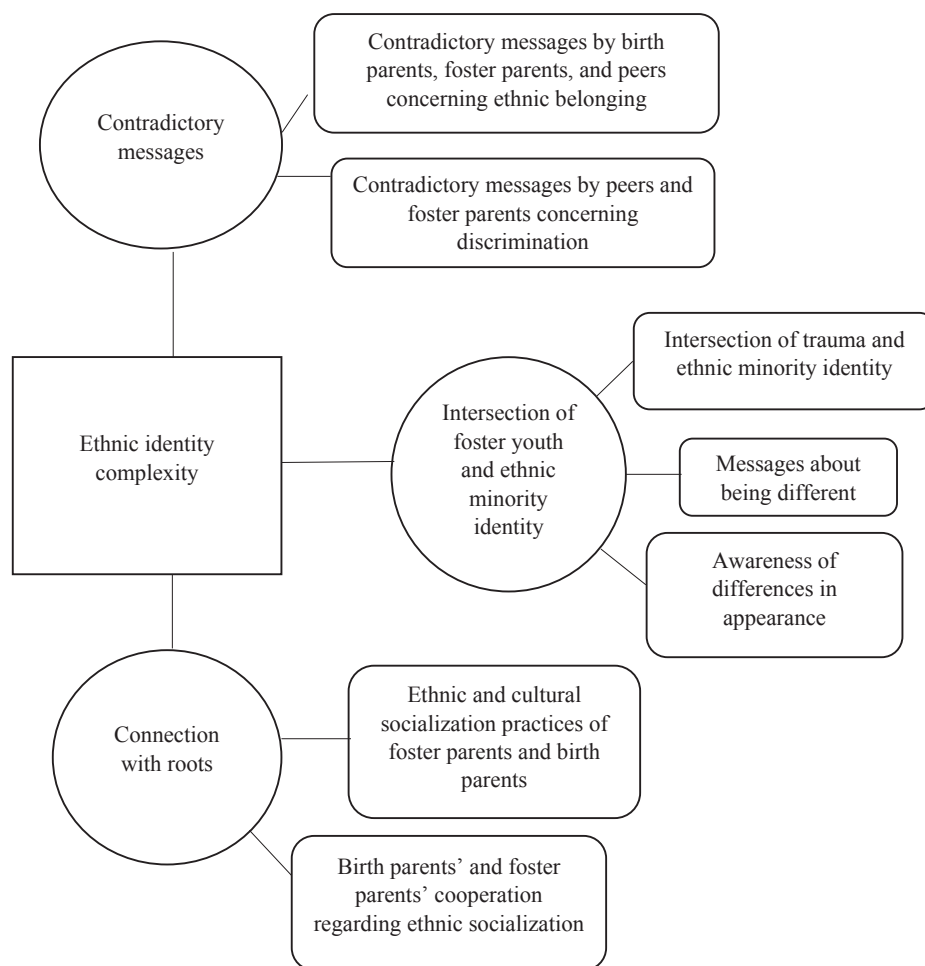


Fig. 1. Thematic network.

discrimination, but most put minimal effort into helping the youth deal with it. Therefore, the foster youth sensed that their foster parents denied, underestimated, or downplayed the phenomenon, as Kevin (12) shows:

You just told me that at school, you have the feeling that brown [sic] children are treated differently from white [sic] children.

Yes.

How do your foster parents react to this?

Well, they say, maybe it seems like that, but we don't think that is the case.

The foster youth thereby received messages from their foster parents regarding ethnic belonging, which contradicted the messages that they received from people with a similar ethnic minority background. This mostly occurred when the foster youth attended ethnically diverse schools or had contact with their birth parents. At school, some foster youth received social exclusion messages about being raised in a "Dutch" family. Isra (15) offers an example of this, explaining that "foreigner," a nickname given to her by same-ethnic peers, is meant to be a socially inclusive term but that being raised in an ethnic Dutch family excludes her socially:

I used to belong to the 'foreigners' [sic], but it ended up in a fight. Who are the 'foreigners'?

All Moroccans.

And they are foreigners according to whom?

According to Moroccan people. First, I also belonged to them, but they found it strange that I was raised in a Dutch way; they found it weird, and now we're not arguing anymore, but we are not friends

anymore either.

Language played an important role in these contradictory messages. Living in a foster family with an ethnic majority background affected the youth's accent, vocabulary, and pronunciation; most of them, therefore, spoke Dutch differently from their family members or same-ethnic peers. They explained that peers with a similar ethnic background tried to label them in terms of ethnicity, frequently referring to their use of language. Gladys (18), for example, showed how same-ethnic peers reacted to her during their interactions: "I can speak Dutch, and a lot of Antilleans can't, and I use a lot of words they don't use ... 'posh' words ... and then they say, Hey, what are you saying? (laughs)". Some foster youth mentioned that their foster parents disapproved of their use of ethnic minority language or, rather, the slang associated with it. The following example offered by 16-year-old Najia shows how her foster mother reacted after she came home from seeing friends with a same-ethnic background: "Why do you talk Moroccan or why ... (looks at the interviewer). Do you understand? Why do you talk so fast, or she [foster mother] says, Ooh, I know where you [just] came from ...".

Later in the interview, Najia described how her birth mother reacted to her use of language due to her acculturation into a majority-background foster family: "My (birth) mother says, and actually, she says it because she's ashamed ... (speaks softly).... it's a shame that you can't even talk our way". The example of Najia shows that her foster mother discouraged her from speaking in a Moroccan way, while her birth mother disapproved of her loss of the Moroccan language.

### 3.1.1. Ethnic identity ambivalence

The interviews indicated that the foster youth had internalized contradictory messages from their parents and peers, which seemed to contribute to the youth's ambivalence about their ethnic identity. Youth such as Najia seemed confused and showed incongruences between their expressed identification and their ethnic majority foster parents' backgrounds and their birth parents' ethnic minority backgrounds: "I am Dutch. I am Moroccan ... I don't know who I am".

Ethnic identity ambivalence occurred to varying degrees. Some foster youth initially presented a clear picture of their ethnic identity and expressed contrasting phrases in later stages of the interviews. Other foster youth contradicted themselves numerous times during the interviews. For example, Kaan (16 years old) related his ethnic background more to being a foreigner than to being Turkish: "My Turkish background doesn't mean a lot to me—yes, street language; I hang around with foreign [sic] guys and, uhm, yes, in the way I behave myself, I am more foreign than Dutch." Later in the interview, he said that he didn't feel Dutch, because he had Turkish blood, so he showed that he could also identify with his Turkish background. When the interview continued, he started to refer to his "Dutch" side: "Here [in the foster family], I am 50% Dutch, and outside, I think it is the same: 50% or 30%. Yes, that is what I think". This means that the foster youth could give themselves different ethnicity labels, depending, to some extent, on the context, and these labels fluctuated during the interviews.

### 3.2. Intersection of ethnic minority identity and foster youth identity

The foster youth related their ethnic minority background to their identity as being in foster care and vice versa. This intersection of identity components occurred in three ways: (a) through the foster youth's awareness of the differences in appearances between themselves and the people in their surrounding contexts (foster family and peers); (b) through messages that the foster youth received from their peers and strangers about "being different," which were related to being in foster care; and (c) through linking traumas from their past with ethnicity.

First, the foster youth explained how the differences in appearances between themselves and their foster parents or peers contributed to their feelings of being or looking "different" and how this made them aware of their ethnic minority identity. In this sense, they talked primarily about differences related to hair, skin, and/or eye color. Being different could mean "feeling special," and this instilled in them a sense of ethnic pride:

I like the color of my skin, and I like my hair.

What do you like about it?

Well, the boys in my class struggle with their hair, and they need to use styling products, and I don't have problems with that ... And brown [sic] is different in this country, and I like that. I grew up with it. I only dislike it when they are calling names because of it, but usually, I like it. (Javi, 13 years old)

However, Javi related "looking different" to being called names, and this was mentioned frequently by the foster youth in our sample, who in contrast to Javi, gave a negative explanation for "otherness". Looking different could lead to social exclusion according to the foster youth and they could express a desire to look like their foster parents or school peers. For instance, Guillermo (14) stated the following: "I would like to be white [sic] because I am the only brown [sic] boy at school".

Second, messages from other people—especially peers—about foster youth being "different" in regard to their ethnicity or skin color led to these youth's increased awareness of their ethnic minority and foster youth identities. The foster youth were reminded of being in foster care when people raised questions about or commented on the ethnic differences between these youth and their peers. In particular,

the foster youth who had attended a school with primarily ethnic majority students—for example, during the primary school period—would receive negative reactions from ethnic majority peers at school about being "foreigners" (sic). In the following fragment, Kaan (16) shared that his ethnic majority peers at primary school excluded him socially because he was a foreigner and had a difficult past: "I was the 'pitiable foreigner' [sic], for example, with an unhappy past; they would judge me because of that".

The foster youth also stated that strangers looked at them in a "funny" way when they visited public places with their foster families and would ask questions such as: "Is he your dad?". In their stories, these reactions to differences in appearances also emphasized on their ethnic identity related to being in foster care.

For some foster youth, the intersection of ethnic and foster youth identity also made their experiences challenging when they linked their traumatic past of abuse and rejection by their birth parents to their ethnic minority background. Maltreatment by their birth parents thus became viewed through the lens of their minority ethnicity. For example, Amina (18) had painful memories of her father, who was Moroccan. She, therefore, tried to avoid to socialize with people of Moroccan descent:

Females are nothing in that [Moroccan] culture, and my brother always said when I visited them, 'You're just a girl; so, you are weak, and you are good for nothing,' and my dad is that way too, [telling me] that I am nothing. They didn't give me anything from that culture ... But what I really dislike is that everyone recognizes that I am Moroccan. So everywhere I go where there are Moroccan people, they see that I am Moroccan, and they start talking Moroccan to me, and I feel bad about that.

How do you deal with that?

I look at them and walk away, or I tell them that I don't understand them.

This quote showed that the way in which Amina perceived herself in terms of her ethnic identity was influenced by the traumatic experiences that she had undergone with her birth family in the past.

### 3.2.1. Distancing from the ethnic minority background

As an outcome of the intersection of foster youth and ethnic minority identities, some foster youth distanced from their ethnic minority background. Farah (14) said: "I just hated it [birth parents' ethnic background] because it was where I came from". Instead of incorporating their ethnic background into their stories, the foster youth found other ways to express themselves when they attempted to explain to which group they belonged. They expressed that they were "a human being" or "just normal," and they stated that neither their skin color nor their ethnic background or that of other people was important to them. The foster youth merely wanted to "be who they are" and behave likewise—not be nor behave like, for example, a Turkish, Moroccan, or Dutch person. They expressed a wish not to be labeled based on ethnicity. Layla (19), for example, stated that she was "a human being." She, therefore, rejected the notion that she would need to express herself in accordance with an ethnicity: "I don't behave that way [referring to her Moroccan background]. I just behave like a human being".

Another way in which the foster youth distanced themselves from their ethnic minority background was by identifying themselves primarily with their foster parents' ethnic majority background and not with their birth parents'. Nada (14), for example, responded quite defensively to the question about how she would refer to herself in terms of her ethnicity. She stated: "I am just Dutch". However, she could not further explain what "just Dutch" meant for her. Therefore, in this example, "just" might refer to the normality of the Dutch context within which she lives. It may also show her annoyance over potential doubts about whether she belonged to the majority Dutch culture or not.

### 3.3. Foster youth's connection with their roots

The foster youth's connection with their roots was another theme that was evident in their narratives. The foster youth explained how, to a certain degree, ethnic socialization practices of their foster parents and birth parents connected them with their ethnic roots. According to the foster youth, the foster parents engaged them in ethnic and cultural socialization practices, such as giving the foster youth space or opportunities to learn their language of origin, preparing or having food that reminded the foster youth of their ethnic minority background, or showing interest in the birth parents' or ancestors' country. Some foster parents also incorporated the wishes of birth parents or other family members regarding religious practices—such as not eating pork for Muslim foster youth—into their ethnic and/or religious socialization practices. Furthermore, some foster youth explicitly mentioned that their foster parents accepted their ethnic minority background, and this seemed to be very important for them. Bonita (17), who had experienced several foster care placements, mentioned that she thought it should be a requirement for the foster parents of ethnic minority children to be open toward people of different ethnic backgrounds. She also expressed happiness that her current foster parents were open in this regard:

You know, let them [foster youth] have foreign friends; you know, don't say, 'Oh, he is black [sic]; he is not allowed to enter my home'; don't be racist; they [foster parents] just need to accept that their foster child is a foreigner, and that's what my current foster parents do.

Birth parents also contributed to the ethnic socialization of most foster youth in our sample, and in some of the youths' narratives, foster parents and birth parents actively cooperated in regard to the foster youth's ethnic socialization. The foster youth explained that both their foster and birth parents helped them learn about the religion or the language of their roots:

My (birth) mother gives me lessons from the Koran once in a while, and I think it is very important. I read a book with my foster mother about religion because my foster mother and (birth) mother think that it is important that I know something about the religion. (Inaya, 11 years old)

According to these stories, the foster and birth parents communicated frequently and accepted each other's ethnoreligious backgrounds.

#### 3.3.1. Stories of ethnic longing and belonging

The foster youth's connection with their roots could lead to narratives about their longing for or belonging to their ethnic minority background. The foster youth talked about the weather or landscapes of their parents' or grandparents' country of birth. They also discussed their ethnic minority language and expressed a wish to learn it; they talked about same-ethnic people in relation to ethnic belonging; and sometimes, they mentioned a shared history with people of African descent. In these stories, the foster youth displayed ethnic minority pride. Gyan (14) for example, who also talked about having a good relationship with his birth mother, showed that he felt a sense of belonging to the people from Surinam whom he met at his football club. They did not share a friendship, but he sensed a "good feeling":

There are a few boys with a Surinamese background in my football club, and I like that.

What do you like about them?

Well, it's not that it is easier to talk with them, but it is just a good feeling.

The youth who traveled with their foster parents to their parents' or grandparents' birth country talked about their journeys in relation to their ethnic identity. They narrated about "feeling at home" and

especially how meeting their family members who lived there gave them a feeling of belonging. Gladys (18), for example, was filled with ethnic pride when she talked about her journey to the Caribbean with her foster parents: "I would like to live there! Beautiful sea, beautiful country, beautiful language". The examples given by Gyan and Gladys show that they felt a sense of belonging to their ethnic roots, which they labeled positively. This gave them a good feeling.

## 4. Discussion

This study provides insight into the context that contributed to the complexity of the ethnic identity formation of transculturally placed foster youth with an ethnic minority background. The context of ethnic minority foster youth consisted of ethnic majority foster parents; an ethnic majority neighborhood; a school where students of ethnic majority and ethnic minority backgrounds attended; and an ethnic minority birth family. Due to living with their ethnic majority foster parents, many foster youth experienced ethnic losses, which has also been shown in studies by Barn (2010) and Moss (2009). Ethnic losses, including decreased ethnic language abilities, lead to difficulties connecting with birth parents or school peers with a same-ethnic background. According to Barn (2018) work on adoption, the social capital of adoptive parents in transcultural settings and the possibilities that adoptive parents and their children have within their networks to bond or bridge with people with minority ethnic backgrounds are important for the ethnic identity development of their children. In our sample, many foster families lacked this "social capital" and consequently offered little guidance in regard to ethnic (minority) socialization. Thus, some foster youth in our study experienced an "acculturation gap" with regard to their birth parents (Birman, 2006), or they sometimes experienced an "acculturation misfit" with their same-ethnic peers (Celeste, Meeussen, Verschuere, & Phalet, 2016), that is, a discrepancy in acculturation. A discrepancy in acculturation appears, for example, when the ethnic orientation of the youth (especially integrative or assimilationist youth) differs from the ethnic orientation of their parents or same-ethnic peers, when the latter are more embedded in their minority ethnic culture (Birman, 2006; Celeste et al., 2016). In our study, a perceived acculturation gap resulted in ethnicity-based contradictions between the foster youth and their birth parents and the foster youth and their same-ethnic peers.

Furthermore, the themes that we used to explain how foster youth would receive contradictory messages about their ethnic background and how their ethnic minority identity would intersect with the identity of being in foster care share a similar underlying mechanism: They refer to foster youth being approached as "the other" in terms of ethnicity. In Dutch society, ethnic minorities may sense that they are being socially excluded by native Dutch people and Dutch society (Huijink, Dagevos, Gijsberts, & Andriessen, 2015; Verkuyten, 2018), and this was reflected in the narratives of the ethnic minority foster youth who experienced social exclusion by their ethnic Dutch peers. However, the foster youth also experienced social exclusion from their same-ethnic peers, who reacted to their ways of acting or being "Dutch" as a result of living with a foster family. These mechanisms of "double social exclusion" left them little room to explore an ethnic identity through their peers. In reaction, the foster youth became confused concerning their ethnicity, expressed a strong wish not to be labeled in terms of ethnicity, or tried even harder to acquire an ethnic majority identity. Expressing a wish not to be labeled seems to go beyond the acculturation styles of Berry et al. (2006). The foster youth's need to experience ethnic belonging seemed to be thwarted (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007), suggesting that they would rather attempt to avoid rejection than seek connection. The foster youth's wish to acquire an ethnic majority identity corresponds with the acculturation-style assimilation (Berry et al., 2006) and may reflect a wish to belong to the foster family.

Thus, although research indicates that the integration of majority and minority ethnic backgrounds is often the most positive

acculturation style for migrants in terms of their psychosocial development (Berry et al., 2006), for the foster youth with an ethnic minority background, arriving at “integration” as a strategy seemed to be a complex cognitive process (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The foster youth experienced multilayered social experiences that challenged their ethnic identity. The messages that they received about ethnicity did not always converge and, in some cases, contradicted their own perceptions of situations. Furthermore, these messages intersected with being in foster care, thereby leading to a double “devaluation of self” (Crenshaw, 1991; Kools, 1997; Madigan et al., 2013). Although some foster youth seemed to switch between cultural frames, this confused a number of them, rather than being an effortless or “natural” act (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). These processes differ from the acculturation of, for example, youth of Turkish and Moroccan descent in the Netherlands who grow up in their birth families (second- and third-generation immigrants; Huijink et al., 2015) and who switch between their Turkish or Moroccan, Dutch, and religious backgrounds with relatively minimal effort.

However, the foster youth also told stories of longing for and belonging to their cultural backgrounds. This is in line with Yuval-Davis (2006), who describes identity development as an ongoing process of belonging and longing to belong, whereby specific and repetitive socialization practices related to social and cultural spaces are crucial. In our sample, these social and cultural spaces seemed to be centered on birth parents and trips to their birth parents’ or grandparents’ country. This also shows why some youth expressed relatively little (be)longing to their minority ethnicity, as their contact with their birth parents was problematic, limited, or nonexistent. In the cases in which the foster parents established a positive connection between the foster youth and their birth parents, the latter functioned as social capital in the process of ethnic identity development, and this was realized through a process of bridging cultural differences between foster parents and birth parents and bonding between birth parents and their children (Barn, 2018). Two cultural worlds became more converged, which seemed to contribute to less ethnic identity confusion (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). However, in practice, this aspect is challenging, as according to Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006), foster youth can have a tense relationship with their parents, wherein they (re)experience rejection, which impacts their identity.

#### 4.1. Strengths and limitations

Power differences between interviewers, parents and youth may play a role in data collection with children, and in our study foster parents and the interviewer could have influenced the participation of the foster youth (Reczek, 2014). Therefore, we emphasized that participation was voluntary and during the interviews, we somewhat shifted the power balance between the interviewer and foster youth by using photo-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002).

Next, the interviewer and foster youth did not have or partly shared a same-ethnic background. This seems to have encouraged a conversation in which topics about ethnicity or discrimination were not taken for granted by both parties (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Mizock, Harkins, Ray, & Morent, 2011), and in our study, foster youth explained in detail about, for example, what discrimination looked like for him or her. However, not having a shared ethnic background may also have disadvantages—for example, a lesser sense of mutual understanding between an interviewer and a participant (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Mizock et al., 2011).

As for limitations during recruitment, foster care workers acted as gatekeepers and did not always give the information letters to the foster families due to a lack of time or the perceived vulnerability of certain foster youth. It is possible that we therefore missed foster families who otherwise would have participated.

Finally, in this study, we did not systematically analyze the role of the socioeconomic status of foster families versus birth families,

although there are indications that this influenced the ethnic identity of foster youth. This is because, as we showed, some youth talked about an ethnic majority or “posh” way of speaking versus the use of street or urban language. Language is seen as an important expression of the class to which one belongs, and it has a reciprocal relationship with identity (Gee, Allen, & Clinton, 2001).

#### 4.2. Implications for practice and future research

Our study showed that when foster youth are transculturally placed in Dutch foster homes, the foster families need to gain social capital so that the ethnic minority foster youth acquire more sources through which they are able to explore their minority ethnic identity. Birth parents may be a key in this process, because the foster youth in this study showed how being ethnically socialized by their birth parents and foster parents can lead to both ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity confusion. Future research should therefore be conducted to more thoroughly examine the conditions under which birth parents’ and foster parents’ cooperation in regard to ethnic socialization leads to healthier ethnic identity exploration by foster youth and how foster care agencies may train birth and foster parents to improve their cooperation in regard to the ethnic socialization of their youth.

Finally, our study showed thematic patterns in the narratives of 20 foster youth. Future quantitative studies based on larger samples should be conducted to validate our findings. Thereafter, Dutch foster parents should be made aware of the complex social context of transculturally placed foster youth. Furthermore, future research should be conducted to design training programs in which foster parents are taught how to guide their foster youth in regard to how best to integrate these complex messages into their narratives of ethnic identity.

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#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Clementine J. Degener:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft. **Diana D. van Bergen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **Hans W.E. Grietens:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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