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## **National Symbolic Capital in a Multinational Environment. An Exploratory Study of Symbolic Boundaries at a European School in Brussels**

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**Abstract:** Despite processes of Europeanisation in education aimed at reducing symbolic boundaries of nationality among Europeans, countries continue to be judged in terms of their reputation or ‘symbolic capital’. Based on qualitative group interviews with students at a European School in Brussels, a unique institution educating the future citizens of Europe, we investigate to what extent the symbolic capital attributed to the students’ national background shape symbolic boundaries between them. Our results suggest that they draw symbolic boundaries in two steps. First, students classify their schoolmates according to criteria specific to youth culture, including: youth lifestyle, effortless academic achievement, cosmopolitan values and language skills. These primary categories may then be attributed to different national groups and language sections at the school. As a consequence, a status hierarchy emerges, running from Northwest-European to Eastern European students. This points to a permanence of symbolic boundaries of nationality, even in the highly Europeanised context of a European school.

**Keywords:** symbolic boundaries, international schools, national symbolic capital

**Word count:** 10052 (excluding title page, abstract and keywords)

## **1. Introduction**

Education policy is a key task of modern nation-states. From the very beginning, it aimed at integrating citizens into a national project and constructing an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983). In today’s European Union, education policy remains in the hands of its member states. However, in recent decades, the EU has been complementing national activities with projects that strive to foster European educational mobility, integrate a ‘European dimension’ into national curricula and support closer ties and exchange between its member states (Walkenhorst 2008). Such initiatives are aimed at reducing the symbolic and social boundaries between European citizens to prepare the social conditions for a deepened European integration. It can be assumed that nationality as a category for identification and classification has thus become less relevant, especially for those Europeans who are mobile across national borders and benefit from the common European area of education (Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008; Recchi 2015).

On the other hand, the nation-state has been the principal form of social organization in Europe, at least for the last centuries, and continues to create stark differences between people in terms of their economic, political and cultural capital (Milanović 2016). Not only are core countries economically more developed and politically more influential than peripheral countries (Wallerstein 2004). Moreover, in the eyes of many, some countries have a higher level of cultural attraction and symbolic capital based on their language, lifestyle or ideology (Bandelj and Wherry 2011; Nye 1990; Anholt 2007). Such national images and stereotypes might be deeply rooted in people’s consciousness and could lag behind rapid social changes (Ogburn 1957). Thus, it can be surmised that the symbolic capital associated with certain countries continues to ‘rub off’ on their citizens (Gerhards et al. 2018), thereby reproducing symbolic and social boundaries between people of

different national background within international environments, despite the Europeanisation of education policy and increased transnational mobility in Europe.

This is exactly what this study aims at investigating. We strive to analyse the effect of national background on the symbolic capital of students at a European School in Brussels. If the fading significance of nationality as a frame of reference can be surmised for any one group, it is this one. Funded by the EU member states, the task of European Schools is to provide education to the children of employees of European institutions in their mother tongue and to mould them into ‘Europeans’ by virtue of a multicultural and multilingual upbringing. These young people come from a relatively privileged social background. They live and learn in a highly globalised environment, which consists of civil servants, experts, diplomats and members of parliament from 28 EU member states. The conditions at European Schools are a very suitable international environment to examine the possible persistence of symbolic boundaries of nationality, precisely because it can be assumed that they should precipitate the loss of their cognitive and social relevance.

In the following sections, we describe the conceptual framework of our study, followed by a description of our method. Our research is based on exploratory in-depth group interviews with secondary school students from different language sections of a European School in Brussels. The results suggest that students draw on four primary criteria to mark symbolic boundaries between groups and to decide who enjoys a high reputation and who is less reputed. These criteria of classification include lifestyle, academic achievement, political values, and language skills. Nationality is not relevant for the students’ primary classification criteria. However, in a second step, students tend to use the above-mentioned criteria when they talk about different national groups and language sections

at their school. Symbolic boundaries between national groups are thus reproduced indirectly, by using these youth-specific criteria to describe other students along their respective national backgrounds. This, in effect, reflects the differences in the distribution of national symbolic capital within Europe. For instance, students from the Scandinavian section of the school enjoy a positive reputation, while those from Eastern Europe seem to struggle to establish themselves within the status hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> Our results hint at the possibility that, while a ‘European dimension’ has been increasingly integrated into education, the relevance of national symbolic capital for processes of distinction might endure, even in an international context.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

Our study brings together two different fields of research. First, we review the literature on symbolic boundaries, which we complement by theorising about the differences and inequalities between nation-states and macro-regions. Secondly, our research is informed by studies from youth and education sociology on the processes of status distinction among children and adolescents.

Regarding the first line of research, symbolic boundaries divide people, objects and social practices into categories and assign them to social groups (Lamont and Molnár 2002). People use these mental categories to structure their social environment and construct social identities. Various real or imagined characteristics can serve to mark group

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that this is an exploratory study, which merely tries to develop a first argument on how national background may shape symbolic boundaries within highly international environments. It does not claim to represent the full complexity of boundary-making processes at this or other European Schools.

membership and to distinguish one group from another. Most often, this process goes beyond solely marking differences. When these classification systems entail positive or negative judgements, the groups they are applied to are viewed not only as different, but also as unequal. Symbolic boundaries become social boundaries when such status distinctions structure social relationships and create an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2008). Viewed from this perspective, symbolic boundaries are a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Existing studies focus almost exclusively on symbolic boundaries between ethnic groups, gender and social classes within a nation-state (see for example Barth 1969; Wimmer 2004, 2008; Alba and Nee 2003; Bail 2008; Epstein 1992; Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Lamont 1992; Jarness 2015). Even though some scholars in this field (like Andreas Wimmer) explicitly criticize methodological nationalism, and even though there are some studies with a genuine transnational perspective, most continue to adhere to a 'methodological nationalism', by rarely moving beyond the nation-state as the container within which they investigate boundary-making between groups (Beck 2007). This also applies to cross-national studies such as Lamont's (1992) analysis of symbolic boundaries drawn by the upper middle classes in France and the US. Therefore, these studies most often neglect the increasingly important international level, which is characterised by substantial differences and inequalities between nation-states. Borrowing from an image of world systems theory, states and regions can be described as integrated into a global economic and political hierarchy that divides core and periphery (Wallerstein 2004; Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995). Those countries that are economically and technologically most advanced and politically most influential constitute the core, which dominates the world

economy and tends to exploit the weaker, less developed (semi-)peripheral countries. Accordingly, countries find themselves in different positions in this global hierarchy, depending on their economic, technological, political and military strength (Sanderson 2005). For instance, while many Western European countries like Germany, France, and the UK, are highly developed, economically powerful countries at the top of the global hierarchy, most Eastern European countries fare much less well economically, e.g. in terms of GDP per capita or in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI). Depending on a country's rank in this hierarchy, its citizens have very different opportunities and life chances. Despite globalisation and European integration, people's birthplace and citizenship continue to account for substantial differences and inequalities between them. National origin has a massive impact on economic capital (income and assets), the quality of social relationships (social capital) and the probability of acquiring knowledge and education. The work of Branko Milanović has most recently highlighted this issue (for a summary cf. Milanović 2016).

These differences in a country's economic and cultural capital can be transformed into symbolic capital or prestige. A country's national symbolic capital is enhanced by, for example, economic success, scientific discoveries, Nobel Prizes and athletic achievements, as well as the global dissemination of its language and perceived lifestyle (Nye 1990; Anholt 2007; Bandelj and Wherry 2011). These symbolic resources are also distributed highly unequally across countries. In Europe, for example, the divide lies between the core and symbolically hegemonic Western European countries and the South

East, which is often deemed ‘backward’ (Boatcă 2015).<sup>2</sup> This national symbolic capital may be attributed to a country’s citizens, thus affecting how people are perceived based on their national background and creating status advantages or disadvantages for them in international environments.<sup>3</sup>

We incorporate the concept of national symbolic capital, which we have briefly outlined above, into our investigation of symbolic boundaries between students and examine to what extent national symbolic boundaries are relevant in the context of a multinational European School.

In addition to symbolic boundaries, our research draws on the literature on status distinction among adolescents, since our study focuses on symbolic boundaries between school students. Issues such as who is friends with whom, who is popular and whose lifestyle is accepted become crucial during adolescence (Corsaro and Eder 1990; LaFontana and Cillessen 2010). They result in the emergence of various ‘status groups’, which are often ranked according to their popularity (Milner 2006; McFarland et al. 2014). Status distinctions among young people, however, are not wholly independent of social-structural categories such as gender (Eder and Parker 1987), class (Eckert 1989; Kramer and Wagner 2012; Weinger 2000) and ethnicity (Comas and Milner 1998; Winkler et al. 2011; Quillian and Campbell 2003; Moody 2001; Hallinan and Williams 1989; Duemmler et al. 2010; Warikoo 2010). The criteria used by adolescents to mark

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<sup>2</sup> We assume that countries with a low national symbolic capital are often not perceived independently, but as parts of peripheral or semi-peripheral regions. Indeed, our interviews show that people single out ‘the French’ or ‘the Germans’, but speak of ‘Eastern Europeans’.

<sup>3</sup> See also: Bourdieu (2005, 229), and the literature on national stereotypes from social psychology (for example, Madon et al. 2001; Cuddy et al. 2009).

symbolic boundaries are often attributed to gender, social class or ethnicity, which makes these groups visible and subject to judgement. This can result in the emergence of socially and ethnically homogenous status groups in school.

Young people focus on criteria such as athletic achievement, physical attractiveness, social skills and status goods to create symbolic and social boundaries between groups (Garner et al. 2006). The group at the top of the status hierarchy is the one able to combine several of these prestigious features. Although our research focuses on the issue of national symbolic boundaries, it is important to take these youth-specific categories into account. When students draw symbolic boundaries between different national backgrounds, we assume they use youth-specific categories to mark those national boundaries.

The relevant literature on international education has not yet paid much attention to the role of symbolic boundaries of nationality in multinational school communities. The focus of existing studies is primarily on investigating the construction of hybrid identities among students between cosmopolitanism and the nation-state (Resnik 2012; Savvides 2008; Shore and Baratieri 2006), or the institutional role of international schools in creating transnational elites (Findlay et al. 2012; Schmidt et al. 2014). This literature is largely based on the premise that students have equal participation and prestige opportunities in a school's status hierarchy, irrespective of their national background.

Our study aims at investigating to which extent that is indeed the case. We trace the criteria used by students of a European School to mark symbolic boundaries, and analyse how those criteria influence their perception and judgement of different national groups.

### **3. Methodology**

First, we reason why the context of a European School is suitable for analysing the relevance of national symbolic capital for drawing symbolic boundaries. Secondly, we describe our method of data collection and analysis.

#### ***3.1 Case Selection***

European Schools are a specific type of international school for the children of employees of European institutions (Hornberg 2010). Across the EU, 26,000 students are currently enrolled in 14 European Schools (for current figures, see Schola Europaea 2015). Every school is divided into language sections, where students are taught in their native languages. The language sections often – though not exclusively – consist of students of the same national background. Nevertheless, particularly the larger language sections like the French or the English section typically host a sizable number of students of other nationalities as well. Apart from being instructed in their native language, students may learn four additional languages in separate classes, where they study together with students from other language sections.

For our investigation, we selected one of the four European Schools in Brussels, which are located near the central European institutions. The approximately 3,000 students come from all EU countries and 95% of their parents work for European institutions. Apart from the three major language sections English, French and German, the school also has sections for less common European languages. This school context is suitable to investigate our research questions for several reasons:

First, European Schools bring together students from all EU countries under one roof and enable them to experience everyday life with young people from other countries.

Second, despite its multinational composition, a European School constitutes a ‘least-likely case’ for observing symbolic boundaries based on national background. Least-likely cases are cases that render the observation of a certain phenomenon very unlikely (Eckstein 2000). If a phenomenon can be observed despite rigorous selective criteria, it is likely that that phenomenon can also be observed under less rigorous conditions. We treat a European School as such a case due to its educational principles, which are geared towards transcending national categorisation and to rear European citizens (Gray 2003). Indeed, other studies (for example, Savvides 2008; Shore and Baratieri 2006) have pointed out the hybridisation of students’ identity constructions and the negligible role of exclusive national identities. If we observe symbolic boundaries based on national symbolic capital in this context, we can assume our findings may also apply to other international contexts, including multinational companies, international organisations, etc.

Third, as mentioned above, adolescent cultural lifestyles and symbolic boundary practices are often linked to social class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Eckert 1989; Lareau 2011). Moreover, social class and ethnic or national origin are often highly correlated in many national contexts (Heath et al. 2008). What can initially seem as an ethnic or national boundary might well turn out being a boundary between social classes. European Schools make such false conclusions less likely since its students are children of EU employees with a similar class background. This makes class-based boundaries unlikely and, in particular, independent of national origin. The composition of the European School – nationally heterogeneous and socially homogenous – enables us to examine the ‘effect’ of national background on symbolic boundaries, ‘controlled’ by the students’ class background.

### *3.2 Data Collection and Analysis*

We conducted four explorative, in-depth group interviews with three to six secondary level students at our selected school (total 17 students). The school staff recruited the interviewees after obtaining written consent by the parents. One of the authors conducted all the interviews at the school.

Group interviews are an effective way to reconstruct symbolic boundaries between social groups. First, they allow to explore ‘group opinions’, a group’s intersubjective knowledge and patterns of meaning (see Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 88-102). The group opinion emerges from the dense interaction between the participants during the interview, and the dialectic of heated statements and replies, approval and contradiction. Second, for the purpose of our study, it is even more important that group interviews allow us to reconstruct the latent attitudes of individual focus group participants: Interviewees might become aware of such attitudes when faced with opposing views in the course of the discussion. A prerequisite for a reconstructive approach to group interviews is the embeddedness of all interviewees in a similar milieu and social group, which makes similar pools of knowledge and meanings accessible to them.

Consequently, we set up the groups to make them as homogenous as possible with regard to our distinguishing feature, their national background. Three of our groups consisted of students from the same language section: German, French and an Eastern European country.<sup>4</sup> This composition ensured representation of two core and one (semi-)peripheral

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from the three larger sections (German, English and French), which exist at every European School in Brussels, we do not disclose the exact names of smaller sections for purposes of anonymisation. This also applies to sections referred to by the interviewees. We

EU country (which, of course, does not cover the entire centre-periphery structure of Europe). We set up a fourth, heterogeneous reference group to find out whether and to which extent mixed groups change the way people speak about other sections – and about other nationalities.

Overall, the French focus group consisted of three students with French citizenship, two students with French and a second citizenship, and one student with non-French citizenship. The Eastern European focus group included three students of the same Eastern European nationality, and one with dual citizenship. In the German focus groups, one participant had only the German citizenship, two had German and a second citizenship, and one participant was not German. Finally, the mixed group included respondents of three different nationalities. The interviews were almost gender-balanced (ten male, and seven female respondents overall).

Before the interviews, we informed the students that they were about friendships at school and the role of nationality. We initially inquired about the perception and judgement of different groups of friends and cliques at school. If this did not prompt spontaneous statements on nationality, we followed up by explicitly asking about the perception of students of different language sections and nationalities, and about their popularity at school. Finally, we asked the students what role nationality plays for them personally. The topical blocks were introduced by the interviewer with open questions to stimulate an autonomous debate within the group. Adherence to the guidelines was flexible,

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resort to general terms such as ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Eastern European’ (referring to the formerly socialist countries in central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004, 2007, and 2013). We will point out throughout the text whether we refer to a specific Eastern European or Scandinavian country, or to Scandinavia or Eastern Europe as a region.

allowing the interviewer to adjust the order and formulation of the questions to the course of the discussion. The interviews were conducted in English (except for the interview with the German group, which was conducted in German). They were between 55 and 75 minutes long.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed, following qualitative content analysis, to discover their main themes (Mayring 2010; Kuckartz 2012). Our analysis consisted of two coding stages. First, we inductively coded all the statements pertaining to how individuals and social groups within the school judge themselves and others regardless of national background or language section. This allowed us to define the categories that the students use to perceive and judge their social environment. Secondly, we coded how students apply these categories to the language sections and national groups. Before turning to the results of our interviews, it must be noted that our exploratory research design only allows us to describe the variety of repertoires that students draw on to define symbolic boundaries, and to interpret the national groups and language schools at their school. Based on a limited number of group interviews, we are not able to uncover to what extent these are used in practice and whether they are transformed into social boundaries.

#### **4. Symbolic Boundaries and National Symbolic Capital: Results of Our Study**

##### ***4.1 Drawing Boundaries in Two Steps: Classification and Attribution***

The aim of our study is to find out to what extent symbolic boundaries of nationality are perceived as relevant and how they are marked in a highly internationalised context. Our analysis of the above-mentioned group interviews suggests that there are two aspects of symbolic boundaries by which adolescents perceive and evaluate themselves and others.

We differentiate between classification based on youth-specific criteria, on the one hand, and the attribution of those criteria to the national background and language section of students, on the other hand.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the first set of criteria, the students we interviewed primarily adhere to patterns of perception and judgement that are typical for adolescents in general, not only for the specific setting of an international school. We identified four classification criteria that seem to shape how students mark symbolic boundaries, determining who enjoys a high reputation and who is regarded an outsider. These classification criteria include lifestyle, academic achievement, political value orientations and, lastly, language skills. The resulting distinctions already contain evaluations – e.g. the definition of an accepted lifestyle, generally accepted value orientations etc.

National origin does not rank among the students' primary classification criteria. In other words, for the students it is more important to adhere to certain lifestyles and attitudes than to have a certain nationality. The students explicitly, and repeatedly state that: 'So, you're not excluded because you come from another country. We're all from other countries and we're all foreigners' (Interview #4, German Section, translated).<sup>6</sup> In fact, including or excluding someone *because of his or her nationality* is considered highly illegitimate, and students were cautious not to "stereotype" others.

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<sup>5</sup> A very similar distinction between primary and secondary classification was observed by Andreas Wimmer (2004) in his study of ethnic boundaries across three cities in Switzerland

<sup>6</sup> Interview quotes have been edited for better readability. Also, please note that the quotes reported in this text primarily serve as illustrations, whereas our interpretation of the data, and the conclusions we draw from it are based on the entire interview material.

As we previously assumed, social class does not seem relevant for symbolic distinctions at the school we investigated. This is unsurprising, since all the students' parents work for European institutions and come from a highly educated, upper middle-class background. A student from the German Section puts it like this: 'Everyone's rich here' (Interview #4, German Section, translated). Another student nuances this statement: 'But it's not like we're all superrich' (Interview #4, German Section, translated).<sup>7</sup>

However, the adolescents occasionally use the four primary classification criteria to perceive and interpret the various nationalities and language sections at their school. This secondary categorisation is a result of students *attributing* certain valuations derived from their primary categories to 'generalize' about students from certain countries and language sections. The German language section, for example, is viewed as highly assiduous. Due to the negative connotation of 'swottiness', the attribution of that feature to German students goes hand in hand with a somewhat negative connotation of the German section. Overall, these attributions seem consistent across several dimensions and suggest the existence of a symbolic status hierarchy.

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<sup>7</sup> Still, there are some 'individuals', in the words of the interviewees, who are not in line with the majority style of educated understatement, and instead showcase their wealth (Veblen 2007). When the respective individual is mentioned, everybody in the German group knows who it is: 'We have this [student], he always comes to school in outfits of – what's it called? – Ralph Lauren, but says that's basically not expensive enough for him' (Interview #4, German Section, translated). Even though the students find this type of behaviour strange, they do not take it seriously. They dismiss it as funny and 'clown-like'. In any case, it shows that such class snobbism does not mark symbolic boundaries between the school's status groups, but highlights the external boundaries of the school community. This student's behaviour deviates from the norm. Class-specific capital is not a means for status distinction at the school.

Attribution of the primary classification criteria to nationalities and language sections sometimes occurred spontaneously and sometimes when asking students explicitly about possible national differences. For example, a French student, when asked to describe her group of friends, answered: ‘So usually I go to the [Scandinavian country’s] parties, not the French ones’ (Interview #2, French Section). This statement was followed by a conversation about the differences between French and the Scandinavian country’s parties, which resulted in a range of classificatory statements about the respective groups (which will be discussed in detail below). When the interviewer asked about differences between nationalities and language sections explicitly, it appeared that students found it easier to describe these, than to identify common school groups such as ‘the smokers’, the ‘nerds’ or ‘the hippies’. This points toward a certain salience of national labels as a means for classification in a school context.

It must be noted that students frequently jumped between a description of language sections and the use of nationality labels, even though these are not always co-extensive. Particularly the large French and English language sections also host a sizable number of students who are not French or British. Furthermore, as we can also see in our interview sample, a number of students in the school hold dual nationalities, because their parents come from different countries. Nevertheless, nationality and language section often seem to blend into each other in everyday school talk, as in the following example: ‘Like very, very little from the *German section*, like they all have like really, really good grades the *Germans*.’ (Interview #2, French Section, emphasis added). Thus, while national labels may be simply used as a shorthand to describe the respective language sections, it is remarkable to what extent these descriptions also reflect the distribution of national symbolic capital in Europe observed at the macro-level of public discourse. This suggests

that the structure of language sections “anchor” the mutual cognitive classification of students along national lines.

Furthermore, it is notable that most of the time, students mentioned specific language sections and nationalities in their attributions, for example by referring to the ‘French section’ or the ‘Germans’. However, the students would sometimes resort to regional categories, in particular when referring to the Eastern European section. These aggregations occurred spontaneously and were made by Western and Eastern European students alike, as exemplified in the following interview segments: ‘Usually it’s Eastern countries’ (Interview #2, French Section). ‘And basically if you’re like [from different Eastern European countries], like from Balkan countries or Eastern European [...]’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section). Of course, the limited exploratory nature of our study does not allow for a comprehensive classification of countries into regional categories according to our participants. Also, while it might be assumed that ‘Eastern European’ students draw further symbolic boundaries among themselves, for example between Central East Europe and the Balkans, these subdivisions were not observable in the interview material. In terms of the theoretical vocabulary of our study, we can surmise that this means that, first, the symbolic boundary between Western and Eastern Europe is of particular salience within the school, and second, that Eastern European countries have lower levels of national symbolic capital and are therefore less visible and recognizable individually. We will substantiate these observations in the following sections.

In the following, we will describe the criteria for marking symbolic boundaries and illustrate how they are used to perceive and describe language sections and nationalities. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the results of our analysis. It is important to emphasize

at this point that by reconstructing symbolic boundaries, we do not make any assertion about actual differences between the nationalities and language sections in question. These may or may not exist. Our aim is to reconstruct how the students construct and attribute those differences.

[Table 1 near here]

#### ***4.2 Lifestyle: Moderately Deviant Behaviour***

Like other adolescents, the students of the European School seem to draw on certain lifestyle markers as a repertoire of distinction. These include, for example, going to parties, meeting up in popular spots in Brussels: '[City Place] is like where you go out' (Interview #3, Mixed Group), first romantic relationships, and moderate consumption of cigarettes and drugs: 'Like there's one group you can say that's like the smoker or the "cool" group' (Interview #2, French Section). Those lifestyle practices, however, seem only moderately deviant from what parents and teachers expect of the students. This is typical for children from the middle and upper classes (Eckert 1989; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2011). Excessive behaviour, in turn, is not only sanctioned by parents and teachers, but also enjoys a lower reputation among the students themselves. This is illustrated by the remarks of a French student who quite naturally implies that one does not appear at the city's party spots during exam period:

'The big amusing place is Friday evening [City Place], you know the [City Place], and around [City Place]. If you're on a Friday evening – like not like before the exams, just a random Friday – you would at least meet like ten people from here' (Interview #2, French Section).

Now, the students draw on these lifestyle criteria when they talk about different language sections and nationalities at their school. The French and Scandinavian sections seem to

enjoy the highest reputation with regard to their lifestyle. For example, when asked about the popularity of different language sections at the school, the students of the German focus group replied:

Respondent 2: 'The French.'

Respondent 3: 'I think there is no one who doesn't like [those from the Scandinavian country].'

Respondent 2: 'Yes, true.'

Respondent 1: 'The English have... The English not really, right? It is really the French and the [Scandinavian country].'

Respondent 2: 'The French are always viewed as the popular ones' (Interview #1, German Section, translated).

These two sections, however, apparently represent two different lifestyles in the students' perception. A German student puts it this way: the French are 'cool' and the students from the Scandinavian country are 'James-Bond-cool'.

The French 'coolness' has a rebellious streak. This is most visible in front of the school gates, where they seem to be overrepresented among the smokers gathering there before and after classes and during school breaks, as pointed out in three of four interviews. This leads to the observation that 'the French have a junkie reputation' (Interview #4, German Section, translated). Although at first sight, the term 'junkie' does not seem to imply favourable judgement, it can be interpreted as a way to describe a rebellious type of popular students (de Bruyn and Cillessen 2005) in the context of other statements, e.g. 'the French are always viewed as the popular ones' (Interview #4, German Section, translated). In this case, high status is a result of high visibility.

The 'James-Bond-coolness' of the students from the Scandinavian country section, on the other hand, is described as relaxed and casual. They are primarily associated with sexual permissiveness. According to the French respondents, 'the things we do in parties are not the same as the [Scandinavians]' (Interview #2, French Section). Instead, their parties are 'world-famous' and are even compared to 'orgies': 'The [Scandinavian country] parties like they always go and finish like two people in bed somewhere' (Interview #2, French Section). As a consequence of these perceived lifestyle differences, it appears that the French section and the section of the Scandinavian country are competing for status:

Respondent 1: 'The other day like a friend of yours told me the [Scandinavian country] hated the French section.'

Respondent 4: 'More generally, they don't love the French section.... I don't really know why.'

Respondent 5: 'Because like we don't feel that hate, like we don't...'

Respondent 3: 'Yeah, we don't feel that hate for [Scandinavians] [laughter].'(Interview #2, French Section)

Other language sections seem to fall behind the French and Scandinavian country's sections regarding their visibility and the reputation of their lifestyle. The German section, for example, is considered as hardworking and too much focused on achievement, which leads to a devaluation: 'They don't get this French chill' (Interview #2, French Section). The interviewees rarely mention Southern European language sections, which indicates their indifference towards them and that they do not perceive them as status rivals: 'We don't hear much about them' (Interview #2, French Section).

The students from Eastern European sections are perceived as a rather marginalised group, whose members stay amongst themselves and hardly appear at the city's popular

party spots. Asked whether integration is more difficult for certain nationalities, some of the respondents from the mixed focus group point to students from the school's Eastern European sections:

Respondent 3: 'I think, I mean they are more apart from the rest...'

Respondent 1: 'They form their own groups.'

Respondent 3: 'Yeah, exactly.'

Respondent 2: 'And like [another Eastern European country] too' (Interview #3, Mixed Group).

If they are ascribed a certain lifestyle at all, it is not one with a high reputation. In two different interviews, it is alleged – albeit not by all participants - that some students from the Eastern European sections drink a lot of alcohol. An Eastern European student echoes this view: 'Eastern Europeans don't smoke that much but drink more, I think' (Interview #1, Eastern European Section). It can be surmised that alcohol consumption – more so than smoking – is associated with transgressive behaviour, which violates the symbolic boundary of accepted, moderately deviant behaviour. Furthermore, some French interviewees attribute an unfashionable ('not-fashioned') style of clothing to students from one Eastern European country.

Consequently, the Eastern European sections seem to be located at the lower end of the reputation hierarchy in terms of lifestyle, as expressed by a French interviewee: 'I think there is only one section that is less popular. It's [an Eastern European country]' (Interview #2, French Section). The students of the Eastern European section also discuss this negative assessment, while not everybody in the group shares the sentiment underlying the following observation:

‘Basically, if you’re like [...] from Balkan countries or Eastern European... I don’t know like, they [Western European students] just think that you’re inferior’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section).

Overall, the attribution of lifestyle-based classification patterns to different nationalities and language sections seems to reflect the core-periphery divide in Europe in terms of symbolic capital (North-West, South Europe vs. Eastern Europe).

### ***4.3 Academic Achievement: Effortless Achievement***

Although the moderately deviant lifestyle described in the section above is rewarded by students, it somewhat collides with the equally important requirement of performing well academically. While the students have largely internalised the school’s academic work ethic, they do not reward a ‘swotty’ commitment to studying. In the eyes of most students, the excessively competitive and ambitious are viewed just as negatively as those that reject school and are perceived as lazy. Ideally, a student can display a casual and relaxed attitude towards the ethos of academic achievement. A German student describes the ideal of a successful student as follows:

‘So, I don’t know, there are also... well, calling them “nerds” sounds stupid...so like they always have good, perfect grades... I’d say, they spend a lot of time studying. They’re like... [...] But like they are totally nice and all and they’re good to talk to. Like they’re not weird people or whatever, it’s not like nobody talks to them and they’re a separate... group that stays among itself, but...yeah’ (Interview #4, German Section, translated).

Bourdieu traced these differing attitudes to studying (effortless vs. ‘swotty’) back to class background (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Considering the social homogeneity of the students of the European School, however, the students do not attribute these characteristics to other students of different class backgrounds. Instead, they may use

effortless academic achievement as a marker to create a symbolic order of countries and language sections within the school.

For example, the German section has the reputation of performing well academically, albeit at the expense of their ‘coolness’. Asked about their reputation, German students reply that they are considered as ‘efficient’ and ‘withdrawn’. Regarding their narrow focus on academic achievement, they are even said to be ‘simple-minded’. This verdict is reflected in the following comments of French students about students from the German section:

Respondent 1: ‘Another cliché a bit, but whatever, for me the Germans they all work really hard’

Respondent 3: ‘Yeah, they work...’

Respondent 6: ‘They don't get this French chill.’

Respondent 1: ‘Like very, very little from the German section, like they all have like really, really good grades, the Germans.’

Respondent 4: ‘Yeah but it's true, they might be a bit...’

Respondent 1: ‘I think they focus more on work than like the French section.’  
(Interview #2, French Section)

In contrast, the students of a Scandinavian section seem to have mastered the balancing act between academic achievement and a casual attitude towards the school’s academic ethos. However, some students insinuate the following: ‘Well, in our school we always say that like the [Scandinavian country] section is easier than other sections’ (Interview #2, French Section). The interviewed students from the French language section point out that the Scandinavian section have a conspicuously collegial relationship with their teachers: ‘They’re like much more friends with their teacher [...] they eat cake in the

section, at least twice a week' (Interview #2, French Section). This statement reflects an admiration for their confident way of dealing with the school's authorities.

The French section ranks itself lower regarding academic achievement: 'We're kind of the lazy section' (Interview #2, French Section). However, they also allege that French teachers are much stricter in comparison. This underscores how hard it is to strike a balance between maintaining a casual lifestyle and achieving good marks.<sup>8</sup>

#### ***4.4 Value Orientation: Cosmopolitanism, Openness and Tolerance***

A third symbolic boundary drawn by the students divides them along the lines of values and political attitudes, specifically cosmopolitanism vs. particularism. Cosmopolitans view a society's diversity (ethnic, cultural, sexual) as an asset and are committed to the recognition and equality of diverse identities. Particularism, by contrast, views diversity as a threat to a group's distinct identity and way of life. This dimension is reflective of a new political cleavage in Western societies (Kriesi et al. 2012).

Cosmopolitan values and attitudes are enshrined in the educational principles of European Schools and, consequently, have a high symbolic value for the students' self-image, while particularistic values are marginalised. The latter generally mark outsider students who reject the school's ethos. The symbolic value of the European School's cosmopolitan principles is underscored by all interviewee groups, who unequivocally recommend that new students be open-minded and unprejudiced and learn languages to better interact with others, for example: 'Be like open-minded' (Interview #3, Mixed Group); 'learn languages, stow away prejudices (Interview #4, German Section, translated).

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<sup>8</sup> The material did not yield any assessment of academic achievement of other language sections.

However, according to our interviewees, not all student groups seem to adhere to this norm. They sometimes draw on the fault line between cosmopolitanism and particularism to discuss differences between national groups and language sections, especially to mark differences between students from Western and Eastern European countries. For instance, a Western European student from the mixed group notes:

‘Well, I don’t like to generalize, cause that’s... but from what I observe here, the people like from these [Eastern European] sections are more close-minded than like other people, from other sections’ (Interview #3, Mixed Group).

Similarly, an openly gay student from the French language section remarks that students from ‘Eastern countries’ sometimes ‘feel a little bit awkward when I’m walking sometimes, or they just like look at their friends and they’re like “Ok, whatever”.’ (Interview #2, French Section).

These kind of attributions of political and social values result in a controversial debate among students from the Eastern European section that was interviewed. Several times, the students switch to their mother tongue to better voice their dissent. Although not all interviewees agree with the statement, the heated debate made clear that this ascription appears to be a feature of the school’s everyday talk. The students are confronted with it and must find ways to handle it. For example, one respondent thinks that the ‘French are more liberal, more open’, and that:

‘I don’t want to generalize of course, but most of the Eastern Europeans around here don’t support gay rights that much, for example’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section).

However, another student replies to this:

Respondent 1: ‘I can’t really say that there would be some policy issues that Eastern Europeans generally agree on’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section).

Regardless of the actual distribution of values and attitudes across language sections, the students allude to the notion of an enlightened ‘West’, which is rated positively, and an ‘East’ steeped in traditional values, which is rated negatively – attributions and judgements that are also widespread in public discourse (Boatcă 2015).

#### ***4.5 Language Skills: English and French***

Finally, the adolescents we interviewed mark symbolic boundaries between groups through language. Other studies have investigated the significance of language for status rivalries among adolescents (for a summary, see: Corsaro and Eder 1990, 211-214). To belong to a status group requires knowing the right slang, buzzwords and nicknames. Moreover, the group best able to persuade others to imitate its language repertoire and style can establish itself as the symbolically dominant group.

Multinational schools like the one in Brussels are a special case: the sheer diversity of national languages transcends the usual differences in language repertoire and style. Every European School in Brussels has a minimum of seven language sections and additional ‘non-institutionalised’ languages. Unsurprisingly, then, students classify their peers according to the languages they speak – as their mother tongue or as their preferred foreign languages.

The languages with the highest instrumental value, which are those spoken widely and therefore enable communication with many people (Gerhards 2012), also enjoy the highest reputation at the school. In our case, these are English and French, both a lingua

franca acquired by most students as a first foreign language. When asked about what they would recommend to new students to integrate into the school community, the answer across all group interviews was to learn either English or French.

As a result, the French section in particular emerges as one dominant faction that can impose its language as a default, excluding those who do not speak French. For example, an Eastern European student remarks that the students from the French section do not seem to like to speak in another language:

‘They don’t look what section are you or something, but just if you can’t speak French, yeah, it’s harder...to approach them. They don’t bother to talk to you or spend energy if you can’t speak French or something’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section).

Students from the French section realize that the fact that French is the school’s lingua franca may serve in their advantage:

‘And maybe [we are] a little bit more extroverted also because we’re a lot and we’re in Belgium and speak French usually fluently, so we can use easily talk to and communicate because we feel comfortable. Because we’re in a French-speaking country.’ (Interview #2, French Section)

Due to the small number of British students at the school, English language skills are not attributed to any particular national group at the school. At most, the Scandinavian section is viewed as having excellent English skills. Two interviews mention the ‘fluency’ in English of the students of a Scandinavian section.

The existence of two lingua franca results in a clear symbolic boundary between the English and the French part of the school, while there is not, however, a clear hierarchy between the two groups with regard to reputation:

‘There’s quite a strong divide between the French-speaking part and the English-speaking part, obviously, depends on what second language people have’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section).

Other languages found unsuitable to interact with people across language sections lag behind English and French, the two languages with the highest instrumental value and reputation. However, some of them are classified as ‘sounding funny’ and are thus highly recognizable. These features are mainly attributed to languages from some Southern European countries:

‘Fast, loud and...a lot. That’s [a South European language]. Fast, loud and a lot, that’s for the [South European country]’ (Interview #4, German Section, translated).

Consequently, students who speak a South European language are easily identified by their accents, which are judged as not quite to be taken seriously:

‘Well, I think nobody at this school has not made fun of [...] the accent of [the South European country]’ (Interview #4, German Section, translated).

Unfortunately, the interviews do not yield any more information about other languages represented at the European School. Eastern European languages are mentioned only once and solely as an obstacle for a better integration of Eastern European students into the school community. They are thus viewed as having a negative instrumental value, as expressed in the following quote from a Western European student:

‘I think for [some Eastern European countries] it’s harder for them [to integrate] because, I don’t know, I think their language is so different’ (Interview #3, Mixed Group).

Overall, this indicates a hierarchy of ‘linguistic capital’ in Europe: French and English are ‘at the top’, followed by South European languages, which have low instrumental value but high symbolic value due to their recognisability, while other languages are hardly mentioned or judged negatively.

## **5. Summary and Conclusion**

In this article, we have traced the criteria of perception and judgement used by adolescents in an international context to define symbolic boundaries between different groups of students and the role of national background in this context. We have argued that symbolic boundaries are marked in two steps, which we have described as classification and attribution. Regarding the former, we identified four criteria used by adolescents to mark symbolic boundaries: a youth-specific lifestyle, effortless academic achievements, cosmopolitan values and, lastly, membership in a dominant language group. National origin is irrelevant for the primary classification.

However, adolescents attribute those criteria to the various national groups and language sections represented at their school, unwittingly creating a status hierarchy among them. Overall, Scandinavian students consistently rank highest across all criteria, followed by the French. In the eyes of our interviewees, these groups best represent the school’s accepted moderately deviant lifestyle, hold cosmopolitan values and belong to one of the two dominant language sections, French or English. The French section ranks slightly lower due to its perceived lower academic performance. The German section is also viewed negatively for its academic performance, but for another reason: they allegedly focus too narrowly on academic performance at the expense of casualness and ‘coolness’. The South European and English section appear to be less visible and are thus not rated

positively or negatively.<sup>9</sup> Students from Eastern European countries seem to experience the greatest difficulty to assert themselves in the school's status hierarchy because of the attribution of several negative criteria to them.

The microcosm of the European School thus appears to reproduce the core-periphery divide regarding the distribution of national symbolic capital, which can be observed between North Western and South European, on the one hand, and Eastern European countries, on the other. This occurs although the adolescents who took part in our interviews are situated in the highly internationalised environment of a school maintaining a cosmopolitan ethos, and have a similar social class background. It is also remarkable that the criteria for distinction emerge from a repertoire that is specific to adolescents, but still tend to reproduce prevailing notions of the distribution of symbolic capital on an international level.

We wish to point out two methodological limitations of our study. First, based on the interviews we conducted, we are only able to reconstruct some of the repertoires that students draw on to perceive and judge their peers. Our study is not conclusive regarding the extent to which these categories actually affect student behaviour, that is, whether symbolic boundaries are turned into social boundaries. This would require further ethnographic research or network studies. Based on the symbolic boundaries our study could identify, it can be surmised that social boundaries divide mostly the Western from the Eastern European sections. This assumption is supported by a number of interview statements by students from the Western European sections about a low degree of

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<sup>9</sup> However, this might also be a consequence of the exploratory nature of our study, as we did not interview students from all language sections, in particular Southern European ones.

exchange with Eastern European students: ‘they are more apart from the rest’ (Interview #3, Mixed Group), or ‘It’s not the first group we see [in the cafeteria], so therefore we’re not attracted’ (Interview #2, French Section). It also works the other way around: ‘Yeah actually, Eastern Europeans group up together more and English are alone and French alone I would say, they’re enough big, yeah’ (Interview #1, Eastern European Section). However, this assumption has to be confirmed by further studies.

Secondly, as mentioned above, our study was exploratory by nature. We are aware that a small number of group interviews lacking ethnographic observation is not sufficient to describe the complexity of symbolic boundaries in the context of this school. In particular, it is possible that students from other European schools, school classes and levels draw different symbolic boundaries, and that age has an influence on these processes. In fact, some interview passages hint at this possibility. For example, students recounted that, as they grew older, they also began to socialize more with other language sections and nationalities; and that language sections may sometimes have different reputations at other school levels. Our analysis was merely focused on illustrating a theoretical argument, and exploring some of the repertoires from which national symbolic boundaries within international environments may be constructed. These turned out to be quite consistent with the symbolic capital attributed to different countries and regions at the macro-level.

Despite these limitations, our research contributes important and novel insights because we analyse the relevance and contents of national symbolic capital in a genuinely international environment. The results of our study suggest that national symbolic boundaries may even be reproduced in a highly international context like a European School. The students are not entirely able to shake off the ‘national marking’, which is

attributed to them by others or occasionally by themselves, creating status advantages for some, and disadvantages for others. Given that we chose a least-likely research design, i.e. a context in which the reproduction of symbolic boundaries of nationality is very unlikely, we contend that they are probably relevant in other social fields as well. Thus, while the EU has enabled a deepening of integration in different areas of social life, and education policy in particular, national symbolic capital may continue to bias Europeans' perception and judgments of each other. These results chime with other studies that have found a considerable cultural lag of national forms of identification and classification in the EU, for example in terms of attitudes towards European integration (Medrano 2003), collective memories (Gerhards et al. 2015) and European identity (Duchesne et al. 2010). We thus need to redirect our attention from conceptualizing European integration as a straightforward process of 'conversion to Europe' in different domains, for example through transnational mobility or education policy, to how concrete social actors actually draw and tackle persistent symbolic boundaries of nationality on a daily basis and within their ordinary social settings.

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## Tables

Table 1. Symbolic boundaries at a European School: Classification and attribution

Classification			Attribution to national background/language section	
Criteria	rated high	rated low	positive	Negative
Lifestyle	a) Going to parties, casualness, sexual permissiveness	Not knowing how to party, excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs	a) Scandinavian country	Eastern European
	b) Going to parties, moderate consumption of cigarettes and drugs		b) French	
Academic achievement	Effortless high achievement	a) Bad performance	Scandinavian country	a) French
		b) 'Swottiness', competitiveness		
Value orientation	Liberal, cosmopolitan values and attitudes	Intolerance, denigration of minorities, non-acceptance of homosexuality	French, Western European	Eastern European
Language skills	a) English language skills	Language difficulties	a) Scandinavian country	Eastern European
	b) French language skills		b) French	