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'Discovering a different me'

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1 **'Discovering a different me'. Discursive positioning in life story telling over time**

2
3 **Introduction**

4
5 In order to be recognised as an agent, one's life story has to make sense to those whose
6 recognition is desired. Since a life story will only convince when it is attuned to the
7 orientations of the intended audience, accounting for one's life trajectory is always a
8 dialogical process. The freedom of narrators to shape their own stories is therefore far from
9 absolute (cf. Olson and Shopes, 1991: 193). This article aims to contribute to the discussion
10 of life history methodology by offering a reflection on the co-production of life stories in
11 longitudinal biographic research between the narrator, the interviewer, and the various
12 audiences that each has in mind. More in particular, the focus will be on the narrator's
13 agentic power in life story telling against the background of societal changes and life span
14 developments. I will demonstrate how I use 'dialogical self theory' (cf. Hermans, 2001) to
15 analyse changes in discursive positioning in life story telling by discussing two editions of the
16 evolving life story of Fatima Elatik, a well-known Moroccan-Dutch administrator. The life
17 story was first produced in an interview in 1999, and subsequently followed up nearly ten
18 years later. In this paper, the focus is on the agentic power in Elatik's life story telling both in
19 the successive biographical choices that she makes and in the changing interaction between
20 her and the interviewer.

21 As one of the first headscarf wearing Muslim women who attained a position in the
22 highest echelons of the Dutch administration, Fatima Elatik has received much media
23 attention. In the late 1960s her parents migrated with their two sons from a rural area in
24 southern Morocco to Amsterdam, where Fatima was born in 1973. In comparison to her
25 parents, neither of whom has enjoyed substantial formal education, Fatima has realised an
26 enormous upward mobility: she presently presides the council of one of the biggest
27 boroughs of Amsterdam.

28 Fatima Elatik is one of the women who participated in my research project on the
29 inheritance of migration in life stories of highly educated Moroccan-Dutch women. The
30 project began in 1998, when I interviewed twenty-five young adult women. The aim of the
31 project was to examine representations of intersecting identifications in their life stories. In
32 2008 I revisited fifteen of the twenty-five women for a follow-up interview. In the meantime,
33 besides 9/11 and the subsequent 'War on Terror,' several local incidents had influenced the
34 Dutch discourse on Muslims. In 2002 the liberal-rightist politician Pim Fortuyn was
35 assassinated by a radical environmentalist of Dutch background. Since Fortuyn spoke very
36 negatively about Muslims, his death is often associated with a perceived danger posed by
37 the presence of (fundamentalist) Muslims in the Netherlands. In 2004, Theo van Gogh was
38 murdered by a young man of Moroccan descent who motivated his act in religious terms.
39 Van Gogh was the producer of the film *Submission*, which contains shots of Koranic texts
40 written on a naked female body. The screenplay was written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, at the time a
41 member of the Dutch parliament. *Submission* was part of what this Somali-born politician
42 called her '*jihad*' against Islam's oppression of women. Particularly during her years in
43 parliament, Hirsi Ali's views had a high impact on the public debate on Islam in the
44 Netherlands. Most recently the flagrantly anti-Islamic statements of Geert Wilders, a
45 populist member of the Dutch parliament have received much media attention.

1 The aim of the follow-up interviews was to study how the interplay between changes
2 in the Dutch societal climate and personal life course developments of my interlocutors
3 informed their experience and organisation of intersectionality. As a well-known public
4 figure, Elatik stands out as exceptional among the participants in at least two ways. First of
5 all, her exceptionality is reflected in her extraordinarily well-articulated life story which
6 bespeaks much experience with presenting herself in the media. For the purpose of this
7 article this makes her story well-suited to use as a case-study to discuss the dialogical
8 process of discursive positioning.

9 Secondly, in comparison to most other life stories, the self-narratives of Elatik focus
10 more prominently on her activities in the public sphere and developments in the Dutch
11 political situation while narrations on her private life and family relations are relatively
12 scarce. The focus in this article is therefore on Elatik's negotiations with the predominantly
13 Dutch public about her own position in society against the background of growing
14 Islamophobia in the Netherlands between 1999 and 2008. I will concentrate on two kind of
15 narrations: those related to the realisation of her personal ambitions and those related to
16 her sense of belonging as a Dutch citizen.

17 In social psychology dialogicality refers to the capacity of the human mind to
18 understand and communicate about social realities in terms of and in opposition to
19 'otherness' (Marková, 2003). In Hermans' dialogical self theory the focus is on dialogicality
20 between various 'I-positions' and 'voices of the self' in personal and social constructions of
21 the self (Hermans, 2001: 248-249).

22 The self is dialogically constructed in two ways: we can look at our selves through the
23 eyes of significant others, and comment on ourselves as we switch between temporally and
24 spatially specific positions that we take as embodied actors. Hermans calls these positions 'I-
25 positions'. From each particular I-position, we enter into dialogues with the selves we are in
26 different I-positions and with significant others to whom we relate in these positions. In
27 what follows I will focus on dialogues between internal and external voices in Elatik's
28 formulation of accomplishments and desires. Since the production of a life story takes place
29 in the encounter between narrator and interviewer, in addition to examining the various
30 audiences or 'voices' that Elatik addresses and responds to in her narrations, I will analyse
31 how she employs her agency in our co-production of her life story. First I reflect on the
32 concept of agency in relation to migration.

33 34 35 **Agency in a post-migration context**

36
37 In psychological and sociological terms, agency refers to the biographical choices that people
38 make in order to lead a 'good life'. Besides the capacity to formulate and pursue life plans,
39 agency also includes coping strategies: one's response to challenges and threats that may
40 jeopardise one's life plans (Skinner & Edge, 2002). Conceptions of the 'good life' and the
41 choices that people make in formulating and pursuing life plans are shaped by the cultural,
42 socio-economic and historical factors that impact their life worlds, as well as by their
43 personal dispositions, ideals and beliefs about desirable self-realisation. Although the goals
44 that groups and individuals formulate may diverge widely, each can be classified in terms of
45 a specific combination of three universal human motivational needs: competence,
46 relatedness and autonomy (Crockett, 2002: 8).

1 According to a popular typology in intercultural communication studies cultures can
2 be arranged on a scale running from 'individualist' cultures (the West) to 'collectivist'
3 cultures (the rest). Individualist cultures are perceived to give rise to 'independent' and
4 bounded persons that strive for individual self-enhancement. Collectivist cultures, on the
5 other hand, are presented as creating 'interdependent' persons with fluid boundaries, who
6 think and act in terms of relationships and accept norms and hierarchies. According to the
7 independent/ interdependent typology, personal autonomy is valued most highly in so-
8 called 'individualist' cultures, and relatedness in so-called 'collective' cultures (cf. Hofstede,
9 1991: 261).

10 Particularly in popular discourse this typology can easily result in a discursive selfing
11 and othering in which a Western, self-determining, independent subject is pitted against
12 non-Western subjectivities that are 'not yet' enlightened but submit to larger entities such
13 as social groups or supernatural forces. In a recurrent Dutch debate about dual nationalities
14 of Muslim members of the Dutch parliament, for instance, the loyalty of these members as
15 Dutch citizens is questioned on the basis of what is assumed to be their much deeper
16 allegiance to the Muslim community. Obedience to this religious collectivity is presumed to
17 overrule their agency as individuals (cf. Hart, 2005).

18 Cultural models of the self, however, should not be mistaken for actual experiences of
19 individualism and relatedness (cf. Spiro, 1993). Moreover, cultural discourses and practices
20 are distributed disproportionately among the members of a society rather than being shared
21 equally by all. Factors such as age, education and social class influence how individuals
22 internalise cultural discourses in dialogue with their psychological make-up (cf. Frank, 2006).
23 Also, intra-personal variations in self-constructions may occur during the course of one's life
24 (cf. Diehl et al, 2004). Therefore, cultures and selves should not be viewed as either
25 independent or interdependent, but as animated by tensions between group loyalties and
26 personal ambitions (cf. Gregg, 2007).

27 Particularly for migrants and their offspring, finding a satisfactory balance between
28 autonomy and relatedness can be a formidable task. Migration is a very agentic act per se;
29 its prime goal is to improve one's standards of living. For most migrants, upward mobility
30 and high achievements constitute the most important desired outcomes of migration, if not
31 for themselves then for the next generation. This explains why the children of migrants often
32 dream of high status careers in medicine and law, or at least pursue white collar jobs (cf.
33 Coenen, 2001).

34 Besides inheriting parental aspirations, the descendants of migrants also have to
35 accommodate an inheritance of loss:¹ in a post-migration context, former feelings of home
36 and belonging are no longer self-evident and new forms of relatedness have to be
37 negotiated both in the country of settlement and in the country of origin. Moreover,
38 differences in the everyday life experiences of migrant parents and their children may
39 produce divergent wishes for relatedness.

40 Interestingly, my interlocutors in the life story project often explained the dilemmas they
41 face in finding a satisfactory balance between personal autonomy and relatedness in the
42 same terms that characterise the dominant Dutch discourse on Muslims (cf. Buitelaar, 2007;
43 2009). The distinction between 'Dutch individualistic society' and the 'collectivistic values' in
44 'Moroccan' or 'Islamic culture' features often in their life stories. From an anthropological
45 point of view such cultural explanations alone do not suffice. Behavioural autonomy, for
46 instance, is not exclusively compatible with separateness from others, but may also occur in

1 combination with relatedness. To disentangle notions of agency, autonomy, separateness
2 and relatedness from views in which independence and separateness are conflated,
3 Kagitçibasi (2005) distinguishes between a *behavioural* and a *relational* dimension that
4 underlie the construction of selves. The identification of these two different dimensions
5 opens our eyes for ways in which desires for various forms of (in)dependence may co-exist.

6 In what follows, I will analyse the dialogicality in the voices in Fatima Elatik's life story
7 that express or contest specific behavioural and relational desires. Comparing the 1999 self-
8 narratives with those articulated in the 2008 interview I will examine the reshuffling of
9 voices negotiating behavioural or relational wishes for (in)dependence in her self-
10 representations.²

11
12
13 Fatima Elatik in 1999: The mission of a 25 year old Muslim girl with a headscarf, brains and a
14 big mouth

15
16 In the 1999 interview, Fatima presents herself first and foremost as a 'a Muslim girl with a
17 headscarf, brains and a big mouth'. In terms of dialogical self theory, the character of the self-
18 confident and independent Muslim girl is, amongst other things, her 'answer' to being
19 addressed in terms of the dominant image in the Dutch discourse on Islam as the oppressed
20 Muslim woman. Simultaneously, it is her answer to being addressed in terms of the dominant
21 image in the discourse of Muslim migrants of the obedient, caring Muslim woman who
22 protects the reputation of her family by staying clear from public space.

23 In the following interview-excerpt we can literally hear Fatima enter into a dialogue
24 with voices addressing her according to these different representations of 'the Muslim
25 woman':

26
27 *You can find me engaged in a debate with three men at eleven o'clock at night. Does that look*
28 *like I'm being oppressed? No, actually it doesn't. I am the living proof that all those ideas that*
29 *we used to have about women and headscarves were just a lot of nonsense. Maybe such ideas*
30 *held some truth in the past, I won't deny that, but it was not just the headscarf that oppressed*
31 *women. It was simply men oppressing women! So what we do is give it (the headscarf, mb)*
32 *different connotations. That's not making it easy on yourself, believe me! What I do is*
33 *challenge society.*

34
35 Rather than the heteronomy implied in dominant conceptions of the Muslim woman, Elatik
36 voices behavioural autonomy and self-determination. Appropriation of the headscarf in this
37 self-presentation points to Elatik's relatedness to the Muslim community. She also speaks a lot
38 about 'spirituality' during the first interview. When asked what spirituality means to her, she
39 answers:

40
41 *You know, this awareness of God. The realisation that God exists and how you let that reflect in*
42 *your own life. There are these ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah. What you do is try to make*
43 *as many of these characteristics part of yourself: to be forgiving, generous, that sort of thing*
44 *appeals to me, honesty, justice, wisdom, you know.*

1 In this excerpt, God is mentioned as an important external position that cannot be separated
2 from Elatik herself: she emulates God's voice in her own wishes for agency.

3 Like most interviewees, Elatik describes adolescence as a time for experimenting with
4 lifestyles and finding her own place in society. She relates how the teenager Fatima began to
5 develop a critical stance towards what she had been taught about Islam and longed to read
6 more about her religion. During a summer visit to the natal village of her parents in Morocco,
7 sixteen year old Fatima has a religious experience; she senses the presence of God. While she
8 is grateful for growing up in a country which has so much to offer, she realises she feels much
9 closer to God in this simple Moroccan village. Wishing to take this closeness home with her,
10 she decides to begin wearing a headscarf. She also takes it upon it as her 'mission' to testify to
11 others about the beauty of Islam.

12 Her religious experience is the main anchor point in Elatik's 1999 life story. It is the
13 episode around which her story is organised both in content and in form; the narrations in the
14 text preceding it lead up to the moment of her decision to cover her head, while nearly
15 everything that succeeds it is presented as resulting either directly or indirectly from this
16 decision.

17 In the vocabulary and images that she uses to describe her religious experience,
18 parallels can be found with the life story of the prophet Muhammed. She recalls realising, for
19 instance, that she has 'a message'. In Arabic the prophet Muhammed is referred to as '*rasûl*
20 *Allah*', the Messenger of God. In several instances elsewhere in her life story Fatima repeats
21 having a 'message' or 'mission'. Another parallel with the life story of the prophet Muhammad
22 is in her habitual retreats in the mountains 'to philosophise'. This is what the Prophet is also
23 said to have done often. In fact, it is believed to have been on one of these retreats that he
24 received his first revelation. Elatik does not describe her religious experience in terms of a
25 revelation, but she does state that her retreats helped her feel very close to God and led to the
26 insight that putting on a headscarf was the right step to take in starting to do something with
27 her message.

28 The prophetic voice in Elatik's life story during the 1999 interview allows her to
29 interweave Islamic discourse with a social democratic discourse that sounds more familiar (and
30 less threatening) to her Dutch audience:

31
32 *I am here with a message, because why has God bestowed al those blessings on me? I was*
33 *raised in a European country. I've had all the chances that one could wish for: good parents, a*
34 *good upbringing and a good education. I have to do something with that. I can't just keep it to*
35 *myself. Because, as you can tell, I am a social democrat by origin: share and share alike!*

36
37 Again, God is presented here as an external position that informs Elatik's agency: divine power
38 has enabled her to formulate her ambitions and secure both individual and group relatedness.

39 Enhancing intergroup relations becomes the main goal of her life once she realises that
40 her headscarf triggers negative responses from Dutch people. She speaks of a 'wake-up call'
41 that gave the impetus to a political career aimed at demanding respect and 'a place of their
42 own' for Muslims in Dutch society. This pursuit combines her desire for personal achievements
43 with her connectedness to both the Muslim community and her network within the larger
44 Dutch society to which she feels to belong, thus developing what Kagitçibasi (2005: 312) would
45 call an 'autonomous-related self'.

1 A recurrent theme in the 1999 life story is the importance to be seen and heard. Elatik
2 proudly relates how she 'launched Moroccan girls who not only wear headscarves but even
3 have outspoken views on matters' on Dutch television. Her political mission is motivated by
4 her wish for recognition. The 'politics of recognition' concern the dual demand for dignity and
5 authenticity (Taylor, 1994). Dignity is related to a politics focused on equal rights, while
6 authenticity focuses on the right to a distinct identity and requires a politics of difference. The
7 underlying demand is the right not to be ignored or assimilated to a dominant identity. The
8 right, in other words, to 'get into the picture', as Elatik expresses it. To her, this means full
9 participation in Dutch society, not *despite* the fact that she is a Muslim woman with a
10 headscarf, but *as* a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf.

11 In sum, Elatik's 1999 life story creates the image of an agent who is engaged in ongoing
12 dialogues with members of various groups she identifies with in order to negotiate the
13 meaning of being a female Muslim Dutch citizen: now from her I-position as Muslim migrant
14 daughter, then as a social democrat she addresses Muslims, non-Muslims, 'new' and 'old'
15 Dutch citizens in voices that for each category contains both familiar and novel claims of
16 behavioural relational forms of in(ter)dependence. The self-presentation as a 'Muslim with a
17 headscarf, brains and a big mouth' allows her to experience being an emancipated Muslim
18 woman and a politically active Dutch citizen as intersecting identifications that simultaneously
19 inform her biographical choices.

22 Fatima Elatik in 2008: Reshuffling voices

24 The years following the 1999 interview, I frequently came across interviews with Elatik in the
25 media. The frequency of such appearances decreased considerably in later years. In the follow-
26 up interview in 2008, the by then 35 years old Elatik explained what had become of her
27 seemingly indefatigable identity politics as a Muslim citizen:

29 *The world has changed tremendously in the last ten years, and that has affected me a lot*
30 *personally. I grew up believing I was an Amsterdam-girl. But after 9/11 I became 'a Muslim'. I*
31 *remember well receiving the first call after the attacks from a journalist who wanted to know*
32 *how I, as a Muslim, felt about what had happened. I was being reduced to a single label: I was*
33 *no longer simply a town councillor, but 'the Muslim' town councillor. That hurt a lot.*

35 In terms of dialogical self theory, Elatik's enormous talent to mix and combine voices from
36 various I-positions was no longer appreciated by a large part of her non-Muslim audience and
37 her hybrid utterances were met with silence. In her experience, the only voice to which her
38 interlocutors henceforth responded was that of a generalised Muslim, a voice that she does
39 not recognise as her own. In analytical terms, what hurt Elatik most was the negation of her
40 experience of intersectionality and the thwarting of her life plan to integrate behavioural
41 achievements with connectedness to several groups in Dutch society.

42 This situation exacerbated when the film producer Theo van Gogh was murdered in
43 2004. Van Gogh had often ridiculed Elatik in his news paper and consistently referred to her as
44 'the whore of the goatfuckers'. The weeks following van Gogh's murder, Elatik received
45 numerous threat-mails and phone calls and for several months, the Dutch state provided her
46 with body guards. Not surprisingly, this situation affected her enormously:

1
2 *I felt unsafe. I had always been so proud of being Dutch, but now my country was changing.*
3 *People were not talking about me, Fatima, as a person, but as a representative of a group that*
4 *was singled out to pile shit on. For the first time in my life I felt that in the eyes of others I did*
5 *not belong.*

6
7 Central to this excerpt is the impact of dialogic relations with others on self-constructions:
8 although Elatik's own feelings about her Dutch citizenship have not changed, experiencing that
9 she is no longer addressed as Dutch by the general public disturbs her sense of belonging and
10 her sense of safety. In 1999 she still believed in her mission as an interpreter of the various
11 collective voices of the groups she identifies with to the benefit of all. In 2008, she realises that
12 she has less power to define herself than she previously thought she did. Once an expression
13 of intersecting identities, her self-presentation as a 'Muslim with a headscarf, brains and a big
14 mouth' is dissected by others into several oppositional identities. Rather than being recognised
15 for a full Dutch citizen of Muslim background, Elatik feels reduced to being a spokesperson for
16 'her kind'.

17 This misrecognition jeopardises not only the realisation of her goals for achievements,
18 but also her wishes for relatedness. What worries her even more is that for a while, she also
19 doubts the spiritual efficacy of her religious heritage:

20
21 *I got scared and lost my trust in people. For a while I also lost my trust in God. I could not get in*
22 *touch with my spiritual power: before I had always felt that whatever I'll find on my path, God*
23 *will guide me. But now I became a control-freak, always alert. That was not Fatima! My*
24 *spirituality had always been my greatest source of inspiration. 'When the going gets tough,*
25 *Fatima gets going' was how it used to be. Well, those days were over.*

26
27 It took Elatik two years to 'get going' again. Slowly her fear made way for anger, and later for
28 the idea that maybe God was testing her:

29
30 *Having been trained so well in my own tradition, I figured maybe I could heal myself by*
31 *reverting to Islam to regain my spirituality. Maybe the meaning of it all was to make me grow*
32 *and change my ways. Because even before this all happened, I was always pressed and*
33 *running. I no longer enjoyed doing things this way, so I decided to go back to the old Fatima.*
34 *And my religion helps me do that. Performing my prayers is like a constant reminder 'Check:*
35 *what are you doing?' Every prayer is a little retreat which helps me get closer to my Creator*
36 *and to myself. Fortunately, God has become my buddy again.*

37
38 This excerpt illustrates the agentic potential of coping strategies: Elatik resorts to religion in
39 response to the challenges to her life plan. She manages to get out of the impasse she finds
40 herself in by reshuffling the voices that inform her sense of self. First of all, she summons her
41 weakened religious voice to give meaning to what has happened to her and to find a new
42 purpose in life by re-entering into dialogues with God. Simultaneously, she employs religious
43 rituals to engage in internal dialogues with different I-positions within her self and re-organises
44 them into different spatial contexts. Now that the formerly successful public self-presentation
45 as the assertive Muslim Dutch citizen has turned against her, Elatik decides to keep her
46 religious inspiration to herself and no longer speak as a Muslim citizen in the public domain. In

1 her new orchestration of voices, Elatik the committed Dutch citizen is forwarded in her I-
2 position as city councillor, while Elatik the Muslim woman takes the lead in private settings.
3 Summarising towards the end of the 2008 interview what has become of the 'mission' that
4 was the red thread in her life story in the 1999 interview, she states:

5
6 *I gave up. There are many young smart people out there who can take over. Professionally, it's*
7 *back to core business: my work as a town councillor. If you want my view on projects to*
8 *improve this town district, fine, but if you want my opinion on Muslims or Islam: go find*
9 *someone else.*

10
11 The contextualised voicing of different I-positions does not lead to complete
12 compartmentalisation of different identifications, however. As she speaks from one position,
13 Elatik remains in dialogue with the voices that are related to her other positions. Describing
14 God as 'her buddy' she introduces an egalitarian, informal mode of relating to others in the
15 religious voice she grew up with, thus presenting herself as a self-determined individual
16 rather than someone who submits to hierarchical relations. More importantly, in calling God
17 'her buddy', she puts God in the position of a coach who monitors her self-realisation in all
18 domains: Even if she no longer wishes to speak out publicly about Islam, she continues to be
19 inspired by her religion to serve the local community as town councillor. Last of all, for
20 personal spiritual reasons, sacrificing the headscarf in order to complete privatise her
21 religious identity is no option to her. Having reduced her discursive self-presentations as a
22 Muslim, the headscarf enables a continuous performative religious self-presentation that
23 allows her to experience her I-position as a Muslim as an embodied meta-position that
24 informs her other I-positions and creates coherence between them.

25 26 27 **Promoting Elatik's I-position as a woman**

28
29 The reformulation of ambitions with concomitant reshuffling of voices that express public and
30 private selves has created space for Elatik to address an I-position that had remained in the
31 background in previous self-presentations. In 1999, the prophetic voice was dominant in her
32 self-narratives and promoted her self-presentation as a politician and administrator. Talking
33 from her I-position as a woman, Elatik spoke much more hesitantly. Explaining why the
34 relationship with a former boyfriend had failed, for instance, she stated:

35
36 *He has this feminine side to him, see, so very sweet and all that. While I am always a*
37 *tough female. [...] I always have to play that male role, because I work in a men's*
38 *world.*

39
40 This quotation bespeaks the influence on Elatik's self-presentation as a woman of the
41 gendered 'tastes' of the voices that populate her life story. Voices representing behavioural
42 independency and achievements in the public sphere are linked to masculinity, those
43 representing relatedness in the private sphere to femininity. Self-evaluations in the 1999
44 interview as an emancipated Muslim girl with brains, a headscarf and a big mouth are not
45 unequivocally positive: Elatik describes herself as: 'a tough battle-axe', 'a difficult woman'
46 and even 'an ogress'. Like the more general expression 'a woman with balls' to characterise

1 a strong female professional, Elatik's self-descriptions as a self-determined woman echo
2 gendered connotations that are not unequivocally appreciated in women. Indeed, in the
3 narrations produced during the 1999 interview, there is a certain ambivalence in her self-
4 evaluations as a female Muslim politician.

5 In the 2008 interview, distinguishing more prominently between a public self and
6 private self goes hand in hand with new self-representations as a woman. By the time of the
7 second interview, Elatik is preparing her forthcoming wedding. Talking about the
8 relationship with her partner, she explicitly presents herself as someone who acknowledges
9 her vulnerability and seeks the support of her fiancée. She states that the difficult phase she
10 went through after the murder of Van Gogh has taught her that silencing the voice of her
11 emotions is contra-productive. Allowing it to speak up has created more space for what she
12 calls the experience of being a woman:

13
14 *The entire emotional world of Fatima... it is only now that I learn how it feels to be a woman,*
15 *you see? In this relationship I am not the town-councillor, I cannot be directive. He is almost*
16 *the only person I know who looks beyond my professional position. He appeals to the young*
17 *girl in Fatima. Also, I feel safe when he is around. Just knowing that he is there gives me safe*
18 *feeling. Besides, we have an awful lot of fun. So I am discovering a very different me.*

19
20 Note the internal dialogues between different I-positions in this excerpt. Elatik initially has
21 difficulty in speaking from the I-position of a vulnerable woman and refers to herself in the
22 third person: 'the emotional world of Fatima'; 'the young girl in Fatima'. She looks at herself
23 from a distance and approaches her new I-position in opposition to her more familiar I-
24 position as a town-councillor before she takes the perspective of the new I-position and
25 speaks from it in terms of 'I'.

26 Dialogues with external voices also play a role in the promotion of Elatik's new I-position
27 as a woman: she presents her fiancée as someone who looks beyond her professional
28 position and who appeals to the girl in her, thus fostering her discovery of 'a very different
29 me'. Elatik feels that her partner is as yet exceptional in recognising this new I-position, but
30 she is actively seeking wider acknowledgement. In fact, the wish to be supported in giving
31 voice to her new I-position as a woman also affected the interview situation.

32 33 **Dialogicality in the interview situation**

34
35 So far, I have concentrated on shifts in Elatik's positioning in her life story in relation to the
36 imagined Dutch audience that she addressed and responded to in her discursive
37 construction of self. In this last section, I will reflect on the dialogicality between narrator
38 and interviewer in the interview situation itself.

39 While in the interviews with most other participants in the research project the agentic
40 power of life story telling was situated mainly in dialogically organised self-reflection and
41 self-regulation, as a public figure with much experience in presenting herself in the media,
42 Elatik's agency in the 1999 interview chiefly related to the performative power of self-
43 presentation. Rather than being addressed as an interlocutor, the interviewer was conflated
44 with the wider audience to whom Elatik wished to convey a story that she had obviously
45 prepared beforehand. Hardly contemplating my questions, she used them as a springboard
46 to present a self-narrative that resembled more a press release than a response to the topics

1 I had suggested. Also, unlike most participants, she was not relieved but in fact slightly
2 disappointed to learn that I would use pseudonyms throughout in the book.³ In sum, Elatik's
3 agentic power in the 1999 interview was located primarily in using it as a platform to convey
4 a carefully constructed and oft repeated self-presentation to the wider public.

5 In our 2008 interview, she took the lead again. This time, however, she controlled the
6 turn taking by questioning me about my own experiences with the topics she addressed.
7 While I teach my students that our interlocutors have the right to demand information
8 about ourselves but that providing such information is usually best postponed until the end
9 of the interview, in the 2008 interview with Elatik I found it just as difficult to ignore her
10 questions about my personal life as it had been to interrupt her story in 1999.

11 Several reasons may account for the shift in her stance towards the interviewer, some of
12 which I would argue are related to more general implications of longitudinal research for the
13 relationship between researcher and the other participants in subsequent phases. First of all,
14 the mere fact that the researcher contacts her interlocutors again after such a long time
15 proves that she has not forgotten them.⁴ The ambiance of reunion that enters the setting in
16 a follow-up interview tends to revive and boost previously developed rapport. Moreover,
17 meeting again after ten years, both narrator and interviewer are aware of the marks that the
18 passage of time has left on each other's face, fostering a sense of bonding and an urge to
19 compare notes concerning life course developments.

20 In the case of the present life story project, mutual curiosity during the 2008 interviews
21 was reinforced by biographical features related to the specific age-cohort of the participants.
22 In 1999, the differences between my interlocutors and I stood out more than our
23 commonalities. Besides belonging to the dominant group in society, I was in my late thirties
24 and had conquered a permanent academic position years ago. Most of my interlocutors
25 were in their mid to late twenties and absorbed in proving themselves as respectable
26 professionals, Dutch citizens and loyal migrant daughters. The bulk of narrations in the 1999
27 interviews focused on efforts to combine the realisation of career goals with family
28 commitments in a post-migration context. Ten years on, the majority of participants had
29 consolidated their professional and family positions while new issues demand their
30 attention. Most women have started a family themselves and they are increasingly involved
31 in the care for ageing parents. The confrontation with human fragility begs for
32 contemplation on the meaning of life and for a re-evaluation of one's wishes for future
33 achievements and forms of relatedness.

34 If this is true for all interlocutors, it is particularly so for Elatik, whose sense of
35 vulnerability has increased tremendously since the Dutch societal climate has turned against
36 Muslims so openly. Moreover, I would argue that Elatik's wish to learn more about my own
37 biography was closely related to the promotion of her new I-position as a woman. Sharing
38 experiences, particular once she elicited the information from me that I had married myself
39 since the first interview and like her was pondering the next step in my career, could assist
40 her in exploring how to give voice to this new position. In return, my willingness to engage in
41 'female talk' with her could contribute to her feeling of being recognised in her new I-
42 position. In sum, in 2008, the agentic potential of the life story telling served Elatik's goals
43 best by organising the interview as an arena for dialogically organised self-reflection. This
44 time, she addressed me much less as a representative of a wider Dutch audience, and much
45 more as an equally vocal interlocutor in a discussion about personal development.

1 For some time after the interview our discussion continued by telephone and email,
2 reaching a peak when I sent Elatik the draft of the book chapter on her life story. Overall, she
3 welcomed the feedback that she read into the portrait I had sketched of her and stated that
4 it was an aid in allowing the woman in herself grow. She shared her own reflections on this
5 process and in turn asked for comments, advice and again, my own experiences. Also, she
6 expressed the wish that we organise a follow-up meeting every now and then in which we
7 would exchange experiences.

8 Much as we were both enthused by this idea, as we might have predicted, nothing has
9 come of our plans so far. I was busy finishing the book and later catching up with other
10 things in life. Fatima herself was hardly granted time to settle into her new position as a
11 married woman before the city-council that she presided was confronted with a huge
12 financial debacle that forced her to step down temporarily. I attempted to contact her then,
13 but did not do so again when she did not answer my emails and letter. Undoubtedly, when
14 our paths cross again we will both be very pleased to see each other. If and how we will pick
15 up where we left off in 2008, however, depends on the biographical themes that each of us
16 will be working on when the time comes.

17 18 19 **In conclusion**

20
21 Life story telling is an agentic act in itself: it consists of a discursive negotiation of the self in
22 relation to others. Also, producing an account of how one has become the person one is
23 today involves the articulation of past, present and future plans and the creation of more or
24 less meaningful links between accomplishments and disappointments. Self-narration both
25 demands and stimulates self-reflection and self-regulation, thus fostering agency. In this
26 article I have analysed Fatima Elatik's shifting self-representations over time to demonstrate
27 how I use dialogical self theory to study the agentic power involved in the co-production of a
28 life story involving a narrator, an interviewer and the intended audiences that each has in
29 mind to whom the life story is directed.

30 In 1999 Elatik used the interview setting as a platform for the performance of a ready-
31 made self-presentation to a wider audience. In 2008, she exerted her agency to organise the
32 interview setting differently, this time creating an arena for dialogically organised self-
33 reflection. I have argued that the shift between these two different locations of agentic
34 power in life story telling is closely related to the successive biographical choices my
35 interlocutor has made in order to realise her desires for leading a 'good life'.

36 She set out to make the best of what the Netherlands had to offer whilst staying close to
37 her parental milieu by formulating a life plan in which the great achievements she strove for
38 were directed at connecting the various groups in society to which she felt to belong. The
39 performative presentation of self in the 1999 interview as a Muslim girl with a headscarf,
40 brains and a big mouth confirmed her experience of intersectionality and mobilised her
41 agency to realise her mission in life.

42 The increasingly negative tune in the dominant discourse on Muslims in Dutch society
43 affected Elatik's experience of intersectionality and her life plan to integrate behavioural
44 achievements with relatedness to several groups by presenting herself as a Muslim Dutch
45 councillor was thwarted. Hoping to convey that we should look for agency not only in the
46 competence to realise goals but also in the capacity to accommodate disappointments and

1 reformulate one's life plan, I have described how Elatik responded to the challenges that
2 confronted her by reformulating her ambitions and henceforth distinguishing more clearly
3 between public and private self-presentations without, however, completely
4 compartmentalising her various identifications in different domains. Although her discursive
5 public self-presentations as a Muslim have declined, wearing a headscarf for spiritual
6 reasons allows for a continuous performative religious self-presentation in public and private
7 settings. Hence, her I-position as a Muslim as an embodied meta-position informs and
8 connects her other I-positions.

9 Finally, I have illustrated that desires for specific forms of agency are not only informed
10 by cultural, socio-economic and historical factors, but that intra-personal variations may
11 occur over the life course as well. I have argued that reshuffling the voices that speak from
12 different I-positions has created space for Elatik to promote her I-position as a woman.
13 Considering her age, her desire to start a family presently takes priority over other concerns.
14 Having secured an influential position in Dutch society conveniently allows her to redirect
15 her attention accordingly. In tandem with the declining power of a public self-presentation
16 in which professional identity is underscored by forwarding religious and ethnic
17 identifications, these life course related factors have contributed to the presentation of her
18 forthcoming marriage as a new anchor and turning point in Elatik's life story. This explains
19 the shift in her endeavours from using the interview as a platform for performative public
20 self-presentation to an occasion for dialogically organised private self-reflection on married
21 life.

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¹ Reference to Kiran Desai's brilliant novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

² A more elaborate analysis of the 1999 interview previously appeared in Buitelaar 2006.

³ I decided to stick to this in order to avoid confusion. In agreement with Elatik, in subsequent articles I use her proper name.

⁴ The very personal information that is discussed in life story telling creates an atmosphere in which both narrator and interviewer tend to feel that they have entered into a personal relationship. While this feeling may subside soon after the interview, it can also persist, sometimes developing into friendships. I have remained in contact with ten of the fifteen women who participated in the 2008 interview over the ten years that passed since the first interview. Elatik was not one of them, although on the occasions that we came across each other at public events she appeared as happy to see me as I was to meet her again.