

Interculturality and identity on Europe's southern border: the vision of its young inhabitants

Interculturalidad e identidad en la frontera sur de Europa: la visión de sus habitantes jóvenes

Cristina Goenechea^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6890-3431>
Macarena Machin Alvarez^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9778-4398>
Soukaina Belkat^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7711-4944>

^a Universidad de Cádiz, Departamento de Didáctica, Cádiz, Spain, e-mail: cristina.goenechea@uca.es, macarena.machin@uca.es

^b Universidad Aldeimake El Essaâdi, Departamento de Lengua y Literatura Hispánicas, Tétouan, Morocco, e-mail: belkatsoukaina@gmail.com

Abstract

This research analyzes the perceptions of youths living in the border space of the Strait of Gibraltar; a maritime and land border that not only separates two countries (Spain and Morocco) but also two continents (Europe and Africa). Thirty-nine youths residing in Algeciras, La Línea, Tangiers and Tetouan were interviewed about cultural positioning and identity; border space (opportunities and tensions) and emigration. The interviews were conducted between October 2019 and February 2020 in Spanish and Arabic according to the interviewee's mother tongue and analyzed using Nvivo 12. Cultural diversity is recognized and generally perceived as something positive on both sides of the border, although there are certain issues that can strain relations between the two groups, these include religion, freedom versus discipline and control over being young and the role assigned to women in each culture.

Keywords: identity, cultural diversity, youth, border.

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza las percepciones de jóvenes que habitan el espacio fronterizo del Estrecho de Gibraltar; una frontera marítima y terrestre que no solo separa dos países (España y Marruecos) sino también dos continentes (Europa y África). Se entrevistó a 39 jóvenes residentes en Algeciras, La Línea, Tánger y Tetuán, sobre posicionamiento cultural e identidad, espacio fronterizo (oportunidades y tensiones) y emigración. Las entrevistas fueron realizadas entre octubre de 2019 y febrero de 2020 en español y en árabe según la lengua materna del entrevistado y analizadas mediante NVivo 12.

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* Corresponding author:
Cristina Goenechea. E-mail:
cristina.goenechea@uca.es

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La diversidad cultural es reconocida y se percibe en general como algo positivo en ambos lados de la frontera, si bien existen ciertos temas que pueden tensionar las relaciones entre ambos colectivos como la religión, la libertad versus la disciplina y el control sobre el ser joven y el rol que se le asigna a la mujer en cada cultura.

Palabras clave: identidad, diversidad cultural, juventud, frontera.

Introduction

This research is undertaken within the international tradition of border studies, which is currently at its peak (Tapia Ladino, 2017). Specifically, it focuses on its dimension as a human border rather than an economic, administrative or political border. The border is understood as a multicultural context where geographical boundaries are clear, yet, according to Brambilla (2015) and Brambilla and Jones (2020), cultural and human boundaries become blurred. From this perspective and according to these authors, borders are not natural elements but are socially and symbolically constructed and reconstructed; systems of classification, categorization and selection of people predominate in them. In the words of Valenzuela (2014), these systems “resort to signified and signifying elements that demarcate systems of belonging and exclusion or affiliation and differentiation” (p. 18). Also, according to Gallego Noche (2019), it is in these areas where opportunities for transformation and resistance to hegemonic power open up.

Concerning border issues, this study is based on the physical area between Morocco and Spain (see Figure 1). Only 14 km of ocean separate the two countries at the narrowest point of the Strait of Gibraltar, a very short distance that marks a gulf between “fortress Europe” and the African continent, which ranks 18th among unequal borders (“Por qué la frontera”, 2021) in the world.

It is a militarized border,¹ a gateway—almost always closed—for African immigration to Europe. On land, the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla have an increasingly reinforced border fence, which, together with highly technological maritime surveillance, completes the security system of what has been Europe’s external border since Spain joined the European Union (EU) in 1986.

¹ By means of border mechanisms such as the *Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior* (SIVE) of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), which is responsible for protecting the external borders of the EU’s area of free movement.

Figure 1. Strait of Gibraltar



Source: Anarkangel, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

It has been stated that “on the Spanish-Moroccan border, two worlds (North and South), two continents (Europe and Africa), two cultures, two religions, two economies and two very different societies, although not necessarily opposed, converge (and diverge)” (Calderón et al., 2023, p. 177).

Undoubtedly, this border is crossed—like so many others—more in a South-North direction than the other way around. The Spanish National Institute of Statistics² estimated that 776 000 Moroccans were residing in Spain in 2022, making it the largest foreign population group, while the same source estimated that 12 863 Spaniards were residing in Morocco. Nonetheless, these data do not capture the full diversity of the area studied since, as a border area, it is an area of constant transit where people often pass through to other European countries or make temporary stays. More than 20 000 people arrived in 2019 on the Andalusian coasts, and it is known that 65—perhaps many more—lost their lives in the attempt during that period (Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía [APDHA], 2020). On the other hand, it is increasingly common for Spaniards to go to Morocco as tourists: in 2019 more than 800 000 Spaniards visited Morocco (Expansión, n. d.). Trade relations are intense as Morocco was at the same time Spain’s main customer and its main supplier during 2021 (Vázquez Rojo, 2023).

² Data extracted from the website of the National Institute of Statistics <https://www.ine.es/>

Historically, the relationship between the two countries has not been easy. It has been said that:

the Spanish border with Morocco is configured as the border *par excellence*, bringing together all the elements that can simultaneously separate and unite two countries that have experienced their neighborhood from the point of view of conflict (something that, in any case, is not exclusive to this case, but tends to characterize most of the relations between border territories). Thus, amid wars and agreements, Spain has historically viewed France from a position of inferiority, Portugal with indifference, and Morocco with habitual superiority. (Lacomba, 2005, p. 182)

This feeling of superiority is undoubtedly inherited from recent colonial history (the Franco-Spanish Protectorate in Morocco between 1912 and 1957) and, ultimately, from the imperialism of the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when “contemptuous ethnocentrism justified domination and this in turn fed ethnocentrism. The entire non-European world was devalued and deprived of its historical dignity” (Djaït, 1990, p. 42). Islam became and is wielded since this time as the great differentiating element between the *us* and the *them*. As for Moroccan society, the general feeling toward Spain and the Spaniards alternates between admiration for their capacity for change in recent decades and grievance for what is considered a lack of fair reciprocity in mutual treatment. For all of the above, it has been stated that “beyond even geographical and material distances, the mental border is the one that continues to separate Spain from Morocco” (Lacomba, 2005, p. 193). These imaginaries are increasingly influenced by the *security-based paradigm* where the migrant is pointed out and perceived as a threat, linking their presence to increased criminality or competition for resources (Buraschi & Aguilar-Idáñez, 2017), as well as a victim, as their experiences of violence and death are increasingly known.

Beyond politics and state boundaries, this research focuses on the people who inhabit this territory, as they are the ones who daily build forms of coexistence (border cultures) and sometimes face conflicts arising from this proximity. Specifically, the question is how young people perceive each other, how they understand multiculturalism, and what attitudes they hold toward their neighbors on the other shore.

This paper reflects on the complexity of cultural identities developed in border contexts in the following segment. Then, the study delves into the vital period of adolescence and focuses on the concept of youth to highlight the agency of the people studied and the diversity of ways of being young. Subsequently, the study's methodological framework is developed, followed by the results and conclusions of the study.

Identities in the border area

The border area is considered a multicultural zone that alludes to the recognition of pluralism and the presence of people with different cultures in the same social area. From this physical and social area, it is of interest to advance in the analysis

of the complex relationships that develop from coexistence in diversity by situating themselves, thereby, in the paradigm of interculturality, which, as Goenechea and Gallego-Noche say, unlike the multicultural approach, is “more attentive to the interaction, exchange, and coexistence between different cultures” (Goenechea & Gallego-Noche, 2021, p. 48). Those aspects indicated by Dietz below are therefore of interest:

(...) set of interrelationships that frame a given society in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, religious denomination and/or nationality; it is an assemblage that is perceived through the combination of the different groups of “us” versus “them”, which interact in majority-minority constellations that are often in constant change. (Dietz, 2017, p. 193)

For Walsh (2010), these aspects would contain the relational aspect of interculturality, which refers in a more basic and general way to the contact and exchange between cultures, people, practices, knowledge, values and different cultural traditions. These relationships and exchanges occur, according to the same author, within a colonial structure and matrix of racialized and hierarchical power that, in the words of Dietz (2017), often gives rise to asymmetrical relations in terms of established political and socioeconomic power and often reflects “historically rooted ways of making diversity visible or invisible, as well as the way of stigmatizing otherness and discriminating against certain groups in particular” (Dietz, 2017, p. 193).

For Castillo Guzmán and Guido Guevara (2015) it is important to highlight that, although interculturality appears as a new way of relating to a political discourse of resistance and cultural vindication, its political or social uses have not been homogeneous. Thus, although interculturality has been associated with a counter-hegemonic sense, it has also benefited the global discourses of governments and international organizations. Critical intercultural positions seek the transformation of structures, institutions and mentalities, not only of minorities but, above all, of the majority population. Therefore, for these authors

interculturality emphasizes the relationship that minorities must establish with majorities within the framework of recognizing their rights and formulating educational policies. Nevertheless, this emphasis forgets that the so-called majority society is the one that most urgently needs interculturality, to the extent that it is within it that forms of discrimination and exclusion toward minorities are produced and reproduced. (Castillo Guzmán & Guido Guevara, 2015, pp. 39-40)

Thus, identity construction processes become precarious when there is interaction with dominant cultures in the context of frontier life, establishing a vertical relationship marked by power, subordination, colonization and exclusion (Mignolo, 2015; Valenzuela, 2014).

Given the nature of the border territory, characterized by constant exchange, it can be assumed that interculturality modulates in this context both social relations and the very subjectivities of the people who inhabit it and, therefore, their cultural identity. As Walsh states, cultural identities “are not prior to them but their product.

It is not essential identities that are related; it is the relationship that allows identities to be defined” (Walsh, 2009, p. 46). Along these lines, Tubino (2005) explains that cultural identities are not “pre-existing entities” to intercultural relations but relational realities. Identity is always a self-image constructed in relation to another; it is not a self-absorbed elaboration independent of otherness and socialization processes. Hence, “they become *them*, and both their territory and mentality are qualified as different from *ours*” (Lacomba, 2005, p. 185).

Consequently, borders are privileged scenarios to make differences and contrasts between groups evident through a series of exclusive and differentiating symbolic elements that seek, under the logic of power mechanisms, to mark the differences and discriminate the belonging of each subject to a category determined by the classification system established by the contrast (Valenzuela, 2014). In this regard, in the words of Uriarte (1994), the border culture swings between xenophobia and xenophilia, manipulating and constantly and contextually redefining nationalist loyalty.

In the case of Spain, it is worth mentioning the work of Tomás Calvo Buezas’ team, which, for decades and on a regular basis, has been carrying out nationwide surveys on these issues among the young population (secondary school and higher education students). These studies offer a diachronic view of the evolution of these attitudes, where the level of militant racism, as the author calls it, has been decreasing over time. Specifically, it is worth noting the responses of this group to the question “*If it were up to you, would you throw them out of Spain?*” (referring to different groups): 48.6% of young people responded in 2002 that they would throw out the Moors/Arabs; 46.9% said the same in 2004 while, in 2019, only 16.2% responded affirmatively to the question above (Calvo Buezas, 2022).

In the case of Morocco, the work of Marfouk (2014) stands out. The author shows, based on an econometric study carried out with data from a survey conducted by the Moroccan Association for Human Rights in 2013, that in Morocco there is a hostile attitude toward migrants, mainly those coming from sub-Saharan Africa. The results reveal that the Moroccan population dislikes having as a neighbor someone whose religion is different from their own. This rejection increases if they are of a different race and speak a different language. Opposition to ethnic diversity also turned out to be a positive factor in the probability of survey respondents saying they do not want to have immigrant neighbors. Other aspects considered by this author were age and gender. According to these variables, the results show that being female increases the probability of rejection toward immigrants or foreign workers and that the older the respondent, the lower the negative perception. This is an interesting aspect to consider, given that the study sample comprises young people residing in border cities in Morocco and Spain.

The racist attitudes unveiled in both case studies must be, as already noted, framed in a given historical context and cannot be understood without considering the power—and resistance—relations and global inequalities that prevail in these areas (Cassidy et al., 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Sperling et al., 2021).

Therefore, borders are dynamic areas of contact and interaction where the construction of meanings and identities is “flexible and porous, formed in processes that do not create a memory supporting a sense of cultural identity. One of the epistemological signs of the frontier has been the category of multiple identities or changing identities” (Núñez, 2007, p. 9) understood as flexible, dynamic and historical realities that can be reached in multiple ways. One of these ways lies in the dialogic exchange proposed by Panikkar (2006), based on questioning the myths that tell realities how they must be or, in other words, on the relativity of other truths. To this end, interculturality moves away from rigid or fixed ways of behaving to explore the richness in diversities that these relationships and cultural exchanges can bring because effective communication is feasible—and desirable, as Panikkar says—between people who inhabit different myths. As the author suggests, this dialogue should therefore not be an airing of grievances or confrontation between two parties but a way to establish bridges between different realities.

Adolescence, youth and identity

Adolescence has been described as a stage of social moratorium necessary to reach maturity in the process of identity and personality construction (Benavides Delgado, 2021). Several authors have assigned the conceptual origin of adolescence to developmental psychology, a discipline responsible for defining it as a stage of life different from childhood or adulthood, and which focuses on individuals and their transformations. From this approach, some authors have compared adolescence itself to a form of internal migration, as it is the vital stage in which individuals face the challenge of rediscovering and reconstructing their identity, a process that never ends.

(...) in this phase of life, individuals begin a task of deep introspection for the first time and, already far from childhood innocence, ask themselves such transcendental questions as who am I, who should I be, or who would I like to be? Somehow, this process could be interpreted as a kind of inward migration of the individual. (Mir Gual, 2022, p. 5)

Adolescence, from this psychological perspective, is mainly attributed to internal causes. It is understood as an *inadequacy* where psychobiological and cognitive-intellectual changes interact with the need to find oneself (introspection). These intrinsic aspects interact with the context in which the subject develops. In the words of Erikson (1968), adolescence is also a period of “identity diffusion”, a time of great intensity and experimentation determined by the adolescent’s life context, so it is not possible to speak of a single adolescence but of ‘adolescences’ in the plural. From this more sociological approach to the concept, adolescence is determined by social causes external to the subject and, in particular, by the processes of socialization and the acquisition of roles to which they are subjected (Dávila León, 2005). From this point of view, it is

not possible to speak of an “adolescent” identity in a “solid” sense but rather of a multiplicity of partial identifications, which are displaced, replaced, and constructed in an unequal and combined manner (Núñez, 2007). In this reality, adolescents resemble “*smart missiles*, who know how to change direction, adapt to changing circumstances, immediately detect the movements that begin to occur, updating and rectifying their trajectory” (Núñez, 2007, p. 14). From this emergence of the subject’s agency, sociology and anthropology have introduced the questioning of the paradigm of being in transition or a not-yet-complete subject that has historically been contained in the concept of adolescence—socially and epistemologically connected with that of adulthood—to give rise, according to Urteaga Castro Pozo and Sáenz Ramírez (2012), to the concept of youth. According to these authors, youth studies, unlike those based on adolescence, “emphasize the *here and now* of young people’s experiences, that is, the social and cultural practices through which they shape their world” (Urteaga Castro Pozo & Sáenz Ramírez, 2012, p. 12). From this point of view, youth is constructed as an “agenciable, flexible, and ever-changing identity, but no more so for youth than it is for the rest of the people of any age” (Urteaga Castro Pozo & Sáenz Ramírez, 2012, p. 12). Thus, the agency of the subject is recovered, as well as the importance of the relational context in which it is situated as that which “gives it a face, because the meaning depends on the situation in which it is used and who it is used by” (Urteaga Castro-Pozo, 2019, p. 65).

In this regard, for example, it is worth citing Capote (2014), who notes that in Moroccan society a culture of migration has been permeating among the younger sectors as an escape mechanism from the generational discontent produced—according to Ortega and Gutiérrez (2018)—by the precarious economic situation and the influence of economic change that is perceived in those who had previously emigrated, as well as the experiences, whether true or not, related by other young people who have emigrated or, simply, because “the curiosity to know, live, and be the protagonist of a life projected as different also motivates minors to decide to emigrate” (Ortega & Gutiérrez, 2018, p. 122). For their part, Spanish youth face what Strecker et al. (2018) call moral juvenicide, a product of the confluence between exclusion policies that aim, on the one hand, at the destruction and precariousness of youth employment (economic juvenicide) and, on the other hand, at the media and cultural stigmatization of young people (symbolic juvenicide).

From the perspective of youth studies in which this article is situated, the differences resulting from the cultural alienation of Spanish and Moroccan youth of school age who not only share the border area but also the virtual relationship processes as modes of interaction with the environment, their families, and their peers, are highlighted. In this shared area, divergent elements of encounter and misencounter arise, which are not—as Checa Olmos et al. (2007) state—strictly the result of the clash of cultures, but rather other deeper factors intervene and blur it, such as schooling, migratory culture, the philosophy of integration of the country of origin, religion, political discourse and the media. Consequently, youth is not only a psychobiological condition specific to an age range but also a border experience that can only be understood through their voices and knowledge (Feixa Pampols & Sánchez García, 2019).

Methodology

Methodological design

The conception of reality in this work is far from being understood as unique and immutable; on the contrary, reality is constructed based on the meanings people give to social facts, hence its multiple and relative character. Therefore, the most appropriate approach is to use a multi-method design, combining and integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches within the framework of a single study. To this end, a mixed methodology based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was developed, allowing to understand and deepen the discourses of the participants of the investigated reality (Lall, 2011; Nind, 2017). The quantitative information collected through the questionnaires conducted on both shores has already been expounded in previous works (Gallego-Noche et al., 2023). In this work, qualitative information is examined by analyzing the content obtained through the interviews and coded with the support of NVivo 12 software. This approach to data collection made it possible to focus on understanding the perception (opinions) held by the people participating in the study on the topic in question from their cultural context.

The technique was face-to-face in-depth individual interviews through a previously prepared script of semi-structured questions. The interviews were conducted in both Spanish and Arabic, depending on the origin of the interviewee, and were audio-recorded and later transcribed into Spanish, maintaining the interviewee's anonymity. This is an innovative study since the participation of researchers from universities on both sides of the border has made it possible to gather in the mother tongue of the participants their positions and reflections on how they feel and perceive the border and the cultural diversity it contains. These interviews were conducted between October 2019 and February 2020 in four contexts: Algeciras, La Línea, Tangier and Tétouan. The selection of these cities as study contexts is premeditated since they all have in common that they are located on the borders of the Strait of Gibraltar, the natural border that separates Spain from Morocco. The participating centers were those with which the researchers had a tradition of collaboration in the contexts studied (Algeciras, La Línea, Tangier and Tétouan). The students interviewed were those available in the period foreseen for the realization of the interviews. Prioritizing the criterion of accessibility, it was sought to have both boys and girls among the participants.

The data obtained through the interviews were analyzed with the support of NVivo 12 software. This software has proven to be an important support for the qualitative analysis of large amounts of textual documents and other units of information with different formats, allowing the generation of an unlimited number of categories and subcategories that can be compared with each other through intersection matrices. Among the main functions of this software are the organization of information into units of meaning, its subsequent coding and the possibilities of creating nodes or categories of analysis at different levels. Each node or category integrates a set of units of meaning that can be analyzed through matrices and cross-references and represented through graphs, concept maps or clusters.

Sample

A total of 39 interviews ($n = 39$) were conducted with young people who were in the 3rd and 4th years of compulsory secondary education (ESO, by its acronym from Spanish *educación secundaria obligatoria*) or high school in schools located in the cities of Tétouan ($n = 9$), Tangier ($n = 10$), La Línea ($n = 10$) and Algeciras ($n = 10$). Therefore, this is a young population that is mostly dedicated to study and few of them were not only studying but also working when they were interviewed. Of the 39 students interviewed, 24 were male and 15 were female. As for their origin, most of them correspond to their place of residence, except for the Moroccan sample, whose origin is more varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample data

<i>N</i>	Residence	Origin	Sex	Schooling	Employment status
10	Algeciras	All from Algeciras	6 males and 4 females	3rd-4th ESO	Do not work
10	La Línea	All from La Línea	6 males and 4 females	2nd-3rd ESO and 2nd high school	Do not work
10	Tangier	Tangier (6), Fes (1), Rabat (1), Al Hoceima (1) and Had Gharbia (1)	6 males and 4 females	3rd-4th ESO and 1st-2nd high school	Only 1 of them is employed
9	Tétouan	Tétouan (7), Al Hoceima (1) and Rachidia (1)	6 female and 3 male	3rd-4th ESO and 3rd high school	Only 1 of them is employed

Source: own elaboration

Data analysis

The data obtained from the 39 interviews conducted in the cities of Tétouan ($n = 9$), Tangier ($n = 10$), La Línea ($n = 10$) and Algeciras ($n = 10$) were descriptive, and most of the topics that emerged were in response to the questions designed in the interview script. The data were analyzed using a systemic analysis of content and questions emphasizing the frequency of words and expressions. To do this, the researchers immersed themselves in the data by carefully reading the interview transcripts to identify topics (dimensions) and emerging categories (see Table 2). These categories were used to compare and contrast the data among the different groups of participants according to their city of residence to understand each one's perspective on the subject matter of this research.

Table 2. Summary of the main topics explored through the interviews

1. **Cultural positioning and identity of young people living in the border area**
 - Definition of culture
 - Appreciation of the culture of the Other (positive and negative aspects)
 - Otherness (similarities and differences)
 - Religion in cultural identity (rating of its importance: much, little or none)
 - Sense of superiority/inferiority and belonging (European/African)

2. **The border area: opportunities and tensions**
 - Proximity between countries (opportunities/threats)
 - Type of relationship between countries
 - Multiculturality in their city (positive/negative rating and why)
 - Mixed friendship and couple relationship (positive/negative rating)
 - Being young in the border area (advantages/disadvantages)

3. **Conceptualization of the emigration of young people living in the border area**
 - Rating of emigration (positive/negative)
 - Reasons why Spaniards go to Morocco
 - Reasons why Moroccans go to Spain
 - Future migration project (existence/non-existence)

Source: own elaboration

Results and discussion

As previously mentioned, the data were systematized by categories and collected in three dimensions: Dimension 1. Cultural positioning of the interviewees (includes five analytical categories); Dimension 2. The border area: opportunities and tensions (includes five analytical categories); and, Dimension 3. The conceptualization of emigration of the young people who inhabit the border area (includes four analytical categories).

Dimension 1. Cultural positioning of the interviewees

In this dimension, the data reveal how young secondary and high school students on both sides of the Strait perceive the culture of the Other and how they position themselves in relation to it, thus constructing their own cultural identity. To this end, firstly, what they understand by culture is analyzed in order to, secondly, delve into those

aspects they consider to be positive and negative of the culture of the Other, what similarities and differences (positioning before otherness) they present, and what weight religion has for both groups in the shaping of their cultural identity. Thirdly and finally, the study delves into the feeling of cultural superiority/inferiority that may exist toward the Other and the feeling of belonging to Europe/Africa.

As can be seen in Table 3, for the students interviewed, culture is mainly a set of customs and traditions (13 references); what differentiates some countries from others as a group (11 references); and the beliefs and ways of thinking/life of each one as an individual part of a society (6 references). To a lesser extent, culture is associated with knowledge (4 references), religion (3 references), cultural riches (3 references), things that unite a society (2 references), the identity of a city (2 references); monuments and art (2 references), and what you are taught at home (1 reference).

Table 3. Definition of culture according to the opinion of the interviewees

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Knowledge	4	0	4
Things that unite a society	2	0	2
Customs and traditions	7	6	13
Beliefs and ways of thinking and being	1	5	6
Differences between countries	7	4	11
Identity of a city	2	0	2
What you are taught at home	0	1	1
Monuments and art	1	1	2
Religion	0	3	3
Cultural riches	1	2	3
Total	25	22	47

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

On a comparative level, both groups (Moroccans and Spaniards) agree that culture is mostly a set of customs and traditions and what differentiates them from other countries. Nonetheless, in comparison, for those of Moroccan origin, culture is more associated with knowledge, with things that unite a society and with the identity of a city (physical space). For the Spanish group, however, these aspects do not appear because they associate culture with religion and with what they are taught at home. This result on the weight of religion in culture is interesting because it is an example of how border culture is constructed where, as shown in the previous section, individuals highlight the difference concerning the Other to position themselves culturally.

Below is the frequency analysis of words and similes where culture appears in first place among the 100 most frequent words with a weight of 0.73%. The word cloud (Figure 2) shows the association of the word culture/cultures with other words. As can

be observed, the word culture is generally associated with words with positive connotations such as people, relationships, friends, religion, identity, equal, and different. Notwithstanding, in this web of meanings, words with possible negative connotations also appear, such as superior and inferior, which can be interpreted as the student's perception of the existence of domination of one culture over another and, therefore, if there is domination, there is also subordination.

Figure 2. Word cloud around culture



Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Another section within this dimension was that of the *cultural appreciation of the Other*, meaning the attribution of value to the culture of the Other. In this subjective exercise, each person's experiences and imaginaries about the neighbor's culture come into play.

For Moroccan students, as shown in Table 4, the most positive aspect of Spanish culture is how Spaniards live and think, while in the case of Spain, the most valued aspect of Moroccan culture is its gastronomy. Other positive aspects that Moroccan students value in Spanish culture are the festivals and dances, the rights they have (salary, health, and freedom), the little disciplinary control and freedom of time and the buildings and cleanliness of the cities. In the Spanish case, in addition to gastronomy, they positively value the language, the way of being, thinking and dressing in Moroccan culture. In this case, the young Spaniards allude to general aspects of the culture of the Other (language, way of life, gastronomy) and only go deeper in the case of clothing—

an aesthetic aspect but valued at this generational stage—while, in the Moroccan case, the aspects they value of Spanish culture are mainly associated with freedom, an aspect related in turn to emancipation and the questioning of pre-established norms.

Regarding the negative aspects, Moroccan students negatively value Christianity and the little importance attached to marriage in Spanish culture. Whereas in the Spanish case, the weight of the references falls, firstly, on the fact that there is no negative aspect of Moroccan culture and, secondly, they express a negative appreciation of the imposition of religion and the way of thinking about women.

Table 4. Appreciation of the culture of the Other by the interviewees

Differences by reference	What Moroccans value about Spanish culture (100%)	What Spaniards value about Moroccan culture (100%)
Positive aspects	How they think and live (they are kind, open-minded people, do not interfere in other people's lives, and care about others) 41.18%	Gastronomy 52.38%
	Parties and dances 17.65%	Language 14.29%
	The rights they have (freedom, health and salaries) 17.65%	How they live and think 14.29%
	Gastronomy 11.76%.	How they dress 9.52%
	Low disciplinary control (in general and freedom of time) 5.88%	Parties, dances and music 4.76%
	Constructions and cleanliness of the cities 5.88%	Religion 4.76%
Negative aspects	Christianity and anything contrary to religion 60%	<i>There is no negative aspect in the culture of the Other</i> 50%
	The little importance attached to marriage 20%	Religious imposition 25%
	The Spaniards' way of life 10%	How they think about women 16.67%
	<i>There is no negative aspect in the culture of the Other</i> 10%	Closed-minded 8.33%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

In addition to the differences found according to origin, differences were found according to the sex of the interviewees, since women of Moroccan origin, in comparison with men, see the Christian religion and the aspects that have to do with this religion more negatively, followed by the little importance attached by Spaniards to marriage. In the Spanish case, women, unlike men, give more weight to religious imposition (2 cases) and to the way Moroccans think about women; in this regard, they allude to the fact that they undervalue them and that they only want them to have children (reproductive topic). In this section on the appreciation of the culture of the Other, the topic of gender appears linked to that of religion and, in particular, to the role of women in marriage. This is a topic that strains the relations between both cultures and that exemplifies what, in the words of Uriarte (1994), is perceived as an ease of swinging between xenophilia and xenophobia in a process of constant and

contextual manipulation and redefinition of nationalist loyalty and, therefore, also of the sharpness of the geopolitical border.

The appreciation of the culture of the other leads to *Otherness*, that is, the result of a process of labeling and classification based on the social construction of differences. Within this category it is possible to observe those common and different aspects of Moroccan and Spanish culture according to the opinion of the students interviewed (see Table 5). Among the common aspects, universal references stand out, such as the fact that they are all people; as well as the sea, an element which as such separates them physically but which, symbolically, also unites them. As for the differences, both groups emphasize language, culture, discipline (rules and organization), ways of thinking and living and religion (beliefs).

Table 5. Otherness in the opinion of the interviewees

	Moroccan students	Spanish students
Similar aspects according to references	Both like to have fun and enjoy themselves (26.67%)	They are people just like us with the same rights (55.56%)
	The way we dress and follow fashion (20%)	They like to learn languages like we do (11.11%)
	Culture and gastronomy (13.33%)	The sea (11.11%)
	The sea (13.33%)	
	How they think (13.33%)	
	History (6.67%)	
	Willingness to travel (6.67%)	
Differentiating aspects according to references	Religion (33.33%)	Culture (28.12%)
	Culture (20.83%)	Religion (21.88%)
	Discipline and regulations (12.5%)	How they think and live (15.62%)
	How they think and live (12.5%)	Food (12.5%)
	The Other's ability to investigate (12.5%)	How they think about women (6.25%)
	Language (4.17%)	Race (3.12%)
	Rights held by the Other (4.17%)	Discipline (3.12%)
		How they dress (3.12%)
	Language (3.12%)	
	Skin color (3.12%)	

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

By comparison, in the Moroccan case, opinions are more diversified when it comes to indicating similar aspects between Spanish and Moroccan young people by establishing bridges of connection between the two groups. The Spanish students refer mostly to a generic aspect of the human condition which is being a person, going to the basics, to the very essence of being. As for the differences, it was observed that both groups establish religion and culture as the main differences. In the Moroccan case, religion is more referenced than culture, as in the Spanish case. In this section, inequality is perceived in the double border directionality since the weight of experiences in the South-North dynamics is reflected in their opinions about the culture of the Other.

In discussing differentiating aspects, *religion emerged as an indispensable element in the shaping of individual and collective cultural identity* and, as such, has been studied as a separate category. Specifically, it has been interesting to know, through the voices of young students on both shores, the importance they attach to religion in shaping their identity. As Table 6 shows, in the Spanish case, 68.42% consider that religion is neither important nor influential in their cultural identity, and in most cases they position themselves as atheists. Meanwhile, in the Moroccan case, 95% affirm that religion is very important in their identity and life.

Table 6. Perception of the weight of religion (important/not important) in the shaping of identity

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Important	95%	26.32%	61.54%
Not important	0%	68.42%	33.33%
Total	95%	94.74%	94.87%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

The last aspect to be covered in the dimension of the cultural positioning of young students was the *feeling of cultural superiority/inferiority with respect to the Other and the sense of European/African belonging* of each of the interviewees. Concerning this aspect, both sides (Moroccans and Spaniards) agree that there is no culture superior to the other; 94.74% of the Moroccan students and 100% of the Spaniards agree. Nonetheless, when discussing subjectivities, as shown in Table 7, young people of Moroccan origin allude to the fact that Spaniards generally feel superior to them (16 references) and Moroccans feel inferior (13 references). On the other hand, the Spanish group believes that 'we are all equal' (10 references) and that 'the feeling of superiority depends on the person, on their mentality and not on the culture of origin' (6 references). Nonetheless, some Spaniards may feel superior (8 references) and affirm that Moroccans may feel inferior (4 references).

Table 7. Perception of the feeling of cultural superiority/inferiority

	Moroccans (n = 19)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 38)
Depends on mentality	2	6	8
Equals	5	10	15
Inferior (Moroccans)	13	4	17
Superior (Spaniards)	16	8	24
Superior (Moroccans)	1	1	2
Total	37	29	66

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

In this regard, what the young students are expressing with this exercise is the result of a social dynamic that has historically incorporated and reproduced imaginaries about being Spanish (European) and Moroccan (non-European) based on the exercise of power and control over the Other in such a way that, over time, this difference is transformed into inferiority or disadvantage.

To continue with the subjectivities at the border, the young people in the sample were asked whether they felt European or African. In the case of the Moroccan group, as shown in Table 8, the majority (7 cases out of 19) consider themselves non-African. Specifically, they consider themselves Moroccans and affirm that Africans are the “blacks”. Of this same group, there is another group that considers itself Moroccan and African (6 cases) and another smaller group that considers itself European (4 cases), either because they have European family or because they find physical similarities as well as common aspects associated with the European way of thinking. This group is differentiated according to sex, with the majority of men claiming not to be African, while women consider themselves to be European (3 cases) and African (3 cases).

In the case of the Spanish group, the majority of the young people interviewed feel Spanish (14 out of 18 cases). Those who do not feel European feel Spanish in the first place and also Moroccan because they have family origins in that country. There are no differences in this group concerning gender.

Table 8. Perception of the feeling of belonging to Europe/Africa

	Moroccans (n = 19)		Spaniards (n = 19)		Total (n = 38)
	Male (n = 9)	Female (n = 10)	Male (n = 9)	Female (n = 10)	
Not African	5	2	0	0	7
African	3	3	1	0	7
Not European	0	0	2	2	4
European	1	3	7	7	18
	9	8	9	9	35

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Once the data related to the cultural positioning and identity of young people residing in the border area have been analyzed and discussed, the next step is to discuss the data of the second dimension related to the border area: opportunities and tensions.

Dimension 2. The border area: opportunities, threats and feelings

This second dimension delves into the border area, a place of tensions and opportunities where the relations between countries and their proximity affect the bodies that inhabit them. In this dimension, the following categories are considered: opportunities/threats brought by the proximity of Spain to Morocco and vice versa, the rating concerning the type of relationship that exists between both countries

(positive/negative) as well as of their city, as a multicultural city and the way of life of the youth in the border area.

Concerning the *opportunities and threats resulting from proximity*, both groups, as can be seen in Table 9, see proximity as a work and economic opportunity (48.28%), followed by migration, that is, ease of moving from one side to the other (17.24%) and, finally, opportunities for cultural exchange (3.45%). It should be noted that the migratory aspect is seen as both an opportunity and a risk for the life of the person migrating; therefore, proximity is a double-edged sword. Only 31.03% of both groups say there are no greater opportunities in their city due to proximity.

Table 9. Perception of opportunities based on proximity between countries

	Moroccans (n = 19)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n=38)
No opportunities	36.36%	27.78%	31.03%
Cultural	0%	5.56%	3.45%
Work and economic	63.64%	38.89%	48.28%
Migratory	0%	27.78%	17.24%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

In addition to the opportunities that arise from the proximity between countries, possible threats of living in this border area were found in their discourse (see Table 10). These include, in the case of the Spanish population, irregular migration (5 references) and smuggling (2 references); and in the Moroccan case, that they are very close should a war break out in the other country (2 references), loss of identity (1 reference) and increased pollution (1 reference).

Table 10. Perception of life experiences in the border area

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Smuggling	0	2	2
We are close in case of war	2	1	3
Irregular migration	1	4	5
Increased pollution	1	0	1
Loss of identity	1	0	1
Positive without further comment	2	4	6
Cultural enrichment	6	7	13
Greater job opportunities	7	1	8
Opportunities to visit another country	4	4	8
Total	24	23	47

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Accordingly, external aspects (opportunities and threats) and subjective aspects derived from the proximity situation are discussed, while internal aspects (strengths and weaknesses) that may arise due to proximity were not covered in the interview.

Regarding the *type of relationship between Spain and Morocco* (see Table 11), out of 26 students who answered affirmatively to this question, 23 affirmed that there is a good relationship between both countries, and only 4 indicated that the relationship is bad due to a political-territorial issue, regarding the Sahara, Ceuta and Melilla.

Table 11. Perception of the type of relationship between Spain and Morocco

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Good	11	12	23
Bad	2	2	4
Total	13	13	26

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

The relationship between the two countries is perceived as mostly positive, as is the *perception students from both shores have of their city as multicultural*. From the 39 students, 44 references have been collected, of which 33 are positive toward multiculturalism in their city (Moroccans 70.59% and Spaniards 77.78%, see Table 12). Specifically, they allude to the cultural learning that this condition offers: “they learn from you and you from them”, “because it enriches you”, “because diversity brings good things”, “it improves coexistence and you can get to know things from other countries and open yourself to the world without traveling”. The rest of the references (a total of 11) focus on the negative, claiming that multiculturalism can affect their culture, taking away part of their identity. They also relate multiculturalism to an excess population in the city, which, in their opinion, results in migrants taking jobs away from locals and making the socioeconomic inequality between the two nationalities more evident. In the Moroccan case, multiculturalism leads to comparisons between the treatment of foreigners and that of their fellow citizens: “they treat foreigners better than other people from their own city or country”. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the perception of their city as multicultural brings lights and shadows associated with a perception of migration as a threat.

Table 12. Rating (positive/negative) of your city as a multicultural city

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Negative	5	6	11
Positive	12	21	33
Total	17	27	44

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Within the framework of this perception of their city as multicultural, it was decided to delve into a specific aspect closer to the experiential and personal sphere. This is how the students perceive in this area *the mixed relationship of couples and friendship* (see Table 13).

In general, both groups value this type of relationship as positive (52 references out of 72 references in total); the group of Spanish women is the one that affirms it the most. Those who perceive it as negative refer mainly to an incompatibility resulting from cultural differences and religion. As for culture, a total of 8 references were collected, mainly from those of Spanish origin (5 references) who allude mainly to the fear of losing their cultural identity or that their children will assimilate the culture of the Other if they establish a marital relationship with a person of Moroccan origin, as well as to the rejection of the possibility of being forced to acquire the culture of the Other.

In the case of religion, there are a total of 11 references where the bulk corresponds to students of Moroccan origin (10 references) for whom religion is an impediment to intermarriage. These students allude to the need for Spaniards to have to convert to Islam to do so. It should be noted that this impediment is not present when it comes to having friendly relations where cultural and religious differences are more accepted. This highlights the weight of culture and religion in the intimate and private space of the person as opposed to the public space where it can be accepted and tolerated.

Table 13. Perception of mixed couple and friendship relationships

	Moroccans (n = 20)		Spaniards (n = 19)		Total (n = 39)
	Male (n = 9)	Female (n = 11)	Male (n = 9)	Female (n = 10)	
Cultural barriers	2	1	3	2	8
Religion as a barrier	5	5	1	0	11
Positive	12	13	11	16	52
Total	19	19	15	18	71

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Finally, in this more experiential line—where information is gathered on the interaction between individuals and their city and the weight of experiences but also of subjectivities, ideals and imaginaries in this border area—young people from both sides of the Strait were asked if they believe that adolescence³ in the other country is different. In response to this question, which allows them to position themselves as an

³ In Spain, the Administration considers the population between 15 and 29 years of age to be young people (see for example the Youth Strategy 2022-2030). The age range of the participants in this study is 14 to 18 years, focusing on the young population of school age. It is situated at the theoretical level in the concept of youth in order to emphasize the agency of the subjects and to distance itself from adult-centric and psychobiological positions. Nevertheless, the concept of adolescence is used in the interview because it is closer to the context of everyday language.

adolescent group in relation to the Other, who is also an adolescent, the data show (see Table 14) that the majority responded that yes, it is different (28 references out of 38). Specifically, young people refer to adolescence in the other country as easier/more difficult. Those living in Spain say that adolescence is more difficult in Morocco than in their country (9 references), while those from Morocco say that in Spain, it is easier or less difficult than in their country (4 references). In the Spanish case, they also emphasize that adolescence in Morocco must be different because of the country's culture and the influence of its religion. In the Moroccan case, they refer to the greater freedom that young people have in Spain, especially once they reach the age of 18 (6 references).

Table 14. Perception of being an adolescent in the border area

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Different by culture	2	7	9
Harder-easier	4	9	13
More-less freedom	6	0	6
Similar	4	6	10
Total	16	22	38

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

This perception of being an adolescent on the other shore entails truncated desires and wishes. Being an adolescent in Spain is perceived as “easy” compared to being an adolescent in Morocco. Implicit in this perception are many things, among them the amenities of the Spanish adolescents and the rights of freedom they exercise.

Dimension 3. The conceptualization of emigration by young people residing in the border area

This dimension delves into the conceptualization of the emigration of young people living in the border area. Its constant presence makes young people coexist with it, form an opinion about it, and position themselves. Specifically, their opinion on emigration, the reasons why they believe that Spaniards go to Morocco and vice versa, why they believe that Moroccans go to Spain and finally, their position on a future migration project (whether it exists or not) are collected and analyzed.

Of the 39 interviewees, 31 affirm that there is nothing wrong with people migrating and that everyone can do what they want, as shown in Table 15. While there were 6 cases (4 Moroccan and 2 Spanish cases) who affirm that emigration is not good, among the reasons they give are that: everyone should stay in the country where they were born (2 Spanish and 2 Moroccan cases); migration is dangerous and brings tragedies (1 Moroccan case); and, migration is a bad sign, it means that something bad is happening (1 Moroccan case). There were two cases without a response.

Table 15. Rating of emigration by interviewees

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Negative	4	2	6
Positive	15	16	31
Total	19	18	37

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Emigration, therefore, at this stage of life is seen as an opportunity but also as a threat that indicates that things are not working (migration from this perspective is a necessity) and can bring very negative consequences, such as the person's death.

Among *the reasons why people migrate* (see Table 16), it was found that young Spaniards believe that their co-nationals go to Morocco mainly to learn about its culture (40%) and to visit the city (26.67%), followed by the reason of buying counterfeit brand-name clothing (20%). According to young people of Moroccan origin, Spaniards go to their country mainly for visiting/tourism (68.18%). Therefore, it can be said that both groups coincide in terms of why Spaniards migrate to Morocco.

Table 16. Reasons why Spaniards go to Morocco according to the opinion of the interviewees by country of origin

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Learn about the culture	4.55%	40%	18.92%
Visiting	68.18%	26.67%	51.35%
Shopping	9.09%	20%	13.51%
For utility services	0%	0%	0%
For work	9.09%	13.33%	10.81%
Have family ties-they study	9.09%	0%	5.41%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Whereas, according to the references of the young Moroccans interviewed, reflected in Table 17, their co-nationals go to Spain for work (38.1%) and to visit and learn about the culture (33.33%), only 14.29% say they emigrate to this country to study and another 14.29% to improve their quality of life. In the case of Spain, the young people stated that people of Moroccan origin go to Spain mainly for work (52%), followed by the opportunities offered by the country in terms of improving their quality of life (24%), and a smaller number said they go to visit and learn about the culture (12%).

Table 17. Reasons why Moroccans go to Spain according to the opinion of the interviewees by country of origin

	Moroccans (n = 20)	Spaniards (n = 19)	Total (n = 39)
Passing through to France-another country	0%	0%	0%
Visiting family	0%	4%	2.17%
Greater quality of life opportunities	14.29%	24%	19.57%
To study	14.29%	0%	6.52%
To visit the country and learn about the culture	33.33%	12%	21.74%
By necessity	0%	8%	4.35%
For work	38.10%	52%	45.65%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

The opinions of both groups clearly show two types of outbound movements: one is voluntary and has to do with pleasure, travel, learning and tourism, and the other has to do with necessity due to structural inequalities between countries. In this type of migration, voluntariness is conditioned by the need to improve the quality of life of the migrants and their families.

In this context, this study sought to delve deeper into the existence (or not) of a future migration project on the part of the young people interviewed. In this case, the responses between the two groups are very similar; as Table 18 shows, this intention is slightly higher in the case of the Moroccan youth (55.56%) compared to the case of the Spanish youth (40%), although the intention of emigrating in the future is present in both groups and both sexes.

Table 18. Existence/non-existence of a future migration project

	Moroccans (n = 20)		Spaniards (n = 19)		Total (n = 39)
	Males (n = 9)	Females (n = 11)	Males (n = 9)	Females (n = 10)	
Existing	55.56%	45.45%	44.44%	40%	46.15%
Non-existent	44.44%	36.36%	55.56%	60%	48.72%
Total	100%	81.82%	100%	100%	94.87%

Source: own elaboration using NVivo 12 software

Conclusions and possible further research

This study provides an opportunity to observe those aspects that unite and separate two groups of young people whose identity is constructed and reconstructed in a particular border area marked not only as a frontier between two countries but also between two continents (Europe and Africa) and between two worlds (between the first and the third world). In this setting, the protagonists of this research start by defining what culture is for them to position themselves subsequently. The young people interviewed show, in general, a favorable attitude toward interculturality. This is confirmed by the responses concerning the positive perception of immigration, the favorable consideration of their city as multicultural and their openness to friendship or even mixed relationships.

On going deeper into the responses, a contradiction was also found between what they admire and desire from the culture of the Other and those elements that they reject and that are interpreted as a threat to their cultural identity. Among the positive, they speak of freedoms, rights, gastronomy and clothing, while on the negative side—that which distances them—is religion and the way they think about women and marriage, thus emphasizing the weight that the social construction of gender has in the shaping of cultural identity and how these identities overlap and force them to position themselves.

Likewise, this study confirms how the subjectivities that feed the feeling of superiority/inferiority with respect to the Other are more marked in the 21st century by those who place themselves on the hegemonic subordinate side. At the same time, young Spaniards disassociate these subjectivities from cultural identity and association with the person, the individual.

Another aspect to highlight in this study is the perception of the proximity between the two countries, which both groups see as both a threat and an opportunity. Concerning the stage of life in which they find themselves, it is interesting how the results make it possible to link the difficulty/ease of being an adolescent with having or not having greater freedom. This topic opens up a possible line of research on the existence of different types of adolescence and how they are constructed in contrast to each other.

The conclusion is that emigration for these new generations is seen as something positive, although it is associated mainly with the need for work and, therefore, far removed from the individual's free will. Finally, it should be noted that the migration project at this stage is stronger in males of both origins than in females, an aspect that may be consistent with the masculinized tradition of migration routes in this border area.

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Cristina Goenechea

Spaniard. PhD in educational sciences from the University of Santiago de Compostela (2004). Associate Professor in the Department of Didactics at the Universidad de Cádiz (Spain). Research lines: intercultural education, social justice and teacher training. Recent publication: Gallego-Noche, B., Goenechea, C., Gómez-Ruiz, M. Á. & Machín-Alvarez, M. (2023). Towards intercultural education: exploring perceptions of cultural diversity and identities of adolescents living in the border area between Spain and Morocco. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), Article 559. <https://doi.org/10.3390/EDUCSCI13060559>

Macarena Machin Alvarez

Spaniard. PhD in social and political sciences, specializing in international migration and human rights, from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (2019). Researcher of the Margarita Salas program in the Department of Didactics of the Universidad de Cádiz. Research lines: inequalities, migrations and environmental education. Recent post: Gallego-Noche, B., Goenechea, C., Gómez-Ruiz, M. Á. & Machín-Alvarez, M. (2023). Towards intercultural education: exploring perceptions of cultural diversity and identities of adolescents living in the border area between Spain and Morocco. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), Article 559. <https://doi.org/10.3390/EDUCSCI13060559>

Soukaina Belkat

Moroccan. PhD in educational sciences from the Universidad de Cádiz and the Abdelmalek Essaâdi University (thesis in international co-supervision). He works at the Moroccan Association for the Integration of Immigrants. Research lines: intercultural education, Islamophobia and inclusion of the Moroccan population. Recent publication: Belkat, S. & Goenechea, C. (2019). Hacerse mujer entre dos mundos. Identidad e integración escolar de las adolescentes marroquíes escolarizadas en España. *Revista Espacios*, 40(26), 1-15. <https://www.revistaespacios.com/a19v40n26/19402615.html>