Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology

Brown researcher, white schools: Racialized positionality in ethnographic research on (anti)racism

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Abstract

This article is a cross-racial reflexive analysis between a biracial brown researcher and two researchers racialized as white in the same research project on (anti)racism in Finnish lower secondary schools. Building on three vignettes, the authors highlight several ways in which a researcher's racialized position as non-white and as white can impact ethnographic fieldwork in a context dominated by Nordic Exceptionalism and normative whiteness. The authors problematize the position of insider gaining access and gatekeepers' trust, before looking intersectionally at the dynamic of being a racial outsider, the conflicts and affects that come with it, and conclude with the onto-epistemological challenges of doing school ethnographic research and contributing to antiracist knowledge production. This contribution crystalizes under-researched dilemmas that call for the development of new ethnographic designs which center researchers' racial positions and further reflection on the ethical, methodological and ontological implications of producing data on racism at school.

Keywords

Positionality; racialized researcher; school ethnography; racism

Introduction

> *The research permits are in order, the pandemic restrictions in place in the schools are slowly being lifted. We have just finalized our interview guides and listen to the final recommendations from our Principal Investigator before our first day in the field: "remember that everything plays a part in ethnography, be mindful of the clothes you wear". "Clothes I can adjust, but I won't be able to do anything about the color of my skin" I tease. The team laugh, but I perceive a hint of nervousness. Come what may. [Maïmouna's research diary. Helsinki, spring 2022.]*

In the context of Nordic education, where staff, researchers and structures still often remain hegemonically white, we see the need to raise the questions of who can do research on racism and antiracism and its constraints and possibilities depending on one's racial position as white or non-white. There is a great need for good praxis and reflexion points for other non-white researchers preparing for field work in hegemonically white settings, but we identified an even greater need to highlight how a researcher's racialized difference in the context of Nordic Exceptionalism directly shapes educational research in various ways. We therefore choose to apply a double research process through reflexivity (Pillow, 2015) and build in this article on cross-racial reflections between one researcher racialized as non-white (and/or brown) and two researchers racialized as white in the same project on (anti)racism in Finnish schools. Recognizing that our racial identity might have impacted our data collection, we offer here to dwell on relevant instances of our respective embodied positionality and their analytic implications. This inquiry is pertinent because it sheds light on several blind spots engendered by the color-evasive history of Nordic educational research. The onto-epistemological inputs of this article can additionally be of value to future studies conducted in the field of ethnography, especially in the questions of the impact of racial positioning on the insider/outsider divide and gaining un/trust in relation to that. Finally, this article addresses the demand for methodological approaches in antiracism research by elaborating on the understanding of what Alana Lentin (2015) describes as what race (including unmarked whiteness) *does* instead of what it *is*.

Building our analysis on three vignettes centering the first author, we ask: how does a researcher's racialized position shape the way in which they conduct educational research on (anti)racism in the context of Nordic Exceptionalism?

For contextualization, we first discuss the terms of the article's title, starting with "white schools" and the concept of Nordic exceptionalism. We then explore the respective authors' racialized positionalities, open up the term "brown researcher" and look at previous research problematizing racialized dynamics in ethnographic studies. Finally, our double research process brings us to the analysis of three vignettes, where we first discuss the position of insider gaining access and gatekeepers' trust. We then look at the dynamics of being a racial outsider and the affect of guilt that comes with it, and conclude with the specific onto-epistemological requirements of antiracist ethnographic research and knowledge production.

Nordic white schools

Recent theoretical discussions from the field of critical race and whiteness studies have made it apparent that the color-evasive racial grammar at play in the Nordic countries conceals racism and racialization. Color-evasiveness (as a less ableist and expanded conceptualization of colorblindness; see Annamma et al., 2016) is the attitude and approach to race that says, "we should not see race, think in terms of race, talk about race, operationalize the concept of race or even make use of the word race itself. [It hinders the] active use of the concept of race to be able to identify, analyze and fight racism" (Hübinette & Lundström, 2023, p. 34). Furthermore in the Nordic context the concept of ethnicity is instead used as an euphemism for the unspoken racial differentiation that lies at the heart of Nordic national self-images as antiracists (Hübinette & Lundström, 2022). In most everyday discourses, we notice nonetheless that the euphemism of ethnicity also excludes the idea of whiteness from the racializing equation, reinforcing whiteness' position as mostly unmarked, unquestioned, and unnoticed. A central tenet of critical race and whiteness studies is to make the workings of whiteness visible, to come to the recognition of whiteness as a colonial and imperial legacy of race and racism, and this topic is increasingly studied by Nordic scholars (e.g. Andreassen et al., 2023; Hoegaerts et al., 2022; Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017). Building on this scholarship, we come back to the definition of racialization (Du Bois, 1903) and investigate how all individuals are racialized, either as white, or as non-white. We will later discuss brown and biracial identities, but we use the term "non-white" here to highlight the hegemonic and normative position of whiteness in the Nordic context. We also understand the term non-white as more englobing than e.g. the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), as it also encompasses the so-called "margins of whiteness" (Krivonos, 2019) and underlies the spatio-temporal liminality of racial categories.

This consideration will become crucial down the line, and especially in a Finnish context where we are often reminded of the history of Finns being racially classified as non-white "Mongolians" in certain times and places [e.g. during the American Civil War, or as part of racial biology in Nazi-Germany (Huhta, 2021)]. Finland has never been a culturally or racially homogeneous nation, nor is it absolved from colonial involvements. Nonetheless, like with its Nordic neighbors, a Finnish myth of homogeneity stemmed from a process of whitewashing and history (re)writing, excluding ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples, and various waves of migration from the dominant narratives (Höglund & Burnett, 2019; Keskinen, 2019; Tervonen, 2014). To this day, the national discourse and social consensus is characterized by the idea of Finland being an "innocent outsider" in the history of colonialism and racism, resulting in *Finnish exceptionalism* (Rastas, 2012), located in the broader context of *Nordic exceptionalism* (Keskinen et al., 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). Furthermore, Finland's narrative of having already achieved equity and equality leaves very little room for introspection, self-reflection and awareness of the majority's biases and privileges (Keskinen, 2022).

Finnish institutions are not allowed to gather statistics on ethnicities and racial identification (Personal Data Act 523/1999, § 11). To gain some understanding of the current ethnic makeup of Finland, one can look at statistics on self-reported first language, although they may not fully capture the diversity within the population, particularly as only one language can be reported.

According to recent data from Statistics Finland (2022), the estimated distribution of first languages is as follows: Finnish 85.9%, Swedish 5.2%, Russian 1.7%, and other 7.2%. As of 2023, 9.6% of Finnish residents had been born in a foreign country. The largest immigrant groups include individuals from Russia, Estonia, and Sweden (for specific research on "pupils with a migrant background", see Helakorpi et al., 2023). The Sami people have a recognized status as an indigenous ethnic group in Finland and are estimated to number around 6 000 to 10 000 people. The Roma community is also a recognized ethnic minority, estimated to number around 10 000 to 12 000 people (THL, 2023). Additionally, Finland officially recognizes several other ethnic minorities, including the Tatar, Karelian, and Jewish communities.

Beyond its demographics, Finland is strongly normatively white. In this article we distinguish between "whiteness" and "white people" and hold to an anti-essentialist idea of whiteness as a fluid and dynamic social construction that embeds problematic power positions (Gillborn, 2019). In other words, whiteness in this perspective is more than what is perceived as white bodies, and is understood as a political and cultural term that holds status and power. It is an epistemic value that can be read i.a. phenomenologically as a habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006), in terms of affects, materialities of bodies and spaces, an orientation (Ahmed, 2007), or as a fluctuating perception of a performed normativity (Chadderton, 2018). Particularly in an American context it is understood as a cultural practice (Frankenberg, 1993), and a social and historical identity with clear symbols and its own canon (Khanna, 2011). It is still noteworthy that whiteness is not homogeneous but has inner hierarchies. In the context of Finland, this has been studied from the angles of Russian-speakers (Krivonos, 2019), Estonians (Kingumets & Sippola, 2022), the Indigenous Sápmi community (Ranta & Kanninen, 2019) and in relation to the Swedish-speaking Finns (Harju, in press.).

Within these frameworks, we employ the expression "white schools" to highlight the hegemonic whiteness of the Finnish schools' structures, as well as the dominant racial position of the white schools' staff and pupils. The active (re)production of whiteness in Finnish schools is visible in the homogenous narratives about Finland and Finnishness (Hummelstedt et al., 2021). National minorities in educational material are very scarce (Kohvakka, 2022) or are portrayed through problematic racializing representations [see (Ranta & Kanninen, 2019) in the case of Sápmi and (Helakorpi, 2019) on Roma and travelers). Other studies show that Finnish schools are a display of normative whiteness (Juva & Holm, 2016; Peltola & Phoenix, 2022) and our use of the expression "white schools" is here a reference to those institutional settings, more than a demographic rationale. In some of the schools in the collected data, non-white pupils were indeed a majority in number, but the school staff, pedagogical material and overall institutional practices remained hegemonically white, hence our denomination, echoing Ahmed's understanding of "white spaces" (2007).

Racialized researchers

In the context of Nordic education, where the illusion of white innocence and Nordic exceptionalism persists, hegemonic whiteness and its impacts on studies conducted in the field has only recently begun to be researched. We address this problematic by addressing how

different researchers' racialised positions can simultaneously create both insider and outsider positions, which in turn affects the opportunity to create data (Haraway, 1988). In doing so we still recognise how our analysis is impacted by hegemonic whiteness (Phillippo & Nolan, 2022), meaning that our onto-epistemological stances will continue to include blind spots while trying to bring light to specific racializing mechanisms. While this article aims to open up and defamiliarize the *doings* of whiteness in the field of school ethnography, it is crucial to note that even within spaces and actions meant to challenge racism there is a risk of maintaining the norm of whiteness and renewing structures of racialization (Mayorga & Picower, 2018). We therefore acknowledge the risk of essentializing some of the racial positions discussed in the analysis; neither do we wish to simplify and pin the complex and shifting positions in the field onto a simple difference in racializing processes, meaning that we aim to work both *with and against* racial categories (Gunaratnam, 2003). Similarly, the insider/outsider divide has been criticized for building on essentialized subjectivities. In this article we continue to use the terms insider/outsider but intend to consider *moments* of insiderness and outsiderness, building on the idea that race, like ethnicity, can become de/politicized at particular moments during ethnographic fieldwork (Baser & Toivanen, 2018). Our reflection stems from feminist intersectional scholarships, which maintain that researchers are intrinsically embodied and biased (Faria & Mollett, 2016) and produce situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). As such we continually reflect on and acknowledge different and fluid social locations of power (Harding, 1991) and their impacts on knowledge production throughout the process, from the design of the study to the data collection/production and its analysis (Bilge, 2013; Linabary & Hamel, 2017). More specifically within the context of school ethnography, we build on studies arguing that the researchers' body sends messages just by being in a space (Gordon et al., 2007), which must be acknowledged along with the fact that we all (staff, pupils and researchers) "strategically perform [our] identity at school" (Stich, 2012), including our racial position (Khanna, 2011).

Regarding the impact of racial positions in ethnographic work, Gunaratnam has debunked the long-established premise that research participants will not necessarily tell what they 'really' think about racial topics to an interviewer from another ethnic or racial group. She criticizes the one-truth rhetoric and extractive logic of the suggestion of matching the racial position of the interviewer and participants, and argue that the question is "not whether 'race' and ethnicity affect interviewing relationships, but, rather, *how* and *when* racialized dynamics are produced and negotiated within the interview process, and how they are given meaning in analysis" (Gunaratnam 2003, p. 76). In the Nordic educational context, the great majority of ethnographic research addressing racial dynamics happens in a so-called white-on-black dynamic, meaning that it reflects on situations where researchers racialized as white study populations or individuals racialized as non-white (e.g. Helakorpi, 2019; Hummelstedt et al., 2021). Some articles discuss the white-on-white perspective (e.g. Loukola, 2025; Lundström, 2010; Schwarz & Lindqvist, 2018), and a few noteworthy studies also challenge the perception of whiteness as being hegemonic e.g. Dankertsen (2019), Țîștea (2020) or Berisha (2023), who describe their positions as white-passing researchers in Norwegian, Finnish and Danish contexts respectively, while Eriksen (2022) describes the process of reassessing her own whiteness and racial identity as she discovers that she has Sámi ancestry. Meanwhile, the few studies that feature non-white ethnographers almost always

describe black-on-black or non-white-on-non-white dynamics (e.g. Bayati, 2014; Li & Yang, 2022). The black-on-white ethnographic dynamic is very rarely discussed and reflected on, and outside from studies framing the US (e.g. Muwwakkil, 2023; Ntarangwi, 2010), the closest we could come to this paradigm in a Nordic educational setting was through Ylva Habel's work (2012; 2008). In "Challenging Swedish exceptionalism? Teaching while Black" Habel analyzes her experience as "a Black academic teaching predominantly White students about the Black Diaspora" (Habel, 2012, p. 107) and theoretically frames it with the concepts of "normative colorblindness", "sanctioned ignorance" and "White liberal doubt". The idea of "sanctioned ignorance" describes the negating discourse of someone being purportedly innocent, unconcerned, and convinced that we all live in a post-racial, post-racist society, where the problematic can easily be steered by personal intention. "White liberal doubt" is about defining racism as something else: tangible, perceptively menacing and something that may exist in society at large, but not in our particular context of Nordic Exceptionalism. Habel then analyzes how she encounters several forms of "White students' resistance" going from micro-aggressions to blatant racism, as well as "outright rejection and disqualification" of her person (Habel, 2012, p. 213) (see also similar processes mentioned in Osman, 2021).

To add to the complexity of racial positioning in the context of Nordic exceptionalism, we bring to this article the seldom described position of brown as black-white biracial. The first author of this article, Maïmouna, indeed defines her own positionality as brown and recognizes the specificity to have only one (white) racial heritage, as she was educated in a color-evasive all-white family and a privileged suburb of Paris in France, where she deeply internalized whiteness and upper-middle class values. Meanwhile, her skin complexion is clearly brown, her hair afro, and she cannot pass as white in a European context. This means that despite how she would like to self-identify, she is racialized and brought back to her assumed racial position as brown. Khanna has noted in a study on ethnic symbols that "minorities have limited ethnic options because their ascribed race trumps any ethnic status" (Khanna, 2011, p. 1051). The black-white biracial respondents in Khanna's study used ethnic and racial symbols to connect with others and/or to stand out and feel unique and noteworthily used so called "white symbols" to negotiate negative black stereotypes, racial inequality and racial privilege. We want to emphasis in this positionality statement that Maïmouna is aware that her status of racialized as brown brings distinct privileges compare to being racialized as black. In a Nordic context most black-white biracial individuals choose to politically identify as Black (Sawyer, 2000), or do not even believe that they would have an alternative to identifying as Black (Hübinette & Arbouz, 2019; Sandset, 2019). Maïmouna does not do so, not through colorism nor lack of solidarity with Blacks, but rather in recognition of the prevalence of her partial whiteness: she sees a need to be held accountable for her white complicity (Applebaum, 2010) and acknowledge its effect when engaging with Black scholars' standpoints (Collins, 1986).

Furthermore, we will mention that Maïmouna integrated in Swedish. Swedish is Finland's second national language spoken by a minority of the population, but often viewed as socio-economically privileged in the capital area, because Swedish was the dominant language of government, business and culture up to the end of the 19th century (Finnäs, 2003). Moreover, it may be relevant to mention that the Swedish-speaking Finns have an unfortunate history of engaging with

eugenics in the endeavor to i.a. demonstrate their racial superiority (and whiteness) over the Finnish-speaking population (see research on the Florinska Commission founded in 1911; Dahlberg, 2021). Maïmouna's integration and language choice had a shifting impact on her constant intersectional negotiation of power, including race, ethnicity, class, education, language, and immigration status, on top of other factors such as gender and ability.

The second author of this article, Saara, is read and identifies as being white. Her first language is Finnish, and she has grown up and been educated in predominantly white surroundings and structures in Finland, mostly among people who also identify as white.

The third author, Ida, identifies as a Swedish-speaking Finn, which is read as a privilege, but at the same time a linguistically limiting identity in Finland where the majority speaks Finnish as a first language. The research schools in our project were both Finnish and Swedish language schools, and as Ida did her fieldwork in a Finnish language school, her identity as a Swedish-speaking Finn who had learned Finnish as a foreign language influenced her sense of fitting in and made her feel an outsider at times. However, being racialized as white and identified as a "teacher-like" person due to her previous work experiences, age, gender, and habitus trumped this linguistic and cultural sense of outsiderness when doing observations in a Finnish language school, and still positioned Ida inside hegemonic whiteness and with access to power in similar ways to the staff racialized as white. Both Ida and Saara have experiences of living in various countries, including global south regions, and had opportunities to reflect on their white privileges, as well as their middle-class background and Finnish citizenship.

Data and method

The empirical material that is the basis for this article derives from a research project on Racism and Antiracism in Lower Secondary Education (RILSE). As part of the project, four researchers (three racialized as white and one racialized as brown) were sent into the field to study how pupils and school staff experience and challenge racism and racialization, including unmarked whiteness. The project consisted of short-term multi-sited observational studies that used ethnographic tools. Because of the COVID-pandemic and the travel restrictions, we focused our study on six schools in the capital region of Finland during Spring and Fall 2022 (N=260 days). Within those limitations, the schools were selected to offer as different profiles as possible, from being very diverse to being very homogeneous in terms of languages, cultures, and socioeconomic factors. Maïmouna did her fieldwork in Swedish-language schools where almost all the pupils and staff were racialized as white. Saara and Ida did their fieldwork in Finnish-language schools where the staff were mostly racialized as white while roughly half of the pupils were racialized as non-white.

In the schools that agreed to be part of our project, we followed two or three eighth grade classes whose head teacher had either volunteered to participate, or had been encouraged by the respective principal to do so (N=15 classes). All pupils, their guardians, and the school staff who were part of the selected classes were informed about the study and asked to fill in a consent form. We faced some avoidance and a considerate amount of open refusal to participate in the study from both pupils and staff, but with help from the principals and other key staff, we

managed to secure access to a representative number of lessons in every school (between seven and twelve different subjects per school).

The researcher's role in ethnography at large, but particularly in school ethnography, is traditionally understood as a position that does not allow taking a stand, especially during lessons, where intervening in the class could be interpreted as questioning the teachers' authority (Tolonen, 2001). Adjusting to the preliminary refusals to participate to our study, we negotiated access to the field by settling for a noninterventionist approach, instead of asserting the anti-racist methodological framework otherwise deployed in our project. Such anti-racist research framework would require the researchers to intervene in most instances of racism "if they are to be true to their intellectual and political obligations" (Okolie, 2005, p. 257). Both the number of such instances, and the difficulty of clearly identifying and navigating them as short-term outsiders, informed our decision. Furthermore, the primary objective of the project was to gather data on racism in the schools, addressing a glaring blind spot in Finnish educational research and allowing the development of knowledge and tools that would contribute to anti-racism in the long run. We estimated that challenging the staff during the observations could result in mistrust, polished comments which would not reflect their thinking, or even further refusal to take part in the research, drastically limiting our access to the classrooms (Wanat, 2008).

The data collected during the overall project resulted in participants' observations (N≈350 participants) and open-ended semi-structured interviews (N=83 staff members, N=178 pupils). Furthermore, as a means to involve the pupils in the collective creation of the data, we invited them to take participatory photographs (Holm, 2020) illustrating their understanding of racism and antiracism at school (N=291 photographs). We pseudonymized and coded the data including the respective researchers' field notes, and analyzed the material thematically from the identified redundancies in the material (N=162 codes) (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This article is a cross-racial reflexive inquiry, drawing primarily on ethnographic vignettes derived from empirical field notes and personal logs produced by Maïmouna. The incidents depicted in the vignettes were selected because of their complex and multi-layered dimensions, which offered opportunities for in-depth analysis and interpretation. As part of our reflexive inquiry and constant communication as a research team, these field moments were dialectically contrasted with the reflections and experiences of Saara and Ida. As a mean to reflect on and acknowledge different social locations of power and their impacts on knowledge production also methodologically as we write, we crafted the vignettes as a combination of observational field notes and personal research diary to convey a sense of affective intensity. The vignette "is a literary device whose purpose is to place a question in the reader's mind and to set an emotional tone over the material that is to come" (Gullion, 2015, p. 90). Vignettes enable narrative descriptions of specific scenes, inviting readers to witness moments of insight and the analytical conclusions reached, thus constructing an affective framework for (feminist) ethnography (Schöneich, 2021; Visweswaran, 1994). In the analysis of the vignettes, we read with "affective dissonance" as feminist praxis (Hemmings, 2012, p. 156), and aim to recenter affects and the body in our understanding of knowledge (Bloom-Christen & Grunow, 2022).

By juxtaposing cross-racially contrasting experiences in dialogue with the vignettes, we hope on the one hand to methodologically challenge epistemic privileges and avoid single-truth narrative building, as well as essentialized and congealed conceptions of 'race' and/or ethnicity. On the other hand, we aim to guide the reader along our double research process and use of *reflexivity as interpretation* informed by *reflexivity as genealogical*. Reflexivity as interpretation, or "a hermeneutics of suspicion" [(Ferguson, 1991, p. 334) cited in Pillow, 2015, p. 423], is described by Pillow as a threefold claim to knowledge: "toward critical awareness and transformation [,] toward insights on power and privilege [,] and toward understandings of researcher and subject self(ves)" (Nagar, 2014; Pillow, 2015, p. 423). Pillow analyzes it in conversation with *reflexivity as genealogical*, comparable to a metalevel of analysis, in some aspects conflating with postmodernist deconstruction as it "modestly seeks to unsettle the settled contours of knowledge and power" (Ferguson, 1991, p. 334). In this article and in our research project more broadly we are *informed* by genealogy in the sense that we try to distinguish and address ethical, ontological, and epistemological aspects of fieldwork dilemmas (Nagar, 2014, p. 8), but we do not claim to be rhetorically "disruptive and violent" in Ferguson's meaning and e.g. decolonial endeavors. Nonetheless our ontological turn is about diffraction, the "displacement and rethinking of terms and structures of research, such as author, data, subjects" (Pillow, 2015, p. 423).

The making of an insider

> I [Maïmouna] am sitting in the teachers' lounge, wondering what I should think of the primitive African sculpture displayed on the window seal. A subject teacher, Nils, comes in and takes a seat in front of me. 'I just spoke with a couple of pupils from the class you are following', he smiles. 'They were wondering if they would dare to speak with you, and how much they should tell you in the interviews. I told them that they should dare to say exactly what they think because the best thing about scientific studies is that they are anonymous. Otherwise, the pupils said that they often forget that you are in the classroom - that is very good!'. I meet Nils again in the tram on my way home and he enthusiastically observes that we live in the same neighborhood: 'the nicest part of the city!'

In the reading of this vignette, we are compelled to address the power negotiation consciously established by Nils, how he places himself as a gatekeeper and simultaneously "grants" Maïmouna a sense of insiderness, in the school, the city, and the Swedish-speaking Finns' community. The proactive approach to recounting his exchange with the pupils appears to center the epistemic of what a "scientific study" and anonymity implies, while also being a rather direct warning about who has the trust of the pupils and the capacity to grant it to outsiders, or not. This example illustrates how (white) school staff on several occasions liked to emphasize their protective roles towards the pupils and the schools, and asserted their power as informal gatekeepers towards the researchers despite also being subjects in our study (Wanat, 2008). This showed up in the staff's tone policing and how they defined the role of the researchers - literally to their pupils and rhetorically to and among themselves. The following moment in the vignette seems to have a

direct correlation with this forwarded trust, meaning that the teacher, after inquiring with his pupils, approves of the fact that Maïmouna had managed to be invisible in the classroom in a way that conformed to his expectations of a "good" researcher. During the remaining time of the fieldwork, this validating game persisted, admittedly also informed by Maïmouna herself, who more or less consciously used the means of the "duck pond" rhetoric at the heart of the Swedish-speaking Finns' identity building where everybody knows everybody else: not only did she live a couple of blocks away from Nils, she also sang in the same choir as another teacher, use to be part of the same student nation as a third one, and recognized yet another staff member as a former student of hers. Being geographically, socially, personally -and ultimately socio-economically (Kosunen et al., 2022)- involved with several members of the school staff granted Maïmouna a feeling of belonging and insiderness that in retrospective can come across as ambivalent.

With a critical stance, we can indeed read this vignette as illustrating how the teacher values Maïmouna's place as an invisible researcher in the classroom as confirming the good girl allegory, or, as analyzed by Yliraudanjoki how researchers might aim to act like a (feminized) top student, "a good girl", who is silent, still, and causes as little disturbance as possible (Yliraudanjoki, 2010). Both Maïmouna and Saara had several similar experiences in the field. But beyond this gendered reading, our process of reflexivity as interpretation brings us to take in consideration other intersectional factors. Given that intersectional analysis is a tool for understanding and addressing structural failure (Crenshaw, 2017), we mean here to highlight the racial component in an otherwise color-evasive context. Analyzing Nils' input from a critical race and whiteness perspective, his comment about Maïmouna being "forgotten" and invisible in the classroom can thus be interpreted as a compliment towards himself and his pupils as they have proven to be successfully *colorblind*. Alternatively, or simultaneously, it can also be read as a possible compliment to Maïmouna for performing whiteness so well and managing to be invisible *despite* her assigned racial position: a performance confirmed by Maïmouna's intersectional stances described above (socio-economic, language etc.), resulting, for Nils, in a familiar white habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006) and/or orientation (Ahmed, 2007).

As part of our cross-racial reflection, it emerged that the topic of whiteness brought different challenges to Saara and Ida. Through several references to their own fieldwork, we will now elaborate on the concepts of good/invisible researcher ideologies as well as white confessions/backstage racism. Analyzing how their assigned racial position also impacted their own sense of insiderness, Saara and Ida indeed reckoned that they were exposed to "unhappy white confessions" (Lockard, 2016) in a way that Maïmouna was not. Both Saara and Ida had the experiences of school staff enthusiastically praising the importance of the research project and hoping for concrete solutions to the problem of racism. However, at the same time white school staff repeatedly brought up beliefs such as "there is a risk that everything can be considered racism" and sought for understanding, sympathy, and validation from Saara and Ida, asking them if they had judged them as racist or as acting racist. For example, Saara had a white teacher venting if she, as a white woman, was guilty of everything. Both Saara and Ida had experiences of (white, female) participants breaking down because of their complex emotions and guilt surrounding the topic of racism. For example, Ida interviewed a teacher who started to cry as she confessed that

she sometimes caught herself thinking in racist ways about pupils when she became angry enough, and that she found it terrible. While the affects lurking behind such confessions can be analyzed as belonging to the spectrum of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), a more challenging set of affects also appeared in the form of confessions, but this time along the lines of locker room talk. In particular, the rhetoric of "reverse racism" was redolent in conversations Saara and Ida heard. It came across through sarcastic comments like "welcome to this very interesting place [...] where the hegemony and minority is turned around compared to what is seen in other places". During an interview, one teacher processed to openly criticize Saara about the aim of our study, commenting, among other things, about how "the question formulation of the research is wrong, because in this school 'Finns' are a minority" while she thought that many fights took place between Muslim pupils who were anyway unable and unwilling to integrate. When she heard those comments also being made outside the practical arrangements of the individual interview, Saara faced challenges navigating around them so as to not have to publicly agree with, or openly dismiss, staff's opinions in front of the pupils and other staff. Confronting these views could have meant risking the cooperation with the staff, who were also informal gatekeepers to the classrooms, and simultaneously compromising the collection of perspectives they held on racism, including the more problematic ones. Meanwhile, blending in as a white insider also posed a challenge while trying to position oneself as an ally to the non-white pupils and staff. The contradiction between claiming to commit to antiracism while simultaneously compromising the research design by aiming to produce data in a noninterventionist way made *problematic silence* salient, making white individuals complicit with backstage racism by not intervening (Yancy, 2018).

We find that our cross-racial understanding of the position of insider can at first be interpreted as the opposite, as when Maïmouna was seeking validation and her sense of belonging appeared to be in the hands of the white school staff. Meanwhile, Saara and Ida were granted the place of insider vis-à-vis white school staff without necessarily wanting it, when that meant becoming a receptacle for white fragility and racist confessions. In both cases, nonetheless, we see that proximity to whiteness, as a performance (for Maïmouna) or as an assumed racial position (for Saara and Ida), was the ruling element that granted us moments of insiderness in the schools. Because whiteness holds positivist assumptions, researchers performing whiteness come across as value-free, objective, and rational. Through our cross-racial analysis, we highlight how a researcher's racialized subjectivity is produced and understood through her own research, thus being at once methodological and political (Gunaratnam, 2003).

Guilty racial outsiders

> *I come into the English class while still thinking of the previous encounter with Mika, a subject teacher: does he really believe that his pupil did not meant to insult me when he shouted the n-word? Why was Mika then worried about the boys 'rallying themselves' against me and preventing me from getting a 'representative picture of their activities'? I am brought back to the moment when the pupil seated next to me laughs and say to his friend: 'Oh, don't open that page, there are swastikas and 1940-stuff.' They laugh and hum an*

improvised melody, rhyming to the words nazi and n***. The pupil suddenly becomes very serious, looks in the void next to me and threatens: 'I'll follow you home, I know where you live. I'm going to bomb your house, your mother…' I hear how he goes back to laughing with his friend about France and its 'n*** soccer team'; but I have 'zoned-out'. My brain is now racing. Would the pupils dare to escalate the provocations to a physical point? I place my hand on my pregnant belly and try to stop the intrusive thoughts of being pushed down the stairs or shoved in the corridor when passing by. Should I worry about the rumors of their guardians' possible involvement in neo-Nazi groups? I try to coach myself: I cannot succumb to this paranoid panic; it would not make me an objective observer and professional researcher!

Since "racial paranoia is an indication of something real" (Jackson, 2008), we see a discursive opportunity to ventilate this traumatic field encounter by bringing our reflexive methodology to focus on its affective dimension. Despite Maïmouna's experiences of racism at school during her own childhood, she was deeply shocked by the rawness of the several attacks she faced and witnessed during her fieldwork, including the one depicted above. The surprise was particularly reinforced by how the expected power position of an adult researcher in relation to eighth graders was repeatedly trumped by race. From being a "good researcher" performing whiteness, Maïmouna started to worry about her non-whiteness becoming an impediment to her role as a researcher, both by making her a (racial) outsider, but also because of the nature of the affects such attacks triggered in her: fear, shame, paranoia, unprofessionalism, guilt. The encounter precipitated a conflict between Maïmouna's subjectivity and her perception of her role as a researcher. Also, Mika the teacher seemed to express similar concerns, juggling between a color-evasive stand, gaslighting and downplaying the gravity of the racist incident he happened to witness, while very paradoxically, also underlining how the pupils might be particularly aware of Maïmouna's racial position. He did show concerns about Maïmouna's feeling when he heard the n-word, but seemed more worried about the reputation of the school and his wish for her to get a *realistic* picture and data, and ultimately went into tone policing by encouraging the researcher not to mix-up what he qualified as meaningless provocations with something that would be "real" racism – displaying a classical rhetoric of "White liberal doubt" (Habel, 2012).

In contrast, Saara's and Ida's experiences converged around the thinking that being a white researcher in schools with numerous non-white pupils and predominantly white staff meant balancing between opposite directions in order not to create barriers and getting a *realistic picture* of their own. Saara's racial position as a white researcher and her role as an antiracist ally was directly challenged by non-white staff, questioning how she would gain the non-white participants' trust. Both Saara and Ida also had similar experiences in their respective schools of how a multilingual instructor with Somali background stayed cautious towards them and the research and did not participate in the interview, despite clearly having thoughts on the topic of racism. When Ida observed a lesson in Somali language as the only white person in a room normally reserved for the Somali community, she felt herself a racial outsider. She recognized the affect of shame, thinking that she perhaps should not have been there, as this was probably one of

the few occasions when the space was safer than usual for the pupils of Somali background.

Both Saara and Ida often found themselves thinking about how to express enough allyship especially towards non-white pupils, because of their positions as whites but also as adults, and thus recognized as having more power to act in school settings than the pupils in vulnerable positions. Those considerations echoed Eriksen's on "knowing when to act as an ally, and when to step aside or not speak, to avoid centering [one]self as a 'white saviour'" (Eriksen, 2020, p. 107). Interpreting her "discomforting surprise" when witnessing racism as an "affective encounter with [her] own white fragility" and white guilt, Eriksen was compelled to "acknowledge complicity", "unlearn" and "let go of epistemic authority, trying to minimize the urge for quick solutions and accepting the complexity and plurality of knowledge and perspectives" (Eriksen, 2020, p. 107).

In this cross-racial reflection and as a brown researcher, Maïmouna has reached a pivotal moment of her black-white biracial positionality. On the one hand, she did not have the (white) privilege to only feel a "discomforting surprise" when witnessing racism, whether it was targeting herself, other non-white pupils, or at large as a discourse in the schools. Her embodied experience and analysis can thus be brought to bear on the plurality of knowledge and on the complexity of the affective grammar of guilt when it comes to racism and coloniality. On the other hand, Maïmouna recognizes behind her guilt a propensity for (brown) saviorism and is critical of how much those affects might be the result of her internalized whiteness - and hence requires unlearning and letting go of epistemic authority.

Additionally, this dilemma brings us to address the decolonial injunction of centering (the knowledge and perspective of) the participants in ethnographic studies. This is especially relevant to e.g. the rising popularity of collaborative engagement, community-engaged and Participatory Action Research as opposed to noninterventionist observational studies (Argyris et al., 1985). While postcolonial feminists have long challenged white feminist desires to 'know' and 'give voice' to the other (Visweswaran, 1994), the decolonial methodological effort in a Nordic context currently focuses on a specific "power of the gaze": a dynamic that implicitly centers white ethnographers producing knowledge about/with marginalized communities. This also shows e.g. in the methodology of reflexive positionality, shadowed by coloniality as "founded for the white researcher to better conduct his/her research on the non-white other, albeit in a more ethical way" (Ganni & Khan, 2024, p. 5). Alongside fellow researchers doing black-on-black ethnography, by playing out the white-on-black dynamic's literal reversal (meaning non-white-on-white ethnography), we highlight an "ontologically predefined" paradigm (Nencel, 2014) and problematic blind spot in Nordic educational research.   Without falling back on one-truth rhetoric and extractive logic (Gunaratnam, 2003), we are compelled to ask with Okolie:

Can the tools used to study the "self' be used to study the "Other"? Can the same tools and methods used for the study of the dominant be used, in an unmodified form, to study the dominated and vice versa? Can the same tools used to study one's "inferiors" be used to study one's equals? In research, are we likely to ask the same question of the dominant as the oppressed, and can we reasonably expect to elicit answers from the oppressor and the oppressed

that are similarly unencumbered? [...] To what extent can anti-racists still conduct research under the cloak of objectivity when the social environment is so skewed and the power differentials so acute that the research environment can hardly be a neutral one. (Okolie, 2005, p. 251)

As such we do not have a solution to the dilemma we raise, but are inspired by the work of researchers doing black-on-black ethnography and suggesting that "rather than Blackness attempting to enter the category of the ethnographer, we would better serve to imagine how ethnography would have to be accommodated by Blackness to have a truly more radical and emancipatory critical ethnography." (Henson, 2020, p. 333). Thus we believe that developing an ethnographic design suitable for non-white researchers (and all the more for a multiracial research team) in the context of white schools needs a stand on reflexivity as being genealogical rather than interpretational, as well as a multiplicity of experiences and analyses of the black-on-white paradigm.

Awkward responsibilities

> I meet Karin, a subject teacher and member of the school's leading group in the teachers' lounge, to ventilate the incident that just happened featuring her pupil Emilie: she interprets Emilie's silence during the discussion of the photography task as Emilie being hurt when the other group "otherized" her. Karin is worried that there will be several similar incidents as she has heard how Emilie's classmates also talked about photographing "another dark-skinned girl from the 7th grade". Karin says that the whole situation feels difficult and rhetorically asks how one should have reacted. She makes it clear that she is dissatisfied that our project's photography task "made visible and underlined differences between us". I feel that she is blaming me for it, and I try to channel my growing shame by analyzing the color-evasive rhetoric at play as we speak.

This debriefing with Karin was the first of a series of multiple similar exchanges between her and Maïmouna, as repeated racist incidents kept happening during her fieldwork in that school, including those depicted in the second vignette. The nature of their encounters progressively shifted from Karin's rhetorically wondering outload about the appropriate reaction to such cases, to explicitly requiring Maïmouna to come up with solutions and suggestions on how to tackle racism in the classroom and in the corridors, even when racist attacks were directed toward the researcher herself. Maïmouna first read Karin's demands as a validation of her antiracist expertise, although they cunningly challenged the established noninterventionist design of the study. Rereading those exchanges, however, we reckon that Karin was implying that Maïmouna needed to deal with the problem that she had created by disrupting the carefully established color-evasiveness at play in the school, a realization that triggered the affects of shame and guilt in the researcher.

The idea of the photography task was to involve the pupils in the collective creation of the data, and they were given a couple of weeks to take pictures illustrating their understanding of racism

and antiracism at school. The different researchers involved in our project guided the pupils in their respective schools to gather the pictures and give them a headline, before sharing and discussing them with the rest of the class. The incident described in the third vignette happened during the first phase of this task. The introduction of the photography task was also the most challenging fieldwork moment for Ida. The situation required her to balance the researcher position of trying to reach and manage relations with as many pupils as possible to gain as many perspectives from the participants as possible, and at the same time expressing allyship and an antiracism stance. During this occasion, a pupil racialized as white took up a lot of space diminishing racism. Ida felt that even if several non-white pupils were given space and shared their experiences of racism, as she was trying to maintain some kind of trust with the whole class, she was conflicted about giving this much space to this one pupil insisting on his argument of everything being called racism.

We realize that the idea of guilt and shame are redundant to our analysis. Also framed in the context of Nordic Exceptionalism as *Scandinavian guilt,* these affects can be read as the sign that we felt "responsible for alleviating the suffering of others" (Oxfeldt, 2018); whether the suffering was judged to be caused by not being a good enough antiracist ally for Saara and Ida, or disturbing normative color-evasiveness and triggering white fragility for Maïmouna. We found that those affects very often stemmed from an unclarity in our position in the field and role as researchers producing data on (anti)racism. The paradox of committing to antiracism while coming to the schools as noninterventional observers revealed itself to be detrimental to our sense of integrity. It created a cognitive dissonance and resulted in a feeling of having done something wrong (guilt) at best, alternatively that our whole ideal self was wrong (shame), which we tentatively explained away with the narrative of being in an "awkward position". Reinforcing those feelings of being in an awkward position was the fact that our presence in the schools appeared to be confusing, especially for the staff, even though we had informed them about our research project several times before it started, sent consent forms, etc. After some time spent in the field and through the interviews with the staff, we also realized that our project had been to some extent misunderstood, as we were seen as having the responsibility to "fix" the racism problem in the schools, and some participants explicitly framed their and the schools' participation in our study as an antiracist measure per se.

Ultimately, Saara and Ida managed to blur in among the dominantly white and female teaching staff effortlessly, almost concerningly normalized in school settings (Rajander, 2010). After their initial confusion, pupils and staff seemed to easily forget their presence on the premises, sometime even giving them staff responsibilities, for instance by leaving them as the sole adult in a classroom. But while Saara and Ida were repeatedly mistaken for teachers, Maïmouna was asked during the entirety of her fieldwork, and sometimes several times by the same individuals, if she was doing an internship, or what stage of her undergraduate studies she was at. While a possible explanation could be found in the intersectional factor of age, rather than essentializing race, studies investigating the paradoxical and strategic erasure of childhood innocence on one hand, and the infantilization of non-white people on the other, urge us to rethink this color-evasive argument (see e.g. Ahrong, 2023). As Navarro (2013) describes how she is always mistaken for an

undergraduate, a child, or cleaning staff when she does not wear a suit at academic gatherings, we realize that the motive appears to be structural rather than being isolated instances. Thus, we find it relevant to our hypothesis that those exchanges might have been caused by Maïmouna's brownness and could be a sign of "an unreflected white desire for ordering non-White bodies" (Polite, 2007, p. 47, as cited by Habel 2012). The role of a postdoctoral researcher and ethnographer, and the underlying symbolic power position it confers, seemed to appear to the school staff as incompatible with Maïmouna's body and presence in the space, or at least not expected – as if "at odds with the existing structures" (hooks, 1994). Furthermore, a body of work highlights how students show preexisting raced, classed, and gendered understandings of what constitutes a "professor" (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002) or a "teacher" (Habel, 2012). The same process applies with regard to what constitutes a "researcher" and how this can come into conflict with "the assumption of a white, male researcher venturing into the unknown as the neutral anthropological position" (Navarro et al., 2013). Thinking in terms of body out of place (Puwar, 2004), we want to argue that Maïmouna's experience as a brown researcher in white schools was to some extent "throwing" and disorienting (white) people (Ahmed, 2007).

Conclusion

Our contribution highlights several ways in which a researcher's racialized position as non-white or as white can impact ethnographic fieldwork. We realize with this cross-racial reflexive analysis that our fieldwork was compromised by our internally conflicting roles as researchers committed to antiracist principles but not fully embracing antiracist practices and methodologies. To some extent, we also failed to anticipate the salience of our respective racial positionality and subjectivity in the field, which was reinforced by the fact that we were studying (anti)racism.

Staying within the context of observational ethnography, we could congratulate ourselves for having managed to produce raw and minimally censored data that allowed us to illustrate the violence that non-white individuals are faced with in a Finnish school context. Simultaneously the noninterventionist design required to produce such data allowed racism to remain unchallenged (at least temporarily) in the schools. This design can jeopardize non-white researchers' subjectivity, well-being, and sense of safety in the field, and one's sense of integrity beyond all racialized positions. For researchers racialized as white, not intervening in racist incidents can jeopardize their status as an antiracist ally and create trust issues with non-white participants and other antiracists in the school.

Moreover, we show with our analysis that the black-on-white perspective requires methodological specificities for which there are no quick fixes. From our field experience, we would nonetheless like to conclude that noninterventionist designs are not suitable for non-white researchers in hegemonically white schools. At the same time, we do not suggest that non-white researchers should have the responsibility to intervene in all racist incidents, particularly when they themselves are the targets of such incidents. Because of these conflictual aspects, we believe that cross-racial research teams, white allyship, and reflexivity are key components in the development of a sustainable antiracist research methodology in white settings. Assuring that the emotional burdens are distributed among the team at all stages of the project can help safeguard minoritized

researchers and in turn allow them to function as outsiders-within in the field (Collins, 1986). While this puts minoritized researchers in challenging situations, the uniqueness of black-on-white research is greatly valuable in producing "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1991) and knowledge on the doings of whiteness that white researchers could not. This kind of perspective is imperative in challenging the status quo of whiteness in a Nordic context.

More broadly, our article calls for an urgent need to develop new ethnographic designs and further reflect on not only the methodological, but also the ethical and ontological implications of producing data on racism in schools. Since "even when race is not named out loud, it is germane to how an ethnographic project will be conceptualized, interpreted, and completed" (Boylorn, 2011, p. 179), we expect that this reflection would start and evolve by centering the racial standpoint of the researcher(s) doing the fieldwork.

Acknowledgements

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