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Beyond 'Where Do You Really Come From?' Rethinking Positionality and Racial Dynamics in Nordic Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Engaging with the complex dynamics of positionality, racialisation, and social demarcation, this study situates itself at the intersection of critical race theory (CRT) and understandings of reflexivity and positionality. It aims specifically to challenge and expand traditional understandings of 'positionality', which have largely centred on introspective concerns, such as how researchers' individual experiences influence their methodological choices. As such, the paper argues for a more nuanced application of positionality, beginning from the Nordic exceptionalist post-colonial context where the societal self-perception is that Nordic countries are free of colonial legacies and uniquely progressive and egalitarian. To this end, the study employs a reflexive methodology deeply rooted in the authors' own intersectional lived experiences. The paper critically engages with the potent, yet often unspoken question, frequently posed to people of colour in Nordic countries: 'Where do you really come from?' This intrusive curiosity is not just one of geographic origin but is intricately tied to perceived racialised positionality (PRP), highlighting a clear connection between the question and assumptions about identity and belonging. Furthermore, the query serves as a mechanism of social demarcation that separates 'us,' the presumed native Nordics, from 'them,' the racialised 'Other.' By focusing on this divisive question, the paper aims to dissect the social, ethical, and methodological implications of 'perceived racialised positionality' (PRP) – a term which captures the essence of how others' perceptions of our racial identity can influence teaching and research specifically, and more generally processes and outcomes of scholarly enrichment of the ethical and intellectual landscape in Nordic settings and beyond.

Keywords

Positionality; Nordic exceptionalism; CRT; critical whiteness studies; reflexivity; counter-storytelling; perceived racialised positionality (PRP); intrusive curiosity

Introduction

What does it feel like to walk into a room and be the 'odd one out'? Most of us have experienced this at some point in our lives. Maybe it was a time when we didn't 'get the memo' about the dress code for an event. Maybe it was when we were visiting a country in a different part of the world and suddenly felt self-conscious at realising how different we look / dress / speak compared to everyone around us (Khawaja, 2022). While such experiences are not equivalent to powerlessness, there are any number of situations where we can experience feelings of not fitting in, not belonging, not being 'from here' and thus instinctually understand these feelings' impact on our reactions, interactions, and (social) contribution. This begs the question: why would one then hesitate to acknowledge the role of perceived racialised positionality (PRP) in human interaction? Why the insistence on being 'colour-blind' or, more accurately, colour mute (Pollock, 2004)?

While some such situations primarily result in an awkward feeling of discomfort, the affective 'feeling' of being an outsider is not born in a vacuum (Ahmed, 2014). Social constructs of who

belongs (and why) are endemic to social situations. Thankfully, in getting to know people, we are often able to move past such initial feelings of discomfort, but not always. Stereotypes, societal prejudices, understandings of the cultural 'normal' do not dissipate easily due to lingering initial impressions triggered by linguistic or racialised stereotypes.

We therefore suggest the term perceived racialised positionality (PRP) to refer to the perception and categorisation of individuals based on racial identity as observed from an external viewpoint (it could be skin colour, language, physical characteristics, etc.), rather than one's personal identification or cultural affiliation. This term captures the ways in which individuals' racial identity, as perceived by others, can affect their interactions, opportunities, and status within society (Abamosa, 2024; Andreassen & Myong, 2017; Drame & Irby, 2015; Țîștea, 2021). In the interaction / continuum of internal and external dimensions or categorisations of 'ethnicity' (Jenkins, 1994), PRP highlights external categorisations, for example, perceived 'race' or 'ethnicity' and its implications. PRP is not per definition about what 'race is', but rather how people / society define you, with or without your consent, due to societal categorisations.

In this article, we highlight the local context as well as explore research within the Nordics on the legacies of Nordic exceptionalist thinking and colonial projects. Further we outline the theoretical and methodological frameworks of critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, reflexivity, and positionality in order to situate our coined term, PRP, within the field. These frameworks intersect in their shared commitment to deconstructing systems of oppression, amplifying marginalised voices, and promoting social justice. We then present our stories – in teaching and research – with reflexive discussion in order to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to PRP as a methodological tool for counteracting the ignorance of Nordic exceptionalism and legacies of colonial whiteness. PRP thus represents a theoretical and methodological contribution to the field of educational research and understandings of positionality.

Context and previous research

The Nordic countries have developed a particular brand of social welfare whereby the Nordic model has been held up as exemplary (Porte & Larsen, 2023). Norway in particular prides itself on its ranking as one of the most equal and inclusive nations in the world (UNDP, 2024; WEF, 2018; WPR, 2024) while also marketing itself as a human rights champion (Vesterdal, 2019). To further enhance this good image, Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdottír & Jensen, 2016) posit that Nordic countries are free of the colonial legacies of other Western countries, having been minor players in the global colonial project. Norway maintains a particular claim to innocence due to having been ruled by Denmark and later Sweden (Bertelsen, 2015), gaining full independence in 1905. However, while Norway is not typically associated directly with colonialism or slavery, by 1890, Norway's merchant fleet was the third largest globally, demonstrating their active participation in the global trade of the epoch (Bertelsen, 2015).

In addition, the 19th and 20th-century 'Norwegianification' project understood heterogeneous elements in the population as problematic. The government thus undertook systematic

institutional measures aimed at eradicating the cultural heritage of national minorities by subjecting them to rapid assimilation measures, including separating Sami children from their parents and sending them to boarding schools where they were forbidden from speaking their mother tongue (Eriksen, 2018; Pedersen, 2022; Ryymin, 2019). Furthermore, the Norwegian Rom/Romani/Traveller minority were subject to mandatory sterilisation, with the law legalising such action still in place until 1977 (Helakorpi, 2019). Ryymin (2019) argues that the continued promulgation of the fallacious view of Norway as uniquely homogeneous likely correlated with an understanding that Norwegians are 'white' – including Norwegian minorities. Furthermore, white Norwegians continue to use the term 'ethnic Norwegian' to differentiate themselves from Norwegians of colour (Svendsen, 2014), demonstrating an understanding of who is really Norwegian or who actually belongs, while 'immigrant' (innvandrer) is usually understood to mean person of colour. Abamosa's (2024) discussion of language training programmes (LTP) for refugees demonstrates that, by and large, Norwegian 'integration' LTPs follow the standard Western assimilationist model where refugees are expected to learn 'our' language and values and gratefully take undesirable jobs with limited options for upward social mobility. Norway could thus be understood as post-colonial in at least two ways: as a post-colonial state which assiduously worked to establish a homogeneous nationhood after independence from Denmark and Sweden; and post-colonial in the sense of wrestling with the legacy of its colonisation efforts towards its own indigenous minorities – not to mention its participation in what Kwame Nkrumah described as the global capitalistic neo-colonial order (Bar-On & Escobedo, 2019). This combined with the Norwegian self-perception as uniquely progressive and egalitarian makes for a distinct context within which to examine PRP. The authors' specific stories are thus situated within the Norwegian context; however, as the review of Nordic research demonstrates, such experiences are not unique to Norway.

Research into racialisation, racial discrimination, colonialism, and whiteness within the Nordic countries has been steadily growing in the last decade. While the Nordic countries may not have been the most noteworthy in terms of former global colonial empires, the hierarchical 'white race' construct has always been tightly connected to the Nordic countries. For example, in Andreassen, Keskinen, Lundström, and Tate's (2024) introduction to *The Routledge International Handbook of New Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, they show that in the post-WWI discourse of pure racial hierarchy, or bloodstock, Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes were ranked top three.

A noteworthy anthology on the topic is Loftsdóttir and Jensen's (2016) book, entitled *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others, and National Identities*. In the book, contributors tackle issues of Nordic participation in the colonial project, minorities, whiteness, immigrants, and reunification, the Muslim 'Other', as well as the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism.

Delving specifically into Norway's participation in the colonial world order, Kjerland and Bertelsen (2015) edited the anthology *Navigating Colonial Orders: Norwegian Entrepreneurship in Africa and Oceania*. In the volume, contributors highlight multiple examples of Norwegian mercantile

enterprises all over Africa and Oceania, facilitating for the British empire, colonial investments in Kenya, as well as a chapter detailing a Norwegian sugar plantation in Hawai'i.

Focusing on the discourse of homogeneity, Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, and Toivanen (2019) edited the volume *Undoing Homogeneity in the Nordic Region: Migration, Difference, and the Politics of Solidarity*. In this volume, they specifically highlight the discourse of same-ness as a prerequisite for unity and the complaints levelled at the 'deviant' Others who are understood to be undeserving of the benefits of the Nordic welfare state.

Nordic research in the field of education has also taken up more critical approaches, moving from a politically correct understanding of diversity and inclusion (Fylkesnes et al., 2018) to an explicit focus on the racialised rhetoric implicit in teacher education policy (Fylkesnes, 2018, 2019). An insightful special issue tackles the impact of Nordic exceptionalism within education from a decolonial perspective (Eriksen et al., 2024). Some of the issues which have been highlighted and problematised by researchers is the refusal to openly discuss racism, whether in public debate (Bangstad, 2015) or in the classroom (Svendsen, 2014). The research also shows that while the 'race' topic may be taboo and understood by children as one to be diligently avoided (Eriksen, 2020), students still draw on ideas of ancestry in addition to linguistic skill to define belonging and Norwegian-ness (Erdal, 2019; Erdal & Strømsø, 2018, 2021). Interestingly, the linguistic dimension seems to operate as an alternative ingress to Norwegian belonging (Dansholm, 2022; Erdal & Strømsø, 2018, 2021) – either due to a desire to avoid reference to 'race' / skin colour or in a sincere attempt to practice inclusivity.

There is also a body of autoethnographic work by scholars highlighting the racialised dimensions of living and / or working in the Nordic countries. These articles highlight disparate experiences of white Nordics and Nordics of colour as legitimate knowledge producers and conveyers (Andreassen & Myong, 2017) as well as the racialised dimensions of being white or non-white second-language learner immigrants in the Nordics and the societal roles considered open or normal for different bodies (Abamosa, 2024; Koobak & Thapar-Björkert, 2012; Țîștea, 2021).

What this research demonstrates is that while Norway in particular, and the Nordics more generally, pride themselves in their global brand as equal, inclusive, politically correct, and champions of human rights (Dansholm, 2022; UNDP, 2024; Vesterdal, 2019; WEF, 2018; WPR, 2024), racialised structures are deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. The notion of Nordic exceptionalism must thus be problematised due to the entanglement of whiteness, national identity, and postcolonial legacies.

Theoretical framework

Critical Race / Whiteness Theory

Critical race theory, or CRT, developed over the last few decades in response to ongoing structural injustice and inequality. Originating among African American legal scholars, such as Derrick Bell (Delgado et al., 2023), the theory was quickly taken up by, for example, educational scholars

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). Such broad frameworks may be defined in a number of ways, with authors emphasising different dimensions. Solórzano and Yosso (2001, pp. 472, 473), for example, define central tenets of CRT as:

1) The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination
2) The challenge to dominant ideology
3) The commitment to social justice
4) The centrality of experiential knowledge
5) The transdisciplinary perspective.

Solórzano and Yosso's (2001, 2002) approach to CRT emphasises its use in educational contexts, including as a methodology for examining Chicana and Chicano experiences in higher education.

Delgado and Stefancic (2023) also offer an overview of core tenets in their introductory book to CRT, which overlaps but also diverges somewhat from the outline above. The first and most important tenet is the understanding that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational" (Delgado et al., 2023, p. 8). This ordinariness means racialisation and racial prejudice is the norm and thus recognising and acknowledging racism is extremely challenging. Secondly, functionally, racism serves the interests of particular privileged groups – whether these be material or psychic. This means that there is a) little incentive to dismantle racist structures, and b) that, for example, inclusive legislation is not a result of altruism or elites' anti-racism ambitions, but due to other interests which are served through such legislation or measures. Third, the social constructs of race are manipulated as per the developing societal needs of white elites. This explains why certain groups may arbitrarily move up and down the racial hierarchy, such as Italians or the Irish. Similarly, Muslims have been shifted from an exotic oriental Other to the deviant threatening Other. Fourthly, and along the same line, such arbitrary shifts in racialisation discourses are tightly connected to labour market needs. For example, the Japanese were interned in the U.S. during WWII due to narratives regarding their questionable loyalties, and yet are now included in the 'hard-working Asians' stereotype. Delgado and Stefancic (2023) also emphasise anti-essentialism and intersectionality. While groups may share certain histories, no one can be condensed to a single story. Lastly, they highlight the unique insight offered by voices of colour. In other words, those without personal experiential knowledge of racism are unable to fully understand, diagnose, and expose the structural inequalities still inherent to our post-colonial modern world. Critical voices of colour must be central to any resistance to racialised structures.

Contributing to CRT's enlightening framework is that of critical whiteness studies which seeks, in addition to highlighting hegemonic racialised structures, to uncover and expose the invisibleness of whiteness (Andreassen et al., 2024). Within this interdisciplinary field, the understanding is that whiteness acts as a pseudonym for normal and natural – the standard by which all Others are measured – while remaining hidden and unnamed and thereby undisturbed and unchallenged. The recent handbook on *New Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* (Andreassen et al., 2024) includes contributions which unpack the workings of racial constructs and whiteness in diverse spheres: technologies, consumption, institutions, crisis, emotions, identities, as well as marginal whiteness. Loftsdóttir (2024) specifically highlights the divergent ways in which colonially

periphery European countries navigate and utilise narratives of colonial innocence to assert themselves as free of racism. Critical whiteness as a concept thus contributes an understanding of "white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (Harris, 1993, p. 1714).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, serves as a critical tool for analysing the complex and interconnected forms of inequality that individuals face due to their diverse social identities. This approach highlights the flaw in viewing inequalities such as race, gender, and class as separate entities, instead revealing the real-life complexities of people who experience these overlapping forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality is employed to address this analytical challenge by recognising the simultaneous occurrence of marginalisation. It asserts both the lived experience of marginalisation and an ontological perspective, considering the interrelation and overlap of various systems of oppression (Carastathis, 2014). This perspective urges a deeper investigation into how different social and political identities intersect, shaping unique experiences of discrimination or privilege, particularly through the lens of societal power dynamics (Cho et al., 2013). It integrates the very power structures it analyses, particularly those related to race and gender, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding societal complexities and power relations without detaching from the very issues it aims to address (Cho et al., 2013). However, intersectionality has been critiqued for its definition, methodology, and the risk of reinforcing essentialist views or focusing too heavily on oppression narratives at the expense of resistance and empowerment discussions. Critics also warn against its broad application, which could unintentionally prioritise Western feminist viewpoints and distort the experiences of marginalisation in non-Western contexts (Carastathis, 2014; Nash, 2019; Salskov, 2020).

When discussing this framework in relation to PRP, it is vital to consider how intersectionality broadens the understanding of racial experiences by contextualising them within the matrix of other intersecting identities. This is crucial because racial identities do not exist in a vacuum; they are always experienced in conjunction with other social categories like gender, class, sexuality, and more. This compounded experience of identities can intensify the marginalisation faced by individuals, making it essential to employ an intersectional lens to grasp the depth and nuance of racialised experiences fully.

As Solórzano and Yosso (2001, 2002) point out, CRT and intersectionality are deeply interconnected frameworks that enhance understanding of systemic racism and multiple forms of social inequality. These perspectives, as well as critical whiteness studies, thus provide a vital foundation for our understanding of PRP.

Methodology: Positionality, reflexivity, and counter-storytelling

Reflexivity and positionality are fundamental concepts in qualitative research that ensure a robust and ethical methodology. Reflexivity is an ongoing, critical self-reflection where researchers continuously evaluate their role and impact throughout the research process. This involves questioning positionalities, biases, and interactions, which may influence study outcomes.

Through reflexivity, researchers seek to mitigate biases and enhance validity by adjusting their methods and perspectives to remain ethical (Cole & Knowles, 2008).

Positionality refers to the acknowledgment and explicit articulation of the researcher's own background, beliefs, and biases that they bring to the research project (Holmes, 2020; Yip, 2023). It encompasses aspects such as the researcher's culture, socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, and any other personal or social identities that might influence the research process. It also considers how researchers are perceived by others (Manohar et al., 2019). Recognising and clearly articulating these elements at the outset, positionality informs the research design and interpretation of findings. Reflexivity, then, is about building upon this initial understanding of positionality, questioning, and addressing the assumptions identified to maintain integrity throughout the research lifecycle (Eriksen, 2022).

Storytelling has been advocated by CRT scholars as a way to address racialised structures and the invisible white 'norm', particularly counter-storytelling (Delgado et al., 2023; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). Counter-storytelling brings together reflexivity and positionality – through reflection on the positionalities inherent within our stories. Solórzano and Yosso (2001, 2002) lay out four functions of counter-storytelling: (a) community building for those marginalised by society, (b) providing transformative alternatives to the dominant discourse, (c) opening space for other voices to be heard and other possibilities to be imagined, while they also (d) serve a pedagogical purpose in enabling the creative exploration of both story and reality.

For us as co-author fellow teachers / researchers, reactions to our varied positionalities and the intrusively curious 'Where do you really come from?' has been a recurring theme in our collegial discussions. This special issue offered the opportunity to reflexively investigate these experiences. Thus, our exploration of racialisation and social demarcation within the Norwegian post-colonial context centres CRT / critical whiteness reflexivity, not merely as a tool, but as the cornerstone of our approach. The reflexive methodology enables us to navigate the nuanced dynamics of being both the observer and the observed, particularly as we delve into the intrusively curious (Dansholm et al., 2024) racialised query 'Where do you really come from?', visible throughout our investigation. Through the storytelling of our personal experiences of racialisation, we critically interrogate how this influences our engagement, especially the probing racialised question of origin. While 'belonging' was also a recurring theme in our collegial discussions, we chose to focus on themes pertinent to the special issue: namely, teaching, research, and intersectionality. This continuous self-reflection and critical interrogation has enriched our understanding and, moreover, challenges conventional scopes of positionality (Wilson et al., 2022).

The dual introspective and outward analytical process involves scrutinising our racialised positionalities and societal perceptions of race, thereby advancing the discourse on how such factors shape methodological and didactic choices as well as research outcomes. Our reflexive storytelling is iterative and dynamic, beginning with documenting and reflecting upon personal experiences and extending to (collective) analysis to identify broader societal mechanisms at play.

Through this discussion of reflexivity and positionality, we highlight the dominant understanding of positionality as an ethical reflection tool, which often centres issues such as insider-outsider (professional) identity and lived experience (Holmes, 2020; Martin & Dandekar, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). In this article, we seek to highlight through a reflexive counter-storytelling of our lived experience that a missing dimension in current understandings is external perceptions, a.k.a. PRP.

Embracing the reflexive approach outlined in our methodology, we now turn to examining our own positionalities in order to foreground our intersectional lived experiences. This provides readers with crucial context for understanding the perspectives and insights that inform this research.

Author positionalities

Gobena

> *My journey to Europe for advanced studies, initiated in my late twenties, was not merely a pursuit of academic enrichment, but also a passage into a new realm of racial dynamics. Coming from Ethiopia, a country where blackness is the majority and racial discourse is not a prevailing issue, my experiences in Norway have introduced me to the complexities of exterior racialisation. As a Black African woman from Ethiopia and someone who spent most of my formative years in that country, navigating my new life in Norway has presented its set of challenges. My racial background, cultural upbringing, and the ongoing development of my Norwegian language skills make me stand out with a visible and audible difference. Now, residing in Norway, I find myself in an environment where my skin colour is no longer the majority but a distinct characteristic that sets me apart. This transition from a society with homogenous racial features to one where I represent 'the other' has been both enlightening and challenging. It has offered me a dual lens through which to examine the complexity of exterior racialisation and the often-asked question 'Where do you really come from?'*
>
> *My conception of identity was primarily framed within cultural and national parameters, perhaps ethnic, rather than racial ones. Thus, my positionality is filled with the compared 'racial' realities of my homeland (where I am part of the majority) and my current status as a racialised individual in Europe (where I am seen as the 'other' or a minority). This interplay between my background and my current situation offers a distinctive vantage point from which to dissect the layers of racial identity construction, perception, and their consequent implications on social integration and research methodologies in Norway.*

Dickstein

> *My mother is a white South African of European descent, and my father is a secular Jewish American. My parents' identities and their experiences with apartheid and racial privilege contributed to shaping my early sensitivities toward injustice and led to an awareness of the realities of state-led persecution of marginalised people.*

In hindsight, while growing up in Norway, the development of my Jewish identity matured from early pride to a more realistic awareness of society's perception (PRP) of being a Jew. In my early experience, 'Jew' (Jøde) was perceived to be a derogatory word due to the term having a frequent pejorative use. While in second grade, I recall a teacher, overhearing students asking if I was Jewish, replying, "Don't say that; that's not very nice". It was not until high school that I can recall the term 'Jew' (Jøde) being raised in a positive light, and even then, I was 'othered' as the only Jew I knew outside my family. My American background also served to define my identity. By the time I had moved to the American East Coast to attend university, I was disinterested in Zionism and suspicious of any ideology that favoured one group over another, especially since I had already accepted my identity as a minority in Norway. However, my Jewish American / South African background has enabled me to empathise with groups persecuted due to 'difference' and the lonely introspection that often accompanies being singled out.

Zeleke

On some occasions, I describe myself as an East African, a region with some racial, ethnic, religious, and geopolitical particularity from other parts of Africa. My attachment to Western Europe began with my career-travelling parents in the early 1980s, who have been to several countries around the world. My mother's parents were assassinated by fascists in the three-day massacre (Yekatit 12) of 1937, the same week she was born. The Italians killed thousands of Ethiopians in Addis Ababa in the exact area where I was born and raised, near the main airport. I recall the stories that she told about her parents were mixed with sad, and sometimes tearful, grief, but she also described herself as a daughter of heroes who fought against the Ferenj invaders until the last drop of their blood. The word Ferenj is adapted to Amharic and refers to white people but originates from the use of French money (Franc) in the French colonial era in East Africa.

I moved to Norway during the Cold War, at a time when Western societies were seen as free from political repression with a democratic culture contrasted with the communist 'East block', which included my home country. Yet, the understanding of the 'Ferenj' and colonial stories likely shaped my perspective on Western Europe and even motivated me to strive to see myself as equal, to work hard in different sectors and levels of the Norwegian bureaucracy. When I reflect on my experiences, I feel I may have focused on my education and work, perhaps unconsciously, as a way of overcoming the injustices and racial discrimination. This has given me a unique lens through which to view and address systemic racial inequalities, particularly in a European / Norwegian context where domination is prevalent.

As an educator in higher education (HE) in Norway who grew up with a consciousness shaped by stories of Western suppression and as a minority educator (underrepresented as Black African) in Norwegian HE, I recognise that my experiences give me a different perspective when observing race and inequalities which linger in Norwegian society. My experience likely increases my sensitivity to the nuances of race and racial domination that

may be even more questionable (dangerous) when they are based on liberal democratic values.

Dansholm

My parents are/were Danish-Norwegian, but I spent the better part of my childhood and early adulthood in non-white majority countries. Thus, I was always aware of my whiteness and the privilege of being white, even if a deeper understanding of structural racism was lacking. I learned how to navigate spaces where I was a constant curiosity, while doing my best to be respectful of the local culture. I was welcomed and shown courtesy, respect, hospitality, and generosity. Moving back to Scandinavia was difficult. Generosity and hospitality are not words I associate with my 'home' country(ies) and thus I continue to feel ashamed of how people of colour are treated here, while I continue to gain deeper understanding of the global colonial legacies of racialised structural injustice.

Reflexive counter-storytelling and discussions

In this section, we offer our personal counter-stories for reflexive analysis as a way to explore the navigation of PRP in the Nordic context. More specifically, three central topics are in focus: teaching, research, and intersectionality. Each topic includes personal counter-stories along with a discussion drawing on our theoretical framework and previous research.

Some of the repeated themes in this section include the pervasiveness of belief in Nordic exceptionalism. As our stories demonstrate, many students argue through the logic of such discourse. Our counter-stories show both the difficulties with [and potential for] challenging the "dominant ideology" of the Nordics / Norway as not having a problem with racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472). Through our stories, we also highlight the evident resistance to the "experiential knowledge" offered by people of colour (Delgado et al., 2023; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 473). Further, our stories highlight the natural and 'norm' of whiteness; in other words, the legitimacy bestowed on whiteness (Andreassen et al., 2024; Andreassen & Myong, 2017). Our counter-stories also highlight the intersectional dimensions which we navigate – situatedness, 'race' dimensions, personal identities and life histories, linguistic issues – showing our negotiations with the consequences of PRP.

Teaching

Zeleke *– "But you, as our teacher, are an example of Norwegian equality."*

I was teaching second-year social sciences students, all white Norwegian students. We discussed the scheduled topic for the day, which was utilising different perspectives to explore racism around the globe and in Norway. After the lecture, we had a discussion. A question emerged among the students, reflecting a degree of scepticism towards the topic, specifically racism in Norway.

A student argued that due to Norway's universally accessed welfare system and high living standards, it was therefore largely immune to the issues troubling other parts of the world, including racism, positing that Norway was largely tolerant of racial differences.

Another student remarked that Norway was recognised globally for its policy on equality and inclusivity. The laws protect everyone, citing legislation against 'forskjellsbehandling', which means differential treatment (discrimination) based on ethnic and cultural background. She felt that discussing racism as a topic was good, but it could easily overlook all the good things and refugees benefiting from the welfare system in Norway, wherever they come from. Her conclusion was along the lines of, "As an African in Norway, you are a living example of teaching Norwegians in the Norwegian higher education." In other words, she understood my position(ality) as proving her point that discrimination does not exist in Norway.

Following her, a student raised an issue, expressing scepticism about my position as a Black teacher discussing racism in Norway. He argued that, given my background as an African, he believed that my experiences outside of Norway might influence my perspective on racism here.

Another student added a different dimension to the conversation, emphasising the global interconnectedness of racial issues. He argued that racism needs to be discussed and even fought against, but he believed that Norway was a small country and not a colonial power like most other powerful European countries. Thus, he questioned how global narratives of race and history could impact the understanding of racism in Norway.

A week later, I had a scheduled lesson with the same class of students on the topic of national minorities and indigenous people, both locally and globally. As an introduction, I touched upon the last discussion we had in the class about issues of contemporary racism in Norway, sparking some emotions in the class. In this lesson, we delved into the topic of the past, examining Norway's history with its indigenous people and national minorities, guided by insights from the reading list, among others, the Norwegian book Skammens Historie, 1814-2014 *[The History of Shame] (Aas & Vestgården, 2014). This book uncovers Norway's severe human rights violations against the Roma people (taterne) and the Kven, which included hospital treatments, such as frontal lobotomization, forced sterilisation, and the forceful Norwegianization of both national minorities and the indigenous people (the Sami) which originated from nationalist ideologies aimed to reduce their number and assimilate them into Norwegian culture, often through harsh methods such as forced boarding schools for children under Norwegian Christian church supervision.*

The text also highlights the numerous deaths from the 1950s due to the lobotomy operation at Gaustad Hospital and the mass grave at Ris cemetery, which is one of Norway's biggest mysteries. The students did not seem to know about this part of Norwegian history, and they were shaken at how extensive the abuses against national minorities were and by the recklessness of countless lobotomies in Norway. In other words, it was necessary to

highlight this 'hidden' part of Norwegian history to demonstrate that 'it even happens here', and if it has happened in the past, then perhaps they should not be too quick to dismiss the existence of racism in Norway in the present.

***Dickstein** – "Can white people experience racism?"*

Sometimes, while teaching bachelor and master courses on identity and belonging, a white student may ask if a white person can experience racism. In one particular case, this question received an excited response from the class, as if there was an underlying assumption that this is a taboo topic and will spark controversy. The class of 15-20 mostly white Norwegian students leant attentively forward sporting playful grins.

"Only in Wakanda", I say to break the ice.

I described how racism differs from racial discrimination, where according to CRT, racism = racial prejudice + institutional power (Delgado et al., 2023). I explained what institutional power may appear to look like. The concentration of one ethnic group of people in powerful institutions such as politics, education, law, police, media, and finance among others is likely to shape society to their advantage. I explained that this does not suggest white people cannot experience racial discrimination, but without the added component of institutional power, the perpetrator of prejudice cannot draw from or wield institutional power to their advantage.

In Norway, differentiating between racial discrimination and racism can be a frustrating endeavour, where educators are frequently met with resistance both internally and outside the educative system (Bangstad, 2015; Eriksen, 2022). However, I have found that my positionality / identity appears to be an advantage that warrants a nuanced and authoritative voice on the issue.

My background and experience living in the United States, may invite the perception of an insider position(ality) which white 'ethnic' Norwegian students seem willing to legitimate. Perhaps this is because I am not assumed to be 'biased' (as POCs may be assumed inherently to be) or deemed a threat to the established 'whiteness' of the class. In the conversation of race, it is natural to take a binary approach, seeing black and white, us and them. My identity allows for the assumption that I am 'siding' with my white students, that I remain a part of the 'Us', while still encouraging the students to 'dip their toes' into critical internal reflection.

Reflections on Teaching

In this section, Zeleke's experience demonstrates some of the key tensions and complexities surrounding discussions of racism, national identity, and colonial legacies while his positionality as a Black African teaching on the topic in Norway highlights responses to racialised positionality. Dickstein's experience, on the other hand, demonstrates the legitimacy offered to white knowledge conveyers.

Zeleke directly challenged the Nordic exceptionalist view through introducing Norway's own historical injustices and human rights violations against minority groups like the Roma, Kven, and Sami. The harsh realities of forced assimilation, sterilisation, lobotomies, and more which are detailed in works, such as *The History of Shame* (Aas & Vestgården, 2014), lay bare for students how racial ideologies and oppressive policies have impacted these communities within Norway itself, and thus required students to reassess their prejudice.

The student who questioned how Zeleke's African background might influence his perspective on Norwegian racism reveals an undercurrent of scepticism about racial minority voices authentically representing the national experience, questioning their legitimacy (Andreassen & Myong, 2017). This exemplifies some of the exclusionary attitudes and gatekeeping of belonging that the literature identifies as rooted in essentialised racial notions of national identity (Keskinen et al., 2019). On the other hand, Dickstein's experience aligns with Nordic researcher's experience (Andreassen & Myong, 2017) that white voices are legitimised as knowledge producers and conveyers.

The student in Zeleke's example who highlighted Norway's lack of a traditional colonial empire overseas raised a relevant point about how differing national histories may contour how racism manifests compared to other European nations (Loftsdóttir, 2024). Loftsdóttir and Jensen's (2016) discussion situates their Nordic analysis within a broader postcolonial frame, showing the importance of grappling with Norway's specific colonial entanglements.

Ultimately, these classroom experience vividly illustrate some of the core tensions and complexities explored in the literature – between the rhetoric of inclusion and actual exclusionary practices, between perceived Norwegian exceptionalism and historical injustices, and between universalist policies and racialised realities on the ground. For teachers, allowing for and making space for these difficult conversations, centring marginalised voices and histories, and pushing students to confront unflattering national pasts aligns with the aim of increasing racial literacy (Andreassen et al., 2024; Delgado et al., 2023).

Opportunities for dialogue, critical questioning of assumptions, and exposure to counter-stories which decentre dominant racial narratives are often instigated by confrontation with racialised positionalities. Intuitively, both Zeleke and Dickstein were modelling some of the transformative pedagogical approaches that scholars advocate. This experience shows how the classroom can be a powerful forum for wrestling with thorny issues of race, national identity, and institutionalised injustice in nuanced ways that avoid oversimplifications in either direction of Nordic exceptionalism or totalising permanence. While the goal is a deeper understanding of how racism permeates societies in complex context-specific ways, such realisations are often born out of the discomfort of racial cognizance (Khawaja, 2022). Critical consciousness of racialised positionality is central to envisioning more equitable futures.

Research

***Zeleke** – research as an African man*

I conducted focus group interviews with students with disabilities regarding assistive technology (AT) in higher education (HE). In a meeting room, I set up a half-circle to encourage an inclusive exchange among participants in the room.

When the students with disabilities entered, their expressions ranged from some curiosity to slightly reserved. I greeted them in Norwegian and wrote my name in capital letters on the whiteboard, which seemed to momentarily surprise them. I also pronounced my name. Despite prior email communication with them, both through their faculty and directly to gain their consent, some reactions indicated they had not expected me as a researcher.

One student, misunderstanding my role due to my earlier interactions and the informal nature of my introduction, hesitantly asked, "So, when you start working, will you be making changes to how things are done here?" The question caught me off guard, revealing that some students had indeed mistaken me for the new student assistant the department was expecting, a role often filled by individuals with immigrant (non-white) background.

The session kicked off with each student giving an introduction. We started discussing disabilities and HE, and it was an engaging conversation, but often they switched between race and disability. Before the start of the conversation, one student remarked, "When I first heard your name, I thought you might be from Eastern Europe because of the Z in your name, like Zlatan, or from a place nearby."

Another student switched the conversation to English, which represented a notable change. He was reminded that he could speak Norwegian since I understand the language. He switched back to Norwegian and said, "It is probably because we are accustomed to seeing immigrants in assisting roles with disabled individuals rather than leading a discussion like this."

Yet another student responded, "It is as if there's an understanding of who embodies knowledge and authority. We overlook it because we are part of it. Today feels like holding a mirror up."

As I reinitiate the discussion, I shifted the focus to the core of the day's agenda. "Let's start our conversation towards the challenges some of you with disabilities face in accessing online education. How do these challenges relate to broader issues of discrimination and inclusion?"

During the discussion, a student, eager to draw parallels, responded, "Just like being unexpectedly confronted with an 'innvandrer' (immigrant) researcher can reveal hidden biases, encountering inaccessible educational technologies shows the systemic neglect for students with disabilities. It is about being seen as different and not fitting the standard mould."

I nodded, acknowledging the analogy while steering the conversation to the topic of assistive technology (AT) in online learning. I continued, "Let's explore this further. Can you share specific instances where technology failed to meet your needs, and how that impacted your learning?"

They mentioned several inbuilt limitations and their frustration with ATs and called for an individually adapted technology on the online education system.

A student added, "It is like some of our systems are built with a one-size-fits-all approach, which actually fits very few. This mirrors broader issues where people who are different, whether because of skin colour or disability, are marginalised."

As we continued through the interview guide to explore discrimination of students with disabilities in HE, a student posed a personal question, reflecting the day's open atmosphere: "Now you have heard about some of our struggles with discrimination due to our disabilities. Do you find that your experiences with discrimination as an immigrant working in HE are similar?" Thus, we had a short discussion on this topic after.

Later, I reflected on the fact that the question about racism would have been irrelevant for a white researcher. The equating of their experiences with discrimination due to disabilities to my experiences as a person with an immigrant background caught me off guard. It created an unusual and somewhat awkward situation, putting into question my 'objective' outsider role as a researcher soliciting their perspective. This comparison, though well-intentioned, but not directly equivalent and overlooking some of the complex and unique nuances of these respective challenges, demonstrates the potential for intersectional solidarity, as well as the need for deeper understanding of different dimensions of discrimination.

***Dansholm** – White privilege / presumption*

A white student of mine had chosen to research experiences of racism among young people of colour. She has educated herself regarding, for example, 'white fragility', and with her Norwegian colleagues of colour, they have a good work environment with strong norms of openness regarding the racism experienced by people of colour in Norway. However, I had to remind her in planning her interviews with young people about racism, that her informants (who do not know her) will see her as just another white Norwegian woman – meaning they are likely to be apprehensive about speaking openly about racism with her since most Norwegians do not acknowledge its existence in Norway. They will not automatically assume that a group discussion with her as facilitator is a 'safe space'. Thus, while she has educated herself regarding people of colour's experiences with racism in Norway and works to support her colleagues of colour, to those who do not know her, she's perceived as 'really' your typical Nordic woman (a.k.a. racism denier). Following our discussion, she took steps in her research to tell her informants something about herself, her experience, and her learning on the topic in order to be explicit about her opposition to the "dominant ideologies" of Nordic exceptionalism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472).

Reflections on research

Zeleke and Dansholm's experiences demonstrate the role of PRP which may be overlooked by white researchers in the Nordics. Zeleke's informants in particular were open and explicit about prejudices and presuppositions regarding legitimate knowledge producers (Andreassen & Myong, 2017), demonstrating understandings of what positions are 'normal' for certain types of people to hold in Western society (Abamosa, 2024). Zeleke's informants' own experiences with discrimination seem to have equipped them with both an appreciation for various types of discrimination as well as a critical approach to standardised 'normal' knowledge (Andreassen et al., 2024). On the other hand, Dansholm's master student, although an ally, still saw her positionality as the norm. This meant her initial expectation was that informants (of colour) would speak openly with her (a white woman) about anything she asked without her explicitly positioning herself as standing against the "dominant ideology" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 473) of Nordic exceptionalism.

Intersectionality

Gobena *– African in Europe*

> *As I reflect on my journey, I recognise how my own racialised positionality diverges in several aspects from Zeleke, notably through my experiences as a woman, a Black woman, and an African (a heritage often unjustly perceived as inferior compared to other racial groups). For my contribution, I choose to highlight how crucial it is to acknowledge that each of us possesses different identities, some shared and others unique, which can either privilege us or place us at a disadvantage within society. For example, here I delve into both the shared and distinct experiences between Zeleke and my experiences within Norwegian society. Despite both of us coming from Ethiopia, our interactions with the white majority vary significantly due to several factors. Specifically, our proficiency in the Norwegian language, understanding of local systems, length of residency in Norway, and employment status create diverse positionalities for us within both the Norwegian community and the academic sphere. Additionally, Zeleke's permanent job and role as an associate professor, positions I currently do not hold, further illustrate the differences, and show how intersecting identities position us within our environment and delineate our room for negotiation.*

Dansholm *– culturally / linguistically Other*

> *After growing up in non-white majority countries, where I was always aware of my whiteness, moving back to my mother's home country was an adjustment. I had to learn the language, and in addition to becoming aware of my cultural difference, I became aware of perceptions of whiteness within white spaces. My cultural difference was excused (or erased) by others due to my whiteness. This became visible in my PhD research during group interviews with teenagers, particular with white teenagers. In discussing citizenship, including new citizens and immigrants, it became clear that although I understood myself to be in the same category as immigrants, they did not. Thus, my attempts to reduce the power difference (researcher to teenagers) through acknowledging my (Norwegian)*

linguistic lacks seemed to have little bearing on the way white students related to me – while such overtures with people of colour are generally implicitly understood and appreciated.

After living in Norway for several years, I continue to be aware of my whiteness and its impact on how people see me (and what they expect of me). Due to my linguistic difference, I continue to be asked, 'Where do you really come from?' as people form their own opinion of where we are 'really from' based on external characteristics and relate to us in kind. In my case, regardless of my feeling of being an outsider (culturally and linguistically), my white features dictate an understanding of my 'really' being Nordic. However, when I am teaching (in Norwegian) on issues related to racism in Norway, my full understanding (knowledge) of the local context may be called into question due to my linguistic lacks.

Reflections on intersectionality and resisting "dominant ideologies"

The reflections of both Gobena and Dansholm indicate how intersectionality operates within specific contexts. For Gobena, her racial and gender identities intersect with her non-native status, positioning her differently from Zeleke who, while sharing some aspects of her background, may not face the same degree of societal scrutiny due to his secure academic position, language proficiency, and knowledge of the Norwegian system. Dansholm, on the other hand, grapples with the privileges and invisibilities afforded by her whiteness, which both isolate and integrate her to varying degrees.

Andreassen and colleague's (2024) highlight that whiteness posits itself as the norm or natural – the standard against which everything else is measured. It offers those who are white a legitimacy which may be undeserved, but which allies may utilise to challenge the "dominant ideology" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472). Dansholm's experience of privilege and invisibilities as a white person also resonate with Dickstein's experience in the classroom. As he points out in the section on teaching, some white students seem to feel less 'threatened' discussing racism with one of 'their own', the lack of experiential knowledge perhaps perceived to be less confronting. The irony is that while such white students accept Dickstein as an objective knowledge giver in that particular context due to his whiteness, they are the same type of people who would in all likelihood pose the othering 'Where do you really come from?' question to Dickstein due to his physical characteristics. In other words, while whiteness may offer him legitimacy in some contexts, racialised social constructs (Delgado et al., 2023) connected to his features indicate he is not an 'ethnic' Norwegian (Svendsen, 2014) and thus his intersectional belonging is called into question despite his dialectic and linguistic proficiency (in Norwegian).

Being allies as white people requires constant sensitivity, humility and awareness. Such awareness is not for the purpose of crafting a white self-consciousness, but for the purpose of understanding that without our explicitly vocalising our opposition to "dominant ideologies" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472), such ideologies will be ascribed to us. In other words, similar to the way that people of colour are often seen as a monolith, white educators must relinquish individual thinking to understand that we may be (seen as) part of the white monolith who are oblivious or indifferent to the challenges experienced by people of colour (Delgado et al., 2023) in the Nordics. To be

allies, we must be explicit and intentional – whether in research or teaching. Being ‘nice’ is insufficient if we wish to distinguish our worldview from the prevailing Nordic exceptionalist understanding of ‘us’ as not guilty of such things as colonialism and racism (Bertelsen, 2015; Loftsdottír & Jensen, 2016). This is important whether we are teaching predominantly white classes and / or attempting to create a ‘safe space’ for students or informants of colour.

Furthermore, intersectional positionalities impact on our negotiation of spaces. In the Nordics, speaking the local language (with or without an accent / dialect) positions one differently in terms of one’s perceived knowledge of the local context (Røyneland & Jensen, 2020) – and thus legitimises or delegitimises one’s voice accordingly. In terms of narratives on who is deserving of the benefits of the welfare state and thus welcome in the Nordics, one’s employment status plays an important role (Keskinen et al., 2019), as Gobena highlights, while gendered expectations have not abated. Thus, we as authors converge and diverge in our intersectional experiences navigating perceived racialised positionalities (PRPs) within Nordic academia.

Discussion

In Dickstein’s case, his intersectional position as an ‘Other’ white person, speaking Norwegian fluently, confers upon him the veneer of white normalcy (Andreassen et al., 2024) or legitimacy. Through speaking Norwegian with a local dialect, his understanding of Norway and the local context is consolidated. As a white man, he is understood to speak on racism from an ‘unbiased’ position, in other words, not considered 'compromised' or complicated by the emotionality of lived experience (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This is not to say that such legitimacy extends to other contexts where he is not in the explicitly authoritative position of ‘teacher’. This underscores the power dynamics at play, revealing how PRP can simultaneously grant and restrict authority / autonomy.

For Dansholm, her white Nordic features dictate not only the status of white normal (Andreassen et al., 2024), but to a degree also erase her (cultural) difference. However, the perception of her as ‘one of us’ is moderated by her less-than-perfect Norwegian language skills. In teaching, she may have to reiterate that ‘research shows’, with an academic reference at hand, in order to persuade students of her knowledge of the local context and that racism ‘also happens in Norway’. Students may refer to her foreign experience and highlight how much better Norway is than other countries – insinuating that because it is ‘not as bad’ here, therefore there is nothing to discuss.

The greater challenge is for Zeleke whose discussion of racism may be invalidated by students due to their resistance to “experiential knowledge” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472), conveying their perception of his lacking objectivity or having an ‘agenda’ due to his positionality as an African man. In other words, ‘objectivity’ is weaponised to invalidate the perspective of someone with lived experience of racism. Zeleke must therefore work hard and hold up a mirror to students through speaking on their own Norwegian history of racism and oppression of minorities, Roma, Sami, and others (Aas & Vestgården, 2014; Helakorpi, 2019; Pedersen, 2022). And while his Norwegian language skills may validate his knowledge of the local context and his presentation of Norwegian history, his ‘really from’ positionality / identity as an African man continue to be ‘used

against him' rather than appreciated as the invaluable resource which lived experience offers (Delgado et al., 2023; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). This reveals the deep-seated powerlessness inherent in PRP where the knowledge and lived experiences of minority racialised individuals are systematically devalued.

What does this mean for Gobena as an early career researcher? As an African woman who does not speak Norwegian (fluently), what chance does she have to be perceived as a knowledge conveyer on the topic of racism and discrimination within the Norwegian context? Will she be dismissed as both emotionally biased and ignorant regarding Norwegian realities since she's 'not from here'? Does this not further highlight the issue of powerlessness, where both her identity and linguistic abilities are used to undermine her intellectual contributions (Lawrence & Escobedo, 2023)?

Conclusion

Through these personal empirical stories, we can see that positionality and 'where we are really from' – or social constructs of race – play a central role in our students' and informants' perception. In the context of teaching, this also means our PRP may impact on our students' attitude towards our competence in certain spheres of knowledge.

Thus, what are the practical implications of such counter-stories to the egalitarian narrative of Nordic exceptionalism for our practice in teaching and research? Primarily, it means we must be conscious, conscientious, and intentional in planning our teaching and research with an understanding of PRP.

When walking into a classroom with predominantly white students, we must understand that most people / students without cognizant experience of racism reject the notion that people of colour experience racism in Norway (Scandinavia), clinging to the Nordic exceptionalist belief that since Norway was a Danish colony, therefore they are part of the 'oppressed' and not oppressors. Furthermore, the Norwegian perception that their welfare system functions better than most other countries' welfare institutions is taken as a sign that equality has been realised (Keskinen et al., 2019). Ironically, this means that the normalcy of white 'objectivity' may be weaponised (Andreassen et al., 2024) to invalidate anyone perceived as having lived experiences of racism, as they simultaneously reject / challenge / question any claims / knowledge that lay outside the realm of their personal sphere of experience or knowledge.

As for research, assuming colour-mute approaches (Pollock, 2004) to planning research, particularly interactions with informants, do disservice to the realities of the world we live in. As various researchers within the Nordics have highlighted (Abamosa, 2024; Țîștea, 2021), understandings of the designated societal roles for people of colour in Nordic countries do not generally include 'academic' and 'researcher'. Thus, researchers of colour are forced to negotiate and challenge such prejudices, particularly when conducting research with white Nordics. Furthermore, it is incumbent on white researchers to examine not only power dimensions in conducting research, but also their 'normal' white privilege – particularly when conducting

research with people of colour in Nordic countries. Humility and awareness facilitate a more effective centring of the voices of people of colour (Delgado et al., 2023).

These are some of the considerations and questions which spring from an in-depth awareness of the role of PRP. While CRT highlights the need to take seriously the lived experience of minority racialised persons (Delgado et al., 2023), critical whiteness theory reminds us of the need for conscious and conscientious awareness of the devastating 'normalcy' of whiteness (Andreassen et al., 2024). Within the Nordic context, where whiteness is entangled with understandings of the 'ethnic' Nordic, we cannot take positionalities and identities for granted. We must practice intentionality in recognising and countering racialised colonial legacies and the pervasiveness of the doctrine of Nordic exceptionalism.

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Almaz Beyene (1941-2025) and continued resistance to the Ferenj – in their many forms.

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