# 'Oh, this is really great work-especially for a Turk' : a critical race theory analysis of Turkish Belgian students' discrimination experiences

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## ABSTRACT

Students of Turkish descent suffer various forms of institutional and interpersonal discrimination in education in Flanders (the northern part of Belgium). Nevertheless, few studies have documented how these discrimination experiences are situated within structures of ethnic inequality across different educational settings. Adopting a critical race theory approach, experiences of 20 Turkish Belgian university students were analysed as counter-stories to expose deficit assumptions towards ethnic minorities and push against inequity in education. The accounts of students show the exclusionary treatment they were exposed to by teachers despite the dominating discourses of objectivity and colorblindness in education. Students' experiences with peers highlight the pervasiveness and intersectionality of racism that targeted ethnic minority students based on their ethnic and social class background, accent, and cultural norms. Lack of minority representation, ubiquitous microaggressions, and exclusionary curriculum shape students' experiences at university context and affirm White normativity. These findings highlight the urgency of recognizing and challenging against systems and structures of racism in education. The implications for research and practice are detailed in the concluding section.



**Keywords:** discrimination, education, critical race theory, microaggressions, Turkish Belgian

## INTRODUCTION

Students with an immigration background remain frequent targets of discrimination from peers and teachers in (higher) education in Belgium, which negatively impacts their academic outcomes and psychological well-being (D'hondt et al. 2015; Van Praag et al. 2015). From a critical race theory (CRT) perspective, institutional norms and practices allow reproduction of exclusion and discriminatory attitudes which perpetuate ethnic inequality in education (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn 2006; Moffitt et al. 2018). Underlining the systemic and permanent nature of racism, CRT calls for exposing various manifestations of racism so that it can be redressed and challenged (Ladson-Billings 1998). Nonetheless, CRT has largely been dismissed as an American phenomenon in continental Europe, where attitudes towards racism are characterised by denial of racial differences and colour-blindness (Salem and Thompson 2016). Given the impact of such denial along with rising White nationalism in Western Europe, CRT is more important than ever to bring to the fore issues of racism and discrimination (Möschel 2011). To facilitate critical questioning of the institutional practices and challenge social norms and deficit notions that perpetuate inequalities in education, the current study examines how Turkish Belgian students in post-secondary education experienced discrimination in both secondary and post-secondary education in Flanders (northern part of Belgium).

Belgium has the widest gap between ethnic minority and majority students in school outcomes in Western Europe (Fleischmann et al. 2011). Students from ethnic minority backgrounds are under-represented in general tracks—namely, those that prepare students for higher education—and this disparity widens through the final years of secondary education (Van Praag et al. 2019). In the Flemish educational system, teacher teams enjoy considerable power to decide whether students repeat a year or change track/fields of study. Such tracking systems often result in students of similar socio-economic status and ethnic background being clustered into groups (Agirdag et al. 2011; Van Praag et al. 2015), reinforcing inequity in access to higher education. While a student's exam results, motivation and behaviour are the main criteria guiding teachers' assessment of the student's options and choices, teacher decisions tend to be influenced by students' social background (Boone and Van Houtte 2013), leaving ample space for discriminatory practices or biased evaluations.

Teachers in Flanders consider proficiency in Dutch as central to ethnic minority students' classroom performance; reverting to (or relying on) the mother tongue is likewise seen as a barrier to educational achievement and integration (Agirdag 2010; Van Praag et al. 2016). As a result, ethnic minority students are usually seen as less capable or motivated than their ethnic majority peers and their poorer school outcomes are often attributed to a lack of Dutch language proficiency (Clycq et al. 2014; Stevens and Görgöz 2010; Vervaet et al. 2016). As such, the cultural and linguistic resources of ethnic minority students are ignored in many Flemish schools and they are treated as 'lacking' the competencies required to thrive in Flemish society (Mampaey and Zanoni 2016).

In Flanders, discrimination is often based on widespread distinctions related to migration background, and whether or not someone is seen as 'originating from here' due to his or her heritage, religion or ethnicity (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Salem and Thompson 2016). Public and political discourses in Belgium, as in most Western settings, foreground 'ethnicity' and 'cultural differences' as crucial social variables. Explicit racial references are rare and are instead implicitly bound up with cultural and ethnic categories (Clycq 2017; Essed and Trienekens 2008). While it is socially unacceptable to be overtly racist, the wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, Turkey, and sub-Saharan Africa to Western Europe has further triggered racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia against those who are seen as perpetual foreigners based on their cultural differences. The mainstream representation of Muslim minorities as a threat to European norms and Flemish identity has contributed to the construction of ethnoreligious minorities as the 'other', normalizing Islamophobia in the process (Billiet et al. 2012). At the same time, the hostile anti-immigrant attitudes of the White European nationalist movements and extreme right (i.e., Vlaams Belang) contribute to an adverse climate for ethnic minority groups (Billiet and Witte 2008). The fear of those who are seen as "other" has resulted in an increase in racist and xenophobic events since the late 1980s/early 1990s and manifested itself in different forms of discrimination (Möschel 2007). For instance, European laws specifically target women with a migration background by restricting their religious rights through imposing restrictions on the wearing of a headscarf (Wing and Smith 2006) and/or violating their rights in the fields of family life and employment through seemingly neutral norms (Staiano 2015).

Being deprived of equal access to the opportunities and resources that are readily available to ethnic majority groups, the Turkish–Belgian community is amongst the most disadvantaged in Belgium (Phalet and Heath 2010). This disadvantaged position is generally attributed to the failure of ethnic minorities to assimilate to Flemish culture; the contribute of entrenched institutional discrimination to the problem is thus almost entirely overlooked (Ceuppens 2006). Turkish origin Belgians confront a kind of 'double prejudice', at once the subject of systemic discrimination for their supposedly 'foreign' ethnic origins and, at the same time, otherised on religious grounds for their Muslim faith (Heath and Brinbaum 2014).

## CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Scholars of colour in legal studies in the US came up with CRT during the civil rights movements to challenge the racial inequalities in American institutions. They have defined racism as the beliefs, practices, or structural systems whose function is to oppress racial groups and to support the socio-economic domination of privileged White groups (Bell 1993). Central to CRT is the notion that racism is deeply hardwired into the fabric of the society and for this reason, appears normal and reasonable to people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism adapts itself to shifting socio-cultural circumstances and could be expressed in various ways, but it does not vanish or decline as individuals

become less overtly racist. This phenomenon reflects the pervasive and permanent nature of racism within the society (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Ladson-Billings 1998). Not long after the initial development of CRT by legal scholars, the framework became prevalent across academic fields to document, critique, and challenge the hegemonic power structure and racism in educational systems (Ladson-Billings 1998; Ledesma and Calderon 2015; Yosso et al. 2009). Solorzano (1997) has identified the five main tenets of CRT scholarship and worked on applying the CRT framework to education.

First, in CRT, race and racism and their intersectionality with various forms of subordination are central unit of analyses. CRT in education is based on the premise that racism is an endemic principle of the contemporary education system. This education system is infiltrated by cultural and institutional racism perpetuating normative Whiteness (Bell 1993; Gillborn 2008). Racism intersects with various forms of subordination associated with gender, class, immigrant status, accent, surname, culture, phenotype, language, and sexuality (Gillborn 2015). Second**,** CRT aims to challenge the dominant ideology and is against the claims based on the notions of objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, and colourblindness because these claims mask the dominance of privileged and powerful groups (Solorzano 1997). Third, CRT is committed to social justice and therefore works to empower subordinated groups and eradicate racism (Solorzano and Bernal 2001). Fourth, the experiential knowledge of racial minority groups is legitimate and valuable in making sense of and addressing racial oppression. Hence, CRT foregrounds the lived experiences and stories of marginalised groups (Moffitt et al. 2018; Yosso et al. 2009). Fifth, CRT adopts a transdisciplinary approach to analysing racism and investigating the oppression embedded in societal constructions of race and particularly its manifestation in schools (Lynn and Parker 2006).

Previous research shows that established institutional policies or standards often reproduce inequalities in education in subtle and non-aggressive—yet still powerful—ways (Gillborn 2005). This can be observed in the particular kinds of curricula and pedagogical approaches that alienate unprivileged youth (Ledesma and Calderon 2015). For instance, in a study on school experiences of Turkish origin students in Germany, Moffitt and colleagues (2018) show how deficit perceptions of students' cultural and linguistic resources and lack of a culturally responsive pedagogy in German schools works to the detriment of ethnic minority students. Furthermore, school policies and practices—including methods of instruction, assessment and punishment systems— and teachers' prejudice and low expectations help to sustain inequalities as they impact on the academic performance of ethnic/racial minority pupils (Gillborn 2008). In Flanders, for example, the pressure on ethnic minority students to abandon their mother tongues or banning female students from wearing a religious headscarf exemplify how institutional racism is manifested in education (Agirdag 2010; Agirdag et al. 2012).

In addition to various forms of institutional racism, the wider racialised structures and norms are also manifested through everyday 'microaggressions,' which are often brief, commonplace, and unintentional (Perez Huber and Solorzano 2015). Even though microaggressions can seem relatively

innocuous and inconsequential to individual perpetrators in comparison to blatant offensive actions, their cumulative effect on the victim can be immense, taking an academic and psychological toll on marginalized groups. Earlier studies have shown how microaggressions are often enacted in the form of negative stereotypes, social exclusion, assumptions of intellectual inferiority, stigmatization, jokes or compliments with demeaning and derogatory undertones (Kohli et al. 2019; Yosso et al. 2009). Accordingly, racial boundaries between groups are not only (or necessarily even) performed through open acts of racism but also via subtle slights that set the minority group off from the dominant one (Ladson-Billings 1998).

## APPLYING CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN A WESTERN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Although CRT was initially devised to make sense of the experiences of people of colour living in the US, scholars have extended its scope to shed light on how racism intersects with gender, class, ethnicity, and linguistic background (Ladson-Billings 1998; Lynn and Parker 2006). Nonetheless, CRT has often been dismissed as an American phenomenon and it has not been widely applied in continental Europe, except the work of several scholars across Britain, Germany, and Belgium (see Gillborn 2005; Goossens et al. 2018; Housee 2012; Moffitt et al. 2018). For many European scholars who refuse to acknowledge 'race' as a formal category, social class position rather than race explains the marginalised status of ethnic minorities in Europe (Warmington 2019). From a CRT perspective, however, race is never secondary to class relations. According to Möschel (2007) the concept of race has been put aside in Europe after World War II following the fall of Nazi Germany. As such, in Europe, racism has been mainly associated with the horrors of the Holocaust, neglecting the impact of Europe's colonial past on exploitation of racialized groups. Nevertheless, racism and discrimination continue to structure the social realities and experiences of many minority populations across European countries, ranging from ethnic and religious minorities to Black populations (Agirdag, 2010; Essed et al. 2019; Moffitt et al. 2018).

The racism against Turkish descent individuals is a continuum of White nationalism and supremacy that is tied to Europe's colonial past in Africa even though the mechanisms of exclusion are mainly based on cultural and religious differences rather than colour (see 'culturalisation of racism, Clycq 2017). However, despite being deeply ingrained in the fabric of European society, racism against people of colour and ethnic minorities is often downplayed by strategies such as colour-evasion (i.e., denial of racial differences) and still viewed as a problem in the US (Salem and Thompson 2016). Therefore, it is important to uncover and challenge mechanisms of exclusion and expose deficit notions about ethnic minority students. The current study explores institutional and interpersonal discrimination experiences of Turkish Belgian students across secondary and post-secondary education in Flanders to facilitate critical questioning of the institutions and social norms that perpetuate inequality and shed light on how they operate. By adopting a CRT approach, we aim

to centralise the experiences of Turkish origin students and acknowledge their experiential knowledge as critical to understanding how discriminatory processes reproduce group inequalities in education.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

In this study, we focus on the discrimination experiences of Turkish–Belgian students as they are members of a major ethnic minority group in Belgium. Most of the students grew up in neighbourhoods where Turkish origin households were in the majority. In primary school, their class groups were relatively ethnically mixed. In secondary school, however, most shared classrooms with few (or no) students with a migration background. This is indicative of the ethnic distribution of students across class groups in the Flemish educational system (Van Praag et al. 2019). Participants for the study were selected using the following criteria: (a) born and raised in Belgium, (b) between 18 and 25 years old, (c) a full-time student at the university, and (d) being of Turkish descent. The snowball recruitment technique was used to supplement the initial cohort of recruited participants, who were first contacted by the lead researcher attending events organized by a Turkish student association on campus. These students were asked to recruit further participants, including those who did not participate in events of the Turkish student association. A second group of participants was accessed after they responded to a call posted to university email lists. All research participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study and were reassured of the confidentiality of their responses and interview data. We use pseudonyms throughout the article to ensure participants' anonymity.

## DESIGN

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 (6 male, 14 female) Turkish–Belgian students by the first author between January 2014 and November 2015. The interviews lasted 2–3 hours. Each interview was taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview language was Turkish, as this is the common language that participants and the lead researcher speak fluently. The shared language and ethnic identity between participants and the lead researcher—a Turkish woman and student at the same university—likely made it easier for participants to more readily trust and talk more openly about their experiences of discrimination, a highly sensitive issue (Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

Participants were asked questions focusing on their experiences with peers and teachers at secondary school and university. In order to gain insights into subtle forms of interpersonal and structural othering and exclusion, we initially avoided directly addressing discrimination in questions. By doing this, we aimed to highlight experiences of othering which might otherwise go undetected due to their insidious and ambiguous character. Thus, we encouraged participants to share experiences with peers and teachers, which they interpreted to be unfair, rude, insulting, and inconsiderate. All

questions were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers as they wished. We adopted a critical race methodology to ground this research in the lived experiences and knowledge of Turkish descent ethnic minority students and to better understand the unique perspectives of students (Solorzano and Yosso 2002). Centralising experiential knowledge of marginalised minority groups is vital for pushing against deficit thinking that perpetuates racism and social inequity in education. By adopting a counter-story telling method, experiences of Turkish origin students are acknowledged as sources of strength and their stories are told from a non-majoritarian perspective—a story that is little heard or told.

ANALYSIS

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author, who then translated them into English. We adopted an inductive thematic analysis using a constant comparative method to reflect critically on the data and compare findings systematically. NVivo11 software was used to index the themes systematically and facilitate the analysis. Data analysis proceeded in several stages. Following an inductive analysis process, we reviewed the transcripts several times and highlighted repeated words, phrases and references revolving around experiences of discrimination by teachers and peers across educational settings (Braun and Clarke 2006). Then, we categorized the findings based on a coding scheme consisting of three separate categories that reflect the nature of students' discrimination experiences in education. Accordingly, in the results section, first discrimination experiences with secondary school and university teachers are discussed and secondly discrimination experiences with peers in secondary school are presented, and then thirdly in higher education. Students' experiences with teachers *challenge the notions of objectivity and colorblindness* in education, underlining the exclusionary treatment they were exposed to based on their ethnic descent. Turkish Belgian students' accounts of discrimination by peers in secondary school reflect the *pervasiveness and intersectionality of racism* that targets ethnic minority students based on their ethnic and social class background, accent, and cultural norms. Finally, in higher education, the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students, everyday microaggressions, and the dominance of a Eurocentric curriculum demonstrates *the normativity of Whiteness*.

## RESULTS

### Challenging notions of objectivity and colorblindness in education

Student accounts of counter-racism clearly highlight the inequitable treatment they were exposed to by their teachers in secondary school and in higher education. They shared their experiences of being unfairly punished by their teachers and being wrongly accused of unruly behaviour due to their ethnic

origin. The narratives of students show that they became the target of aggressive behaviour and name-calling by their teachers because of their ethnic background (D'hondt et al. 2015). Several students stated that they were called 'dirty Turks' by their teachers when they were, for instance, involved in a fight with ethnic majority students. Students highlighted the inequitable treatment by their teachers, who did not call Belgian heritage students such names, even when they initiated such fights.

Fulya (Criminology) mentioned the way 'Turk' was used in her school context: 'Flemish students used the word "Turk" to swear at one another in secondary school. It was used to insult. When you know that it is a joke you will laugh at it, but some of them really meant it. Teachers also used the word "Turken" [Turks] in the same pejorative way. They are not very considerate'. Fulya's extract shows how students of Turkish descent were exposed to ethnic victimization by peers and teachers in school. While jokes and teasing that subtly insult student's ethnic identities are often seen as harmless and normative, they can be detrimental for marginalised students because the underlying intention of the perpetrator is usually ambiguous (Douglass et al. 2016).

All the participants' teachers were of Belgian descent, which also seemed to create certain power and social-support dynamics in schools (Agirdag et al. 2012). For instance, several participants recounted that teachers gave more academic support to Belgian descent students and ignored their questions in the classroom. Such student narratives show how deficit notions about the motivation and capacity of ethnic minority students negatively impact teachers' attitudes towards them and undermine the chances of students (Clycq et al. 2014; Stevens and Görgöz 2010; Vervaet et al. 2016).

Turkish Belgian students often referred to inequitable assessment by teachers when giving track recommendations at the end of the school year or when they had to repeat a year. Even though almost all of the participants, in the end, followed an academic track during secondary school (i.e., the track that aligns, in most cases, with university courses), a number of students were referred to the technical track by their teachers, such as Nil (Psychology):

> When I was in the first year of secondary school, my teacher warned me about my study results in the Dutch language and suggested that I take a technical track instead of an academic one. When I studied hard and got a high grade, she would say that I had just been lucky. In the second year, another teacher encouraged me a lot but in the third year, there was this teacher who thought that I was very bad at Flemish. She asked me to watch the Flemish TV at home, she would warn me about my performance when I got 69.5 instead of 70.

By attributing her success to luck, Nil's teacher had implied that Nil could not get high grades otherwise. Even though track recommendations need to be based on the academic performance of students, the participants' accounts suggest that teachers tend to discourage them from continuing in the academic track, albeit inadvertently. As such, teachers' prejudice and low student expectations help to sustain institutional discrimination as they might impact on the academic performance of ethnic minority pupils by making them feel academically futile (Agirdag et al. 2013; Gillborn 2008; Ladson-Billings 1998).

While some students avoided interpreting discriminatory attitudes of their teachers as 'racist,' most of them recognise that certain groups are treated 'differently' in the Flemish educational system. The perceived unintentional nature of teachers' discriminatory actions could have discouraged students from interpreting these acts as 'racist.' This was also highlighted by a student, Ali (History), who was advised to follow a technical track by his teachers during secondary school: 'Some teachers, like 15 to 20%, will encourage you to just keep on but the rest usually discourage you without being aware they are doing it'. Such student accounts show that the elimination of conscious and intentional racism does not mark the end of racial inequity since racism also exists at the subconscious level (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014).

Unlike Ali, students like Salih (Sinology) contested the apparent lack of intentionality. Salih said that his teacher benefited from his parents' limited knowledge during this process of decision-making. He argued that his teacher made him enrol in a vocational track in his first year: 'I wanted to follow an academic track; they [the school] did not allow it. What they did was illogical, but my parents were oblivious, and this suited the interests of teachers'. Students' experiences suggest that their teacher's attitudes are characterized by the lack of a culturally relevant pedagogy, which promotes positive engagement with students' cultural realities and having high expectations (Gay 2013). Furthermore, not being well-informed about the tracking system or having differing interpretations of the current (and unwritten) educational practices, students and their parents relied more on teacher's advice and had diverging interpretations of the provided information compared to their ethnic majority peers and parents (Van Praag et al. 2015), which was potentially further influenced by students' social background (Boone and Van Houtte 2013).

When students had to repeat a year, due to inequitable treatment based on their ethnic descent, this had emotional repercussions, as demonstrated by Nalan's (Social Sciences) interview extract:

> In the last year of secondary school, they did not allow me to graduate and I had to repeat the final year. Other [ethnic majority] students were allowed to graduate despite having lower grades than me. I tried so hard to get them to change their views. I was psychologically destroyed. You know, I was already one year behind, and it became two years. In primary school, they made me repeat one year because I was so introverted. I was afraid that people would make fun of me [for failing two years].

Overall, students' accounts of counter-racism demonstrate that various forms of discrimination are reproduced in schools due to the institutional freedom of decision-making and teacher dispositions that are embedded in the powerful narrative of meritocracy and objectivity. These stories also illustrate how such narratives allow denial or indifference to the issues of racism in education and undermine the opportunities of nondominant group members (Ladson-Billings 1998; Vass 2014).

While universities usually adopt a rhetoric of equality and non-discrimination, students' experiences underlie the permanence of racism in higher education, albeit to a lesser extent than in

secondary school. These experiences were mainly related to the inequitable assessment of their exams by teachers and being othered during oral exams. For example, Ali (History) talked about a lecturer who inquired about his ethnic background before an oral exam:

> Some of them [teachers] can be moody sometimes during oral exams. In my first and second year at the university, I repeated a course. He [the teacher] came to the door and called out my name when it was my turn to take an oral exam. He asked me if I was a Turk and when I said yes, he said 'oh, this will be very interesting'. I thought that my question was related to Ottoman history. When the student before me was in there, I overheard their conversations. He chatted with him quite some time about how his vacation was and how the other exams were going etc. When I went in there, he said 'what are you waiting for, come on—begin'. When it was over, I expected him to say something, he said 'you can go'. I failed the exam. He gave me 3 out of 20. This meant that none of my answers was correct. I did the exam again and got 7. I did it again and I finally got 10. This is the only course I had problems with. He was usually very cold to me. I had got at least 12 [out of 20] from other oral exams during which I did much worse than this one. It was about this man, not something general.

Ali told that he was discriminated against by the teacher based on his Turkish background as he compared the teacher's attitude towards the previous student and himself. His feelings about the teacher's inequitable treatment were confirmed when his grade was lower than he expected. Nonetheless, he treats this as an isolated case and did not recall any other experiences of being discriminated against in his university career. Later during the interview, Ali referred to the diversity of the student body as an explanation for lack of discrimination in the university setting in comparison to secondary school.

Even though students referred to the international character of the university and mentioned that there was not much discrimination in comparison to secondary schools they attended, they were still discriminated by teachers because of their ethnic background and deficit notions about ethnic minority students. Such exclusion processes in the university context underline the permanence of racism and show that the narrative of objectivity and meritocracy serve to privilege ethnic majority students while masking and perpetuating exclusionary norms which devalue ethnic minority students (Patton 2016). Some Turkish descent students also seem to endorse such discourses about equal treatment and neutrality at university and downplay their experiences of discrimination as isolated cases.

**The pervasiveness and intersectionality of racism**

The nature and frequency of discriminatory experiences involving peers varied from one student to another. Nevertheless, most Turkish descent students reported experiencing some form of discrimination from ethnic majority peers in secondary school and in higher education. Students'

accounts of counter-racism show that they became target of discriminatory attitudes and remarks by ethnic majority peers often due to their ethnic descent. In addition, they were exposed to exclusion and othering based on other factors that intersected with students' ethnicity, such as social class, accent, religion, gender, and phenotype (Gillborn 2015).

Participants' accounts revealed that their experiences of discrimination were often in the form of social exclusion and othering based on ethnic origin. One of these students, Burcu (Medical Sciences) said: 'A friend of mine was celebrating her birthday, but she did not invite me because her mother does not like Turks'. Unlike Burcu, who was openly exposed to a racist attitude, Nil (Psychology) felt alienated due to not being accepted in friendship groups based on her Turkish background:

> I did not worry about it [being seen as different] that much when I was younger, even though I did feel like a stranger from time to time. You realize it more as you grow older. One Flemish girl [in my class] just ignored me completely. Then I wanted to hang out with another one who was half Flemish, half Turkish. She said: 'Don't you have any Turkish friends'? I got over it after a while even though I was left out that year.

Not feeling fully included by their peers of Belgian descent was a common experience for students. The presence of other ethnic minority students in their secondary schools served as significant social support for a small number of Turkish–Belgian students, as there were few Turkish descent students enrolled in the general tracks that prepare students for university.

The accounts of students overall suggest that ethnic majority culture and language was treated as the norm in school and that ethnic minority students were expected to adapt themselves to it, even as their cultural and linguistic resources were not recognized (Agirdag 2010; Mampaey and Zanoni 2016). For example, Yasemin (Economic Sciences) remarked that classmates often made fun of her because of the distinct way she pronounces certain Dutch words:

> I kind of felt like a loser when I was around rich kids. Also, I was really embarrassed to say that we were five kids [siblings in the family] because they would always react as if this was really strange. [Turkish descent students] tried to be more like them by memorizing 'their' songs and watching 'their' TV programs, but you know it was very hard. (…) In the second year, my Turkish friends went to a different class. That was an awful year. I had to hang around with a shy Flemish girl. There was no else to hang around with. (…) The others were all cool [did not hassle her], but they were not interested in me. I was shy and hesitant. It was quite difficult.

Even though Yasemin had better relations with students of Belgian descent when other Turkish–Belgian classmates were in the same class group, she felt like 'a loser' when she was the only ethnic minority student in her class group (e.g., Van Praag et al. 2015). Besides the challenges of mixing with her socio-economically better-off peers, the intersection of several factors (e.g., ethnicity, social class) appeared to make her a particularly vulnerable target (Kohli 2009).

Turkish–Belgian students recalled being made fun of and bullied because of their attire and/or having working-class parents. These jokes often hurt ethnic minority students who were seen as different, inferior, and intellectually incapable. Being excluded and made fun of by his peers, based on ethnic and social class differences, Ali (History) reflected on the causes of prejudice his peers had:

> Of course, there are bad memories, like in the class there were those who did not like Turks. It did not matter how nice you were; it was very obvious that they did not like you. You don't understand it much before high school because you are still young. As you grow older you see it better. They probably learn it [disliking Turks] from home, on the street, from media, their families, etc. Also, some teachers would help Flemish students more. And of course, the [differing] financial situation between Turks and Flemish affected things. The girls from rich families would make fun of our clothes.

Ali was clearly more aware of the hostility against him and, by extension, his ethnic group in secondary school. In addition to facing discrimination from his teacher, he was victimized at school by a few Belgian descent students who were always playing practical jokes at his expense. For instance, they would often try to pull his chair out from underneath him. When making sense of these experiences, he referred to how he was made to feel 'out of place' by richer children who continuously targeted and bullied him. Such forms of ethnic-cultural bullying and victimization which repeatedly targets students from migration backgrounds reflect the power imbalance among ethnic minority and majority students and negatively affect the school belongingness of ethnic minority students (D'hondt et al. 2015).

Canan (Medical Sciences) also mentioned the negative attitudes of her classmates whose verbal and nonverbal gestures implied that she did not belong in that school due to her ethnic background and social class:

> I went to a Catholic school. There were children from very elite families at the school. (…) Those children who were rather spoiled by their families, they kind of looked at Turks as workers. (…) They are surprised to see that you are getting an education. (…) On the one hand, they claim that Turks are backward. On the other hand, they think you don't deserve to be there [in such a good school], to have a chance at achieving something, to be in a position [of upward mobility].

Referring to the overall negative perceptions about people of Turkish descent in her school, Canan underlined how her presence on a prestigious educational track confused people as they viewed people of her ethnic descent as socially and intellectually inferior. Thus, the lack of ethnic diversity in academic tracks and ethnic segregation in tracks was seen as the norm, reflecting the persistence of ethnic inequalities in education (Agirdag et al. 2011; Van Praag et al. 2015). Consequently, Turkish–Belgian students enrolled in esteemed tracks were made to feel that they did not belong there due to their ethnic origin and social class.

**The normativity of Whiteness in education**

Students' accounts of racism underline how the higher education context is characterised by an elitist system that values and serves Western European descent students from middle-class backgrounds (Bhopal, 2017; Patton, 2016). The overrepresentation of students and faculty with Western European backgrounds, everyday microaggressions experienced by ethnic minority students, and the dominance of a Eurocentric curriculum design sustain a system of opportunities and privileges bestowed on students belonging to dominant ethnic majority group (Bernal 2002).

A common form of exclusionary discrimination reported by the Turkish–Belgian students was when Belgian descent people treated them as foreigners, rather than fellow Belgians. for instance, Esra (Chemistry) mentioned how her daily encounters with ethnic majority students on campus left her feeling like a 'foreigner': 'Now on campus, too, they always talk to me in English. They see me as a Flemish [only] when I am with a Flemish friend. They are surprised that I can speak Dutch fluently. They are just ignorant, you know'. Esra's experiences of being othered were arguably linked to her facial features which distinguished her from students of Belgian descent, as well as the company she keeps. Students, in general, are aware that their physical characteristics influence whether they are perceived as an insider or not. Reyhan (Biomedical Sciences) noted: 'I was never discriminated against due to being a Turk. You are discriminated more when you look like a Turk in every way. Like your physical features—if you have darker skin or something (…). [Because of my features] they tend to assume that I am half Belgian'. Such racialized experiences of students mirror the prevailing hegemonic narratives associating Belgianness with Whiteness.

Turkish Belgian students also reported that they did not feel welcome among certain ethnic majority student clubs or peer groups because of their ethnic origin. Nonetheless, having access to same-ethnic peers on the university campus seems to alleviate marginalisation of Turkish descent students (Colak et al. 2019). Coming together with their same-ethnic peers in a safe space where their experiences and views are validated and shared is important for ethnic minority students to build a sense of belonging in a higher education context where they are significantly underrepresented (Yosso et al. 2009). Still, they experienced microaggressions by Belgian descent students that made them feel like they don't belong at the university.

One form of microaggression from peers in higher education is backhanded compliments. Although praise is a sign of admiration, the way their Belgian descent friends commended students for individual achievements and positive characteristics entailed an insensitive and ambiguous put-down of the ethnic communities from which they hail (Kohli et al. 2019). For instance, Belgian descent students singling their peers out as a 'good Turk' tends—albeit indirectly and unintentionally—to reproduce negative stereotypes about Turkish people generally. Furthermore, such remarks by their peers strongly hint that students of Turkish descent are not recognized as a

'Belgian'. Burcu (Medical Sciences) stressed how being confronted with negative ethnic stereotypes and being othered as a Belgian was a frustrating experience that made her feel excluded:

> They sometimes say things that hurt you, but they are not even aware of it. 'Oh, this is really great work —especially for a Turk.' When I started medical sciences, they thought I was Greek. Yeah, because Turks couldn't possibly have any education. (…) Sometimes in conversations, they seem not quite sure that I can understand them.

Burcu takes exception to being distinguished as 'a good Turk' and not being seen as a Belgian since this is her nationality and she can easily follow a conversation in Dutch without any linguistic difficulties whatsoever. Being individually praised based on their perceived differences from the rest of one's ethnic group makes students feel like they should be ashamed of their ethnic identities. This also complicates individual ethnic identity formation and hinders positive development of ones' ethnic identities (Kohli et al. 2019).

Discrimination on campus typically arises on occasions where Turkish–Belgian students are confronted with ethnic stereotypes that they feel significant pressure to respond to, assuming the role of 'correcting' misinformed societal discourses about ethnic minorities. Although a couple of students reported enjoyment in engaging in the conversation, it seems to burden and exhaust most (Mellor et al. 2009). For instance, Fulya (Criminology) recounted the experience of confronting such questions:

> Questions like 'is it this way or that way' sometimes get a little boring. Ok, on the one hand, it is nice that they are curious and inquisitive. But on the other hand, I also want to be able to talk about everyday stuff. Especially when I first came to university, the questions were just so absurd sometimes: 'Are they going to force you to get married to someone, or can you choose the person you want to marry'?

Being asked stereotypical questions that assume their ethnic origins and perceived cultural differences are somehow 'exotic' or 'curious', leaves Turkish–Belgian students feeling reduced to their cultural identities and unable to pursue a 'normal' student life. Furthermore, the superficiality of knowledge about Turkish culture and practices frustrated many Turkish–Belgian students, who understandably expect—half a century after the first Turkish immigrant communities settled in the country—that their ethnic majority peers will have acquired a deeper awareness and understanding of issues relating to their Turkish ethnic background.

Students were also targeted because of their more visible features, such as wearing a headscarf or a pronounced dark beard. Kerem (Social Sciences) recalled an incident in which he was confronted with negative stereotypes about Muslims:

> Once I met a friend of mine. She was drunk. She said to me, 'I am actually quite frightened of you, you look exactly like a fundamentalist, extremist Muslim. I am scared that you will take this country from us'. I had a beard then. I grew it because I thought it looked cool, and I liked it. It did not have any political meaning. When she said these things, I kind of felt bad but did not react to it. She was drunk, you know.

Kerem's account shows that carrying visible symbols associated with Islamic identity exposed students to various forms of microaggressions, including assumptions of ties with terrorism or fundamentalism. Female students appear particularly conscious of their attire, and grapple with whether to dress differently to avoid adverse reactions. Even though most female participants were not wearing a headscarf, many of them disclosed that this was more to avoid negative looks and being stigmatized as 'threatening.' These strategies adopted by students reflect the overall negative attitudes towards visible Muslims in Belgium (Bracke and Fadil 2011). They also uncover how ways of life and individuals that depart from White normativity are devalued and pressured to assimilate.

Finally, students' stories underscore how White perspectives and knowledge are acknowledged as the norm in the curriculum design which largely ignores perspectives and realities of ethnic minority students. Ezgi (Engineering, Turkish origin) reflected on this:

> You know, I think it would be great if there was a course on immigration. We don't even know what the first-generation immigrants went through. Last year, there was a guest lecturer who talked about it, that Belgium wanted immigrants, and that they [immigrants] saved the economy by working here. If they [Belgian descent students] also attend these lectures, they will understand better why we are here. They need to see these things a bit. Otherwise, the only thing they see is that you are a foreigner.

Such narratives clearly show that the current university curriculum largely dismisses ethnically diverse perspectives in so far as it is aligned more with the views of dominant group members (Ladson-Billings 2000; Yosso 2002). The lack of course materials that promote students' deep interaction and critical engagement with issues relating to cultural diversity from a non-White perspective reproduces the notion that the knowledge and views of ethnic minorities are deficient and inferior to the 'norm' (Bernal 2002).

## DISCUSSION

Data from interviews focusing on Turkish descent young adults' school experiences were used to identify students' interpersonal/institutional discrimination experiences by peers and teachers across the secondary school and higher education. Using CRT to analyse discrimination experiences of ethnic minority students in the Belgian context, this study shows that various forms of discrimination Turkish–Belgian students were confronted within educational settings reiterate mainstream negative stereotypes which suggest that they have a lower intellectual and social status, do not equally belong to Belgium due to their perceived status as 'foreigners,' and pose a potential threat to society as Muslims. While systemic discrimination and racism is not acknowledged as a phenomenon in Europe (Billiet et al. 2012; Essed and Trienekens 2008), these findings highlight how students' counter-stories of racism challenge the notions of objectivity and colorblindness in education, uncover the pervasiveness and intersectionality of racism, and expose White normativity in educational settings.

Teachers were responsible for discrimination in educational institutions, often in the form of inequitable treatment and unfair assessment of ethnic minority students' academic performance. Teacher's (un)intended attitudes and behaviours—such as stereotypes and low expectations of ethnic/racial minority children—appeared to aggravate the inequality further and isolate ethnic minority students (Gillborn 2008; Ladson-Billings 1998; Matias and Liou 2015). Nonetheless, due to the institutional freedom of decision-making in the Flemish educational system, it remains a challenge to increase awareness about how unquestioned ethnic biases inherent in the educational system have significant consequences for the academic trajectories of ethnic minority students (D'hondt et al. 2015; Milner 2011). Thus, educational systems allow ethnic inequalities to be reproduced in schools often in subtle, non-aggressive ways, and limit the opportunities of ethnic minority students (Gillborn 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998; Mampaey and Zanoni 2016). Also, even though students reported fewer cases of inequitable assessment by university teachers, they still shared experiences of discrimination based on their ethnic descent, during oral exams or when writing papers. While universities claim to adopt a rhetoric of meritocracy, which assumes that hard work alone is sufficient to excel, students' accounts uncover how institutional discrimination affects their experiences and undermines their opportunities (Ledesma and Calderon 2015; Patton 2016).

Students' counter-narratives of racism by peers in secondary school and at the university underscore the pervasiveness and the intersectionality of racism in education. The accounts of Turkish Belgian students reveal the ubiquitous nature of stereotypes in education and show how ethnic minority students are constructed as perpetual foreigners based on their ethnic, social class, and cultural differences (Billiet et al. 2012; Yosso et al. 2009). Experiences of social exclusion and ethnic victimization in secondary school and experiences of everyday microaggressions were visible within this research. Most examples of microaggressions were characterized by a lack of recognition of Turkish Belgian students as a legitimate member of Belgian society and negative stereotypes and remarks regarding their ethnic identities. These discrimination experiences made students feel 'out of place' in academic tracks and at the university, motivating them to seek safe spaces on the university campus (Yosso et al. 2009). While Turkish origin students were regularly exposed to various forms of discrimination, the lack of reflection on these matters among their ethnic majority peers underpins the normativity of Whiteness and lack of engagement with wider structures of justice and ethnic inequality in educational settings (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Howarth and Andreouli 2015; Mampaey and Zanoni 2016; Welply 2018). Therefore, the ethnic bias and racism that is deeply entrenched in the educational system was not made visible nor problematized, leading to the sustenance of a system that benefits and supports ethnic majorities at the expense of those from marginalised groups (Clycq et al. 2014; Moffitt et al. 2018). In higher education, for instance, the organisation of campus activities based on ethnic majority students' norms and interests, and the lack of an inclusive curriculum that reflects the experiences and perspectives of ethnic minority students clearly indicate that universities bestow privileges and

advantages upon students based on their ethnic descent (Bhopal, 2017; Ladson-Billings 2000; Patton, 2016).

This study opens avenues for further research in Europe, given that the CRT framework is rarely used in the European context and to date, insufficient focus has been placed on how various forms of discrimination that arise in education are situated within the wider structures of racial injustice. Future studies could explore the racialized experiences of students from other ethnic minority backgrounds in Belgium (e.g., Moroccan Belgians) and investigate the impact of so-called neutral institutional practices and policies on students' educational experiences. Moreover, researchers could further study the ways discrimination processes intersect with ethnicity, religion, social class, sexual orientation and gender and expose how members of nondominant groups experience multiple forms of injustice.

Several policy implications and recommendations arise from the findings of the present research. Educators need to acknowledge how schools perpetuate inequalities through seemingly colourblind policies and practices and work on developing an anti-racist identity (Capper 2015). For instance, adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy that addresses issues of power, privilege and racism can bolster ethnic minority students' sense of belonging and academic engagement and give teachers the opportunity to reflect on the impact of their attitudes and bias (Gay 2013; Milner 2011). Also, eliminating inequities requires a deep engagement with the perspectives of those who are marginalised and acknowledgement of their value to the school (Capper 2015). Moreover, universities need a more forceful push back against the post-racial myth and actively engage in disrupting White normativity and dominant ideologies of meritocracy, while validating the voices and experiences of those from minority backgrounds (Patton 2016). Employing inclusive and critical pedagogies and non-Western perspectives in university curricula can help all students to develop a more critical consciousness and to combat inequities (Castillo-Montoya and Abdul-Abad 2019). Finally, greater representation of ethnic minority students, teachers and administrators in schools and universities is critical to pushing for anti-racism policies and challenging structures and systems of racism in education.

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