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To cite this article: Talitha Stam (2020): Losing white privilege? Exploring whiteness as a resource for 'white' Dutch girls in a racially diverse school, *Whiteness and Education*, DOI: [10.1080/23793406.2020.1747028](https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2020.1747028)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2020.1747028>



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Published online: 14 Apr 2020.



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Losing white privilege? Exploring whiteness as a resource for 'white' Dutch girls in a racially diverse school

Talitha Stam 

Department Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Much research on the role of race in education focuses on young people with a migrant background. The racial experiences of 'white' children are under-researched, especially in the Netherlands. This article examines whether 'white' Dutch working-class students experience white privilege and if so, how they make use of it as a 'resource' in their school settings. Most studies on 'white' working-class students do not take white privilege into account, and most work on white privilege has inadequately disentangled the impacts of race and social class. The ethnographic findings from a Dutch senior vocational school where the vast majority of students are of colour suggest that the whiteness of working-class 'white' Dutch students may or may not act as a form of white privilege, depending on their interaction with their middle-class teachers. Due to its intersection with social class, white privilege in this setting appeared to be conditional upon meeting teachers' expectations.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 10 January 2018
Revised 4 February 2020
Accepted 22 March 2020

KEYWORDS

word; white privilege; whiteness; working-class; girls; diversity; resources; the Netherlands

Introduction

'White' children are under-researched in studies on the role of race in education (Byrne 2009; Morris 2005). Nevertheless, they present a relevant case for analysing racial practices in schools, especially in racially diverse settings like Amsterdam, where people can be traced back to over 180 different countries and where there is no longer a racial or ethnic majority group that is dominant on the basis of its demographic majority position (Alba & Nee 2012; Crul 2016; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2002; Vertovec 2007). In this article, I examine the experiences of 'white' Dutch working-class girls who form a numerical minority in a racially diverse school, where over 70% of the students have a migration background. I question whether their whiteness functions as white privilege and provides them with a resource in this school setting, such as teachers' support. The guidance and information provided by teachers has been found to be a significant resource that helps students to develop and achieve their educational goals and aspirations (Stam 2017). Due to their social class backgrounds, working-class students are heavily reliant on external resources as previous studies have shown that working-class parents are less often able to provide educational support (Stam 2017; Stephens et al. 2015). This study aims to make a contribution to the research on race and education

CONTACT Talitha Stam  stam@essb.eur.nl

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because, on the one hand, studies on young, working-class ‘white’ people seldom take white privilege into account, while on the other hand, most studies on white privilege hardly focus on education and tend to overlook the intersection between race and social class. More specifically, this study challenges the concept of white privilege articulated within the frameworks of race, ethnicity and social class, which I will elaborate on in the theory section below. I will integrate these concepts into the research question of if and how the whiteness of ‘white’ Dutch working-class girls in a racially diverse senior vocational school context functions as white privilege that provides them with a resource. The data come from a two-year ethnographic study of the *Randstad School* (a pseudonym, as are all the names in this article) in the Netherlands, which offers a highly diverse context in which the old majority group of ‘whites’ is now, demographically speaking, just one of the many minority groups in the school (Crul 2016). In the Netherlands, references regarding race are shunned in favour of ethnic, cultural or national associations (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Weiner 2015, 2016). Having researched both the Dutch and the American context Essed (1996) suggests using the term ‘racial-ethnic’ instead. More methodological detail is provided in the method section.

Theoretical tools

In order to challenge the concept of white privilege, this section contextualises theoretical tools – race, ethnicity, social class, whiteness and white privilege – within the Dutch context.

Ethnicity trumps race

The Netherlands has a rich history of migration studies and policy documentation. These studies and policy documentations usually focus on people with a migration background from various places around the world and their integration in the Netherlands. Both these publications and the Dutch public discourse on people with a migrant background concentrate predominantly on their ‘ethnicity’, ‘national identity’ and ‘cultural differences’, but not primarily on their skin colour (Essed and Trienekens 2008). Racial categories tend to be used more easily in the United States and United Kingdom than in the Netherlands (Siebers 2017). In these countries, for example, people with a migration background would fall into the category of ‘people of colour’. Whereas race was a common category in early twentieth-century Dutch school textbooks and scientific works, it disappeared after the Second World War (Essed and Trienekens 2008). In the early seventies, when large groups of migrants arrived, the Netherlands once more began to make a distinction in its statistics. This time a distinction was made on the basis of the country of birth of a person’s parents by using two categories: *allochthones* and *autochthones*. The first category described people with at least one parent born abroad and was specifically introduced by the government to denote a category of difference in the late 1980 s. The second category consisted of people whose parents were born in the Netherlands (WRR [The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy] 2017). In 2016, these classifications were replaced by ‘*residents with a Dutch or a migration background*’ (CBS [Statistics Netherlands] 2016). Once more, there are no notions of race

to be found in these new terminologies. Yet, this does not mean that racial references are never used in the Netherlands. For example, this study is located in a racially diverse school, generally known as a 'black' school, a term widely used in the public debate in the Netherlands to denote schools where more than seventy percent of students have a migration background (Paulle 2002). In 2010, more than half of the students in the four largest cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Rotterdam) had at least one parent which is born outside of the Netherlands (CBS [Statistics Netherlands] 2016). In these racially diverse contexts, there is no longer an ethnic majority group that is dominant on the basis of its demographic majority position (Alba & Nee 2012; Crul 2016; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2002; Vertovec 2007). Therefore, it is even more relevant to study the former majority group of 'whites'—who are now, statistically speaking, one of the many minority groups— and their experience with race and ethnicity in education.

Whiteness in the Dutch context

Studying 'white' people and their whiteness is not common in the Netherlands (Wekker 2016). Due to the general lack of Dutch literature, I have turned to international studies on these topics. Internationally the study of whiteness stretches back to at least 1860, with Wilson's essay '*What Shall We Do with the White People?*' Three successive waves of whiteness studies followed, which were mainly dominated by publications written in English. Garner (2006) identified five interpretations of whiteness in the sociological literature, namely whiteness as absence, as content, as a set of norms, as resources and as a contingent hierarchy (see for example Frankenberg 1993; Freie 2007; McIntosh 1988; Perry 2002). Next to whiteness studies there is a field of critical whiteness studies that seeks to examine the construction and moral implication of whiteness in order to reveal and deconstruct its assumed links to white privilege and white supremacy (Nayak 2003, 2007). Several authors, such as Applebaum (2016), Nayak (2003, 2007) and Preston (2007), have offered strong reviews of the literature on whiteness and critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies provide both a critique of whiteness and a way for whites who engage with the discipline to re-centre their work on whiteness and themselves (Preston 2007). A major criticism of critical whiteness studies is that it overlooks the heterogeneity of 'white' experience, whether it is due to class, immigrant status, or geographical location (Nayak 2007). In the domains of critical race theory and intersectionality a substantial amount of international research does tease out intersections between race and class, see for example Byrne (2009), Rollock (2014), and Vincent, Ball, and Braun (2008), to name just a few. Some have even done so within the field of whiteness (e.g. Reay et al. 2007). Yet, in order to understand whiteness in the Dutch context, it is important not to simply use an international normative frame of reference. Weiner (2015, 2016) was among the first to document the 'white' discourses infusing a diverse primary school classroom in the Netherlands. In the same year the documentary 'White is a colour too' by Bergman (2016) was broadcast on national television and followed by several books on this topic, e.g. Wekker (2016, 2017), Nzume (2017) and Essed ([1984] 2018). Moreover, two new political parties led by politicians with migrant backgrounds entered both national [DENK] and local [Bij1] governmental institutions. At the same time, there was a coinciding rise in political parties with anti-immigrant

rhetoric, namely 'PVV' and 'FvD'. Race remains a complex concept in the Netherlands. Essed and Hoving (2014) argue that the lack of attention paid to racialising mechanisms in the Netherlands can be attributed to Dutch historical discourses— or the lack thereof— about the nature of race, and therefore racial inequality. An example of this was when the book *White Innocence* (Wekker 2016, 2017) was translated from English into Dutch. In the Dutch version, the author translated the word 'white' as *wit* and not *blank*. In English both words would be translated as 'white'. In Dutch, however, these terms have different connotations. *Blank* also means clean, fair, colourless, etc. and it has a normative, positive term that is almost exclusively used in statements referring to 'white' people. It also has the connotation of white supremacy from the colonial past (Nzume 2017, 17). The dominant role of whiteness was contained within the parameters of studies of racism, which meant that there has been less discussion on diversity within whiteness. Engelen (2018), amongst others advocates a shift of focus from what he refers to as 'identity politics' to an emphasis on social class differences. His popular column was followed by a national public debate, in which for example Donner (2018) wrote '*Henk en Ingrid hebben weinig aan hun witte privileges* [Henk and Ingrid do not benefit much from their white privilege]'. This article builds on the idea that while the 'white' group in society shares the same skin colour, its members are not 'equally white' (cf. Bonnett 1998).

White privilege

But if not all 'white' people are equally 'white', how does this affect white privilege? Lareau and Horvat (1999), for instance, argue that whiteness is a form of cultural capital in educational settings. White privilege refers to the idea that 'white' people, including 'white' students, profit from hidden institutional benefits that stem from their whiteness (Morris 2005, 100). For this, Weiner (2015) found evidence of a Eurocentric discourse, in which reflections of white cultural norms of order, time, cleanliness and Western and Christian superiority dominated in a diverse classroom in Amsterdam. However, this approach does not take into account significant other background characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic class and migration background, which are crucial to understanding the social construction of whiteness and white privilege. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) for example, demonstrate how people who are seen as belonging to the 'black' group racially are often perceived as working class, while people who are considered as 'white' racially are perceived as belonging to the middle class. Twine (1996) also shows that a 'white' identity has become inextricably linked to a middle-class economic position. This was even the case for the girls of African descent in her study, whose identities were first socially constructed as 'white' based on their economic position, and later as 'black' (Twine 1996). Morris (2005) shows how 'black' American teachers perceived 'white' American students as being of a higher social class, while 'white' American teachers perceived the same 'white' American students as lower social class, based on the residential setting, minority setting and attitudes associated with being lower class. Morris (2005, 102) argues that for many 'black' American teachers, whiteness appears to represent a 'symbolic' form of capital (see Bourdieu 1986; Lareau and Horvat 1999) that links these students to a larger system of privilege and power and encourages favourable treatment of them. This was also observed by Reay et al. (2007, 1042) who stated that 'it is a person who makes value judgments that carry symbolic power; a value

of others'; and Roediger (1994) who wrote: 'It is not about being a "white" woman, it is about being thought of as a "white" woman' (1993, xii). Davis and Nencel (2011) also point this out in their auto-ethnographic study on Dutchness as a 'white' ethnic national identity and showed how being 'white' in the Netherlands is not the same as being perceived as 'white' Dutch; 'Even after 30 years, being "white" and Western, we still do not fit in the category of "white" ethnic Dutch' (Davis and Nencel 2011, 482). Hence, whiteness may have different meanings in different contexts. In an attempt to understand the process of the making and unmaking of whiteness in the Dutch context, this article applies a social constructionist approach that sees whiteness as an ideology tied to social status and privileges, taking the heterogeneity of 'white' experience into account. Moreover, following Weiner (2015, 2016) I examine whiteness in a racially diverse educational setting by looking at whether 'white' working-class students also have white privilege and if so, whether or not they can profit from it.

Setting and methods

The data for this study came from a two-year ethnographic study of the *Randstad School*. This Dutch school is in the Randstad, an area typified by major cities with highly diverse populations. Moreover, the *Randstad School* is part of a larger regional senior vocational education centre (MBO) that houses numerous types of senior vocational and adult education programmes for students aged 16 years and above. In the Netherlands, lower senior vocational programmes are part of the compulsory education system. Students in the vocational track (as opposed to the academic track) must switch from their local high school to a regional senior vocational school at the age of sixteen. Consequently, regional senior vocational schools are attended by students from many local high schools. This study centres on the level 2 senior vocational programme (MBO), which is equivalent to ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) level 3. The respondents are enrolled in the Social and Health Care programme that primarily trains students in elderly care. Female students are traditionally overrepresented in this programme. For decades, these level 2 programmes have been perceived as having a low status due to the ambivalent status of basic care work in Dutch society (see also Jonker 2006).

Respondents and data-collection

Most of the students in the programme are working-class female students of colour with a migration background, while a small minority is 'white' Dutch without a migration background. School classes are composed of students drawn from several local high schools. There are around one hundred students in total, seventeen of whom are 'white' Dutch students. Of these 'white' Dutch students, sixteen are female and one is male. They are divided over four classrooms. I chose to make the 'white' Dutch female students the starting point for my analysis. Unlike the United Kingdom or the United States, researchers in the Netherlands tend to focus more on young people of colour with a migration background when studying the social reproduction of inequalities, leaving 'white' Dutch students without a migration background from lower classes underrepresented.

I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with all sixteen ‘white’ working-class Dutch female students as well as ten school staff members, including teachers, the head teacher, a school social worker and a school administrator. Detailed themes were not imposed on the data gathering beforehand, but were generated from data using grounded theory (Glaser 1998). I entered the field with a broad interest in students’ aspirations, the main theme of my Ph.D. research project (Stam 2018). Guided by the fieldwork data, race and ethnicity appeared to be of significant importance for my respondents both in behaviour (segregated seating) and expressions. During the years 2014 and 2015 I observed the four classrooms for two days per week. This included the observation of intake interviews, school breaks, activities in the school cafeteria, examinations, staff meetings, internship placements and graduation celebrations. A triangulation of methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) enabled the collection of valid and encompassing data on both students’ meaning-making and behaviour, and relevant contextual factors. The factors that form a pattern in the data follow the line of argumentation in this article and are illustrated using representative fragments and citations. These quotes were translated from the original Dutch interviews.

Analysing race

In this article, I use race and ethnicity as a category of analysis to scrutinise the concept of white privilege as a resource for students. In doing so, I often refer to ‘white’ Dutch to indicate Dutch people without a migrant background in their families. Although this division follows a common practice in the Netherlands, I realise that it can be problematic as it ascribes seemingly fixed identities. There are many more divisions to be made in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, languages, social class, gender, age, sexuality, etc. In various studies, ‘white’ people tend to be viewed as one group in contrast to people with a migration background. But ‘white’ people are not a homogeneous group and ‘white’ experiences should not be essentialised, as I will demonstrate in this article. However, I will not elaborate on the diversity within the contrast group of Dutch students of colour in great detail. But I will use various terms including specific regional, religious or racial identities, depending on the issue I want to draw attention to. Like all racial and ethnic categorisations, whiteness is a complex concept and perceived members may also ‘belong’ to other groups. The question of who is ‘white’ and who is not may be described by ancestry or appearance and as such ascribed to a person, but it is also an issue of self-identification. Following other researchers such as Essed (1996), Hall (2000), Wekker (2016), Wimmer (2015) and Winant (2015), this article will use race and ethnicity as two sides of the same coin, subsuming and merging a more physical understanding of race with a more cultural view. I will use the notion of ‘white’ and approach it as a social construction that is associated with skin colour, culture, perspective, social class and power (Nzume 2017, 18). I have put the described racial and ethnic categories between single quotation marks to make clear that I see them as a social construct rather than as something factual. I use double quotation marks whenever I cite people.

Race and the researcher

It is important to elaborate on the racial and ethnic background of the researcher when examining themes like race and education. I am a racially ‘black’ woman of Haitian descent with racial and/or ethnic features that are markedly different to those of my key ‘white’ Dutch respondents. Yet, all my respondents shared very personal stories with me and even invited me to their homes. Both ‘white’ Dutch students and teachers were comfortable enough with me to share their outspoken and sometimes negative feelings about Dutch people of colour without making any reference to my own racial or ethnic features or making excuses to me. My gender also helped me to gain the trust of the respondents in this female-dominated school environment. I frequently reflected upon situations and remarks made by the respondents in conversations about teachers, naturally without compromising the students’ identity. A combination of various ethnographic approaches made it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the position in which ‘white’ Dutch students at the *Randstad School* find themselves socially, culturally and educationally.

Findings

The main findings of this study will be presented in three parts: *becoming ‘white’*, *white privilege* and *losing white privilege*. In *becoming ‘white’*, we follow the process of the making of whiteness in the Dutch context by the ‘white’ Dutch working-class girls themselves within their racially diverse classroom settings. *White privilege* examines whether their whiteness functions as white privilege and may offer a resource for them. And in *losing white privilege*, we learn that not all ‘white’ Dutch people are equally ‘white’ due to the intersection of race with social class. As a result, the white privilege of ‘white’ Dutch working-class girls appears to be conditional upon meeting teachers’ expectations.

Becoming ‘white’

The *Randstad School* is a large regional education centre attended by both students from the neighbourhood and the surrounding villages. The following ethnographic vignette from my field notes illustrates the different ways in which two ethnic/racially ‘white’ Dutch students, fictively named Dewi and Anouk, experienced entering the classroom for their first lesson at this racially diverse school. Unpacking this encounter reveals how whiteness becomes a racial and ethnic category for these female students.

After a 30 minutes’ scooter drive, she arrived at school: “*So many different cultures I have never seen them together. I feel like a peppermint in a bag of liquorice.*” For Dewi, the racial and ethnic composition of this classroom was the opposite of her elementary and secondary schools in the racially and ethnically homogeneous ‘white’ village where she lives. Dewi was very happy to see Esther, the other ‘white’ Dutch female student in the classroom, who lives in a neighbouring village. Anouk arrived a little too late, even though she lives within walking distance of the school. With a cup of coffee in her hand, Anouk glanced around the classroom and shrugged her shoulders. Nothing special for her, because it is just like her secondary school, where there were also many girls from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. Thus, Anouk walked to the back of the classroom as she wanted to take a seat at the back. Meanwhile, Dewi was gesticulating that Anouk could join Esther and her, but Anouk

ignored her. When Anouk wanted to take her place at the back of the classroom, Fatima, a female student of colour, placed her bag on the chair where Anouk had wanted to sit and said: “*You girls are already sitting in front of the classroom.*”

This vignette demonstrates how Dewi and Anouk experienced entering the classroom for their first lesson in different ways. Moreover, it shows a common phenomenon whereby students divide themselves into groups along racial and/or ethnic lines, in which physical appearance—recognising diversity from someone’s looks—is the main criterion for categorising classmates (see also M’charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014). Searching for a seat in the classroom, Dewi was very happy to see someone like Esther, another ‘white’ Dutch student. Based on her racial and ethnic ‘white’ Dutch background, Dewi and Esther expected that Anouk would join them, but she did not see any reason why she should do so. At the same time, Fatima was policing her boundaries, which forced Anouk to sit next to the other ‘white’ Dutch girls. Anouk, Dewi and Esther were the only three ‘white’ Dutch students in this classroom that consisted of twenty-two students in total. From this day onwards, it was common for them to sit separately during classes, lunch periods and special events. Students placed themselves in clearly defined racial and/or ethnic categories that were acknowledged by their peers. Frankenberg’s (1993) study of ‘white’ women in California demonstrates a particular understanding of race as only being activated by the presence of others. Similarly to Frankenberg (idem), the ‘white’ Dutch girls in this study also expressed varying degrees of unawareness of their own whiteness until it was activated by the presence of others. Those whose childhood had been spent in ‘white’ or largely ‘white’ communities did not understand this as having anything to do with race. Anouk, and sixty percent of the racial and ethnic ‘white’ Dutch students in this study, had grown up in a racially diverse reality that was similar to their current school settings. Most of these students had attended secondary schools where they were ‘the only’ ‘white’ Dutch student, which often made it impossible for them to form groups with other ‘white’ Dutch students. For them, their whiteness was activated not so much by the presence of Dutch students of colour, but by the few fellow ‘white’ Dutch students. Despite these distinctions, all of the ‘white’ Dutch girls in this study were not used to accentuating their racial and ethnic background. Thus, grouping along a complex combination of racial and/or ethnic lines made the racial and ethnic characteristics of ‘white’ Dutch students visible for themselves, while this was already visible for the Dutch students of colour. This situation initiated their process of *becoming* ‘white’.

White privilege

I have demonstrated that whiteness plays a significant role for my respondents, and will now turn to analysing the notion of white privilege as a resource for ‘white’ students. Bourdieu (1986) argues that the dominant culture (upper middle-class) reproduces its dominance by rewarding children in the education system who speak its language and share its assumptions and aspirations. Overall, schools operate according to a system of fixed rules and more implicit school values that form their identity. Within an institution, a school curriculum is developed, school staff is hired, and certain practices become part of a school’s implicit norms and culture over time. Some argue that whiteness is embedded in teachers’ pedagogy through ‘unvarying conformity with the dominant

white Eurocentric discourse that underlies white society's ways of thinking, living, and relating with people of colour' (McIntyre 1997, 135). This is also true for teachers, who are cognisant of racial and ethnic differences and inequalities (Feagin and Van Ausdale 2001). McIntosh (1988) described this as 'the invisible knapsack' in which 'white' people have invisible tools that provide them with white privileges. This contributes to the different layers of the concept of whiteness. The teachers in this study initially had more confidence in the 'white' Dutch girls without a migration background than in the girls of colour with a migrant background in the same class and showed this in various forms of direct (intake interview and phone call) and indirect (cookery class) privileges.

The first example of one of the direct forms of privileges is the intake interview. At *Randstad School*, all prospective students have an intake interview before being admitted to the study programme. These intake interviews are conducted by different teachers, two at a time, to gain a better idea of the background and needs of their prospective students. The specific manner described below did not occur just once, but was systematically repeated in a variety of ways by all of the teachers. Esther, a 'white' Dutch student, went to the introductory meeting with her mother, who works in maternity care. Esther's intake interview only lasted five minutes, even though thirty minutes was scheduled for each meeting. A teacher explains, 'So if a girl from [anonymised village] comes with one of her parents, who already works in the health and social care sector, I do not have to talk for thirty minutes.' The next interview was with Shirley, a Dutch student of colour with Surinamese-Hindustani background, who was accompanied by her mother, who also works in a hospital. Shirley, however, was interrogated about her motivation and personal matters and her intake interview lasted even longer than thirty minutes. The same teacher responded: 'you know, "Hindustani" girls are often different at school than with their parents, so we don't trust answers that are given in the company of their parents. Well, what can we do? We just need to wait and see.' While a mother working in the Health Care sector was seen as an advantage for the 'white' Dutch student, the same advantage did not seem to apply to the student with 'Surinamese-Hindustani' background. In fact, it was even perceived as a negative, as the teacher was suspicious of whether Shirley was truly motivated or if she had been forced in this direction by her mother. Hence, intake interviews with 'white' Dutch students and their families were considerably shorter and received with less suspicion. The fact that the teachers initially had more confidence in these girls made a positive start more likely. Weiner (2015) found similar results regarding the way in which 'white' cultural capital reinforced the cultural hegemony of the Dutch identity, while devaluing students of colour with a migration background.

Another form of direct privilege was a phone call that 'white' Dutch students received from their teachers. At the *Randstad School*, a day before the first exam of the school year, all 'white' Dutch students were called to ensure that they would actually be present at the exam. With this, they received an extra reminder to arrive on time. According to Weiner (2015), *time* is central to discourses of whiteness. In this way, 'white' Dutch students were given an extra opportunity to meet the requirement of whiteness according to their teachers. Yet, the 'white' Dutch girls were not aware that they were the only ones to receive this call. This is what Garner (2006) refers to as whiteness as a kind of absence, in which 'white' people tend to think that what happens to them is what happens to everyone else, which was not the case in this instance.

Other discourses reflecting ‘white’ cultural norms in Dutch education found by Weiner (2015) concerned *order*, in which ‘the teacher emphasised doing things in a correct and very rigid order’ (367). Doing things in a correct and rigid order demonstrated by the teacher indirectly privileged ‘white’ Dutch students. During cookery classes, which are part of the curriculum, a teacher makes a dish which the students then have to reproduce as accurately as possible. In this instance, the teacher put the pan on the stove, removed the meat from the package and threw it directly into the heated frying pan. While the ‘white’ students followed the teacher at each step, a group of students of colour looked at each other puzzled, and asked the teacher where they could find the lemon or lime. The teacher replied: ‘if you have checked the ingredients list carefully, you will see that this recipe does not need any lemon or lime.’ ‘But how do we clean the meat then? At home, we always clean the meat thoroughly with water and lime or lemon,’ said Jennifer, one of the students of colour, uneasily. Several other students of colour expressed similar feelings of discomfort. The teacher looked blankly at them and then told them to do the assignment as instructed: ‘Just put the meat in the pan without any discussion.’ The teacher got angry and did not understand why ‘Dutch students’ could simply follow her orders, but ‘allochthones’ [students of colour] had to be ‘so difficult’. Similar to Weiner’s (2015) findings, this example shows students of colour being ‘admonished for doing things in an incorrect order’ (367). The ‘white’ teacher’s way of doing things was presented as the unquestioned norm, making this part of the “‘white’ racial knowledge’ (Leonardo 2009) which gives ‘white’ Dutch students an advantage over Dutch students of colour. It is in these unmarked cultural practices that the power of whiteness becomes clear (Wekker 2016). Like the teacher in this example, other studies have found that in Dutch schools, ‘white’ teachers are more likely to have positive interactions with ‘white’ students and the least positive interactions with students of colour (Thijs, Westhof, and Koomen 2012; Weiner 2016).

This paragraph has shown that the whiteness of these students appeared in various forms of direct (intake interview and phone call) and indirect (cookery class) ways to represent a *symbolic* form of capital (see Bourdieu 1986; Lareau and Horvat 1999) that links these students to a larger system or privilege and power and encouraged favouritism towards them.

Losing white privilege

In the previous paragraph I showed how several forms of direct (intake interview and phone call) and indirect (cookery class) privileges were made available to ‘white’ Dutch students at *Randstad School* at the beginning of the year. This is because on the one hand the whiteness of these students linked them to a larger system of privilege, and on the other hand they were also seen as ‘white’ by others, including their teachers (Reay et al. 2007; Roediger 1994). However, over the course of the year I observed that direct forms of white privilege were often withdrawn by the teacher due to the actions and attitudes of the ‘white’ Dutch students. This meant that ‘white’ Dutch students were no longer called prior to an exam, they no longer received the benefit of the doubt and they also received punishments. Because this situation was new to the ‘white’ Dutch students, many of them perceived that they were being treated even more harshly by the teachers, which was true compared to their treatment earlier in the year. Teachers expressed their disappointment

in the behaviour of the ‘white’ Dutch students, pointing out that they too were often late (*time*) and unwilling to follow *orders*. In other words, the ‘white’ Dutch students were not living up to ‘white’ Dutch cultural norms (Davis and Nencel 2011; Weiner 2015), as perceived by their teachers. In this context, not only whiteness is an unnamed and unmarked cultural practice that is considered as the norm (Frankenberg 1993), but middle-classness too (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Twine 1996). Hence, whiteness is mediated by class (Garner 2006). The concept of intersectionality helps us to understand this phenomenon. The teaching workforce in the Netherlands is almost exclusively ‘white’ and generally from a ‘white’ middle-class background (Van den Berg, Van Dijk, and Grootsholte 2011; Weiner 2016). This is also the case in this study. Therefore, on average, the teachers have little in common with the ‘white’ female students other than skin colour, ethnicity and gender. Few teachers live in the immediate vicinity of the school or in other low-income neighbourhoods. Moreover, most teachers have a bachelor’s degree in education, which is a much higher qualification than the one these students are studying for and the educational qualifications obtained by their working-class parents. The teachers’ middle-class background influences their understanding of what whiteness should entail. This is important for understanding the dynamics between ‘white’ working-class students and their middle-class teachers. I argue that whiteness alone cannot promote white privilege as a resource available to students as it depends on the interpretations of others, in this case the teachers. Thus, how teachers actually *perceive* students’ class background has been explored. In this, the teachers’ interactions with ‘white’ students intersect with race, social class and power. The power pertains to the teachers, who have the ability to either assign or remove privilege from ‘white’ students according to their interpretations of what can be considered as being truly ‘white’ depending on socioeconomic factors. The students at this school, both ‘white’ Dutch and Dutch students of colour, often face numerous personal difficulties, which some argue are characteristic of this low vocational education level. Below are a few brief examples of some of the personal challenges facing four ‘white’ Dutch female students. These are not extreme cases, but are representative of both ‘white’ Dutch students and Dutch students of colour at this school:

Anouk is 17 years old. Her father is currently unemployed after spending two years in prison. Since his return, there have been many tensions at home. Therefore, she often stays with her boyfriend.

Dewi, 17 years old, does not have much contact with her father. She explains that she has a “*Lot of problems with my father. He prefers drugs and alcohol to his own kids you know.*”

Stephanie, 18 years old, has been taking care of her mother since she was diagnosed with cancer. Her twin brothers are too young to understand or help with household chores. Her stepfather left after she reported him to the police for sexually abusing her.

Ellen, 19 years old, has a two-year-old daughter. The father of her child got into a large amount of debt and so they are currently living under the supervision of an administrator while paying off their debts.

These heart-breaking stories¹ show that many of these ‘white’ Dutch students have to cope with several issues that make it extremely difficult for them to function at school and concentrate on their studies. Multiple disadvantages, including their lower social class

background and challenging home situations, overlap and make them even more reliant on external resources. The guidance and information that teachers can provide can be an important resource to help students to complete their education and achieve their aspirations (Stam 2017). While at the beginning of the school year teachers displayed a high degree of understanding for the difficult personal circumstances many students were facing, their sympathy tended to wane after a few months as they became increasingly irritated by their students' behaviour. A possible explanation for this change in attitude lies in the *process* through which teachers make sense of the complex connection between 'white' students' race, class and the school context. The teachers developed assumptions and expectations about 'white' Dutch students through their own middle-class lens. Over time, they began to wonder aloud if personal issues really were the reason why students were missing classes. One teacher stated, 'It is quite remarkable that "everyone" is always absent during the exams.' And of course, 'white' students occasionally used their personal situation as an excuse to skip classes, when in fact they just didn't feel like attending school: 'Yes, sometimes I'm not in the mood to go to school, so I won't. This does not have anything to do with my private life, you know. Sometimes, I just do not feel like it. Especially in the early mornings.' Both the difficult circumstances and the 'I just don't feel like it' behaviour of the 'white' Dutch students corresponded to those of Dutch students of colour. Whereas the teachers tended to differentiate between the 'white' Dutch and Dutch students of colour at the beginning of the year, they stopped making such distinctions halfway through the year. Instead, they referred to 'everyone' instead of to certain racial and/or ethnic groups. At first, the teachers had higher expectations of the 'white' Dutch students, but they became disappointed in them. 'White' Dutch students were expected to be more conscientious, so failure to attend school became an indicator that a student did not deserve the initial privilege awarded to them. Certain types of behaviour were not associated with the teachers' interpretations of whiteness, and this changed their approach to these 'white' Dutch students. This is different from the approach they took towards Dutch students of colour as expectations of them were low to begin with and remained so. Although teachers were sometimes positively surprised by them, this did not result in privileges. In this process, the teachers relied heavily on their own middle-class interpretations of what is considered appropriate behaviour, often dismissing the challenges that these girls had to cope with. Consequently, the group of 'white' working-class Dutch students lost their direct forms of privilege because the teachers perceived their behaviour as being typical of that of students of colour (see also Wekker 2016). In the long run, the whiteness of these students did not act as a form of recourse as their social class status tarnished their whiteness. In the context of school and interaction with teachers, white privilege was also about meeting middle-class behavioural expectations, thus the onus was on the individual to really deserve white privilege.

Discussion and conclusion

It was a challenge to study the racial experiences of 'white' students in a racially diverse senior vocational school in the Netherlands, where 'whiteness is not acknowledged as a racialised/ethnicised position' (Wekker 2016, 2). First of all, how do we define and refer to the respondents with respect to the Dutch context and in a way that is understandable

for an international audience? Davis and Nencel (2011) revealed in their auto-ethnography that being 'white' in the Netherlands is not the same as being *seen* as 'white' ethnic Dutch. The girls I studied situated themselves as individual actors without meaningful group memberships or shared struggles in terms of their social class. While their working-class position implies that they are in a marginalised position, their race and/or ethnicity suggests the opposite. Therefore, they were treated differently at first. Hence, their whiteness was interpreted as 'normal' not only by themselves, but also by their teachers and others. Once these differences were visible, it became clear that not all members of the 'white' group in the Netherlands were equally 'white' (Donner 2018, Engelen 2018). And if not all 'white' people were equally 'white', how does this affect white privilege?

This article examined whether these girls' whiteness functions as white privilege and offers a resource for them. The concept of white privilege is often considered as being inherent to 'white' people. However, this rather absolute approach does not take significant factors such as class and gender into consideration. An intersectional approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of white privilege. Within racially diverse schools, the former majority group of 'white' people is now numerically one of the many minorities. My ethnographic findings suggest that the whiteness of working-class 'white' Dutch students simultaneously did and did not act as a form of white privilege, depending on their interaction with their in-majority 'white' middle-class teachers. I argued that whiteness alone did not promote white privilege as a resource available to students, but depended on the interpretations of others, in this case the teachers. This was also observed by Reay et al. (2007, 1042) who stated that 'it is a person who makes value judgments that carry symbolic power; a value of others'. Correspondingly, Morris (2005) also found that whiteness became a resource primarily through the way in which the teachers linked it to social class and status, exemplified in perceptions of 'white' students as '*middle class*' by the 'black' teachers or as '*trailer trash*' by the 'white' teachers. My longitudinal results revealed that white privilege was not only granted by their in-majority 'white' middle-class teachers, but also withdrawn over time. This added a dynamic aspect to white privilege that had not yet been discussed in the literature. Initially, the in-majority 'white' middle-class teachers in this study provided direct and indirect forms of privilege, but over the course of the year, 'white' working-class students lost their direct forms of white privilege, because they behaved in ways that the teachers perceived as being typical of students of colour behaviour (Wekker 2016). In this way, the whiteness of the lower vocational students had a different meaning than the whiteness of their middle-class and higher educated teachers. As a consequence, students' access to the resource of direct forms of white privilege also depended on meeting middle-class 'white' behavioural expectations. Hence, the onus to meet these expectations fell on the individual. It is important to underscore that the withdrawal of the direct forms of white privilege did not put 'white' Dutch working-class students in the same position as Dutch students of colour. 'White' working-class students will continue to enjoy both indirect and direct white privilege based on their physical appearances in other settings, such as the labour market, that can help them to achieve their aspirations in the long run. Further research is needed to show how this kind of white privilege works out for this group of 'white' working-class students in other contexts.

To conclude, I have demonstrated the limits of white privilege and the ways in which it can be reduced. These findings add to the complexity and depth of both academic and

public debates on white privilege and the role of race and ethnicity in education from the perspective of ‘white’ Dutch working-class female students in racially diverse schools where they are a numerical minority. This insight is important in order to critically develop social theory on race and power dynamics, as well as social policies aimed at improving the educational experience for ‘white’ students in schools, both in the Netherlands and beyond.

Note

1. In consultation with the students, these stories have been reported to various authorities.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Maurice Crul, Liesbet van Zoonen and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the paper. Many thanks to the Randstad School, the teachers, other staff members and all the students for participating in this study. I also would like to thank Maurice Crul, Liesbet van Zoonen and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Commission, 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development [grant number: SSH-2012-1-320223].

ORCID

Talitha Stam  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8421-5601>

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