The Power of Ignorance

Epistemic Construction of *whiteness* in Secondary Schools in Germany

by

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Abstract

Whiteness maintains an "invisible" and often unquestioned normative position within the German society in general and the educational system in particular. Previous research in Critical *whiteness* Studies has highlighted the importance of directing attention toward *whiteness* as a system of knowledge and power to effectively counteract its concealed nature and dismantle its normative position. This thesis aims to follow up this project by investigating the less explored educational context in Germany. To achieve this, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with *white* staff members in secondary schools located in Nord-Rhein-Westfalia. These interviews served as a textual base for a Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings indicate the presence of four main discourses ("Denial and color evasiveness", "Us – Them", "Negative depiction of others" and "*White* saviorism*")* working in close interconnection to create and reproduce a broader epistemology of *whiteness.* Of notable importance is the role of *white* ignorance as a tool to sustain the supremacist position of *whiteness* in supposedly non-racist societies. This discursive formation is embedded in and facilitated by the structure of the German educational system driven by the intention to uphold the existing status quo.

Keywords: critical *whiteness* studies, *white* ignorance, education, critical discourse analysis,

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1. Introduction

> "Racism is not a Black, but a white problem. You
> must realize that you're already wearing the shoe
> that you don't want to put on. Only then you can get
> rid of it again"
>
> (Sow, 2019, p. 272, my translation)

Despite some progress, over the recent years, there is a persistent embedding of racist beliefs and mentalities within societies and their structuring potential for all spheres of life. As Alcoff (2007, p. 48) emphasizes, "oppressive societies (…) do not acknowledge themselves as oppressive" which requires a certain form of dominance, as the abusive form of power (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254), over discourse as a way to shape meaning. An important role in this regard is incumbent upon the educational system as a central "Hegemonieappart" (hegemony apparatus) (Amesberger and Halbmayr, 2008, p. 91). Its function does not only lie in the shaping of "realities" through the active attribution of meaning but also in consistently keeping certain perspectives and positions outside of the main order of discourse. Parallel to a slowly rising awareness regarding the unwavering significance of racism (Sinanoglu and Polat, 2023), *whiteness*[1] as a position of power and privilege remains invisible or rather ignored by the *white* German Dominanzgesellschaft[2] ("dominant society"). Covered by this invisibility, *whiteness* pervades educational institutions worldwide, shaping curricula, pedagogies, and the very structure of learning environments. Additionally, this invisibility enables *white* people to both claim a progressive and racially aware

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[1] I chose the italic here to underline the socially constructed character of the concept. In contrast, for terms such as Black or BIPoC, I chose a capitalization to also underline the emancipatory and resistant potential inscribed in these self-attributions.

[2] The term is taken from Şeyda Kurt's (2021) book "Radikale Zertlichkeit" and describes a society characterized by the dominance and oppression by a certain group.

position and guard their unearned racial privileges. This has been identified as a dead-end to anti-racism by Gilroy (1992).

Through critically examining the discourse of *white* teachers and school staff on matters of *whiteness* and racism, I aim to shift the focus to *whiteness* as the "normative" and thereby contribute to its deconstruction. Throughout this exploration, it is important to keep in mind the experiences of marginalized communities and how they have been historically and presently impacted by the normalization of *whiteness* leading us to two important premises: "1) race, racism, and white supremacy are operating at all times; and 2) the study of whiteness intrinsically enables society to better understand how People of Colour are racially oppressed" (Matias and Boucher, 2021, p. 11)

1.1 Purpose and Aims

> "The work toward racial justice must begin with the acknowledgment of racial ignorance and the epistemic limitations it creates for social relationality"
>
> (Medina, 2016, p. 178)

In this thesis, I take an epistemological perspective on *whiteness* as a system of power and knowledge and investigate how this is reproduced within secondary schools in Germany.

My work is situated in the field of Critical *whiteness* Studies aiming to counteract the often-present invisibility of *whiteness,* sustained by a collective form of *white* ignorance, by making it the explicit object of analysis. Through this, I aim to challenge the normative positions that *whiteness* holds within a racially structured society. In the words of Ruth Frankenberg (1993, p. 10) "knowledge about a situation is a critical tool in dismantling it". This thesis, therefore, works with *whiteness* in order to work against it (Gillborn et al., 2018, p. 174). I apply a critical perspective tracing the constitutive and self-sustaining process of *whiteness* as a system of knowledge and the associated acts of epistemic oppression.

I focus on the educational system as a fundamental institution for socialization and knowledge production. Schools are key places for early childhood experiences of personal interaction and group-building processes and therefore hold an important role in identity-building and understanding of social dynamics. They have the power to both reinforce existing discriminatory power structures as well as actively work to deconstruct these inequalities. To use this potential, it is essential to investigate who produces what knowledge and how within these institutions.

Putting these two aspects together we arrive at the research question:

> **How is *whiteness* epistemically constructed by *white* teachers in the secondary school system in Germany?**

This represents an important contribution to the scientific debate in different ways. First, while classical philosophical epistemology has in the past three decades moved towards a more social view, taking into account a group-based dimension of knowledge (Fuller, 1988; Schmitt, 1994) *race* is still often not adequately considered from an epistemological perspective (Mills, 2007). This is problematic as *race* plays an important role in the way that credibility is distributed, thereby also limiting which knowledge is accessible to whom. Secondly, especially outside the US context, *whiteness* continues to be an understudied research topic. Especially regarding the strong contextuality of the topic (Lewicki, 2022, p. 919), it is important to conduct research in different social, political, and cultural environments. My thesis contributes to the understanding of the topic in the context of Germany.

1.2 Thesis Outline

In the following, I begin with a brief description of my positionality. I then examine the broader German discourse on *race* as well as the German school system. These function as a foundation for the later conducted analysis. In the literature review, I give a short insight into the former scientific work on Critical *whiteness* Studies going from a more general toward a more concrete educational focus. Next, I lay out my theoretical framework by explaining the used concepts relating to *whiteness*

and describing its epistemological construction with a particular focus on the role of *white* ignorance. In the following, I demonstrate and justify my methodological choices regarding the combination of interview data with critical discourse analysis. In the analysis section, I present and discuss my empirical findings. Finally, I capture and restate the most important findings of my study.

2 Positionality

In this thesis, I follow a feminist understanding of epistemology according to which knowledge is not fully objective and universally accessible, but highly dependent on and shaped by our position within society (Harding, 2004). Knowledge production is tied to unequal power hierarchies and follows both testimonial and hermeneutical dimensions of injustice caused by the intersectional effect of different modes of oppression (Hunter, 2002, p. 119). The position one has within these oppressive structures determines the accessibility of related knowledge (Haraway, 1988). As I am engaging in the process of knowledge production, it is essential to critically discuss my positionality.

As Frankenberg (1993, p. 142) puts it, "thinking through race implies thinking from within a racialized body". For me, that means that my thinking is shaped by a *white*, male-socialized, middle-class background. Despite my engagement with topics of racism and *whiteness* and the perspectives of BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) inside and outside of academia, I cannot free myself from my socialization into the privileged position of a racially organized society and my entanglement in relations of racism.

The beauty and challenge of qualitative research lies in its various possibilities of interpretation (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 30). This gives a lot of weight to the perspective taken by the researcher. In other words, "there is no such thing as an 'objective' analysis of a text" (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 14–15). My perspective, shaped by my personal background, influences what I look at in the first place, how I structure my data collection, and how I finally analyze it (Davis, 2014). This is

nothing I can nor aim to entirely avoid. Instead, I have done my best to critically engage with my positionality at every step of the research process.

At first, this means that I have consciously chosen to focus my reading on BIPoC researchers both for the broader conceptualizing of the topic as well as for its situation within the German context. I aim to give these positions the space and attention that they deserve in order to not simply reinforce a form of extractivist research.

This also includes an awareness of my silence and ignorance toward the hegemonic position of *whiteness.* In their work on the methodology of *whiteness,* Corces-Zimmerman and Guida (2019) state that (*white*) researchers will always be complicit to some extent. Especially in interview situations with other *white* people, questions about personal behavior toward 'problematic' comments and situations arise. Simply letting those situations pass by might indirectly express reassurance and thereby further create *white* comfort. On the other side, directly countering might seal the further flow of information, by creating reluctance on the part of the interviewee. The way I dealt with this during the interviews was mainly by withdrawing my often seemingly expected *white* solidarity and instead posing critical follow-up questions.

3 Background

3.1 *race* and Racism in the German Context

Germany has a tradition of suppression concerning the unprocessed colonial responsibility of the country (Roth, 2017). This is closely linked to the still far-reaching attitude that racism is a problem of the past that has no structural implications on the present society, often accompanied by the reference to other supposedly worse national contexts.

Different from Anglo-American countries where *race* at least in the scientific perception has experienced a shift from a biological concept towards a socially constructed one, the term *"Rasse"* in Germany has no such critical connotation (Junker, 2017, p. 432). This makes it considerably harder to speak about, without

reinforcing an essentialist perspective. As a consequence, one can see a widespread taboo to deal with topics of *race* in Germany (Wischmann, 2022, p. 102) also referred to as a "tradition of evasion" (Roth, 2017). By implication, this also means that racism is often reserved for those who openly propagate a biological differentiation and hierarchization of *race*. To circumvent this linguistic dilemma, *"Rasse"* is often simply replaced by "*Ethnizität"* (ethnicity)*.* Such a solution is not very helpful as it on one side blurs the existing difference between the concepts and on the other side does not solve the initial problem of essentialization. This widespread color evasiveness might make the application of a critical *whiteness* perspective very relevant for the German context as " it may be more difficult for white people to say 'Whiteness has nothing to do with me - I'm not white' than to say 'Race has nothing to do with me I'm not racist'" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6).

Historically *whiteness* in Germany has been largely constructed in the colonial past of the country (Dietrich, 2007) as a form of differentiation from the colonized and dehumanized "Other" and as a tool for the discursive construction of nationhood. Through this, "being *white*" and "being German" are closely entangled within the public perception. This image has stubbornly sustained itself throughout time despite the broad presence of Afro-Germans within the society and their significant contribution to German history (Campt, 2009; Oguntoye et al., 1992). The discursive closeness of *race* and nation manifests itself in the concept of the "Deutsche Volksgemeinschaft" (German folk community) (Arndt, 2017, p. 26). The exclusivity of this "community" and its reliance on decent and consanguinity was essential for German nation-building (Walgenbach, 2017, p. 381). Exemplary for this (and different from e.g. the British Empire), is the categorical denial of the inclusion of the colonized in the German nation (Walgenbach, 2017, p. 385) and the strong social and juristic prohibition of *interracial* marriage (Walgenbach, 2017, p. 384).

Such a perspective forcefully ignores the essential component of Black lives in the historical development of Europe and Germany, and at the same time renders invisible the presence of Afro-Germans in contemporary German society[3].

In addition to Germany's colonial past, the Nazi dictatorship crucially affected the public depiction of *whiteness* and Germanness. While resentments and prejudices against Jewish people date back much further, they reached an exceptional level in the holocaust. The Nazi depiction of the *Aryan race* was not only positioned in contrast to Black People and People of Color but also against Jewish people, Slavic people, and people with disabilities (important here is to remember that these categories can also overlap (Bruder, 2008)).

In the present public discussion *whiteness* is often perceived as exclusively related to this *white* supremacist ideology (Müller, 2011, p. 620), hiding the structuring role it plays also in less openly racist settings. The effect of such a discursive and historical interconnection is that racism in Germany is often discussed under the term "xenophobia". Such an equalization is problematic in different ways. Firstly, the reverence to a phobia constitutes a euphemism as it is mainly not a form of fear that drives hostility towards racialized groups but the conscious and unconscious preservation of *racial* privileges at the cost of others. Secondly, it creates the impression that it is about a distinction between Germans and non-Germans while we do see that racialized violence is first and foremost based on racially loaded phenotypical differences and not on the country of origin (Walgenbach 2017, p. 378).

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that the role of *whiteness* in Germany is not monolithic; it intersects with other identities, such as gender, class, religion, and migration status. Each of these dimensions contributes to a unique experience and understanding of power dynamics within German society.

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[3] For an important depiction of these untold stories see Campt (2009) for a discussion about Black People under National Socialism and Oguntoye et al. (1992) for the history of Afro-German women.

3.2 German School System

The legal responsibility regarding educational policy in Germany lies within the federal states. This leads to a very heterogenous landscape that often hampers educational research on a national or cross-state level without necessarily taking a comparative perspective. Within the public school sector (private schools show another organizational deviation from the norm[4]), children usually start school at the age of six and then attend primary education for the first four grades. After this follows a secondary education for another six to nine years, therefore roughly including students between ten and nineteen years of age. At the transition point from primary to secondary education, students are separated into a tripartite system of Hauptschule, Realschule, and Gymnasium. The final decision is, depending on the state, incumbent upon the teacher or the parents. While it is mainly based on the educational performance of the student, research has also shown the influence of socioeconomic background and migration background (Kristen, 2002)[5]. The initial aim of this separation was a diversification of the school system to enable the parallel promotion of more cognitive and more manual abilities (Jackson, 2013). However, the development seen over the last decades was a continuous degradation of the public perception of Haupt- and Realschule. As a result, the division into a three-tier school system is often seen as the main reason for the high level of educational inequality in Germany in international comparison (Rözer and van de Werfhorst, 2017). Additionally to these school forms, comprehensive schools have the aspiration to combine those three tracks within one common facility.

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[4] The proportion of students at private schools has risen sharply over the last three decades and now stands at just under 10% (Grossarth-Maticek et al. (2020).
[5] Across the three different school forms we see the highest share of children with a migration background in Hauptschule (62.7 %) compared to 43.6% in Realschule and 32.9% in Gymnasium Quelle: RDC of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States, [Mikrozensus], survey year(s) [2019], own calculations.

4 Literature Review

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the history and emergence of Critical *whiteness* Studies (CWS hereafter) as a scientific field as well as its application in the German context and educational research.

4.1 Critical *Whiteness* Studies

CWS has the aim to "make visible the practices of visibility itself" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 194). It is a "revolt against color blindness" (Nguyen, 2001) and an attempt to mark the unmarked and thereby deconstruct the normative position of *whiteness*. This provides a promising theoretical framework for my thesis and offers an important conceptual foundation for the further development of my argumentation.

From an academic perspective, CWS is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. It seeks to understand and challenge the ways in which *whiteness* has been constructed as the normative standard, and how it affects social, economic, and political structures. This is done by "a shift away from a reductionist view of anti-racism which is exclusively focused on the 'other'" (Green and Sonn, 2005, p. 480) towards a focus on the privileged side of the racially structured society.

Thereby it is essential to emphasize that for BIPoC the forced critical engagement with *whiteness* is as old as racism itself (Wollrad, 2005, p. 32). Simply referring to the origin of the concept in the 1960s in the US and the later translation into other national contexts denies the importance of the preceding struggle with *whiteness* (Piesche, 2017). These struggles did not constitute merely intellectual and theoretical treatises but were "to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society" (hooks, 1992, p. 338). In other words, "critical whiteness first and foremost contains a Black collective knowledge of survival" (Piesche and al-Samarai, 2018, p. 168) also described as a "Black knowledge archive" (Eggers, 2017). This legacy is important to keep in mind throughout the engagement with the topic, especially from my *white* positionality. First, to create visibility for the marginalized position of those who have fought for centuries for a more just society,

and second, to not forget what CWS is actually about. It is not a discursive project to clear and re-legitimate a *white* identity nor a space for a new "woke" left to compete for the most self-critical reflection from a purely *white* perspective but instead focused on the combat of the oppression of racialized people. In their recent plaidoyer for a critical study of *whiteness,* Matias and Boucher (2021, p. 10) argue for the need for an "interpellation between whiteness and its dehumanization of people of Colour". This would also serve to realign the field toward the aim of understanding the racial oppression of People of Color through a deconstruction of *whiteness* (Matias and Boucher, 2021, p. 11). CWS should include the perspective of racially oppressed communities while simultaneously emphasizing the responsibility of *whites* to take concrete action.

Also, within an academic sphere, the foundation of the study of *whiteness* is much older than the recent approach by authors like Ruth Frankenberg, David Roediger, and Toni Morrison who are usually the first ones associated with this topic (Twine and Gallagher, 2008, p. 4). Black radical thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon have critically engaged with this topic already a century ago. Du Bois is also considered one of the founders of what Twine and Gallagher (2008, p. 7) call the "first wave" of CWS. In "The Philadelphian Negro", Du Bois (1899) provides a detailed and nuanced portrait of the lived experiences of African Americans. This necessarily also encompasses a discussion of *whiteness* which Du Bois considers as a historically grown social construct attached to power and privilege. In the same vein, Fanon (1986[1952], p. xii) emphasizes the devastating effect of a *white* lens that the world is seen through, categorized, and defined "The White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence".

Another important impulse comes from the US feminist movement. In "Women, Race and Class" Angela Davis (2019[1981]) problematizes the far-reaching exclusivity of the mainstream feminist movement stemming from its unquestioned predominately *white* perspective. *whiteness,* according to Davis, was socially constructed to create a hierarchical division between people that can also be found within the feminist movement. Frankenberg (1993) takes up this aspect, by applying

a (self-) critical perspective on *white* feminism, emphasizing the insufficiency of a one-dimensional analysis of oppression. Drawing on the experiences of white women in the US in social and political contexts, Frankenberg shows how they despite the gender-based oppression still benefit from the privilege that comes with *whiteness*. In this regard, CWS is also closely intertwined with the concept of intersectionality, a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989). Frankenberg sets out three main theses regarding the concept of *whiteness*. She defines it as a standpoint from which *whites* watch themselves and the world, that is unmarked and invisible and attached to certain privileges and advantages.

4.2 Critical *Whiteness* Studies in the German Context

Against the outlined background of the taboo status of topics around *race* and *whiteness*, the scientific field of CWS is also less popular in Germany compared to for example the Anglophone context. These topics have also been declared as rather recent scientific foci, mainly taken over from a US context (El-Tayeb, 2017; Melter and Mecheril, 2011, p. 13). Melanie Bee (2012) discusses the possibilities and risks of such transmission processes by arguing that they always evolve some form of "cultural hybridity" as "artificial copies" (p. 4). Taking a concept developed in the US and imposing it on a German context without referring to the concrete situation and approaches of German Black People and People of Color, denies their agency, and might reproduce racially organized discursive power hierarchies. Especially if this is happening from a *white* perspective, the procedure can take clear imperial characteristics (Bee, 2012, p. 5).

However, it is important to note here that the German discussion is not solely an acquisition from the US, but has rather parallelly evolved in mutual exchange (Piesche, 2006). Some initial studies go back to the 1980s. In 1983 the Black Ethnologist Diana Bonnelamé tried to do her doctorate on protestant initiation rites of young *white* Germans. While ethnological studies on Black people seemed to be perfectly normal, exchanging the roles of researcher and researched was highly controversial and eventually led to the boycott of the work since no supervisor could be found. Without specifically referring to CWS, also Mamozai (1989) already

touched upon many of its elements by investigating the role of *white* women in German colonial rule.

The first monography focusing more explicitly on *whiteness* and its critical examination was "Weißsein im Wiederspruch. Feministische Perspektiven auf Rassismus, Kultur und Religion" by Eske Wollrad (2005). The author offers a genesis of the term with references to the theoretical landscape in Germany. Another cornerstone in the German CWS was the volume "Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland" published by Eggers et al. (2017). However, the topic is still largely ignored by the *white* scientific mainstream (El-Tayeb, 2017, p. 8)[6].

4.3 Critical *Whiteness* in the School Context

CWS has played an important role in the research on *racial* inequalities in the educational system. Studies have focused on a variety of different aspects within this broad field.

A focus on *white* teacher candidates poses the question of how their positionality and life experiences shape their behavior in the school environment (Picower, 2009). Solomona et al. (2005) for example show how these teachers employ strategies of "ideological incongruence, liberalist notions of individualism and meritocracy, and the negation of white capital" (p.147) to counter or silence discourses about *white* privilege. While these can be described as ideological tools, Picower (2009) emphasizes that they can also take a more emotional or performative character. These tools can occur both isolated and in accordance with each other (Picower, 2009). In these situations, an opportunity for the critical examination of *whiteness* is transformed into a further legitimization of its unquestioned normative position (Castagno, 2008). Another founding contribution regarding the treatment and avoidance of *whiteness* by *white* teachers has come

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[6] Besides these more scientific approaches, to the topic there is also a considerable engagement of Black communities and People of Color outside of academia, (e.g. Oguntoye, Noa Sow, Mutlun Ergün, ManuEla Ritz)

from McIntyre (1997). It is also important to note that the role of teachers expands beyond the direct interactions within the classroom as it also encompasses "their expectations of white students and students of color, curricular choices, presentations of classroom material, organization of the classroom–including seating patterns, conduct of student assessments, and use of particular teaching approaches or tactics" (Charbeneau, 2015, p. 656). Moreover incidents of racism are often met by silence from the teacher's side with the explicit or implicit aim of creating a "safe space" for *white* students, which by implication means epistemic and linguistic violence for Students of Color (Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

Other authors have focused more on the side of (*white*) students. When confronted with their privileged *white* position, *white* students often react with either confusion (hooks, 1994), strong expressions of resentment, or a "wall of silence" (Cohen, 1995). If a discursive interaction does take place, it is often characterized by a culturalization of the topic in order to hide both *whiteness* as a position of power as well as their involvement (Hytten and Warren, 2003, p. 67). In their discourse analysis of how students protect *white* dominance, Hytten and Warren (2003, p. 70) show a separation between appeals to the self, appeals to progress, appeals to authority, and appeals to extremes.

Some studies have also taken a broader perspective on the role of education within a *white* supremacist society. *Whiteness* often takes the role of un-reflected "normality" within the school complex which has a strong impact on the solidification of racial discrimination and the development of children's identity (Rösch, 2010, p. 93). Schools function as a "gateway to knowledge construction" (Sue, 2004, p. 766) giving them substantial power in defining truth and reality also for a broader societal sphere. If the discourse in school is characterized by the notion of *whiteness* as normative and superior, these institutions are helping to maintain the status quo of privileging the white majority (Wischmann, 2022, p. 103) and actively participate in reinforcing *white* privilege (Castagno, 2014). With a more curriculum-based focus, we can for example see the limitedness of history classes, centering a purely *white* Western point of view while structurally blending out

Black and Indigenous perspectives (Reed, 2013). This creates a form of master narrative (Woodson, 2017) and enables the presentation of history as an objective science (Dozono, 2020, p. 4). While producing a form of racial comfort for *white* students and teachers, it constitutes a form of epistemic violence by denying the existence of their experiences.

Authors also discuss the possibilities of countering *white*-centeredness in education. In a more general manner, McMahon (2007, p. 686) emphasizes the potential of schools for democratic transformation. While the term "democratization" is also not unproblematic due to its legitimizing function for European *white* imperialism, it shows the essential role of school within the struggle. Charbeneau (2015) describes the importance of an interplay of "expressing *white* awareness" and "challenging its dominance". With a stronger focus on Students of Color Matias (2013) illustrates how their counter-stories can be essential tools in disrupting a dominant *white* identity

4.4 Critique

As already touched upon in the beginning CWS has also gotten some critique which should be mindfully considered during its application. Too often CWS has served mainly as "creating a positive, proud, attractive, antiracist white identity that is empowered to travel in and out of various racial/ethnic circles with confidence and empathy" (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998, p. 12). This might to some extent lead to a more aware engagement with one's racialized position, but often misses the core interconnection with forms of oppression. While the origin of a critical engagement with *whiteness* lies within Black thought on survival in a *white* society, critical *whiteness* study might have departed too far from this. Such a risk might be even more prevalent in Germany due to the much lower scientific engagement in Black and Postcolonial Studies, compared to the Anglophone context (Wollrad, 2005, p. 48).

Furthermore, it has been stated that CWS do not sufficiently capture the complexity of racial discrimination by remaining too strongly within a black-and-white binary (Kerner, 2007, p. 1; Röggla, 2012, p. 50). Referring to the German case, Tsianos

and Karakayali (n.d.) describe that a clear group allocation of those who do profit from racism and those who are subordinated by it often falls short of properly depicting reality.

5 Theory and Concepts

In the following chapter, I lay out the theoretical foundation of my thesis. For this, I first outline the main theoretical concepts of *white* ignorance, *white* invisibility, and norm as well as *white* privilege. Then, I describe their circular dependency within an encompassing *white* epistemology.

5.1 *whiteness*

whiteness is neither a biological category nor a visual description of skin color, but a social construct. It reaches across a multiplicity of abstraction levels and may be described as an "Invisible regime of power" (Moreton-Robinson, 2014, p. 75) through the prerogative of interpretation over knowledge, an ideology (Mills, 2017), a "set of relationships" (Apple, 2001, p. 204), a "social location" (Lewis, 2003, p. 163) tied to structural advantage (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1), or part of an identity formation (Alcoff, 2021).

In this thesis, I take an **epistemic perspective defining *whiteness* as a system of knowledge and power with material effects in everyday life** (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 2; Moreton-Robinson, 2014, p. 75) that is continuously shaped and filled with content by interpersonal performative acts (Amesberger and Halbmayr, 2008, p. 132). *Whiteness* also has a strong systemic dimension stemming from its powerful impact across institutions, groups, and individuals shaping relationships and norms.

Following Alcoff (2006), I apply a contextual understanding of *race* as opposed to nominalist and essentialist approaches. While the latter two have a purely biological or deterministic understanding of *race*, contextualism perceives *race* as "socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 182). It thereby manages to contain both, the substantial reality of *race* as well its contextual fluidity. The non-essential

conception of *whiteness* also implies its transformability across time and space. "[R]ace is a structure of contemporary perception" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 188), shaped by present social dynamics and structures and interpersonal interactions[7].

5.2 *white* privilege, *white* norm, *white* invisibility

whiteness is a privileged social position within racially structured societies. This privilege can be defined as "the unearned benefits and advantages white people get simply by being white in a white supremacist[8] society, even if other parts of their identity will influence what this privilege looks like" (Applebaum, 2016, p. 6). Peggy McIntosh (2009) gives an impression of these privileges with her concept of the "invisible knapsack" that contains a broad set of mostly unacknowledged privileges for *white* people. These advantages are not dependent on their endorsement by the individual but apply simply through the way society is structured. This perspective also further strengthens the claim that racism and *whiteness* are rather structural than individual problems. Racism is here defined as "the belief that different races possess distinct characteristics, abilities, or qualities that distinguish them as inferior or superior to one another" (Banerjee et al., 2021, p. 166).

These privileges have for centuries been openly institutionalized and backed by politics and the legal systems. Today, at least regarding the German context, they often play out in a more subtle way. This should not obscure the continuation of such privileges into the present day but to a certain extent changes the way that they are sustained and reinforced. Formerly built on the open claim of racial supremacy, they are now backed by the normative position that *whiteness* has within society.

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[7] See for example the process of the Irish People "becoming white" Allen (2012 [1997]); Ignatiev (2009) or "Verkafferung" Wollrad (2005). The latter term was invented by the German colonial ruler to describe assimilation of mostly white German men into the colonized societies. This was perceived as a "racial degradation" followed by the derecognition of the person's whiteness and therefore all political and legal privileges that were attached to it.

[8] Belief in the superior position of *white* people and the resulting legitimation of their violent domination over others

"Eddy is white which we know because nobody is sayin it"

(Morrison, 1992)

This quote by Toni Morrison presents the characterization of *whiteness* as the default category, the one that is unmarked and unquestioned. It holds an implicitness that is so far-reaching that it does not even need to be emphasized (Arndt, 2017, p. 27). This normative position runs through all spheres of societal life and is dependent not only on personal enactment but primarily on collective performative creation. In other words, the collective non-disclosure of *whiteness* as a racialized category is constitutive of the performative creation of *whiteness* itself (Wollrad, 2001). *Race* is always exclusionary defined from a *white* position as something that "the others" possess (Jones, 2004, p. 66), something that *whiteness* is implicitly depicted against and thereby distanced from.

The unquestioned and normative position of *whiteness* in society is maintained by withdrawing from every gaze of the analytical eye leaving the marker of the racialized always to 'the other'. Such a discursive framework is closely tied to colorblindness[9] as the new modern "polite language of race" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 142) and the "dominant racial ideology of the post-civil rights era" (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 42). This poses a dead-end to the project of (*white*) antiracism (Gilroy, 1992) as a "focus on others' can itself be seen as a manifestation of the "naturalness" and dominance of whiteness" (Chesler et al., 2003, p. 217).

The "undefined place" that *whiteness* holds is at the same time the place from which the definition of the environment proceeds (Wachendorfer, 2001, p. 88). Control of the Self is hereby enacted by the control of "the other". This also relates to the juxtaposition of invisibility and hypervisibility (Reddy, 1998). Through the depiction of three different stories Maureen T. Reddy (1998) illustrates how

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[9] The term itself is problematic and slightly misleading, as it has for once an ableist connotation and secondy creates more the impression of a form of unknowing than of ignorance. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) has introduced a more accurate terminology by referring to an interplay between "color-evasiveness" and "power-evasiveness". This evasion serves in comforting *white* people by not engaging in the acknowledgment of their own racial privileges and broader racial oppression within society. This comfort is achieved by accepting further lack of safety for People of Color.

whiteness (and heterosexuality), while seemingly invisible for those in the privileged position, has a brutal patency for those defined as deviations. This also shows again the huge importance of BIPoC perspectives.

As shown so far, the normative position of *whiteness* and its invisibility (for *white* people) are closely entangled and mutually dependent. *Whiteness* remains invisible through its monopoly on the norm (Andersen, 2003, p. 26), and vice versa the normative position is dependent on invisibility as an essential precondition.

5.3 Epistemic Creation of *whiteness*

So far, I have focused mainly on the concrete concept of *whiteness* in a racially structured society. It has been shown how the tandem of *white* norm and invisibility mutually reinforce each other and constitute the base for *white* privilege.

In the following, I focus on how this interconnection is built, preserved, and reinforced through *whiteness* as a system of knowledge and power, as well as how this connects to the educational system as a fundamental site for knowledge production. This will also constitute my main theoretical foundation and enable a more concise depiction of the concept of *whiteness* used in this study.

5.3.1 *whiteness* as an Epistemological System

Epistemological systems can be defined as governing bodies for knowledge acquisition. (Toole, 2021, p. 80) or "a holistic concept that refers to all the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession" (Dotson, 2014, p. 121).

In this way, w*hiteness* (and *white* supremacy) is not only a social but also an epistemological system with the latter often underlying the former and functioning to "justify or naturalize the political, material, and social oppression that white supremacy produces" (Toole, 2021, p. 76). Through a forcefully implemented epistemological regime of power (Foucault, 1980), *whiteness* controls the discursive space by allocating speaker roles and access to legitimate knowledge as well as by constituting itself as an epistemological a priori (Moreton-Robinson, 2014, p. 75). Dwyer and Jones (2000, p. 210) also emphasize the epistemic

character of *whiteness* as a "particular way of knowing and valuing social life", by showing how spatial categorization serves in maintaining *white* identities (see also (Reed, 2013)). *Whiteness* can thus be understood as an "epistemic frame" through which *white* people perceive the world, but which itself remains invisible (Railton, 2006). This frame is an instrument of power, valuing certain perspectives while structurally excluding others manifesting in "a set of culturally embedded discursive practices" (Hode, 2014, p. 55).

In this structure, the *white*, male subject is depicted as the "ideal type" of knowing (Moreton-Robinson, 2014), whereas other voices are categorically denied access to the process of knowledge production. This exclusion of "certain parties from meaning-generating practices has also excluded certain bodies of knowledge" (Toole, 2021, p. 81). Additionally, the epistemic system of *whiteness* consolidates a decoupling of the knower and the known allowing itself to maintain the formerly discussed level of invisibility (Liu, 2022, p. 779), further normalizing a *white* perspective by letting it disappear behind the claim of universality. Therefore, an active linkage and contextualization of knowledge according to the engaged positionalities can play an essential role in demonstrating the role and functionality of *whiteness.*

The establishment and preservation of *whiteness* as an epistemology that assumes knowledge to be objective and universal rests on the idea of a master narrative that is inevitably dependent on the application of epistemic ignorance. The concept is further described in the following chapter and serves as a more concrete theoretical foundation for the analysis.

5.3.2 *white* ignorance

> *"how we view the world is not only about what we*
> *see, but about what we do not see."*
> *(Sue, 2004, p. 766)*

Classic epistemological research is focused on how we come to know, what we know, and on the underlying structures of authority and power (Feenan, 2007,

p. 510). What is often lacking is the incorporation of what we do not know (or rather do not want to know) (Tuana and Sullivan, 2006, p. i). However, epistemological power does not only lie in the act of knowing and the ability to constitute a narrative as an objective truth but also in actively not knowing and in the exclusion of certain positions from the sayable (Foucault, 1980). "Sayable" here must be interpreted with regard to Spivak (2004) not as the pure ability to articulate something but more as a possibility of being heard

As the study of *whiteness* itself, the knowledge about *white* ignorance has a long history in the scientific sphere. It was already coined by Du Bois (1899), as the unwillingness of *white* folks to acknowledge their affiliation to a racialized group, and their privileges that are based on the oppression of others. Currently, three different conceptions of ignorance can be found in the scientific body: "(1) Ignorance as lack of knowledge/true belief, (2) Ignorance as actively upheld false outlooks and (3) Ignorance as substantive epistemic practice" (El Kassar, 2018, p. 300). In this thesis, I define ignorance mainly in line with the third perspective. In contrast to the first definition, the characterization as an epistemic practice more clearly outlines the active production, framing it not simply as a "gap in knowledge" but as "actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation" (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007, p. 1). Regarding this, one could also refer to a self-imposed hermeneutical disability, that Liu (2021) describes as an active act of unknowing. This can take the form of a refusal to acknowledge or to engage with the experiences and perspectives of People of Color, dismissing them as unimportant or irrelevant. Compared with the second conceptualization, the idea of a substantive epistemic practice puts more emphasis on the structural dimension. Maintaining ignorance does not only require individual but also social and collective labor (Spelman, 2007, p. 126), deriving from the suppression of certain knowledge within society as a whole rather than personal racist and prejudiced attitudes (Mills, 2007). In the same context, Swan (2010, p. 478) speaks about ignorance as something that manifests "at a macrosystemic level and which performs epistemic violence". It is, however, important to keep the close interconnection and reinforcing character of the structural and the agential conception of ignorance in mind (Alcoff, 2007, pp. 39–

40). In his famous article on "White ignorance", Charles W. Mills (2007) precisely describes the interaction of individual visual perception and social construction. According to him "Perception is also in part conception" (p. 23) since the perception is never gained through an unbiased gaze but instead through already socialized eyes and ears.

For the theoretical foundation of *white* ignorance, I mainly draw upon the work of Charles Mills regarding the epistemology of ignorance inscribed in the racial contract that organizes and structures society. Mill's concept of the racial contract (Mills, 1997) constitutes the basis for an all-encompassing system of *white* supremacy and is "held in place by an implicit consensus about cognitive norms" (Bailey, 2007, p.79). The epistemology of ignorance thereby constitutes an essential pillar for keeping the system of *white* supremacy in place which on the other side shows the importance of making it an object of investigation to deconstruct it.

Mills sees the concept of *white* ignorance in the legacy of standpoint theory within the field of feminist studies (Mills, 2007, p. 15). Both share a perspective of knowledge as being shaped by power and therefore criticize the claim for objectivity and universality. He defines *white* ignorance as an "inverted epistemology […] a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)(Mills, 1997, p. 18). This comes close to the concept of hermeneutic disadvantage coined by Medina (2012), however, with a stronger focus on the active role and responsibility of racially privileged subjects. The purpose that Mills is following in his work is "looking at the 'spread of misinformation,' the 'distribution of error' […], within the 'larger social cluster,' the 'group entity,' of whites" (Mills, 2007, p. 16). Misinformation needs to be widely interpreted here, not simply as stating objectively false facts but also as strategically and systematically leaving out certain aspects and thereby picturing a distorted reality. Furthermore, misinformation and error do not primarily relate to factual knowledge but rather to moral judgment and misguided perception of what is right and what is wrong (Mills, 2007, p. 22).

The attribute of "*white*" in *white* ignorance refers to the ignored object of knowledge or the theme the hermeneutical attitude is directed towards. It does not restrict the acting subject to a positionality of *whiteness.* In other words, also *non-white* subjects can enact a form of epistemic *white* ignorance. With this, I follow the analysis of José Medina (2017) in her discussion of Fricker's concept of hermeneutic injustice. Nevertheless, *white* ignorance remains a tactic predominantly applied by *whites* to secure *white* hegemony and supremacy. Interesting here is to look at the interlinkages between the individual and society in this process. Medina (2017) reminds us to not see *white* ignorance as a solely personal act but to consider the importance of a collective responsibility (p.42). This, however, should not lead to a total acquittal of the individual.

Ignorance is an essential tool in the epistemology of *whiteness* that keeps the cycle of invisibility – normativity – *white* supremacy (*white* privilege, epistemic power) running in a supposedly non-racist society as the "implicit agreement to misrepresent the world" (Mills, 1997, p. 80). This cycle is visually represented in *Figure 1*. Ignorance enables systematic resilience defined as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker et al., 2004, pp. 81–82). In contexts of openly enacted, institutionalized, and broadly supported forms of racism, individuals can freely acknowledge their *white* privileges as something they earned simply by being *white* (Spelman, 2007). This changes in societies that promote racial justice, where racism is perceived as something bad that individuals seek to distance themselves from. Also there *whiteness* maintains its privileged position and its role as a resilient and oppressive epistemological system that resists change (Dotson, 2014), but does so in a more clandestine way where normativity is achieved by invisibility and not by openly promoted superiority. *White* ignorance functions as a protection for a system of *white* supremacy and *white* people while enabling a certain form of moral arrogance (Applebaum, 2008).

Figure 1: Theoretical structure of white epistemology
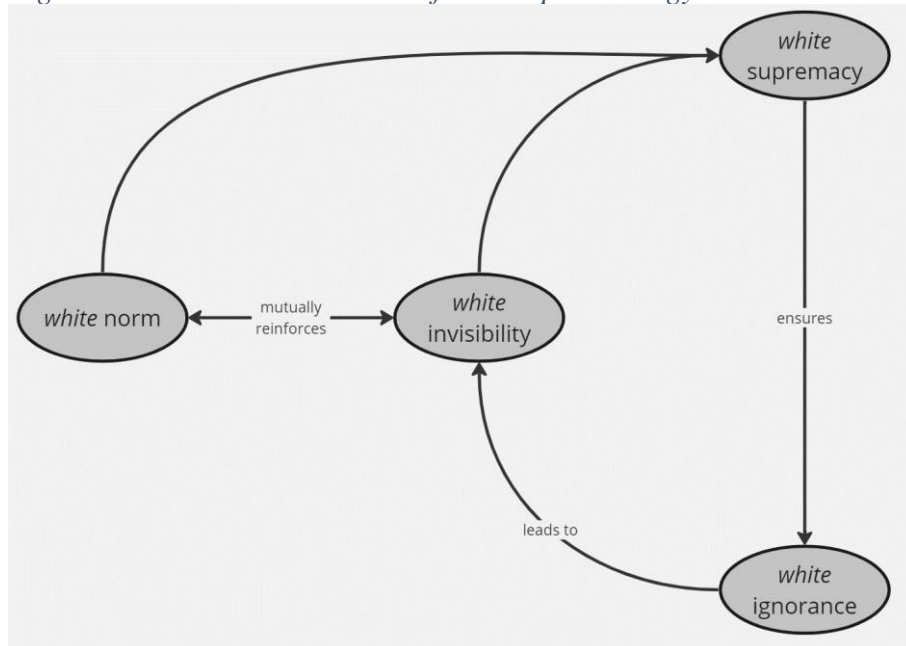
(Own illustration)

Spelman (2007, p. 120) demonstrates a simple but informative equation on the functionality of ignorance by contrasting it with a claim of falsity. The latter still leaves the theoretical potential for the actual truthfulness of a certain situation or fact and thereby bears the risk of being proven wrong. Ignorance on the other hand suppresses the thematization of the fact as such. It gives the subject the possibility to implicitly remain with the assumption of falsity but without the risk of refutation.

As shown above, the practice of ignorance is essential for the continuity of a system of *white* supremacy. Ignorance is at the same time dependent on this very structure and the involved power relations (Hoagland, 2007, p. 96). In other words, the ignorance of *whiteness* is only possible due to the hegemonic position that a *white* epistemology holds within society. *Whiteness* serves as the guarantor for the preservation of *white* invisibility by offering "subjects who can claim it an opportunity to ignore the constitutive processes by which all identities are constructed" (Dwyer and Jones, 2000, p. 210). This results in the ironic outcome that *white* people "will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills, 1997, p. 18).

The practice of ignorance "involves a whole battery of mechanisms of avoidance and resistance to know and to learn" (Medina, 2016, p. 182). Proctor and Schiebinger (2008, p. viii) name these more concretely as "deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition and myriad forms of (...) culture political selectivity". These practices are employed against the background of an "availability of the relevant meanings and interpretations in localized hermeneutical practices" (Medina, 2017, p. 44) provided first and foremost by communities of Black People and People of Color. It is therefore not the lack of resources but their active dismissal that constitutes the practice of ignorance.

Another important practice in relation to *white* ignorance is the creation of "the other", described by Spivak (2004) as a main example of epistemic violence. When *whiteness* itself is ignored, its self-definition becomes inherently based on the creation of "the other". In this way, *whiteness* can acquire meaning through its juxtaposition with a perceived antagonism while remaining invisible. Also (Amesberger and Halbmayr, 2008, p. 90, my translation), In therefore main "power to define the other" that establishes *white* supremacy. Therefore, the construction of *whiteness* is at its root epistemic violence.

The epistemology of ignorance has for a long time created a sort of *white* comfort at the expense of the racial safety of People of Color. In this way, the group-based interest of *white* people is a "central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance" (Mills, 2007, p. 34). Therefore the ignorance of *whiteness* de facto maintains unequal power positions and reinforces racism (Castagno, 2013; Steyn, 2012, p. 10). This does not happen accidentally (Mills, 1997, p. 19) but as a "strategic practice" (Hoagland, 2007, p. 101)

As described above, *white* ignorance is something collectively learned and enacted. In this way, institutions of education with their essential role for identity building and socializing become important sites both for the maintenance as well as the deconstruction of *white* supremacy. Connell (1993, p. 27) describes the goals of education as "the production of social hierarchies" and "the modern legitimation of

inequality". Within an oppressive system, schools rather normalize and legitimize privilege (McMahon, 2007, p. 684) than actively counteract it (this however should not discredit the important, valuable work of individual teachers for more social justice). In the words of McMahon (2007, p. 684) schools work as "mirrors of the economic, political and ideological stratification of societies in which they exist". But they are more than this. Instead of simply mirroring the malfunctions of society, schools are actively engaged in sustaining and reinforcing them. They serve the dominant classes in power by upholding the status quo through the narrative of neutrality and objectivity (Feinberg and Soltis, 1998, p. 43). Additionally, Leonardo and Porter (2010, p. 147) show that in the educational system, *white* comfort is continuously prioritized over the racial safety of Students of Color.

With regard to racism and *whiteness,* schools sustain a dominant position of *white* people by offering the pedagogical framework of *white* privilege (Castagno, 2014). These pedagogical practices include "teacher's expectations of white students and students of color, curricular choices, presentations of classroom material, organization of the classroom–including seating patterns, conduct of student assessments, and use of particular teaching approaches or tactics" (Charbeneau, 2015, p. 656).

6 Methodology

6.1 Critical *whiteness* Methodology

Methodology stands in close interdependence with the applied epistemological framework, theoretical considerations, and the research problem, functioning as a connection between research and theory (Carter and Little, 2007, p. 1324).

My main philosophical conception lies in social constructivism which perceives knowledge as being the product of social interaction (Scotland, 2012, p. 13). This can be seen as a scientific counter-project to the dominance of positivism rejecting notions of naturalism, rationality, neutrality, and individualism (Rogers, 2004, p. 3). Instead, it acknowledges subjectivity and normativity within scientific research as well as the importance of context and the complexities of human

interaction. Such a framework is reasoned by the discursive construction of *whiteness* as my main object of research. As Berger (1963, p. 11) points out, "it is not the presence of objective physical differences between groups that creates race, but the social recognition of such differences as socially significant or relevant". My understanding of discourse, however, divers from a purely poststructuralist perspective (as applied by Laclau and Mouffe (2001)) that defines discourse as the entirety of social reality. I do acknowledge the existence of non-discursive elements and material effects. Due to the primary focus on *whiteness* as an epistemology, social constructivism is more applicable to my thesis than a critical realist approach.

Such a perception of reality and knowledge production leads toward a qualitative research design as this allows to draw a more nuanced, context-specific, and less generalizing image. It suits the thesis's aim of inductively exploring the performance of *whiteness* in a rather understudied context rather than deductively testing preexisting hypotheses.

Additionally, there is a strong focus on the concept of critique both in my theoretical framework as well as regarding my methodological consideration. This adds the important perspective that knowledge is not only socially constructed but also influenced by power relations within society. Moreover, it aims at "revealing structures of power and unmasking ideologies" (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 8). The notion of power is thereby negatively connotated with an emphasis on its transition to domination and oppression (Rogers, 2004, p. 3). This underlines how "Critical theory is explicitly prescriptive and normative" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 26) which also leads to methodology being partly political rather than purely practical (Hunter, 2002, p. 119)

With regards to CWS Corces-Zimmerman and Guida (2019) develop a methodological framework as shown in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Critical Whiteness Methodology Framework
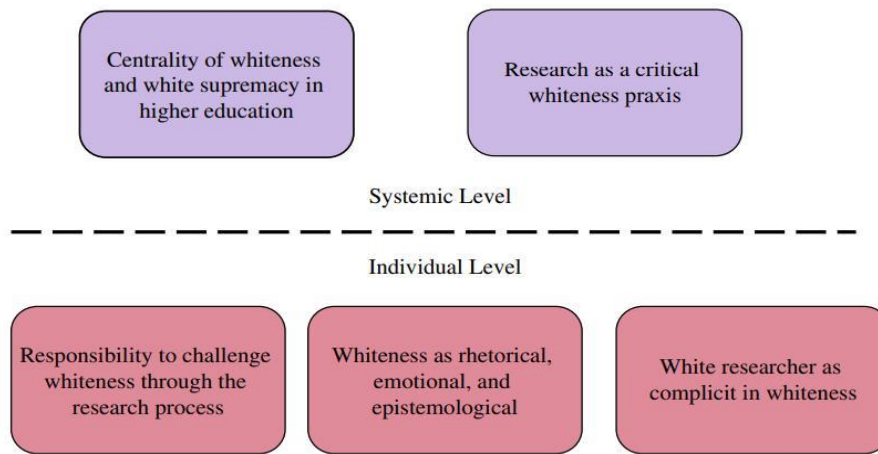
This clarifies that the aim of research in this field is not solely scientific knowledge production but also to "challenge and educate white people through a critical whiteness research praxis and methodology" (Corce-Zimmerman and Guida, 2019, p.100), which applies to both the researcher and the researched. Especially the applied interactive format of interviews opens a space for collective learning and critical self-reflection through the eyes of the other person.

6.2 Data

For the data gathering, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews (for the interview guide see Annex 1), with *white* school staff at five different secondary schools in Nord-Rhein-Westphalia. Eight of the participants were at the time of the interviews in active teaching positions and one was working solely in the school administration. Regarding the gender composition of my sample, seven of the participants were read as female and two were read as male. Among the schools were three "Realschulen", one "Gymnasium" and one comprehensive school. Most interviews were conducted within the facilities of the school, one was done at the participants' home and two were held online. While interviews generally contain a variety of multi-sensory information (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 349) I nearly entirely rely on auditory elements.

All interviews were held and recorded in German, thus the excerpts included in the following to illustrate certain analytical aspects are not original but translated by myself to the best of my ability. It is important to note that certain linguistic elements are hard to translate. For that reason, I decided in some cases to keep the original German word and explain its meaning in English. Direct quotes from the interviews are written in italics and indented when they exceed a certain length to make them stand out clearly from the rest of the text.

Regarding the sampling of the data, I used a convenience sampling strategy with different personal contacts who functioned as gatekeepers and mediators for the schools I wanted to investigate. This decision stood at the end of a long process of attempts to directly contact schools which were met with silence or constant postponing into a, as it felt, never materializing future. While qualitative studies in general rarely apply probabilistic sampling and do not attempt to achieve a state of representativeness, a convenience sample based on personal contacts might be especially prone to bias (Jager et al., 2017). This is further reinforced by the fact that the gatekeepers forwarded the interview request mainly to those teachers who were expected to have a general interest in the topic. In addition to the critical perspective on racism and *whiteness* in the invitation letter (see Annex 1), it can be expected that the participants of the study were more progressive and sensitized regarding the topic at hand than the average teacher.

Within the interview itself, it is important to consider the strongly inscribed social desirability regarding the discussion of *race* and racism. This can also be connected to my appearance as an interviewer. While my *whiteness* potentially leads to a more open sharing (Cabrera, 2012, p. 384) and partially also to the active search for solidarity for racist views and comments, which will be discussed more at a later point, my visible markers of a left political orientation might also increase the described effect of social desirability. This might lead to the intended or unintended disclosure of relevant information or the untruthful depiction of certain events and circumstances.

To adequately analyze interview data, it is essential to be aware of the nature of the interview situation and the information it does and does not contain. An interview can be seen as a "partly shielded situation" (Cruickshank, 2012, p. 43) which is to some extent pulled out of the social context. It is for that reason always at least partially artificial. This distance to reality constitutes one of the main challenges to analyzing the generated data, especially in combination with discourse analysis (Cruickshank, 2012, p. 43). In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that text and language produced in an interview setting are always just traces of the attitudes and experiences of the individual (Denzin, 1991, p. 68). The memories of certain experiences and events that are captured in interviews are "complex, political, and idiosyncratic" (Frankenberg, 1993), often making them tricky to interpret.

O'Rourke and Pitt (2007) discuss the different forms in which interviews can be used in discourse analysis. These forms derive from the parallel existence of two different settings within the interview context, "interview data reflect both the events described and the context of the interview itself" (Briggs, 1986, p. 9). In this thesis, the interviews constitute less the discourse itself and more "reports of the discourse of interest", being the construction and depiction of *whiteness* within the German school system. However, contrary to Cruickshank (2012) I do not see the necessity to entirely spare the interview situation and to mute the researcher's participation in the interview. Instead, I consider this information as potentially bringing further insights into the performance of *whiteness* within *white* teacher talks. This is also more in line with a critical *whiteness* methodology that does not assume a detached relationship between researcher and participant but considers both as being embedded in the same social structure and therefore mutually influential (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida, 2019, p. 95).

Against the above-mentioned risk of social desirability and disclosure, the conclusion on a discourse outside of the interview must be treated with caution. Speaking with the terms of Fairclough (1992, pp. 226–227), it is important to consider the archive, constituting the "totality of discursive practice". My limited access to this archive also limits my ability to tell a complete story.

In summary, it can be said that my data does not allow for far-reaching claims on the general discourse within the German school systems but still offers an important insight into possible discursive figures that are active in this setting.

6.3 Ethical consideration

In general, the participants of my group were, through their *white* positionality, in a privileged and thereby more powerful positions regarding the topic at hand. This does not mean that their general wellbeing does not play an essential role in the data gathering and analysis but that the process is not fully centered around it. A certain level of discomfort is often an unavoidable component of thematization of *whiteness* for *white* people. In fact, this discomfort might even be necessary a part of addressing *white* privilege.

All participants voluntarily consented to participate after being informed about the purpose of the study as well as the inclusion and role of their data. The possibility of terminating the interview as well as the skipping of certain questions was always granted to the participants. Moreover, after the interview they were given the opportunity to entirely withdraw their data from the study.

During the transcription of the audio data, all participants and their schools were anonymized. For the participants, I use randomly chosen pseudonyms in order to simplify the report of empirical examples and to enable the linkage of different statements. For the schools, all identifiers such as geographical cues were removed from the data.

6.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

In my thesis, I apply critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA). I mainly follow the approach of Norman Fairclough, constituting an attempt to connect critical social science with linguistics.

Structures of power are at least partially discursive, as they are shaped by and reinforced through "language in practice". In other words "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). One can

distinguish between power in and power behind the discourse. While the former refers to the power structures between the different actors, the latter is more related to the underlying social structure. Relations of power and domination are then often maintained and protected by *ideologies* as constructions of meaning (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 75)

Discourse is understood by Fairclough (1992, p. 28) as a type of social practice expanding its scope behind a purely linguistic level. It is determined by dialectic relationships to other non-discursive social practices as well as the broader social structure (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). In this way, text is shaped by social agents and the social structure (Fairclough, 2003, p. 22). These discursive practices can be defined as "habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world" Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 21). „CDS [Critical Discourse Studies] is therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in analysing, understanding and explaining social phenomena that are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach" (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 2).

Such an understanding of discourse leads Fairclough to a three-part conception of CDA. The first level which is closest to the actual textual data is linguistic analysis. Important here is the use of certain words, grammatical particularities, and the used themes. This has then to be connected to an analysis of discourse as a social practice evolving the different actors engaged in its construction as well as the *intertextuality* with other discourses. The last step is the positioning of the discourse within the social structure referring to its ideological and political effects and its relationship to the order of discourse as the "socially structured articulation of discursive practices" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, p.114). The different parts do not have to be addressed in the presented order and are usually not clearly separated from each other but rather mutually reinforcing.

Moore (2013) has also specifically combined critical whiteness and critical discourse analysis as critical *whiteness* discourse analysis (CWDA). This approach

investigates how discourse functions to reproduce the normative racial order (Moore, 2013).

The choice of CDA over other approaches to text analysis is motivated both by the applied epistemological foundation as well as by the topic of the thesis. The method recognizes the social embeddedness of research and therefore well integrates into the outlined structure of social constructivism (Bourdieu, 1988). Speech as the database of this study is seen not as a separate and neutral entity but as always being part of a larger discursive and societal framework. Besides CDS also have a clearer normative stance in comparison to for example content analysis becoming apparent in the aim of "deconstructing ideologies and power through the systematic and reproduceable investigation of semiotic data" (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 4). This focus on power structures makes the methods particularly appropriate for the investigation of *race* matters (Hode, 2014, p. 78). Also, a conceptualization of power and domination as being deeply embedded in institutional practices and the individual's interaction within these (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 24; van Dijk, 1993, p. 255) aligns with my focus on the school context. In line with my theoretical approach of *white* ignorance, CDA acknowledges the often invisible characteristics of modern power (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 24), its structural rather than individual features (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 12), and the seeming neutrality of dominant ideologies (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 9). It, therefore, seems to be very well-suited to uncover instances of *white* silence and invisibility.

Regarding the relatively low scientific coverage of CWA in the German context, I applied an inductive coding scheme using NVivo. Thereby the codes are developed by taking the collected data into account. Such a method is often better equipped to detect nuanced and unexpected information within the data. After a first round of coding some codes were split up or combined depending on their coverage and proximity to each other. Then the resulting codebook was used for a second round of coding.

7 Analysis

As shown in the methodology chapter, critical discourse analysis encompasses the analysis of text, social practice, and social structure. Due to their close interdependencies and the blurry borders between them, I decided not to discuss them separately but to employ a rather thematic subdivision. This will evolve along the four main discourses I detected within the collected interview data, "Denial and color evasiveness", "Us – Them", "Negative depiction of others[10]" and "*White saviorism*". All of them are closely interconnected and perform important functions within a *white* epistemology as a broader order of discourse.

Before going into a more elaborate discussion of the different discourses on a textual level as well as their relation to social practice and a broader societal framework, I briefly portray their connecting structure. This should serve to embed my findings into my theoretical framework and thereby facilitate the understanding of the following analysis.

In *Figure 3* I took over the map presented in my theory section and added the discourses I detected in my analysis to illustrate their functionality within a *white* epistemology. The theoretical concept of *white* ignorance manifests most directly in the discourse of denial and color evasiveness. As shown above, this constitutes an essential base for the continuation of a superior construction of *whiteness* in "liberal" societies. The resulting *white* norm and *white* invisibility influence the construction of groups supposedly based on cultural differences while blending out the persistent relevance of racial markers (shown in the Us-Them discourse). This then constitutes a precondition for the elevation of the "*white* Self" through the negative depiction of the perceived "*racial* other". In a last step, the discourse on *white* saviorism which is also dependent on the negative depiction of others and the delimitation of the "own" group serves as a moral justification for a superior *white* position. At the same time, it is closely linked to a narrative of anti-racist work that

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[10] Within my analysis I often refer to "the other" thereby I do not intend to transmit an essentialist difference between certain groups of people but rather refer to the perceived difference by the interviewees (or *white* people in general). Do underline this, the term is put in quotation marks.

is solely focused on the "*racial* other*"* deriving from a one-dimensional understanding of racism itself.

Figure 3: Theoretical concept and discourse structure
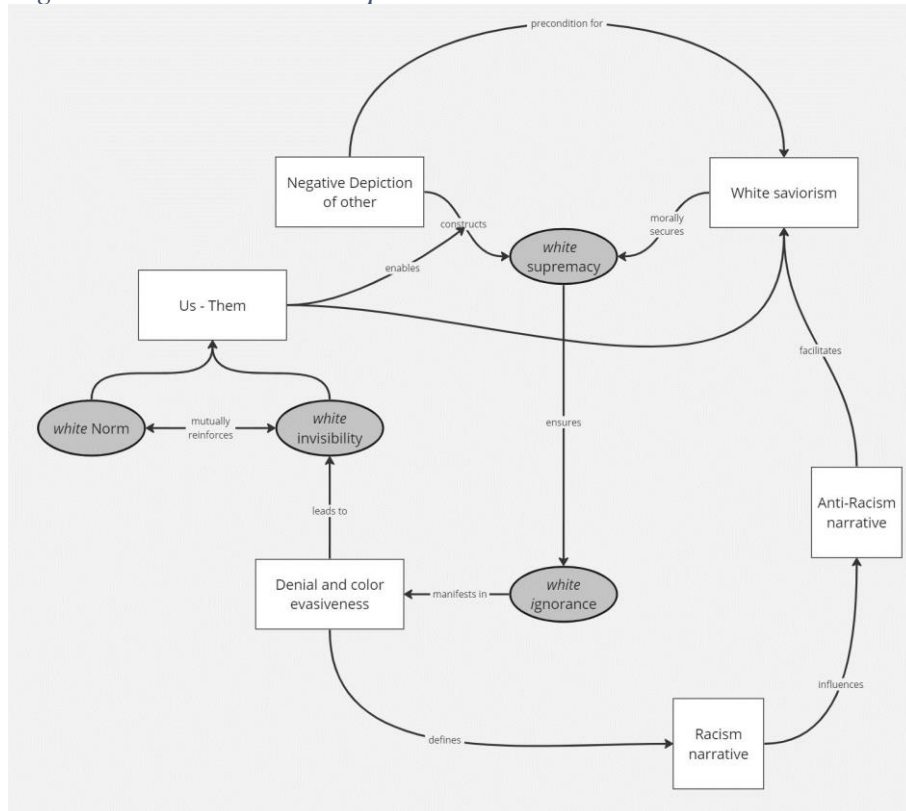
Through the application of this structure, I aim to answer my research question of how *whiteness* is constructed by *white* teachers in the German secondary school system. In general, I could detect very different levels of awareness regarding the topic of racism and *whiteness*, reaching from openly racist comments to relatively high levels of critical self-reflection.

7.1 Denial and Evasiveness

As laid out in the theory section, *whiteness* often remains in a state of invisibility. This invisibility does not imply a lack of presence or impact on people's lives but its omission from the hegemonic discourse. It therefore depends on active engagement, or more specifically the active ignorance of (*white*) people for

remaining in a state of an unquestioned continuation of *racial* hierarchies. This is performed through a discourse on denial and color evasiveness.

Thereby, silence as an "instrument of power" (Ni ma Rashid, 2022, p. 426) is an essential characterization of the discourse at hand. It is defined not as the mere absence of talk but as "full of density, itself offering a discrete corporeality" (Dowsett, 2000, p. 31). To capture this silence of the participants regarding certain topics, the interview guide was intentionally devolving from a wide to a narrower frame.

The opening question was directed toward the participant's initial thoughts regarding the given topic as presented in the invitation letter. Despite the direct reference to *whiteness* there, the topic was not proactively brought up by most of the participants. The same avoidance could be noticed regarding the discussion of the role of *racial* inequalities on a societal as well as an educational level. Also here, questions started from a more general perspective opening the room for the interviewee to potentially initialize a consideration of *white* privilege. However, the topic was in most cases only considered after being explicitly named by me. But even then, I still noticed a high level of avoidance reaching from circumventing the topic to actively pushing it in a different direction. Interviews are usually characterized by a superior power position for the interviewer in terms of topic setting. If the topic control shifts towards the interviewee, it often indicates an "insight into the preoccupations of ordinary life and the common sense structuring of the lifeworld" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 155). Such shifts occur primarily in connection with the thematization of *whiteness* but also regarding more broader references to racism.

An example of this is Sabine, who even when confronted directly with questions regarding her association with *whiteness*, the role of *whiteness* in education, or her positionality, never refers to the term herself. Instead, she shifts the attention to what their school already achieved (*white* Saviorism) and to the responsibility of "the other" (Negative Depiction of others). A similar discursive behavior can be seen in Sarah who reacts to the question of the impact of her *whiteness* simply by

speaking about the, in her eyes problematic, dimensions of Islam. This gets further emphasized when the question regarding the role of racism in the classroom is only met with a description of the intolerant stand towards sexual diversity by "*racial others*". The change of topics serves to preserve the integrity of *whiteness* by avoiding critical consideration. It also shows the close connection between the different discourses. The blank spot that is created through *white* ignorance is filled with one's own indirect construction of *whiteness.*

As Pollock (2004, p. 4) illustratively shows, "all Americans, every day, *are* reinforcing racial distinctions and racialized thinking by using race labels; but we are also reinforcing racial inequality by refusing to use them".

With a progression of questions towards a more specific theme of *whiteness,* its absolute ignorance seemed to be less feasible and the tactic shifted more to a denial of the relevance of *whiteness*. When asked about their *white* positionality, Laura and Sarah state:

> "*Well no, I have to honestly say that I have never thought about it that much, because one always looks at it from the other side*" (Laura)

> "*Well yes, I'm white now but I never thought about this*" (Sarah)

Interesting here in terms of wording is the use of "*well*" ("ne gut") at the beginning of the sentence which devalues the importance of the topic or the necessity to think about it. Also Ben, who shows a relatively high awareness of racist behavior and stereotypes on the societal but also on a school level still claims that "*it doesn't play a big role for me if Black or white*", which to some extent contradicts his own statement that it is nearly impossible to entirely free yourself from societal stereotypes. This again exemplifies how people avoid fully acknowledging their involvement even against the background of a general awareness of the topic. Keeping it on a more distant level outside of the direct own social environment serves to further hide personal involvement and the resulting responsibility.

Such a denial is often connected to the narrative of color blindness or rather "color numbness" (Medina, 2016, pp. 179–180) constituting a "polite language of race"

(Frankenberg, 1993, p. 142). This limits both the individual's ability to understand the structural dimension of the problem and society's ability to resist it (Guinier and Torres, 2002, p. 56). At the same time the "unimportance of race" is linked to a claim of personal *racial* progressiveness which rather serves for securing *white* comfort (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 121). An example is Sarah who states that: *"There is no such thing as being white. We are all (i: mhh), we all belong together"*. Claiming the insignificance of *race* in a society that is still structured by clear *racial* hierarchies and suppression leads to an individualization of inequalities. This often results in responsibility reversal where the focus lies on missing skills and an unwillingness to integrate on the side of Black People and People of Color. Interesting is also a comment by Laura where she claims that it is also the job of the school to convey the message *"that it [racial difference] just really doesn't matter anymore"* (Laura). Thereby especially *white* children are from the beginning on included in a sphere of *white* comfort where they do not have to think about *race* and where they can frame their position in the light of personal achievement rather than structural privilege.

Another interesting dimension is the presentation of *white* privilege as something people actively engage in, rather than as "'unearned benefits and advantages' white people get simply by being white in a white supremacist society" (Applebaum, 2016, p. 6). Laura speaks about how a *"white person privileges themselves"* assuming that they could simply choose not to. This is further emphasized by her comment "*that sometimes you say or do things that you don't really mean privileged, but I think for the other side it sometimes still comes across that way*" (Laura). This understanding of *white* privilege again disregards its structural dimension and opens an escape for *white* people to say, "I'm *white* but I don't actively push my privileges".

The possibility of especially *white* teachers not engaging with their *whiteness* and the effects this has on their behavior and the behavior of others towards them is a privilege itself and helps to disassociate from the responsibility of a racially unjust society while still profiting from its benefits. However, in some interviews, I could

also identify a more open and critical engagement with *whiteness*. Bea for example specifically acknowledges that *"White people have a different perception of whiteness than Black People"* and speaks about her involvement through an internalization of racist patterns.

7.1.1 Color Evasiveness in the Discourse on Racism

Such exclusion of *whiteness* from the discourse was also present within the discussion of racism. More specifically I identified three discursive patterns emphasizing this aspect, "a general invalidation", "the depiction of racism only as a disadvantage", and "a focus on the extreme". As Doane (2003, p. 17) describes "Whiteness cannot and should not be studied apart from white racism and racialized social systems" (p.17). I would therefore like to focus more on the portrayal of racism and the inscribed ignorance of *whiteness* in the following section.

7.1.1.1 Invalidation

Racism as a theme was not as rigorously avoided as *whiteness* but was still coined by different forms of denial and invalidation. While most interviewees agreed that racism plays some kind of role in the broader society the acknowledgment of its impact on the direct school environment was less common. Johanna for example specifically argues that *"skin color has never played a role"* regarding the behavior of teachers towards different students. Very present in this regard is also an "everything-is-good-here narrative" illustrated by the following excerpts:

> *"So I don't feel that ehm it [racism] plays such a big role for us"*
> (Johanna)

> *"In our school racism hardly exists"* (Laura)

> *"We pay a lot of attention to the fact that racism has no place at our school (I: mhh) and this is usually not a problem at our school."*
> (Sabine)

If the existence of racism in the school context is acknowledged, it is seen mainly as a vexatious problem of thoughtless insults between students and not as a structural component impacting the educational system as such. The outward

racism of the children is often presented in a general light of the unknowing or something that comes from an unpolitical standpoint.

> "*We sometimes have pupils in class 8 who, in my opinion, are very apolitical at the moment. And sometimes they also put swastikas somewhere*" (Sabine).

This creates the impression of racism being more of a juvenile sin than an actual structural problem, or as something that is unlearned as the children grow older. Such a depoliticization of the topic further hides the structural dimension of it.

Regarding the presence of several national backgrounds within the class context, Laura asks *"who is supposed to tease whom in a racist way there?"*. Two points are central in this very casually asked question. First, the word use of "teasing" somehow devalues the significance of the topic and second, it entirely disregards the power dimension within a racist hierarchy by presenting it as a conflict between different equal parties. In the same way, function the descriptions of clearly racist comments and actions as "*only slightly racist*" (Sarah) or as "*questionable*" (Monika) and "*ungeniert*" (Monika). The latter is hard to translate without losing its meaning, defined by Duden as "behaving freely, uninhibitedly, showing no inhibitions" (Dudenredaktion, n.d.).

Interesting in this regard is also that the thematization of racism within the college primarily happens through the reference to an accusation of racism by a student. It generally seems to be easier to admit that "*It might have happened before, yes, that I have also noticed that maybe somehow a teacher has been accused of this.*" (Johanna) than to speak about it in a more active and actual way. The reaction of the affected people is then often presented as overplayed. Their anger is reduced to "*being overly sensitive*" (Laura) or "*totally sensitive*" (Monika) and is portrayed by the use of different negative connotated hyperboles like "*huge riot*" (Monika). In the words of Medina (2016, p. 180) "complaints about racial insensitivity are often answered with complaints about racial oversensitivity" which further diminishes the relevance of racism.

However, it must also be said that other participants, like Tim, show a much stronger awareness of the relevance of these (micro-) aggressions. He also speaks about this narrative of "overreaction" as being a common answer to the accusation of racism, however, he discusses it from a more critical standpoint by pointing towards the different experiences attached to different standpoints and it being "*their damn right*" to be triggered by these situations.

7.1.1.2 Focus on the Extreme

Another discursive tool within the talk on racism that allows for the disregard of the structural role of *whiteness* is the focus on the extreme. Concerning the impact that racism has on education, many of the teachers primarily referred to cases of openly racist slurs and comments or the drawing of swastikas. Regarding a broader societal perspective mentioned aspects were the strengthening of the right-wing populist party AfD and the presence of the Ku-Klux Klan in the US (Sabine). This creates the impression that racism is something that is mostly attached to people with a consciously racist ideology. Things such as saying the n-word are picked out and stamped as racism as "something you don't do", while it is at the same detached from a broader structural system of racism within society. This allows people to distance themselves from racism and depict it as not being part of society. This is further emphasized by the description of the educational and family background of children following this racist ideology, as being "abnormal":

> "*Parents are divorced and ehm Maths 6 English 5 so progress at our school is not possible, especially as he has already repeated a primary school class*" (Sabine)

> "*These children who insult each other, like the children who insult in a racist way, also insult in any other way and generally display behavioral problems*" (Johanna).

While the narrative seems to be rather uncritically followed by most interviewees, Tim shows more awareness regarding these aspects by explicitly separating between "*being a racist and serving a racist structure*" which allows to hold people structurally accountable even if they do not show a clear racist ideology.

Focusing solely on severe cases of open racism allows for an individualization of the topic and ignorance of its structural dimension. Sabine and Laura explicitly refer to this singularity and therefore fail to acknowledge that the outbursts of openly violent racism serve the same structure that is built by *racial* inequality in all spheres of social life. Less directly this can also be found in a comment by Ben when he says with regards to racist behavior in the college *"But of course in such a large college there are problems here and there"*. The addition of "here and there" disconnects those problems and thereby obscures the underlying structure. Interesting is also the use of a manifest intertextuality to the voice of certain racist teachers which further individualizes the problem and hides *whiteness* as the actual culprit. Such a single case debate can be traced through several discourses regarding *race* and racism in the German public especially present in the treatment of racialized violence inside the German police[11].

This opens a dualism in which you either make racist comments, making you a racist and a bad person or you are entirely detached from racist structures which makes you a good person. Such a dualism obscures the view on the structural dimension and takes *white* people (and therefore also *whiteness* itself) who are not directly engaged in openly racist action out of the responsibility.

Such a characterization of racism only through extreme cases is closely linked to the highly emotional reactions of anger and denial following the accusation of being racist.

"The colleague concerned [p] got really upset" (Tim)

"*He has felt terribly offended"* (Monika).

This reminds us of the concept of *white* fragility as laid out by DiAngelo (2018). She describes how "The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive

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[11] The ridiculousness of such an argumentative framework especially regarding the police has been continuously laid out by different societal actors (…) and can also scientifically no longer be maintained at the latest since the interim report of the study regarding "Motivation, attitude and violence in the everyday life of police officers" Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei (2023).

responses" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 1). It serves as a form of self-protection for the preservation of *white* innocence (Langrehr et al., 2021, p. 404). These reactions are then in the following backed up by the (*white)* social surrounding in an attempt of *white* solidarity described by DiAngelo (2018) as the "unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort" (p. 57). Especially obvious in this regard is a situation described by Lynn where Black students have addressed the principal to report the racist behavior of a teacher. The reaction of the principal was to entirely shut this down and explain "*you don't blame teachers for things like that*" (Lynn). A similar situation is portrayed by Tim by referring to the reactions within the college after an accusation of racism against one of the teachers as *"I don't want my colleague to be called a racist, who I have known for 8 years or 10 or what do I know and who is not a racist to me*" (Tim). Lynn even goes so far as to present the accusation of racism as a disadvantage for *whites*. As Castagno (2008) describes "students' race talk could create opportunities for critiquing Whiteness, when it is silenced by teachers, it instead becomes another place for the legitimation of Whiteness."

7.1.1.3 Racism only as a Disadvantage

Another point is the depiction of perpetrator and victim roles within these structures. The focus thereby lies primarily on the *racially* disadvantaged groups of society. Questions of how these structures are kept in place, and who benefits from them, however, often remain unanswered. Framing racism only as a disadvantage for Black People and People of Color rather than as a privilege for *white* people was already described by McIntosh (2009, p. 91) in her famous essay on "White Privilege and Male Privilege". This is most present in the definitions of racism given by the different participants framing it as a *"disadvantage and discrimination"* (Ben), "*a lack of acceptance"* (Sarah), "*exclusion of certain groups"* (Sabine), or a *"worse treatment dependent on certain phenotypical markers"* (Lynn). A portrayal of racism as a form of privilege for *white* people was not shared by any of the participants without an explicit impulse in this direction by me as an interviewer.

This contradiction between acknowledging the disadvantageous position of Black People and People of Color on one side and failing to see the advantage of their *white* positionality on the other side is exemplarily illustrated in an interview situation with Lynn. Contradictions often display moments of rupture, where the discursive strategies become apparent and offer further inside (van den Berg, 2003, p. 120)

> *00:08:13 Interviewer*
>
> *Mhm yes, so would you say that your whiteness influences the behavior of others towards you? Or rather not?*
>
> *00:08:25 Lynn*
>
> *I don't think so, but I think compared to someone who is a darker skin type, or I say black frizzy hair. I think that they might have disadvantages*

What influences the behavior of others is, according to her, only a deviation from a *white* norm, she as a *white* person is treated "normally" without advantages and privilege. Together with the belief of already treating people equally, this arrives at the conclusion that one is already doing enough. Such a perspective on racism also conditionally links its impact to the direct presence of "the *racial* other" rather than the behavior of *whites* also discussed by (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 1). In other words, people perceive racism only as a problem if there is a significant share of People of Color. This aspect became clear in my research, even before the actual interviews while searching for potential schools and teachers. I was repetitively confronted by gatekeepers and other personal contacts that functioned as entry points into the field, with the idea that the schools most fitting for my work must be the ones with a "high share of children with a migration background". Predominantly *white* schools on the other side were considered to be much less informative. However, these *white* spaces are often the ones where *white* privilege develops its full potential (Lipsitz, 2011). Within the interview, this perspective also becomes present when for example Johanna presents the "difficult background" of her

school, defined as *"We have a lot of pupils who ehm simply don't get along very well in terms of language, so we also have a lot of pupils from ehm international remedial classes, so to speak"* (Johanna), as a logical selection criterium. In the same vein, Lynn questions her ability to talk about the topic since she is not so familiar with children with a migration background.

Interesting is also the depiction of racism as a passive act that "allows for the omission of the agent" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 182). Laura for example describes the racist experiences of students in the educational environment as a "*feeling of being treated differently* ", leaving the position of the perpetrator vague and undefined. At the same time, such a grammatical construction has an important effect on the modality, as the qualification of the situation as racist is left much more unclear.

As mentioned above, I argue that this discourse on "color evasiveness and denial" is most closely linked to the concept of *white* ignorance. It establishes a discursive practice, in which the focus is directed away from *whiteness*, opening the room for a construction of the *white* self through the focus of the other.

7.2 Us – them

Another discourse that is important for construction of a *white* epistemology is the clear binary distinction between us and them. The discourse is coined by a close dependency on *white* ignorance which mainly shows in, what I call, "designation diffusion". This concept describes the use of nationality- and religion-related markers for the description of *racial* groups. This should be more elaborately discussed in the following before going into the actual juxtaposition of us and them by the participants.

One category that commonly serves as a placeholder for *race* is nationality. Sarah, for example, describes people whose families have been living in Germany for two generations (and who most certainly have a German passport) as actually not being German due to their "different decent". This implies that nationality is more dependent on family background than formal citizenship. Similarly, Monika portrays her college as "*being more or less all of German origin (deutschstämmig)*". The context, however, makes it evident that she refers to *whiteness* rather than

Germaneness. Additionally, on a more linguistic level, the suffix -stämmig derives from Stamm which translates to tribe and refers to a group of people with ethnic similarities.

On the other side also the term "migrant" works as a synonym for Black People and People of Color. This becomes present in its association with visual registers:

> " *[…] because one obviously has no migration background" (Lynn)*

> *"Of course, you can see a lot of things on the outside, you can already classify that there might be a migration background behind it at some point." (Johanna)*

Although the latter statement is somewhat undermined by the subsequent clarification that it may not always be the case, there is a clear depiction of a migration background as something that you can see, something visual. This is particularly obvious in the interview with Sabine who explicitly positions children with a migration background against those coming from Ukraine. The latter, who are mainly perceived as *white,* do therefore not seem to fall under the public understanding of migrants.

Besides nationality also religion is closely interlinked with *race,* reaching back to colonial times as exemplary shown in the negotiations of the German colonial congress "The diversity of religion is the quite natural expression of the natural diversity of the races" (Becker, 1910, p. 645, my translation). Islam was considered a threat to the German colonial project and the German nation as such which needed to be combated (Richter, 1905, p. 510). The conflation on both sides is also evident for religion. Christianity is connected with Germanness and *whiteness* while Islam stands for the perceived "*racial* other". This is shown in a comment by Sarah regarding the diversity of her teaching education.

> "*We had one who wore a headscarf, met someone at university and then but no no no no she was German*" (Sarah)

The fact that the person was German somehow seems to revise their Muslim positionality which underlines the incompatibility of the two categories.

Beyond this rather descriptive textual representation of the phenomenon, it is also important to look at its possible function and mode of action. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) emphasize the ideology-building potential of discourse. The construction and usage of word meanings can have important effects on the depiction of selves and others (Fairclough 1992, p. 89). In this case, the diffusion of different designations serves as a culturalization of perceived *racial* differences. This is part of the long process of a transition from a biological to a new cultural understanding of racism that has been discussed widely in the scientific literature (Messerschmidt, 2008, p. 43).

> "This racism that aspires to be rational, individual, genotypically and phenotypically determined, becomes transformed into cultural racism. The object of racism is no longer the individual man but a certain form of existing." (Fanon, 1967, p. 32)

In this way, group allocation can be superficially based on cultural differences (in nationality and religion) while remaining to be dependent on racial markers in the background. The *white* subject can sustain its dominant epistemic position of defining the world around them and constructing strong and essentializing separations between groups without running the direct risk of racism accusation (Keskinkılıç, 2023, p. 13).

Having laid out the general terminology used by the participants to refer to different *racial* groups, I now shift the focus to their actual juxtaposition.

An interesting aspect to start with is the dichotomous understanding of this narrative with a clearcut separation between in-group and out-group. An example is the statement by Sarah that "*one does not celebrate Eid al-Fitr in German*y" which shows the perceived incompatibility of these term. This is further emphasized by her apparent lack of understanding of my follow-up question concerning the difference between Christianity and Islam. Interesting is thereby also the strong

modality of the statement, as instead of framing it as her opinion, she presents it as a general fact. Such a binary framework is described by Okun (2010) as one of the three main discursive elements in order to reproduce *whiteness*.

This is further fueled by a generalization of "the other" group. This can for example be seen in the attempt of Sarah to unite all deviations from the *white,* Christian norm within one general category *"non-whites whatsoever headscarf, black or darker everything together"* and her reference to "*the Muslims*" as a seemingly homogeneous group. In a similar way also functions the reference to an African background as a coherent cultural unit.

> *"I also have the impression that there are many conversations with parents ehm, from many conversations with parents, especially also Black boys who really have an African background, who are here in the second generation or so, I have the impression that education is handled fundamentally differently." (Monika)*

There are many things to unpack in this short excerpt. The assurance of "**really** having an African background" presents it as something abnormal or even slightly disturbing. Secondly, this "African background" is not described any further neither in terms of how people would qualify for this attribution nor how this is generally characterized. This creates an impression of "you know what I mean" closely linked to the formerly described concept of searching for *white* solidarity. Together with the portrayal as "fundamentally different education" it universalizes Africa as a homogenous mass that is generally different from "the norm". The question of the identity of the "base category" that an African background is pictured against remains unanswered here.

Such a subtle normative depiction of to the *white*, German, and Christian side of the binary group understanding, normalizes its unquestioned dominant position within society. This is also exemplified by Monika who shares that:

> "*There are still many colleagues who have the non-existent normal secondary school pupil in their heads*" (Monika)

Similarly, also works the presentation of "the other" as being noticeable and worth mentioning, which shows in Laura's lack of understanding for the broad celebration of Eid al-Fitr. This creates the impression that one should be a faithful Muslim to celebrate religious holidays. The celebration of Christin holidays, however, due its normative position, is not questioned. Also Ben refers to a migration background as something that is "standing out" when speaking about the homogenous composition of their college. Thereby he avoids the use of racial markers and still underlines the visual dimension of a deviation from the *white* German norm.

This is also where the narrative of inclusion and assimilation comes into play which becomes apparent in the following excerpts:

> *"I think people have to adapt where they go to and cannot demand that we do everything for them because it suits their religion."* (Sarah)

> *"But I also have the opinion that someone who wants to live in Germany, with all the positive things we have, also has to adapt to our society."* (Sabine)

Thereby "the other" is contrasted against a German (*white*) culture which further reinforces the dualism between those two. At the same time, the *white* German society is here framed as something positive, something that does not need to change. The only necessary change that must occur seems to be in "those who come here" because their "culture" does not align with "*white* German values".

> "*you have to be open and able to adapt, then all people are equal*" (Sarah)

The equality of humans is thereby tied to the willingness to align with some local (in this case German) cultural particularities. This elevates Germanness (and indirectly also *whiteness*) to a superior position. Secondly, it also paves the way towards diffusion or reversal of responsibility. In this regard, Attia (2009, p.78) also speaks about a reversal of perpetrator and victim. Such a narrative already leads to a negative depiction of others which is presented in the following chapter.

Also, on a linguistic level, I could find many references to an "us -them" narrative. An example of this is a phrase from Laura "*I mean, basically, <u>we</u> are really quite free (i:mhh) here, fortunately in <u>our</u> country*". The accentuation of "we" and "our" strengthens the importance of this category and the possessive ascription of a country to a certain group of people. In the same context, Sarah simply refers to *non-white* people as "others" which also indirectly emphasizes the dualism and inherent difference between different racialized groups.

However, similar to the other discursive formations, some participants were also actively countering this. Bea for example lays out a brief argumentation of how *whites* tend to define social position and material possessions as solely personal achievements, disregarding the role that their racial positionality might have played in this. Also, Monika speaks about how she actively tries to counter the common perception of us and them in the college, which, however, is not met with a lot of discernment.

The described confrontation of in- and out-group serves also as an important function in the further discursive progression within the epistemology of *whiteness*. The establishment of different distinct groups and their legitimization through culturalization opens the possibility to create a positive image of *whiteness* through a negative depiction of the perceived "*racial* other" (Mills, 1997, pp. 58–59).

7.3 Negative Depiction of "the other"

As Chesler et al. (2003, p. 217) describe, a "focus on others' can itself be seen as a manifestation of the "naturalness" and dominance of whiteness".

Simply the presence of "the *racial* others" is often perceived as negative. This is for example present in the terminology of "Brennpunktschulen" ("hotspot schools") and "difficult background" used by Johanna to describe the high share of children with a migration background. Fölker et al. (2015, p. 9) describe this Brennpunkt-debate as "no longer only a category of a (critical) description of inequality and disadvantage; rather, it also serves the discursive construction of urban danger scenarios". In the same way, also functions the emphasis on the large number of "others" in Germany or within the social environment of the participant.

> *"Yes, it will change in 10 years so that there are even more Muslims here, that this will then become bigger and bigger"* (Sarah)

> *"There are also an incredible number of children of African origin in each year group"* (Laura)

Here it is worth taking a closer look at the word use of "*unheimlich*" ("*incredible*") within the German original. The word is commonly used as an addition to intensify the following adjective. However, it also means "scary" which often creates a somehow negative connotation. This is even further intensified by the second part of the sentence:

> *"who who [p] yes [p] (i:mhh) simply quite often become very, very very dominant in the classes through joining together, so you can, as a teacher you can hardly resist them (laughs), sometimes, (i:yes) they are very massive, so that is noticeable with them and I yes"* (Laura).

Very concrete is also a comment by Sabine where she says, *"So that's a bit of the difficulty, where we're still on the island, don't get me wrong, but on the island of good fortune - we don't have that many"*. Framed differently this means that the more homogenous *white*, German composition of the school body is perceived as a good fortune – as something positive. Thereby the negative depiction of "the other" is linked to a positive connotation of "the Self".

The perception of this potential danger is also clearly present in the depiction of the construction and presence of certain groups within the student body of the school. The group formation of Black children and Children of Color is continuously referred to as negative and dangerous. This happens through the linguistic use of certain terminology both for the description of the groups themselves as "*mob*" (Laura) and "*gang*" (Laura) as well as for the process of group building like "*zusammenrotten*" (flock together with a highly negative connotation). Besides that, Sabine also more directly states the need to "*place them [children with a migration background] in different classes as far as possible*". Other participants like Bea do not use such a negative connotation for the description of *non-white*

groups, however, the group-building and separation process is still considered as something mainly driven by Black people and People of Color. The problematic dimension of homogenous *white* groups is never specifically referred to, putting *whiteness* in the light of a normative category that does not need to be discussed. This also prevents a critical analysis within the teachers of how a predominately *white* society with exclusionary *white* spaces might create the necessity for Black People and People of Color to build ingroup structures of support and care. The only one who is specifically countering this narrative is Tim by stating that this group building is also a form of self-defense.[12]

The negative perception is also often conveyed through an alleged decline in the level of academic achievement. This is mainly framed in the context of children with a firsthand migration experience and the language barriers that this often entails.

> *"The level is so low (i:yes) because the pupils here a lot of them have only been here for 4 years or so, they they can't afford it, they can't understand it." (Laura)*

My intention here is not to discredit the firsthand experiences of teachers regarding the challenges that arise with language barriers in the school context. However, some participants also show a clear attribution of responsibility for the missing language abilities towards people with a migration background. This is reflected in Sabine's lack of understanding that children who have been in Germany for 1.5 years still need their smartphones for translation. As a result, people are also indirectly held responsible for their low academic achievement. In the same way, Johanna and Sabine both point out that it is mainly dependent on family background and individual motivation that there is a lack of performance.

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[12] The presence of this perception also in the broader German society has been artistically presented by the collective "Kanak Attack". In the early 2000s they went to predominately *white* upper-class neighborhoods and asked people about the problematic aspect of their homogenous *white* environment and their lack of integration into a more diverse German society. The confusion and strong emotional objection of the people emphasize that racial homogeneity is only perceived as a problem when it is not *white.*

> "*I always make a stand against, when people say that children from uneducated backgrounds or migration backgrounds have lower education opportunities*" (Sabine)

> "*(…) some also don't use their chances*" (Sarah)

This denies a structural dimension and the complicity of *whiteness* in creating disadvantaged conditions for Black People and People of Color. Such an individualistic perspective is presented by DiAngelo (2010, p. 1) as the "primary barriers preventing well-meaning (and other) white people from understanding racism".

While these depictions still at least superficially refer to language barriers as more legitimate reasons for performance decline[13], some participants also focus their argumentation more directly on "the *racial* other".

> "*The more ehm [p] non-white, however headscarf, black or darker people come together, the more it pulls down the performance and quality, I think.*" (Sarah)

This portrays a very openly racist assessment. Besides the very generalized defamation of Black People and Muslims, it also serves as an indirect increase of a *white* position. This becomes clear through the use of "*non-whites*" which sets *white* people as the invisible reference category. Through the lowering potential of the presence of Black People and Muslims, *white* people are presented as having a higher academic standard.

Another common notion of a negative portrayal of *non-white* people is the reference to patriarchal and misogynist structures, exclusively focusing on the generalized problematic relationship to women and queer people by racialized others and especially Muslims. These structures are presented as imported from the outside entering the German "Leitkultur" through the arrival of "the other".

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[13] As shown above, also the category of migrant or migration background is often rather tied to racial markers than to actual migration experiences.

It is important to point out here that my intention is in no way to question the experiences of primarily female teachers with the sexist behavior of male-socialized students nor the role that religion can play within this. A critical analysis of the often-dogmatic norms regarding sexuality and gender within all world religions is an important part of queer liberation. It is, however, very informative that the topic is so broadly discussed despite the different thematic focus of the interview guide. As pointed out by Popal (2007, p. 94) "The central question arising from the thematization of 'the headscarf' is its thematization itself". Every instance of such a discursive appearance, therefore, constitutes a topic setting by the participants. As already shown above, the moments in which participants are taking control of the topic often reveal important aspects of their attitudes. Monika describes the difficulties female teachers face in dealing with classes with a *"high scare of boys with a migration background"* as a response to the question of how *whiteness* affects the behavior of students towards the teacher. Within a similar narrative Sabine states right at the beginning of the interview in response to the question which subjects she teaches

> *"that we have a lot of children with a migrant background Afghanistan, Syria, Syria and so on, also a lot of contact with them (I: yes) and it's not always easy, let's say so (laughs loudly) the boys, they just have problems accepting women."*,.

Such a discourse connects to a broader order of discourse within German society, which is largely fueled by the negative and discriminative depiction of Muslims in German media (Wagner, 2010) who "play a key role in the construction of 'the other' or the 'the foreign'" (Farrokhzad, 2006, p. 55, my translation). Also, the obvious expectation of the participants for my agreement with their arguments underlines the deep-rootedness and normalization of this discourse within the German public. This becomes present for example in the question by Sarah "*You know what I mean?*" after stating that Eid al-Fitr is not celebrated in Germany and also Laura's confusion when confronted with the follow-up question of why the visual presence of hijabs is an indicator of backwardness.

The function of this discourse seems to be twofold. First, it sets up an excuse for potential negative attitudes towards Black People and People of Color in the sense of *"That is, there is already a mistake on their part, because they don't accept us like that"* (Sarah). Second, in combination with the clear distinction between different groups, it creates a superior moral position of *white* people and leads towards a narrative of *white* saviorism which is discussed further down. In general, it seems that Islam offers the possibility of a "legitimized" blame of the racialized other and thereby presenting another veil of invisibility for the guilt of whiteness described by Keskinkılıç (2023, p. 10) as the invisible privilege of *whiteness*.

While this is a very powerful narrative within the interviews and in a broader societal public, it also needs to be acknowledged that it is specifically countered by some teachers. Tim for example emphasizes how their school considers the heterogeneity of the student body as an enrichment for all. However, as more elaborately discussed in the next chapter this appeal to diversity also must be treated with caution. Focusing more on the aspect of religion, Ben points out that also Christianity has more liberal and more strict strands, an aspect that is ignored by most other participants serving to stabilize the invisible superior position of *white* Christianity. Furthermore, he also refers to the good cooperation with (liberal) Muslim Parents' Association. This counteracts the often-present mode of action within the *white* (Christian) dominance culture to solely attribute Islam with negative aspects and entirely blend out progressive and liberating movements within the religion.[14]

7.4 White Saviorism

The discourse on *white* saviorism has close links to the narrative on anti-racism which is again dependent on the one-dimensional and color-evasive understanding of racism itself.

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[14] However, these movements do exist within civil society through associations like the Issan e.V., Kanak Attack, and Queer Arab Barty or the voices in lyric and literature like Momtaza Mehri, Aisha Sharif, and Mohja Kahf to just name a few. They pull the *white* Christian norm into the spotlight of attention to deconstruct its superior power position and at the same time embrace the possibilities of merging queer feminism with Islam.

As shown above the narrative of racism is strongly focused on the side of the disadvantaged. This in turn leads to a perception of anti-racist work as being an instrument for the support and empowerment of those negatively affected. Such an attitude becomes apparent in the predominant focus on the promotion of Black students and Students of Color regarding the possible action framework for schools in combating racism. While empowerment is surely an essential part of anti-racist intervention, a sole focus on this side, allows *white* people to escape their responsibility. In other words, it enables *whiteness* to take a morally valued supportive position without the need for critical self-reflection.

Interesting in this regard is also the praise of diversity as the final solution. While increasing diversity in powerful *white* spaces is crucial for a racially just society, this approach is problematic when seen as a sole measure for tackling racial inequality according to the motto *"[we] just have to always continue [...] and for that one has to maybe also mix a bit more in school"* (Laura). Hall (2012, p. 198) lays out how the practice of diversity is far from being a universal remedy for racial inequality and can often further support its evasion if taken as a single measure for anti-racism. At the same time, the outward promotion of heterogeneity is still accompanied by an expectation of inclusion and assimilation as presented above. Diversity is therefore accepted if people blend in a German, Christian norm.

White saviorism thereby positions the German *white* subject as a guiding figure for the perceived less knowledgeable "other." Comments like *"they [People of color] have to be strengthened and protected"* (Laura) emphasize such an understanding. Similarly, Monika describes:

> *"We have so many children ehm African children, I don't know what, who don't live in their families with youth welfare offices and this and that, so we simply have a very broad clientele, for whom teaching is only in second place because it is actually the educational work that is important."* (Monika)

The treatment of racial inequalities within the educational system is presented as additional labor for (*white*) teachers as "*educational work*" (framed more in terms of a general upbringing) for "*African children*". Black People and People of Color are presented as not being able to advance from a lower academic standing and as being dependent on the help of *white* people. In general, it becomes apparent that the question regarding the possibilities of schools and teachers to address racial inequalities is mainly met with a description of the linguistic and cultural deficits of "the others". Lynn for example states "*Yes, and we teachers yes, what we teachers can do I say yes, it starts with speaking loud and clear*" (Lynn). The perceived lower linguistic abilities stand in the foreground while the task of the *white* teachers is solely to support in this regard. This on the other side indirectly attributes *whiteness* to a higher academic standpoint. This argumentation should not override the validity of challenges for the teachers to deal with multi-linguistic classrooms and their feeling of overload against the lack of support from higher authorities (Johanna).

If the focus lies also on the side of the perpetrator or the beneficiary, it is primarily directed toward the students, which links to the finding above that racism is discussed with much more certainty on a student level. This further strengthens the narrative that teachers are already on the "right side" and that the role of anti-racist work in school lies mainly in the correction of what has been "going wrong" in the social environment of the children outside of the school context. A structural dimension of *whiteness* and racism that is ingrained in society and therefore also projected to the school and internalized by the teachers is left aside. This framework also leads to the common thematization of the limited scope of actions that schools have in this regard vividly, illustrated in the rhetorical question *"But what can schools do?"* (Sarah). The following answer by Sarah herself is primarily focused on the support of "children with a migration background" due to a lower educational competence. In the following, she then seems to have a realization that school also educates those people who later reinforce racist structure from their position of power. This broadens the perspective of anti-racist work from mere support of the disadvantaged to also include elements of a critical self-reflection.

Th notion of *white* saviorism is also strengthened by a general emphasis on existing anti-racism projects within a broader discussion on racism. This is reminiscent of an "appeal to progress" identified by Hytten and Warren (2003, p. 70) as one of the main discourses employed by *whites* to sustain racial power within education. An example of this is Ben who strongly focuses on the school's efforts in anti-racist initiatives, even though the questions were primarily aimed at exploring racism itself and the role of *whiteness* in perpetuating it. Only in the end, and more parenthetically, he refers to a survey of the student body revealing widespread experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination. The actual problem of racism itself is thereby shifted a bit more to the background.

Particularly striking in this context was the reference to the network/organization "Schule ohne Rassismus, Schule mit Courage" (School without racism, school with courage) in which all the schools represented in my data pool were part[15]. During the interviews, different perspectives emerge regarding this label. For some, it serves as a description of the school elevating it to an ontological fact. Monika for example speaks about "*when we became a school without racism*" rather than being awarded a specific label and Sabine states that "*We are a school against racism School with courage*". This shows how the label is exploited for an argumentation of already "being done". However, other teachers take a more critical stance toward such labels. They point to the low requirements to apply and the fact that "*there is no such thing as a school without racism*" (Tim) and dismissing it as "*nothing but a nice plague on the wall*" (Johanna).

It has become clear that the limited perspective on racism also entails a limited understanding of anti-racist work. Through the evasion of a structural component of *whiteness* from the discourse on racism also the narrative of anti-racism is primarily focused on the perceived "other". At best this only leads to a loss in potential for countering racism and in the worst case it can itself function to further expand and legitimize *white* supremacy through a narrative of *white* saviorism. This

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[15] This is as a label that schools can apply for if they assure to facilitate a biannual project with a focus on anti-racism.

happens through creating a narrative of "selfless and altruistic dedication" by *white* people, instead of acknowledging their involvement.

Besides the presented reliance on an anti-racist narrative, the discourse on *white* saviorism also stands in accordance with the negative depiction of a moral position of "the other". This also shows in the presentation of different anti-racist projects within the school context. An example of is presented by Ben called "Verfassungs-Schüler" (constitution student) funded by the Ministry of Interior in Germany. The project is directed towards children who are disconnected from society to a certain extent, mainly with a "migration background" to *"enthuse them for democracy"* (Ben). Such a discourse is closely tied to the more public perception of a promotion of democracy from the West to the Middle East and the African continent as a legitimization of a continuation of imperial military intervention (Encarnación, 2005).

Another discursive tool that is applied within the framework of *white* saviorism is a kind of feminist narrative. Again, open and inclusive sexual education and non-patriarchal interaction should be essential components within the school. If, as presented by Sarah, a Muslim faith is instrumentalized to counteract this, it should be elaborately discussed and addressed. However, if these problems are solely thematized with the reference to patriarchal and misogynist structures in the behavior of perceived "*racial* others", it might also serve the promotion of the own "emancipatory" culture. This becomes present in the depiction of a "*clash"* between the presence of headscarves and "*our own culture"* characterized by "*we are really quite free (i:mhh) here, fortunately in our country"* (Laura). The focus here is not on the superiority of certain abilities but on one's moral position. The notion of freedom and therefore higher moral stand of the "German culture" then seems to legitimize its enlightening role "for others".

> *"they have problems accepting women, especially the Afghan and Syrian boys […] and they have to continuously be brought on the right track"*. (Sabine)

The exclusivity of "the *racial* other*"* as the perpetrator and the missing addressing of broader patriarchal structures also in the "German culture" can also fuel a larger societal discourse. This is illustrated by the much-criticized article by Mannke (2015), published in the journal of the German philological association. A bit simplified, the message of the article can be read as a call for saving *white* German girls from the dangerous uneducated, and overly sexual Muslim man in the educational context.

With this, also the strong moral dimension of *white* saviorism becomes clear, which in some cases also functions as a shield and legitimization for racist behavior. Exemplary for this is also a situation shared by Monika in which a teacher recommended a group of Black students that "*that they have to behave particularly well in their situation (i: mhh) because they are met with resentment anyway*". Instead of holding the people having and reinforcing those resentments accountable, it is expected of the already disadvantaged to further take up the initiative. After being confronted with the racist dimension of such an argumentation by the social workers of the school, he simply referred to his intention to help.

In summary, it becomes clear how the discourse of *white* saviorism not only strengthens a superior *white* position but also immunizes it to a certain extent against moral accusations.

7.5 System level

Until now I have looked at the four main discourses employed to sustain a *white* epistemology as well as their intertextual chains between each other and embedding in broader societal structures. As Fairclough (2003, pp. 15–16) emphasizes, besides the relation to a societal level, also the institutional setting is essential for textual analysis. For that reason, I apply a more concrete focus on the characteristics of the educational system and its relation to the discursive formation of *whiteness* in the following chapter.

As shown by McMahon (2007, p. 684) and also mentioned by Tim during the interview "*school is the mirror of society*". Thus, different forms of discrimination

and their intersections inevitably find their way into the educational system. While this is important to acknowledge to not perceive schools as safe spaces, that does not mean that education is not a promising starting point to systematically counter these tendencies. However, as I show in the following, this would require certain structural components and resources that are not in place.

I would like to start with the composition of the teacher body within the school context. As mentioned earlier "diversity" should not be considered a panacea that as soon as in place would cure racial discrimination by itself. However, it is still telling that so many teachers from different schools describe their colleges as predominantly *white*. Tim mentions that the reason for that is mainly the high educational prerequisites in combination with the lower average educational attainment of Black People and People of Color. Ben refers to the lack of personal choice of them for the teaching profession and adds that their school is very open and actively searching for a more diverse composition. However, I would argue that there is more at stack here and that *white* people often have a misconception regarding the openness of certain spaces for Black People and People of Color. As also shown in the analysis, the evasion of *whiteness* from the discourse serves to create *white* comfort which endangers the racial safety of Black People and People of Color within the school context (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 121). In this way, simply stating the wish for diversity is not enough when there is a lack of self-critical engagement of *white* colleagues with their own racial positionality. Additionally, "intentional, targeted agitation that leads to White racial dissonance is necessary to disrupt racially privileged students [and teachers] out of their blissful epistemology of ignorance" (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 130). This would require more training and workshops that are not only directed towards the children but also at the teaching staff. And these should also cover the entire spectrum from empowerment to critical self-reflection (Autor*innenKollektiv Rassismuskritischer Leitfaden., 2015, p. 13). These trainings are described by Tim as one of the most important tools to combat racial inequality within schools. An essential element in this is cooperation with external organizations and people who are specifically trained for these struggles.

Instead, however, nearly all the participants describe a lack of adequate training within the field of *racial* sensibilization.

> "*I cannot remember a single training session*" (Laura)

> "*Yes, you've got a point, so I haven't seen any training in that direction yet*" (Lynn)

This is then also connected to the feeling of some participants of not knowing enough about the topic, which became clear throughout the analysis and was also explicitly expressed by Laura and Lynn. A similar picture also emerges regarding the study to become a teacher. Also there, a critical engagement with the topic of *whiteness* does not constitute a firm component (Sarah, Ben).

On the other side, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the topics and workshops that do get promoted and founded. Digitalization is identified by many participants as a topic that gets widely covered in teacher training and even takes away resources from other fields (Monika, Sabine). Besides Laura also describes inclusion and the handling of classroom disruptions as broadly discussed topics in teacher training. These foci seem to be very directed toward the capitalist ideal of efficiency and productivity, which underlines the school's role in shaping new generations for this kind of societal organization (Feinberg and Soltis, 1998, p. 43).

Through the lack of structural approaches on a state level, the responsibility to address these issues is thus shifted to the individual school. However, the interplay of the legal denial to generate money and the very low financial means for internal training strongly limit the scope of action (Tim, Bea). Tim for example shares that for an upcoming workshop on anti-racism and critical *whiteness* the teachers must pay themselves. This lack of monetary resources especially hinders the possibilities of much-needed continuous support and coaching rather than punctual and often only reactionary actions (Johanna). Thus, even if there is an awareness of the importance of this training, it often cannot be realized as shown in a comment by Monika:

"Actually, ehm, I would also like to address the topic at a training course (i: mhh) if there wouldn't be so many other problems, but we never actually get around to" it. (Monika)

This further individualizes the engagement with anti-racism to the teacher level. They need both time and financial resources to educate themselves within the field. However, many participants share a general lack of time resources both for personal training as well as for the realization of projects in cooperation with the students illustrated in a question posed by Sarah *"Only where does a teacher have much time to attend further training?"*. One reason for this is the often-rigorous curriculum binding which stands in contrast to the described unguided anti-racist work (Johanna). This then leads to the fact that anti-racist projects in the school context are often very dependent on individual teachers who bring in a lot of personal dedication (Ben, Tim, Laura, Sabine). Which, in turn, then also often means the expiration of a project with the leaving of the teacher. Laura for example shares how an anti-racism project at their school completely died out after the teacher who has been taking the leading role left the school and no one else had the knowledge or the experience to continue it. Vaught and Castagno (2008) also show that there is the problematic assumption that "change can occur effectively on the individual level" resulting from the missing link made between personal experiences and structural privileges.

Also relevant regarding the homogenous *white* teacher body, is the general power imbalance between teacher and student within the educational context. Due to their educational role, the teacher holds a superior hierarchical position often leading to an extensive denial of agency for the students. The interview with Sabine gives a glimpse of a more general authoritative handling of the children in school, while Tim more concretely refers to a specific situation where a teacher told a Black student "*You don't know anything about racism"* (Tim). This is especially striking since children are usually more vulnerable to epistemic injustice (Carel and Györffy, 2014). Especially in the interplay with an as very diverse presented student body this can further strengthen racial power imbalances within the school.

However, I could also identify examples where the position and opinion of students were more taken into account. Tim shares the direction-giving power of an anti-racist student group regarding the school's further progression on this path and their inclusion regarding the conceptualization of a critical *whiteness* workshop for the teaching staff.

Another aspect, which was touched upon in the background chapter, is the division into a tripartite school system combined with societal and political stigmatization. Monika describes *"an unpleasant odor that clings to Realschulen and their teachers"* and Sabine speaks about *"a general social problem, also the Hauptschule is being badmouthed"*. This is problematic on different levels. First, we still see a higher share of children with a migration background[16] in Realschule and Hauptschule compared to the Gymnasium (Schu, 2021) who are then also disproportionally affected by a stigmatized perception of their education. Additionally, it also creates an incentive for teachers to go to a Gymnasium which still also means a higher salary, leading to a concentration of "good teachers" in this school form. This is especially striking regarding the fact that most teachers in Germany hold a civil servant status, which makes it nearly impossible to suspend them. Instead, they are usually moved to another school as a reaction to misbehavior with the destination often being rather a Realschule or Hauptschule (Monika).

In summary, it can be said that as long as good case examples are solely dependent on individual commitment and effectively suppressed by the structures, we will not start to see systemic changes.

8 Conclusion

The objective of this thesis has been to explore how *whiteness* is constructed by *white* teachers in secondary schools in Germany. By conducting a critical discourse analysis of semi-structured interview data, I could identify four different main discourses within a broader system of *white* epistemology.

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[16] I am using the category of migration background here due to the lack of statistical composition of *race* regarding the composition of the student body.

The discourse of "denial and color evasiveness" serves as the foundational basis, paving the way for the interaction between the "us – them" discourse and the "negative depiction of others". These elements collectively work to establish a positively connotated conception of *whiteness*, without openly referring to it. The discourse of "*white* saviorism" further solidifies the perceived superiority of *whiteness* on a moral level, aligning it with support rather than subjecting it to critique. This illustrates the close embedding of my data in a broader theoretical framework of *white* ignorance. It shows that concept is essential for the perpetuation of *white* privilege and *white* norm in a supposedly post-racial society. The power of ignorance lies in the possibility of the dominant class to consistently hide the source of their privilege from the main societal discourse.

My thesis gives an important insight into the still understudied German context of *whiteness*. Particularly intriguing is the prevalent avoidance of discussions on race in the German public sphere and the linked conflation and masking with national and religious markers. This should not distract from the fact that the results, due to the small convenience sample, cannot simply be generalized to a wider German perspective. However, regarding the heterogeneity of school forms and local contexts present in my data, I still expect the detected discursive patterns to be influential outside of my sample.

Furthermore, a focus on the educational system plays a fundamental role to understand and thereby also combat the functionality of a *white* epistemology. Regarding this, the analysis could show a strong link between the discursive construction of *whiteness* by the participants and the structural dimension of the educational system. The latter is characterized by a lack of sufficient time and monetary resources which individualizes the anti-racist work to the teacher level.

While offering recommendations for potential transformations within the educational framework and avenues for future research, it's important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of advice emanating from a white perspective. Without claiming to provide a new or sufficient measure to combat racism within the educational context, my analysis reiterates the importance of considering racial

inequalities also in front of the background of *white* privilege. This would in the following also include a critical self-reflective and structural engagement with *whiteness* as an important component of anti-racist work (Green and Sonn, 2005, p. 480). This must happen both on a student and also on a teacher level. While this educative work should not simply be laid in the hands of Black People and People of Color it is essential to amplify their voice, within the still very homogenous *white* teacher body.

In terms of further academic research, I think it would be valuable to move from the very epistemic position applied here also to a more phenomenological or materialistic stand by connecting the construction of *whiteness* by *white* people also with the life experiences of Black People and People of Color. It is important to explicitly center these experiences within academic work. This would also address the valid critique on critical *whiteness* studies, which applies to this thesis as well, that it is too much focused on ""*whiteness"* in the absence of experience of People of Color" (Andersen, 2003, p. 21).

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Appendix

Annex 1: Invitation Letter [English Version]

Dear Participant

My name is Linus Covic and I'm a graduate student in the "Social Scientific Data Analysis" program at Lund University with a study focus on methodology and inequality studies.

I'm currently writing my master's thesis on the conception and construction of *whiteness* in the German School System. For this, I'm planning to collect data from teacher interviews as well as classroom observations.

The interview would approximately take 1-2 hours and will cover a variety of questions on the role racialized perception plays in the school system. The questions will contain both more general as well as more personal questions. I know that these topics can sometimes be difficult to speak about, they are for me too. For this reason, I aim more for a dialogue format, instead of a very standardized interview structure, with space to learn and reflect together.

The high ethical standards of scientific research guarantee certain rights for you as a participant that are always protected. First, you have the right to anonymity and confidentiality. This means that neither your name, address nor contact details will enter the published work (this also counts for specific details on the school and subject that would jeopardize your anonymity).

Secondly, your participation in the project is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any point without stating a specific reason. Moreover, you are always free to not answer specific questions or to keep certain parts of the interview from entering the analysis. This also applies for two weeks after the interview during which you can still request the deletion of all your material. The interview transcripts will be stored until my Master's thesis defense in August on an encoded hard drive. The audio files will be deleted directly after transcription. People who have access to the data will be me, my supervisor, as well as two examiners.

There will be no monetary reimbursement for your time.

With your participation, you would make an important and unique contribution to scientific research in this field. If you are willing to do so, I would invite you to fill in the attached form and send it either by email or by post back to me.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the research, please feel free to contact me via email or telephone!

Thank you for your time!

Yours Sincerely, Linus Covic

Annex 1: Interview Guide

Intro Questions

How long have you been working in the school context?

What is your position in the school?

>   What are your tasks?

>   Which subjects do you teach?

Personal Dimension

Can you recall what your first thoughts were regarding the interview invitation?

What do you think of hearing the term *whiteness*?

Do you perceive yourself as a racialized subject? (if so when?)

How do you identify yourself?

>   Do you think it effects your behavior?

>   Do you think it affects the behavior of others towards you?

Which role does race play on a societal level?

School Dimension

Do you think racial differences play a role in education?

>   And in what way?

>   What do you think is the reason for a persistence of racism?

What do you think is the school's role in this regard?

Is Race Consciousness a part of teacher's education? (If not, should it be?)

How would you explain racism / *white* supremacy if a student in your class would ask you?

Are discussions on race and racism part of the interaction in class?

>   In which way are they addressed? Only from a historical or also present perspective? Do they include personal experiences from teachers and students?

Are discussion on *whiteness* part of the interaction in class?

How would you deal with (white) students using racially discriminatory language?

Do you have anything that you feel was not covered in the discussion so far and that you would like to share?