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Diversity in White: An Autoethnographic Case Study of Experienced Diversity and (Un-)Silencing

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Abstract

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's observation that the one who files a complaint ultimately becomes perceived as the problem, this article exposes the processes of silencing that occur within academia—particularly regarding issues of diversity, racism, and equality, while also exploring how un-silencing can occur in such a context. Despite committing to diversity and equality, academic institutions and their decision-making mechanisms are still largely led by white middle-class individuals with little understanding of intersectional inequalities, thus (re)producing mechanisms that silence those who experience discrimination and inequality. I apply methods such as autoethnography and interpretive textual analysis to challenge dominant (diversity) narratives that perpetuate silencing. Based on memory notes and (in)formal correspondence, the article describes the long process of silencing after an initial experience of discrimination to reveal common institutional patterns and how complainants feel trapped in a labyrinth and consequently forced to "give up."

Keywords

complaint; discrimination; diversity; dynamics of exclusion; intersectionality; juxtaposing narratives; racism; (un)silencing; white feminism

1. What Makes This Article Autoethnographic and Where Did This Article Come From?

1.1. How It All Started—"This Could Happen to Everybody"

At the start of my career, I participated in a career development mentoring program for women researchers—this terminology is specified by the program—at a university in the Global North. This included mentoring, group coaching, and professional training, and lasted four semesters. In my application, I wrote:

> Understanding and accordingly navigating the (academic) system is of particular interest to me because I was not socialized in [country X]. I keep noticing that there are points that I do not quite understand. Therefore, I am sure that I will benefit a lot from the mentoring program in this respect.

Coming from a Kurdish farming family that had been displaced, it seemed like a "dream come true" to be the first and only woman in my family to study and work at a university in the Global North. I was, however, unaware of intersectional discrimination in academia. I was fairly young and new to academia and was not a native speaker of the working languages (on the importance of language in the academic context, specifically to how language contributes to the exclusion of migrants, see Povrzanovic Frykman et al., 2023). From today's perspective, I can say that I was overwhelmed and naïve to believe that the participants in such a mentoring group would be fair, collegial, and ethical in their academic practices. I now realize that it was precisely my insecurity that allowed a fellow participant in the mentoring program to take advantage of my research.

Following the program's conclusion, some participants, including myself, continued to regularly meet for mutual support. During this period, a fellow participant who had, through this program, become familiar with my work on migration and so-called "guest workers"—I will call her MR for "migration researcher" to ensure anonymity and because she has since worked as a migration researcher. MR approached me to collaborate on a joint project funding proposal. The funding call had a multi-layered process, demanding at least two applicants from different disciplines.

I submitted my joint application with her and this was followed by an invitation to continue to the next stage of the selection process. However, significant differences arose between us at this point. I did not experience a sense of trust in relation to her and found her to be paternalistic, domineering, and discriminating. Indeed, for a while, I was subdued, as is often the case with marginalized people. At one point, she stated that my contribution was "only about the guest workers anyway" and everything else was her work: I should, therefore, "take my guest workers." She added that although she could do this part of the research herself, she would "leave it to me." I considered this statement racist and discriminatory because it implies that she did not see me as an equally qualified scholar. Rather, she limited my expertise to "one topic only," namely "guest workers," based on the fact that such "guest workers" have the same country of origin that I do. The same criteria did not hold for her: As a white researcher from the Global North, she could work on "guest workers" without any knowledge of their country of origin or their languages, as she does now, in a project, at the time of writing. I withdrew from our collaboration then (which was a big challenge as she would not take "no" for an answer) and emphasized via email that the proposal approved in the first round could not be used further, especially the parts using my research expertise. I also informed the funding body about my withdrawal from the project application.

I believed the issue was resolved, assuming we would pursue separate research paths due to completely different areas of expertise. But in a subsequent meeting with the participants of the mentoring program, she insisted on discussing it in front of everybody, even though I objected and repeatedly told them that I could not deal with the subject anymore and had already told MR everything that I had to say. The participants repeatedly said that "this could happen to everybody," "this [was] a group matter," and they wanted to hold a workshop, which they would call Peer Conflict, to be led by the program's official coach. However, I did not know that MR had already approached some of the group members, including the program's official coach, from whom she also received individual coaching, and nobody told me that they were aware of the details of

the situation, more than just the fact that there had been a "conflict." I, on the other hand, thought that all the group members were just as surprised and overwhelmed as I was by her public divulgence of our conflict and by her demand for a group intervention (more on this in Section 3).

The group members ignored that the conflict was a matter of unequal power and discrimination, taking MR's perspective for granted. Even now, I do not know what the group members meant by "*this* could happen to everybody," but, to me, *this* represented the group's reductionist interpretation of what the conflict was and how it was represented in the first place: white feminism's interest in getting rid of the "killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010). MR also made the ultimatum that, with both of us as participants, the group "would not be safe anymore" and that one of us would have to leave. This first instance of exclusion was the first step in a longer process in which she took over my network and research and marginalized me in my field. The dynamics in the group made it impossible for me to make it clear that the actual reason for ending the collaboration was my experience of racism and discrimination.

Sara Ahmed argues that "the term *complaint biography* helps us to think of the life of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or group of people" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 20). While a complaint can be the beginning of something, it is never the starting point (Ahmed, 2021, p. 20). This article narrates my *complaint biography*, which began several years ago, but was reduced to a "singular conflict between two" and was dismissed on the grounds that there was "no reason for further engagement with this conflict case." I was also accused of wanting to "monopolize the field" and of being "unreasonable"—something that complainants are commonly told (Ahmed, 2021)—which made me feel very ashamed and shocked.

Institutional denial, poor comprehension, and power dynamics collectively contribute to the silencing of complaints regarding intersectional discrimination. These factors are, moreover, interconnected with prevailing white middle-class interpretations of equality and diversity. Silencing happens in many ways: through requests to repeatedly relate discriminatory experiences even though nothing is ever done in response to the complaints, which causes exhaustion and resignation; through well-intentioned advice from senior academics saying that they experienced the same, but nothing can be done; and through (legal) threats (Ahmed, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023). I did receive a legal threat from MR telling me to "cease and desist your accusations against me and retract them in writing." Otherwise, she would consider legal action "to protect my [her] interests." She also threatened me with the power of institutions "as an employee of the DBC [anonymized acronym]," noting that my accusations "indirectly concern the DBC itself" and she was "in ongoing consultation with the latter."

There have been changes in both demography and the university student population in the Global North, which are partly related to different migratory and mobility movements, including the widespread displacement of people due to violence, economic inequality, and other factors. This has led to demands for equal participation in institutions and society more generally. Consequently, academic institutions recognize that they must at least acknowledge such changes. They mostly do so under the banner of "diversity" (without a clear definition) and apply the contradictory practice of "exclusionary inclusion" (Alpagu et al., 2019). While institutions address the importance of diversity (Ahmed, 2012), the decision-making bodies remain largely dominated by white middle-class-identified people, who have not typically experienced structural discrimination or racism and often lack understanding about intersectional inequalities. In the context of institutional feminism, for example, Rafia Zakaria argues that "it is true that, by and large, the

women who are paid to write about feminism, lead feminist organizations, and make feminist policy in the Western world are white and upper-middle-class" (Zakaria, 2021, p. 5). She further argues that being a white feminist does not require being of white ethnicity. In fact, I also met people of color who did not recognize the cost of discrimination and racism, as one person underplayed my experience by telling me that, in their encounters with her, MR "was not racist to me"—without taking into account that they occupied a position in the university hierarchy higher than MR.

Zakaria (2021) concludes that it is important to note that the concept of whiteness remains fundamental within the framework of white feminism. As Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan states: "Just because they give you a seat at the table doesn't mean they want you to speak at the table" (Manzoor-Khan, 2019, p. 81). In this regard, while institutions at least superficially address the importance of "diversity," it does not mean that they are concerned with providing meaningful support to employees and students most affected by racism and other forms of discrimination. Hence, institutions perpetuate and expand silences while reproducing inequality and the normalization of white middle-class standards. This article questions and challenges structural discrimination and racism using the example of white feminism, which does not mean that white feminism is the only device responsible for such structures. It is just an extension of a larger system and is at the other end of the hierarchy. This is one of the reasons that makes it difficult, even impossible, to demonstrate in an institutional context how gender is also influenced by issues of race and migration.

1.2. What This Article Is (Not) About

That "the personal is political" highlights the connections between personal experiences and larger social and political structures. A common response to complaints is to treat the matter as an isolated "claim" or an "individual case," rather than as a structural problem, which isolates individuals who are labeled as "unreasonable" and "angry" (Ahmed, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023). Furthermore, complainants usually face painful experiences that lead them to display emotions like anger. Paradoxically, these emotions are taken as further evidence to individualize the cases and thus discredit the complainants (Abuzahra, 2023). How to raise one's voice against inequalities and discrimination? How can these experiences be recorded and made public? Most importantly, how to show the link between "the individual" and the social structure?

I apply autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) as a "political/personal intervention" (Viaene et al., 2023). The method combines (auto)biography and ethnography, which "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality" and "sensitizes readers…to experiences shrouded in silence" (Ellis et al., 2011). Hence, looking at the societal micro level can explain certain macro-level social phenomena.

Echoing Ahmed (2021, p. 14), who notes that "in remembering, we make the past present; we make the present," this article seeks to make *my present*, a present against forgetting past harms and against being ignored. There are only memories—mostly painful—and correspondences as well as conversations—mostly disappointing—that show largely invisible but deeply unfair academic practices. By combining autoethnography with interpretive textual analysis (Oevermann et al., 1979), which focuses more on the subtle interactions hidden in the data, I aim to make inequalities visible. As such, this article advocates for resistance to situations where complaints about racism/discrimination, scholarly misconduct, and ethical violation are adjudicated according to unequal power relations, which arise from the absence of precise rules concerning integrity and ethical misconduct. As I was told many times, it was clear that MR had hijacked my

research, but there were no legal rules for such situations. Nonetheless, "we have to keep saying it. Because they keep doing it" (Ahmed, 2023, p. 37).

This article is an attempt to figure out how we might think about unethical, unfair, and uncollegial academic environments. It aims to reveal what is happening in academia beyond what we see and show in a CV. Sharing my experiences is an attempt to discuss a theme that is taboo even though it is, apparently and shockingly, a common practice—and those who benefit from the existing power structures often get away with this practice. Before this experience, I could not imagine that something like this could happen. There are meanwhile some attempts to facilitate a more ethical academic environment but I saw that the people involved in such attempts are often overwhelmed. As one of these people told me, they are working for free and do not have much time.

This article is not meant to whistle-blow. All names, including the names of the institutions, are anonymized, which was a challenge. To achieve this, I used pseudonyms but also so-called false trails to facilitate anonymization. I use this publication as the only way that there is for me as a scholar to make people aware of inequalities in academia. More and more publications are emerging (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Viaene et al., 2023; Zakaria, 2021) as academia becomes more and more diverse, even though the structures stay rather homogenous, e.g., white, binary, heterosexual, and middle-class. What are the costs of these unequal structures for those who are in a less powerful position? What are the costs of neoliberal university structures that demand more competition for recognition and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2012) under increasingly precarious working conditions? This article shows how, in the context of such a neoliberal university structure, racial exclusions are ignored and sometimes even enabled in favor of white feminism.

What happened to me was unfair and very damaging—emotionally and career-wise—but I was able to find like-minded people (who are not only people of color but also people who are aware and compassionate about the unequal structures in academia) and, most of the time, found my peace. I do not have any expectations that my article will bring "justice" for me, but I hope to bring greater attention, especially within the scholarly community, to the fact that extractive (and violent) practices in knowledge production do not only happen in distant countries but also in the Global North, where the knowledge produced through (forced) migration and mobility is already being exploited.

In the following, two narratives related to the topic of diversity are juxtaposed. First, I will analyze the award-winning "diversity concept" within the university to show that although universities now promote diversity concepts, these concepts do not really work and only serve as "politics of admission" on paper (Ahmed, 2004, 2012). Next, I will reconstruct my email correspondence with one of the program coordinators of the awardee unit and my memory notes from a meeting with program coordinators, demonstrating how this unit "managed" my complaint of discrimination and reinforced the discrimination I already faced. As a third step, I will discuss my attempts to make a complaint after I found out about MR's project. The analysis was conducted with a close textual analysis (Oevermann et al., 1979). To protect privacy, only short excerpts and words were included in the results.

2. The University's Award-Winning "Diversity Concept"

Sara Ahmed draws attention to the "politics of admission," wherein "institutions as well as individuals 'admit' to forms of bad practice, and where such 'admissions' are valued as a form of good practice" (Ahmed, 2004,

p. 1). She further argues that "admitting to one's own racism does not do what it says. Such admissions are not anti-racist actions" (p. 1). "Rather than reading texts for 'what' they say," Ahmed suggests "that texts circulate as documents or objects within public culture, and that our task is to follow them, to see how they move, as well as how they get stuck in specific contexts of utterance" (p. 1). Following this suggestion, I will provide a short analysis of the diversity concept of the university and juxtapose it with my experiences of diversity within the unit.

The subsequent case happened at a university that received a national award for diversity, which the university announced with a short statement on its webpage. For the announcement, a Latin term was used, which ostensibly evokes distinction and implies international repute. The announcement makes the university's diversity project look appealing and interesting but also raises expectations since important institutions, such as government ministries and the university itself, are involved. Furthermore, the title is catchy and suggests that there are concrete plans in place and that action is being taken as it names four concrete directions in which to manage diversity. Although the term "diversity" is used superfluously—appearing six times in three languages (none of them being a language of the Global South)—its meaning is unclear, while it is likewise unclear what it means to manage diversity and how such a thing can even be managed. When clicking to find out more about the concept, a page-long text appears. The text states that all members of the university are affected by diversity and explains that such an understanding of diversity helps the university identify intersectional areas and integrate them. Gender, sexual orientation, age, social/cultural background, and physical/cognitive abilities are given as examples of diverse categories.

The text is ambiguous, difficult to understand, and contradictory. It raises questions about whom it serves and whom it is meant to help. How can everyone be affected by diversity despite the academic debate that brings attention to forms of discrimination based on, e.g., race and gender (Ahmed, 2021; Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023)? In my academic mentoring program, which was part of a diversity unit that I will elaborate on later, two additional colleagues experienced discrimination and racism. Moreover, previous participants also have reported discriminatory experiences. There are hints of who, indeed, wrote this text—or at least hints that point to their perspective—as evidenced by the ordering of categories they use (gender being the first position), the use of a positive framing (e.g., "physical/cognitive abilities"), and the fact that race is not mentioned. Although the language used in this text highlights people's abilities, it fails to recognize the challenges and discrimination they face.

Instead of solving and addressing existing issues, the concept of diversity is used to create an impression of the university doing everything right. It is a good first step to commit to diversity and equality; yet, evidence shows that these commitments remain instances of "textual performance" if they are not institutionalized (Ahmed, 2004). Only at the end does the statement provide information about how the measure aims to raise awareness of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, prevent discrimination, and enable career success regardless of personal circumstances or characteristics. There is still no information about the source of this statement or about who is (most) vulnerable to discrimination. Most importantly, there is no information about what an "action" against cases of discrimination (racism is not mentioned at all) would look like at the university.

The question of who is writing and from which perspective becomes clearer when looking at which unit produced the text: It comes from the unit for diversity and gender, though, perhaps unsurprisingly, the award ceremony shows a group of exclusively white people. Bourdieu (2012) argues that awards serve as a means

for recognizing significance and symbolic power, which is how institutions gain legitimacy for what they do. Arguably, this award signifies the effective implementation of diversity initiatives, demonstrating their success "in action." It validates the university's approach to managing diversity, legitimizes the unit, and maintains a system created by white middle-class individuals. But the image of the unit shows how people outside the "norms" are, in practice, not represented (Schick, 2023). Instead, those directly affected by exclusion and discrimination often work under precarious conditions and even for free, e.g., for student unions.

3. What Happened After the Group Meeting

3.1. Experienced Diversity—"But the Group Has to Agree on It"

In the following, I will discuss my email correspondence with one of the people responsible for the mentoring program, showing how her intervention worsened my situation and how a form of white feminism dismissed and covered up my experience of discrimination (Schick, 2023). This correspondence exposes the lack of understanding of those in decision-making positions concerning intersectional discrimination and inequalities (Zakaria, 2021).

After the group meeting recounted in Section 1, I contacted one of the people in charge of the mentoring program and explained the situation to her by phone, including that I experienced racism and discrimination from MR and felt pressured by "the group." I noted that I didn't understand why I should discuss the problems I had with MR in a group where I felt pressured and unheard. I added that this network was important to me, but I might need to leave it. I also requested that she prevent the proposed workshop because I could no longer emotionally deal with the situation and couldn't see what purpose the workshop would serve. She lamented my experiences, but since our group's program had officially concluded, there was nothing she could do, except cover for the coach. I also explained that coaching in a conflict situation from the proposed coach would be inappropriate, as MR had received private coaching from that same person. She followed up our phone call with an email, where she thanked me "for the trust" I had expressed in her and added that "the subject of your call exceeds my responsibility and also my competencies." She still gave me her personal assessment that I should not "give up" (which she formulated as an exclamation) "your [my] place in the group." She continued the email by saying that she thought, "at the moment, [the conflict was] also about…whether and how the group can continue to work together and exist." She continued to recommend coaching and added:

> If your group wants to work on this issue with a coach…[then] whether the conflict you describe is discussed in the group or not can still be decided, there is—among other possibilities—also the option to agree in the group that this topic is excluded (tabooed)—but the group has to agree on this.

The email gives the impression that while the coordinator empathized with me, a bureaucratic understanding of "responsibility" circumscribed her position and limited what she could do. Yet, because she was so kind, she made a personal recommendation to "not give up." At the same time, she distanced herself from the issue of racism and discrimination by not naming what happened and remaining generic in her correspondence, which ultimately dismissed my concerns. I reached out to her due to pressure from "the group," and she insisted that "the group" held the final authority. Hence, she turned my experience of discrimination into *my problem alone* for which she was "not responsible or competent," while failing to explain who was. Paradoxically, although she deemed it *my problem*, she still underscored the importance of the "group decision." She chose to leave me

at the mercy of the dynamic of "the group," despite still using the program's official budget and coach. With the person in charge declaring herself not responsible for racism and bullying, but for keeping "the group" together, "the group" not only succeeded in shifting the focus from discrimination and inequality to a *knowledge problem*, which was intended to be resolved through coaching. Sibel Schick argues that white feminism only focuses on sexism as gender-based discrimination and represents the interests of a supposed "norm woman" who is, e.g., white, well-educated, and not poor (Schick, 2023). This feminism disconnects racism from feminism and aims for "norm women" to have equal status as men in the social hierarchy. On the way up, however, it inevitably exploits people as "collateral damage." The exclusion of multiple marginalized women results in their direct discrimination.

My response to her shows clear anger and disappointment:

> Thank you for your assessment but, in this case, I will leave the group. I don't have the time and energy to be bothered with this issue (in such a large group).

As the program lead, one might anticipate her to acknowledge my feelings and offer support. However, her response was cold, viewing my complaint as an attack. She merely thanked me for informing her about my decision and wished me "all the best" for my "scientific career," which felt cynical given her lack of support. There is a significant difference between having theoretical knowledge about racism and actually *experiencing* discrimination and/or being aware of the structures that (re)produce racist and exclusionary mechanisms. Mariam Malik argues that university lecturers often respond to the naming of racism with scandalization. This can "lead to the formation of a white solidarity community of consenting and silent students" (Malik, 2022, p. 40). Consequently, "racism as such can be dismissed as a complaint" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 2). Complainers are hence labeled as "emotional," but there is no understanding of the emotions—especially rage—caused by racism (Abuzahra, 2023).

In my final email, I wrote:

> I don't know what kind of information you have but there is something very rotten and one-sided going on. I don't see why the group should decide on something that I don't want to speak about. Maybe as the unit [name anonymized], you would like to take that away as feedback? In any case, the structural problems have become more apparent to me as a woman with an "immigrant background."

I expressed how disappointed I was in the unit for its handling of cases of discrimination and exclusion so poorly. She responded with administrative language and thanked me for my feedback. She refused to move beyond a limited understanding of her professional "responsibility," since addressing such a conflict did not align with her agenda. The conflict is delegated to a group that consists of a majority of white women including program participants, its managers, and the coach. The unit and the coach legitimize the unit and its position as a firewall "against patriarchy and the male-dominated world" (excerpt from an email from the coach, justifying the coaching). This demonstrates the unit's limited definition, which divides people into just two genders and ignores distinctions between "women" on the one hand and all other genders on the other. The matter is shifted from racism to a "group problem," which benefits MR at my expense. The unit, contrary to its original claim, does not consider itself "responsible and competent" against discrimination but feels itself responsible only for the maintenance of "the group." Consequently, the unit acts in favor of

appropriative white feminism, which can lead to a perpetrator–victim reversal. The differences that exist between "women" are made invisible.

In the following I will discuss my experiences with individuals and institutions after finding out that MR had submitted the project that we had initially worked on together, showing the consequences of my exclusion from the mentoring program. I also consider how I retrospectively understood why my participation in the group would constitute a "threat [to] the safe space of the group" and why "the group" kept ignoring me after I found out about MR's project; if "the group" wanted to have its "peace," I would need to leave the group. As a consequence, the idea of the "safe space" was used to exclude a "problematic" element, namely a "complainant," who had accused one of their members of racism and scholarly malpractice.

3.2. A Migration Researcher is Born—"Go on Your Own Way, Publish"

One year after leaving "the group," I discovered that MR had submitted the project behind my back based on the proposal we had co-authored. I had invited a scholar to give a talk on the topic, and he told me that MR had contacted him. He asked if I knew her, as the project seemed very similar to mine. She submitted this project with a new co-applicant—without mentioning me in any way. They did not even change the subtitle of the original project, which reflected my precise research focus. Neither of them had any previous experience in my research area and came from different fields; in their application, however, they used concepts, themes, and approaches similar to those of my research. Furthermore, people who had been interested in collaborating with me now supported this project.

I contacted someone from "the group," who was until that point an active member of "the group" together with MR. I will refer to them as CiS, my "colleague in solidarity." I sent CiS the media coverage of MR's project—which was eventually accepted for funding—since she had been the only member of the group to demonstrate solidarity with me. This reconstruction of the incidents only became possible through efforts to share my experiences with CiS. I learned that MR had already contacted some group colleagues, including CiS. This short passage from CiS's statement explains how MR had contacted her before our meeting. The idea of coaching and the involvement of the unit already happened at this stage without me knowing anything about it:

> In the presence and with the support of her partner, MR emotionally described to me at this meeting that this project application was immensely important to her, but that a continuation was in jeopardy because FA surprisingly wanted to stop the cooperation and communication, with the side note that apparently "private and health problems" of FA could be the cause. MR also told me that for her the group as a whole was no longer a "safe space," and that she wanted to address the conflict at the next online group meeting in front of all participants, and asked me for my personal assessment. I advised her to talk to FA in advance and offered to seek professional support from the [name anonymized] unit.

My exclusion from "the group," as well as my marginalization in the academic scene, facilitated her appropriation of the project.

My PhD supervisor and our program mentor recommended that I write a detailed log so that relevant authorities could investigate the matter. Together with statements from my mentor, my supervisor, and the CiS, I submitted my official complaint to several institutions and then experienced a bureaucratic labyrinth.

The funding agency did not want to respond formally to my accusation of racism and bullying on the grounds that it was the university unit's responsibility; "something very wrong happened there." Likewise, the body overseeing scientific misconduct and ethical issues did not examine my primary allegation at all and issued a report that clearly showed they misunderstood my request. However, upon my request to amend this misunderstanding, they refused to reopen the case. Conversely, the diversity unit acknowledged that unethical practices and scientific misconduct took place, but emphasized that my complaints about racism, discrimination, and bullying from "the group" were merely a "claim." This was almost entirely deliberated in "confidential discussions."

This is a short passage from my mentor's statement, who also acted as MR's mentor in the program:

> Since 2015, FA has established a scientific standing as a specialist in migration research…until then, MR had not done any research on migration….It is important for me to emphasize that plagiarism, bullying, and unfair conduct in the academic field should not be personalized, but should always be regarded as embedded in structures of inequality and competition. Also, this conflict is not one between the two junior researchers alone; rather, it also refers to structures of inequality and competition that are linked to social positioning, and in this case above all migration histories.

A passage from my supervisor follows:

> The specific accusation is that, contrary to an agreement after the end of the collaboration, essential parts contributed by FA to the development and conception of the research project were integrated by MR into her own, now-funded application without indicating the authorship. In this way, not only is the essential contribution that FA made to the conception of the research project made invisible; rather, FA finds herself confronted with an appropriation, even expropriation, of the topics and concepts she has worked on for many years. As someone who has known, appreciated, and supported FA and her research for a long time, I find the indignation and disappointment absolutely understandable. However, this is not a question of sensitivities; what is under discussion is an unfair research practice that raises fundamental questions of research ethics….The fact that FA's research input continues to be used after the end of the collaboration, apparently to suggest authentic authorship, is not only dishonest but, frankly, shocking.

The reaction to these statements from the scientific misconduct investigation was that the parties would "not provide any additional information regarding possible scientific misconduct."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 222) argue:

> The gaslighting strategy of marking young female researchers as "difficult" and "aggressive" is something we take with us while building further up our academic career….We experience challenges in building up new, healthy, and trusting professional relationships due to the feeling of constantly walking on a tightrope….Everything can eventually be used against you.

Upon discovering MR's project, I reached out to the people involved and was shocked to find out the extent of their involvement without my knowledge. MR had contacted my networks for her benefit and expressed

her uncertainty about how to handle me, that I refused to talk to her for no reason, and the perception that I was "not doing well and had private problems." By telling people about my very normal everyday concerns, which I had shared with her during our collaboration, she presented me as unreliable. This strategy worked as people admitted to avoiding me, "not to bother me" since I was "not doing well." I realized that for a while, I became so insecure that I started concealing any struggles or health issues from colleagues in order not to be perceived as a "problematic person."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 216) describe the concept of "drawbridges" as individuals who offer support to "victims" but refrain from taking action against the institution to safeguard their position. I have also encountered several "drawbridges." One colleague, who had supported MR in the application process, was "shocked" after she read the media coverage about the project, and expressed her solidarity, but ultimately refused to write a statement because she feared possible consequences. Another person from "the group" told me that what MR had done was "simply not okay" and that she didn't think "we could have stopped MR from submitting the application, but everything that happened with the group—I definitely see my (our) responsibility there." The same person added that she needed some time to think about how to react and to see "what the consequences are for me [her]." She never contacted me again. A professor who had supported MR during the submission of the project and could have intervened against MR's practice after I informed him referred to what she did as "cannibalism," but took no action and told me that he had experienced something similar but managed to overcome it. He said I was "very strong" and should "go on my own way and publish."

I felt that they could not understand how outraged I was that my multi-year research work had been appropriated by a researcher, with no former knowledge of the topic, who was from a completely different research area, and marginalized me in my field while claiming that she was the first academic doing such research. This appropriation, with no credit given, felt like a colonialist act. She used my knowledge and network to her advantage and started to attend the same conferences—which was never the case until this project application. When I presented my work, scholars made me aware of "this big project, which is very similar to [my] dissertation, and [that] I should 'exchange and network with MR.' " Interestingly, people were compassionate about MR: The professor who described her actions as "cannibalism" rationalized that she did it because of "her circumstances"; another person told me that they and another colleague supported her because she had a child. Anger is based on the feeling of being excluded, but only privileged people have the opportunity to express their anger. Marginalized and racialized people may show anger but often face increased discrimination as a result. And the root cause of their anger often goes unaddressed. While, e.g., "concerned citizens" are "tolerated" to express their anger at demonstrations, marginalized people seem "too loud, too demanding, too threatening" (Abuzahra, 2023). Similar to how men are being protected against sexual assault accusations due to having close relations with women (Viaene et al., 2023), I found that MR's supporters rationalized that "she is very kind" and "has lots of migrant friends."

3.3. Ambivalent Managements—"How the System Is"

This is a note I made after a meeting with the unit's leadership:

> She begins by informing us why we are gathered here and emphasizes that it is not about "individual cases." They want to hear "my feedback for the future." She does not address my repeated questions about what they can do for me and how they handle situations like my case. I also repeat several times

> that I am not the only one affected by discrimination and racism. I tell her that I don't have a camera with me to record all the racist and discriminatory experiences. She says: "You don't have to record anything, you just have to be credible." She repeats over and over again that what I am saying is just a "claim."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 210) argue that experiences of institutional abuse "become known through survivors' voices, naturally subjective, emotional, or even resentful." They therefore argue that "reflecting on a traumatic event brings with it the repetition of its violence, making it difficult to describe coherently. Therefore…demanding objectivity to a survivor's description is also an act of violence" (p. 210). I argue that institutions use the demand for excessive repetition to cause another form of silencing, since "victims" need to eventually take a step back to protect their own mental health.

Muzayen Al-Youssef states that racism exists throughout society and is systematic, multi-layered, subtle, and therefore often dismissed (Al-Youssef, 2023). She concludes that "whoever experiences racism has had bad luck," meaning that there are hardly any consequences for racist actions. After the meeting from which my memory notes above emerged, I realized the unit's leadership lacked understanding of my situation, of how this system (re)produced inequality and exclusion (Schick, 2023; Zakaria, 2021). Most importantly, they were very ambivalent; first of all, this meeting only took place after the intervention of two mentors of the program (two distinguished scholars in gender studies), who made the unit's leadership aware of the problems within the program, which shows the importance of hierarchy and power. It was obvious that the unit leadership was overwhelmed and also restricted by the larger bureaucracy, as the unit occupies the lower end of the organizational hierarchy. The same person who told me that I should be credible also expressed: "You are right but that is how the system is. We are twenty years behind when it comes to racism." It was obvious that they, and especially the person with whom I had the phone and email communication, felt sorry and realized that their way of "managing" was problematic. Ultimately, though, in the meeting, they were focused on preserving their own positions and the institution's reputation. Each meeting was a painful experience, which made me feel worse: hurt, sad, outraged, frustrated, and lonely. Consequently, I decided to stop seeking conversation with them to protect my mental health, as I felt they were using these conversations to legitimize themselves by listening to me, to make me feel like they were doing what they were supposed to, but were unaware of how much they had repeatedly hurt me. I understood and experienced very deeply what Ahmed (2021, p. 1) meant when she wrote that "to be heard as complaining is not to be heard."

Although the authorities admitted that "something went terribly wrong" behind closed doors, they did everything to control the official narrative: Only after my persistent demand that something be done about complaints regarding the mentoring program did the coordinators send an email to "the group," reducing the allegations to only "my case" and writing that they had developed "a bundle of measures for increased protection against discrimination and the integration of intersectional perspectives in the future program." Regarding CiS's follow-up question about making the measures public, they offered her a personal and "confidential" meeting to "present the package of measures mentioned."

4. Conclusion

This article discussed a complaint that brought me into conversation with a variety of organizations and people, demonstrating the limitations that institutions face despite the diversity of their members and

despite diversity plans. Complaints against discriminatory and racist practices are regarded as an attack on the system, and institutions tend to deny complaints and make their decisions according to power dynamics. Furthermore, people involved do not necessarily intend to support perpetrators but do so because it is difficult for them to admit to themselves that they work in positions that (re)produce mechanisms that cause painful experiences. However, these responses have consequences for those who have already experienced discrimination. Complainants eventually "give up" and are silenced (Malik, 2022). People who are willing to transform the system are more likely to work in precarious positions with limited opportunities for intervention, because decision-makers tend to be white, middle-class, and often lack the necessary understanding of intersectional inequalities (Schick, 2023; Zakaria, 2021). Therefore, institutions inevitably practice "exclusionary inclusion" (Alpagu et al., 2019) by committing to diversity and equality while simultaneously applying barriers to institutionalizing their commitment (Ahmed, 2021).

I have elaborated upon how my *complaint biography* was "managed" by different actors and organizational units. The racist and discriminatory experiences I had were turned into a "group problem" that could be solved by "coaching"; the fact that racism and discrimination were the actual reason for terminating the collaboration was thus made invisible. This invisibility was then reinforced by the unit in charge, which "did not feel responsible and competent" for protecting me against discrimination, but for maintaining "the group." The university's diversity strategy claims to stand for "protection from discrimination," yet its focus on narrow and reductionist white feminism has done just the opposite. The abuse of "trust" and the commitment to "saving face" are particularly troubling. Actors took what was said about me for granted, namely, that I was "not doing well," "not healthy," discrediting my person, and causing me further "othering," while they discarded what I said as mere "claims." The experienced white (feminist) strategies can be characterized as shifting the matter from discrimination to "a group problem" among women who are supposed to support each other; thereby silencing discrimination and promoting perpetrator–victim reversal; and declaring the person discriminated against a "threat to the group." This shift allowed the unit to maintain the narrative that they *did everything right*. The control of a narrative adapted to a white feminist perspective is also noteworthy: After I confronted those in charge and "the group" with evidence, "my issue" was re-transformed from a group concern to a two-party conflict.

This article reveals how a narrow and reductionist gender perspective that overlooks any differences, inequalities, and power relations among "women," can lead to more inequality, discrimination, and racism. Racism does not always come to light as "explicit" racism, but can instead fall back on "substitute discourses," i.e., by ascribing "health problems" to a person, labeling them as "difficult" or "exhausting," and "endangering" an important project. When MR declared herself as the "victim," she sought protection and support in a group designed to support women, using gender as the only operative category and making racism and scientific misconduct invisible and even impossible to address.

This article shows that it is precisely such a form of gendered self-presentation that the unit feels responsible for: a woman who can show that her career is "endangered" by another, who is not "entirely healthy" and "not reliable." Paradoxically, nobody who was involved in supporting MR asked what the project was about. The same professor who called her action "cannibalism" told me that he did not read the proposal as he did not have time. It was very easy to "other" me, as the person who was "difficult," "has problems," and about whom they felt sorry—but they still held the view that the project and MR were very important and could not be endangered.

My *complaint biography* was closed by the institutions within a year, and I met "drawbridges" (Viaene et al., 2023) and compassionate people who all shared the view—even if from different perspectives—that I follow my way and publish. Here, I am publishing as a way to beyond the limitations of middle-class, white institutions, and white feminism.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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