

## Doing racialized masculinities in Finnish schools: subjectivation and de/humanization

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on Judith Butler’s theorisation of the performative subject and contemporary critiques to consider its relevance to the doing of racialized masculinities in Finnish schools. Recent postcolonial critique has indicated that, early work on performativity and subjectivation implicitly assumes a *white* and western, enlightenment subject and does not take the aftermath of slavery into account. While Butler’s work since then theorises inequalities including racism, it leaves untheorized the de/subjectivation of Black people and those from other minoritised ethnic groups as well as how racialisation and abjection is a systematic part of the subjectivation of *white* people. This paper draws on a study of the narratives of Finnish 12–15-year-olds in order to shed light on processes of subjectivation they do while doing racialized masculinities. The findings point to the need to extend Butler’s theory of subjectivation to take power-knowledge-affect-relations and de/humanization on board in ways that account for Black as well as *white* people’s performative subjectivation.

**Keywords** Performativity · Subjectivation · Colonialism · Gender order · Power-knowledge-affect-relations

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## Praktiken der Herstellung rassifizierter Männlichkeiten in Finnischen Schulen: Subjektivierung und De/Humanisierung

**Zusammenfassung** Dieser Beitrag fokussiert Judith Butlers performative Subjekttheorie und zeitgenössische Kritiken, um ihre Relevanz für das *Doing* rassifizierter Männlichkeiten in finnischen Schulen zu untersuchen. Aktuelle postkoloniale Kritiken haben darauf hingewiesen, dass frühe Arbeiten über Performativität und Subjektivierung implizit von einem *weißen* und westlichen, aufgeklärten Subjekt ausgehen und den Nachhall der Versklavung nicht berücksichtigen. Während Butlers Arbeit seit jeher Ungleichheiten einschließlich Rassismus theoretisiert, lässt sie die De-/Subjektivierung von Schwarzen Menschen und Angehörigen anderer ethnischer Minderheiten sowie Rassifizierung und Verwerfung als systematischen Bestandteil der Subjektivierung von *Weiß*en untheoretisiert. Dieser Beitrag basiert auf einer Untersuchung der Erzählungen finnischer 12- bis 15-Jähriger, um Prozesse der Subjektivierung im Zusammenhang mit rassifizierten Männlichkeiten zu untersuchen. Die Ergebnisse weisen auf das Desiderat hin, Butlers Subjektivierungstheorie zu erweitern, indem Macht-Wissen-Affekt-Beziehungen und Entmenschlichung so einbezogen werden, dass sie der performativen Subjektivierung Schwarzer *und* weißer Menschen Rechnung trägt.

**Schlüsselwörter** Performativität · Subjekt · Kolonialismus · Geschlechterordnung · Macht-Wissen-Affekt Verbindungen

### 1 Introduction

In their early publications Judith Butler<sup>1</sup> draws on work by Fanon, Althusser and Foucault to suggest that subjectivation is a symbolic and materializing process achieved through the repeated taking up and reiterating of racializing and gendering practices (Butler 1993, 1997b, 2004a, 2006). Butler's theorisation has, however, been much more developed and used in relation to gender than to racialisation and some recent discussions of their work have critiqued their (lack of) theoretical construction of racialisation. This paper draws on Butler's theory and postcolonial critiques of it to consider its relevance for the narratives of young people on 'race' and masculinities. The first three sections discuss Butler's theorisation, how it has been applied in educational contexts and postcolonial critiques of Butlers theory. The fourth section describes the methods used in the study of masculinities in Helsinki schools that informs this paper. This is followed by the main section that focuses on the analyses of relational processes of racialised/gendered/sexualised subjectivation and de/subjectivation that operated in the schools. We use the empirical study to examine the extent to which Butler's theory can usefully be employed in analysing the relational

<sup>1</sup> We chose to represent Judith Butler by the pronoun 'they', thereby representing Butler's recent identification in terms of non-binary gender.

processes of subjectivation for Black and *white* subjects<sup>2</sup>. The final section brings together the paper in two ways. It first evaluates how Butler's theory fits with considerations of the intersections of racialisation and gender in 'doing masculinities' in Helsinki schools and how subjectivation and desubjectivation work together in this context. This includes discussion of how affect works in constructions of *Whiteness/Blackness*. It then rounds off the paper by considering how Butlerian theory needs to be refocused and extended in order to become more relevant to analysis of the performativity of race and gender.

Butler's work on 'race'/racism is extensively discussed in Butler's investigations of "Excitable Speech," (Butler 1997a) as well as in individual essays (2004a, 2008) that refer to Frantz Fanon's "historico-racial-schema" (Ewara 2020; Fanon 1986 [1967]). However, Butler does not present a systematic anti-essentialist reconceptualization of race comparable to their theorisation of gender. Thus, in recent years, there has been increasing questioning of the extent to which Butlerian conceptions of the subject and performativity is relevant to Black people's subjectivation and to racism or, more provocatively, whether they are rather unintentionally complicit with the objectification of Black people, central to enslavement and colonialism (Broeck 2018, p. 174). Critics argue that the Butlerian theorisation of the subject does not account for processes of de/subjectivation associated with (the aftermath) of the transatlantic slave trade. This line of critical voices is primarily associated with Anglo-American Black Studies, postcolonial literary studies, and some gender studies (Ewara 2020, 2021; Hartman 1997; Sharpe 2016; Spillers 1987) and with their reception in Germany (exemplified by Broeck 2006, 2018). It is, however, relevant to European contexts, including in countries such as Finland that have long histories of treating racialisation and racisms as irrelevant in their contexts (Hoe-gaerts et al. 2022). In a period where social theorists are increasingly arguing that a renewed sociological imagination requires the centring of histories of enslavement and colonialism (Bhambra 2021; Meghji 2021), it is apposite to extend Butler's thinking on performativity and subjectivation for the simultaneous consideration of racialisation and gender.

## 2 Subjectivation and intersections of racialisation and gender

The basic idea of Butler's concept of subjectivation can be summarized as emphasizing the fundamental *ambivalence* and *relational character* of subject constitution, which simultaneously entails being subjected to power and becoming a subject in the sense of the emergence of agency. Butler uses Althusser's theorisation of interpellation in order to explain how individuals are made subjects through being inter-

<sup>2</sup> We express our understanding of race and gender as social and historical constructions that are connected to systems of oppression as follows: We capitalize Black to express that Black is a political self-description as well as a resignification of pejorative terms for Black people and of colourism; *white*, on the other hand, is written cursive to express that *whiteness* is also a construction, but unlike Blackness, indicates privilege. Trans\*gender refers to ways of life that do not identify with the ascribed birth sex, cis\*gender describes the opposite. If we include cis\* and trans\* we just write 'boys'. The asterisk expresses that there is a multitude of subject positions, for example connected to trans\*.

pellated by an instance of power, which in Butler's work is connected to systems of oppression, like heteronormativity, racism and classism. The subject positions made available by interpellation have to be taken up in repeated performative 'doings' for subjectivation to occur. In other words: persons become subjects by being intelligible, to themselves and others, within discourses and the materialization of gender and 'race' is built upon repeated interpellations. That performative reiteration is part of a process of becoming subordinated by, and subjected to, norms and expectations encompassed by orders of discourse and power relations (Thiem 2008). Subjection to social norms is relational in that subjects come into being by being interpellated by others in encounters that encompass power relations. Those social relations make some lives intelligible because they are socially acknowledged and others abject because they do not fit with what is considered normative and acceptable (Butler 1993). What is considered acceptable may change over time and vary in different social contexts. However, the very condition of becoming an intelligible subject lies in the abjection of certain others who are proximate to the self in order to maintain the integrity of the subject, without psychotic dissolution (Butler 1993).

### 3 Subjectivation within educational contexts

Since Butler's (1990) theorisation of the performative subject, scholars have produced a wealth of research addressing processes of subjectivation within educational contexts. That research shows that pedagogical processes are imbued with power dynamics and how they constitute processes of subjectivation. Butler's approach enables empirical investigations of how (gendered and racialized) subjects are produced in pedagogical contexts without presupposing difference in a naturalizing way. This is one reason that it has been taken up in investigations that try to avoid the problem of essentialism.

Deborah Youdell's (2006) ethnographic study in Australia and the UK showed that 14–16-year-old students cannot escape positioning as 'im/possible learners' and how educational inclusions and exclusions are produced through mundane processes within schools. The framing of Youdell's study includes a critical perspective on neoliberal global education systems, while her ethnography focusses on the ways in which the interpellation of gender, sexuality, race, social class and dis/ability in everyday school life is linked to the differential production of good and bad, possible and impossible student subjectivities in classrooms. For example, 'cool' masculinities were often not commensurate with being good students and were often unintelligible subjectivities for teachers. That could mean that teachers positioned boys into the 'impossible student' category. The ways in which teachers interpellated the boys in their classes reflected intersections of gender, racialisation, social class and sexuality.

Butler's theorisation has also been taken up in the German school context in research that shows how intelligibility for students is constructed in connection with gender and sexuality (Kleiner 2015; Jäckle 2009) as well as 'race' (Rose 2012), ability (Händel and Fritzsche 2016) and their intersections (Kleiner and Rose 2014). These studies focus on social norms taken up in peer-group interactions in informal

school spaces as well as classroom interactions involving teachers and learners and students' experiences of in- and ex-clusion. There is also a body of research that focusses on pedagogical practices and norms in German schools (Rabenstein et al. 2014, 2013). The findings of this group of studies show that social and pedagogical norms intersect in complex ways. Not only the preferences of the teachers, but also the symbolic constructions of the school culture require—and so interpellate—students to relate to the (situationally varying) differences of performance, class, gender, sexuality and racialisation (Rabenstein et al. 2013, p. 152; Youdell 2006). Pedagogical norms (such as of the autonomous and independent learner) and symbolic orders are inscribed in the history of school, mobilised in the daily pedagogical work and by the teaching staff.

#### 4 Critique of Butler's theory of racialized subjectivation

The ethnographic work of educational researchers such as Youdell (2006) point to the ways in which the process of become a legible school subject is simultaneously gendered, racialised and sexualised within and outside the classroom. It is less clear, however, how the performativity and subjectivation of 'race' works in contradistinction from gender and sexuality. This area is one in which Butler's theories of subjectivation, abjection and racialisation have been subjected to debate and critique. A major source of criticism of Butler's theory relates to the *absence* of consideration of the ways in which histories of enslavement and their aftermath are important to the understanding of subjectivation for Black and *white* people, which is highly relevant to the US context in which Butler writes (Ewara 2021).

However, while 'race' is increasingly discussed, including by Butler (Butler 2004a; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Yancy and Butler 2015) especially in work informed by intersectionality, its implications for the ways in which racialisation is constitutively connected with subjectivation and its histories of transatlantic enslavement are still rarely examined. Yet, the effects of this tyranny are still at work today, both in the form of globalized material relations of inequality (Broeck 2018, p. 152; Ewara 2021; Hartman 1997) and in ways that Black People are denied the status of subjects. This has opened Butler's recognition of the ways in which racialisation and gender operate together to produce abjected subjectivation to critique. Ewara (2020) for example, argues that Butler's theorisation dehumanises Black people by focusing on them only in terms of the external, *white* view instead of giving an account of how they develop senses of themselves in the context of *white* racist perceptions.

Ewara (2020, 2021) argues that Butler's use of Kristeva's notion of 'abjection' as a model for thinking about racialization presents racism as a problem of *white* anxieties to be overcome instead of focusing on the harm that racism does on one hand and on the lives of 'the abjected' on the other. A theory of racialised subjectivation therefore would have to start with the abjected and dehumanized other and integrate theorising of relational de/subjectivation.

Recent postcolonial critiques indicate that theoretical work exploring subjectivation frequently normalises a *white* and enlightened western subject (Ewara 2021) and does not adequately engage with the concrete social and historical conditions of

subjectivation and the entanglements of coloniality that Frantz Fanon (1986 [1967]) and others foregrounded in their theorisations of racialisation. Broeck (2018), Ewara (2021), Hartman (1997) and Sharpe (2016) all argue that Black lives are structurally excluded from conceptions of the human as conceptualized in European philosophies. Consequently, normative understandings of the human are implicitly racialized. While this line of critique stresses that the aftermath of historical events and their connection with enlightenment philosophy have to be taken into account, theorists informed by decolonial theories have also argued that colonial oppression and the dehumanization of Black populations was and is structured not only by exploitation, stereotypes and narratives but also affective conditions (Ahmed 2014; Fanon 1986 [1967]). Sara Ahmed (2014) suggests that emotions/affects are a productive form of world making (Ahmed 2014, p. 12). It is, then, not sufficient to focus on knowledge production and powerful speech acts when analyzing subjectivation, but necessary to analyze emotions/affects (as well as bodies and objects).

In keeping with this, racialisation and *Whiteness* are beginning to be addressed in new ways across a range of countries (Eriksen 2020; Zembylas 2018, 2021). Zembylas employs the increasingly popular concept of “coloniality of affect” to describe the making invisible and devaluation of minoritised racialized affect in Cyprus classrooms, while enhancing the importance of *white* affect, which is part of the dominant imperial world order. This economy of affects serves to dehumanize the other. While Zembylas discusses the question of the role of affect in connection to colonial relations and especially in dehumanising Blackness, Eriksen (2020) analyses the production of *whiteness* in Norwegian classrooms in a society that understands itself as very tolerant. He concludes that “*Whiteness* as technology of affect” is an apparatus that produces inequalities and identifications and prevents affective connections with Others (Eriksen 2020, p. 60).

Theorists such as Eriksen and Zembylas have begun the task of analysing how abjection shapes the lives and experiences of members of abjected minoritised groups in schools. There is still, however, relatively little known about the relational processes of dehumanizing those racially abjected while implicitly confirming the humanising of *white* people as subjects. The section below describes the study that informs the later analyses of processes of de/subjectivation for young people in Helsinki schools.

## 5 Methods

The analyses below draws on interviews conducted as part of data from a project on Masculinities and Ethnicities at School. Interview data were gathered among sixth-eight-graders (12–15 years) in three comprehensive schools in Helsinki as well as one youth club. Schools in different residential areas were recruited into the study in order to include students from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. One school was located in a wealthy (upper) middle class area, and the pupils in this school were almost exclusively *white* Finns. Another was in an area that was socioeconomically mixed and had approximately one fifth of pupils with what is referred to in Finland as ‘foreign backgrounds’. The third school was located

in a socioeconomically more vulnerable area, and had a more sizeable share of pupils from other backgrounds than Finnish. The youth club was also located in a relatively socioeconomically vulnerable area. Ethical permission was received from the University of Helsinki, the Divisions for Education (schools) and Culture and Leisure (the youth club) of the City of Helsinki and the principals of each school.

Seven focus group interviews with between two and five participants (two mixed gender, five boys' groups) and 22 individual interviews were conducted with altogether 32 participants. Ten interviewees participated in a focus group interview only, six participated in an individual interview only, and sixteen participated in both. Twenty-seven of the interviewees were boys, four were girls and one identified as transgender. Most of the interviews were done in the schools; only three were conducted outside schools. The majority of the participants—22—were *white* Finns, three were mixed-parentage and six had 'migrant backgrounds' (the category recorded in Finnish statistics, rather than ethnicity or racialisation).

The interviews are analyzed using narrative analysis taking a performative view of simultaneous subjectivation to race, cis\*gender and heteronormativity and how these intersect in the Finnish context. The analyses aim to document the complexity and relationality of racialized-gendered-sexualized subjectivation in schools.

Narrative accounts facilitate the analysis of subjective ideas and meaning making about what matters to people in their histories and anchor each person to the contemporary and to shared experiences in earlier times with peers, parents and other family members and to different historical periods (Andrews et al. 2013). They are part of an ongoing process of making sense of the past in relation to the present and the future (Riessman 2008). At the same time narratives point to discourses and social norms, which frame what can be said and cannot be said or even is unspeakable. The individual narrative does therefore exceed individual experience as it allows for conclusions about social conditions as well as their impact.

It is a commonplace in narrative theory that all narratives are produced in the present from particular places and viewpoints that build on the past but look to the future. So the stories people tell connect events into a meaningful sequence that is consequential for the meanings that they think will be significant for readers or listeners and that they want them to understand and remember (Phoenix et al. 2021). Equally, what people themselves remember and what they forget or omit from their accounts is important (Schiff 2017). Narratives are temporal, in that people have to describe events, feelings etc., in a particular order and the things they talk about happened at particular times (Rosenthal 2006, 2019).

The analyses below draw both from focus group discussions and from individual interviews. It is commonly considered in methodological literature that focus groups allow researchers to explore the breadth of issues, while individual interviews allow more exploration of depth (Robinson 2020). In recent years, however, it is increasingly recognised that focus group discussions can have advantages over individual interviews in enabling the sharing of sensitive stories and ideas in a supportive environment amongst peers (Edwards and Holland 2013).

Following Allen (2005), we understand both group discussions and individual interviews as social settings where both what is said and how masculinity is performed

through talk and other communication in the interview situation are relevant. Focus groups are, therefore, usefully viewed as complementary with individual interviews, but equally important for producing a holistic picture and possible to analyse both for individual stories and stories that are normative within the group.

One of the benefits of conducting both focus group discussions and individual interviews is that they illuminate different everyday practices. In the study reported here, the individual interviews allowed the young people to talk confidentially and think about doing masculinities, including in ways that run counter to constructions of hegemonic masculinities (Frosh et al. 2002). The focus groups enabled insights into both the breadth of issues encompassed in the topics of discussion and the ways in which these are negotiated across boys or between boys and girls (Barbour 2018). The combination also enabled the interviewer to get two accounts from most of the young people. Both the focus groups and the individual interviews were semi-structured and guided by an aide-mémoire summarising the central interview themes, which included school and its social hierarchies, differences among boys, differences between boys and girls, leisure time and hobbies, (social) media, friendships, (multi-)ethnicity and family. Both sets of interviews are analysed below, taking into account the context in which the narratives were produced.

The interviews were done by a Finnish researcher in Finnish and translated into English, which means that some nuances of meaning are likely to be missed in the English translation. Mistranslations and questions about precise meanings were addressed by joint analysis sessions with Finnish and British researchers to arrive at joint conclusions regarding the meaning of the narratives in the interviews.

In the next section we present extracts from interviews with Black and *white* boys as well as some from other minoritised ethnic groups and analyse them with regard to intersections of race, gender and sexuality, including focussing on affects.

## 6 Doing race and (cis\*)masculinity

The extract below presents two sequences from a focus group interview with four boys, 13 years old, three of them with *white* Finnish backgrounds and one mixed *white* Finnish and Asian parentage. Names are for the purpose of anonymization changed. The interview was done by a *white* Finnish cis\*woman.

### 6.1 Ridicule as a means of performing heterosexual cis\*masculinity

Q: Okay. Well but so, as I said last time, so this really this research is about boys, so what would you if an alien came here who had never seen people then how would you explain them that, what boys are like, at this moment in Finland?

Jaako: I would say turn away, there is no information to be found here.

Q: [laughs] How about if they absolutely wanted to know, would be doing research for example?

Jaakko: Then I would say that they ought to move somewhere else. [laughs]



- Daniel: [laughs] yeah.  
 Q: Okay. Are boys and girls the same.  
 Elmeri: No, we are (-) [0:06:01] in everything.  
 Jaakko: There's more water in us hey.  
 Daniel: Yeah.  
 Q: You are better in everything?  
 Daniel: There's more water in us.  
 Q: You have more water, yeah, what else?  
 Daniel: Boys have a magic wand.  
 [laughter]

Here the interviewer asks for an explanation of what boys are like. After Jaakko first stresses that there is no information to be found within this group of boys and Daniel agrees, Jaakko answers the request by literally suggesting sending the interviewer away. This jokey rebuttal can be interpreted as a rejection of the question, perhaps because it is asked of a group by a woman and the refusal starts the interview off by visibly resisting a woman's authority. When contrasting boys and girls—an opposition that is introduced by the interviewer—the three boys build a narrative together that asserts that they are better “in everything”, superior to girls and the ultimate humans. Joking about “more water” and the magic wand symbolically, and unexpectedly, brings power and the penis into the focus group and it naturalizes maleness. The implied hierarchy between male and female is additionally enacted performatively: The boys attempt to exercise power over the woman interviewer by rejecting her questions, by not cooperating and by ridiculing what she asks in ways that are sexist in effect, even though they, like all the sample also maintain gender-egalitarian discourses. By laughing at her and excluding her from the meaning making in the group they set up a gendered hierarchy within the heterosexual matrix. As pubescent boys, the participants were also performing generation in excluding the woman interviewer by employing insider narratives. Coming as it does at the start of the focus group, they have wrongfooted the interviewer leaving her puzzled and struggling to regain control of the interview. This highlights the importance of an intersectional perspective that recognises that masculinity is built on relations between boys and men and girls and women (Connell 1995). The boys have performatively demonstrated the power of masculinities by what they say and how they say it. It is noteworthy that, in such a short extract, the boys engage in exchanges they find hilarious using humour to exclude the interviewer and to set up inclusionary *bonhomie* amongst themselves. This fits with the body of research done on masculinities in that joking has repeatedly been found to be central to the construction of masculinities and homosociality and to feelings of positive affect (Odenbring and Johansson 2021).

While *Whiteness* has not been mentioned in the extract above, when the same group are later asked about whether people from other countries would be treated differently, one of them tells a story that performatively enacts the intersections of masculinities and racialisation and, in doing so, dehumanizes the ‘dark-skinned’ boy described while constructing the speaker as *white*.

## 6.2 The refusal of empathy for a Black boy as a means of dehumanizing

Q: Have you ever encountered something that they would treat people who come from somewhere else differently than-

Elmeri: Yeah, (--)

Q: Okay, where?

Elmeri: Well because we have one like a dark-skinned forward. He is really good at running so they always shout at him everything like, go steal bikes and then, everything else a bit racist like this.

Q: Okay, so some opponents shout or?

Elmeri: Opponents and then some parents shout.

Q: Parents, for real?

Elmeri: Yeah and sometimes in school they throw bananas at him and [laughs] other stuff like that.

Q: Yeah right. Has your, coach or someone said something about it?

Elmeri: Yes but it doesn't help at all when, they just don't listen.

Q: Well what do you think about it?

Elmeri: I think it's a bit dumb but, not everyone needs to be (friends with everyone). [0:20:37]

Q: Yeah they don't but of course it's probably a bit unpleasant to every time hear about some same thing.

Elmeri: Mmm.

Elmeri here is talking about something he seems to have observed over a period of time, as is shown in adverbs like *always*, *sometimes*. What is described is racist violence frequently done to a Black boy, called “a dark-skinned forward” and being performed by “opponents” (in sports) and parents in everyday school life. The Black boy who is the object of these racist attacks only appears in relation to his position in the football game so that gender becomes an unmarked background, implicit in that the football games are gender segregated. This makes Blackness the central category in the scene. The racist incidents described range from shouting and performing racism verbally by playing to the stereotype that Black people steal, to physical violence as in throwing bananas, which is also a highly symbolic act that evokes images of monkeys or apes and has long been used to dehumanize Black people as lower down the phylogenetic scale than *white* people. This dehumanizing is repeated in the unemotional, apparently neutral description and lack of empathy with the Black boy described. This (learnt) absence of affect, as Zembylas (2018) explained, serves the purpose of de-humanization by refusing the Black boy any feelings and failing to recognise the damage that the episodes described cause, particular to the only Black boy who populates the scenes.

The end of this extract is also important for the consideration of Butlerian performative theory and racialisation: Although Elmeri qualifies these incidents of shouting and throwing things as racist and stupid, he downplays them as being something personal, having to do with friendship. By that means it becomes possible to mark the violence observed as ‘dumb’, rather than racist and to separate himself from it. From a Butlerian perspective it would seem then that Elmeri is performatively

reiterating norms in which *Whiteness* and masculinity intersect to reproduce 'white masculinities as powerful, superior and innocent of oppressive practices rather than complicit in them.

This extract is, however, also significant because not all the boys are *white*. One is of mixed Asian and Finnish parentage. While he is not Black it is not known at the point that the story is told how he does identify and the potential costs to him of listening in silence.

### 6.3 Denial and contradictions marking a space in-between

Q: What do you think about that, does your background matter anything here at school?

Amal: Well, no.

Q: Like you are considered just like, like everyone else?

Amal: M-mm (agreeing). But if those who are for example dark-skinned or something, may sometimes have that n-word shouted at you. (...)

Q: There is quite a lot talk in the media, like for example about racism and this and that and so, have you ever thought about it, generally?

Amal: You mean racism?

Q: Yes.

Amal: Well I haven't ... I mean, everyone is equal but I haven't more, like, I mean I don't start going to streets and shout that racism is wrong, so.

In the extract above, from the individual interview that took place after the focus group discussion, Amal appears to distance himself from the 'dark-skinned', even though he recognises implicitly, as the pronoun 'you' suggests, that the 'n-word' might be shouted at him, too. He eschews the idea of being dark-skinned himself and to have thought about racism, on the grounds that 'everyone is equal'. The participant is among the very few pupils from minoritised ethnic groups in his school and, may distance himself from antiracist action also because he does not wish to draw additional attention to the ways in which he deviates from the pervasive *white* Finnish norm in his school<sup>3</sup>. In this episode he seems to defend himself against taking on board the pervasiveness of racism in his school while not entirely denying it. In doing this he seems to be somewhat discomfited in that his last turn above is marked by stops and restarts and an extreme case formulation suggesting that he does not go to the streets to shout that racism is wrong, although there has been no suggestion that he should challenge racism and he has only been asked whether he has ever thought of racism. Since the interviewer is a white woman (differing from Amal in terms of racialisation as well as generation and gender), the opening questions may well have interpellated him into minoritised racialised positioning and positioned the interviewer as *white*. The contradictions he seems to face may well allow space for change in his narratives. As Youdell (2006) suggested

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<sup>3</sup> These interviews were conducted before the resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests following the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a policeman in the US. We do not, therefore, know if this boy's narrative has changed as a result.

from a Butlerian perspective, boys do not necessarily take up the subject positions constructed for them but can resist and constitute themselves differently.

#### 6.4 Being trans\* and having to learn boy culture

Over the last forty years, a variety of studies have shown that masculinities are not confined to cis\*boys (Renold and Ringrose 2012). Butler's (1990) theorisation of performative gender was amongst the first to illuminate the importance of attending to subjects and practices who are queering the cis\* and heteronormative order. In the study reported here, one trans\*boy was interviewed along with his friend. Sami, having been a girl for most of his life, reported that he was unfamiliar with the performative elements of normative masculinity. In particular, the joking rituals that boys routinely use to maintain relationships with each other and negotiate masculine hierarchies. As is evident in the extract below, the boys in Sami's school used his unfamiliarity in ways that excluded him, rendered him an outsider and reproduced a gender binary. In consequence, Sami continued to 'hang out' with girls.

Q: Yes that how in your own life that are you um --you said that the girls and boys normally stay separate and also that some things are boyish and some are girly, so do you in your opinion fit into the girls' or boys' mould?

Sami: Well. I can say that many boys, I basically hang out with some boys, they are quite nice guys they have funny jokes with each other all the time. But, especially with the teen boys there is a certain culture which is sometimes very kind of-- that I obviously don't know. So it is difficult to hang out with the boys sometimes, there is always that kind of thing that you are a girl. You do not know what's going on. So then I often hang out a bit more with the girls. Then I have some transgender boys as friends that are (pause) not so-- although many of them are masculine and behave in very boyish ways, so they do not have the 'Go away you are not one of us' thing going on. And then quite uniquely. I don't know what's going on. I kind of do not fit any moulds very well. (Sami, a 14-year-old trans boy interviewed with his friend Katarina).

As with any group, being able to fit in is often a prerequisite for being able to permeate the boundaries constructed around the group and be accepted as an insider. Sami explains that there are other transgender boys who are 'better' at doing masculinity and do not have the same difficulty he does. His short extract indicates how difficult it is to achieve acceptance as masculine and how easy it is to fail if one does not understand and feel comfortable with the practices that have to be reiterated to claim masculinity. It becomes clear that sometimes he is denied masculinity and read as a girl, who does not know how boy culture works. This can be seen as a violent act, which denies Sami recognition of his gender identity and is meant to exclude him, downgrading him as well as femininity in general. But being trans\* seems to allow him to move between different groups—the cis\*boys and girls as well as the trans\*boys, who behave in more boyish ways and, according to Sami, are more included by the boys. Like Amal in the sequence above, he inhabits a liminal space, in this case in relation to gender.

While ‘race’ is not mentioned here, it is noteworthy that Sami, at different points in the interview does bring together gender and sexuality, constructing his Queerness together with *Whiteness*, as when he discusses enjoying a particular computer game because it has LGBT\* characters. He also, together with the girl with whom he is interviewed, addresses the intersections of gender, racialisation and social class by pointing out that it is the *white*, middle-class boys who are most exclusionary in school.

## 7 Discussion

In the interviews discussed above *Whiteness* was implicitly constructed as the norm and rarely mentioned. As (Peltola and Phoenix 2022) have argued, in Finland the myth of a racial monoculture has been pervasive since the nationalist movements and it has overshadowed Finland’s history with the Sami, Roma, Tatars, Russians and Jews. This myth of Finland as a *white* country is evident in the interviews with the young students.

Regarding intersections of race and gender it was striking that cis\*masculinity is constructed implicitly as *white* and superior, while Blackness is constructed as the other and in the case of the Black boy described Blackness is made the only central category in the scene while gender is sidelined. In general, ridicule, exclusionary practices and devaluation—of femininity, Blackness, trans\*—appear to be important parts of doing *white* masculinity here.

The examples above show that Amal (who is mixed Asian/Finnish) and Sami (who is a *white* trans\*boy) face contradictions and ambivalences that keep them from being part of hegemonic masculinity but that also allow for space for change. They seem to inhabit liminal spaces that are marked by both exclusion and inclusion. In the interview with Amal it was striking that racism was denied and colorism adopted while racism was repeatedly emptied of meaning. We assume that these contradictions mark this attempt to pass as a member of the in-group (*white* cis\*boys). This contrasts with Sami’s doing of trans\*: He seems to take the opportunity to move between different groups and to accept that there is no one group to which he completely belongs. In addition, the trans\*perspective makes it possible for him to address intersections of gender, racialisation and social class by pointing out that it is the *white*, middle-class boys who are most exclusionary in school. This critical view might be open to him precisely because the option to be part of cis\*masculinity is not open to him.

Analysing discursive processes of subjectivation together with affect show very clearly how “the affective economies of Whiteness” (Eriksen 2020) serve to produce male identities in the classroom, while race is externalised, and racism is ridiculed or downplayed. The legacies of colonialism can be seen most explicitly in the story of the degradation and racist attacks on the Black boy reported in a focus group discussion to have bananas thrown at him. In that example the dehumanization of Black people is linked with a lack of empathy and a refusal to recognize the damage that racism causes to those subjected to it. This lack of empathy then reproduces relations of inequality and oppression and (unemotional) *white* male

superiority. In keeping with Zembylas (2021) it is not only knowledge but also affects that are learned in schools and that consequently have to be unlearned, if decolonization is to be achieved. In this context, we also want to point to the paradox between egalitarian discourses and students' maintenance of racism and hierarchical racialised structures: the equality discourse was adopted by most of the students interviewed, even when racist incidents were described. Techniques like the downplaying of racism as something personal and individual make it possible to mark violence observed as 'dumb', rather than racist and to externalize racism as the preserve of some dumb individuals.

Bringing together our theoretical arguments about performativity and subjectivation with Helsinki young people's narratives of masculinities, racialisation and gender, it becomes clear that there is a need to expand Butler's theory in three ways. First, the performativity of gender is always racialized. If gender is theorized as "colour-neutral" it usually implies *Whiteness* and, as Sabine Broeck has recently argued for most feminist theories, the abjection of Blackness is implied (Broeck 2018).

Second, the relational construction of racialized and gendered subjects would have to focus on the simultaneous emergence of different relational positions, including the humanizing of some positions and the dehumanizing of others. If subjectivation goes along with the de/subjectivation of others, then the processes by which de/subjectivation occurs and the affects involved have to be central to theories of subjectivation.

Third, the relations between power-knowledge and affects need to be given a systematic place in theories of subjectivation. While Butler's theorization has addressed melancholia as a reaction to unacknowledged and socially enforced losses (Butler 2001), a broader range of affects would have to be addressed when Black subjects and histories of enslavement are made the focus of the theorization of subjectivation.

Overall then, the analyses above have shown that the dynamic and situated inter-sectional linking of racialisation and gender make considerations of racialisation, racisms and their associated affects central to Butler's (2004b) vision of un/doing gender.

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