

# Everyday racism and constructions of racial/ethnic difference in and through football talk

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## Abstract

Earlier research has shown how football media use specific racial/ethnic stereotypes, thereby reinforcing certain hierarchies along the lines of race and ethnicity. We use a cultural studies perspective to explore the discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in football among Dutch multiethnic football media audiences when they talk about football. We have interviewed 30 participants in five focus groups to collect our data. Our analysis shows that everyday football talk mainly reproduces racial/ethnic stereotypes and everyday racisms, and that race and ethnicity intersect with other markers of difference like nation, culture and religion in the discourses people draw on. Which specific difference is prioritized depends on context and interview questions. Furthermore, our analysis shows that ethnic diversity is celebrated and supported but that this support is conditional and combined with reinforcing biologically and culturally informed racisms. Findings are discussed in a wider academic and societal context.

## Keywords

Audiences, football talk, gender, media, race/ethnicity, sport

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## Introduction

Issues related to immigration and diversity dominate news headlines in contemporary European media. This also applies to the Netherlands – the main point of reference in this article – where opinion makers emphasize the necessity of managing the influx of refugees and stress that immigrants need to integrate fully in society. Islam, in particular, is perceived – by the press as well as many politicians and lay publics – as incompatible with ‘Western’ cultural values and an obstacle for minority ethnic groups to integrate. In addition, strongly rooted colonial and racist concerns have remained significant in Dutch society and media as well. In the past years, racialized divides and racist mindsets have become more visible and explicit (Wekker, 2016). This is not specific for the Netherlands but has also been discussed for other countries like, for instance, the United States, the United Kingdom or Finland (Hylton, 2009; Morning, 2009; Rastas, 2005).

An important but often unacknowledged site for the reproduction of hegemonic discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in contemporary society is football in the media (Carrington, 2011; Van Sterkenburg & Spaaij, 2016). This applies especially to men’s football *on television* which is characterized by its massive ‘live’ audiences as well as the visibility it gives to players of diverse racial/ethnic origins.

Various researchers have tried to capture how the media give meaning to footballers and athletes of various racial/ethnic origins (e.g. Hylton, 2009; Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers & De Leeuw, 2012). Most content analyses of sport media have been US- or UK-oriented and have defined race in terms of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). Results show that sport media often associate Black male and female athletes with natural athleticism and genetic athletic superiority (e.g. Carrington, 2001; Hylton, 2015). White athletes, on the other hand, are more often associated with hard work, dedication and intelligence, or remain more invisible in the coverage, thereby becoming the ‘invisible norm’ against which Black athletes are constructed as extraordinary ‘natural’ athletes (e.g. Bradbury et al., 2011; Hylton, 2009). This racialized discourse about Black and White athletes is widespread and has been found in sport media across the world (e.g. Coakley et al., 2008; Coram, 2007; Ogasawara, 2004). The omnipresence and daily repetition of such discourses means that they can easily become part of common sense knowledge. Consequently, they *naturalize* a social hierarchy in which (White) majority ethnic people are associated with skills like leadership and mentality that are usually rated more positively than characteristics like natural athleticism ascribed to (non-White) racial/ethnic minorities. Müller et al. (2007) have used the term *racialization* for this which refers to the routine, subconscious and everyday practices of racial/ethnic categorization and stereotyping through which everyday racism becomes normalized.

## Research question and previous research on audiences

Despite the relevant knowledge these content and textual analyses have generated, relatively little is known about discourses surrounding race/ethnicity used by *ordinary football media audiences*. This is a serious omission given the widespread academic consensus that media consumption is never straightforward and should be seen as a

process of negotiation in which media content gains meaning in interaction with the 'public'/viewers (e.g. Hermes, 2005; Madianou, 2011). The present study aims to address this omission and explore youth media audiences (15–30 years) of men's and women's football and their discourses surrounding race and ethnicity when they talk about football. A focus on youth is relevant as young people are relatively susceptible to social influences (Flanagan and Sherrod, 1998) including those produced by the (football) media. Based on previous research, we expect that everyday racism and racialized/ethnicized discourses get reinforced in and through respondents' football talk. At the same time, it remains unclear which directions these discourses go and how young people themselves reflect on racial/ethnic stereotypes in football media. Some of the few audience studies that have been done found that young media users of different racial/ethnic origins generally tend to accept and promote the hegemonic discourses surrounding race and ethnicity (re)produced by the sport media (e.g. Buffington and Fraley, 2008; Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Other studies suggest, however, the matter is more complex and concluded that whether or not, and how, media users adopt hegemonic media discourses depends on context and social positioning they bring to the media text (Azzarito and Harrison, 2008; Hermes, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2003; Morning, 2009). The present study will give further insights into how everyday football talk draws on and reinforces (or challenges) wider racial/ethnic stereotypes, categorizations and hierarchies. Including men's *and* women's football in our study is rare but provides us with the opportunity to analyse how meanings given to race/ethnicity may intersect with those about gender. The question of relevance of this study can now be formulated as follows: *How do young Dutch media users give meaning to race/ethnicity in their football talk and how do they (re)produce (or challenge) racial/ethnic stereotypes and everyday racism in that meaning-making process?*

## Race and ethnicity

Following a cultural studies theoretical approach, we consider race and ethnicity not as 'properties' or 'essences' residing in individuals but rather as naturalized social constructs that operate in everyday culture, among others in mediated football and 'TV talk' about football (Hylton, 2015; Pitcher, 2014). Various scholars have distinguished between the concepts of race and ethnicity, with ethnicity usually referring to cultural traits such as language, dress, norms and values, and 'race' referring to biological characteristics such as skin colour, 'natural' strength or other physical markers. Although we acknowledge these analytic distinctions between race and ethnicity, we also argue that race and ethnicity often get used in conflated ways in everyday discourse, thereby disrupting the analytic distinctions between the concepts (Gunaratnam, 2003; Hall, 2000; Hylton, 2009). Such conflation happens, for instance, when ethnic groups are discussed as biologically or physically different from each other or, the other way around, when a non-White skin colour is associated with *cultural* inferiority (Van Sterkenburg, 2011). We therefore use race and ethnicity as conflated concepts in our writing ('race/ethnicity'). Hall (2000) and Gunaratnam (2003) spoke of racism's two registers of biology and culture, with one getting primacy over the other depending on context and situation. Morning (2009) showed, for instance, how US students equated

race with culture and ethnicity when discussing ‘race’ in a general sense while claiming biologically informed racial differences between Blacks and Whites when discussing sport performance (also Van Sterkenburg, 2015).

Everyday race/ethnicity talk is further complicated by the fact that when (re)creating racial/ethnic divisions, people draw on other markers of difference as well, most notably those grounded in religion or nationality (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Hermes, 2005; Hylton, 2009). References to nationhood or religion allow people to circumvent the use of older, biologically informed racisms that are considered taboo and instead construct more ‘accepted’, hidden forms of racial/ethnic hierarchies and in/exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Morning, 2009). In our research, we reflect critically on such ‘race/ethnicity talk’ in the context of (mediated) football and explore, among other things, how power relations mediate the discourses used by youth audiences. Following a cultural studies theoretical approach, we thereby consider (football) media audiences as negotiating the various discourses and racial/ethnic classifications the media text offers while we also acknowledge that media content and media production prioritize and inscribe certain privileged representations and classifications that tend to produce ‘preferred readings’ of the text among audiences (Morley, 2006).

## **Dutch (football) context**

The main point of reference in this study is Dutch society. Dutch society can be characterized as a multiethnic society. The largest minority ethnic categories are usually defined as ‘Moroccan’, ‘Turkish’, ‘Surinamese’ and ‘Antillean’, while the (White) majority ethnic group is usually coined ‘Dutch’ in everyday discourse. This terminology shows how in everyday Dutch discourse minority ethnic groups are framed as having no history in the Netherlands (Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004), as not really ‘Dutch’ and, thus, outsiders. Those who are seen as belonging to the White Dutch majority ethnic population, on the other hand, are automatically included in the popular imagination of the Dutch nation (Wekker, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Similar to many other European countries, football players of a great diversity of ethnic backgrounds participate in the Dutch men’s club competition and the national team. Especially Dutch players of Surinamese descent and (increasingly) those of Moroccan descent are well represented and visible in Dutch professional club football as well as the national men’s football team. Contrary to men’s football, women’s professional football in the Netherlands is mainly a White sport. In terms of participation, women’s football is the most popular team sport for Dutch adult women. Despite this, women’s football gets only marginal media attention compared to the men’s game. Again, this is not unique to the Dutch context but applies to many other European countries including those that have a successful track record in women’s football like Germany or Sweden (Peeters & Elling, 2014).

## **Method**

### *Sample*

In order to explore how Dutch multiethnic youth audiences give meaning to race/ethnicity in mediated football, five focus group interviews have been conducted with 30

participants, 15 males and 15 females. Composition of all focus groups was mixed in terms of race/ethnicity and gender of participants. Respondents were aged between 15 and 30 years and had different racial/ethnic backgrounds, with interviewees of majority Dutch (11 participants), Indonesian (5), Antillean/Aruban (3), Surinamese (2), Surinamese-Moroccan (1) Moroccan (1), East European (2), South European (2), Turkish (1), Chilean (1) and Portuguese-Angolese-Cape-Verdean (1) backgrounds. Educational level of participants ranged from vocational education called *Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs* in the Netherlands (middle-level applied education) to higher education (universities and universities of applied science). All participants practised sports on a recreational level, some practised many sports including football, on an almost daily basis, while some others practised only now and then. This variation also applies to football media consumption with some interviewees watching football occasionally and others watching on an almost daily basis. The main source of watching football mentioned by the respondents was television. The majority of respondents watched men's football only, though a few respondents watched both men's and women's football.

### *Data collection and analysis*

In total, we have conducted five focus group interviews. Focus group methodology reflects as closely as possible the natural environment of watching and talking about football. Each focus group consisted of five to seven respondents who were often friends or acquaintances from each other. This created an informal atmosphere in which people felt free to discuss a possibly sensitive topic such as race/ethnicity in football. The interviews were conducted in November and December 2015 by student-interviewers who did the interviews in the framework of their fourth-year research workshop Television Audiences (*Televisiepubliek*) at Erasmus University Rotterdam.<sup>2</sup> Authors of this article have trained the student-interviewers prior to the interviews. Interviewers used, to an important extent, a similar topic list which was drafted by the authors of this article and was structured according to the following main themes: (1) sport practice and football consumption in media, (2) identification with football players (among others based on race/ethnicity), (3) discourses surrounding (qualities of) footballers of diverse racial/ethnic origins and (4) perceptions towards football media's treatment of race/ethnicity in football. Apart from these topics, there was room for some different, additional themes and topics to emerge during each interview (Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). It means that the focus groups were largely similar although sometimes different in content and that some topics were only discussed in one or two interviews. Respondents came from across the Netherlands and were recruited through the snowball method (Boeije, 2010). Interviewees were told that the interviews would be transcribed literally and were offered anonymity. The interviews took place in people's homes or in a location selected by the interviewers (usually a quiet location) and lasted around 40 to 60 minutes.

We analysed the transcripts from the interviews by searching for emergent patterns through the use of open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). The detailed breaking down of data and the constant comparison of themes with the data and with each other expanded the density of the analysis. This finally resulted in a limited number of themes that covered the data and that reflected the wider discourses participants drew on when

interpreting race and ethnicity in the football context. In the analytic process, we attended to the variegated nature of discourses that respondents drew on. We also reflected on our own positioning in terms of race/ethnicity in relation to our research. In the next concluding paragraph of this ‘Method’ section, we will address this in some more detail.

### *White researchers*

Similar to most of the researchers publishing on the topic of race and sport, we are White (male and female) researchers. We recognize that our White skin colour usually remains invisible, unexplored and unquestioned, both in society at large and in relation to the possible impact it has on our research. We realize we may tend to use White-situated frameworks of interpretations in our daily lives and our research without being aware of it, and that we have not been the object of racial discrimination or (media-)stereotyping like some of our interviewees (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg & Mignon, 2018). We therefore consider the primacy we give to our theoretical perspective of cultural studies as an important tool to avoid writing in ways that are automatically congruent with a White situated way of thinking (Van Sterkenburg, 2011). We have discussed extensively the cultural studies perspective and Whiteness theories with our (mainly White) student-interviewees as well. A cultural studies perspective encourages self-reflection and awareness of racial/ethnic situatedness; this helps us to rethink and extend beyond commonsensical (often White situated) discourses when interpreting research findings. As such, we believe that our results and analysis give a theoretically informed and situated account of the various discourses produced by participants that were being interviewed.

In the next section, we will present our analysis. In describing our findings, we will focus on three separate, but ultimately interrelated themes: the (conditional) ideal of ethnic diversity in football, racial/ethnic stereotypes in football talk, and the aura of individuality. These themes reveal how football talk mainly draws on and reinforces implicit and taken-for-granted racialized/ethnicized discourses and stereotypes. The ‘Analysis’ section is followed by a ‘Discussion/conclusion’ section, where the discourses will be discussed and the power structures related to these discourses analysed and uncovered.

## **Analysis**

### *The (conditional) ideal of ethnic diversity in football*

A prominent discourse that was drawn upon in almost all focus groups was that ethnic diversity in (mediated) football is something that should be cherished. Various argumentations lay behind this notion. The most prominent one identified is that Dutch society is viewed as multiethnic in composition and the national men’s team in this instance as a mirror of that same society. The following statement by a woman of Chilean descent is indicative of this discourse: ‘[...] because the Netherlands is so multicultural, that it [the Dutch national men’s team in the media] basically shows the real image of the Netherlands’. One White Dutch woman praised the solidarity that arises among various cultures when the Dutch national team plays: ‘It’s no longer the case that cultures are separately supporting their countries, but that everyone supports the Netherlands together’.

Although ethnic diversity in football was lauded, there were limitations to this ideal. The last quotation in the preceding paragraph suggests, for instance, that support for diversity may be connected to other aspects like the positive effect it has on the support for the Netherlands among different cultural groups. Another example comes from a male and female interviewee of Dutch-Indonesian descent who argued that players should have a Dutch passport to be eligible to play for the Dutch team. The man went one step further and added that players 'should be properly Dutch', but he did not divulge any extra information as to what being 'properly Dutch' consists of beyond having a Dutch passport. In some interviews, an example was introduced to the interviewees that provides us with some additional insights on this matter. In 2007, there was some consternation after a couple of Dutch-Surinamese players playing for the Dutch national team under 21 were waving a Surinamese flag after winning the European Championship. The KNVB (the Dutch National Football Association) decided to instate an impromptu ban on flags from countries other than the Netherlands. Most interviewees expressed some confliction over this issue and were ambiguous as to whether the right choice was made by the Dutch national football association (KNVB). A couple of interviewees argued that it would be hypocritical to forbid such a thing as it would deny the colonial relation between Suriname and the Netherlands. Previous research has shown how Dutch youth of diverse ethnic backgrounds sometimes view the colonial linkage between the two countries as an important criterion to view Dutch players of Surinamese descent as 'properly Dutch' (Van Sterkenburg, 2013).

On the other hand, it was considered a bit odd to wave a flag of another country during a game for the Netherlands and most stated that, would they themselves be in that exact position, they would refrain from such behaviour. A minority of interviewees gave more straightforward answers by, for example, ridiculing the notion that a flag was in any way important. Yet, as discussions went on, most of the interviewees remained conflicted about celebrating multiple ethnic/national identities by waving another countries' flag when playing for the Dutch team. A Dutch White male argued,

I agree with the KNVB on this point, because they [Dutch-Surinamese players] are playing for the Netherlands and not for Surinam. Because then you get Moroccan players with Moroccan flags and this would open the floodgates.

This quotation confirms that while ethnic diversity is celebrated, this celebration is not unconditional. To be seen as 'properly Dutch' then means identifying with the Dutch nation and refraining from expressing loyalty or identification with multiple nations even though those nations are connected to one's ethnic heritage. Factors like ethnicity and colonial relationships play a role in perceived identification with the Dutch nation and in who is seen as properly Dutch. Furthermore, the quotation bears witness of another discourse. Because although the example supplied was specific to Dutch-Surinamese relations, the respondent broadens this to Dutch-Moroccan players waving a Moroccan flag that 'would open the floodgates' to who knows what else. In this case, the Dutch-Moroccan identity is viewed through the prism of Dutch football as the 'ultimate ethnic Other' (Van Sterkenburg, 2013: 389). We will return to this in the 'Discussion/conclusion' section. These debates signal the conflictual nature of the hegemonic Dutch discourse surrounding ethnic diversity and the celebration of multiculturalism in football. This discourse was furthered when attention was directed towards women's football.

Whereas men's professional football in the Netherlands is a multicultural phenomenon, the national women's team is largely made up of White players. As mentioned earlier, most of the respondents did not watch women's football in the media and only a few had seen a couple of games. Nevertheless, some very clearly defined discourses emerged around this intersection of gender and ethnicity. First, it was generally argued that it would be a good thing if the Dutch national women's team would be more inclusive of other ethnicities, which mirrors the discourse on the ideal of ethnic diversity that was salient in the discussion of men's football. Various explanations were given for the homogeneous (White) composition of Dutch professional women's football, the most dominant ones being the perceived traditional gender relations in 'Other' cultures and the disinterestedness of Black women (specifically of Surinamese, Antillean descent) in football. So it was argued, regardless of interviewees' gender or ethnicity, that the reason the Dutch national women's team is overtly White has to do with the traditional upbringing in certain minority cultures. While these 'minority cultures' were not always explained or specified it, others were more forthcoming as one woman of Dutch-Italian descent explained:

Because yes, Turkish women participate less in sport. They, if I may say so, are prohibited from doing this by their husbands and family. The same goes for Moroccan women. And as for Surinamese women, I don't know, maybe they're just lazy. And Antillean might just be [lazy] as well.

These discourses around traditional gender relations also reveal that the interviewees who used this discourse viewed cultures as clearly demarcated entities and thereby disavowing the potential for symbiosis between multiple cultures (e.g. Dutch-Turkish, Dutch-Moroccan). The last two statements of the quote on women of Surinamese and Antillean descent were echoed by other interviewees, with a Dutch-Antillean man arguing that Black women are built to 'be quiet', 'sit still' or 'dance'.

These quotations show how football talk is both receptive to and productive of racialized/ethnicized meanings. These meanings posit racial/ethnic minority athletes as 'different' and deviant in physical and cultural terms using long-standing racial-gendered tropes such as (here) the association of Black women with 'being lazy' and 'built to dance'. The White Dutch category, in contrast, remains unspoken and thereby becomes the human norm against which 'the racial/ethnic Others' are described and assessed. In the next section, we will return to football talk as a site in which such racial/ethnic differentiation gets reproduced, both in relation to male and female athletes.

### *Racial/ethnic stereotypes in football talk*

The relation between race/ethnicity and players' capabilities or properties was frequently discussed. Two major discourses could be distinguished here: one drawing on the idea of racially/ethnically defined capabilities (discussed in this section), the other emphasizing individuality and the irrelevance of race/ethnicity (presented in the next section). The main point of reference was usually men's mediated professional football, which was viewed as the overall norm in football.



The first major discourse, used by both majority and minority ethnic respondents, was one that reproduced dominant ideas about Black natural athleticism and White ‘mental and intellectual capacities’. A ‘natural physicality discourse’ was invoked by claiming that Black players were faster, more athletic and stronger than White players. Explanations were not always given, but when that happened it was argued that Blacks could more easily gain muscle mass which required more intensive training for White players. Furthermore, players of Surinamese origin in particular were described as being ‘egocentric’, more interested in ‘making these little dance moves’ and generally to have an inclination towards showmanship. A conversation between various interviewees is indicative of this type of discourse:

Black players they shoot harder I think. I don’t know, it looks like they can shoot a fair bit harder than other players (Dutch-Antillean man)

More animal (Dutch White man)

More muscle (Dutch White woman)

But, uhm, less concentrated (Dutch-Antillean man)

Seedorf [a Dutch ex-professional football player of Surinamese origin], that was truly an animal. You would see his stomach and then, uh, when you would hit it you would break your own hands. But I think that Black players shoot harder, but less controlled and that White players shoot with more control, but with less speed and that Moroccan players shoot a bit in between, but with more action and flair. (Dutch White man)

Footballers of Moroccan or Turkish descent, as can partly be gleaned from the explanation by the Dutch White male above, were often described in opposition to both Black and White players. Besides residing somewhere ‘in between’ Black and White players with regard to shooting power and skills, Dutch-Moroccan players were also seen as being ‘more athletic/dynamic’ (than White players) and as possessing ‘better technical skills’. The fact that players of Moroccan and Turkish descent were described in opposition to both Black and White players was also evident in the divergent racial terminology used by some. For example, a man of Dutch-Antillean descent used the denominator ‘light tinted brown player’ – it is quite common in the Dutch language when talking about people with a Moroccan and Turkish background to refer to their skin complexion residing between White and Black – to describe these players as fast and athletic. Players were also discussed as coming ‘from the street’ and as ‘attacking and fast players’. These street footballers were seen as egocentric, focused on making goals and going for their own success. Previous research (Van Sterkenburg & Blokzeijl, 2017) also revealed how Dutch-Moroccan footballers were relatively often associated with ‘street culture’ and how egoism and technical skills were seen as part of that culture.

Now and then, female football players were discussed. Black women were sometimes seen as lazy or simply not interested in football, while a contradictory discourse was also used by arguing that Black female players (with women of Surinamese origin oftentimes used as a referent) are either fast, tough and fierce or technically gifted

players. Sometimes, these discourses of differences between races/ethnicities were rejected and the significance of individual qualities of players was stressed. We will return to that later in our results.

In contrast to Black players, White (male) players were more readily associated with mental capacities: having key tactical insight combined with technical competency (e.g. giving key passes, controlling the ball) and acting as leaders on the pitch. This was also evident in the fact that White Dutch players such as Wesley Sneijder, Robin van Persie and Arjen Robben were pointed out as being representative of Dutch football and who were seen as possessing these same values. There were some divergences from this discourse when White Dutch defenders such as Jaap Stam and Frank de Boer were associated with an ‘imposing and beast-like appearance’. The overall height and strength of White Dutch players, and thus their strength as defenders, was noted as well. However, these aberrations mainly show that White players could be described with a variety of skills and capabilities, and were above all described as possessing a combination of good technical and tactical skills.

### *Individual quality is king, but where does it leave race and ethnicity?*

Sometimes claims which connected racial/ethnic background to specific qualities were discredited, and the ideas of race/ethnicity as an indicator of a player’s capabilities dismissed. Generally, it was then argued that the professional values and qualities of the individual mattered and not his or her race or ethnicity. A man of Dutch-Surinamese descent argued from his own perspective as a footballer:

I don’t think that it matters in football where you’re from or whether you’re White, Black or yellow. That doesn’t really factor into your performance. I can know. When I was playing for Sparta [Dutch professional football club], I certainly wasn’t better than those Dutch boys.

The implicit notion here was that if you have got the individual quality as a player, you will be exactly at the place you need to be. Race or racism in football, in its most explicit and identifiable instance, when it was at all identified, was usually relegated to amateur football or the stands (‘look, football fans are idiots that sing those sort of things [racist chants] or throw bananas on the pitch [...]’).

The emphasis on the individual was furthermore evident in the discussions about stereotypical representations in the sport media. Not surprisingly, the main point of reference in these discussions was football *on television* (with the televised football match as one of the most popular TV genres in the Netherlands). First, it was generally argued that stereotypical ideas about racial/ethnic difference might reside in the sport media – to some extent at least. However, this was often quickly followed up by either saying that this is specific to some individual journalists in the media or that these stereotypical ideas actually have some basis in reality and thus were not necessarily wrong. As one male with a mixed-racial background explains,

[...] They really say it indeed, yes, 'I think that Black guy is quick so keep him short'. So it's a prejudice, but very often it corresponds to reality which makes them right in their judgement. I also think it depends upon the personal appeal of the player if he gets such an opinion or not.

Two interviewees argued that the association between the capacity to run on one hand and being Black on the other may be just a correct reflection of reality, pointing to the case that good marathon runners are always from Kenya or Ethiopia and that White athletes rarely feature at the top of such events. Another example focused on the dominance of Black boxers like Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson. Commentators, it was also argued, might unconsciously adopt stereotypical tropes about race/ethnicity, but that is simply because these tropes are manifest in the sporting practice itself and therefore are simply a fact. These examples show how a physicality discourse around Black athletes which is socially constructed was interpreted as 'natural' and common sense. Racial and ethnic difference might be enlarged somewhat by the media, but in the end they are simply (objectively) reporting what they see on the playing field, these interviewees argued.

## Discussion/conclusion

The present study shows how everyday football talk constitutes an important platform for everyday practices of racial/ethnic categorization and stereotyping. At first glance, our analysis seems to provide an optimistic view of Dutch audiences' understanding of race and ethnicity in televised football. Existing ethnic/racial differences seemed to be celebrated in football and seen as a reflection of the social reality of racial/ethnic diversity in the Netherlands. However, at the same time, it becomes clear that this celebration of racial/ethnic diversity in the Dutch national football team has its limitations. Some respondents who promoted racial/ethnic diversity *also* assessed this diversity primarily with regard to minority players' visible identification with the Dutch nation and the Dutch team. The celebration of diversity is, thus, not as inclusive as it may look but instead draws on a dichotomy between the minority ethnic players on one hand, who have to express their loyalty to the Dutch nation in order to be accepted as 'properly Dutch' and included in this celebration of diversity, and the majority White Dutch on the other, who remain unspoken, invisible and normative.

Sometimes ethnic/racial diversity was celebrated while an enlightened racist discourse (Hylton, 2009) was used in which positive natural physical characteristics are ascribed to the ethnic/racial (Black) Other. Thus, in the opinion of some of our participants, diversity would increase the talent pool in sport. This dovetails with previous research which shows how in sport Whites are often socially constructed as intellectually superior and hardworking, while Black athletes are associated with physical strength and a biological predisposition to excel in sports because of their physique (e.g. Bradbury et al., 2011; Hylton, 2015). The natural athleticism discourse seemed most prominently used to understand racial and ethnic differences in relation to the White norm.

In contrast, it was also argued that race and ethnicity have nothing to do with the competences of football players. Ideas about individual capabilities were invoked instead. The discourse on individual capabilities seemed to provide an alternative that allowed our

participants to avoid seeking explanations for these differences that could be interpreted as racist.

The focus on individual capabilities arguably stems from the neoliberal context and meritocratic ideals embedded herein. These structures seem to be common not only in the Netherlands but also in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and Australia (e.g. Coakley and Pike, 2014; Van Houdt et al., 2011). Coakley and Pike (2014), for example, argue that the meritocratic ideals in the United Kingdom often provide arguments for people to explain athletic success. They write that the meritocratic ideology produces the idea that ‘... success is achieved only when people develop abilities to work hard. As a consequence it justifies inequality as a natural result of competition ...’ (Coakley and Pike, 2014, p. 301). Such a discourse presents (professional) sport as a level playing field and an egalitarian place independent of wider society where racial inequalities play no role whatsoever. Academic findings, however, show that professional (mediated) sport ‘remains a critical site for the reproduction (and rearticulation) of forms of racial knowledge and common-sense’ (Carrington, 2010: 175). Our findings about the use of commonsensical racial/ethnic stereotypes among our interviewees show that this also applies to everyday football talk. Various scholars such as Van den Brink and Benschop (2012), Brown et al. (2013) and Van Amsterdam (2013) have pointed out how focusing on individual capabilities renders persistent patterns of everyday racism and social inequalities invisible, not only with regard to race but also in relation to gender, social class, ability and age. Thus, the focus on individual capabilities limits possibilities for understanding the systematic character of everyday processes of racialization/ethnization.

Arguably, the same focus on individuals is implicated in discussions on the media. Even though there was an awareness that football journalists may use racial/ethnic stereotypes, the relevance and impact of those stereotypes were generally denied by arguing they may have some basis in reality. More specifically, interviewees argued these stereotypes may exist but square with the practices of individual athletes or reflected the requirements of a certain position. These interpretations undercut any discussion of systematic and institutionalized racial/ethnic bias in relation to sports media. It seems to point to a hegemonic discourse of color-blind racism and Whiteness (used by White and non-White participants in the study). Color-blind racism can be considered among the most influential discourses about race in contemporary society and operates through the denial of structural forms of racialization and the perception of racism as something of the past (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). A color-blind logic tends to trivialize and leave unaddressed structural forms of racial/ethnic bias through a focus on the individual. Within this logic, people may have a vague awareness of the structural existence of racial/ethnic stereotypes but, at the same time, these stereotypes are either seen as accurate reflections of individual qualities of athletes (see also McCarthy et al., 2003) or as the accidental result of an *individual* racist sport journalists. Either way, the focus on the individual shifts attention away from more institutionalized practices of racialization. It thereby legitimizes the lack of any substantial action against structural forms of racial inequality which numerous studies have revealed. The discourse around sport journalism as (race-) neutral and objective – which audiences as well as sport journalists themselves often draw on (Knoppers and Elling, 2004; Van Sterkenburg, 2013) – squares with and

strengthens this denial of structural forms of racial/ethnic bias in sports media. The end result is the confirmation of a racialized status quo which incorporates commonsensical stereotypes, while White normativity remains unaddressed and unchallenged (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Hylton, 2009; Wekker, 2016).

Our analysis furthermore indicated how this meaning making around race and ethnicity by Dutch audiences was enormously complex and often involved not only conceptualizations around race and ethnicity but also around issues regarding national and cultural identification. Thus, the concepts of race, ethnicity, national and cultural identifications were constantly shifting and collapsing into each other. For example, the discourse about natural athleticism was mainly used to refer to Dutch-Surinamese football players when they were trying to make sense of their athletic abilities. These players were also considered Black. It shows how biologically, racially informed discourses were prioritized when giving meaning to the category of 'Black Dutch-Surinamese' in the context of athleticism. Here, race-based categorization and biology-based argumentation seem to take function as a default category, and Dutch-Surinamese players were constructed as the ultimate *racial* Other. This dovetails with claims made by critical race scholars (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Essed and Goldberg, 2002; Hill Collins and Solomos, 2010), who argue that current discriminatory practices with regard to race and ethnicity often centre on older (colonial) discourses that use biology-based arguments or on newer discourses that focus on cultural differences but imply racialized subjects. The logic that was applied to explain the athletic abilities of Black Dutch-Surinamese players resonates with biology-based justifications of differentiation dating back to the time of colonialism and slavery when Black people were often 'defined' in terms of their physicality while White people were associated with 'the mind' and 'civilization' (Carrington, 2001; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012).

Yet when Dutch-Surinamese players were discussed in other contexts (not referring to their athletic abilities), the meaning making shifted from biology-based racial commentary to ideas about national belonging and ethnicity. For example, when interviewees discussed the incident when Dutch-Surinamese players coming out for the Dutch team under 21 during the European Championship waved the Surinamese flag, ethnic and national categorizations took precedence over racial ones. The specific markers of difference used to discuss Dutch-Surinamese players shifted from racial-biological to ethnic and national. Put differently, different topics invoked different 'registers' of racial/ethnic differentiation prioritizing either biology/'natural' capacities or ethnicity and nationality. Dutch-Moroccan players (and to a lesser extent Dutch-Turkish players) were viewed from a slightly different perspective than Dutch-Surinamese players and more often associated with ethnic and cultural differences. They were often not referred to in terms of racial or biological attributes such as skin colour but were associated with street culture, with egoism and technical skills being part of that culture. This resonates with the notion that differentiating practices expressed through currently salient migrant-hostile discourses – specifically those focusing on Muslims – are formulated along lines of culture and ethnicity (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Hill Collins and Solomos, 2010; Siebers and Dennissen, 2015). These migrant-hostile discourses seem to affect not only migrants who arrived in the Netherlands recently but also second-generation and third-generation Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan people who are reduced, through the use of these

discourses, to the master category of ‘Muslims’. As Essed and Trienekens (2008) state, within discourses about Dutch national identity, ‘references to race are more implicit and often intertwined with notions of culture and ethnicity’ (p. 55). This seemed apparent in our research when reference was made to Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish football players but less when reference was made to Dutch-Surinamese players. The absence of Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish players in women’s football, for example, was often understood in terms of cultural and religious incompatibilities of these groups with Dutch mores and values. Sometimes the absence of Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish women in football was explained by evoking stereotypes about traditional gender relations, implicitly suggesting that these are inherent to non-Western cultures and the Muslim faith. Considering the perceptions of our participants of both male and female Dutch-Moroccan – and to a lesser extent also Dutch-Turkish – players, we contend that culturally informed arguments got primacy over biologically informed arguments when discussing Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish players. Put differently, these players were constructed as the ultimate *ethnic/cultural* Others, in the sense that these ethnic categorizations were often associated with cultural and religious differences.

Moreover, the meaning making around race and ethnicity in football seemed highly gendered; both Dutch-Surinamese players (the racial Others) and Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish players (the ethnic Others) in women’s football were often described in negative terms, such as lazy, not interested, not built for or allowed to play football. While these gendered discourses were the most prominent, there were also those participants who instead drew on the same discourses for Black women as they did for Black men by characterizing them as fast, tough, fierce. These discourses reveal how Black women’s bodies are inscribed with racialized and gendered signifiers that connote both a sense of wildness and aggressiveness (fierce, tough, fast) and those that connote passiveness (lazy, not built/made for football). Together, they lay bare the intersection of sexualized and racialized discourses that Wekker (2016: 45) argues is still at the heart of Dutch racism.

Our analysis indicates that a hierarchy is constructed in relation to who counts as ‘properly Dutch’. The position one can occupy within this hierarchy depends on the positions a person is assigned on various markers of difference and sameness, most notably those of race, ethnicity, culture, nation and religion. The discourses about natural Black athleticism and White mental capacities allowed for the construction of Dutch-Surinamese players as physically superior and White ethnically Dutch players as intellectually superior. White players thus seemed to be assigned the most privileged position of Dutchness. Dutch-Surinamese players were also seen as Dutch because of their colonial heritage, among other things, but less so than their White counterparts. Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish players seemed to be placed at the bottom of this hierarchy by our participants, because of their ethnic minority status which carries implicit associations of Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish people’s religious affiliations with Islam. This may be an effect of hegemonic migrant-hostile discourses – with the refugee migrations acting as a catalyst for those – that currently dominate debates in many European countries and that focus on Muslims as culturally incompatible with the values and mores of White Western European populations (Yilmaz, in Siebers and Dennissen, 2015).

In conclusion, our analysis exemplifies how everyday football talk can be considered a site where colonially informed racial stereotypes and culturally/religiously informed ethnic stereotypes mainly get reproduced. The research also reveals the plurality of biological/colonial and new cultural forms of racism among Dutch media audiences. This emphasizes the need to move beyond the strict dichotomy of Black and White conceptualizations of race and take into consideration how other social markers such as religion, nationality, culture and gender come into play in everyday discursive practices. Our analysis indicates the difficulty of addressing these issues, because in the meaning making around differences in football the categories on which our participants drew shifted constantly from biological and racial markers, to a focus on individuality, and to cultural, ethnic, national and religious markers of difference. This makes it difficult to pinpoint or identify differentiating practices, since the perspective on what emerges as the most adequate dimension to explain differences among football players shifts according to the topic, context and interview questions. The risk of attributing differences to individual capabilities or biological makeup, as our participants often did, lies in the fact that these discourses limit possibilities for understanding and countering the systemic character of these differences and their associated discriminatory practices.

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## Notes

1. When we as the authors of this paper speak in this article of ‘Dutch society’, we mean the entire Dutch (multiethnic) nation and not only the majority racial/ethnic (White) fraction of the Dutch nation.
2. We want to express gratitude towards the student-interviewers for the time and effort they put in the interviewing process.

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