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The reproduction of deficit thinking in times of contestation: the case of higher education

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ABSTRACT

In the sociology of education, opponents of deficit thinking would be seen as important change agents, potentially inspiring radical policy change aimed at reducing systemic discrimination of specific sociodemographic groups. That is, contestation of deficit thinking can in theory lead to its destruction. In this paper, we argue that contestation can be overruled or downplayed via public discourses. From a discourse-historical approach, we illustrate how contestation was attenuated in the context of ethnicity in Flemish higher education in the period 1985–2020. We show how a variety of discursive processes eventually marginalize anti-deficit narratives in mass media texts, even though these stances were dominant at certain moments. The major contribution of our study is that it highlights important discursive mechanisms underlying the reproduction of deficit thinking in times of contestation.

Background

Deficit thinking is often seen as a major barrier to reduce long-lasting inequalities in Western education. It relates to a discourse of negativity and disempowerment (McCallum, Ryan, and Caffery 2022). Deficit thinking is linked to narratives that blame underrepresented groups for their unequal position and deny the existence of structural or systemic factors causing and maintaining inequalities (Clycq, Ward Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke 2014; Johnson, Avineri, and Johnson 2017). For instance, deficit narratives typically point at ethnic minorities lacking language skills, lower social classes lacking parental support and social networks and women lacking technical skills. In general, deficit thinking is linked to the victimization of (groups of) individuals who underachieve in education (Colak, Van Praag, & Nicaise, 2020).

However, systemic discrimination, intentionally or not, is a widely demonstrated phenomenon. According to many sociologists of education, this systemic discrimination is the real cause of long-lasting inequalities. Multiple manifestations of systemic discrimination have been identified such as educational tracking (e.g. Shavit and Müller 2000), school segregation (e.g. Beach and Sernhede 2011; Gorard and Siddiqui 2018) and institutional

racism (e.g. Agirdag 2010; Mampaey and Zanoni 2016). From this perspective, the dominance of the deficit thinking does not offer space for alternative discourses. Deficit thinking ignores the necessity of radical policy change and dismisses a sense of urgency aimed at fighting systemic discrimination, and hence, contributes to the reproduction of structural inequalities. From a deficit approach, the pupils, students or their families need to change or assimilate to the dominant norms, values and conventions.

Accordingly, most sociological studies approach deficit thinking as a dominant model in contemporary Western education, which implies that contestation tends to be neglected. Studies explore the relationship between deficit thinking and long-lasting inequalities, but they consistently assume that deficit narratives are not called into question, at least not at the macro level. At the micro level, many studies have focused on counter-narratives in specific and exceptional settings (e.g. Browning 2018; McKay and Devlin 2016; Sperling 2019), but these counter-narratives have not yet been studied at the macro level of public discourses. This brings us to the motivation for this study. Especially in the last decade, contestation is increasingly observable at the macro level, for instance in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017). Would that not—contrary to the somewhat dystopian and fatalistic perspectives of continued dominance of deficit thinking—lead to changes in public discourses?

We therefore ask what happens to deficit thinking in times of contestation. Opponents of deficit narratives may, in current public discourses, point at the existence of systemic discrimination, by pointing at structural factors causing and maintaining different types of inequality. In theory, when taken seriously, this contestation could lead to the development of policies aimed at fighting systemic discrimination. However, such processes of contestation and its implications have not been fully explored yet. In our study, we investigate whether deficit thinking is challenged and how. We zoom in on the discursive mechanisms underlying the reproduction (or destruction) of deficit narratives in public discourses. Accordingly, our research questions are: (1) How are, over time, deficit and anti-deficit narratives represented in public discourses on inequalities in higher education?; (2) How does contestation between proponents and opponents of deficit thinking evolve over time?; (3) How does contestation relate to the reproduction of deficit thinking over time? To address our research questions, we draw on the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009), which we present in the following section.

A discourse-historical approach

Drawing conceptually from the discourse-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl and Wodak 2009), we assume that contestation does not necessarily lead to the eradication of deficit thinking because anti-deficit narratives may be suppressed, either intentionally or not. When competing discourses enter the public sphere, which often happens, they fight for dominance. Our main expectation is that the arguments and perspectives of the opponents of deficit thinking will be consistently overruled or downplayed in public discourses and mass media texts in particular (see also Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker 2021). This also implies that the rise of anti-deficit narratives may—unintendedly—not challenge the status quo.

The DHA is especially relevant to explore the evolvement of public discourses over time. DHA is centred around the interdisciplinary study of language, by using a combination of

linguistic, historical and sociological analysis. Our DHA focuses on the critical analysis of the discourses of those in power, social actors who have access to public discourses and can (re)produce or resist deficit narratives. Power is quintessential in our study and is in line with van Dijk (1996) approach, who relates power to 'privileged access to valued social resources, such as wealth, jobs, status, or indeed, a preferential access to public discourse and communication' (p. 82). More specifically, we focus on the role of mass media discourses. These types of public discourses have an import agenda-setting function in the political reality (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Mass media texts affect public opinion in that they prioritize certain discourses and marginalize others. In the context of critical media studies, scholars have already demonstrated that mass media texts tend to suppress anti-liberal social movements in the public sphere, for instance, by representing opponents of liberal policies as criminals, idiots, scumbags, etc. (Di Cicco 2010). In this way, mass media texts can have an important role in the reproduction of the status quo, given that they can silence the discourses of opponents. Analogously, we posit that mass media texts may marginalize opposition to deficit thinking, a process contributing to the reproduction of the status quo in times of contestation.

To address our specific research questions, the most relevant concepts of the DHA are ideology, power and discursive struggles. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) define ideology as 'an (often) one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group'. For instance, mass media texts may reveal ideological struggles over contrasting deficit and anti-deficit explanations of inequalities, but specific language may be used that effectively suppresses anti-deficit narratives. The concept of power is defined as 'the possibility of having one's own will within a social relationship against the will or interests of others' (Reisigl and Wodak 2009, p. 88) and this also implies that social actors differ in their ability to shape mass media texts. For instance, academics have a certain scientific authority, hence they possess more power to (re)shape the dominant thinking in mass media texts. However, producers of mass media texts can also control the access to these public discourses, hence they could also be seen as powerful social actors themselves. For instance, journalists can give voice to academics reproducing deficit narratives and they can consistently exclude academics (or other social actors) resisting these narratives. Accordingly, public discourses result from the dynamic interplay between powerful social actors (e.g. politicians, civil servants, academics, journalists). Overall, our DHA is positioned around the identification of powerful actors' manipulative language that establishes, maintains or resists deficit thinking.

Methodology

We address our research questions by conducting a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of mass media texts (see also Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker 2021) on ethno-racial inequality in Flemish higher education. Traditionally, deficit thinking has been very dominant in the context of Flemish education, especially in discussions about ethno-racial inequality (Clycq, Ward Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke 2014; Colak, Van Praag, & Nicaise, forthcoming). However, we chose this context because of the contestation of deficit thinking that we observed, especially in the last decade. More specifically, we encountered multiple mass media texts pointing at systemic discrimination in Flemish (higher) education. For instance,

in a recent article, reference was made to segregation and prejudice as important causes of ethno-racial inequality in (higher) education (*Het Belang van Limburg*, October 24, 2020).

We collected mass media texts from 1985–2020, which we approach as public discourses. We used a combination of key words to search relevant texts in the Gopress database (www.gopress.be). This database is a digital archive of newspapers in the Netherlands and Belgium, from which we selected (all) Dutch-language national and regional newspapers (currently there are twelve newspapers in the database, nine of these featured texts we analysed) and looked at texts appearing in the period 1985–2020, taking two-year time spans five years apart (e.g. 2009–2010 and 2004–2005) to capture the discourses in those periods. In Flemish printed media research, scholars commonly make a distinction between quality and popular newspapers. Popular Flemish newspapers should however not be compared to British tabloids, Joye (2010) qualifies popular Flemish newspapers as middle market broadloids. It is generally agreed that the relationships between political parties, union and newspapers gradually disappeared in Flanders (Distelmans 1999). In the period of our analysis, the newspapers do not differ much in terms of ideology (see also Raeijmaekers and Maeseele 2014), be it that the quality newspapers are slightly more geared towards an elite readership. This is also reflected in their circulation. Currently, the distribution of broadloid *Het Laatste Nieuws* is around 300,000 copies, followed by another broadloid *Het Nieuwsblad* (265,000 copies). The regional popular newspapers reach around 100,000 copies (*Het Belang van Limburg, Gazet van Antwerpen*). The largest quality newspaper is *De Standaard* (100,000), followed by *De Morgen* (50,000) and *De Tijd* (35,000). Obviously, the circulation changes over time, but market shares (in percentages) did not change drastically. Two media concerns (also involved in other media: radio and television, and both working internationally)—*Mediahuis* and *DPG Media*—dominate the Flemish landscape. They each distribute both popular and quality newspapers. *Mediahuis*, for instance, owns *De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen* and *Het Belang van Antwerpen*.

The discourses on deficit thinking and ethnic (in)equalities in society, and education in particular, is hard to disconnect from the socio-political context and demography patterns. In terms of demographics, between 1980–2005, the migrant population in Flanders was stable, amounting to roughly 10% of the total population. From 2005 on, there is a steady increase, with currently around 25% of the inhabitants being foreign-born. The most common origin of foreigners is from neighbouring countries France, the Netherlands and Germany, but there are also large groups from Italy, Romania, Morocco, Poland and Spain. Sealy and Modood (2019) report that the increasing ethnic and religious plurality went hand in hand—as in many other Western countries—with increasing inequalities, various studies confirming that ethnic/religious minorities also suffer from social and economic deprivation. The authors also report high levels of racism and discrimination in Belgium/Flanders, according to Eurobarometer results, among the highest in Europe. Another important element of pluralization is religious radicalization. Although the country for a long time has not witnessed a major terrorist attack, it became (and especially the capital Brussels, in the 1990s) a staging area or transit country for terrorist activities (Sealy and Modood 2019), with citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight for terrorist groups, the terrorist attack in Paris (2015) prepared in Brussels and the attacks on Zaventem airport and a Brussels metro station (2016) being visible elements of that radicalization. Politically, in the 1980s and 1990s, the traditional parties (socialists, liberals, Christian-democrats) dominated in Parliament (around 75% of the seats), although there was a big right wing/

nationalist party having around 15% of the seats. Gradually, however, extreme right-wing parties gained ground, one of them becoming the largest party in the 2004 elections (*Vlaams Blok*). Since the 2014 elections, a populist right-wing party (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*) is the largest party. Over the period of our analysis, there is a clear shift from politics being dominated by conservatives, liberals and social-democrats to a dominance of (extreme) nationalist and populists parties.

Upon closer inspection of the materials, we decided to take the texts for the period 1985–2000 together, because in these years there were—relatively speaking—fewer texts fitting our purpose. The keywords were 'allochtonen' (the Dutch umbrella term for eth-no-racial minorities and migrants), 'allochtone studenten' (students), 'migranten' (migrants), 'minderheden' (minorities), in combination with 'hoger onderwijs' (higher education). This resulted in a collection of 1,150 media texts. Then the authors carried out the next steps of the data analysis. For each text, we checked whether the text actually addressed ethno-racial inequalities. There were for instance texts that mainly addressed minorities in secondary education and mentioned 'higher education' in passing. Subsequently, in the remaining texts, we searched for signs of deficit and anti-deficit narratives. Deficit narratives are defined as accounts that emphasize equal opportunities and that attribute inequality to certain deficits such as individual or family-related problems of ethno-racial minority students (e.g. 'ethno-racial minorities are not motivated', 'they lack language skills', 'they lack parental support', etc.). Anti-deficit narratives are accounts that attribute inequality to (un) intentional systemic discrimination or certain structural factors (e.g. 'ethno-racial inequality is mainly due to educational tracking', 'ethno-racial inequality is caused by institutional racism', etc.). A key difference is that deficit narratives go hand in hand with the idea that students themselves need to change to reduce inequality (e.g. by learning the majority language), whereas anti-deficit narratives rather point at systemic and enduring challenges and, therefore, aims at radical change at the system level.

This selection process, obviously, resulted in a much smaller set of media texts, for in many texts these discourses were not clearly visible. A fair number of texts, for instance, presented factual data about participation levels of minorities in higher education. Then we embarked on an iterative process of coding to arrive at a mutually agreed upon coding scheme. While reading and discussing the texts—and inspired by our methodological and theoretical perspectives—we discovered two additional dimensions—beyond the already chosen dimension of deficit and anti-deficit narratives. First, we found that texts often discussed causes of and/or solutions for the perceived challenges or problems. From a deficit approach, solutions relate to supportive practices to counter the perceived problems of ethno-racial minority students (e.g. mentoring, tutoring, language courses). From an anti-deficit approach, solutions are centred around radical system change aimed at fighting systemic discrimination (e.g. affirmative action/positive discrimination, decolonization of the curriculum and other multicultural practices). Second, when discussing these causes and solutions, texts included either concrete causes/solutions or rather ambiguous causes/ solutions. In total, we found 228 instances of deficit or anti-deficit thinking. The table below (Table 1) presents the coding scheme and examples from our data. Quotes are translated from Dutch to English by the authors and, where needed, paraphrased to make them understood by an international readership.

From the DHA perspective, it is important to identify a range of discursive strategies underlying the prioritization or marginalization of specific discourses. Reisigl and Wodak

Table 1. Codes with examples.

Code 1: deficit/cause/concrete	'It is not that they [ethnic minorities] do not have the talents to move on to higher education, it is <u>because</u> they encounter too many obstacles. <u>Undoubtedly, one of the biggest is language deficiency</u>'	'<u>Social background continues to affect the participation</u> in higher education'.
Code 2: deficit/cause/ ambiguous	'She confirms that dropout rates among students from an ethnic minority are high. Often this is not <u>because</u> of a lack of competencies, but the <u>consequence of other social and cultural factors</u>'	'Ethnic minorities are not easily accepted on the job market, <u>participate less in higher education and cultural activities and have more health problems</u>'.
Code 3: deficit/solution/ concrete	'This project emerged from … a real concern to <u>support and guide children from an ethnic background better and to involve their parents more</u>'	'The aim is that also parents [of ethnic minorities] visit these information fairs. … <u>They have questions about study opportunities and job perspectives</u>. … It is assumed that students will perform better and <u>gain more insight in their future prospects</u>'.
Code 4: deficit/solution/ ambiguous	'He <u>initiates awareness activities at schools, mosques and community centres to promote</u> a higher level of participation in higher education'	'Provide <u>more resources to schools with underprivileged children. Ensure that teachers receive appropriate support</u>, so they can get the best out of themselves and the pupils'.
Code 5: anti-deficit /cause/ concrete	'… I do not think my teachers have assessed me objectively. <u>Dutch is not my mother tongue and I was a restless kid</u>. They judged me more on the <u>basis of those criteria than on my school results</u>'	[on the use of admission tests] '… Many mistakes happen with these tests … The worst is that there <u>were more wrong predictions for ethnic minorities, students from a lower socio-economic background and girls</u>'.
Code 6: anti-deficit/cause/ ambiguous	'I nevertheless find it appalling that citizens of this region with a migration background <u>are institutionalized</u> in the health sector'	'This is <u>not a multicultural country. It is a country that discriminates</u>, even if you have lived her for 16 years and are a dentist'.
Code 7: anti-deficit/solution/ concrete	'They [ethnic minorities] <u>are enabled to choose two foreign languages and Dutch</u>. They need to focus on their mother tongue as well. Upon graduation they have learned Dutch and three foreign languages'	'Courses will also be <u>decolonised</u> … by paying attention to scientists from diverse backgrounds, the university recognizes that <u>there are other role models next to Western scholars</u>'
Code 8: anti-deficit/solution/ ambiguous	'<u>Separate schools for ethnic minorities are out of the question</u>'	'The university <u>is not yet ready for active pluralism</u>'

(2009) pointed at five strategies, which we also explored in our study: nomination (i.e. discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions), predication (i.e. discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes and actions, more or less positively or negatively), argumentation (i.e. justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness), perspectivization (i.e. positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance) and intensification/mitigation (i.e. intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances).

It is also important to investigate texts in broader political and historical contexts (Graham, Keenan, and Dowd 2004). In the Flemish higher education context, the political climate of the last decades could be typified as neoliberal (Broucker and De Wit 2015).

Given the role of mass media in supporting the status quo (Di Cicco 2010), we assumed that mass media texts would play an important role in the protection of neoliberal ideology in case of contestation. By gaining distance from the data, which is quintessential from a CDA perspective, our overall research aim was to criticize and deconstruct the accounts in mass media texts. Three types of critiques are quintessential from the DHA (Reisigl and Wodak 2009): (1) discourse-immanent critique aimed at discovering inconsistencies and paradoxes at the micro level of texts; (2) socio-diagnostic critique demystifying the persuasive and manipulative character of these texts, by linking them to broader political and historical processes; and (3) future-related prospective critique seeking to contribute to the improvement of communication that gives space to true emancipation of socially disadvantaged (groups of) individuals. In the analysis below, we focus on discourse-immanent and socio-diagnostic critique. In the discussion, we also elaborate on future-related prospective critique.

Quantitative analysis

We first present some general trends over time, before addressing the discourses in more detail. Table 2 offers an overview of the appearance of deficit and anti-deficit narratives, following our coding scheme.

It is clear that the deficit discourse that stresses concrete solutions is dominant in the full period 1985–2020 (37.2% of text codes, see last column), but also the deficit discourse that emphasizes concrete causes (17.3%) figures largely. This does not mean, however, that anti-deficit voices are silenced. In fact, the anti-deficit/cause/ambiguous discourse constitutes the second largest group. In addition, over the years there has always been a fairly strong undercurrent of anti-deficit thinking as the one-but-last row in Table 2 illustrates.

Moreover, the anti-deficit thinking trumps deficit perspectives in the most recent period (with 39% of text codes belonging to the category 'anti-deficit/cause/ambiguous') and overall anti-deficit thinking being slightly more strongly visible (53.7%). This clearly signals a countertrend towards deficit hegemony and illustrates an increased awareness of the need for more radical solutions to the persisting problems.

Two important qualifications are necessary. First, whereas there appears to be an ideological turning point, the data suggest that the discourse is dominated by ambiguity

Table 2. Frequencies (in % of total codes per year/period, n = 231).

Code	1985–2000	2004–2005	2009–2010	2014–2015	2019–2020	Avg 1985–2020
1 Deficit/cause/concrete	25.0	22.8	10.8	7.7	9.8	17.3
2 Deficit/cause/ambiguous	8.3	3.8				3.0
3 Deficit/solution/concrete	33.3	40.5	54.1	34.6	22.0	37.2
4 Deficit/solution/ambiguous		6.3	2.7	23.1	14.6	7.8
Deficit total	*66.7*	*73.4*	*67.6*	*65.4*	*46.3*	*65.4*
5 Anti-deficit/cause/concrete				7.7	2.4	1.3
6 Anti-deficit/cause/ambiguous	18.8	11.4	10.8	19.2	39.0	18.6
7 Anti-deficit/solution/concrete		6.3	5.4	7.7	4.9	4.8
8 Anti-deficit/solution/ ambiguous	14.6	8.9	16.2		7.3	10.0
Anti-deficit total	*33.3*	*26.6*	*32.4*	*34.6*	*53.7*	*34.6*
Total	100 (=48)	100 (=79)	100 (=37)	100 (=26)	100 (=41)	100 (=231)

regarding the causes and solutions. Across the whole period, 39.4% of the codes are labelled as 'ambiguous'. The second point is even more important. In the anti-deficit camp, the ambiguous codes dominate (56 out of 70 codes, 80%). In the deficit discourse, the majority of codes are concrete (126 out of 151 codes, 83%). Accordingly, a major problem is that the rise of anti-deficit narratives goes hand in hand with high levels of ambiguity, implying that the causes and/or solutions are mystified (see also Mueller 2017). This mystification is highly problematic for it reduces performativity (Butler 2010), defined as the capacity to consummate action. Hence, the performativity of anti-deficit discourses is reduced when ambiguous language is deployed and it is therefore highly likely that these discourses will never affect system change when they remain ambiguous (in contrast to the concrete suggestions from the deficit discourse). However, even when anti-deficit discourses become more concrete, they may still be problematic, which we will illustrate in our qualitative analysis.

Our focus in this paper is on the discourses as such and not on potential differences between quality and popular newspapers. Nevertheless, it appears relevant to mention that we did not find strong differences between these two types of newspapers. Whereas popular newspapers—across the full period—signalled a smaller percentage of the anti-deficit discourse (12%) compared to the quality newspapers (22%), they did not differ much with respect to the deficit discourse (34% versus 32%, respectively). In the next section, we turn to the in-depth qualitative analysis of the anti-deficit narratives and we demonstrate their problematic nature. We also elaborate on the lack of comprehensive/integrated approaches when it comes to the concrete discussions of solutions from an anti-deficit perspective.

Qualitative analysis: three examples of anti-deficit narratives

Example 1: public debates on ethno-racial inequality in the early 1990s

Consider the following excerpt, characterized by a combination of deficit and anti-deficit explanations:

> For the Christian People's Party (CPP), education is the most important element of our integration policy. Central objectives are remediating educational deficits, promoting intercultural cooperation, guaranteeing compulsory education for girls, the transition to higher education and transfer to the labour market. The CPP does not think there is a readily available alternative for the so-called 'concentration schools' [schools with a high to very high participation level of ethno-racial minorities, note from authors]. These schools, must however be supported with appropriate human resources policies. The emergence of new "concentration schools" must be prevented through stimuli to (other) schools to register foreigners, but this cannot be enforced. This would, after all, threaten the freedom of education. Knowledge of the Dutch language is a requirement to realise integration. That is why the party is in favour of mandatory language lessons for long-term unemployed and for recently arriving migrants. (Excerpt 1, De Tijd, January 18, 1990)

This text appeared in *De Tijd*, a newspaper that is generally seen as a high-quality and reputed outlet. More specifically, *De Tijd* is seen as a trendsetter of scientifically-informed public debates. In this specific excerpt, we immediately noticed a discursive struggle, with deficit and anti-deficit accounts of ethno-racial inequality in (higher) education. More specifically, we found reference to two specific causes of ethno-racial inequality. The first

cause could in theory fit in an anti-deficit discourse. That is the problem of 'concentration schools' (analogous to black schools), resulting from one type of systemic discrimination, which is segregation. From this perspective, segregation disadvantages primary and secondary educational careers of ethno-racial minorities, hindering their access to higher education. The second cause is a typical deficit explanation blaming ethno-racial minorities: language deficits of ethno-racial minorities hinders their educational careers. When it comes to the solutions, it is conspicuous that the anti-deficit solution (desegregation policy) was immediately marginalized as it would contradict the important value of 'freedom of education'. This could also be interpreted as a neoliberal rationalization of the status quo 'referring to free market economic logic and norms' (Joutsenvirta 2013, p. 466). More specifically, the logic in this argument is that radical change (desegregation policy) would require a violation of the free market logic. On the contrary, attention was immediately drawn to a specific type of tutoring (majority language courses), which is a solution fitting the deficit discourse. In this way, the trend was set for the reproduction of deficit thinking on ethno-racial inequality, in spite of the (implicit) acknowledgement of systemic discrimination. The next article in the same newspaper reinforced the emphasis on deficit narratives:

> In this way, students from a working class background continue to be underrepresented in university education. The same goes for children with a migrant background. […] The Socialist Party want the government to take measures to better support children with a study deficit—both Belgians and migrants. (Excerpt 2, De Tijd, August 31, 1990)

Here, it is interesting to note that attention is drawn away from the causes of ethno-racial inequality, but immediately solutions fitting deficit thinking (mentoring and tutoring) are prompted. This could be interpreted as a discursive strategy of intensification, by selectively and consistently drawing attention to one-sided solutions from a deficit perspective. This intensification continued in later articles. After a long silence, another article was published in De Tijd, again emphasizing causes from a deficit perspective:

> At secondary schools, foreigners are underrepresented. This is, amongst others, due to a language deficit, a lack of motivation and aspects of ethnicity. These factors also determine the study choice of foreigners for vocational education. Hence the low level of transfer to higher education. The low level of education obviously affects their chances on the labour market. (Excerpt 3, De Tijd, August 4, 1993)

Some important interpretations should be discussed here. First, after the first mention of ethno-racial inequality in higher education in 1990, from 1990–1993 this problem was ignored by other newspapers besides De Tijd. Second, given that this problem was mentioned in De Tijd, the reputation of this journal could contribute to the trustworthiness of the one-sided deficit accounts introduced in this newspaper. Indeed, in articles published in other newspapers from 1994–1995, deficit narratives remained dominant. For instance:

> A dozen migrant children participate in an introduction week to higher education. The regional integration centre (PRIC) organises the project, but the participants themselves are expected to actively engage. Andrea Evers (spokesperson of PRIC) says "The idea is that the children do a lot themselves and especially think a lot. This is the first time this experimental project takes place. Participants have an idea about their future education, but they do not know yet where to go and what actions to take. One of the reasons is that they are often first-in-family students. They do not know the right channels or are not able to take the barriers to

higher education. Flemish parents are much more inclined than migrant parents to grab the phone to ask for more information." (Excerpt 4, Het Belang van Limburg, July 6, 1994)

In some articles, school segregation was re-emphasized as a structural factor underlying the reproduction of ethno-racial inequality in higher education. For instance, in this excerpt, voice was given to a member of the ethno-racial minority:

Naima (32) has been elected as a member of the city council, representing the Agalev party. […] Despite all solutions offered, problems continue to exist [with respect to ethno-racial inequality in higher education, note authors]. And for third-generation migrants we even see a decline in language skills. According to Naima, this is a result of the 'concentration schools'. (Excerpt 5, De Tijd, November 24, 1994)

Clearly, the author of this contribution distances him/herself from the speaker's accounts, but this was—in this and other excerpts—especially the case when speakers constructed anti-deficit narratives referring to the structural factors explaining ethno-racial inequality. The last sentence of the excerpt is quintessential. Instead of presenting the utterance as an objective fact ('This is caused by "concentration schools"'), the writer explicitly used a perspectivization strategy ('According to Naima…'). This explicit perspectivization was however totally absent when it comes to the construction of deficit discourses on ethno-racial inequality in higher education. On the contrary, these deficit discourses tended to be presented as objective facts. For instance:

It is well-known that children in secondary education with a migrant background, statistically speaking, more often have language problems. [Management and teachers of the Saint-Joseph Institute in Bokrijk, note authors] (Excerpt 6, Het Belang van Limburg, March 30, 1996)

In the two last excerpts, writers used quotes, giving voice to specific (groups of) social actors. However, as illustrated above, the journalist explicitly distanced himself from the content in excerpt 5. By emphasizing the logic of science in excerpt 6 and referring to statistical evidence supporting deficit explanations, authority was given to the speakers. Accordingly, producers of mass media texts can in theory distance themselves from deficit discourses of speakers, but these strategies were mainly observed in the context of anti-deficit narratives.

Example 2: public debates on ethno-racial inequality in the late 1990s

Notably, whereas the marginalization of anti-deficit narratives occurred rather abruptly in the previous example, this tendency was not always observable. The hostility towards these discourses gradually faded away over time, as could also be witnessed in our quantitative analysis. Whereas deficit discourses could still be identified in many texts, even in the most recent periods, we also found evidence of some very explicit anti-deficit discourses. For instance:

The fear of the Other is inherent to our culture and we will probably be stuck with this for centuries. As long as this fear exists, there will be racism. On our search for explanations for racism we can look, for instance, at cultural gaps in our education. Neither in secondary education, nor in higher education, there is attention to important African and Islamic civilisations, only in specialised university studies like African Studies or Studies of Islam. The majority of Belgians only touch upon these civilisations in the context of slavery, colonisation,

crusades and the threats of the Moors and the Ottoman empire: all key episodes for the history of Western Europe (Author: Dirk Boeckx, department of Philosophy, Cornell University, United States) (Excerpt 7, De Morgen, January 5, 1998)

In Excerpt 7, institutional racism was explicitly acknowledged and linked to the dominance of western curricula excluding non-western history. At first glance, this anti-deficit narrative was highly promising, opening up room for solutions focusing on structural factors. At the same time, this anti-deficit perspective is problematic, for institutional racism was naturalized ('we will be stuck with it for centuries'). Neither were concrete solutions offered to counter institutional racism in higher education. Quite on the contrary, institutional racism was constructed as an inevitable, enduring reality that is uncontrollable. Notably, the genre of this excerpt is also important, contributing to the appearance of objectivity of this account. More specifically, it was an opinion piece of an academic affiliated with a highly reputed university.

Abstract anti-deficit explanations seem to be increasingly accepted over time, in contrast to the concrete solutions that could be offered from this perspective. In the previous text, anti-deficit solutions were not mentioned by the author, but in another text solutions were addressed. The following example deals with affirmative action policies in the Unites States. These policies were constructed as ineffective, again supported by an academic of a highly reputed university (UCLA Berkeley, United States):

> An important argument to abolish positive discrimination is, according to professor Fay, that the system does not work. Many ethnic minority students get a place at the university at the cost of better qualified white and Asian students. And 45% of the students that owe their place to positive discrimination do not finish their studies as opposed to 71% of with and Asian students. Moreover, only few poor people, for whom the policy is developed, profit. Students benefiting from the policy are often from a middle-class background that not really need positive discrimination. For most poor black and Latino children studying at the university is impossible. It is therefore, according to Fay, better to put more resources in primary and secondary education and to abolish preferential treatment in higher education. (Excerpt 8, De Tijd, April 5, 1996)

The strategies to marginalize anti-deficit solutions became more diverse over time. Either by ignoring the solutions in anti-deficit narratives (Excerpt 7), by constructing them as ineffective (Excerpt 8), by linking them to speakers without any authority (Excerpt 9), or by constructing a classless society as a utopia (Excerpt 10):

> Geert Smeekens (22, inhabitant of Lommel and final-year teacher training student at the Catholic College Limburg in Hasselt) is of the view that the high migration rate in the region is the cause of the lower participation, compared to other Flemish regions. "Migrants also get fewer chances in primary and secondary education. Consequently, this is also the case for higher education," Smeekens thinks. "Moreover, high unemployment rates may discourage young people to continue their educational journey." The soon-to-be-teacher thinks quality improvement of primary and secondary education is a possible solution. Smeekens concludes: "Especially migrant children must have more chances. This can be achieved by integrating them better in schools with mixed populations and by abolishing the 'concentration schools.'" (Excerpt 9, Het Belang van Limburg, December 5, 1996)

> There is still hope for humankind. In the communist future there is work, housing and toys for everyone. Unfortunately, first capitalism must be overthrown. But no worries, the Labour Party youth goes to war. The children of the Pioneers sing and dance, pupils of the Red Youth

party and protest, and students digest files. We are on the road with the smallest youth movement of the country and are acquainted with historical materialism. In the meantime, the Labour Party hopes for an electorial gain. Maybe there will be soon be a communist in Belgian Parliament. (Excerpt 10, De Morgen, February 20, 1999)

In Excerpt 9, desegregation policies were put forward as a reasonable anti-deficit solution aimed at fighting a specific type of systemic discrimination (segregation), in contrast to Excerpt 1. The problem here is that this text has little authority. The speaker was a student and the producer of the text used perspectivization strategies ('Geert Smeekens, a student from Lommel…'), similar to Excerpt 5. In Excerpt 10, in the context of a wider discussion on the reproduction of inequality in Flanders, an utopian picture is constructed of a classless society. The genre of the story is highly problematic, given that this genre assigned anti-deficit narratives to the realm of fiction. At the end of the 20th century, the inevitability of deficit-oriented solutions was reaffirmed in the context of the election of the new Flemish government in 1999, where the writer uncritically presented the political agenda for the following years, strongly centred around the assimilation of ethno-racial minorities (and migrants in particular):

> Migrants will be integrated in society through language courses, by teaching them our democratic values and through integration in the labour market. (Excerpt 11, De Morgen, July 9, 1999)

Example 3: public debates on ethno-racial inequality in the 21st century

At first glance, the rise of more radical and concrete anti-deficit narratives seemed highly promising, especially since the early 2000s. In many instances, we could not identify obvious distancing strategies of writers, especially in the last two decades. Neither could we find univocal accounts where speakers explicitly constructed anti-deficit solutions as ineffective or out of reach. However, two problems could still be detected when it comes to the construction of these anti-deficit narratives in public discourses. The first problem was that in many excerpts, causes and solutions remained ambiguous, as illustrated in our quantitative analysis. Second, even in those excerpts that zoomed in on concrete causes/solutions, the anti-deficit narratives remained problematic. For instance, in the following excerpt, critical reference was made to Eurocentric curricula, which is applaudable from an anti-deficit perspective.

> But there are also causes that have to do with the characteristics of a university. "A university is pre-eminently an intellectual institution that is very clearly Western. That can be a deterrent." The same with the professors: they teach from a Western perspective and form a homogeneous group whose language use is anything but adapted to a diverse audience in the auditorium. "The image of the universities is wrong," said Almaci. "Many immigrants think it is too elitist and too Western." And so the universities must adjust their images. "Make it clear that you are open and tolerant and that you do not only appeal to the ethnic majority," says Almaci, whose research is now being used at the VUB to develop appropriate policies. (Excerpt 13, De Morgen, September 24, 2004)

In response to this criticism concerning Eurocentric curricula, the debate in mass media has also acknowledged the need to experiment with multicultural practices. The University of Antwerp, for instance, recently showed intentions to decolonize its curricula in order to avoid excessive Eurocentrism, again very promising from a critical sociological perspective:

From next year, the University of Antwerp will offer three sets of broad optional courses, including a set on 'active pluralism and interculturality'. Students are obliged to take a course from that set. The courses are also 'decolonized', although the rector does not want to call it like that. "By paying attention to scientists from different backgrounds, the university recognizes that there are other role models besides Western scientists," as the policy plan says. "This can lead to an increased and more diverse influx of students to programs that usually attract fewer students with a migration background. Attention to the complex and diverse reality and a de-prioritization of Eurocentric knowledge in course content broadens the student's view." The rector, who teaches the course 'Political History of Belgium', gives an example, immediately admitting his own mistake. 'In my own course, I now realize that I pay little attention to the colony. That needs to be changed." (Excerpt 14, De Standaard, January 2, 2019)

What is however suspicious in Excerpt 14 is that this radical change (decolonization) was reduced to one specific solution, the recognition that 'there are other role models besides Western scientists'. Whereas it seems indeed quintessential to integrate scientists and knowledge from non-Western contexts to counter institutional racism, decolonization should be much more comprehensive and integrated in all cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of the learning processes (Dei 2000). Across all texts, the number of concrete suggestions for structural change came across as rather fragmented (versus comprehensive/integrated), in that quite often only one (or few) of the systemic solutions were addressed. There was, for instance, a text pointing at the availability of praying rooms to meet the ethnic minorities needs. For sure, this can be seen as a supportive measure aimed at countering institutional racism, but decolonization requires much more change. Neither would decolonising the curriculum (see example for code 8 in Table 1) or 'using less abstract language in teaching' likely be the sole solutions.

Conclusions and discussion

Our first conclusion is that powerful social actors affect public discourses via a range of discursive strategies, especially in times of struggles between deficit and anti-deficit narratives. This happens through intensifying deficit narratives and downplaying (or distancing from) anti-deficit narratives (see example 1). Our second conclusion is that opponents of deficit discourses may not truly challenge the reproduction of deficit thinking (see example 2). Opponents that mention anti-deficit explanations of ethno-racial inequality may still marginalize (possibly unintendedly) anti-deficit solutions by keeping them out of reach in their discourses or by constructing them as ineffective. Alternatively, in case opponents do mention the reasonableness of anti-deficit solutions, producers of mass media texts may still downplay the authority of these speakers via a range of discursive strategies. Our third conclusion is that concrete anti-deficit narratives could still be problematic given their focus on fragmented solutions (see example 3). What these results teach us is that deficit thinking should not be taken for granted in order to be reproduced. Contestation is possible (and highly likely), but due to specific discursive strategies of the producers of public discourses, contestation may be overruled or downplayed. Accordingly, the performativity of anti-deficit narratives may be limited.

Our results indicated that struggles between deficit and anti-deficit narratives have existed since the early 1990s. Whereas deficit accounts have dominated in public discourses on ethno-racial inequality in the context of Flemish higher education, these discourses have not been uncontested. In the last years preceding this study, anti-deficit discourses were

even dominant. The major implication is that deficit thinking is not necessarily taken for granted: there is scope for contestations and alternative discourses. Whereas public contestation may be a positive social development, opening up room for radical policy change aimed at fighting systemic discrimination, our findings actually point at much more problematic reality. That is, through subtle processes of overruling or downplaying anti-deficit public discourses, ultimately dominant deficit thinking is reconfirmed. In theory, mass media texts are sites of public discourses and struggles. Accordingly, our study pointed at the relevance of discursive processes in the reproduction of the status quo and these processes are especially relevant in contexts where the dominant deficit discourses are contested. In one of these contexts, where we identified opposition, we found that a combination of discursive strategies contributed to the reaffirmation of the status quo in the last three decades prior to the study. Our conclusion is that public discourses are (ab)used as means to avoid systemic changes aimed at reducing long-lasting inequalities, especially in times of contestation.

As argued, it would be hard to disconnect the public discourses from the socio-political context. We discussed the clear shift from politics being dominated by conservatives, liberals and social-democrats to a dominance of (extreme) nationalist and populist parties. It was however surprising to observe that this shift to nationalism and populism correlated with the rise of anti-deficit discourses in the last decades. After all, nationalist and populist ideologies rather fit with deficit discourses that construct ethno-racial minorities as inferior subjects. Our preliminary explanation is that public discourses have been (re)constructed in a context with conflicting macro-level ideologies. As organizations without an explicit ideological position, it could be argued that Flemish news agencies have been navigating this landscape by increasingly merging these conflicting ideologies in ambiguous mass media discourses, a form of 'strategic ambiguity' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). More specifically, the ambiguous discourses can enable multiple, conflicting interests. By doing so, news agencies do however actively contributed to the reproduction of deficit thinking in times of contestation.

It should be noted that this (ab)use of public discourses has not necessarily been intentional, planned or were meant to be deceptive. Discourses are socially constituted and socially constitutive (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Hence, they are not just the result of the free choices of the producers of these discourses, aimed at intentionally deceiving the audience. Quite on the contrary, they result from a dynamic interplay between powerful social actors. At the same time, the DHA does acknowledge leeway for producers of public discourses to shape the social construction of reality. In a context with widespread beliefs in deficit (and meritocratic) ideology, where powerful social actors (e.g. elite, white men) also benefit from this ideology, these actors may truly belief in equal opportunities. Acknowledgement of unfair bias in the system would be a threat to their own self-esteem. That would imply that they have to acknowledge that their own powerful social positions are the result of unfair bias instead of intelligence or skills. Nonetheless, when it comes to the socially constitutive nature of public discourses, text producers may be highly creative when they reaffirm deficit thinking, as we also illustrated in our study.

As we mentioned earlier, part of the DHA is future-related prospective critique. Given that we identified public discourses contributing to the reproduction of the status quo, what could emancipatory discourses look like in the future? Emancipatory discourse is possible, but it should be radically different from what we observed in our empirical study. More

specifically, besides the acknowledgement of systemic discrimination, public discourses should move beyond ambiguous commitment discourses and be much more concrete and comprehensive regarding the societal and organizational structures necessary to reduce long-lasting inequalities. They should also be much more specific regarding the powerful societal actors who should take responsibility. For instance, in the context of Flemish higher education, three specific types of systemic discrimination have been demonstrated consistently: (1) educational tracking in secondary education, excluding socially disadvantaged students from preparatory tracks (Hirtt, Nicaise, and De Zutter 2007), (2) segregation in secondary education, excluding socially disadvantaged students from preparatory schools (Mampaey and Zanoni 2014), and (3) institutional racism that excludes multicultural practices, disadvantaging ethnic minorities (Mampaey and Zanoni 2016). Public discourses could be much more specific regarding the multiple means that are necessary to fight these three types of systemic discrimination. This could be the comprehensive organization of secondary education and the desegregation of secondary education (Hirtt, Nicaise, and De Zutter 2007), the institutionalization of multicultural practices such as multilingualism (Van Der Wildt, Van Avermaet, and Van Houtte 2017) and curricula that fully integrate non-Western knowledge (Barnhardt and Oscar Kawagley 2005), at all levels of education. In order to achieve these aims, a strong political commitment seems to be necessary. We realise this may be a tall order, with Western neoliberal governments marginalizing policies reducing inequalities (Gillborn 2005), which is especially the case in Flanders, characterized by strong nationalist and populist ideologies.

CDA-inspired research opens up opportunities to approach our world from an anti-positivistic point of view and allows researchers to investigate ideological struggles and the underlying discourses. However, some limitations are important to acknowledge. As Reisigl and Wodak (2009) argued, '[a]s an object of investigation, a discourse is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation' (p. 89). Accordingly, we invite other scholars within the tradition of CDA to explore discursive processes underlying the reproduction of deficit thinking in times of contestation, either reaffirming or reinterpreting our findings in multiple contexts.

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