Communicating anti-racism

Müller, F.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter summaries

Before discussing the answers to the main questions that frame this dissertation, the eight chapters are summarized below. The summaries are ordered like the chapters themselves, in four separate parts.

Part one: Everyday communication about racism

In the first section of this dissertation, the reception context of anti-racist campaigns was charted by analysing how racism is understood in everyday life. In Chapter 1, it was argued that the recognition of racism in everyday life needs to be understood as a discursive social accomplishment. An analysis of the focus group discussions demonstrated that common sense knowledge constructs racism as immoral, negative and as intentional forms of discrimination against racial, ethnic or religious minorities. This common sense knowledge was central in negotiations about the potentially racist nature of particular expressions or behaviours. On the one hand, it allowed some expressions or behaviours to be constructed as racist rather unproblematically. For example, verbal abuse that explicitly positioned ethnic minorities as inferior was generally recognized as racism directly. In many other everyday experiences, on the other hand, common sense knowledge appeared to be biased against the recognition of racism. This bias was related to the emphasis placed in common sense knowledge on the malevolent intention behind any racist expression or act. In order to get an expression or act recognized as racism, an account needed to be constructed in which the racist intentions of the perpetrator were convincingly demonstrated. In many cases, where no explicit racist speech had been uttered, this involved the painstaking process of eliminating all other explanations for the behaviour at hand. This requires a lot of information that is often not available and therefore renders the recognition of racism a practical impossibility.

The dynamic process of recognition of racism in everyday life was further complicated by the common sense understanding of racism as an immoral activity. All participants in these studies therefore avoided being perceived as ‘racist’. They actively sought out the subject positioning of the ‘non-racist’ and were also wary of attempts to label their community and its practices at large as racist, as was illustrated by the general tendency on the part of the white Dutch participants to oppose any attempts to construct the Dutch tradition of ‘Saint Nicolas and black Pete’ as racist. Moreover, since the accusation of racism was considered so grave, failed
attempts to label something as racist were generally scorned upon. Individuals perceived to have engaged in such behaviour were accused of ‘fussing’. As a result, instances where cultural difference had played an inappropriate role in an experience in their everyday life could be left unaddressed because as it was simply too difficult or risky to try to get them recognized as an instance of racism.

The second chapter expanded on these findings by examining the ways in which racism was recognized and regulated within the particular societal domain of soccer culture. Interviews with hardcore fans and soccer players showed that particularities of a cultural context (such as in the masculine codes of honour and the need to remain focused on winning the game in soccer culture) can further problematize the recognition of racism. Acts that might otherwise be constructed as racist unproblematically were downplayed by constructing them as unfortunate but meaningless expressions that were brought about by involvement in an exciting match. Their ‘accidental’ and therefore unintentional nature prevented these acts from being recognized as racist and were left unchallenged. Furthermore, the ways in which redress is sought for racism took on locally specific forms as players argued that the only two appropriate responses to racial abuse were either to retaliate or to win the match. These responses suggest that the culture within which racism was being expressed (i.e. a soccer culture in which racial difference continued to be a salient organizing principle) remained unaddressed in everyday life.

These two studies suggest that everyday communication patterns concerning racism show evidence of a lack of ‘cultural citizenship’. Members of racial, ethnic and religious minorities expressed the feeling that in many situations, their difference played an inappropriate role in their interactions with others. Moreover, the means and occasions were limited for discussing these matters openly without fear of retribution and without having to disqualify others as malevolent, immoral ‘racists’. One important factor in this respect appeared to be common sense knowledge about racism that was used in these negotiations. The second main factor that contributed to the persistence of this lack of cultural citizenship was the wider culture within which these discussions took place. With soccer culture, for instance, masculine codes of honour and the need to remain focused on winning the game further constrained the opportunities to address acts or social practices in which racial, ethnic or religious differences played an inappropriate role.
Part two: Mass media communication effects

In the second part of this dissertation, the impact of mass media campaigns for anti-racism on individual attitudes and behaviours were charted through two case studies. In Chapter 3, an analysis of the content of Nike’s campaign ‘Stand up Speak up’ demonstrated how anti-racist discourse can reproduce certain problematic aspects of common sense knowledge about racism. This particular campaign was framed in a (visual) discourse that clearly distinguished between the perpetrators of racism, its victims and an innocent majority. The perpetrators were represented as an immoral group of individuals that do not belong in soccer culture. Furthermore, racism was depicted as an alien presence that needs to be expelled from soccer culture by a silent majority of non-racists. The victims were represented as discriminated against ‘because of the colour of their skin’. In so doing, this (visual) discourse constructed an opposition between the racist trouble makers and an innocent majority. The audience of the campaign (i.e. the majority that is to ‘stand up and speak up’ against the racists) is constructed as unresponsible for the problem of racism. At the same time, they are invited to be its solution by helping to expel ‘the racists’. Despite its common sense appeal, however, this particular construction of the problem of racism and its solution fails to engage with all forms of racism in soccer culture other than the explicit racist abuse hurled at soccer players during matches. Moreover, it also does not engage with the role of the ‘silent majority’ in processes that reproduce the cultural context in which racism is expressed and fails to be addressed properly. Reactions from the campaign suggest that most people approved of the message and agreed that racism was immoral and the ‘racists’ needed to be kicked out of soccer. At the same time, however, they considered themselves to be part of the silent and innocent majority and saw no need to reconsider their own contributions to soccer culture or discuss the role of cultural difference at their own local clubs.

These results draw attention to the fact that in contemporary Western societies like the Netherlands at least, common sense knowledge already dictates that racism is by definition immoral. Moreover, as was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, most people are keen to avoid the label of ‘racist’. Campaigns that seek to affirm the ‘immorality’ of racism therefore merely end up reproducing common sense understandings. They do little to challenge those aspects of the wider culture through which racism is reproduced or recognized and challenged. Moreover, they do not motivate people who identify as ‘non-racist’ to contribute to these transformations and renegotiate the role of cultural difference in their own sports clubs. The study of ‘Stand up Speak
up’ demonstrates that a campaign that uses a discourse that explicitly defines ‘racists’ and an innocent majority runs the risk of being perceived as a mere reflection of common sense knowledge. As a consequence, people’s perceptions of racism or their own sense of responsibility in the perpetuation of the problem are left unchallenged.

In Chapter 4, a study is presented of a campaign that avoided any explicit mention or challenge of the problem of racism at all. This campaign used multicultural television drama as an alternative to mass media campaigns that seek to confront racism head on. Such an alternative engages directly with the meaning of racial, ethnic and religious differences within a society by presenting viewers with engaging alternative representations of such differences. These alternative representations challenge the everyday processes of racialization through which racial, ethnic and religious differences come to be constructed in essentialistic and mutually exclusive ways that are conducive to the expression of racism.

The effects of the multicultural television drama series West Side were compared with those of watching a mainstream soap opera. The meaning of racial, ethnic and religious differences was operationalized using the concept of ‘perceived ethnic threat’, which implies a particular kind of construction of cultural difference. Using social identity theory, this study hypothesized that these perceptions of threat could be affected by the degree to which viewers identified with characters in the show that belonged either to their ingroup or their outgroup. This hypothesis was supported by the results, suggesting that multicultural television dramas can affect the meaning viewers give to ethnic differences. Such dramas need to be constructed in such a way as to produce a balance between viewer’s identifications with ingroup and outgroup characters. The effects that were found were small, however, and suggest that a single programme is not likely to have an enduring effect on perceptions of threat. However, they do suggest that mass media anti-racist campaigns may successfully engage with the meanings of cultural difference in everyday life without drawing on common sense knowledge of racism or engaging with ‘racism’ head on.

Taken together, the studies presented in Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that mass media campaigns need to be constructed carefully if they are to challenge and change individual attitudes and behaviours in anti-racist directions. A discourse that emphasises the immorality of racism risks reproducing existing common sense knowledge and leaving the discourses and practices untouched that contribute to the persistence of racism in a cultural context. Campaigns that avoid such a discourse arguably face different challenges. Chapter 4 constitutes a first
examination of the ways in which multicultural television entertainment may be useful in this regard. Although the effects found were small, it illustrates how the content of a campaign may be constructed to produce anti-racist changes in the perception of ethnic outgroups.

Part three: Mass media communication and citizenship
In the third part of this dissertation, the indirect approach to mass media communication was further explored using qualitative methods. In particular, the potential of communication campaigns was investigated with respect to, first, the development of inclusive senses of community and, second, the stimulation and facilitation of the performance of cultural citizenship.

In Chapter 5, campaigns for urban cosmopolitanism were investigated that sought to communicate a racially, ethnically and religiously inclusive sense of community. In these campaigns, this inclusive community was defined as a community of equal urban dwellers. Audiences were invited to identify with this urban community (and, in the case of the campaign ‘What are you doing for the city’, to contribute to it). In contrast to some of the literature that suggests the city unproblematically constitutes an inclusive community of equals, focus group discussions showed that audiences generally problematized these appeals. In the majority of reactions, urban dwellers either rejected the notion of an inclusive urban community or claimed it was a self-evident but meaningless truth that had little consequences for their own daily lives. This appeared to be related to fact that belonging to such an inclusive imagined urban community contradicted common sense knowledge about what it means to live in the city. In some specific circumstances, however, reactions also showed the possibility of temporarily adopting an urban cosmopolitan subject position. This “performance of urban cosmopolitanism” was more easy or difficult depending on a number of factors. One crucial factor in the context of discussions of anti-racism was that an ethnic background could sometimes make the adoption of an urban identity more difficult because, as the discussions showed, urban identities could sometimes implicitly be coded as white.

The results from this study suggest that the city is not an undiscovered basis for an inclusive community that can readily replace the more socially exclusive national community. Instead, the ideal of urban cosmopolitanism is better approached as a social practice that requires considerable effort to adopt in everyday life, especially from urban dwellers with different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Communicating an ideal inclusive urban community as was
done in the campaigns ‘We are Londoners, we are one’ and ‘What are you doing for the city’ does not acknowledge the difficulties that may be involved in adopting a cosmopolitan outlook for different kinds of urban dwellers. Such an approach is furthermore based on the assumption that the definition of an inclusive community can be determined top down by expert campaign designers. As such, not only does it fail to consult the people who are assumed to take part in such a community, it also fails to acknowledge their effort that individuals exert when adopting and maintaining such an identification with an inclusive urban community.

As was discussed in the introduction, the right to be different within such an inclusive community also involves the obligation to deal with difference of others in a respectful way. In Chapter 6, the relation between communication and these negotiations of cultural difference are explored. The chapter consists of a qualitative exploration of audience reactions to the multicultural television drama series West Side that was also the focus of Chapter 4. In this chapter, the potential of the show to facilitate performances of cultural citizenship is investigated. The analysis of audience reactions to the show demonstrates that engaged viewing and reflection on the meaning and resonances of the content of multicultural television shows for one’s own life are important. They may lead to discussions about ideological dilemmas surrounding the role of cultural difference in viewer’s everyday lives. Subsequent negotiations about these dilemmas in the lives of viewers were identified as performances of cultural citizenship. The content of multicultural television drama is relevant to such performances in two ways. First of all, it can trigger engaged discussions about the role of cultural difference in people’s private lives. Second, the content of such a show also constitutes a resource for the performance of cultural citizenship. It offers a shared and relevant reservoir of examples and narratives with which to articulate one’s experiences and opinions regarding the role of cultural difference in everyday life. This chapter illustrates how communication campaigns may be used to stimulate the performance of cultural citizenship. However, the case of West Side also showed that most audience reactions could not be regarded as cultural citizenship and were generally inconsequential. Moreover, the performances of cultural citizenship that were discussed in this chapter were too isolated to be of direct consequence to challenging racism. On the one hand, this suggests that a single programme like West Side is not likely to be sufficient to affect larger societal processes. On the other hand, it illustrates the need to use the outcomes of such performances in the development of social policy or further anti-racist campaigning.
Part four: Facilitating communication

In the final part of this dissertation, campaigns were discussed that sought to facilitate intergroup communication directly by organizing intergroup encounters. In Chapter 7, an analysis was presented on the discourse and practices of campaigns for intergroup contact. The selected campaigns were framed by their organizers in a dominant discourse that suggests that intergroup contact under favourable conditions would lead to reductions in prejudice and increases in understanding and tolerance. More specifically, contact was assumed to be a uniform, decontextualized intervention that would (all else being equal) naturally lead to both the recognition of the equality of all humans and to the recognition of the need to respect the differences between racial, ethnic and religious groups. A further analysis showed, however, that the meaning of intergroup contact at the social projects studied was closely related to their social and political context. This context was formed by the recent murder of Islam critic Theo van Gogh by a Dutch youth of Moroccan background and the social unrest that had erupted in its wake. Hence, these social projects for intergroup encounters were set up with the intention of pacifying the tensions between the Muslims and the white majority in the city. The ensuing practices were conceived as entirely voluntary encounters between well willing members of both groups. In these encounters, the Muslim minority was centrally assumed to have an opportunity to demonstrate their innocent nature to the prejudiced white majority and gently challenge their stereotypes. The intended encounters, interactions and discussions at these social projects bore the imprint of larger societal debates about multicultural integration and reproduced the power differentials between the white majority and Muslim minorities that was inherent to it. The chapter concludes that intergroup contact and communication is always/already situated in a particular social historical context. This context affects the kinds of discourses through which such encounters are organized and experienced. These practices and experiences are therefore also socio-historically situated and caught up in the workings of power despite the common rhetoric about the apolitical nature of interpersonal contact. It is clear that when projects simply seek to make ‘contact’ between groups and assume that it will ‘naturally’ generate tolerance and reduced prejudice, their discourse should not be taken at face value.

In Chapter 8, these results are further elaborated on through the presentation of a study of the Amsterdam World Cup. In contrast to the social projects discussed in the previous chapter, the AWC tournament is an example of a project for intergroup encounters, which explicitly
sought to regulate the intergroup contact that it produced. By requiring each team at the tournament to represent a different national group and to consist of actual members from these groups residing in the Netherlands, the tournament constituted an attempted top-down renegotiation of the meaning of cultural differences within the Netherlands. The analysis of the discourse of organizers, funding municipality, soccer players and spectators showed that the tournament was a classic case of a multiculturalist approach to generating tolerance as it fixed the boundaries between groups at the tournament through official discourse and regulations. Consequently, it sought to improve the relations between these groups by letting them play soccer against each other. Ideologically speaking, the tournament reproduced the dominant discourse on multicultural integration that assumes that members of ethnic groups are defined first and foremost by their ethnic identity and cannot be members of different ethnic communities simultaneously. Practically speaking, the tournament mostly appeared to serve as a welcome contribution to the development of cohesion within national-ethnic communities as their members cooperated closely in preparations for the tournament and attended the festival together. Because of the tight organization, the tournament left little room to challenge the dominant discourse about multicultural integration and diversity at the tournament and the arrangements of power this implied.

The studies from Chapter 7 and 8 demonstrate that campaigns for the facilitation of communication between racial, ethnic and religious groups about the role of cultural difference are a much more delicate affair than their own official rhetoric suggests. The encounters and discussions in the social projects that were investigated did not appear to constitute performances of cultural citizenship. The lack of critical negotiations about the role of cultural difference in everyday life appeared to be caused, on the one hand, by a lack of overt regulation as found in the projects discussed in Chapter 7. On the other hand, a project in which these projects were regulated more strongly showed how (well intended) organization and regulation may easily lapse into the reproduction of existing dominant discourses about the problem that is being addressed (i.e. multicultural diversity and integration), which are part of the problem.