Ethnic-racial identities and leadership strategies in the Dutch (semi-)public sector: conforming and resisting, resilience and vulnerability
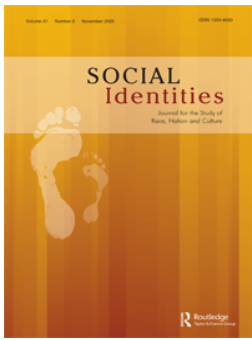
Mesman, J.

Ethnic-racial identities and leadership strategies in the Dutch (semi-)public sector: conforming and resisting, resilience and vulnerability

Judi Mesman

Published online: 18 Nov 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⏎

Article views: 23

View related articles ⏎

View Crossmark data ⏎

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Ethnic-racial identities and leadership strategies in the Dutch (semi-)public sector: conforming and resisting, resilience and vulnerability

Judi Mesman

Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Hague, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The current article describes an exploratory qualitative study of the experiences of 40 people of color (18 female, 22 male) in leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector in the Netherlands. Reflexive thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews yielded three main themes: (1) the salience of ethnic-racial identities in lives, careers and leadership experiences, (2) balancing conforming to dominant White norms and resisting those same norms, (3) alternating narratives of resilience and vulnerability. People of color in leadership positions in the Netherlands present strong ethnic-racial identities, are experts at conforming to dominant norms, but invest in changing those norms now that they are in leadership positions. They show and advocate resilience, but also express feelings of vulnerability, which negatively impacts their wellbeing. The discussion section synthesizes the three themes, reflects on the advantages and pitfalls of different personal and leadership strategies, and contextualizes the findings in relation to Dutch culture.

Introduction

Following substantial research attention to women in leadership positions, there is an increasing interest in studying ethnic-racial identities and representation in leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Roberts et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025). These studies show substantial challenges to ethnic-racial minoritized people in the road to leadership (e.g. exclusive norms, selection biases), and in actually being in a leadership position (e.g. not being accepted as leader, resistance). However, it has been noted in several reviews that studies in this area have been mostly localized in the United States (U.S.), where ethnic-racial diversity and identities have different characteristics in terms of both relevant populations and societal context compared to European countries (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Zhang et al., 2025). In addition, research on racism in general is much less common in Europe than in the U.S., which means that the lived experiences of ethnic-racial minoritized individuals and groups in European contexts have remained largely unexplored, including the experiences of people of color in leadership positions. The current study aims to contribute to filling that gap and aims to answer the following question: What are the formative

CONTACT Judi Mesman ✉ j.mesman@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

experiences and leadership practices of people of color in leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector in the Netherlands? The study is explorative and qualitative in nature, employing semi-structured interviews focusing on lived experiences of leaders from ethnic-racial minoritized groups. Although the study does not test specific hypotheses, the guiding interview questions were informed mainly by several relevant strands of research.

One of the main themes in research on the role of ethnicity and race in the White workplace to date is the issue of navigating dominant White norms. The notion of 'cloning cultures' captures the idea that organizations but also wider society reproduce sameness by advocating and reinforcing particular norms that exclude other perspectives (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). In the workplace, this manifests itself as a process of Othering, where those who do not conform to the hegemonic norm face obstacles in daily work and in upward mobility (Ahmed, 2012; Ossenkop et al., 2015). This, in turn, has negative effects on wellbeing, feelings of belonging, and work engagement, as well as experiencing pressure to conform, whereas actually doing so comes at the cost of authenticity and can exacerbate negative feelings (Hewlin, 2003; Weiss et al., 2018). Specifically in relation to leadership positions, research has shown that the standard picture of a leader is still that of a White man (Gündemir et al., 2014; Petsko & Rosette, 2023), so that people who do not fit that identity category are not automatically seen as leaders, and may thus be less likely to be selected for such positions (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023).

Despite evidence of racism in recruitment, selection, and the workplace itself, the dominant narrative in many organizations is one of what is often labeled 'colorblindness' (Neville et al., 2013), which can manifest itself in 'color-muteness' or 'color-evasion' (Sue, 2016). These terms reflect an ideology of 'everybody is the same', resulting in a narrative of 'not seeing color' and the idea that we should not (and/or do not have to) talk about or even acknowledge ethnic-racial differences between people. The objections to this approach are myriad, most importantly its 'side effect' that the existence of racism is denied and can therefore not be addressed (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

In the context of grappling with hegemonic White norms while facing 'color-mute' organizational cultures, it is no wonder that policies and practices in the realm of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) represent an area of much contestation, and subsequent exhaustion in those who spearhead such movements (Weeks et al., 2023). Although not a given, ethnic-racially minoritized people are often expected to be motivated to advocate for DEI based on their own experiences of racism and exclusion. This is consistent with research showing that more ethnically diverse boards pay more attention to diversity and inclusion policies and behave more inclusively (Buse et al., 2016; Fulton et al., 2023). However, studies also show that people are generally more inclined to adapt their behavior to moral standards if they are propagated by someone from their own group (Ellemers et al., 2017). This may help explain why attention to diversity and inclusion in the workplace of a White organization can count on less appreciation when it is done by leaders of color and women than when White men do it (Hekman et al., 2017). Thus, addressing DEI as a leader of color can be a mine field.

It is not only through addressing DEI that people of color in leadership positions can make a difference to the careers and experiences of other ethnic-racial minoritized people. They also serve as role models, as inspirations. A role model can be an

example of how to achieve something, can broaden the idea of what is possible for someone, and can generally inspire them to follow a certain path (e.g. Kofoed, 2019; Morgenroth et al., 2015; Redding, 2019). This also comes with a burden. According to token theory, marginalized groups who are heavily outnumbered and who are therefore hypervisible face increased pressure to perform, greater distance from peers, and more stereotyping and being seen as representing an entire group (Kanter, 1977).

Summarizing, salient topics emerging from the literature that are relevant to the experiences of ethnic-racial minoritized people in organizations in general and in leadership positions in particular include navigating dominant norms and 'colorblind' ideologies, tensions in advocating for DEI and being a role model, and the dangers of tokenism. The insights about ethnic-racial diversity in leadership and the experiences of leaders of color are overwhelmingly based on research in the United States. The populations studied in the U.S. usually include African American and Latinx American leaders, whereas the largest populations of interest in Europe would consist of people with more recent migration backgrounds, postcolonial migrants, and a large group identifying as Muslims. In terms of societal context, Europe has been much more silent about race for much longer than the U.S., a pattern that is thought to be due to its relatively recent genocidal Holocaust past (Lentin, 2008). This is also the case in the Netherlands, a country that has been described as having a self-image of tolerance for diversity and not being racist, which in effect forecloses any discussions about racism in Dutch society, and frames racial Others who do raise the issue as ungrateful (Essed, 1991; Ghorashi, 2014; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016). However, numerous public reports have shown that racism is far from eradicated in the Netherlands (e.g. Staatscommissie tegen Discriminatie en Racisme, 2023).

One scholarly study has addressed ethnic-racial identity in relation to leadership in the Netherlands. A qualitative study by Waldring et al. (2015) focused on a specific population of leaders: people with a Turkish or Moroccan background who were born in the Netherlands and manage at least five people in their position in the public or private sector. This study showed that these leaders experience subtle discrimination at work at different levels of the organization: from managers, peers and subordinates. The current study aims to elaborate on the Dutch study by Waldring et al. (2015) by interviewing leaders from a wider range of ethnic-racial groups, holding positions at a higher managerial level (mostly strategic leadership positions with end responsibility), and addressing not just their experiences of discrimination in their current position, but also their pathways to the top and their leadership practices. The current study focuses specifically on the (semi-)public sector as a logical starting point, given the inherent responsibility of government bodies and publicly funded institutions (such as education, health care, and cultural organizations) to promote a just society.

Before moving on to the Method section, first some notes on terminology. The use of the adjective ethnic-racial (or the noun ethnicity/race) is a conscious choice based on the self-identifications of the participants. The word 'race' is not often used in the Netherlands. Instead, the word 'ethnicity' is often used as a 'color-mute' replacement, and refers to a shared cultural identity based on shared customs, religion, language, region of origin, and so on. Participants identified themselves and others in racial and ethnic terms interchangeably. Other terms that were used by participants to describe themselves and others were 'person of color', bicultural, 'allochtoon' (being from elsewhere) or even the more outdated word 'foreigner' (often with hand gesture to indicate quotation

marks). Still others called themselves Surinamese or Moroccan or Black (or combinations such as Turkish-Dutch). The different terms were also regularly used interchangeably during the interviews, depending on the specific topic. Almost all participants called the Dutch majority group White. I have chosen to use 'of color' and 'bicultural' in the main text, and only use outdated words if they are part of a direct quote. Finally, the word racism is used to denote all forms of discrimination based on race, skin color and national or ethnic origin (cf. the United Nations, 1966).

Method

Participants

Inclusion criteria for participation in this study were as follows: (a) being in a position with (final) responsibility for (part of) an organization; (b) being in the (semi-)public sector, which includes (local) government, healthcare, education, security and justice, social security, culture, public media and non-profit organizations; (c) being appointed to the leadership position after May 2020 (after the murder of George Floyd) so that the experiences reflect contemporary mechanisms in DEI; (d) self-identifying as a person of color. Date of appointment was leading for inclusion in the sample, regardless of whether participants were still in that position at the time of the interview, and regardless of whether or not they had previously held leadership positions. Recruitment and data collection took place in the period from May to November 2023.

Participants were recruited through the author's professional network, followed by the snowball method, and by following up on media reports about new appointments that fit the study's criteria. I approached 46 people to participate in the study. Four people did not respond; two indicated that they did not have time. The final group consists of 40 people (18 women, 22 men).

Participants were asked about their ethnic-racial self-identification with regard to the part of their ancestry that makes them a person of color in their view. Of the 40 participants, 17 self-identified as Black (Pan-African), 13 as Pan-SWANA (South West Asia North Africa, or what is also known as the Middle East), 5 as Pan-Asian (South and East), and 5 reported having mixed non-White ancestry. Eight participants were raised by one or two White parents. Eighteen were born in the Netherlands. Of the 22 who were not born in the Netherlands, the majority (17) came to the Netherlands in childhood. Further, six participants identified as LGBT.

The vast majority of the participants (34) already had managerial experience and two-thirds (27) already had experience in a senior management position when they applied for the leadership position that was the focus of the study. At the time of the interview, participants were in their current leadership roles for 2–36 months (16 months on average). Six participants were appointed after May 2020, but were no longer in that same position at the time of the interview.

Data collection procedure

The study's procedures were approved by the local Ethics Committee of the author's affiliation. All participants gave permission for the recording of the interview and the

anonymous processing of their experiences in publications. In addition, they gave permission for the use of specific anonymized quotes from their interviews. All interviews were conducted by the author at a location of the participants' choice. The interviews were guided by a list of topics that were addressed in every interview, albeit not in a fixed order to allow for a more natural flow of conversation. The topics included: personal/family background, education, career development, leadership appointment procedure, dominant norms, diversity policies, and role models. Interviews usually last 60-90 min, with some peaks downwards (approx. 45 min) and upwards (more than 2 h). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Analyses

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the data: the analyses are primarily based on the collected data and the organization and interpretation of the data takes place on the basis of the scientific and personal knowledge and experience of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method of analysis acknowledges that neutrality does not automatically lead to maximum objectivity. Instead, 'strong objectivity' can be achieved through research practices in which the experiences of the (marginalized) group in question are taken as a starting point and in which openness is given about the profile of the researcher and its possible influence on the results and conclusions (Harding, 1995).

In reflexive thematic analysis, the research goes through the following steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) Study the data multiple times (listen, read); (2) Formulate and record provisional codes that reflect interesting aspects of the data; (3) Clustering and arranging codes that together form a possible underlying theme; (4) Verify that the preliminary themes are indeed a good reflection of the codes and of the dataset as a whole; (5) Defining and labeling themes through continuous adaptation and refinement, including their relation to the overarching storyline; (6) Reporting. In practice, the first four steps take place partly at the same time. At several times in this analytical cycle, the preliminary themes and insights were shared with a sounding board, consisting of four tenured professors from different research groups and universities with relevant expertise in the topics of the study (three of whom also identify as people of color). Their questions and feedback helped shape the narrative conveyed by the themes. Thematic saturation occurred after about 30 interviews.

Positionality statement

For conducting reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data, the scholarly and personal knowledge and experience of the researcher are important tools. The researcher does not hide behind so-called neutrality, but is open about their own profile and how this can influence the research process (cf. Haraway, 2016; Harding, 1995).

Regarding my scholarly profile, I have a PhD in psychology and have a long track record in studying cultural, racial and gender bias and discrimination in the youth domain, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In recent years, I have broadened my research horizon to studies on adults and institutions. On a personal level, I am a

cisgender heterosexual woman of color with Dutch and Indonesian roots ('Indo' in the Dutch vernacular). In childhood, I experienced various forms of 'everyday' racism and discrimination. Because the Indo population in the Netherlands is generally seen and framed as a 'model minority' and is seen as belonging to the Dutch culture, experiences of overt racism have been largely absent from my adult life.

Professionally, I have held formal leadership positions in higher education for 10 years. These experiences taught me a lot about navigating issues around racism administratively and personally, and the precarious position in which someone of color finds themselves when this theme comes up in the workplace. In terms of the influence of my positionality on the study, many participants told me that it was exactly my positionality that made them agree to participate and feel confident that their experiences would be understood and accurately represented. The sounding board provided perspectives other than my own to limit the danger of a single story.

Results

The analyses led to the identification of three themes: (1) the salience of ethnic-racial identity; (2) conforming and resisting; (3) strength and vulnerability, and they will be discussed below. The quotes are labeled by participant number (i.e. P1 to P40).

Theme 1: the salience of ethnic-racial identity

Almost unanimously, the participants confirmed that their ethnic-racial background and racialized experiences were formative in their lives and had made them who they are as people, as professionals, and as leaders. Most participants emphasized that their identities and life experiences had given them valuable skills and insights, because they had been through hardship and were experienced in navigating (between) social groups. The vast majority also indicated that they think their ethnic-racial identities and what that brings to their profiles played a role in their appointment, because organizations are looking for the particular skills and knowledge that they – as bicultural leaders – have. 'It always plays a role', is what several participants told me. However, the subject was rarely discussed in the selection interviews for the leadership positions (cf. White 'color-evasion'). A quarter of the participants mentioned their ethnic-racial identity themselves in the selection procedure and what that means for who they are and what they can do, because they want the subject to be open on the table and the organization knows 'who they are bringing in' and what that means for the interpretation of the role.

> Because I don't want to get to a point where I bring something up, everyone says 'we don't see color and we don't understand it.' Don't downplay it, but ask me what I need. (P8)

> (…) so that they know that it will be difficult. That people will also start to doubt whether I can do this or that. (P20)

This strategy of bringing up one's own bicultural background in relation to the leadership position they are applying for is a way of saying that they do not just leave their ethnic-racial identity at the front door (Bell et al., 2019). This is reminiscent of findings by

Slootman ([2018](#)) that a higher position on the socio-economic ladder allows for (and might even encourage) assertion of ethnic-minority identity. However, being seen only or primarily in terms of one's ethnicity or race was not something they appreciated. This often came to light when it was said or suggested that their appointment was not so much because of their skills but because of their ethnic-racial identities. In other words, that they are a token (Kanter, [1977](#)).

> Someone said, nice that you got that position, now that us White people are no longer eligible for those kinds of jobs. (P12)

> A colleague, consciously or unconsciously, who said 'hey, you must be here because you're such a 'knuffel-Marokkaan' (literally: cuddly Moroccan, a derogatory Dutch term commonly used to denote a model Moroccan).' (P35)

> If that was the main reason for hiring me, then I don't want the job anymore. (P18)

These experiences also make participants feel that they have to work harder than others to prove themselves, that their talent is not automatically recognized or that they are only seen as that person of color. Others had developed a thick skin in response to allegations of tokenism, or simply accepted the advantage that institutional diversity goals might have for them.

> I'm not saying that the fact that I'm Black didn't play a role, I'm just saying that my qualities are so convincing that those could not be questioned. And of course that's actually the problematic part, if you're a person of color then you need that. (P2)

> I'm not that sensitive in that area. I rely very much on my own strengths, I know what I can and can't do, what I'm good at and what I'm not good at. (P13)

The salience of the participants' ethnic-racial background was also emphasized by the messages from other people of color in – and outside of their organization in response to their appointment in a leadership position. For them the participants were important role models (and sometimes also mentors), a phenomenon also found in other studies in relation to their positive influence on career choices (Kofoed, [2019](#)) and achievement (Redding, [2019](#)).

> I regularly receive messages from women with a refugee background. They see me as an inspiration and want to learn how they can get ahead despite the barriers they face. (P38)

> I've come to discover that it has quite an impact. (…) That someone is now comfortable giving his child an Arabic name because I have also come to this position with my name. (P39)

There was also criticism of the idea of the role model function specifically for people of color, as it reflects an overly restrictive vision of identity, and being pigeonholed or racial identity being essentialized. The role model function also means that many participants feel a certain obligation to do well, not to fail to pave the way for other people of color. That duty can also feel like a burden. You are not just doing it for yourself, but for an entire community, which again highlights your ethnic-racial identity rather than your professional skills and goals.

> So it's actually bigger than you think. That's why there can be quite a bit of pressure, like I have to do this right. (…) you actually carry the whole community as well. (P19)

> If I'm there, I can say it. But if I'm not there, it [bias] will just continue. (…) So that's the responsibility that's exhausting, and then ending up being on those boards. (P21)

Even though being a role model to others from marginalized ethnic-racial groups gives participants energy and motivation, it also comes with an additional and sometimes tiring burden for this group. They feel responsible for making a difference within their organization and for the hopes of an entire 'constituency'. And if they fail, it also reflects negatively on others of color, because then the image is confirmed that 'they' can't do it, reflecting badly on the associated group (Cook & Glass, 2013). In these discussions, participants also reflected on the balancing act of individuality and collective identity (Essed, 2001).

Theme 2: conforming and resisting

For the vast majority of participants, conforming and resistance coexisted and alternated. First and foremost, participants mentioned the rigidity of cultural norms in the Netherlands in general and in organizations in particular.

> You notice that in Dutch situations you are really expected to behave in a Dutch way. I always find that obligation extremely difficult. (P9)

> I don't actually walk freely into the (professional) world as if it were mine. (..) The world I'm in, that's just not made for me yet. It's up to me first to fit in. (P30)

It was generally agreed that without conforming to the dominant White Dutch (male) norm, they would not have made it to the top. Conforming was second nature to almost all participants.

> I think that a lot of people like me who have ended up in positions like mine are extremely good at being adaptable. I really think that's our talent.(P11)

> I've always been very aware that I have to look proper, so that there is no comment or criticism of how I look, and I have to talk very nicely so that there is no comment on how I talk. I also taught myself to use very expensive words. (P15)

Some others who had been culturally mainstreamed early in life, were usually aware of the fact that this came with benefits.

> I have the same cultural customs, for the most part. I'm used to going out for drinks, I know when I should or shouldn't say something, so I completely conform to those mores and I'm not a threat. I do not ask much of the adaptability of the other. (P6)

That last observation is telling: in order to be accepted, it is wise not to ask or expect too much adjustment from the (White) other, but to shoulder the burden of adaptability. In addition, several participants mentioned compensating strategies: anticipatory adjustments in behavior aimed at preventing or removing prejudice in others, based on their awareness of stereotypes that other people may have about the ethnic-racial group to which they belong (Shelton et al., 2005). This was a theme in all ethnic-racial groups, but were different in nature depending on the stereotypes specific to their group membership (and gender) they were trying to combat. For example, female Black participants made sure to not be too loud, male participants with a Muslim identity felt they had to prove that they were not misogynists, and Asian women felt that they needed to amplify their leadership to not appear weak.

Most participants also voiced criticism of dominant norms, talked about resisting the status quo, especially now that they were in a leadership position, and chose to play

an active role in policy-making around DEI in their leadership role. They often opt for pro-verbial velvet gloves to prevent resistance and lack of motivation, wrapping it in acceptable language and preventing discomfort. There was also a clear pattern of participants finding this approach exhausting. Several participants also mentioned the pitfall of being a leader of color who spearheads DEI policies. It could erode one's status as general leader/director when one is associated primarily with this topic, and could lead to accusations of DEI being a personal hobby. Another pitfall is that the inevitable resistance to this theme quickly becomes personal. It is not just another management topic, but one that is directly related to the positionality of the leader of color, and that can be painful.

> Yes, you make up your mind, if I'm at the helm, then I'm going to make a difference and that's what I want to do and that's what I eventually do, but I do notice how much stomach pain that causes. (P6)

Despite resistance, most participants actively led changes intended to foster DEI in the organization wherever they could. Overall, being an expert at conforming and compensating does not necessarily get in the way of these leaders questioning dominant norms of quality and value, and trying to make an institutional difference once they have the power to do so as leaders in an organization (Fulton et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Resilience and vulnerability

The third theme concerns the emphasis on individual resilience, while also acknowledging vulnerability. Participants talked about their individual strengths, qualities and perseverance as characteristics that helped them get into leadership positions, often within a survivor narrative, reminiscent of the phrase 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'.

> I've also developed a knack for dismissing things. (…) So things do not affect me as quickly as they do others. (…) I think that's part of that survival mechanism. (P11)

> In a sea of adversity, grab a shovel and dig in one direction. A lot of people of color have learned that in this White society. (…) Otherwise, you'll break. (P2)

With the predominant focus on individual resilience and agency, it is not surprising that victimhood does not fit with the participants' self-images. However, they were acutely aware of their vulnerability as a person of color, so not as an individual characteristic, but as a function of group membership. This started with the more abstract feeling of not belonging, based on people's reactions or simply the characteristics of those in the room. Participants were often the first (and sometimes the only) person of color in the top layer of their organization, and it was clear that their colleagues, hierarchically above, below or equal to them had to get used to this.

> I've been to a number of events where I was the only non-White person and then I felt like the others didn't know what to do with me. (P18)

> I speak Arabic (…). The only people who speak Arabic in this building are the cleaners. So it must be very strange for my employees that I'm now the one telling them what to do. (P12)

Apart from simply being different than the majority, several participants also met with resistance to their leadership in ways that suggested a vulnerable position due to racial

bias. When discussing such situations, most were quick to say that they did not want to accuse people of racism, or that they were not sure whether it was indeed racism, and sometimes sought other explanations for what they experienced. However, the underlying sense was that their ethnic-racial background was a significant factor. According to the participants, being of color in the White top of organizations regularly leads to a kind of 'short circuit' for others. This short-circuit stems from the discrepancy between the expectations of what a leader looks like (White and male) and the actual appearance of the participants, as also frequently shown in studies of the 'standard' expectations of what leaders look like (Gündemir et al., 2014; Petsko & Rosette, 2023). Often unaware of the cause of their confusion, people say things that confirm the existence of those prejudices. These patterns appeared to be more pronounced among the female participants, which is consistent with a type of double jeopardy phenomenon in which women of color deviate from the leadership norm on two dimensions, reflecting the salience of intersectionality (Rosette et al., 2016).

Intersectionality was also relevant for those among the participants who identified as LGBT. These participants – especially the gay men – had the impression that this part of their identities was 'helpful' because the associated stereotypes 'alleviated' those about their ethnic-racial group, for example, the prejudice that some groups of color are homophobic or too dominant. It was also noted that if you are the odd one out on multiple dimensions, including within your own ethnic-racial community, it demands even more of your adaptability and insight into power relations.

Several participants also reflected on the tension between being the boss and being a victim when you experience racism from employees in a leadership position. On the one hand, you have a position of power from which you can set boundaries, but it almost feels like an abuse of power if you have to discuss such experience with employees whose boss you are. In those situations, participants still felt powerless.

Vulnerability also stemmed from structural organizational problems that made effective leadership a type of 'mission impossible'. Half of the participants indicated that there were significant problems in the organization at the time they stepped up to the leadership plate. For example, there were financial problems, an unsafe working atmosphere, many changes at the top in a short period of time and/or overdue maintenance in various areas. The term 'neglected organization' was used several times. Sometimes these problems had been shared transparently in the selection procedure, but some only found out about them once they had started in their leadership position. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the 'glass cliff', originally coined in relation to women in leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) and later to people of color in leadership roles (Glass & Cook, 2020). A meta-analysis shows that people from marginalized groups are indeed more likely to be appointed to leadership positions when the organization in question faces significant challenges (Morgenroth et al., 2020), indicating a vulnerable position with a high risk of failure, because being the leader of an organization in trouble and who is expected to perform miracles is not an easy task.

> No, I didn't find out until I was hired. A colleague from another organization even said, 'I don't know if I should congratulate you with this appointment.' (P1)

> Well, I was so happy with the opportunity I was given, that I asked very few critical questions. (…) it felt to me like beggars can't be choosers. (P10)

Support from their own superiors (like supervisory boards) in difficult times was felt to not sufficiently present in more than a third of the twenty participants who found problems in their organizations. A lack of support manifested itself in resistance to the participants' ideas, not being taken seriously and a lack of understanding of the understanding of the specific challenges that people of color experience in these positions.

> When I'm trying to explain what things were like for me [as a leader of color], well they were flabbergasted, they didn't understand anything at all. (P36)

> I find it really hard to say whether how I have been treated was due to the fact that in many ways I do not resemble people I deal with. But for me, it doesn't really matter if it's because of that or not, I've felt alone over and over again, that matters. (P10)

Feelings of loneliness were unfortunately not exceptional in this group. In addition, if your experiences are systematically denied or distorted, you will end up doubting yourself. A deep-seated insecurity and sometimes the fear that you might not be good enough for this position was also explicitly mentioned by several participants.

> For a long time, I worked out of fear. A lazy day is not in the cards for me. I've had to do more all my life to prove my worth. Much more than if I hadn't been a person of color. (P4)

> Doubting yourself is a structural problem that I have, because you have been questioned so many times about your expertise, your knowledge, your professionalism. (P20)

So even though the general narrative was one of individual resilience and the resistance against victimhood was palpable in most interviews, there were clearly situations where participants felt vulnerable because they were apparently not treated with the respect and support that a White leader might have received. Such experiences are usually not shared widely, and to the outside world a façade of strength is often kept up. As described earlier, these leaders will generally just work harder in the face of adversity to come out on top. Only when all else fails, will they decide to call it quits, and even then it is seen as a strong and agentic decision, albeit one forced by the multi-layered vulnerability of their positions.

Discussion

This study is the first of its kind in the Netherlands, foregrounding the experiences of people of color in (strategic) leadership positions, reflecting on their pathways to the top and how they navigate the challenges at the top of White organizations. The themes that emerged from the interviews highlighted the salience of ethnic-racial identities in (and on the way to) leadership, balancing conforming and resisting in relation to dominant (White) norms, and the alternating narratives of resilience and vulnerability in the context of racism.

Synthesizing themes

Their ethnic-racial identity was salient to almost all participants and seen as a source of both strength and vulnerability. Experiences of being othered and not accepted as a leader created a vulnerability that was not often understood by those who had originally hired the leader of color, and at worst even denied. The fact that the experiences,

concerns, and suggestions of leaders of color about restrictive norms and racism in the organization are not taken seriously, appears to be a significant hindrance to an inclusive working climate. All too often, the burden is on the marginalized group to fit in and not cause discomfort. The latter usually means not mentioning racism. This is also related to a feeling that people of color are expected to be grateful for being included at all, and that criticism such as pointing out racism is an expression of ingratitude (Ghorashi, 2014).

The pressure to conform to the dominant White norm was felt and put into practice from the participants' childhoods onwards. The obvious advantage of conforming is acceptance by colleagues and increasing the chances of making a good career (Keskiner & Crul, 2017), but the disadvantage is that it perpetuates the (White male) norm (McCluney et al., 2021). Another disadvantage of conforming is the potential loss of authenticity (Ossenkop et al., 2015). Hewlin (2003) calls this adaptive behavior 'façades of conformity', and research shows that forced conformity can actually lead to feelings of exhaustion and less engagement at work (Weiss et al., 2018). Intersectionality played a role, as women and people identifying as LGBT reported cumulating challenges, and the types of compensating behaviors varied depending on one's specific ethnic-racial identity.

The burden of adapting was clearly felt to be on the shoulders of the leaders of color who often already had to overcome substantial challenges to get to where they are. A narrative of strength and exceptionality is an understandable coping mechanism to combatting imposter feelings and insecurities about fitting in. The struggles with confidence was one of the vulnerabilities that came to the fore in the interviews, in addition to lack of acceptance and support, and feelings of exhaustion and loneliness (cf. Shim, 2021). These psychological costs were sometimes accompanied by physical symptoms, bringing to mind the well-established link between being exposed to racism and a myriad of serious health problems (Paradies et al., 2015).

One of the tenets of token theory is that a critical mass of individuals from a marginalized group needs to be reached to counteract exclusionary mechanisms and their negative effects (Kanter, 1977). Although the notion of a specific critical turning point in number or proportion has not been consistently confirmed, there is evidence that token stress diminishes when there are more people from your underrepresented group in the organization (e.g. Fila et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 1995). Most participants were highly motivated to make a difference, to make their organizations and their sectors more inclusive, to prevent others from having to conform as much as they had to do to succeed, consistent with findings that more racially diverse boards and leaders pay more attention to DEI policies and behave more inclusively (Buse et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2024).

The Dutch context

The main themes emerging from the current study echo findings from the U.S. context, showing that the struggles of ethnic-racial minoritized individuals in leadership positions are not specific to particular countries. However, in contrast to study populations in the U.S., more than half of the participants (22) were born outside of the Netherlands, which appears to be consistent with national patterns in this age group (although ethnic-racial census figures are absent in the Netherlands). The reality of actually being newer to the country than most White people in the Netherlands may exacerbate the feeling of having to conform when you are a person of color. In addition, the very

Dutch commandment to 'act normal because that is crazy enough' ('doe maar gewoon dan doe je al gek genoeg') is unlikely to be helpful in allowing for more diverse behaviors and perspectives to be acceptable. This is compounded by a self-image of being a 'tolerant' country, a word that used be seen as a source of pride, but has come to be associated with the non-Dutch other being tolerated rather than welcomed and accepted (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

About a third of the participants in the current study identified as having roots in a Islamic culture. In the Netherlands, the largest migrant groups identify as Muslim in the Netherlands (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2018). This adds a layer of Othering to this group because of religion, a cultural trait that has become essentialized and racialized in the national discourse on migration (De Koning, 2020). Indeed, nationalist political parties focus on the Muslim population in particular as the source of all the country's problems. The combination of the size and marginalized status of this group is not easily compared to one in the U.S., but is similar to patterns in other Western European countries, such as France.

The current study adds to the findings by Waldring et al. (2015) who studied a more specific sample of lower-level leaders from Moroccan and Turkish descent in the Netherlands focusing on discrimination in their current roles: (1) Even people at the very top of an organization face racial discrimination, and that this is tricky to address when one is both the victim and the highest-ranking person in the organization; (2) They use their top position to improve inclusive policies and practices but have to do so with 'velvet gloves' so as to not offend or alienate their employees; (3) Intersectionality was relevant, given that women need to combat two sources of stereotyping, LGBT leaders are stereotyped as less threatening, and the type of racism that leaders of color face varies according to specific racist stereotypes about specific racialized groups.

Strengths, limitations and future research

The study has some limitations. It is not possible to know how representative the participants in this study are for the total population of people of color in leadership positions in the Dutch (semi-)public sector, as there are no reliable figures on such numbers in the Netherlands. It is possible that people with stronger ethnic-racial identities and those who value DEI were more likely to participate in this study. Further, no control group of White leaders was included in this study. Some of the participants' experiences may also apply to White leaders, such as resistance to new ideas. Nevertheless, many of the themes that emerge in this study had to do with the ethnic-racial identity of the participants. For example, it is unlikely that White leaders will be told that they only got that position because they are White. Finally, although 40 is a good sample size for this type of study, it did preclude more fine-grained analyses of things like specific ethnic-racial subgroups, intersectionality, and organization type.

Conclusion

People of color in leadership positions in the Netherlands are characterized by strong ethnic-racial identities, a talent for conforming while at the same time being critical of dominant norms, resilience in the face of racism and adversity, but also vulnerability in

organizations where a lack of support from superiors and a lack of understanding for their experiences is a threat to their personal wellbeing and effectiveness as leaders. Often being 'the first and the only' at the top in a particular organization or sector, gives them role model status, but this comes with the burden of having to represent an entire constituency. The individual excellence narrative is understandable in this context, but may also set unrealistic standards. Shifting the focus from individuals to systems, fostering widely shared responsibility for an inclusive workplace where everybody is willing to adapt and open up norms emerge from this study as crucial to the personal wellbeing and professional effectiveness of people of color in leadership positions. Embracing leaders of color who currently have to run the proverbial gauntlet will not only be an important move towards racial justice, it would also enrich organizations and society as a whole when these leaders can realize their full potential.

Acknowledgements

Author contributions

CRediT: **Judi Mesman:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

References

Adamovic, M., & Leibbrandt, A. (2023). Is there a glass ceiling for ethnic minorities to enter leadership positions? Evidence from a field experiment with over 12,000 job applications. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *34*(2), 101655. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101655

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

Bell, E., Nkomo, E. L. J., & M, S. (2019). Race in organizations: Often cloaked but always present. In L. M. Roberts, A. J. Mayo, & D. A. Thomas (Eds.), *Race, work and leadership. New perspectives on the black experience* (pp. xi-xvii)). Harvard Business Review Press.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2013). "New racism," color-blind racism, and the future of whiteness in America. In A. W. Doane & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White out* (pp. 268–281). Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Buse, K., Bernstein, R. S., & Bilimoria, D. (2016). The influence of board diversity, board diversity policies and practices, and board inclusion behaviors on nonprofit governance practices. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *133*(1), 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2352-z

Cook, A., & Glass, C. (2013). Glass cliffs and organizational saviors: Barriers to minority leadership in work organizations? *Social Problems*, *60*(2), 168–187. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2013.60.2.168

De Koning, M. (2020). The racialization of danger: Patterns and ambiguities in the relation between Islam, security and secularism in The Netherlands. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *54*(1-2), 123–135. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1705011

Ellemers, N., Pagliaro, S., & Barreto, M. (2017). Morality and behavioral regulation in groups: A social identity approach. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *24*(1), 160–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2013.841490

Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. Sage.

Essed, P. (2001). Multi-identifications and transformations: Reaching beyond racial and ethnic reductionisms. *Social Identities*, *7*(4), 493–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630120107665

Essed, P., & Goldberg, D. T. (2002). Cloning cultures: The social injustices of sameness. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *25*(6), 1066–1082. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987022000009430

Essed, P., & Hoving, I. (2014). Innocence, smug ignorance, resentment: An introduction to Dutch racism. In P. Essed & I. Hoving (Eds.), *Dutch racism* (pp. 9–29). Brill.

Fila, M. J., Purl, J., & Jang, S. (2022). Demands, resources, well-being and strain: Meta – analyzing moderator effects of workforce racial composition. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, *17*(4), 2163–2190. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-021-10018-8

Fulton, B. R., Oyakawa, M., & Wood, R. L. (2023). Critical standpoint: Leaders of color advancing racial equality in predominantly white organizations. In L. A. Dicke (Ed.), *Understanding nonprofit organizations* (pp. 107–124). Routledge.

Ghorashi, H (2014). Racism and "the ungrateful other" in The Netherlands. In P. Essed, & I. Hoving (Eds.), *Dutch racism* (pp. 101–116). Brill.

Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2020). Pathways to the glass cliff: A risk tax for women and minority leaders? *Social Problems*, *67*(4), 637–653. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spz045

Gündemir, S., Homan, A. C., De Dreu, C. K., & Van Vugt, M. (2014). Think leader, think white? Capturing and weakening an implicit pro-white leadership bias. *PLoS One*, *9*(1), e83915. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0083915

Haraway, D. (2016). 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective'. In L. McDowell & J. Sharp (Eds.), *Space, gender, knowledge: Feminist readings* (pp. 53–72). Routledge.

Harding, S. (1995). "Strong objectivity": A response to the new objectivity question. *Synthesis*, *104*, 331–349.

Hekman, D. R., Johnson, S. K., Foo, M. D., & Yang, W. (2017). Does diversity-valuing behavior result in diminished performance ratings for non-white and female leaders? *Academy of Management Journal*, *60*(2), 771–797. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2014.0538

Hewlin, P. F. (2003). And the award for best actor goes to … : facades of conformity in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review*, *28*(4), 633–642.

Higgins, K., Friedman, S., & Reeves, A. (2024). Outsiders on the inside": how minoritised elites respond to racial inequality. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *48*, 1–21.

Jackson, P. B., Thoits, P. A., & Taylor, H. F. (1995). Composition of the workplace and psychological well-being: The effects of tokenism on America's Black elite. *Social Forces*, *74*(2), 543–557. https://doi.org/10.2307/2580491

Kanter, R. M. (1977). Some effects of proportions on group life: Skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. *American Journal of Sociology*, *82*(5), 965–990. https://doi.org/10.1086/226425

Keskiner, E., & Crul, M. (2017). How to reach the top? Fields, forms of capital, and strategies in accessing leadership positions in France among descendants of migrants from Turkey. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(2), 283–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1245435

Kofoed, M. S. (2019). The effect of same-gender or same-race role models on occupation choice: Evidence from randomly assigned mentors at West point. *Journal of Human Resources*, *54*(2), 430–467. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.2.0416.7838R1

Lentin, A. (2008). Europe and the silence about race. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *11*(4), 487–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431008097008

McCluney, C. L., Durkee, M. I., Smith II, R. E., Robotham, K. J., & Lee, S. S. L. (2021). To be, or not to be … Black: The effects of racial codeswitching on perceived professionalism in the workplace. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *97*, 104199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104199

Mesman, J. (2024). Leiderschap in Kleur [Leadership in color]. Universiteit Leiden.

Morgenroth, T., Kirby, T. A., Ryan, M. K., & Sudkämper, A. (2020). The who, when, and why of the glass cliff phenomenon: A meta-analysis of appointments to precarious leadership positions. *Psychological Bulletin*, *146*(9), 797. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000234

Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015). The motivational theory of role modeling: How role models influence role aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology*, *19*(4), 465–483. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000059

Neville, H. A., Awad, G. H., Brooks, J. E., Flores, M. P., & Bluemel, J. (2013). Color-blind racial ideology. *American Psychologist*, *68*(6), 455–466. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033282

Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2009). A critical review of race and ethnicity in the leadership literature: Surfacing context, power and the collective dimensions of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*(6), 876–896. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.005

Ossenkop, C., Vinkenburg, C. J., Jansen, P. G., & Ghorashi, H. (2015). Ethnic identity positioning at work: Understanding professional career experiences. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *31*(4), 515–525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2015.08.002

Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., … & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS One*, *10*(9), e0138511. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138511

Petsko, C. D., & Rosette, A. S. (2023). Are leaders still presumed white by default? Racial bias in leader categorization revisited. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *108*(2), 330. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001020

Redding, C. (2019). A teacher like me: A review of the effect of student – teacher racial/ethnic matching on teacher perceptions of students and student academic and behavioral outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *89*(4), 499–535. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319853545

Roberts, L. M., Mayo, A. J., & Thomas, D. A. (2019). *Race, work, and leadership: New perspectives on the black experience*. Harvard Business Press.

Rosette, A. S., Koval, C. Z., Ma, A., & Livingston, R. (2016). Race matters for women leaders: Intersectional effects on agentic deficiencies and penalties. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *27*(3), 429–445. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.01.008

Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence that women are over – represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*, *16*(2), 81–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2005.00433.x

Shelton, J. N., Richeson, J. A., & Salvatore, J. (2005). Expecting to be the target of prejudice: Implications for interethnic interactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*(9), 1189–1202. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205274894

Shim, J. (2021). Token fatigue: Tolls of marginalization in white male spaces. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *44*(7), 1115–1134. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1779947

Slootman, M. (2018). Social mobility allowing for ethnic identification: Reassertion of ethnicity among Moroccan and Turkish Dutch. *International Migration*, *56*(4), 125–139. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12406

Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau. (2018). *De religieuze beleving van Moslims in Nederland*.

Staatscommissie Tegen Discriminatie en Racisme (2023). *Aard, omvang en oorzaken van discriminatie en racisme in Nederland: Eerste inzichten en vervolg*.

Sue, D. W. (2016). *Race talk and the conspiracy of silence: Understanding and facilitating difficult dialogues on race*. John Wiley & Sons.

United Nations (1966). *International convention on the elimination of All forms of racial discrimination*. Treaty Series, 660, 195.

Waldring, I., Crul, M., & Ghorashi, H. (2015). Discrimination of second-generation professionals in leadership positions. *Social Inclusion*, *3*(4), 38–49. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i4.227

Weeks, K. P., Taylor, N., Hall, A. V., Bell, M. P., Nottingham, A., & Evans, L. (2023). "They say they support diversity initiatives, but they don't demonstrate it": The impact of DEI paradigms on the emotional labor of HR&DEI professionals. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *39*, 1–23.

Weiner, M. F. (2014). The ideologically colonized metropole: Dutch racism and racist denial. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(6), 731–744. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12163

Weiss, M., Razinskas, S., Backmann, J., & Hoegl, M. (2018). Authentic leadership and leaders' mental well-being: An experience sampling study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *29*(2), 309–321. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.05.007

Wekker, G. (2016). *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race*. Duke University Press.

Zhang, Y., Mooney, A., & Ozgen, S. (2025). Racial minorities in strategic leadership: An integrative literature review and future research roadmap. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *36*(1), 101840.