PREFERABLE DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIVES: ‘CULTURAL BROKERING’ AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF POWER CENTRES

Eline Severs – Vrije Universiteit Brussel & Universiteit Antwerpen (Eline.Severs@vub.ac.be) and Sara de Jong – Universität Wien (sara.de.jong@univie.ac.at)

Paper prepared for the panel ‘The Good Representative 2.0’ at the 4th ECPR Conference on Politics and Gender, Uppsala, 11-13 June 2015.

***This is a draft paper – Please contact us for an updated version before citing our work***

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to contribute to the burgeoning literature on preferable descriptive representatives. The development of the concept of ‘preferable descriptive representatives’ builds on two main considerations: first, the notion that not every descriptive representative will promote the interests of her social group and, second, the insight that the heterogeneity of social groups and the diversity – and potentially conflicting character – of their members’ interests may cause descriptive representatives to overlook the interests of the most dispossessed subgroups. Together, these insights suggest that the mere presence of descriptive representatives in decision-making institutions may not be sufficient for realising the goals advanced within group-based theories of fair representation; that is the inclusion of the social perspectives of historically disadvantaged groups in decision-making processes and the promotion of citizens’ equal standing in these processes (e.g., Phillips 1995; Kymlicka 1995; Williams 1998; Mansbridge 1999; Young 2001).

In this paper, we draw on the historical and anthropological post-colonial literature on colonial ‘cultural brokers’ to develop a standard for preferable descriptive representatives that centres on their active contribution to deconstructing power centres. Contrary to Dovi’s (2002) original conceptualisation of preferable descriptive representatives (as actors who have mutual relations with dispossessed subgroups), our standard endorses ‘preferable acts’ and extends considerations thereof to inter-group relations. We argue that reflections on the ‘preferable characteristics’ of descriptive representatives (i.e. the traits that ensure fidelity to their group’s social perspective) cannot be disengaged from considerations on the precarious power positions of descriptive representatives. Recruited on the basis of particular traits that make them desirable to party leaders (e.g., proficiency in the dominant language, the display of individualist attitudes), descriptive representatives are often expected – and sometimes disciplined – to promote a conception of citizenship that is complacent with dominant conceptions of ‘normalcy’. Without acts of resistance and contestation, their presence in decision-making bodies may reinforce those very power relations that group-based theories of fair representation seek to transform.

1 Eline Severs gratefully acknowledges support from the Research Council of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Strategic Research Programme ‘Evaluating Democratic Governance in Europe’ – EDGE, 2013-2016). Sara de Jong gratefully acknowledges support from the EU Marie Curie Actions, IEF (Grant number 624577), the Catherine van Tussenbroekfonds and the OeAD (Ernst Mach Grant).
INTRODUCTION

‘It is also noteworthy that, in our desegregation cases, we rejected arguments that are virtually identical to those advanced by the University today. The University asserts, for instance, that the diversity obtained through its discriminatory admissions program prepares its students to become leaders in a diverse society. [...] The segregationists likewise defended segregation on the ground that it provided more leadership opportunities for blacks. [...] This argument was unavailing. It is irrelevant under the Fourteenth Amendment whether segregated or mixed schools produce better leaders. Indeed, no court today would accept the suggestion that segregation is permissible because historically black colleges produced Booker T. Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., and other prominent leaders.

Likewise, the University’s racial discrimination cannot be justified on the ground that it will produce better leaders.’ – Justice Clarence Thomas, June 24, 2013.

In 2008, Abigail Fisher and Rachel Multer Michalewicz applied to the University of Texas at Austin and were denied admission. The two women, both white, filed suit against the University; alleging that its race-conscious admission programmes had discriminated against them on the basis of their ‘race’ and was, concomitantly, acting in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Fisher and Michalewicz asked that the Court declare the University’s affirmative action admission policy inconsistent with the Grutter v. Bollinger case which had in 2003 established that ‘race’ had an appropriate but limited role in the admission policies of public universities. Following lower appellate court’s ruling in favour of the University, the Fisher v. University of Texas case was brought before the United States Supreme Court. In June 2013, and to the relief of civil rights groups, the Supreme Court refused to revisit the constitutionality of using ‘race’ as a factor in college admissions and ruled in favour of the University. Following the Court’s decision, Justice Clarence Thomas – the second and current sole African American to serve on the Court – filed a concurring opinion. In this opinion, Thomas argued against the University’s affirmative action policies and compared its justifications to those of Jim Crow-era segregationists. The University’s arguments today are no
more persuasive than they were 60 years ago,’ stated Thomas⁶, ‘There is no principled distinction between the University’s assertion that diversity yields educational benefits and the segregationists’ assertion that segregation yielded those same benefits’. As one of the most notable critics of affirmative action policies, Justice Thomas is conceived by many African Americans as a traitor and hypocrite (e.g., Merida and Fletcher 2007, p. 19). These feelings are reinforced by Thomas’ personal background and, what many perceive as, his refusal to account for the part of affirmative action in his current success. Born in poverty in rural Georgia, Thomas made it – as beneficiary of affirmative action schemes – to Yale Law School. He believes, however, that the stigma of preferential treatment made it more difficult for him to obtain a job after college. He, therefore, routinely calls upon African Americans to take responsibility for their own fate. Thomas’ austere individualism stands in sharp contrast to the belief shared by many African Americans that affirmative action remains a necessary instrument for overcoming the structural inequalities related to racism. Because of these strong divergences, Thomas’ capacity to represent African American communities has been widely scrutinised.

The controversy over the representative qualities of Clarence Thomas is not a stand-alone case (cf. Dovi 2002, p. 735; Williams 1998, p. 6). In contemporary politics, conservative women – such as, activist Phyllis Schlafly and Alaska governor Sarah ‘mama grizzly’ Palin – are often critiqued by feminists for their opposition against modern feminism⁷. Similarly, the critical views on Islamic practices voiced by Somali born Dutch⁸ activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali are by many migrant organisations found damaging to the claims for recognition of Islamic communities in the Netherlands. Her emphasis on migrants’ duty to integrate within Dutch society and adapt to Dutch socio-cultural norms is critiqued for its negation of migrants’ dual identities and the relevance of cultural recognition to their sense of self-worth. Much of the controversy over these actors’ representative claims centres on their descriptive similarities – in terms of outward characteristics of lived experiences – with the group spoken for and about and the expectation that these similarities would translate into fidelity towards their group’s social perspectives.

Although controversies of this kind elicit and deserve⁹ critical responses from the scholarly community, the nature of these controversies also complicates the formulation of such responses. It is difficult for scholars to intervene and adopt a position in debates over descriptive representatives’ qualities without also invoking ‘Brown v. Board of Education’ case. The remaining Jim Crow laws were overruled by the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) which granted equal civil rights and civil liberties to Americans from African descent.

⁷ For recent studies on conservative women and political representation, see the edited volume by Celis and Childs (2014).
⁹ As Susanne Dovi (2002, p. 734) has cogently argued, silence on the matter may play into the hands of historically privileged groups that are still frequently in charge of selecting party list candidates or nominating candidates for office. Critically evaluating the standards for descriptive representatives may, in addition, elicit social group members’ judgment on their representatives and, as such, facilitate processes of democratisation.
standards that have the potential to reify essentialist notions of group identity (cf. Squires 2001, pp. 14-5; Childs 2006, p. 10; Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers 2007, p. 554; Severs 2010, p. 414). In the past, conservative activists Susanne Venker and Phyllis Schlafly (2011) have regularly stated that ‘as women have gained more freedom, more education, and more power, they have become less happy’. Feminist responses that the increase in women’s levels of unhappiness is caused by an incomplete transformation of the gender regime – as opposed to women’s increase in power – risk overruling the ways in which many conservative women attribute meaning to their lives. In the case of Clarence Thomas, organised protests from civil rights organisations could be taken as indicators of his failure to adequately represent the social perspective of African Americans. The robustness of such conclusion however depends on the representativeness of civil rights organisations themselves and the possibility for dissent over appropriate means within them (cf. Severs et al. 2013b, p. 447).

Scholarly commitment to non-essentialism and the formulation of standards for preferable descriptive representatives\(^{10}\) are, however, not mutually incompatible. The notion that descriptive representatives have a responsibility to bring up for discussion the structural inequalities that negatively affect the lives of members of historically disadvantaged groups does not place undesirable constraints on representatives’ behaviour. Such a principle does not propose that descriptive representatives should only act as the spokesperson of particular social groups within society or that they should represent a prior demarcated set of group interests (cf. Dovi 2002, p. 734). Instead, it draws attention to historical processes of marginalisation and allocates descriptive representatives – on the basis of their perceived group membership – the responsibility to promote the equal standing of each citizen in decision-making processes. Although a commitment to citizens’ equality is a responsibility which members of privileged and disadvantaged groups share alike, the social position of privileged citizens often prevents them from articulating a standard of equality that does justice to the social perspectives of historically disadvantaged groups, their experiences with social events and their beliefs about the structure of social relations (cf. Young 1989, p. 262).

In this paper, we set out to contribute to the burgeoning literature on preferable descriptive representatives\(^{11}\). We formulate an account that defines the responsibilities of descriptive representatives in terms of their contributions, on the basis of their situated knowledge, to deconstructing centres of power. Contrary to Dovi’s (2002) original conceptualisation of preferable descriptive representatives (as actors who have mutual relations with members of dispossessed subgroups), our standard endorses ‘preferable acts’ and extends considerations thereof to inter-group relations. We argue that reflections on the ‘preferable characteristics’ of descriptive

\(^{10}\) In essence, all representatives stand, in a descriptive sense, for certain groups within society. Within the literature, however, the term ‘descriptive representatives’ is used in reference to representatives who share outward characteristics or certain lived experiences with members of historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, LGBTQI, ethno-cultural minorities, persons with a physical disability) or social groups that may be conceived as vulnerable in other terms (e.g., the elderly, young people, persons with a cognitive disability).

\(^{11}\) Although non-descriptive actors may equally promote the interests of historically disadvantaged groups and contribute to their inclusion in decision-making processes (see for instance, Childs and Krook’s (2006) notion of ‘critical actors’), we limit ourselves to a reflection on the standards for descriptive representatives. We motivate this limitation to the responsibilities that stem from being elected or appointed to promote the representation of a historically disadvantaged group.
representatives (i.e. the traits that ensure fidelity to their group’s social perspective) may not be disengaged from considerations on the precarious power positions of descriptive representatives. Dovi’s (2002) account of ‘preferable characteristics’ is based on the assumption that the traits (e.g., proficiency in the dominant language, the display of individualist attitudes) that make some members of social groups more desirable to party leaders may cause alienation from their group’s social perspective. In the paper, we do not contend this claim. But, rather, we argue that Dovi’s (2002) emphasis on descriptive representatives’ mutual relations with members of dispossessed subgroups risks downplaying the power differentials which may prevent descriptive representatives from acting upon their situated knowledge. Representatives’ identification with their social group may conflict with the pressures exerted on them by more privileged actors within the representative system. We draw on historical and anthropological literature on the colonial figure of the ‘cultural broker’ to demonstrate that descriptive representatives are often confronted with calls from political elites for a singular allegiance (to prevailing discourses on what is just and unjust). While such calls illustrate the precarious position of descriptive representatives, they equally suggest that the promotion of a group’s social perspective will require an active dismantling of the power structures that coat certain social locations with privilege and power. Only such dismantling will open up the discursive space necessary for the recognition of members of historically disadvantaged groups.

Our argument continues over four sections. We, first, elaborate on group-based theories of fair representation and specify the empirical and normative claims on which they rest. Next, we discuss the burgeoning literature on preferable descriptive representatives. We review Dovi’s (2002) work on preferable descriptive representatives and clarify the premises that underpin her notion of ‘preferable characteristics’. Following that, we use the concept of the ‘cultural broker’ as a means to illustrate the need for expanding standards for preferable descriptive representatives from ‘preferable characteristics’ to ‘preferable acts’. In the conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our argument for empirical studies and offer some guidelines for operationalising our standard for preferable descriptive representatives.

GROUP-BASED THEORIES OF FAIR REPRESENTATION

The 1990s were characterised by the development of theoretical accounts which, in the name of fair representation, advocated the presence of members of historically disadvantaged groups in contemporary democracies’ central decision-making institutions (e.g., Young 1989; Kymlicka 1995; Phillips 1995; Williams, 1998; Mansbridge 1999). These group-based accounts of fair representation challenged traditional theories in two important respects. Their attention to historical processes of marginalisation, first, called into question the liberal principles of individual equality and autonomy on which traditional accounts of representation were founded. Group theorists’ arguments for redressing historical injustices, second, expanded concerns for fair representation beyond the relationship between those represented and their representatives to also include power relations among social groups.

12 For a more extensive elaboration on the individualist underpinnings of traditional, liberal accounts of political representation, please consult the works of Melissa S. Williams (1998) and Iris Marion Young (1989; 2000).
It is not coincidental that group-based theories challenged the extant literature on these two aspects. In many regards, theorists’ traditional concerns for the proper kind of relationship between those represented and their representatives can be seen as deriving from their principled attachment to individuals’ equal moral worth (e.g., Dworkin 1978, pp. 180-81) and their belief in citizens’ capacity for discovering and communicating the choice on policy matters which would best serve their interests (e.g., Dahl 1989, p. 99). The insight that representatives’ actions have the capacity to bind those represented prompted questions related to representatives’ responsibilities vis-à-vis those represented and the degree of autonomy that is permissible when speaking not just on behalf of the represented (to promote their best interests) but also in the name of the represented (giving them a stake in the action itself) (cf. Runciman 2007, p. 96). In their attempts to specify representatives’ responsibilities scholars (e.g., Griffiths 1960; Sobolewski 1968; Eulau & Karps 1977) were confronted with a particular dilemma: while representatives’ autonomous judgement on how to act could, on the basis of their elevation, best promote the interests of those represented, such judgment could, when too far removed from that of those represented, alienate the latter from processes of decision-making.

In her influential work ‘The Concept of Representation’, Hanna Pitkin (1967, p. 145) aptly summarised this dilemma as the question ‘whether a representative should do what those represented want, and be bound by mandates or instructions from them, or whether (s)he should be free to act as seems best to him or her in the pursuit of their welfare’. The way in which scholars have approached this question – also referred to as the ‘mandate-independence’ controversy – depended to a large extent on their beliefs in citizens’ political competence. Much as some have argued that a representative should commit herself to the preferences of those represented, others have objected this stance; arguing that it would make representatives ‘functionless most, if not all, of the time; for it is seldom clear precisely what a constituency, or even its majority wishes’ (Pennock 1979, pp. 324).

Although the ‘mandate-independence’ controversy continues to rumble on (Runciman 2007, p. 97), growing consensus on its insoluble character has – since the 1970s – led scholars to define the fairness of political representation mainly in terms of procedures we may count on to produce fair outcomes on the basis of their built-in commitment to impartiality (e.g., Mayo 1960; Przeworski & Stokes 1999; Ferejohn 1999). Procedural accounts generally advance two conditions to the fairness of political representation. The principle of ‘one person, one vote’, first, assures citizens – by means of an equally weighted vote – an equal stake in their political representation. The principle of open and free competition of interests, second, facilitates the

---

13 Marek Sobolewski (1968, p. 209), for instance, argued that: ‘in the theory of representation, the relation between electors and their representatives is the most fundamental problem. The way in which it is resolved determines the content of the general theory of representation. That is obvious: Representation means the subject represented and the representative acting on his behalf’.

14 That is, citizens’ capacity for discovering and communicating the choice on policy matters which would best serve their interests (Dahl, 1989, p. 99).

15 As Susan Bickford (1996, p. 57) has argued: ‘political equality is an equalising of unequals; it gives equal standing to those who may otherwise be unequal. Political equality makes peers out of those who are different’.
voicing and mobilisation of diverse, and potentially conflicting, interests in politics. From these procedures follows that the outcomes of political representation – whatever they happen to be – are fair. So long as every citizen has an equal opportunity to endorse the electoral candidate of their preference and mobilise politically around the interests that are important to her, the standard of fairness is met (Williams 1998, pp. 9-11).

As critics of liberal democracy (e.g., Kymlicka 1995, p. 50; Young 1989, p. 259; Phillips 2000, p. 251) have argued, procedural accounts of fair representation depend on seeing citizens as unique individuals which are nevertheless fundamentally the same as each other in terms of enjoying equal opportunities for voice and mobilisation. By conceiving of citizens primarily as individuals, liberal theories of fair representation awarded little room for considerations on the social identity of representatives. As individuals, it is unlikely that citizens will share identical constellations of interests with others. Their uniqueness notwithstanding, citizens may share an interest in, for instance, protecting the environment, the teaching profession, austerity measures, etc., with others. As a consequence, liberal democrats considered the social identity of representatives irrelevant to the question of fair representation (Williams 1998, p. 10). From liberal democrats’ individualism follows that any representative may be capable of representing others; not as a whole but with respect to a particular interest (cf. Pennock 1979, p. 353). The conception of individuals as the bearers of unique and complex interest constellations precludes closer attention to representatives' social identities. What matters to citizens’ fair representation is not the identity of their representatives – which is unlikely to map neatly onto that of other citizens – but the extent to which procedures of representation treat individuals impartially; providing them an equal chance in interest aggregation (cf. Williams 1998, p. 69).

Proponents of group-based theories of fair representation have challenged the individualist and proceduralist underpinnings of these accounts of liberal democracy. The presupposition that individuals’ complex interest constellations may best be promoted by a diversity of representatives (who may in some respects be considered similar to them) leads to a fragmentation of individuals’ interests. This fragmentation leaves little room for assessing issues in relation to each other and identifying priorities for the individual (cf. Young 1989, p. 251). Without closer attention to individuals’ social positions it becomes difficult to evaluate the case in which a young African-American woman finds her interests as a student and future entrepreneur met by extant policies but routinely sees her claims regarding unjust racialisation discredited. According to procedural standards of fair representation, the woman’s equally weighted vote and her equal opportunity to mobilise around the issue of racism suggests that in the described case no injustice was committed against her.

Such an evaluation would, however, omit the historical processes of marginalisation that make it more difficult for members of some groups to voice their preferences in a way that assures that the more central and dominant groups in society will listen or hear properly (Fraser 2003, p. 82). Historical legacies and cultural traditions prevent a political system from every being fully neutral or bereft of cultural ethos (cf. Young 1990, pp. 96-121; Benhabib 2004, p. 3). Even in the absence of formal exclusions, informal pressures that

---

16 Because it facilitates the mobilisation of diverse and potentially conflicting interests in politics, this principle is also referred to as 'interest group pluralism.'
marginalise the contributions of subordinate groups persist; rendering their claims less audible or acceptable to wider audiences. Members of historically disadvantaged groups often apply different stylistic registers, find it difficult to convey their messages to others, and are encouraged to keep their wants inchoate when these conflict with majority interests (Mansbridge 1990, p. 127; Young 2000, p. 23). As Iris Marion Young (1989, p. 260) has argued, individuals’ social identities disprove the possibility of achieving equality through ‘difference-blind’ conceptions of impartiality. Historical processes of marginalisation have packaged meaning onto social differences (such as, gender, ‘race’, sexuality, age, etc.) that locate members of social groups in mutually exclusive positions of privilege and disadvantage (such as, those related to whiteness and blackness) to each other.17 Contrary to interest groups, in which individuals come together as already formed persons with the intention of realising a mutual goal and may leave upon the realisation thereof, social groups have an element of ‘thrownness’ to them. When it comes to social groups, there is no act of ‘joining’. Instead, individuals find themselves together as members of a group whose existence and relations to others are experienced as prior to themselves. Because of their aspect of thrownness, social groups are difficult to leave on the basis of individuals’ personal intentions or efforts thereto. Leaving requires a transformation of self and the recognition thereof by other groups; in particular by privileged groups (cf. Young 1989, p. 260; Young 1997, p. 385).

Grounding their accounts in an explicit acknowledgment of historical processes of marginalisation, proponents of group-based theories (e.g., Phillips 1995, p. 157; Williams 1998, p. 6; Mansbridge 1999, p. 629) extended normative concerns beyond the representative relationship and also consider the power relations among citizens themselves. Raising citizens’ equal standing in decision-making processes as the standard of fair representation, group-based theories emphasised the need for an institutionalised voice for historically disadvantaged groups. In addition to institutional mechanisms, such as minority veto’s and the allocation of resources that facilitate the self-organisation of members of historically disadvantaged groups, scholars also pointed to the need for descriptive representatives.18 The argument for descriptive representatives draws from the insight that speakers’ social locations have ‘an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims’ (Alcoff 1991, p. 7). Because of their history, shared experience of cultural and structural obstacles, group-specific values and relationships with other groups, members of historically disadvantaged groups have different ways of understanding the meaning of social events. They are likely to know different things about social structures and the potential impact policies may have on their lives and relations with others. Because of their social locations, privileged actors are less likely to understand and acknowledge the relevance of these perspectives (Young 1989, p. 264).

17 We define social locations in terms of positions of privilege and disadvantage that situate social groups in hierarchical relations to each other and that are the product of social interactions that have packaged meanings on social differences. Depending on processes of social interaction these relations may be defined in a singular or intersectional manner.

18 The term descriptive representatives refers to representatives who are in their own persons and lives in some sense typical of the larger class of person whom they (are seen to) represent (cf. Mansbridge 1990, p. 629).
Group-based theories of fair representation, thus, base their arguments for a ‘politics of presence’ (Phillips 1995) on the enhanced capabilities of descriptive representatives for articulating their groups’ social perspectives in a manner that facilitates recognition of their members’ distinct voices. This presumption does not, however, rest upon a presumption that all members of a social group share the same policy preferences and goals (cf. Phillips 1995, p. 157) or that a social group’s interests are objectively given (cf. Mansbridge 1999, p. 629). Instead, descriptive representatives are considered more capable of articulating their group’s social perspective because of their relationships of trust with group members (Phillips 1998, p. 228; Williams 1998; Mansbridge 1999). Descriptive representatives’ outward signs of having lived through the same experiences as other group members generate relations of trust and facilitate communication with members of historically disadvantaged groups. Such communication allows descriptive representatives to draw not only on their proper experiences as ‘woman’ or ‘black’ but equally on – similar or different – experiences of other group members (Mansbridge 1999). Having a female or African American representative in central decision-making institutions may equally enhance the self-esteem of female and African American citizens; empowering them to communicate their policy preferences to their representatives (Phillips 1998, p. 228). Finally, in their relations to other representatives, the outward signs of difference allow descriptive representatives to speak with a ‘voice carrying the authority of experience’ (Mansbridge 1999, p. 644). The fact that descriptive representatives have gone through the same experiences as members of their social group attributes them the status of ‘hands on’ expert; potentially adding credibility to the claims they formulate on behalf of their social group.

BEYOND PRESENCE: PREFERABLE DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIVES

Following its original development in the 1990s, the literature on group-based representation received new impetus from two strands of literature. Empirical research on social group representation, first, disconfirmed the intuitive idea that sharing certain lived experiences with social group members would automatically promote loyalty to the group perspective. Not all female representatives, for instance, seek to promote women’s interests, at the same time that some men do (Celis et al, 2008: 104). Studies, similarly, demonstrated that a rise in the number of descriptive representatives does not automatically translate into a better substantive representation of historically marginalized groups (Hawkesworth 2003; Crowley 2004; Franceschet et al. 2012). These findings led scholars to conclude that the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is probabilistic at best (cf. Dodson 2006; Erzeel 2012). Insights from intersectionality theory, second, warranted attention to the heterogeneity of social groups and the diversity, and potentially conflicting character, of their members’ interests. The notion that gender is lived in, among others, ‘race’, class and age conscious manners provoked critical debate on the nature and character of women’s shared experiences and the capacity of, for instance, white female representatives to represent the interests of women from ethno-

19 While the status of ‘hands on’ expert may enhance descriptive representatives’ credibility in terms of their description of the problems experienced by members of their group, this may not be the case when it comes to the solutions advocated by them; especially when these call the foundations of privileged positions into question.
cultural minorities. Together, these insights pushed the scholarship beyond merely quantitative considerations on the number of descriptive representatives in decision-making institutions and rekindled critical debate on the type of criteria that make some descriptive representatives preferable over others (e.g., Mansbridge 1999; Dovi 2002; Strolovitch 2007).

The formulation of such criteria is however complicated by two aspects. First, group-based theories of fair representation originally conceptualised the relationship between descriptive representatives and their social groups in terms of trust. Theories’ emphasis on representatives’ descriptive similarities with members of historically marginalised groups implied a retreat from strict notions of accountability as based in the pursuit of fixed interests or pre-agreed priorities (cf. Phillips 1995, p. 156). Group-based theories demonstrated the shortcomings of such notions of accountability: they depend on seeing citizens as a set of individuals capable of expressing their wishes for themselves (Young 1989, pp. 251-2). Such accounts overlook citizens’ social situatedness and the power structures that prevent members of historically disadvantaged groups from articulating and mobilising around their preferences on equal footing with other citizens. Compensating for substantive inequalities, descriptive representatives are, on the basis of their shared experiences and perspectives, expected to promote the representation of previously overlooked or disadvantaged groups. Descriptive similarity, however, carries in itself no mechanism for accountability and offers a rather ambiguous base for grounding role obligations (Urbinati & Warren 2008, p. 401). Insofar as representatives’ descriptive characteristics are considered a heuristic for substantive representation, they promote representative’s autonomy. The expectation behind selecting representatives on the basis of their character is that descriptive representatives will act, even when confronted with unpredictable future situations or must act speedily or creatively, in a manner that converges with citizens’ expectations (cf. Mansbridge 2009, p. 370).

The formulation of standards for descriptive representatives is, second, complicated by the fact that social groups and their interests are not objectively given or static (cf. Saward 2006; Severs 2010; Disch 2011). This insight promoted critical reflection on scholars’ social predispositions and the impact thereof on traditional measures of substantive representation (e.g., Celis et al. 2008; Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers 2011). Building on the work of Sapiro (1981) and Diamond & Hartsock (1981), the interests of social groups were traditionally

---

20 The insight that not ‘every woman will act for women’ originally inspired modifications of the presumed causal link between women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Critical mass theses (e.g., Kanter 1977; Dahlerup 1988) originally hypothesised that once women would pass a certain numerical threshold in parliament, they would constitute a critical mass which would make it easier for them to challenge the dominant political culture and successfully promote women’s interests. Multiple studies have disproved the explanatory force of the critical mass hypothesis (cf. Childs & Krook 2006). Although an increase of the number of women may influence men’s behavior in a feminist direction – causing both male and female legislators to pay more attention to women’s issues (Bratton, 2005) –, a rise in the number of women may equally result in the election of an increasingly diverse group who may or who may not be interested in pursuing women’s issues (Franceschet et al. 2012). An increase of women may equally provoke a feminist backlash among male legislators (Hawkesworth 2003) or make it more difficult for female legislators to specialize in women’s interests (Crowley 2004).

21 The concept of ‘social situatedness’ supposes a close-knitted interaction between agent and structure and assumes that the development of individual cognition depends on individuals’ embedding in social, political and cultural contexts.
defined in a relational manner; as the result of historical processes that packaged meaning onto social groups. Women’s interests were, as such, seen as originating from the distinct social positions which men and women occupy in society. Jónasdóttir (1988, p. 38), for instance, stated that ‘women’s shared interest lies in not allowing oneself to be oppressed as a woman or in fighting patriarchy’. Reflecting scholarly concerns for gender inequalities, women’s interests were often defined in an explicitly feminist manner. The principled equation of women’s interests with feminist projects has been challenged by both conservative activists and comparative scholars. Comparative studies (insert references) drew attention to the contingency of women’s interests and the historical developments and political contexts that affect women’s opportunities for resisting patriarchy. Molyneux (1985, p. 235) originally remarked that, in non-western contexts, feminism may threaten the short-term interests of some women. Because feminist projects uproot traditional relations that regulate the basis of male protection and female submission, some women may prefer to support the patriarchal order in order to not lose traditional forms of protection. Closer attention to the ways in which women bargain with patriarchy reveals that women’s resistance to feminism cannot unequivocally be understood in terms of false consciousness – although it may be part of it – and merits closer scholarly attention (cf. Kandiyoti 1988, pp. 282-3).

In addition to challenging the equation of women’s interests with feminist projects, contemporary debates have called into question the possibility of any prior demarcation of women’s interests (e.g., Celis et al. 2008). These debates feed off black and lesbian feminist critiques (e.g., Lorde 1979; Crenshaw 1989; Rich 1984; hooks 1981) that have clarified the ontological implications of invoking women’s gendered experiences as a ‘minimal common denominator’ that unifies them and which may provide the basis for a shared women’s interest (Erzeel 2012, pp. 18-9). By defining women’s commonality in terms of their gendered experiences, scholars risk privileging gender-based inequalities over inequalities that are grounded in sexuality, ‘race’, class, age, ability, etcetera. Scholars risk, inadvertently, creating inequality hierarchies that reinstate the status of exceptionality of members of intersectional subgroups or that subsume individual differences among women under the header of gender. Acknowledging the Foucauldian point that practices of knowing and practices of power are inseparable (Marx Ferree 2015, p. 3), a growing number of gender and diversity scholars is currently advocating a more prudent approach to studying social group representation. Abandoning prior demarcations of social group interest, they (e.g., Squires 2001; Meier 2008; Severs et al. 2013a; 2013b) promote closer investigation of the kind of interests that are (not) claimed in the name of and on behalf of social groups. Such investigation facilitates an inductive identification of the poignant most power struggles.

Given the levels of complexity involved, it is not surprising that full theories of representative ethics are still in development (Urbinati & Warren 2007, p. 401). One of the most elaborate accounts of standards for descriptive representatives is Suzanne Dovi’s (2002) path-breaking article: ‘Preferable descriptive representatives: will just any woman, black or Latino do?’. In the article, Dovi (2002) rejected the notion that formulating standards for preferable descriptive representatives invariably places undesirable constraints on

---

22 For a recent update of this argument, see Baldez’ (2011, 422) statement that ‘women have a shared interest in their gender not being the basis of discrimination’. 

11
their behaviour or undermines a social group’s autonomy. Dovi (2002, pp. 733-4) refutes the notion that the articulation of criteria necessarily assumes group essentialism. She turns this notion around and argues that the necessity for a theoretical discussion stems from the very real and politically relevant differences among members of historically disadvantaged groups. Differences among group members, especially in terms of social status and self-identification, are relevant: when descriptive representatives denounce their group affiliations or deny having any responsibility towards the members of their group, their presence in decision-making institutions would fail to achieve the ends for which descriptive representation was originally introduced. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that descriptive representatives would contribute to the articulation of previously overlooked interests, that they could serve as a role model, enhance group members’ self-esteem, and contribute to the democratisation of politics (cf. Phillips 1995, p. 228). Because descriptive representatives are perceived as members of a social group, they evoke relationships of trust based on shared experiences and perspectives. Irrespective of representatives’ self-identification, these relationships need to be honoured.\(^{23}\)

Having established the necessity of articulating standards for preferable descriptive representatives, Dovi (2002, pp. 733-4) goes on to argue that the articulation of such standards are not incompatible with the belief that members of historically disadvantaged groups must determine for themselves whether a specific criterion is appropriate at any particular moment. The formulation of guidelines is not the same as requiring that particular criteria be applied in all circumstances. The formulation of criteria also does not remove the right of members of historically disadvantaged groups to judge their representatives and evaluate their actions by means of criteria that are properly theirs. If anything, theoretical accounts may help members of historically disadvantaged groups come to terms with their expectations towards their representatives and help refine their judgment (cf. Dovi 2002, pp. 733-4).

In her account, Dovi (2002, pp. 735-42; emphasis in original) defines preferable descriptive representatives as actors who ‘have strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups’. Her account is, first, premised on the notion that mutual relationships with other members of their social group will enhance representatives’ awareness of their group’s social location and will promote fidelity to their group’s social perspectives or understandings of social events. To possess mutual relations, Dovi (2002, p. 736) argues, descriptive representatives must recognise and be recognised by members of a historically disadvantaged groups in two ways. They must, first, recognise each other as belonging to a historically disadvantaged group and they must, second, recognise each other as having a common understanding of the proper aims of a descriptive representative. Such mutuality both engenders a sense of linked fate\(^{24}\) among descriptive representatives and has the potential to mobilise members of a historically disadvantaged group to act in concert with their

\(^{23}\) This expectation is confirmed by recent research that showcases that representatives’ descriptive similarities with citizens help shape the latter’s expectations towards them. Jones (2014, p. 193), for instance, found that in evaluating their representatives women place more weight on policy congruence when they are represented by women than when they are represented by men. Feelings of commonality (see also, Barreto 2010; Tate 2003) drive members of historically disadvantaged groups to expect descriptive representatives to act in concordance to their policy preferences.

\(^{24}\) A sense of linked fate refers to actors’ beliefs that power structures affect members of a historically disadvantaged group in a similar way.
representatives. The latter is crucial to descriptive representation: it facilitates the articulation of previously overlooked interests and allows members of a historically disadvantaged group to coordinate consciously chosen political activities; facilitating their inclusion in decision-making processes (cf. Dovi 2002, p. 735).

Dovi’s (2002) emphasis on descriptive representatives’ relations with dispossessed subgroups is, second, premised on the insight that different forms of oppression intersect and may, even within historically disadvantaged groups, generate real and politically relevant status differences among group members. Such status differences may make it more difficult for members of dispossessed subgroups to articulate their preferences and see them be taken into consideration by the more privileged members of their group (cf. Mansbridge 1990, p. 127; Young 2000, p. 23). The very sources (elections, charisma or other) that attribute individuals the status of representatives sets them apart from other members of their social group and makes them privileged in some respect. Countering the risk of alienation inherent to privileged status, Dovi (2002) emphasises the need for mutual relationships with members of dispossessed subgroups. Such relationships may make descriptive representatives more attentive to experiences others than their own and, as such, attributes dispossessed subgroups a stake in the claims made for and in the name of their social group.

Dovi’s (2002) account of preferable descriptive representatives is inspiring and commendable in many regards. Her focus on representatives’ preferable characteristics allows her to avoid the trap of essentialism inherent to identity politics. While her standard assumes group members’ shared discursive marginality (cf. Pringle & Watson 1998, p. 218), her focus on mutuality and mediation simultaneously acknowledges differences among group members. The political effectiveness of Dovi’s (2002) account of preferable descriptive representatives is, however, undermined by two aspects. Dovi’ account, first, assumes that dispossessed subgroups are relatively easy to identify. Although it may be relatively straightforward for members of historically disadvantaged groups to determine whether descriptive representatives meet the standard of mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups, this is not the case for researchers. For instance, regarding the issue of the Islamic headscarf, disagreement persists – both among scholars and members of Islamic communities – on the type of women that are most vulnerable and require protection by means of legislation. While some invoke patriarchal relations within Muslim communities to define women’s vulnerability in terms of their incapability to appeal against social pressures to veil, others draw attention to the ways in which headscarf bans infringe the right to self-determination of women and define women’s vulnerability predominantly in terms of their relations of dependence with dominant societal groups. Although Dovi (2002, p. 741) acknowledges that her account offers little guidance when one has to make a choice between two descriptive representatives who possess mutual relationships to different dispossessed subgroups, such guidance is crucial to the political effectiveness of standards for descriptive representatives. The possibility of deep division within social groups suggest that the articulation of some kind of ‘preferable acts’ could be a constructive avenue for addressing such situations.

25 By political effectiveness we refer to theory’s capacity for providing guidelines that facilitate citizens’ and scholars’ judgment of fairness in real-life situations.
Second, and most important in light of the argument developed here, Dovi’s (2002) account of preferable descriptive representatives fails, somewhat paradoxically, to account for the inter-group relations that may prevent descriptive representatives from articulating their group’s social perspective(s). As stated earlier, Dovi’s (ibid.) attention to representatives’ preferable characteristics derives, at least in part, from the consideration that the very traits (such as, proficiency in the dominant language, the display of individualist attitudes, leadership qualities, entrepreneurial instincts, etc.) that make some descriptive representatives desirable to party leaders may equally generate alienation from their group’s social location. Dovi’s (ibid.) emphasis on descriptive representatives’ mutual relations with dispossessed subgroups risks downplaying the precarious position which descriptive representatives often occupy within political parties or broader decision-making bodies. Within the European context, descriptive representatives were often scouted and recruited to support projects of party renewal in the 1990s and attract new – i.e. female and ethnic minority – electorates. Descriptive representatives often lacked prior experience in politics and were expected to abide to – rather than radically challenge – party policies. The precarious power positions in which many descriptive representatives find themselves suggest that upholding their moral responsibilities towards their social groups often also requires some act of resistance or defiance.

**The Cultural Broker: Insights from Colonial Studies**

In this paper we suggest to employ the insights from research on cultural brokerage in colonial and settler societies to develop a better understanding of the complex positionality of the ethnic minority descriptive representative. Taking our clue from Dovi’s invitation to elaborate her criterion for preferable descriptive representatives (2002), we explore the evocative insights that the colonial cultural broker can bring concerning the precarious power position that the descriptive representative occupies. We argue that studies on the colonial cultural broker alert us to the importance of carefully considering inter-group relations, in which the issue of (in)fidelity is central. Based on the historical precedent of cultural brokers, we argue that the power dynamics in which the descriptive representative operates, risks transforming the descriptive representative into a ‘tragic figure’; a figure that continuously has to fight off accusations of betrayal. In order then to carve out a more constructive position for the descriptive representative, we propose that they should engage in what we call ‘preferable acts’; to be precise, the deconstruction of power centres.

Historical anthropologists and ethnohistorians have reconstructed the role of so-called ‘cultural brokers’ who mediated the encounters between indigenous communities and colonisers or settlers across a wide variety of geographical settings and in different phases in colonial and settler societies (Szasz, 1994; Karttunen, 1994; Metcalf, 2005). Cultural brokers are described as ‘operators [...] “between two worlds”, exemplars of “transculturalisation”’ who are both situated “on the fringes of governing institutions as well as within them” (Hosmer 1997, p.504)’ (Hosmer 1997, p. 493-504). While language interpreting was often a key ingredient of cultural brokerage, the broker role exceeds mere linguistic translation and is associated with a range of

---

26 While raising attention to descriptive representatives’ precarious power positions, we do neither suggest that all descriptive representatives find themselves in a precarious position nor that their relations with more privileged political actors are static.
complementary key competences, namely cultural mediation, negotiating different community’s interests, acting as a bridge and performing the function of a role model (Hagedorn 1988). These competences can by no means be equated with the political role of descriptive representatives. They do, however, reveal important overlap with the situation of contemporary descriptive representatives. While trade and religious activities formed other terrains on which cultural brokers were active, they were traditionally most prominent in the field of politics and diplomacy. The parallels – not exact similarities – between the ethnic minority descriptive representative and the cultural broker are thus related to: 1) their tasks, 2) their position in between what are perceived as two different cultures and 3) their operation in a power field.

Drawing a connection between the historical phenomenon of cultural brokerage and the interaction between ethnic majorities and minorities in contemporary plural societies has precedent in other scholarship. In the 1990s, when historical research on colonial cultural brokers experienced an upsurge, some commentators (Karttunen 1994; Weibel-Orlando 1995; Massman 2000) attributed this renewed scholarly interest to the contemporary processes of pluralisation in the United States. These processes generated renewed historical attention to persons who negotiate between different communities. Around the same time, the concept of the cultural broker entered modern social work literature to describe ethnic minority mediators in, among others, medical and educational settings (cf. Gentemann and Whitehead 1983; Kaufert and Koolage 1984; cf. Demir 2015 on diasporic brokering). In contrast to this literature – which merely employs the term cultural broker for contemporary ethnic minority mediators and advocates but lacks any reference to historical cultural brokers –, we turn to historical studies on colonial cultural brokerage to develop a clearer picture of contemporary dilemmas (cf. de Jong 2014a), specifically surrounding descriptive representation.

The role of cultural broker was in some instances forced upon particular subjects, either by the ‘other’ community who was in need of a mediator, often literally kidnapping someone27, and subsequently teaching the person the language and values of his/her adopted society, before sending him/her back as messenger (Metcalf 2005; Smith 2009). In other cases, cultural brokers were identified and thrust forward by their own communities to operate as advocates of their interests, in line with descriptive representatives nominated by the social groups they emerge from. This was, for example, the case with children and adolescents who were handed over to the other community (Hagedorn, 1995; Cohen 2011), or the encouragement of inter-racial marriage practices (van Kirk, 1980; Kidwell 1992; Sleeper-Smith 2000; Lightfoot 2005). There were also cultural brokers who actively pursued such position (Lansing 2000), drawing on specific traits that facilitated their bridging role, such as their ‘mixed-race’ heritage. Despite their operating in a power field and their exposure to competing demands and expectations, cultural brokers are far from powerless. In fact, the cultural broker, precisely because of its dual role – communicating both in the direction of her own and towards the other community – has subversive potential. The position of cultural broker is one marked by social mobility and

27 These situations of kidnapping were in some cases ambiguous. Camilla Townsend (2004) describes a case in which the Spanish in North-America claimed that a certain Luis, had come with them on his own accord; at the same time she disputes that he could have known the implications of that decision.
social and political advantages (cf. Ghosh 2006), in the same way that descriptive representatives gain, by means of their appointment, election or selection, a higher social status.

Regardless of the original impetus at the source of their role of cultural broker, cultural brokers generally emerge as both exemplary and exceptional, as a part of their community, but at the same time as standing apart from the social group they represent (de Jong 2014b; de Jong forthcoming). Indigenous cultural brokers are ‘privileged’ not only by virtue of the social mobility and status engendered by their brokering role (Ghosh 2006), but also because of specific traits such as their Western education, their conversion to Christianity, their adoption of colonial dress, their bilinguality or their ‘mixed-race’ background (see also: Conradie 1998; Richter 1988; Osborn 2003; Fullagar 2009; Goodwin 2013). The cultural broker’s standing apart from the social group they are part of, as well as the fact that they need to be acceptable in the eyes of the dominant group they negotiate with, suggests potential issues with alienation from the social group they emerge from and assimilation into the dominant group. This recalls Suzanne Dovi’s (2002) critical discussion of the (economic) privilege which some descriptive representatives enjoy in relation to dispossessed subgroups. Because of intersectional privileges and disadvantages within a social group, Dovi emphasised the need for mutual relations between the representative and the dispossessed subgroups. Based upon historical case studies of cultural brokers, we argue that this is not a sufficient and feasible remedy for addressing the issue at stake.

The rich historical case studies of particular individuals who acted as cultural brokers on the one hand reveal the significance of particular geographical and temporal contexts for their mode of operation and space for manoeuvre; in the same way that the effectiveness and leeway of descriptive representatives depends on the political context. On the other hand, different studies on cultural brokers also present some striking similarities across geographical and temporal locations, one of which is the fact that the cultural broker is generally a tragic figure, associated with uncertain loyalties. Not only the specific exceptional traits discussed above, but also the mediating and negotiating role of the cultural broker in itself, introduce problems of trust. Cultural brokers occupy an unstable precarious, albeit also powerful, position: although both sides need and value them, neither side completely trusts them. Colonial history, moreover, demonstrates that even though distrust could arise on either the indigenous or colonial side, the fact that colonisers and settlers progressively gained a monopoly of power brought an end to a period of mutual dependency, in which there was a clearly defined need for mutual accommodation of needs.

---

28 It also recalls Dovi’s observation that “Privileged citizens are frequently in charge of selecting political appointees and nominating candidates for public office” (2002, p. 734)

29 For example, in the early phases of settler and colonial societies, when there was a strong mutual dependency between indigenous and settler/colonial communities resulting in a more equal power balance, cultural brokers were more likely to thrive, while with a shift in power cultural brokers’ position became increasingly precarious. For example, Paul Barclay describes how functional interethnic marriages ‘lost their symbiotic character [...] as power relationships shifted between Europeans and non-Europeans—that is, as trading peripheries [where Europeans constituted a minority] became colonial spaces’ (2005, pp. 324).

30 Paul Cohen seeks to analyse the uniqueness of the French North American case, compared to other settler communities in North America, in the specific prominence given to what he describes as ‘cultural mediators’. He calls such mediators ‘weapons of the weak’, most necessary in the specific context in which French settlers
One of the most famous historical cultural brokers, Doña Marina, who was presented as a ‘gift’ from the Aztec community to Spanish general Cortes, became his indigenous interpreter, negotiator and mistress. Cortes eventually caused the demise of the Aztec empire in Mexico, and Doña Marina became known as a traitor/translator (Alarcón 1989). Her almost equally famous ‘sister’, Krotoa (baptized: Eva) child servant and mediator of van Riebeek, first governor of the Cape Colony in South Africa (who is speculated to have been in an illegitimate relationship with her) was as Wells reconstructs, seen as an ‘irredeemable sell-out’ by her own tribe (Wells 1998:426; cf. Conradie 1998). And while Pocahontas seems to get a better press in the Western mythologized and romanticized retellings of her story, the focus on her – most likely historically untrue – act of rescuing John Smith from her father’s hands and subsequent conversion and marriage to John Rolfe, casts her as having shifted her allegiances to the other side (Fullagar 2009; Paul 2014). Cultural brokers then are more frequently than not described as tragic figures, who after a period of ascendancy to key roles, are cast out of their social groups, dying lonely and deserted. Their potentially subversive and radical position of brokering in both directions gets reduced to one-sided informant, or even collaborator. As Weibel-Orlando states in a review essay on two edited volumes recounting the lives of several cultural brokers: ‘Success at walking the multicultural tightrope can be ephemeral, elusive, and, in several cases, ultimately destructive’ (Weibel-Orlando 1994). By extension, this suggests that the problem of the descriptive representative’s fidelity to her social group is situated in the context of the power relations between historically privileged and disadvantaged groups. This reinforces it as an inter-group problem that cannot be resolved with solely an intra-group solution, that is, of mutual relations between the descriptive representative and disenfranchised social groups, as suggested by Dovi. Instead, we propose that the descriptive representative should engage in preferable acts aimed at deconstructing the power imbalance between centre and margin.

We further want to develop this claim by moving to a historical study with the evocative title: ‘When Brokers go Broke: Implications of Role Failure in Cultural Brokerage’, by Michael Salovesh (1987). Studying the actions of two cultural brokers in Mexico in the 1930s (one from the Ladino, one from the indigenous side), Salovesh discerns an inherent essential tension: if these cultural brokers would have been truly successful in promoting the interests of their community, they would make themselves redundant. However, ‘if they had been unable to deliver some kind of progress toward both integration and independence, they would have been unable to continue in their roles as brokers through failure to serve the interests of their “clients”’ (Salovesh 1987: 368). While Salovesh is rather focussed on the balance between the individual interest of the broker and the structural interest of the community, suggesting that ‘for the broker to succeed as broker, he must try to control those [cultural] gates so as to guarantee that only the broker himself may pass them freely” (Ibid.) what is more interesting for our discussion on descriptive representation is that it underlines that community boundaries are constructed, porous and unstable. While these boundaries might be policed and reinforced, the

were less numerous than their European counterparts and dependent for their survival on indigenous communities (Cohen 2011, p. 226).

31 When Dovi (2002, p.735) quotes Angela Dillard, about the controversies surrounding some African American political leaders, the same terms of sell-out and traitor return.
cultural broker undermines them at the same time by virtue of her mobility across social groups. The descriptive representative has by extension the same potential.

As alluded to above, while (membership of) social groups has an element of ‘thrownness’, the demarcation of and meaning given to social groups is underpinned by historical processes of marginalisation. The evaluation of cultural brokers as exemplary and exceptional, is shaped by such processes: the notions of ‘mixed-race’, Christian colonial convert, have gained meaning in the context of colonial racism and the civilising mission. Interestingly, the boundaries that keep cultural brokers, and descriptive representatives ‘in their place’ – i.e. that prevent them from being seen as ‘regular’ political representatives (reinforcing a white male middle class norm) rather than as descriptive representatives –, might in some cases enable their subjectivities and positions of relative privilege from which they could potentially undo these power-laden structures. Indeed, and following Saloves’ idea of the personal vs. the structural interest, the success of the descriptive representative in deconstructing power centres – exposing and challenging the power structures that give meaning to social divisions – would ultimately result in the descriptive representative becoming meaningless as a category and therefore obsolete.

**Preferable acts: the deconstruction of power centres**

Descriptive representatives are, in many regards, similar to cultural brokers. They occupy a similarly precarious position in a power field. As stated earlier, in the 1990s European party elites actively recruited descriptive representatives in an attempt to enhance their representativeness and improve their access to historically disadvantaged groups, such as women and migrant communities. Especially with regard to migrant communities, descriptive representatives were often conceived as crucial bridge-heads that could facilitate the diffusion of party ideas in these communities and inform party elites on their reception. As bridge-heads, descriptive representatives simultaneously demonstrate the porosity of social group boundaries and re-affirm the existence of separate and purely containable groups whose respective cultural codes and repertoires need to be explained to each other. Like the cultural broker, descriptive representatives occupy a proverbial no-man’s land: they vacillate between social groups and the complex simultaneity of their privileges and disadvantages cast suspicion on their belonging to either group.

In her account of preferable descriptive representatives, Suzanne Dovi (2002) casts suspicion on descriptive representatives’ ‘in between-ness’. The traits (e.g., proficiency in the dominant language, the display of individualist attitudes) that make some descriptive representatives desirable to political elites carry a risk of alienation and even treason with them. In order to ensure fidelity to their group perspective, descriptive representatives need to be sufficiently embedded in their social group. Their mutual relations with other group members, and in particular members of dispossessed subgroups, prevent descriptive representatives from raising as it were their extraordinary lived experiences to a standard. Representatives’ mutual relations with

---

32 The term bridge-head is traditionally associated with warfare. It refers to the strategically important area of ground around the end of a bridge or other place of possible crossing over a body of water which at time of conflict is sought to be defended or, alternatively, be taken over by belligerent forces.
other group members foster their engagement in processes of deliberative account-giving. In order to obtain durable mutual relations, they need to explain the reasons for their actions and have to display a willingness to take the judgment of other group members into consideration (cf. Mansbridge 2009, p. 370; Severs 2010, pp. 416-7).

The historical and anthropological literature on colonial ‘cultural brokers’ demonstrates that an inward focus on historically disadvantaged social groups and descriptive representatives’ embedding within them provides with only a partial understanding of the complex positionality of descriptive representatives. So-called infidelity to a group’s social perspective may not only result from descriptive representatives’ social mobility: it is often also the result of their precarious position in a complex power field. The traits that make descriptive representatives desirable to political elites also raise expectations towards their political performance. Their shared traits with political elites (e.g., verbal eloquence, individual success, perseverance) evoke, more specifically, expectations of a singular allegiance (cf. Bickford 1997, p. 121). Such expectations are often accompanied with a depoliticisation of descriptive representatives’ social identities: as members of the political elite, their social identities are either considered secondary to their identification as citizen or are not considered to challenge or raise particular demands on prevailing discourses on citizenship.

Informal pressures that call for singular allegiance create challenges to the promotion of a social group’s perspective: they limit the discursive space available to descriptive representatives for making complex justice claims that simultaneously invoke their social group identity and their belonging to society (cf. Bassel & Emejulu 2010, p. 517; Severs 2015). The impact of calls for singular allegiance is apparent in the recent debacle over the children’s festivity figure of Black Peter (‘Zwarte Piet’). In the Netherlands and increasingly also in Flanders (Belgium), members of migrant communities contest the figure of Black Peter33 for its stereotypical depiction of people of colour and their inferiority to white people. Activists’ allegations of racism and pleas for alternative attire and make-up34 for Black Peter are often cast to the side by more privileged members of society. They discard allegations of the racist character of Black Peter as harmful attempts to politicise a traditional and inoffensive cultural practice. Alternatively, activists are critiqued for their failure to understand their country’s long-standing traditions and customs (cf. Severs 2015). The fact that it remains difficult for members of historically disadvantaged groups to challenge practices of meaning-making without also jeopardising recognition of their belonging to society helps explain the low visibility of political (descriptive and non-descriptive) representatives in this debate35.

33 In the Dutch/Flemish tradition of Santa Claus (‘Sinterklaas’), Santa’s helpers are not elves but ‘Black Peters’. Actors portraying Zwarte Piet typically put on blackening make-up and wear colourful attire, in addition to curly wigs, red lipstick and golden earrings.

34 Anti-racist movements have suggested to replace the traditional black make-up of ‘Black Peter’ by a variety of colours, including pink, blue, green and yellow. Alternatively, and offering a reply to traditions that attribute Black Peter’s black face to his nightly descents through the chimney, they have suggested to replace the thick layer of black make-up by irregular stripes of soot.

35 For a rare media article that problematises the absence of politicians’ public stances on the issue, please consult: http://www.joop.nl/politiek/detail/artikel/23965_zwarte_piet_niet_politiek/
The example of ‘Black Peter’ illustrates the unequal standing which members of historically disadvantaged groups occupy in political debates. They are regarded as equals only insofar as their claims to do not challenge, denounce or upset prevailing conceptions of what is just and unjust. When their claims challenge prevailing discourses, there is an important chance that they will be ridiculed, delegitimised or otherwise silenced. The insight that power still firmly resides with unmarked poles of privilege (such as, whiteness, maleness, etc.) both suggests that descriptive representatives have an important role to play in deconstructing such poles and that such task will require an act of resistance or defiance (cf. Bickford 1997, p. 120).

In the face of power struggles, the mere promotion of interests or the communication of claims as appeals to justice (cf. Williams 1998) will not suffice. Such claims may, in fact, reaffirm the boundaries between claimants and judges, between those formulating demands and those judging their rightful. Without denaturalising the positions in which power and privilege cluster, appeals to justice risk re-affirming the secondary status of marginal others (cf. Squires 2001, p. 13). Claims for justice need to be paired by representations that actively portray members of historically disadvantaged groups as peers, as rightful participants in debates about what is just and unjust (cf. Bickford 1996, p. 126). The effectiveness of such claims, in turn, depends on descriptive representatives’ capacity to call into question the naturalness of the ‘centre-periphery’ relations which their very presence in politics seems to evoke. As figurative bridge-heads, the effectiveness of their claims for social group recognition depends on their capacity to dismantle the bridge that unifies but also keeps separate – and in so doing, subordinates – the periphery and centre. Only when deconstructing the power structures (e.g., sexism, racism, heteronormativity, ageism, etc.) that coat certain social locations with privilege and power are descriptive representatives able to open up discursive space for the recognition of group’s social perspectives.

In sum, what makes some descriptive representative preferable over others is not merely their relations of mutuality with other group members but also their active contributions, based on their situated knowledge, to deconstructing power centres. Only such ‘preferable acts’, which addresses the intergroup power structures, will create the discursive space needed for making complex claims that promote citizens’ equal standing.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have aimed to contribute to the burgeoning literature on preferable descriptive representatives. This literature draws from two important insights. The insight, first, that descriptive representatives’ outward signs evoke relationships of trust with members of their social group fuelled scholarly reflection on the nature of descriptive representatives’ moral responsibilities. The insight, second, that not every descriptive representative will contribute to the articulation of their group’s social perspective showcased the need to move beyond mere quantitative considerations on the number of descriptive representatives in decision-making bodies. Together, these insights prompted scholarly considerations on what makes some descriptive representatives preferable over others (e.g., Dovi 2002; Strolovitch 2007).

The articulation of standards for preferable descriptive representatives is complicated by two aspects. The heterogeneity of a social group, first, warrants attention to the diversity and potentially conflicting character of
its members’ interests. This makes it difficult to identify a set of interests that a representative should promote.

The articulation of standards is, second, complicated by the fact that, in re-affirming a social group’s history of oppression, one risks defining its members’ identity narrowly in terms of victimhood and powerlessness. Suzanne Dovi’s (2002) account aptly takes these challenges into account. Her standard for preferable descriptive representatives avoids the narrow terminology of interests and raises, instead, attention to representatives’ embedding or rootedness within their social group. The expectation is that descriptive representatives’ exchanges with other group members will enhance fidelity to their group perspective. Representatives’ mutual relations with dispossess subgroups is, next, considered to enhance the likelihood that their representative actions will also be beneficial to the least privileged members of their social group.

In this paper, we have argued that an emphasis on descriptive representatives’ preferable characteristics may not suffice. An inward focus on descriptive representatives’ and their mutual relations with other social group members (cf. Dovi 2002) regretfully places sole responsibility for infidelity to a group’s social perspective on descriptive representatives. In the paper, we have used historical and anthropological literature on the colonial ‘cultural broker’ to draw attention to the precarious power status of descriptive representatives. Like colonial brokers, descriptive representatives can be seen as vacillating between two realms: because of the simultaneity of their privileges (as members of the political elite) and disadvantages (as members of historically disadvantaged groups), they belong neither here nor there. The traits (e.g., proficiency in the dominant language, the display of individualist attitudes) that make them desirable to political elites raise expectations regarding their loyalties. As the result of informal pressures for singular allegiance, they are often expected to share elites’ perspectives on policy matters or political events. Descriptive representatives’ ‘in-betweenness’ helps us understand that infidelity to their group perspective may as much be caused by their precarious power status in decision-making institutions as by their lack of group identification. (In)formal pressures and expectations may prevent descriptive representatives from articulating a perspective on political events that uproots prevailing conceptions on inter-group relations. Because of prevailing power mechanisms, fidelity to their group perspective will equally require resistance to and sometimes defiance of prevailing power structures and discourses. Drawing attention to such defiance, we define preferable descriptive representatives as actors who, on the basis of their situated knowledge, deconstruct power centres. The deconstruction of power centres implies a denaturalisation of the positions in which privilege and power cluster and against which subordinate others acquire meaning. While some may argue that such representation strategies risk making social groups – and, hence, claims for fair representation – obsolete, we argue that only such strategies will open up the discursive space needed for making complex justice claims that invoke citizens’ equal standing in contemporary societies. Only a strategy of deconstruction has the capacity of bringing forward the multidimensional identities of historically privileged groups; thus rendering that of historically disadvantaged groups less problematic.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop it in full, the operationalisation of our standard for preferable descriptive representatives will require an expansion in scholarly attention from the kind of interests claimed on behalf and in the name of historically disadvantaged groups (cf. Meier 2008; Severs et al. 2013;
2014a) to the ways in which interests are claimed. Such focus implies a consideration of the ways in which representative claims constitute the relations between social groups (Squires 2008) and whether they contribute to a more equitable power distribution among groups. Discursive strategies that simultaneously denounce forms of oppression and reclaim social groups’ power and contributions to society make some descriptive representatives preferable over others. Such dual emphasis promotes citizens’ equal standing in decision-making processes: it transforms members of historically disadvantaged groups from subordinate others that request special policy measures into peers that can be listened to (cf. Bickford 1996, p. 57; Severs et al. 2015). Clearly, the identification of descriptive representatives cannot be settled in a one-off fashion. Especially when it comes to realising short-term goals or when challenging assimilationist ideas (Verkuyten 2003, pp. 386-7), descriptive representatives may prefer to emphasise the forms of oppression experienced by members of their social group or claim the need for a differentiated treatment. In the long haul, however, an unequivocal emphasis on difference may inscribe a sense of identity group essentialism that downplays the diverse experiences of a group’s members and overlooks their similarities with members of other (including more privileged) groups in society. Because it emphasises their shared responsibilities and contributions to society, a notion of sameness is crucial to the claims for equal standing of historically disadvantaged groups.

REFERENCES


De Jong, S. (2014b) ‘The Cultural Broker in Diversity Politics’, Politicologenetmaal, University of Maastricht, the Netherlands, June 2014


Reingold, Beth, and Michele Swers, “An endogenous approach to women's interests: When interests are interesting in and of themselves.” *Politics and Gender* 7, no 3(2011):432;


