(Un)suitable Difference: Ethnic and Racializing Differentiations in Recruitment Practices of Local Administrations in Berlin

Christine Lang*

Abstract: This article investigates the role of ethnic and racializing differentiations in recruitment practices of public administrations in a context of demands to employ more staff of immigrant origin. Drawing on a qualitative study of local administrations in Berlin, I show how figures of "(un)suitable candidates" are constructed, in which ethnic/racializing differentiations intersect with gendered and spatial differentiations. This serves both to justify low recruitment numbers and established routines and to showcase openness to diversity.

Keywords: Public administrations, organizations, recruitment, institutional discrimination, migration background

(Un)geeignete Differenz: Ethnische und rassifizierende Differenzierungen in Rekrutierungspraktiken lokaler Verwaltungen in Berlin

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel untersucht ethnische und rassifizierende Differenzierungen in der Rekrutierungspraxis öffentlicher Verwaltungen im Kontext von Forderungen nach mehr Personal mit Migrationshintergrund. Anhand einer qualitativen Studie in Berliner Verwaltungen wird gezeigt, wie Figuren «(un)geeigneter Kandidaten» konstruiert werden, in denen ethnische mit geschlechtlichen und räumlichen Differenzierungen zusammenwirken. Dies ermöglicht, geringe Einstellungszahlen und etablierte Routinen zu rechtfertigen sowie Offenheit für Vielfalt darzustellen.

Schlüsselwörter: Öffentliche Verwaltungen, Organisationen, Rekrutierung, institutionelle Diskriminierung, Migrationshintergrund

Différence (in)adequate : différenciations ethniques et raciales dans les pratiques de recrutement des administrations locales à Berlin

Résumé : L'article étudie des différenciations ethniques et raciales dans le recrutement des administrations publiques dans un contexte de demande d'emploi de personnel d'origine immigrée. Basée sur une enquête qualitative dans des administrations berlinoises, l'article montre la construction de figures de « candidats (in)adéquats » sur la base de différenciations ethniques et raciales articulées avec des différenciations de genre et spatiales. Cela sert à justifier le faible nombre de recrutements et les routines établies et montrer l'ouverture à la diversité.

Mots-clés : Administrations publiques, organisations, recrutement, discrimination institutionnelle, origine immigrée

* Institute for Geography and Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies, Osnabrueck University, clang@uni-osnabrueck.de

1   Introduction

More than other types of organizations, public administrations are expected to respect norms of equal treatment and non-discrimination in their recruitment and to act "without regard to the person", as Weber described it in his ideal type of bureaucracy (Weber 2005, 186). At the same time, ethnic difference[1] in civil service has become increasingly relevant in many European countries in a context of public and political demands that the access of persons of immigrant or ethnic minority background be improved and that bureaucracies be made more representative of the societies they serve (Maravić et al. 2013). Yet, in many countries, staff members of immigrant or ethnic minority background continue to be underrepresented, particularly in the higher ranks of public administration (e.g. Andrews and Ashworth 2013; Meziani-Remichi and Maussen 2017; Ette et al. 2020), which indicates barriers and discrimination in the access to jobs.

Taking the intersection of formal bureaucratic "difference blindness", increasing "difference consciousness", and the differential inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority staff as a starting point, this article investigates the role of ethnic and racializing differentiations in administrative recruitment. Specifically, how and why do public administrations use such differentiations in their recruitment practices? How is this affected by a changing institutional environment in which diversity in the workforce is increasingly observed and expected?

While there is increasing scholarly interest in the way "street-level bureaucracies" (Lipsky 1980) differentiate between and discriminate against immigrant or ethnic minority clients (e.g. Hemker and Rink 2017; Adman and Jansson 2017; Wagner 2017; Brussig et al. 2019; Piñeiro et al. 2019), such practices have been less investigated with regard to recruitment for administrative jobs. Studies have examined barriers for immigrant descendants in access to jobs (Meziani-Remichi and Maussen 2017) and the recruitment and self-perceptions of diversity officers (Schiller 2017). Recent research on Swiss administrations indicates that administrations may target individuals with foreign-language skills (Piñeiro et al. 2019) or ignore the underrepresentation of staff of immigrant origin (Wagner 2017). However, we still lack a deeper understanding of how and why ethnic and racializing differentiations matter for administrative recruitment practices and of the dynamics of reproduction and change in a changing institutional environment.

To investigate this, I draw on the literature on hiring discrimination and ethnic/racial inequalities in organizations and look at the empirical example of the recruitment of junior staff members in local administrations in the German city-state of Berlin. The case of German public administrations is interesting for its interplay

---

1   I use the terms "ethnic difference" and "ethnic differentiations" as umbrella terms for social differentiations on the basis of ascribed origin and their product. Where these differentiations imply subordination, devaluation, and exclusion of those differentiated as "others", I use the terms "racializing" / "racialized".

of a strong self-description of "difference-blind" recruitment for the civil service – the principle of meritocracy is laid down in the constitution (GG Art. 33.2) – and public policies since the mid-2000s declaring the objective to increase the share of staff members with a "migration background".[2] Official personnel statistics in public administrations do not record this category, but surveys indicate a pronounced underrepresentation (Bürgerschaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg 2009; Ette et al. 2016, 2020).

Based on extensive qualitative data and two in-depth case studies of local administrations, the article reveals how recruitment practices use and (re)produce ethnic and racializing differentiations in the form of constructions of (un)suitable candidates in which ethnicity/"race" intersects with gender and space. Further, I show the functions of these differentiations for the administrations: they allowed, on one hand, the justification of unequal recruitment outcomes and established routines, and on the other, the showcasing of hiring efforts and the organization's openness to diversity. These functions are further supported by statistics on the "migration background" of candidates.

In the following sections, I first discuss the literature on ethnicity/"race" in the recruitment of organizations. After introducing the empirical data and methods, I present in the cases of two local administrations in Berlin how and why ethnic and racializing differentiations were (re)produced in recruitment practices. The final section summarizes and discusses the findings.

2   Ethnic and Racializing Differentiations and Organizational Recruitment

I conceptualize the question of ethnic and racializing differentiations in administrative recruitment from a more general perspective on the role of ethnicity and "race" in organizational practice. Recent scholarship foregrounds the importance of the organizational meso-level for understanding the (re)production of racial inequalities (Ray 2019). Organizations such as public administrations are specific forms of social systems with distinct structures, logics, and modes of operation (Luhmann 2000; Scott and Davis 2007). They play an often-neglected role for the in/exclusion of immigrants and ethnic or racialized minorities (Lang et al. 2021). Organizational goals, rules, routines, and infrastructures shape the potential relevance of categories of difference (Nieswand 2017, 1717).

The growing body of literature on organizations and ethnic/racial inequalities indicates different ways in which categories of ethnicity and "race" may become relevant in recruitment and employment contexts. Research on hiring decisions, looking

---

2   "Migration background" (Migrationshintergrund) is the official statistical category in Germany: "A person has a migration background if he or she or at least one parent does not have German nationality by birth" (Statistisches Bundesamt 2018, 4).

mostly at the private sector, has recurrently shown that employers utilize negative representations of candidates of immigrant or ethnic/racial minority background as lacking skills and qualifications for jobs to which they apply in order to justify their exclusion (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2001; Imdorf 2010; Midtbøen 2014; Scherr et al. 2015). Explicitly or implicitly, these studies draw on the concept of "statistical discrimination" (Phelps 1972; Pager and Karafin 2009), according to which employers use (stereotypical) assumptions about the productivity of specific categories of people because they lack the necessary information, time, and resources to thoroughly evaluate a candidate. This helps reduce the costs of their decisions and the risk of recruiting potentially unsuited employees (Midtbøen 2014). Yet negative ascriptions may also allow justifying inequalities in the access to jobs, which are produced not through direct hiring discrimination but through regular hiring routines that disadvantage migrants, e. g. when recruitment is based on employee networks in which migrants are not included (Bommes 2012). In their concept of "institutional discrimination", Gomolla and Radtke (2009) show that referring to widespread stereotypical knowledge about migrants' "cultural segregation" or "lacking willingness to integrate" may allow an organization to legitimize inequalities, which it produces itself through its regular decisions.

These studies describe functions of ethnic and racializing differentiations that relate to more general characteristics of organizational practices. As the systems theory emphasizes, organizations operate in a situation of uncertainty that they have to reduce in their decision-making (Luhmann 2000). Neo-institutionalist approaches stress the need for organisations to secure legitimacy and support from their environment by demonstrating that their practices comply with societal rules, norms and beliefs (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). In hiring contexts, this means particularly demonstrating their respect for the principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination. Mobilizing common stereotypes about migrants or ethnic minorities as lacking professionally relevant skills can, thus, be understood as a strategy that helps reduce uncertainty and secure legitimacy.

Going beyond hiring decisions, more recent scholarship emphasizes that organizations as such are racialized, turning the perspective to the often implicitly operating norms and cultural schemas that reproduce racial inequality (Acker 2006; Wooten and Couloute 2017; Ray 2019). They are covered by official accounts of presumably "neutral" and "difference-blind" structures and procedures, i.e. the "whiteness" of an organisation (Ahmed 2012). These studies point out that the differentiations, which become relevant in recruitment contexts, express and reproduce the institutionalized norms and schemas of the organization in question. These include representations of suitable employees. According to Ray (2019), "racialized organizations" are particularly (re)produced through internal hierarchies and occupational segregation, where specific positions are associated with and allocated to specific racial categories with "non-whites" placed at the bottom and "whites" in leadership positions. In a study on

the British senior civil service, Puwar (2001) identified the "racialized somatic norm" in this profession – "white bodies" – as a core mechanism perpetuating institutional racism. Similarly, Ahmed observed that recruitment practices tend to prioritize those "bodies […] that can inherit and reproduce the character of the organisation, by reflecting its image back to itself, by having a 'good likeness'" (Ahmed 2012, 40). This "good likeness" can refer to physical appearance but also to cultural similarity (Hartmann and Kopp 2001; Rivera 2012).

Further, ethnicity/ "race" may intersect with other categories. Acker argued that representations of the "ideal worker" (Acker 2006, 449) underlying recruitment practices are both racialized and gendered, with different types of jobs associated with different representations that are at least partly shaped by the ethnicity/"race" and gender of those already occupying the positions. Studies on hiring decision-making in the US show that race intersects with space and class in addition to gender, with employers particularly associating black men from poor inner-city neighbourhoods with a lack of skills (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991). This draws attention to the role of spatial (and concomitant class-related) differentiations of urban neighborhoods in representations of racialized "others" (Pott 2016), which may be activated in recruitment decisions.

Combining these insights from the literature on hiring discrimination, racialized organizations and general organizational theory, we can assume that ethnic and racialized differentiations fulfil functions in recruitment situations by helping to reduce uncertainty and legitimize recruitment decisions.[3] Further, the differentiations drawn are not to be understood as mere stereotypes of individual decision-makers but as reflecting representations of suitable employees or "ideal workers", which are inscribed in the norms and cultural schemas institutionalized in the organization. Moreover, in these representations, ethnicity/"race" may intersect with other categories, particularly gender and space.

The present study extends the existing research empirically and conceptually, particularly in three respects: first, by examining public administrations – an organizational type minimally studied thus far – with their specific rules, norms, tasks and routines; second, by taking a broader view of ethnic and racializing differentiations in recruitment practices that looks beyond concrete hiring decisions; and third, by focussing not only on the persistence and reproduction of inequalities but also on the potential dynamics in a context of institutional change – i. e. increasing demands that public workforces become more diverse.

---

3   I distinguish between the function of ethnic and racializing differentiations for the operation of an organisation and the product, e. g. exclusion and perpetuation of power relations. While there might be hiring situations in which differentiations fulfil the function to bar "non-whites" from access to jobs, this has not occurred in the organisations studied.

3   Empirical Case, Data, and Methods

The present article draws on a comparative case study of local administrations in the German state of Berlin and extensive qualitative data gathered from 2012–15. The city-state of Berlin provided fruitful terrain for the research since it allowed a comparison of recruitment practices in different local administrations situated in the same, changing institutional environment, in which "consciousness" about ethnic difference in the civil service had increased.

Berlin comprises 12 districts that represent the local level and enjoy relative autonomy in matters of staff recruitment. These administrations are important local employers, each having about 2000 staff members. Their tasks include, among others, offering citizen services, social and youth welfare services, responsibilities in matters of urban development, culture, and public order. Since the mid-2000s, Berlin's integration policies have pursued the objective "to increase the share of employees with a migration background" in the civil service. In early 2021, a draft of a new "Act for the Promotion of Participation in a Migration Society" (updating the "Participation and Integration Act" of 2010) sparked nationwide debate for suggesting a quota for the proportion of employees with a migration background in the civil service corresponding to their proportion in the city's population; the suggestion was abandoned after much criticism. Measures to recruit more staff with a migration background have focussed on vocational training (*Ausbildung*). In Germany, this is a highly institutionalized and recognized pathway leading to a wide range of qualified occupations. The three-year training, which requires a secondary-school degree, combines a traineeship in the employing organization with theory at vocational schools. In public administration, it is the entry requirement for the middle grade of the civil service (e. g. administrative clerk positions). After successfully completing training, trainees are usually offered continued employment; internal careers can lead up to middle management. In Berlin, a programme called *«Berlin braucht Dich!»* ("Berlin needs you!") aims at promoting vocational training in the civil service among young people of immigrant origin by supporting internships, providing promotional materials, and facilitating contacts between employers and schools. All administrations are expected to participate, but the state government cannot enforce this. The available data show large variations between Berlin's administrations in the recruitment of trainees with a migration background. When fieldwork was conducted, a few districts had regularly shown percentages of new trainees with a migration background of 25–50 %, whereas in others, the percentage had varied largely from year to year, and some districts had rarely reported proportions greater than 10 % (BQN Berlin 2014).[4]

4   The percentage of population with a "migration background" in Berlin overall was 27.9 % in 2014 with districts' shares ranging from 8.7 %–47.2 % (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg 2014). As shown in the case studies below, a district's share of population with a "migration background" is not necessarily reflected among newly employed trainees.

The empirical study focussed on the recruitment of trainees for administrative clerk positions, i. e. generalists who could later be employed in a variety of administrative departments. Recruitment for these positions was chosen for being the main focus of the policies, which raised the question about their effects in practice. Further, it allowed the investigation of a regular and important recruitment channel as well as a comparison across administrations. Overall, I gathered empirical material on the city-state level and five district administrations, three of which were then selected for in-depth case studies as contrasting cases regarding the recruitment of trainees with a migration background and responses to the city-state's diversity policies.

The following analysis draws on two of these cases, which were chosen to show interesting differences in the function and meaning of ethnic and racializing differentiations for recruitment practices. In administration A, shares of newly hired trainees with a migration background remained low, and no active recruitment was undertaken. In administration B, in contrast, several measures had been introduced to increase the proportion of trainees with a migration background, and thereby, these numbers had risen significantly. Both districts are situated in the western part of Berlin and have high proportions of inhabitants with a migration background (in 2014, when fieldwork was conducted, these were 36 % in district A and 42 % in district B). While district A is commonly more associated with its bourgeois neighbourhoods, district B often features in public discourse around immigration-related problems.

The analysis is based on different types of empirical data. These include, first, 16 semi-structured interviews plus several informal talks with different actors involved in trainee recruitment in the two districts (vocational training officers, administrative department heads, integration commissioners, members of district parliaments, representatives of NGOs offering projects to support access to civil service for young people of immigrant origin), as well as 17 semi-structured interviews with trainees and employees of immigrant origin. Second, participant observation was conducted in the trainee recruitment process (e. g. in the selection of applications, in interviews, at job fairs). Third, an analysis of a significant body of political, administrative, and media documents was undertaken. Data analysis combined inductive content analysis with fine-grained, hermeneutic analyses of key passages to reconstruct the logics of action, interpretation schemes, and modes of differentiation underlying recruitment practices (for additional details, see Lang 2019).

4 Ethnic and Racializing Differentiations in the Trainee Recruitment of Local Administrations in Berlin

Recruitment for vocational training in Berlin's local administrations officially followed meritocratic, "difference-blind" criteria. Migration-related characteristics such

as language and intercultural skills or the individual's "migration background" were formally not considered. My interviewees in the HR departments regularly emphasized "§ 33.2" in the federal constitution, which affirms meritocratic access to civil service. However, with the policies to increase the proportion of staff members with a migration background, administrations were expected to pursue specific measures – at least participating in the programme "Berlin needs you!", which aimed to foster the access of young people of immigrant origin to the civil service – and to report on the numbers of newly hired trainees with a "migration background". In this context, ethnic and racializing differentiations of (potential) candidates were quite common in all administrations investigated, both in the ways my interviewees narrated their recruitment practices and how the organizations portrayed themselves to the public. The following two case presentations show how local administrations and their personnel officers use and (re)produce such differentiations to construct figures of (un)suitable candidates and the functions this serves.

4.1 "Unsuitable others"

In administration A, trainee recruitment followed routines that had not changed for years and drew on classic selection criteria. The selection of applications was based on school performance as documented in school reports (grades, degrees, absences) and assessment tests focussing on German spelling, grammar, mathematics and general education. For the officers, "ideal candidates" were those who took the traditional route into vocational training, applying directly after graduating from secondary school. They were prioritized over applicants with less linear educational pathways. The district did not have a policy regarding the recruitment of staff members with a migration background, and the district's mayor, in charge of the personnel department, did not demonstrate an interest in this issue. The vocational training unit participated only on paper in the city-state's programme "Berlin needs you!" and undertook no other promotions for their traineeship. These routine recruitment and selection practices were not questioned within the administration in regard to any potential barriers they might create for young people from immigrant families, e.g. by implicitly expecting prior knowledge about entry opportunities in German public administration and reproducing potential inequalities produced or enhanced in the school system (see Lang 2019). The reported proportion of newly hired trainees with a migration background usually remained below 10 %.

While the personnel officers stressed that they did not differentiate along "migration backgrounds", ethnic and racializing differentiations played an important role in the recruitment practice. Intersecting with gendered and spatial differentiations, these differentiations constructed figures of "unsuitable" candidates, which helped justify why the numbers of trainees with a migration background were low and why no specific measures were developed to increase them.

When I asked about trainees with a migration background in the administration, the head of the training unit emphasized that such candidates demonstrated lower performances than their peers without a migration background in the selection criteria and singled out specific categories:

> *In the first round of selection, we also had some candidates with a migration background, but it is not the cliché-Turk who enters here. […] Turkish and Arab young men, from my experience, have much more difficulties to make it here, because, I think, they experience another influence. Maybe they don't want to work in the civil service, if so, only in office management but not as administrative clerk […]. But migration background is not defined by the country of origin; we have a wide range of migration backgrounds spread over many countries, including Turks, but we also have Finns and Italians […] But the image that many people have of people with a migration background – [name of a prominent immigration district of Berlin], Turkish, Arab origin – they are hardly in the administration. Often, they also don't pass the tests, if they are invited at all.* (Interview A3.1, § 110)

This description constructs specific "others", or the "constitutive outside" (Hall 1996, 3), of the administration: the ethnic and gendered differentiation of "young men" from Turkish and Arab backgrounds, categories most commonly associated with cultural difference compared to the German "majority society", invokes images of "hypermasculinity" and backward gender norms (Lutz and Huxel 2018), which are used to explain an assumed lack of interest in the predominantly female administrative professions. The reference to a different district, which in Berlin and beyond stands for socio-economic problems and the segregation of immigrants, reproduces a discourse of "integration deficits" – ascribed in particular ways to young men (Spindler 2013) – that substantiates the assumption of this category's lack of skills for the job. This construction of "unsuitable others" performs an externalization in two respects: by externalising the reasons for the underrepresentation of the differentiated category among the trainees in ascribing them to the candidates' cultural and educational deficiencies, and externalising the "unsuitable" candidates themselves by situating them outside of the own administrative territory.

Candidates of (specific) migration backgrounds were also assumed to show deficiencies regarding other expectations of "good trainees", which reveal, at the same time, the "white" norm underlying these expectations. These included skills in the "official language German" («*Amtssprache Deutsch*»), which were recurrently stressed as critical for the job by my respondents for this study. The head of the personnel unit, for instance, assumed that individuals of immigrant descent were *"underperforming"* due to not having the *"German mother tongue"* (Interview A1.2, § 88). Further expected deficiencies included the motivation for the job. Sharing the assumption by the head of the training unit that young people from immigrant

families were less motivated regarding administrative professions, the head of the personnel department explained:

> *In interviews with applicants, it often becomes clear when our training officer asks about motivation, "Why are you interested in training in the civil service?" The answer is "Hm, I don't know". Surprisingly, this is more common among migrants, or at least among those with migrant roots, than among those from, let's say, still classic German families.* (Interview A1.1, § 53)

He perceived applicants who lacked sufficient motivation and realistic ideas about the traineeship as potential risks: *"Because this could quickly lead to the impression "I had a very different idea" and then it would be a pity for the dropout rate"* (Interview A1.1, § 53). The difference from the norm of "classic German" backgrounds among the trainees is presented as a factor of uncertainty for recruitment, which could mean that the resources invested in training could turn out to have been in vain.

By constructing potentially "unsuitable others" who deviate from established expectations regarding "good trainees", the administrative officers could justify the low numbers of trainees with a migration background and ignore the potential contribution of their own recruitment practices (e. g. selection based on school-performance criteria and a lack of advertising, which perpetuated the little knowledge about jobs in the civil service among young people of immigrant background). Ascribing such deficiencies to the "others" allowed the maintenance of the myth of their own meritocratic, "difference-blind" recruitment practices.

Moreover, ethnic and spatially coded ascriptions of "unsuitability" helped justify why no measures were undertaken to increase the proportion of trainees with a migration background such as participating in the programme "Berlin needs you!". The head of the unit argued:

> *In my view, there is for sure a need to support the persons concerned, but not in the question of hiring them for civil service positions, but in the question, how can they be motivated to be able to perform correspondingly, [...] also the language background, that there is language support, so that especially those who live in districts that have a very high proportion, or where the family situation does not allow it, can somehow break out of their own mother tongue area. [...] We would actually have to start two levels earlier, even in early childhood, right? […] and that is not the task of the employers; that is a political decision, how do I deal with this in the school system. But we can only act and bear the fruits that then result from supporting this group of people.* (Interview A3.1, § 125)

By defining hiring inequalities as due to educational and language deficits, i. e. questions beyond the administration's responsibility, and localizing the problem in the prominent immigration districts of Berlin, outside of the own district's borders,

the officer externalized the responsibility for addressing the problem. Similarly, the head of the personnel department argued that implementing specific programmes in the prominent immigration districts was *"extremely obvious, because there is simply a completely different proportion of foreigners there than here in relation to the Turkish-speaking fellow citizens"* (Interview A1.1, § 125). In contrast, he associated the migrant population in his own district with *"embassies"* and *"a very very high proportion of university students"* (Interview A1.1, § 125) and, thereby, less in need of integration measures. Since space functions as a marker of administrative responsibility (Klüter 1999), differentiations of migrants along the territorial borders of districts allowed rejecting responsibility for implementing integration policies.

In addition to these everyday constructions of difference, the officers drew on statistical differentiations to substantiate their recruitment practices. In the context of the city-state's programme "Berlin needs you!", all administrations were asked to record the proportion of trainees with a "migration background". For this purpose, the officers in administration A had included a column "migration background" in the detailed Excel table that documented all candidates and their performance in the different selection steps. They communicated the statistics produced on candidates and trainees with a migration background to present their recruitment as appropriate. The head of the unit emphasized that, compared to the share of applicants with a migration background, the share of recruited trainees was relatively high, which indicated that these applicants were *"even more successful"* (Interview A.3.1, § 76), and thus, specific recruitment measures were not required: *"There are no special initiatives, but based on the numbers that we have, I also don't think that this is really necessary"* (Interview A3.1, § 94). This argumentation draws on the power of numbers as a specific "medium of communication" (Heintz 2007, 65) suggesting objectivity and exactness (see also Supik 2014, 75–78). Thus, mobilizing statistics could support that the argument of appropriate recruitment was approved in the organization's environment.

Yet the communicated numbers covered the contingencies of their production and the heterogeneity of those included. Since "migration background" was not an official category in the recruitment procedures, the officers recorded it only where it was made explicit in the applications (e.g. by place of birth or nationality). In the Excel table, I observed that a notable number of applicants whose names suggested a familial migration background were not classified as such. The proportion of applicants with a migration background seemed significantly higher than the personnel officers' statistics suggested.[5] This raised the question of why these applicants appeared only relatively rarely among those selected for traineeship positions and cast into doubt the argument of their "relative success" in the recruitment procedures.

---

5   The onomastic method of using names as proxies for a "migration background" is also imprecise, but the juxtaposition of the counting methods revealed that the personnel departments' statistics included only part of the category they promised to represent.

Further, about half of the hired trainees classified with a "migration background" in administration A during my fieldwork were "white" (e. g. Finnish-German, US American-German), which illustrated that the statistics revealed little about the inclusion of racialized "others". However, because numbers invisibilize their empirical basis, signal objectivity, and allow the establishment of various comparisons (Heintz 2007), these statistics on "migration background" could serve as an additional resource for the personnel officers striving to legitimize their recruitment practices and their outcomes of low numbers of trainees with a migration background.

4.2   "Suitable diversity" and its limits

Unlike administration A, recruitment practices in administration B had changed considerably over the years. In the mid-2000s, the district mayor had initiated measures to increase the share of trainees of immigrant background, which included active participation in the programme "Berlin needs you!" and a cooperative arrangement with a local association offering preparation courses for vocational training in the civil service for young women with a migration background. Each year in the four years the arrangement endured, a certain number of successful participants received preferential access to vocational training. In the early 2010s, the vocational training unit began to develop active promotion strategies, expecting significant hiring demand related to a retirement wave and increasing competition for good trainees since secondary-school graduates increasingly opted for higher education instead of vocational training. The traditional selection criteria and procedures were replaced by a "suitability assessment" with criteria independent of educational achievements; this was conducted by an external HR service provider. Parallel to these changes, the numbers of trainees with a migration background had increased significantly, from 5 % in 2000 to about 25 %–35 % regularly since the late 2000s.

In this context, ethnic differentiations fulfilled a different function than in the previous case. They served to display recruitment efforts and showcase the administration as an attractive, diversity-friendly employer. While also drawing on constructions of "suitable candidates" in which ethnicity/"race" intersected with gender and space, the meaning of these differentiations seemed to change in part.

The early measures to recruit more trainees with a migration background were accompanied by representations of, in particular, young women as potentially lacking qualifications and, thus, requiring a preparation programme to make them suitable for vocational training. Promoting their recruitment was in line with the district's integration policies, which depicted migrant women as particularly disadvantaged and in need of integration measures, and it allowed the mayor to showcase his efforts towards immigrant integration. Most of the preparation programme's participants had a Turkish background, which in German public discourse is often associated with patriarchal gender norms that oppress women, thus strengthening the image

of a mayor who actively supported disadvantaged "others". One of the participants, a young woman of Turkish descent who later became employed, complained that they had been treated as *"token dolls"* (Interview M4, § 94): *"There was a press release. Here, [name of mayor] with many trainees and all have a migration background. District mayor of [B], do you see this? Hires a lot of young women with a migration background because he supports them"* (Interview M4, § 102). Showcasing these trainees could help gain recognition and enhance the administration's legitimacy in a changing institutional context where Berlin's policies stressed the goal of increasing the proportion of employees with a migration background.

As in administration A, the communication of statistics on the "migration background" among trainees further supported this. Here, the recorded proportion – which had risen steeply through recruitment via the preparation courses – was used to present the administration as a role model and *"pioneer for a quantitatively committed and qualitatively demanding training of young migrants"* (BQN Berlin 2008, 4) as the mayor stressed in a brochure. However, while the visible diversity was "suitable" for the external presentation, internally the young women's suitability was questioned. They were obliged to attend German classes during their training, irrespective of their actual German-language skills. Their "migration background" was racialized as deviating from the German-language norm and perceived as requiring specific measures to produce suitability for the job.

At the time of my fieldwork, the representations of "suitable trainees" seemed to change. In the context of active promotional strategies for vocational training to counter the expected growing competition for good trainees, young people of immigrant descent appeared as a new target group. A promotional clip diffused on the district's website and on YouTube illustrates how ethnic differentiations, intersecting with gender and space, were used to construct a new image of a "good trainee", thereby allowing a presentation of the administration as a diversity-friendly employer. Cut like a music clip and evoking elements of urban youth culture (in motifs, language, and accompanying hip-hop track), the clip depicted this prominent immigrant district as cool and vibrant, and migration-related diversity as a normal feature of both the local population and the local administration's staff. A young man with dark hair who introduces himself with a Turkish name presents the vocational training together with a young blond woman with a German name who presents opportunities to enter higher ranks in the administration. While drawing on the same differentiations as the officers in administration A – Turkish background, young man, immigrant district – here they served to construct an exemplary trainee in a vibrant neighbourhood. Presenting a young man of Turkish descent as a public image of vocational training appears not only as a strategy to address two underrepresented categories in administrative jobs – men and individuals of immigrant origin – concurrently. But also the intersection of ethnicity/"race", gender and the spatial embedding allowed showcasing the administration as a modern employer in a diversifying urban

society and enhancing its position in the competition for good trainees. While in administration A, ethnic/racializing and intersectional differentiations were used to externalize the problem of unequal inclusion and the responsibility for addressing it, here they were used to appropriate the benefits of diversity to support the reproduction of personnel in a changing labor-market situation.

Further observations suggest that representations of suitable trainees were also changing beyond marketing purposes. The newly hired trainees during the time of my fieldwork included several young men with a family background from Turkey, and the head of the vocational training unit stressed their positive appearance in the job interviews:

> *I was pleasantly surprised that male applicants with a migration background were better prepared than German young men […] especially here [...] young men with a migration background from our district, whether Kurdish or Turkish or Arabic, who had put on their shirts, jackets, sometimes even ties, were neatly prepared with a portfolio or with the requested presentation.* (Interview C5, § 24)

The expressed positive surprise reveals pre-existing negative representations of the differentiated category as not meeting expectations of suitable candidates. However, these representations had been questioned; the image of "appropriate gendered and racialized bodies" (Acker 2006, 449), which also appear spatialized – located in particular districts – seemed to change.

Yet the case also points to limits in these changing representations of "suitable employees". First, women who wore a Muslim headscarf continued to be perceived as unsuitable. It was commonly known that the district mayor disliked the headscarf, and the personnel officers interviewed shared quite openly that the administration attempted to avoid employing women who wore it. The former head of the vocational training unit argued:

> *These are precisely the threshold fears and barriers that we want to reduce when we employ people with a migration background here. To reduce barriers for citizens with a migration background, it is important to have their nationalities represented here, but of course we don't want to create barriers for normal citizens from [B] who might be frightened when someone sits in front of them in the citizens' office wearing a headscarf.* (Interview C2, § 160)

This argument aims to justify the discrimination against women who wear headscarves with the (assumed) expectations of "normal" citizens – the norm represented as non-migrant. Headscarf-wearing women are constructed as a risk to smooth interaction with the public. Their exclusion is, at the same time, defended by emphasizing the administration's attempts to foster the inclusion of staff with a migration background – those whose differences fit (or can be made fit) the established

expectations of civil servants – which, according to the officer, were endangered when hiring women who wore headscarves. In juxtaposing suitable and unsuitable forms of difference, this reflects Ahmed's observation that displaying "diversity" may be a way of reproducing organizational "whiteness" (Ahmed 2012, 147).

Further, change was concentrated on vocational training for administrative clerk positions, i.e. the middle rank of the civil service. In the promotion clip described above, the pathway to higher ranks was presented by the young blond woman with a German name. As Ray (2019) reminds us, maintaining internal hierarchies is a feature of the organizational production of racial inequality. Thus, whether a more encompassing transformation of representations of "suitable employees" that included higher positions occurred remained an open question at the time of this fieldwork.

5   Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the role of ethnic and racializing differentiations in recruitment practices of local administrations in a context where traditional accounts of bureaucratic "difference blindness" intersect with growing "difference conscious" demands for a better representation of the population of immigrant background. Drawing on the example of trainee recruitment in two local administrations in Berlin, the article depicts how recruitment practices, their persistence, and change are closely interwoven with constructions of suitable and unsuitable candidates. In these, ethnic and racializing differentiations intersected with differentiations of gender and space, with the "Turkish" or "Arab" young man from a prominent immigration district as an emblematic figure of the "other" of public administration. These constructions reveal racialized norms and expectations of "good trainees" or "ideal workers" (Acker 2006). Further, the administrations produced and communicated statistics on the "migration background" of candidates and trainees. While suggesting that they provided objective knowledge, these simultaneously invisibilized the contingent production of the numbers and the heterogeneity of candidates subsumed under the "migration background", which included individuals commonly perceived as "white".

The findings elucidate that mobilizing ethnic and racializing differentiations may help administrations respond to different requirements in regard to recruitment practices – they fulfil functions. On the one hand, by constructing "unsuitable others" who lacked qualifications and the motivation for the profession and localizing them outside the district's borders, personnel officers could externalize the reasons for their lack of employment and the responsibility for addressing this problem. This helped justify inequalities in recruitment outcomes and the perpetuation of established routines despite political demands to implement diversity policies. Racialized constructions of "unsuitable candidates", supported by statistical knowledge, stabilized

established norms, routines and beliefs – including the myth of meritocracy – and discharged an administration from reflecting on the potentially discriminatory effects of its recruitment practices. This helped to maintain legitimacy and reduce uncertainty regarding appropriate recruitment practices in a changing institutional context. This illustrates that, paradoxically, policies aiming to foster the inclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities may also foster the production of racialized constructions of their (presumed) unsuitability.

On the other hand, the same differentiations fed into constructions of "suitable diversity", which appropriated the benefit of visible differences, both in bodies and numbers, for an administration's self-presentation and self-marketing. By showcasing efforts to increase the share of trainees with a migration background and portraying itself as a diversity-friendly employer, an administration could enhance its legitimacy and secure new personnel in a context of a retirement wave and increasing competition for good trainees. While this demonstrated that the meaning of ethnic difference in public administrations may change in a changing institutional and labor-market environment, particular forms of difference – notably the Muslim headscarf – remained racialized as "unsuitable".

The findings make three contributions, in particular, to the literature on ethnicity/"race" in recruitment practices of administrations, and organizations more generally. First, while research has focussed mainly on private-sector organizations, this study shows the forms and functions of ethnic and racializing differentiations in the officially "difference blind" context of public and, specifically, local administrations. Here, in addition to the intersection of ethnic/racializing differentiations with gender, spatial differentiations of "(un)suitable candidates" – localized within or beyond the borders of the respective administrative territory – played a particular role. They helped to externalize "problematic" or appropriate beneficial forms of difference. Further, the study reveals how the communication of statistics, as a specific administrative technique of differentiation, constitutes a flexible source of legitimacy for administrative practices.

Second, the study extends the perspective on the functions of ethnic and racializing differentiations for recruitment practices by showing that they may serve not only to legitimize concrete hiring decisions and the exclusion of candidates of immigrant/ethnic minority background, a focus of existing studies, but also to legitimize established recruitment criteria and procedures or to present an administration as a role model and attractive employer. This demonstrates the broader significance of such differentiations for stabilizing and supporting recruitment routines and strategies.

Third, the findings emphasize that racialized representations of "(un)suitable candidates" are not stable but may change. That is, they not only reproduce discriminatory structures, which is foregrounded in the literature, but may also be element and manifestation of, at least partial organizational "openings". This draws attention

to the dynamic interplay between organizational practices and meanings of ethnic difference, which may produce both persistence and change in organizational norms and schemas. The boundaries constructing and in/excluding ethnic or racialized difference may shift over time when organizations are faced with new demands that call for an adaptation of practices in order to secure their survival. Organizational "whiteness" has to be conceived as dynamic.

The chosen case of trainee recruitment in local administrations in a German city-state also results in several limitations for this study. Particularly, how and what kinds of ethnic and racializing differentiations matter in recruitment for higher ranks, management, or specific street-level positions frequently interacting with clients of immigrant origin remains an open question and requires further research. Future studies might also more closely investigate how specific contextual factors, such as recruitment policies, procedures, criteria, routines, or observed hiring needs, shape the perceptions and meanings of ethnic difference – topics this article could only touch upon (but see Lang 2020). These may differ not only between local but also national administrations and civil service traditions, thereby calling for more comparative research. Finally, further extending the dynamic perspective emphasized by this article, future research should investigate the extent to which the recruitment of "non-white" staff affects the perception and meaning of ethnic and racialized difference within an administration and contributes to change in administrative practices and the underlying "white" norms and cultural schemas.

6   References

Acker, Joan. 2006. Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations. *Gender & Society* 20(4): 441–464.

Adman, Per, and Hanna Jansson. 2017. A Field Experiment on Ethnic Discrimination among Local Swedish Public Officials. *Local Government Studies* 43(1): 44–63.

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press.

Amt für Statistik Berlin Brandenburg. 2014. Statistischer Bericht. Einwohnerinnen und Einwohner im Land Berlin am 30. Juni 2014. Potsdam. https://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de.

Andrews, Rhys, and Rachel Ashworth. 2013. Determinants of Representation: An Empirical Assessment of the UK Civil Service. *Policy & Politics* 41 (3): 429–448.

Bommes, Michael. 2012. Systems Theory and the „Ethnic Inequality" of Migrant Workers. Pp. 59–82 in *Immigration and Social Systems: Collected Essays of Michael Bommes*, edited by Christina Boswell, and Gianni D'Amato. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

BQN Berlin. 2008. Berliner Verwaltung Zeigt Gesicht. Ausstellung Zur Kampagne «Berlin Braucht Dich!». Berlin: BQN.

BQN Berlin. 2014. Entwicklung des Anteils neuer Auszubildender mit Migrationshintergrund im Öffentlichen Dienst Berlins 2006–2013. Berlin: BQN.

Brussig, Martin, Dorothee Frings, and Johannes Kirsch. 2019. Diskriminierungsrisiken in der öffentlichen Arbeitsvermittlung. Berlin: Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes.

Bürgerschaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg. 2009. Mitteilung des Senats an die Bürgerschaft. Bericht über die Ergebnisse der Beschäftigtenbefragung 2008 zur Erhebung eines Migrationshintergrundes der Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter der hamburgischen Verwaltung (Drucksache 19/2532). Hamburg: Bürgerschaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg.

Deephouse, David L., and Mark Suchman. 2008. Legitimacy in Organizational Institutionalism. Pp. 49–77 in *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, edited by Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Roy Suddaby, and Kerstin Sahlin. Los Angeles, London: SAGE.

Der Beauftragte des Senats von Berlin für Integration und Migration. 2005. *Vielfalt fördern – Zusammenhalt stärken. Das Integrationskonzept für Berlin.* Berlin.

Ette, Andreas, Susanne Stedtfeld, Harun Sulak, and Gunter Brückner. 2016. *Erhebung des Anteils von Beschäftigten mit Migrationshintergrund in der Bundesverwaltung: Ergebnisbericht im Auftrag des Ressortarbeitskreises der Bundesregierung.* Wiesbaden: Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung.

Ette, Andreas, Norbert F. Schneider, Sophie Straub, and Martin Weinmann. 2020. *Kulturelle Diversität und Chancengleichheit in der Bundesverwaltung. Ergebnisse der ersten gemeinsamen Beschäftigtenbefragung der Behörden und Einrichtungen im öffentlichen Dienst des Bundes.* Berlin: Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration; Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung.

Gomolla, Mechtild, and Frank-Olaf Radtke. 2009. *Institutionelle Diskriminierung: Die Herstellung ethnischer Differenz in der Schule*. 3rd ed. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

Hall, Stuart. 1996. Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"? Pp. 1–17 in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall, and Paul Du Gay. London [u. a.]: Sage.

Hartmann, Michael, and Johannes Kopp. 2001. Elitenselektion durch Bildung oder durch Herkunft? *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 53(3): 436–466.

Heintz, Bettina. 2007. Zahlen, Wissen, Objektivität: Wissenschaftssoziologische Perspektiven. Pp. 65–85 in *Zahlenwerk*, edited by Andrea Mennicken, and Hendrik Vollmer. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

Hemker, Johannes, and Anselm Rink. 2017. Multiple Dimensions of Bureaucratic Discrimination: Evidence from German Welfare Offices. *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (4): 786–803.

Imdorf, Christian. 2010. Wie Ausbildungsbetriebe soziale Ungleichheit reproduzieren: Der Ausschluss von Migrantenjugendlichen bei der Lehrlingsselektion. Pp. 259–274 in *Bildungsungleichheit revisited: Bildung und soziale Ungleichheit vom Kindergarten bis zur Hochschule*, edited by Heinz-Hermann Krüger, Ursula Rabe-Kleeberg, Rolf-Torsten Kramer, and Jürgen Budde. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

Kirschenman, Joleen, and Kathryn M. Neckerman. 1991. "We'd Love to Hire Them, But…": The Meaning of Race to Employers. Pp. 203–232 *The Urban Underclass*, edited by Christopher Jencks, and Paul E. Peterson. Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Klüter, Helmut. 1999. Raum und Organisation. Pp. 187–212 in *Handlungsorientierte Sozialgeographie. Benno Werlens Entwurf in kritischer Diskussion*, edited by Peter Meusburger. Stuttgart: Steiner.

Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lang, Christine. 2019. *Die Produktion von Diversität in städtischen Verwaltungen. Wandel und Beharrung von Organisationen in der Migrationsgesellschaft.* Wiesbaden: Springer.

Lang, Christine. 2020. Workforce Diversity Policies in Practice: Drivers and Barriers in Local Administrations. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43(11): 1961–80.

Lang, Christine, Andreas Pott, and Kyoko Shinozaki. 2021. Organisations and the Production of Migration and In/Exclusion. *Comparative Migration Studies* 9(60). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00274-w.

Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. *Organisation und Entscheidung*. Opladen: Westdt. Verl.

Lutz, Helma, and Katrin Huxel. 2018. Migration und Geschlecht. Pp. 76–81 in *Handbuch Interkulturelle Pädagogik*, edited by Ingrid Gogolin, Viola Georgi, Marianne Krüger-Potratz, Drorit Lengyel, and Uwe Sandfuchs. Bad Heilbrunn: UTB.

Maravić, Patrick von, B. Guy Peters, and Eckhard Schröter (eds.). 2013. *Representative Bureaucracy in Action: Country Profiles from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Meziani-Remichi, Yamina, and Marcel Maussen. 2017. Recruitment in Public Administrations: Diversity Policies and Selection Practices in a French City. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(10): 1679–1695.

Midtbøen, Arnfinn H. 2014. The Invisible Second Generation? Statistical Discrimination and Immigrant Stereotypes in Employment Processes in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(10): 1657–1675.

Moss, Philip, and Chris Tilly. 2001. *Stories Employers Tell: Race, Skill, and Hiring in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Nieswand, Boris. 2017. Towards a Theorisation of Diversity. Configurations of Person-Related Differences in the Context of Youth Welfare Practices. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(10): 1714–1730.

Pager, Devah, and Diana Karafin. 2009. Bayesian Bigot? Statistical Discrimination, Stereotypes, and Employer Decision Making. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621(1): 70–93.

Phelps, Edmund S. 1972. The Statistical Theory of Racism and Sexism. *The American Economic Review* 62(4): 659–661.

Piñeiro, Esteban, Martina Koch, and Nathalie Pasche. 2019. Un/Doing Ethnicity in Intervening Swiss Street-Level Bureaucracy. A Police Service and a Child Welfare Service – an Ethnographic Perspective. *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 45(1): 35–55.

Pott, Andreas. 2016. Geographien des Rassismus. Pp. 185–192 in *Die Dämonisierung der Anderen. Rassismuskritik der Gegenwart*, edited by María do Mar Castro Varela, und Paul Mecheril. Bielefeld: transcript.

Puwar, Nirmal. 2001. The Racialised Somatic Norm and the Senior Civil Service. *Sociology* 35(3): 651–670.

Ray, Victor. 2019. A Theory of Racialized Organizations. *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 26–53.

Rivera, Lauren A. 2012. Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review* 77(6): 999–1022.

Scherr, Albert, Caroline Janz, and Stefan Müller. 2015. *Diskriminierung in der beruflichen Bildung: wie migrantische Jugendliche bei der Lehrstellenvergabe benachteiligt werden*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Schiller, Maria. 2017. Authenticity or Skill-oriented Individualism, Neutrality or Managerialism: Diversity Officers as Modern Public Officials. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43 (10): 1662–1678.

Scott, W. Richard, and Gerald F. Davis. 2007. *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural, and Open System Perspectives*. 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Spindler, Susanne. 2013. Junge männliche Migranten. Der Diskurs um Integration. Pp. 61–73 in *Intersektionen von race, class, gender, body: Theoretische Zugänge und qualitative Forschungen in Handlungsfeldern der Sozialen Arbeit*, edited by Cornelia Giebeler, Claudia Rademacher, and Erika Schulze. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Statistisches Bundesamt. 2018. Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit: Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund – Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus 2017. Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt.

Supik, Linda. 2014. *Statistik und Rassismus: Das Dilemma der Erfassung von Ethnizität*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Wagner, Constantin. 2017. *Öffentliche Institutionen als weiße Räume? Rassismusreproduktion durch ethnisierende Kategorisierungen in einem schweizerischen Sozialamt*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Weber, Max. 2005. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft – Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlaß. Teilband 4*, edited by Edith Hanke. Tübingen: Mohr.

Wooten, Melissa E., and Lucius Couloute. 2017. The Production of Racial Inequality Within and Among Organizations. *Sociology Compass* 11(1). doi:10.1111/soc4.12446.