

## Ethnicity, Inclusion and Youth Welfare Practices.

A case study from a neighbourhood counselling centre in a diverse German city

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Since my paper slightly deviates from the general agenda of this workshop about racialisation and citizenship, I want to stress three particularities which contextualise the paper's analytical perspective in the wider context.

Firstly, I don't primarily speak about race, but about ethnic differences. This is related to the German context in which I am socialised and in which the category of race – even in its critical interpretation – is discredited by its prominence under the Nazi rule. It is noteworthy that this tendency to avoid explicit or implicit references to race is not only characteristic for my analytical language but, as I will argue later, can also be observed among the social workers in Germany among whom I did fieldwork.

Secondly, the presented case study shows how the ascription of ethnic-cultural difference matters in terms of *including* persons into the procedures of a youth department in a larger German city and not *excluding* them from citizenship rights. It goes without saying that I don't deny exclusionary aspects of ascriptions racial and ethnic difference and their relevance for the debate on citizenship. Nevertheless, it appears to me more useful from a theoretical point of view to think of inclusion and exclusion as relational, situational and entangled categories instead of understanding them as binaries which represent an overall relationship of a person to *a* society. They can be used to describe the manifold relationships of persons with the variety of social contexts and institutions that can be found in a society. These relationships result in complex configurations of inclusions and exclusions rather than in a unitary status which could be identified as either being included into *a* society or 'excluded from it. This view follows the argumentation of students of transnational migration who tried

methodologically to get away from a normative concept of integration in order to examine empirically how migrants become simultaneously incorporated in different contexts within and across national borders (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Glick Schiller, Nieswand, Schlee, Darieva, Yalçin-Heckmann, and Fosztó 2005; Nieswand forthcoming). If we perceive incorporation as situational, plural and fragmented process, the same must be also true for the complementary concept of exclusion. Generally, this means that social inequality in terms of distribution of economic resources and access to legal rights is not only a matter of exclusion but also refers to differential modes of inclusion. For instance, undocumented migrants depend more than persons with access to social welfare services on incorporating themselves in certain segments of the labour market, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitative practices. This means their positionality is not only determined by a dominant mode of exclusion but also by the consequent forms of inclusion. In addition to the question of how the ascription of ethnic difference is used to exclude persons from some societal spheres, in this analytical framework it becomes plausible, to ask how it affects complementary modes of inclusion.

Thirdly, the paper applies a relational perspective on ethnicity, which reflects an inherent ambiguity to this category. On the one hand, my study of a neighbourhood counselling centre of a youth department in a German city focussed on the meaning of ethnic diversity for administrative practices and social casework. On the other hand, I tried to avoid to reifying the relevance of ethnic differentiations. Thereby, I tried to take up a criticism that was put forward by Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006). They argued that, in the past, migration studies focussed too exclusively on ethnicity and consequently oversaw the relevance of alternative forms of sociality, like non-ethnic forms of religious organisation or cross-ethnic relationships in diverse neighbourhoods. Generally, the methodological inscription of the centrality of ethnicity in migration research

has two manifestations: on the one hand, ethnicity can be affirmatively represented as mode of self-organisation and self-representation of migrants as it is done in the community studies or diaspora studies (e.g. Pasura 2008; Ceylan 2008; Weißköppel 2005; Müller-Mahn 2005; Conrad 2005). Alternatively, ethnicity or race can also be critically interpreted as a product of exclusion, exploitation and discrimination in the context of the receiving country as it is done in the context of the research on racialisation and *Ethnisierung* (e.g. Miles 1989; Bukow 1996; Barot and Bird 2001;). Although these positions have different implications and consequences, they converge at the point that they both assume ethnicity and race to be the central category of description.

Dealing with the ambiguity of studying ethnicity in the context of local state organisation and at the same time trying to avoid reifying it I looked at ways in which actors themselves referred to ethnicity, neglected or relativised it. In this framework I became particularly interested in the idea of secondary or marginal relevance. Secondary or marginal relevance refers to situations in which ethnic ascriptions play a role but are not the central focus of interaction. The interest in it is related to the observation that although the societal impact of ethnicity derives from the fact that it can be actualised in almost all social situations, not all social situations are primarily about ethnicity. This means that it becomes situationally articulated to situations which often have other dominant topics, like a doing job interviews, playing football or negotiating youth welfare services. In these contexts ethnicity has to be configured with often more contextual person-related categories, like being a good or a bad student, being a forward or a defender, being an alcoholic or being depressive etc.<sup>1</sup>

Although the question of relevance or irrelevance of ethnicity itself is a highly contested issue, it seems that an ethnographic approach to ethnicity, which wants to avoid the step into

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<sup>1</sup> Thinking about the meaning of ethnicity from an interactionist point of view also evokes the question of the situational irrelevance of ethnicity and how it can be observed. In the context of gender studies, Hirschauer (2001) reflected on the possibility of 'forgetting' gender.

the traps of the ethnic lens, has to be able reflect about the possibilities of observing differentials degrees of relevance of ethnicity and the relationality of ethnicity to other person-related categories. In the latter respect the applied perspective connects to academic discourses on intersectionality (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Jakobsen 1998; Yuval-Davis 2006) and diversity (Vertovec 2007), which stress the relevance of the interaction of person-related differences for understanding social difference in complex societies. I will come back to this relation at the end of paper.

## Stuttgart

The city of Stuttgart where my research was situated is the centre of a larger metropolitan agglomeration in the southwest of Germany, which consists of the city itself and a belt of medium-scale cities. Altogether about 600,000 inhabitants live in the city and 2.6 million in the larger metropolitan area. As a result of its demand for labour, the Stuttgart region went through a noticeable process of ethnic diversification since the 1950s. Altogether citizens of 173 different countries live in the city. Totally, persons with migration background make up almost 40 percent of the total population. About 85 percent of the non-Germans in the city originate from Europe, 10 percent from Asia, three percent from Africa and two percent from the Americas.<sup>2</sup> It is almost trivial to say that the structure of the migrant population is heterogeneous in terms of nationality, legal status, occupation, class background, duration of stay, religion, educational background and so forth.

My field site was one out of ten local neighbourhood centres of the municipal youth welfare office of the city of Stuttgart. These institutions are concerned, as their name indicates, with a variety of youth-welfare and youth protection related activities, which range from general counselling over family social work to emergency interventions in cases of child protection. Due to the demographic composition of the neighbourhood in which about 50 per cent of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

population has a migration background the staff of the counselling centres, out of which four persons have a migration background themselves, deal with ethnic diversity on daily level. The youth department is a low threshold organisation. Its responsibility is not limited to German citizens but includes all persons who reside legally in a locality. Due to their special legal responsibility in the context of child protection the youth department has also to include persons who don't want to be included and persons who have difficulties to relate to, meet or to understand the cultural and normative standards which are inscribed in the procedures of the youth department.

As a result of ongoing decentralisation policies, the counselling centres of the youth department grew, became more multifunctional and the staff members more diverse in terms of qualification. At the counselling centre where I did my fieldwork sixteen persons were employed; eight social workers, two administrative staff members, two secretaries, a psychologist, a mid-wife, a remedial teacher and the head of the department. Some of the services, like psychological or divorce counselling, are provided by the counselling centre itself. In the case of family social work the youth welfare office remains responsible in a legal sense and manages the cases but the daily work with the clients is done by non-government organisations. Nevertheless the implementation and management of the family social work assistance is one of the most important parts of the daily work in the counselling centre. It bases on a complicated decision-making process during which it becomes determined which type of assistance is considered adequate for a specific family or a specific child. In its course diverse kinds of information about clients are collected and documented. Pieces of information profoundly vary in respect to their importance for a case. While some define a case in the terms of youth welfare office, others remain secondary or neglected. If a case or parts of it become categorised it often entails more or less specifically defined procedures which are applied on it. For instance, if teachers and social workers think that a child has an

attention deficit syndrome, it has to be attested by a paediatrician who is accredited by the youth welfare office. If there are suspicions that a child is sexually abused, an alarm plan is applied which is specially developed for this type of cases. If a situation is identified as an emergency in terms of child protection, the custodial care over a child has to be taken over by the youth welfare office through a specific legally defined procedure. Since cases are often complex and different emphases and interpretations might co-exist with each others, it is part of the daily routine of social workers to weigh pieces of information in regard to their validity and differential relevance in the context of youth welfare practice. Altogether, my experience was that in the process of defining, selecting and configuring information, ethnic-cultural differences are made relevant but they rarely play a dominant role. Since most of the formal procedures and standard packages of social work assistance are indifferent in regard to ethnic or religious categories they have little formal administrative power. Nevertheless, they played a role. It appeared promising to me to pursue the question of how ethnic-cultural categories interact with and relate to other dimensions of difference in the context of daily case work. To exemplify this point, I will present the case of Ms Osei, a single mother originating from southern Ghana, and her son Kofi.

### The case “Osei”

The case “Osei” was reported to the neighbourhood centre by the day care facility to which Kofi, a three-year-old boy, went to. Kofi’s behaviour appeared delayed in terms of speech and development to the nursery teachers. This impression was confirmed by a paediatrician’s examination which the nursery teachers had asked the mother to initiate. Thereupon, the nursery contacted the local counselling centre of the youth welfare office with which they cooperate on a more or less regular base. In this context the respective nursery teacher indicated that the delay in development might also be affected by the fact that the Ms. Osei would not play and speak extensively enough with her child. When the case was discussed by

one of the two teams of the neighbourhood centre that checks incoming cases, it appeared serious enough to the social workers to initiate further steps. Subsequently, the case responsibility was assigned to Ms. Müller, one of the younger social workers of the counselling centre. She started to gather information on the base of which a better appraisal of the case could be made. Ms. Müller visited Ms. Osei at home, met with the nursery teachers and talked to the doctor. She came to the conclusion that altogether Ms. Osei cared sufficiently for the basic needs of her son and that, therefore, the child wellbeing was not seriously endangered. Nevertheless, it was critically noted by the social worker that Kofi had few toys, which, according to her assessment, could stimulate his development, and the nursery teacher's suspicion was underlined that the mother would eventually not intensively enough interact with her child. However, since compared to other cases the situation appeared harmless, it remained questionable whether it was justified to implement a family social worker on a regular base at all. Since the most serious concern in regard to the child's wellbeing, the delay in language, was dealt with by a language training, the implementation of a family social worker was seen by the professionals as contingent, as the responsible social worker indicated to me. Finally, it was decided by the decision-making board to send a social worker to support the family. In this context it became important that the nursery teachers and social workers had doubts in regard to Ms Osei's capability of mastering her daily life. This was related to the fact that her reading and writing abilities as well as her German language skills were very limited. These limitations had for instance caused problems in the interaction with the labour office from where she received social welfare assistance. The ascription of ethnic-cultural otherness motivated a moderate form paternalism which let the social worker in this case of doubt decide in accordance with what they perceived to be Ms. Osei's interest. Obviously her appearance as an intimidated "black" woman in a predominantly "white" context, her non-middle class background and her communication problems merged into holistic ascriptions of ethnic or racial otherness that evoked a modest paternalism.

Another relevant issue in the context of the procedure, which was not directly related to Ms. Osei, concerned the relationship between the counselling centre and the nursery. Generally, youth related institutions in the examined neighbourhood rely on maintaining long-term relationships with each other. This means that although in the case of Kofi's nursery the social workers felt that the teachers too quickly delegated their problems to the neighbourhood counselling centre, they had to document interactional care not to damage the relationship.

It does not surprise that the three factors, Kofi's delay in speech and development, Ms. Osei's practical constraints and the relationship to the nursery, had unequal relevance in terms of the formal documentation in the files. While the concerns about the relationship to the nursery did not appear in the files at all, the medical diagnosis of the paediatrician played a central role. The fact that that the a child-related problem was medically attested that could be related to the wider family situation made it easy for the social workers to justify the implementation of a family social worker. Without it "family Osei" would not have become a case of the youth welfare office in the first place. Ms. Osei's language constraints and her problems of interacting with German institutions were subsumed under the broad and unspecific social work category of 'deficiencies in mastering the requirements of daily life', which applies on a larger range of rather diverse phenomena. In addition to the delay in the development of speech the implementation of a family social worker required to underline the family's need for regular assistance. However, "the deficiencies in mastering the requirements of daily life" remained secondary in relation to the medical classification in terms of its administrative power.

Most surprising for me was that the ethnic framing of the case was not done explicitly by the involved professionals. Because of Ms. Osei's bodily appearance as a black African woman and her partly language-related interaction problems it was so transparent to the procedure that it did not require explicit reference. Dealing with the ascription of ethnic cultural



difference implicitly, was a pattern. In the case of another African family the responsible a social worker wrote the following question on the form that was submitted to the decision-making board of the counselling centre: “How can the family be supported to educate their children more successfully in Germany?” The mentioning of the country name “Germany” obviously underlined that the family is not originally from Germany and evoked an ascription of ethnic-cultural difference although it did not state it explicitly. In fact, explicit references are risky. Due to their weak administrative power ascriptions of ethnic and cultural otherness can easily be challenged as either wrong or discriminatory. In contrast to other categories, such as diseases, syndromes or legal categories, there exist no formalised procedure by which it could be evidenced or decided that certain patterns of behaviour are related to the culture of a family and, little formalised procedures exist to process ethnic difference. Moreover, probably more than most other categories in the context of social work, the reference to culture and ethnicity can evoke suspicions of racist discrimination. Mr. Köhler, an experienced social worker confirms this interpretation and explained it to me the handling of cultural and ethnic difference like this:

“If you make it [cultural difference, B.N.] an explicit issue it can lead to a vigorous debate of principles. And, what for? No, there is some knowledge that everybody of us has- because we have the experience. If we sit there and somebody comes- okay, I mean: we have seen it before and, then, we know how to handle it”<sup>3</sup>

It is very remarkable that although the term cultural differences was suggested by me as an interviewer beforehand, Mr. Müller explicated at no point in the passage what “it” is what experienced social worker “see”, “know” and “handle”. The implicitness of the discourse on ethnic difference remained even salient in a situation in which explication was invited. It even remains undecided what the dominant category of differentiation actually is. Is it culture?

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<sup>3</sup> Interview transcript, Herr Köhler, 29.08.2010, Stuttgart.

race? language? Rather than defining what “it” is it remains at a level of a vague othering”, which seems to work efficiently not despite but because it remains under-discoursified. This strategy of under-discoursification became most obvious within to me in a so-called contract talk between Ms Osei, Ms. Schmidt, the social worker who carries out the social work family assistance and Ms. Müller from the youth welfare office.<sup>4</sup> In the first phase of the talk, the activities of the last three month were recapitulated and documented. Ms Osei’s role in the situation was to confirm politely Ms. Schmidt’s narrative of success. Although sometimes it became obvious that Ms Osei could not follow the conversation in all details, she produced evidence that she, at least, understood basic parts of it and was able to answer simple questions. In the second phase of the talk, the plan for the next three months was discussed. Since the conversation became more technical, Ms Osei had more problems to follow. When Ms Schmidt and Ms Müller recognized that Ms. Osei was not attentive anymore, they switched the code, spoke faster and stopped expressive gestures to integrate her.

The signing of the contract with the youth department is normally embedded in an interaction ritual. Although the clients’ agreement can normally be presumed at this stage of the process, when all practical questions are resolved, they are explicitly asked whether they want to continue the collaboration with the youth welfare office. Despite its often rhetorical character, the question, nevertheless, is important. One the one hand, it is a dramatic element by which the contractual character of the support is underlined, which is an element of the relatively recent neo-liberal reforms. On the other hand, the parents’ accord is a necessary legal requirement for the implementation of family social work assistance. Therefore, Ms. Müller asked Ms. Osei in a friendly tone “Do you want to continue the work with Ms. Schmidt?”. Ms. Osei smiled a bit shyly, shifted her gaze to the ground and kept quiet. Ms Müller reformulated the sentence but, again, Ms Osei did not reply and avoided eye contact. Also the consequent attempts to translate the questions into English and Twi remained unanswered.

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<sup>4</sup> Field Protocol, 13.05.2009, Stuttgart.

Ms. Osei's silence created a situational crisis. As long as the question remained undecided the next step could not be taken and as long Ms. Osei did not speak there was no way to find out how the crisis could be solved. After Ms. Müller had recognised that Ms. Osei will not answer the question in any form or any language, she took a pragmatic decision. She simply skipped this part and proceeded with the formal bureaucratic script of the procedure, which required the signing of the contract. Being exposed to the form by Ms. Müller, Ms. Osei signed the contract. Afterwards, all participants, including Ms. Osei, appeared to be relieved to have solved the short interactional crisis and started small talk.

It is important to understand the full impact of this banal scene that this crisis was in terms of the procedure itself very problematic. First, clients are obliged to actively cooperate (*Mitwirkungspflicht*) in the procedure according to the formal requirements of the youth welfare office. Insufficient cooperation can be an argument either to stop an ongoing program or in cases in which the child well-being appears to be endangered to escalate the case by involving the family court. As a consequence, intransparent and uncooperative behaviour is risky and often disadvantageous for the clients. Second, dysfunctional modes of interactions are often used by social workers as diagnostic incidents. They evoke questions and might be seen as indicator that something more worrisome might be hidden behind them. Therefore, it is remarkable that Ms. Osei's silence did not evoke any further investigations although it remained unclear why she did not answer. Obviously it appeared to the involved actors sufficiently explained by her ethnic-cultural difference. When Ms. Osei had left it was not the social workers but I who felt the need to discuss the case. Ms. Müller answered me that she just would not ask Ms. Osei the next time because it was already the second contract talk in which she refused to answer the question.

Although, again, no explicit reference to Ms. Osei's ethnic-cultural background was made, it is difficult to imagine the same reaction to a client who appears culturally more competent

and ethnically less different in eyes of the social workers. In this sense, it is relatively evident that it was the ascriptions of cultural difference that affected the situation although it was at no point addressed in an open way. In this respect Mr. Köhlers statements that was cited above appears a very concise description of what has happened:

If you make it an explicit issue it can lead to a vigorous debate of principles. And, what for? (...) If we sit there and somebody comes. Okay. I mean, we have seen it before and, then, we know how to handle it.

### **Conclusion**

Of course, the potential for generalisation from one single case are limited. Nevertheless, I presented this case to highlight three points, which I found interesting for further discussion.

First, ethnicity is in the context of the youth welfare office part of larger configurations of differences. This does not surprise because the social casework does not deal with ethnic-cultural differences per se but only as part of cases which primarily are characterised by those sets of differences, like legal, medical, psychological or social work categories, which are within the framework of the youth department's legal responsibility. In order to understand how ethnicity operates in this context, it is important to see how it interacts with these are more formalised and more legitimate categories. In this respect, the case description resonates with discussions on intersectionality and diversity. The specific difference is that within these frameworks normally the interaction of *similarly* general person-related categories are examined like gender, class and race (Davis 2008; Vertovec 2007). In addition to that my empirical material suggests is that there also some demand to examine the interaction between categories which are *different* in regard to their degree of generalisation and their societal scope. This question is of particular relevance for ethnographers who try to understand how more contextual and field-specific categories which they encounter in their field-sites interact with more general ones of larger societal scope like ethnicity. Or to phrase it in a abstract

way: how the fragmentation of society in different context with more or less specific forms of meaning production and power structures relates to the unity of society and the corresponding patterns of stratification.

Ethnography is well equipped to contribute to a better understanding of the situational side of these interactions especially if they include, as in the case of Ms. Osei, silent forms of meaning ascription, which can only be observed by participating in concrete situation and not by methods like questionnaires or interviews (Hirschauer 2001). Nevertheless, this element of silence points also to the limits of ethnography. Although after four months of field work in the neighbourhood counselling centre, in the presented case it appeared obvious to me that ethnicity played a role, this interpretation might still be contested. It becomes even more complicated in cases which are less clear. Sometimes even for the involved social workers it remains ambiguous in how far their colleague's assessment of a case might be influenced by the ascription of ethnic difference or not. In this respect, ethnography does not provide objective observations and judgments but is part of the social practice of ascribing, weighing and contesting the relevance ethnic differences. However, the observed vagueness, transiency and fuzziness of the ascriptions are not so much a product of methodological shortcomings but appear to be an important feature of the phenomenon itself.

Third, I wanted to show that from the perspective of the youth welfare department ethnic othering has an important function for *closing* the administrative procedure in relation to the complexity of the environment in which the neighbourhood counselling centre is situated. Under the conditions of relatively limited resources, social workers have to apply relatively standardised administrative procedures and social work programs on a heterogeneous population. In this respect the interpretation of administrative discretion often follows the pragmatic interests of maintaining these procedures and limiting the effort which is invested

in a single case (cf. Lipsky 1980).<sup>5</sup> This presumably was also a reason why the social workers did not show more efforts to understand Ms. Osei's silence. The goal was to bring this relatively simple case to an end within the normal time slot. In this respect ethnic othering gained its functionality. It explained Ms. Osei's deviance from the normality expectations, which are inherent to the procedure and allowed the social workers to stop further investigations.

However, the link between administrative logic, inherent expectations of normality and ethnicity matters in the context of the discussion about citizenship. As Lipsky (1980:4) has argued, "street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship to the state" and "hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship". The presented example was selected to show that between the poles of exclusion and inclusion in a society there is a large gray area, in which ascription of ethnic differences affect these processes in relatively unpredictable and ambiguous ways. This gray area, nevertheless, is important to develop a deeper understanding of how race and ethnicity articulate to different social contexts and how it influences the citizenship rights of the involved persons.

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<sup>5</sup> Lipsky argues that in the case of street "level bureaucrats" like social workers routinisation and stereotyping are important practices to cope with the misfit between the work load and limited resources.

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