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Article

Confronting Racialised Power Asymmetries in the Interview Setting: Positioning Strategies of Highly Qualified Migrants

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Abstract

Based on our longitudinal, in-depth qualitative research focusing on the social construction of deskilling among highly educated migrants from Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the European Union, we will discuss in this article the positioning of the interview partners within the interview situation as interrelated to societal racialised power asymmetries. In this contribution, we exemplify that critical migration research can only be carried out when we reflect on our methods accordingly. To do so, we discuss actual evidence from this ongoing research project: While we see that many of our interview partners from new EU member states are reluctant to point to negative experiences in our conversations, we want to highlight that the potentiality of discrimination is part of the interview setting in our research and thus co-constructs the empirical data. By analysing a variety of discursive positioning strategies employed by our interview partners that can be understood as strategies to avoid anticipated discrimination, we aim to fulfil the promise of methodological reflexivity and thus contribute to the quality of interview research in the context of migration studies. The aim of this contribution is thus twofold: We want to contribute to methodological discussions as well as refine current research focussing on the racist experiences of CEE migrants.

Keywords

discrimination; everyday experiences; highly skilled; interviewing analysis; migration; positioning

Issue

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1. Introduction

Until very recently, migrants from Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states were not considered as being subjected to discrimination (for a literature review and in-depth analysis see Kalmar, 2023). As very recent analyses show, the discrimination of so-called Eastern Europeans (a confusing and negatively connotated expression by now) on so-called Western European labour markets is not only latent but also visible in quantitative data (Lee, 2022). Such discrimination has a historical side to it and is usually construed today via cultural diversity going back to the times of the cold war as Kalmar (2023) described. Moreover, in Austrian mass

media, CEE migrants are not portrayed positively but usually as a threat to Austrians’ jobs and as persons who try to abuse the Austrian welfare state (Zelano, 2018). Also, most of the political parties in Austria promote negative imaginaries as they have been against a swift integration of potential workers from EU member states that joined the EU in the course of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. CEE citizens are continually confronted with being unwanted by Austria—the most recent example being the government’s veto against the Schengen integration of Bulgaria and Romania in December 2022 (Oxford Analytica, 2022). Whilst these examples are clearly visible to the public, everyday discrimination is also a fact (ZARA, 2021).

Based on these reflections, we are interested in how mobile CEE citizens perceive and position themselves in this context of racialised power asymmetries, discrimination, and processes of othering, not only but especially in the specific context of research encounters. In doing so, we want to contribute to reflexive research that aims to explore the complexity of research identities, positionings (Scheibelhofer, 2019), and intersubjectivities, thereby building on concepts and discussions of postcolonial, cultural, gender, and queer studies.

In this contribution, we focus on highly educated EU citizens from CEE countries moving to another EU member state (in our case, Austria) and ask how they position themselves in an interview situation, which we perceive as a societal site on which racism may be re-enacted. Secondly, we also contribute with this article to the advancement of empirical research on discriminated migrants in societies. Especially in qualitative research, we can swiftly overlook acts of positioning as we stress the actor as the main site of investigation: Essed (1988) showed in her groundbreaking work that when discrimination is not part of what can be said without damaging oneself as a victim, the issue is silenced. We are pursuing these two aims simultaneously, as we need to come up with adequate research tools to make the unspoken visible through our research. By applying a constructivist perspective inspired by Kathy Charmaz's works, we suggest how we can reach a better understanding of the different patterns of how such silenced discrimination is dealt with (see Charmaz, 2006).

Analysing the interview situation as an example of an encounter within a racist society (El-Mafaalani, 2017), we perceive it as a potential setting of everyday-life racism to be experienced by the interview partners due to the research question and our positionality as researchers: Three academics who can be read as Austrians holding jobs in academia are interviewing equally highly qualified migrants from CEE member states about their experiences of being denied commensurate jobs in and by the Austrian labour market. The interview situation as such is thus at risk to be in itself an experience of everyday discrimination for the interview partners, because it may reproduce othering and racialised positions of power.

2. Theoretical Background

We see that in an ethnically and racially stratified society, the persons we interview are positioned by members of the majority—and also need to forge out for themselves positionings according to the situation they find themselves in. Concentrating on such positioning is thus a way to analyse social inequalities in the making (Karakasoğlu & Doğmuş, 2016). Positioning is usually happening without the speakers' intentionality. We thus need to find a methodology in order to study it: As prior research has shown, positioning usually takes place and is reproduced in narratives (Baumgarten & Du Bois, 2012; Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004).

As Ryan (2015) points out, qualitative research (especially when actor-centred, often feminist, and/or with interest in migration) has a long tradition of questioning positionalities (Draxl & Holzinger, 2016, 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2019; Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014). Going back to Merton's (1972) essay on insiders and outsiders, Ryan criticises "fixities" of social positions. She, therefore, is in line with research on the social positioning of migrants that emphasises the importance of context for acts of positioning (Spies, 2013). Building on transnational migration scholarship (Amelina & Faist, 2014) including the thinking around methodological nationalism (Scheibelhofer, 2016; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), she points out that, as researchers, we need to keep an eye on this "dance" of positioning while researching, as it is usually power-ridden. This is the case as interactions between researchers and their research subjects are embedded into an unequal society (Cederberg, 2014; Wiest et al., 2022). For our specific context, i.e., Austria, xenophobia and racism have been documented for decades (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009; Opratko, 2019; Schäfer & Schadauer, 2019; Schuster & Weichselbaumer, 2022; Wodak, 2015). Of interest for our specific context of labour market integration, Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2009) identify a "new" racism that is usually not expressed in overtly racist terms, but through justifications related to topoi such as protecting jobs, concerns about the abuse of welfare benefits, or cultural incompatibilities.

As already indicated, positioning happens in an actual conversational situation but is embedded in a wider societal context. While we assume that nation-states are powerful constructs (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) that may not organise the complexities of today's migration experiences as one might assume (Scheibelhofer, 2016), we are nevertheless referring to natio-ethno-cultural (Hoffmann, 2022; Karakaşoğlu et al., 2022; Wiest et al., 2022) ascriptions as we speak to one another (Battaglia, 2007). This is also the case if we distance ourselves from such (assumed) ascriptions and/or stereotypes. While distancing would mean naming issues and experiences, Essed's work—as already introduced above—points to the fact that instances of discrimination and racism may not be talked about without the risk of damaging the self as well. Theories of the spiral of silence, silencing and self-silencing (Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991) refer to the observation that people may remain silent in certain contexts while expressing their opinions freely within their own circles of like-minded persons. In this theoretical work, it is assumed that individuals decide they either remain silent or they would speak out about a topic—depending upon their estimation of the interlocutor's reaction. While this line of thinking is helpful for our work, we needed to go beyond the literature of silencing/self-silencing because, when applying a constructivist grounded theory approach, we could discern more variability among different positioning

strategies that we understand as reactions to racialised power asymmetries.

While conducting this study, we are continuously reflecting on our own positioning and its influence on the research process, the results, and most importantly the interview partners themselves. We want to stress this aspect as we concur with Ryan (2015) that we are involved in a certain “dance” when doing our fieldwork—placing ourselves in the presence and in reaction to our interview partners—while they are doing the same. Our theoretical position is, therefore, clearly one of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1973, 1986) and we perceive it as important to address our societal positionings that are most likely influencing the interview situation: We are three women of differing age and status in our academic careers employed at the University of Vienna. We were all born into families with no recent migration history and are perceived as part of the white majority society. We were reinforced in our interpretation of the influence of our positions as when conducting the interviews, we left the choice of the interview location to the interview partners (with a clear preference on our part for their homes, work, or public places) but the majority of the interviewees wanted to meet in our offices at the university department. Thus, our academic positioning is stressed—whilst the topic of our research addresses how the interviewees experience their way into the Austrian labour market—whereby they might experience deskilling and discrimination based on natio-ethno-cultural ascriptions.

In our research, we use the term “deskilling” synonymously with “overqualification” and understand it as the phenomenon of exercising a job that requires a lesser qualification than the level of the highest degree obtained (Cardu, 2015). Deskilling affects both younger workers and migrants entering the destination country’s labour market. However, the persistence over time of deskilling among migrants is significantly higher than among native workers (Johnston et al., 2015; Mollard & Umar, 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015), indicating the presence of migration-specific causes and mechanisms. Not only might the recognition of educational diplomas be problematic, but also hidden discriminative elements, as migrants may experience a depreciation of their educational and professional credentials. Discrimination based on the place of education and reluctance to recognise seemingly “suspicious” foreign experiences may furthermore intersect with ethnic and religious prejudice towards certain groups (Cardu, 2015; Gächter, 2012; Mollard & Umar, 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015). Difficulties in mastering the destination-country language are a further obstacle that may lead to migrants’ downward professional mobility. However, language issues transcend communication problems as linguistic discrimination may limit migrants’ access to certain jobs even though their proficiency or accent does not impair understanding or good performance in the actual job environment (Lopez-Ekra,

2015). Thus, our research and, consequently, our interviews focus on issues of discrimination related to the migration biography of our interview partners as well as to natio-ethno-cultural ascriptions (for a discussion of the term see Wiest et al., 2022). Thereby, the interview setting itself is characterised by the abovementioned asymmetries.

3. Research Methodology

Our analyses presented here are based on preliminary findings from the ongoing qualitative research project DeMiCo (2021–2025; for more information see: <https://demico.univie.ac.at>) that investigates the social construction of “deskilling” among highly educated migrants from CEE member states in the Austrian capital of Vienna. Aiming to explore the concrete micro-level processes involved in the production of this phenomenon, we apply a qualitative, actor- and process-oriented research approach to give special attention to the individual motives and migrant agency in coping with (the risks of) deskilling.

Austria constitutes an ideal-typical example of the European context as, like in most member states, the proportion of employees declaring themselves to be overqualified is lowest for native-born residents with native backgrounds, slightly higher for second-generation immigrants, and much higher for first-generation immigrants (Eurostat, 2017). The focus on migrants from CEE countries is thereby particularly relevant because they are disproportionately highly qualified and at the same time affected by deskilling above average (Gächter, 2016; Johnston et al., 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018).

Also, migration between Austria and most CEE countries must be seen against the background of long-standing migration histories as well as considerable income disparities that exist between the states. Moreover, mobility and migratory patterns between these countries are complex and manifold, as one-way migration, circular forms of migration, and cross-border commuting co-exist.

Our focus on Vienna is based on decisive regional differences in the Austrian labour market as well as on the high share and heterogeneity of migrants in the Austrian capital compared to other Austrian regions (Statistics Austria, 2022), making this field of research of particular interest.

Our research employs a qualitative-interpretative approach drawing on the methodological principles of constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). To factor in the temporal dimension of deskilling, we conduct a qualitative panel study accompanying migrants over two years in three interview waves to gain insights into how deskilling processes are lived and understood by the individuals concerned. The data analysis is geared towards initial and focused coding techniques, as proposed by Charmaz (2006, 2014). The accompanying writing of memos serves for the systematic development of

the analysis as well as reflection and quality assurance (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Special importance is given to critically reflecting on our role as researchers and social positioning during the interview and research as pursued in this article.

Per grounded theory, we employ theoretical sampling, whereby data is jointly collected and analysed and additional data is selected based on theoretical insights gained in the previous analyses. However, we formulated some initial sampling criteria focusing on Hungarian, Czech, and Romanian nationals who live and/or work (transnationally) in Vienna and hold a tertiary degree acquired outside Austria. Our sample includes both migrants working in positions below their level of qualification as well as migrants not (anymore) affected by deskilling, thus providing valuable insights into coping and counter-strategies regarding over-qualification. As the phenomenon of deskilling among migrants from new member states in Austria is still under-researched, we did not limit our sample to certain employment sectors or types of education. Also, our sample is not limited to one-time migrants but includes a wide range of migration and mobility patterns based on our knowledge from previous research (Scheibelhofer, 2018). At the time of this article's completion, the first research cycle has been completed involving 25 narration-based, problem-centred qualitative interviews (Scheibelhofer, 2008; Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with migrants, ranging from 45 minutes to three hours, with an average length of 84 minutes. At the time of the interview, our interlocutors exercised a great variety of jobs (ranging from working as a hotel receptionist to holding a professorship at the university), and some were also unemployed. Also, the reasons why they came to Austria varied significantly: While some had followed their spouses and partners, others sought better professional and economic conditions or international experiences. Some had dreamt of migrating to Austria for a long time while others more or less accidentally "ended up" in this country.

The interview languages varied according to the interviewees' choice. We followed a multilingual research design based on the socio-translational collaborative approach suggested by Littig and Pöchhacker (2014), which includes the systematic involvement of qualified interpreters and translators throughout the entire research process. We offered every interviewee a Czech, Hungarian, or Romanian interpreter for the interview, which was accepted by ten participants. Another ten interviews were carried out in German, four in English, and one in a mix of German and English. All interpreters were themselves migrants from the same country as the interviewed persons—important information that affected the positioning strategies in the interview strategies as we will discuss below.

In the following, we elaborate on how racialised power asymmetries and thereby the potentiality of discrimination is part of the interview setting in our research and thus co-construct our empirical data.

As addressed already, we also have an eye within the analysis for our positioning as well as the positioning of the interlocutors. By analysing a variety of discursive positioning strategies, we aim to fulfil the promise of methodological reflexivity and thus contribute to the quality of interview research in the context of migration studies.

4. Positioning Oneself to Counter Potential Discrimination in the Interview Setting

In our interviews, instances of discrimination were only rarely narrated explicitly, and then often presented as an exception and/or normalised. Especially the idea of potentially being a victim of racism is vehemently refuted by some of our interview partners. Based on the theoretical work of Essed (1988), we understand this denial of (racist) discrimination as a coping strategy in order to avoid damaging oneself as a victim. Thereby, it is of crucial importance to envision the concrete conversational situation in which our data is constructed, i.e., in which the narratives about instances of discrimination are elicited. Foremost, we must consider who talks to whom in such an interview setting. Considering the positionality of researchers (and in some interviews, the presence of another migrant from the same country, i.e., the interpreter) is essential to understand the acts of positioning carried out by our interlocutors.

As elaborated above, in each of our interview settings, a member from a minority group (the migrant interview partner) finds herself/himself talking to a member of the majority group (the non-migrant researcher)—who could potentially discriminate against them. The anticipation of potential discrimination is present in our conversation because our research is embedded in the migration society we live in with its specific racialised structures. These racialised structures lead to everyday life discrimination and microaggressions for migrants: Asking questions regarding one's assumed foreign origins in situations that do not call for such asking is an example of discrimination continuously experienced in daily life (El-Mafaalani, 2018). As we might ask such questions, too—and *are doing so*, as we open the interview with the question to elaborate on one's migration history with a focus on one's education and work life—the interview situation is clearly set up within a racialised order. Reflecting our own research critically was fuelled by a peculiar set-up we developed for our study: Whilst this contribution focuses on the "classical" interview setting where only two persons (interviewer and interviewee) are present, this setting was often extended by a third person because we work with co-national interpreters—further complicating the conversational situation. The interview partner has to position herself/himself then not only concerning one but two interlocutors (researcher and interpreter)—and the respective positioning strategies might be difficult to reconcile. While we see the need for methodological reflections on this triad as well, we want to point out for

the following results that the comparison between our interviews alone with one person versus the interview as a triad was helpful to stir our thinking as presented here.

When analysing the transcripts of the interviews, we could identify a variety of strategies employed by our interview partners to avoid anticipated potential discrimination on our part. In the following, we will describe those positioning strategies that we repeatedly reconstructed with grounded theory coding techniques in a condensed manner.

4.1. Strategy: “Do Not Take Me for an Immigrant”

Our data indicate that our interview partners often recurred to discursive strategies assuring us that popular perceptions of migrants would not apply to them. For some interview partners, this meant that they explicitly differentiated themselves from “immigrants.” For example, one of our interview partners, Lukas Vacek, a jurist from the Czech Republic in his mid-thirties who worked in an Austrian bank complained about elderly colleagues who saw him and his other colleagues from abroad as “immigrants” (to assure anonymisation, we opted for changing names, places, and also industries to protect our interview partners). Other interview partners referred to themselves as “foreigners,” a term not directly connected to the context of migration. While this word sounds rather exclusionary in the German-speaking context, it can also be understood as a strategy to discursively distinguish oneself from migrants who are labelled negatively in public discourse (Schadauer, 2022).

Such distancing occurred also vis-à-vis co-nationals when some interview partners emphasised that they were more highly skilled and better educated than other migrants from the same country of origin. One of our interview partners, Zsuzsanna Becsei, a 38-year-old woman from Hungary working in the administration of a university in Vienna, stressed that she never experienced difficulties when looking for a job in Austria. However, she acknowledged that she also “hear[d] the contrary,” “that many have problems but this can also be related to the job. Because...many people, for example, from Hungary do construction work and so on” where they encounter problems at work: “So, it makes a difference which profession you have and which education, and so on and so forth,” she concludes. This citation is paradigmatic as it is an example of how instances of everyday life discrimination cannot be directly addressed: Even if she is not a target of discrimination herself (an account that we take into consideration), she wants to let us know that other Hungarians have discriminatory experiences based on their nationality. Whilst the content of this citation clearly delineates the social situation she describes—being discriminated against based on nationality—one may not say out loud words like “racist” or even “discrimination.” Still, in a racially structured society, she can assume that the researcher still understands clearly what she is alluding to. Thus, positioning occurs in the form of

a “do not take me for an immigrant” stance instead of self-silencing as the issue is brought up by her without the researcher prompting her into this venue.

Also, in the vein of this strategy, we met interview partners who clarified that they were not forced to migrate by economic necessity but had made a conscious and self-determined decision to come to Austria to work in a qualified position and “not to play a dishwasher,” as our interview partner Martin Svoboda, a political scientist, stated. His wording also reveals an identity construction of himself as highly qualified in any circumstance of life—so that at the utmost he would only be able to “play” a role instead of being a proper dishwasher himself. Purely economic reasons for migration or even threats of one’s livelihood were often explicitly refuted by our interview partner, such as, e.g., Paul Bretschneider, a 53-year-old doctor from Romania: “In Romania, I will never starve, I can always do something and I am doing relatively okay there.” In the case of Romania, public perceptions as a poor country may also play a role for Mr Bretschneider to clarify the possibility of leading a “relatively” acceptable life in Romania, too.

Presenting oneself as different from other migrants also might mean activating negative stereotypes to position oneself in contrast to them (for similar patterns see also Cederberg, 2014). One of the activated stereotypes that we could identify was the figure of the “lazy,” not working migrant who lives from Austrian social benefits. Lukas Vacek is a good reference for such perceptions: He told us that while wanting to go back to the Czech Republic in the long term, he and his wife planned to start a family in Austria because of the good social system. The discourse on migrants as a threat to the Austrian welfare state being common in media coverage (Schadauer, 2022) is a good way “out” of openly telling us about the couples’ plans and immediately emphasising that, up to now, their tax contribution in Austria was outstanding. He highlighted their therefrom derived deservingness in contrast to welfare “scroungers”: “We are paying quite high amounts of money to the social system, so we want to get something back. But we are not some kind of people who are applying for all the social benefits...not at all.” Questions of deservingness are thus not constructed as a right of a European citizen living legally in the country—which would be the legal prerequisite for receiving family benefits in Austria. Instead, there are moral grounds that need to be covered: Not only does it suffice that they are both paying taxes in Austria, but positioning oneself as other than “those immigrants” calls for the specification he gives as paying “quite high amounts of money”—and not just one of them, but both.

Underlining one’s own hard work and contribution to the Austrian welfare (system) is a recurrent motive that we could identify in the interviews. In this vein, the insistence on one’s own efforts in and for the Austrian society can be understood as a strategy to position oneself in opposition to the public negative stereotype of the

migrant who is assumingly “unwilling to integrate.” One of our interview partners, Martin Svoboda, a Czech political scientist who has been working for several years in an IT company in Austria, finds rather strict words in this regard: “I believe that if you come to a society, and if it is not for professional reasons for one to three years, then you should really try to adapt.”

Language plays a crucial role in this regard and is by many of our interlocutors presented as the key to integration. Not knowing German is often presented as a legitimate and plausible penalty on the labour market. As one of our interview partners, a Czech biologist in her thirties, Michaela Huber, frames it: “I never had the feeling that I couldn’t get a job only because I am Czech and not an Austrian. I rather don’t think so. In the beginning, it was the language skills and everything.” Again, we see in this citation how interview partners vaguely point to areas of discrimination in everyday job life, but at the same time, the risk of damaging oneself seems too high to elaborate on the matter. As Michaela Huber explains: Being Czech was in her view never the reason why she would not get a job. Still, there is a need to nuance this clear statement: In the past, in her first time in Austria, it may well have been the case that she did not obtain a job (and it is relevant to add that she did get a job but not one consistent with her qualification)—because of her then still lacking language skills. So, again, we see the need to concur with public conceptions of the “good migrant” learning fast and proper (maybe even Austrian) German (Verwiebe et al., 2016).

This described recurrent positioning as an active, hard-working, and self-reliant person as well as the highlighting of one’s own educational and socio-economic status can be understood as a strategy to set oneself apart from preconceived ideas about migrants. In their positioning acts, our interview partners thereby refer to collective stereotypes known by both the researchers and themselves. These stereotypes are social constructs and part of a shared social reality—and consequently present in the interview situation. Activating them and positioning oneself in contrast to them can thus be understood as a strategy to avoid potential discrimination from researchers.

4.2. Strategy: “We Are Alike”

A further possible strategy that we identified in our data was to emphasise not the differences to other groups but instead to point out the likeness between the interlocutors, thereby discursively creating a union with the researcher. This can also be understood as a communicative technique to counter potential discrimination in the interview setting. At times, our interview partners suggested shared values or similar educational status. Also, the historical connectedness and assumed shared cultural heritage of their countries of origin and Austria were often mentioned. While historical as well as cultural entanglements are a fact, these references deserve a

closer look considering the contextualisation in the narration. For example, Martin Svoboda conceded that differences might exist between the organisation of the labour markets, but also recurrently underlined the proximity and cultural similarity of the respective countries:

If some people encounter difficulties—I won’t call it discrimination—then it is because they don’t know the system and that they can’t adapt to the system, because it is different even though we are neighbours and the countries are culturally similar....In Europe we have similar cultures, so Romania, uh, Denmark, we have the same rules, we try to treat each other with respect and that is a good basis.

As this quote well illustrates, pointing to “difficulties” needs to be right away set into the correct context to position oneself not within a discriminatory racist structure. The chosen wording yet invites the interpretation that—although the participant would “not call it discrimination”—it might as well be exactly that. At least he does not rule out the possibility of discrimination right away. Constructing European countries as neighbours is a typical metaphor in Austrian and CEE politics of EU integration (Péti et al., 2021). Additionally, the emphasis on shared values and cultural similarity often goes hand in hand with putting forward a European or cosmopolitan identity. One of our interview partners, Elena Nedelcu, a Romanian academic in her fifties, even admitted her astounding relief when she was for a very short period stateless, having given up the Romanian nationality and waiting for her Austrian nationality (as in Austria, dual citizenship is only permitted in exceptional cases):

And there was a very, very strange feeling, I mean for the short time when I was really stateless, although my husband was absolutely worried....But for me, it was a very strange feeling of liberation, so to speak, to be free, so to speak, to be free from all—curious.

While this “strange feeling of liberation” she talks about might as well be caused not only by being stateless but also by supposedly being free from everything negative that goes with having foreign citizenship, her ideal, however, wouldn’t be to have Austrian citizenship. As she told us, if at all, she would have preferred to receive “European citizenship” rather than the Austrian nationality because she can “identify well with it,” thereby emphasising something “we” have in common (Favell, 2011; Nowicka, 2020).

4.3. Strategy: My (Natio-Ethno-Cultural) Inheritance Is an Asset

Another identified strategy to counter societal power asymmetries and avoid potential discrimination on our part was to accentuate the value of one’s own natio-ethno-cultural background. The concept of natio-ethno-

cultural difference refers to the everyday construction of otherness, where categories such as “nation,” “culture,” and “ethnicity” are combined in diffuse ways, thereby structuring “we”-groups and “others” (Mecheril, 2010). We use this term because we perceive a difficulty in many other terms as they might further contribute to the essentialisation of Otherness—a social process we want to analyse but not perpetuate with our own work and terminology. Thus, it is neither the nationality nor the ethnicity or the culture per se—from an analytical point of view that is ascribed to persons or groups. By using this triad in one term, we hope to contribute to a problematisation and a heightened awareness of everyday life discrimination and racism as we (and readers) again and again stumble over this inelegant term. We are sure that we will find new expressions in the coming years as research on racism within Europe against CEE citizens just begins as discussed above.

Interview partners often put forward the importance they attributed to their first language. Also, the engagement in cultural associations was at times underlined and the reliance on and value of co-ethnic networks was emphasised. Occasionally, this might also mean to activate stereotypes—this time not to position oneself in contrast to but instead to be part of a positively connotated group. Exemplarily, let us look at the following quote in which Lukas Vacek describes, in a rather generalising manner, how his employer, an Austrian banking group, benefits from its international (especially Czech) employees—without sufficiently appreciating their contribution:

So I would say [thankfully] this company has people from abroad because otherwise, it would be a really big problem to perform. Especially Czech people, we are not really obeying all the rules but we are super effective, we are thinking outside of the box and you can really do whatever—almost whatever is asked. I mean, from the work perspective, we are really hard workers but now we start to have a feeling that we have to be paid at least equally.

This interview passage exemplifies how the interview partner copes with perceived discrimination by underlining the positive qualities he ascribes not only to himself but also to his co-nationals, positioning himself thus in a positively connotated “we”-group. In opposition to the experienced disregard, Lukas Vacek presents this group as achieving an over-average performance, an asset in the workplace, and consequently as deserving. While in this example, our interview partner primarily addresses a sensed discrimination from an entity exterior to the interview setting (his employer), we can nevertheless understand his insistence on positive ethno-national stereotypes (also present in other passages of the interview) as a discursive strategy to defend himself against anticipated discrimination from us researchers.

5. Conclusions; Or: “I Won’t Call It Discrimination”

The observations explored here could also be summarised with the words of an interview partner, Martin Svoboda, who coined the multifaceted phrase: “I won’t call it discrimination.” Such a brief sentence carries diverse allusions to the multifaceted dimensions of the lived experiences of everyday life discrimination. More specifically, this phrase hints at strategies individuals apply when confronting the danger of discrimination in the actual interaction situation. Following Essed (1988), we understand such (unconscious) denial as a strategy to avoid damaging oneself as a victim and therefore co-constructing the invisibility of everyday discrimination and racism. Simultaneously, the potential existence of discrimination shall not be ruled out—as the interview partner uses the subjunctive form of the verb and thus a wording that leaves the door open for the opposite of what he is negating. In other words, if it was the wish to negate discrimination as part of the situation he described, the interview partner could have easily formulated: “This is not discrimination.”

Discrimination is hard to grasp in everyday life, as well as in research, as it is often disguised as naturalisations or justified with different reasons and intersectional categories. Interpretative research aims at uncovering latent structures by looking at the contextualisation and references in the narratives of our interviewees. After analysing our data, we identified the above-described acts of positioning in our interview transcripts (“do not take me for an immigrant,” “we are alike,” “my (natio-ethno-cultural) inheritance is an asset”), asking ourselves about their functions in the interviewees’ narrations. Considering the context of racialised power asymmetries both in society and the interview setting, we understand them as different types of coping strategies aimed at avoiding potential discrimination (becoming discernible within an interview situation). The strategies were neither present in all interviews nor did they necessarily co-occur or emerge to the same extent in the data. However, our analyses suggest that these ways of positioning oneself influence the narratives of the research subjects and thus the (co-constructed) interview data—especially in the case of such sensible, harmful topics as discrimination and racism in a migration context. To critically reflect on the positionality of researchers and research subjects as well as the societal power structures in which the interview setting is embedded is thus an important prerequisite in migration research and must not remain hollow words. Our contribution aims at furthering this discussion by giving concrete examples of positioning and positioning strategies. In this way, we are aware that silencing and self-silencing as discussed earlier may also occur along and additionally to the acts of positioning discussed above. It will be a matter of future research to understand in more detail how these positioning strategies are influenced, interlinked, or accompanied

by spirals of self-silencing (Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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