Cultural Othering in Social Work. Reflections from a Critical Race Perspective

Matthias Rangger, Bielefeld University

Introduction

In this paper I explore the complexities and contradictions of client-provider relationships in social work in the context of diversity. To do this, I focus on experiences of social workers in relation to the significance of "diversity" in the field of social work that deals particularly with migration phenomena in Germany. I discuss these examples from the perspective of an approach named "migration pedagogy" (*Migrationspädagogik*) in the German context – an approach that focuses on how pedagogical reality is produced and structured by illegitimate social orders (such as racism) and how more appropriate pedagogical conditions for everyone could be possible (cf. Mecheril 2018). By focusing on social work in the German context through the lens of migration pedagogy, I hope to make a valuable contribution to the international debates on diversity when it comes to client-provider relationships in social work.

By focusing the relation between diversity and social work through the lens of migration I am *not* interested in exploring the particularity of migration phenomena. Rather, I assume that an "artificial", "pragmatic" research focus (on migration, gender, class or whatever) is productive and insightful because it brings the general picture more clearly into view. And, there are at least three reasons for focusing on the general aspects of the connection between diversity and social work on the basis of migration, which I explain briefly:

1. Firstly, the focus on migration is productive because in our so-called "age of migration" (Castles et al. 2014), migration phenomena such as immigration and emigration, transnational movements and spaces, the mixing of languages, discourses of othering, (white) privilege, racism and discrimination constitutively produce and structure the present social reality and its social relations – in general (Castles et al. 2014, pp. 55–83; Mecheril 2004, p. 8; Samaddar 2020). This constitutive significance of migration phenomena is summarised in the approach of migration pedagogy against the backdrop of what has been termed the "migration society" (Mecheril 2004, p. 8), which I will use in the following to mark my "artificial" reduction of social reality onto the significance of migration phenomena.

2. Beside the significance of migration phenomena, this focus is insightful because migration discourses and practices in social work are dominated by the signifier of "cultural diversity" (Park 2005). As studies looking at social work and migration in the German context suggest, the possibility of differentiating clients through the category of "diversity" often plays a functional role in social work practice, ignoring the underlying contextual conditions in favour of a shift to their supposed "cultural difference" (Kalpaka 2015). "Cultural diversity" can be seen as a functional category of differentiation in social work that, as a result, has "largely replaced the categories

of race and ethnicity as the preferred trope of difference" (Park 2005, p. 29), thereby contributing to the reproduction of social inequality through the medium of social work, even though there need not be any negative intentions towards clients on the part of practitioners.

3. Thirdly, the focus on migration phenomena is a useful approach because migration phenomena go far beyond the methodologically reductive (and often nationalistic) categorising of migration into the immigration of people into some purportedly fixed and "naturalised" container (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 2003). Migration phenomena, in their diversity and contradictions, both question and strengthen existing social orders. According to Paul Mecheril (2018, p. 321), a German educational scientist who has focused on migration and racism research, the nature of migration from a social theory perspective lies above all in the fact that migration is associated with the unsettling of social conditions and regulations and thus displays and symbolises the contingency and fragility of these very conditions and regulations themselves. This is because social orders are not simply a given; they are not based on essential foundations. Rather, social orders should be viewed as provisional hegemonic products that must be constantly produced and maintained in practice (Laclau & Mouffe 1989). Thus, focusing on the significance of migration phenomena and, in particular, "cultural diversity" for client-provider relationships in social work has the potential to let us think about possibilities for more appropriate orders of society and social work.

Thus, the approach of migration pedagogy (Mecheril 2004 & 2018), which is grounded on notions of hegemony and on critical race theories (cf. Hall 1986), is a contextualising approach that does not view social phenomena as neutral and autonomous, but always in the context of those social, institutional and organisational conditions which both enable and constrain them. Furthermore, it highlights the asymmetrical possibilities of influencing social reality by people who are differently positioned socially and thus enables a critical questioning of social work practice in the context of power and domination, which ultimately harbours the potential to develop possibilities for more appropriate social work conditions. The following reflections are therefore less about analysing practices of differentiation as individual phenomena divorced from social conditions. I instead critically examine articulations of "diversity" in social work and their effects in relation to the social conditions that enable them. At the heart of the paper are the issues of what effects this reference to "diversity" has, who is defining "diversity", to whom this term is supposed to apply, and what conclusions can be drawn for the organisational facilitating of a professional approach to "diversity" in client-provider relationships in social work.

To explore these issues, I draw on empirical material from a research study investigating a series of training programmes on (social) pedagogical professionalism in migration societies conducted with Paul Mecheril (Mecheril & Rangger 2022a). For this reason, my first step is to introduce the data material used and how I deal with it. Building on this, I outline the perspective of cultural othering by means of which I analyse the data. I then model three possible effects of referring to "cultural diversity" under the hegemonic condition of difference from the perspective of othering: "domination", "recognition" and "agency". Finally, I conclude with an "othering-reflective" approach that takes full account of the complexity and contradictoriness of social work in the contexts and conditions of social inequality.

Data material and methodology

The further reflections draw on material from a training series on (social) pedagogical professionalism in migration societies. This material has allowed me to contextualise issues surrounding the effects of referring to "cultural diversity" – and who is doing the referring – in client-provider relationships in social work. The training series was aimed at employees of what are known in Germany as "integration agencies". These are municipal departments that have been set up with the intention of contributing to the integration of migrants into society without precisely defining what is meant by integration. Rather, in the German context, "integration" has taken on the status of an empty signifier within a discourse on migration that tends to be repressive. In this context, the participants of the focused training series are employed as social workers, social pedagogues and teachers in the broad field of migration work. They deal with a variety of tasks (organisational development, concept development, counselling, monitoring, etc.) and tend to view themselves as predominantly critical of dominant understandings of integration. The aim of the training series was to professionalise them with regard to social inequalities in the migration society from the perspective of migration pedagogy. The training series took place in the form of several workshops which were designed to reflect on their working practices: participants shared examples, questions and enquiries from their working practice in the training context (in this paper called "practice reports"), which were then considered and discussed from different theoretical perspectives in the wider field of migration pedagogy in the workshops of the training series (Mecheril & Rangger 2022a).

The training series was accompanied by an ethnographic action research study, in which we tried to explore, on the one hand, the contradictory and complex conditions of the participants in their working fields and what types of migration pedagogy could help to deal with these conditions in a less excluding way. We also explored the training series itself with a focus on migration phenomena: What precisely is going on there and how is the training series itself able to reflect this? In pursuing this aim, we worked with different methods such as participatory observations (supported by audio recordings) and interviews (ibid).

In the following I focus on the "practice reports" which participants shared with one another in the workshops and which were analysed by the accompanying research with the help of further contextual information. The practice reports mentioned in the training series or in interviews are treated by me as translations from the working context to another setting – that is, the context of the training series. This means, on the one hand, that they are not neutral presentations of the "real" events occurring in – and the conditions influencing – the participants' working lives. These reports are shaped by the situated perspectives of the participants and modelled for the specific workshop context. Nevertheless, they can, on the other hand, be regarded as significant references to relevant discourses and conditions of the participants' working fields and practices as well as on dominant patterns of interpretations, perceptions and treatments of social reality.

In that sense, I use these practice reports in the following for an interpretive approach to exploring the effects of referring to "cultural diversity" under the condition of social difference in client-provider relationships in social work. Therefore, I chose three exemplary reports from the data material, which represent three effects (domination, recognition and agency) as ideal types of the references relating to "cultural diversity" identified in and interpreted from the data. But before I come to these, I will turn first to the knowledge-generating perspective of cultural othering on which I based my data analysis.

Cultural othering

To elaborate on the perspective of "cultural othering", I start with an example from the training series – or, rather, the data material derived from it. One workshop discussed the relationship between social orders based on (essential) differentiations (as a condition) and discrimination (as an effect) was discussed. On this theme, one participant talked about their counselling work in the context of organisational development processes in the migration society. They mentioned that in their daily professional work they often had the sense "that many colleagues in schools or kindergartens would like us to open the drawer for them for every corresponding culture of origin" (Mecheril & Rangger 2022b, p. 98; translated by MR). They continued:

> "So, the Greeks are like this and we treat them like that. And the Turks are like this and we treat them like that. In this way, we imply that the children and their families have a certain point of view, orientation and behaviour that may not exist at all, because they have a completely different orientation." (ibid., pp. 98–99)

They ended by saying that this kind of differentiation has a negative effect, for example, when recommending a transition from one school level to another.

This example refers, on the one hand, to the apparently self-evident nature and widespread use of static cultural concepts in thinking about and dealing with the reality of the migration society. On the other hand, it highlights the extent of referring in a functional way to the category of "cultural difference" by social workers and pedagogues in order to identify and legitimate decisions as "professional" because these are supposedly based on knowledge and expertise. The problem behind this seems to be less the general need for differentiation in social practice than the fact that other cultural orientations or other contextual conditions (for example, legal ones) are ignored and the supposed culture of "the Others" becomes an obsessed-about object of pedagogical influence. Social workers or pedagogical practitioners then run the risk of potentially failing their clients ("... because they have a completely different orientation").

For migration pedagogy, critique of this reducing of migration phenomena to "merely" cultural phenomena is a key starting point in the development of a distinct yet related approach to intercultural pedagogies (Mecheril 2004). Therefore, the concept of cultural othering in the context of (post)colonialism is important for this approach. That's why I briefly introduce the concept here.

The analytical concept of othering originates in postcolonial theory. The term was introduced by Gayatri Spivak (1985), but it is the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said (2003 [1978]) which is regarded as a paradigmatic examination of the effectiveness of othering in the context of the creation of a colonial landscape that still underpins global relations between "the West and the Rest" (Hall 1995). In *Orientalism*, Said analysed a number of different practices of knowledge production about the supposed "Orient" in the context of European imperialism and traced how a dominant discourse and specific institutions were established that initially produced "the Orient" and "the Occident" as poles that were supposedly different in nature and hierarchically arranged in relation to each other. He (Said 2003, p. 3) points to the importance of understanding "speaking" (writing, thinking...) about "the Orient" or – more generally – about "culture" as part of a hegemonic discourse in order for us to build to a clearer picture of the "enormously systematic discipline" (ibid.) "by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily,

ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (ibid.). Said argues that "knowledge (which is always produced within a particular social position) and relations of power are closely interconnected" (Velho & Thomas-Olalde 2011, p. 30). Stuart Hall (1995, p. 205) explains this powerful effect of discourses and the knowledge they produce as follows:

> "Discourses are ways of talking, thinking, or representing a particular subject or topic. They produce meaningful knowledge about that subject. This knowledge influences social practices, and so has real consequences and effects. Discourses are not reducible to class interests, but always operate in relation to power – they are part of the way power circulates and is contested. The question of whether a discourse is true or false is less important than whether it is effective in practice. When it is effective – organizing and regulating relations of power (say, between the West and the Rest) – it is called a 'regime of truth'."

Understanding cultural othering as a discursive practice means situating practices of referring to the supposedly static, "foreign" culture of others in the context of a long history and tradition of loosely related but collectively dominant ways of interpreting, perceiving, feeling and treating others as racialised (non-Western) Others, whether intentionally or not. This perspective does not seek to delegitimise any reference to another culture or to locate it in the context of the reproduction of racist discourses. However, the concept of cultural othering sensitises us to a (self-)critique of any essentialist and static juxtaposition of homogeneous cultural blocs, and to a de-thematising of other relevant social conditions beyond cultural difference (Shure 2021). When dealing with cultural diversity in client-provider relationships in social work, it is important to note that "cultural diversity" is never neutral, but is always an ingredient of the hegemonic conditions within which social work takes place. From this perspective, "cultural diversity" cannot be introduced into the process of client-provider relationships as an objective and neutral diagnosis, but always represents a discursive practice in the context of hegemonic power relations, which can lead to the risk of contributing to a cultural othering that reproduces the (postcolonial) asymmetries between self and Other.

However, the notion of hegemony (Gramsci 2012; Laclau & Mouffe 1989) illustrates the recursive relationship between the general discursive conditions and the specific practical articulations on the terrain of the social. Thus, to keep it brief, hegemonic social conditions enable and limit the possibilities of articulation by people, organisations and institutions. At the same time, these enabling and limiting conditions do not exist by some natural fiat, but depend on their reproduction in and through the re-articulations by those same people, organisations and institutions. In this recursive relationship, a double contingency of the social is revealed, which underlies the contradiction between the non-necessary and the necessary reproduction of the hegemonic conditions in which social work always operates. In what follows, I illustrate this contradiction by highlighting three effects, as ideal types, of the reference to "cultural diversity" under conditions of social inequality, produced by discourses and practices of cultural othering: (1) domination, (2) recognition, and (3) agency. I analyse these using three representative examples from the research on the aforementioned training series.

Domination

The first example comes from a workshop on discrimination. In this example, participants report to the other participants on a small-group exercise that looked at the question of where and when knowledge about discrimination is relevant for their working practice. On this

topic, one participant reported that they had been confronted with a particular concern by their "political leadership":

> "My political leadership came to me and said: 'Wouldn't it be great if you could create dossiers on the different cultures we have in the city? That's what the economy does. In other words, when they send a manager to Japan, they find out what you're doing in Japan so that you can come back profitably – we should do the same.' The problem is that in my city there are massive problems with crime in some neighbourhoods, which the press and the public debate in that city identify with a particular ethnic group. It's against this background that my own political leadership is asking me to do this." (Mecheril & Rangger 2022c, pp. 136–138; translated by MR)

Later in the ethnographic field-notes, the participant emphasises the importance of the fact that they themselves are included in the "problematic" ethnic group. They interpret the "request" as a mandate for the organisation they work for to take on a "control function", comparing the content with the "nazi Main Office, where they also compiled dossiers on various groups" (ibid., p. 137).

For the interpretation of this practice report it should be noted that the organisation this participant works for is involved in municipal migration work. Thus, while the organisation is not directly subordinated to municipal politicians and policymakers, it is part of the municipal administration and is therefore subject to their influence. That's why the participant speaks in abstract terms about "political leadership", whose representative had made a proposal that the participant interpreted as follows: the unit they work in, and this workshop participant especially, is supposed to collect information on the "culture" of a specific ethnic group in the community in order to use this knowledge to address a perceived problem relating to this group. The participant surmised that they had been the addressee of this proposal because they were seen by the proposer as somehow culturally "belonging" to the group in question.

The proposal that the "political leadership" representative put forward implicitly refers to discourses in intercultural approaches borrowed from the field of international business communication (cf. Tuleja 2022), with the intention of applying them to municipal urban policy. However, this proposed approach does not take into account the fact that (a) the contexts of international business communication cannot be compared with the context of everyday differences between, among and within communities. Without our really being able to assess the situation or knowing anything about the group mentioned in the example, it does not really need explaining that knowing, for instance, that in South Korean "culture" it is considered too casual to greet another person with only one hand (ibid., p. 5) is probably neither relevant nor necessary when it comes to addressing issues or groups in the example cited above. Furthermore, the proposed approach does not take into account that (b) the problem at hand, which – in the view of the participant – has been erroneously attributed to an ethnic group, should not be reduced to a cultural problem. Rather, it seems more important to introduce and integrate knowledge about the social relations of inequality, marginalisation and discrimination that may co-constitute "the problem", as well as knowledge about the discourses of domination (in the press and the public debate) that may play a role in the dominant constructions and thematising of the problem's context.

From the perspective of cultural othering, the policymaker's apparent concern joins – without having negative intentions – a long history of essentialist differentiation of the social by means of the category of "cultural otherness". A social phenomenon – with certainly legal,

economic and political conditions as well – is thereby reduced to a "cultural problem" – not a problem in the policymaker's own culture but occurring in the "culture" of the presumed others who are not themselves represented in the hegemonic discourse. As the participant alludes to by linking the proposal to the work of the "nazi Main Office", the practice of referring to the "culture of the others" in the context of postcolonialism, to produce and then resolve a social problem, risks contributing to the hegemonic domination of others. And a social worker in the migration society who participates in and therefore helps to reinforce these discourses risks reproducing domination by obscuring the local, regional, national and global social conditions that reduce social phenomena, such as crime, to a static cultural stereotype.

Recognition
The second representative example regarding the reference to "cultural diversity" in social work practice comes from a social worker who is also active in community migration work. The example was reported by the participant during group work as part of a workshop on "Critical Whiteness and the integration discourse". The aim of the group work was to discuss the influence of one's own racisms and privileges on one's work. The participant reported that the organisation they work for had been commissioned to help draw up a municipal concept for the integration of migrants. They said they had tried to be as inclusive as possible when helping to develop the concept. In addition to translating the concept into different languages, the participant also looked for an illustration that would be as representative as possible for the cover page and came across an image entitled "Flags of the World" (Mecheril & Rangger 2022d, p. 164; translated by MR):

> "And I looked as conscientiously as I could: 'OK, there's an Israeli flag.' Then I looked: 'Okay, there are some with a crescent moon'. And I honestly don't know my way around, and we printed that on there." (ibid.)

In addition to this illustration, they had accidentally copied the Turkish translation of the concept into the German version of the programme, which changed some of the words.

> "As a result, we, rightly, received angry calls from the Turkish community about the translation. But the second thing was that there was no Turkish flag on it. Thus, we heard from many people [he changes his voice slightly]: 'And we are never represented.'" (ibid., p. 165)

Apart from and also somewhat in contradiction to the generally repressive character of the German discourse on integration, the participant refers, in this example, to an attempt at recognising the "diversity" of target groups of people by a policy of addressing them using a mix of national and cultural symbols. But, due to ignorance and mistakes these attempts at recognition failed because members of at least one of the addressed groups – and, it has to be mentioned, not an unimportant one – complained that it was never represented in the discourses and practices of dominant institution(s).

Similar in some ways to the previous example, the workshop participant was referring to an attempt to address a socially marginalised group by means of national and cultural symbols, which had been assumed somehow to represent the addressed groups. Interestingly, the example does not deal with a rejection of the representations used, but rather with the criticism that the representation was a failure due to various errors. Even if the mistakes mentioned seem avoidable, they point to the constitutive limitation of recognition practices,

namely that recognition is always partial, selective und generalising. So, while I used the first example to highlight the dual process of stereotyping and obscuring social inequality through practices of cultural othering, I chose this example to address the contradictory nature of empowerment and subjugation through practices and discourses around recognition, which necessarily have to ground themselves on predominant ideas of social differentiation. This suggests that social work practice, in the context of the hegemonic presence of cultural othering, depends on recognising those identity categories by which social inequality is produced and by which people experience it, to highlight discrimination or to address and empower marginalised social groups (Plößer & Mecheril 2011). In its operations, social work at the same time necessarily reproduces hegemonic constructions of difference to a certain extent (for example, by representing German citizens whose parents or grandparents have Turkish backgrounds as "Turks") and is never fully able to recognise social differences and identities in all their subtlety ("... there was no Turkish flag on it").

Without elaborating on the processes of becoming a subject from the perspective of subjectivation theory here, the contradiction between the necessity of recognition and necessary exclusion can be found in the idea that subjectivity does not exist independently of external social conditions (Smith, 2016). Rather, subjects are characterised by an ultimate lack, as a result of which they must look beyond themselves for ways of identifying themselves, others and the world. The process of subjectivation consists in identifying with discursive subject positions and thus becoming an intelligible subject in a specific discourse (Laclau & Zac 1994). This also explains the effectiveness of socially dominant discourses: not only are they ubiquitous, but they also underscore the contingency of the social through the normative power of exclusion from the realm of the "normal" (Butler 2011).

Despite the critique of the dominance of discourses and practices of cultural othering and racism, social work in the migration society must therefore acknowledge that both clients and providers of social work are complicit in creating their own subjectivities under hegemonic conditions and are existentially bound to them, regardless of whether they affirm or subvert these hegemonic conditions (Youdell 2006). Therefore, recognising subjectivations that affirm the hegemonic discourse also seems necessary to some extent, since people's agency is linked to hegemonic conditions, however restrictive and degrading these may be for some of us (Plößer & Mecheril 2011).

Agency
This latter point is an important one, because at the same time as the practice of recognition as an affirmative reference to social differences reproduces existing social patterns of discrimination, inequality and disadvantage, it also provides "a framework for problematizing a lack of resources, discrimination and disadvantage" (ibid, p. 802). With reference to this contradiction between enablement and restriction, which is embedded in hegemonic relations, I now turn to a further example in the context of diversity and social work.

The example comes from a workshop as part of the training series, in which cultural othering was at the centre of the debate on pedagogical professionalism. After an introduction to a critical perspective on cultural othering by the trainer and a discussion of some practical examples brought up by participants from their professional experience, one participant mentioned that "at one point, however, it becomes difficult" (Mecheril & Rangger 2022b, p. 108; translated by MR). They explain this difficulty:

> "I have a very specific example. A Moroccan cultural association approached us; they wanted to organise an event about Morocco, with traditional food and so on and so forth. So, I'm not the one who says: 'Hey, tell me something about Morocco' – it comes from them. And in many places, I see exactly what we have criticised here being conveyed. As [name of the organisation], do I say to them now: 'Nice event, but without us?' Do I somehow bring a moment of reflection into the event? Or, yes, how do I deal with that?" (ibid., p. 109)

For this participant, the Moroccan cultural organisation "would of course also like to educate people about their country and their culture" (ibid.) and that it is also their task to intervene when their culture is misrepresented in the public discourse (ibid.). After they finish speaking, another workshop participant immediately follows this up by confirming that they very often have to deal with migrant-representing organisations that approach them with the request to "cultivate their culture" (ibid.).

The participant is referring here to an example in which it is not the dominant actor that refers to the supposed otherness or "the others" but the supposed others articulating themselves as others in order to voice a concern. Thus, the key difference between this example and the previous ones I have discussed is that the example refers to an affirmation of culture from a socially marginalised position, in which the marginalised others use the dominant categories of the discourses of cultural othering to present themselves and to articulate the demand. In contrast, cultural othering has so far been considered as the alienating of others from a socially dominant position (in this case, the stance of someone engaged in social work). Understandably, this makes it difficult for the participant on the one hand not to fall back on or support historically sedimented categories of social inequality, and on the other hand not to paternalistically reject the self-representations of the marginalised group.

However, if cultural othering is part of a discourse that has been sedimented over centuries of colonisation (see above) and hegemony is fundamentally based on our "voluntary" subordination and participation, even of those called by Gramsci (2012) "subalterns", then the question arises for social work as to whether it is not also its task to intervene in any type of self-subjugation through acts of self-essentialising in order to contribute to emancipation and a dignified life. At the same time, in the relational theory of hegemony and subjectivation, such an intervention could mean a (renewed) disempowerment and restriction of the client's agency from a socially dominant position (see above). This is because both the agency and the embedded understandings of self, others and the world can be interpreted as contextualised phenomena that manifest under the existing (migration-related) social conditions and respond to them.

From this perspective, the practices of "self-culturalisation" under the given conditions of the migration society, which are still characterised by the dominance of cultural discourses, can sometimes (but do not always have to) be interpreted also as an instrumental and consciously used way of creating agency. Self-culturalisation then is able to represent a resource in the struggle for social recognition, participation and the distribution of resources. At this point, it makes sense for social work to turn the participant's questions around and not ask whether it is legitimate for people to "culturalise" themselves but, rather, to ask what social, institutional or organisational conditions compel marginalised people to think like and act as culturally "other".

Reflecting practices of othering in social work

Diversity is a much-discussed topic both in academia and in the public sphere (Vertovec 2015, p. 1). It is "a zeitgeist term, a policy catchphrase, or a corporate tool" (Brubaker 2012), which should be viewed rather as a result of "modes, mechanisms and outcomes of social differentiation" (Vertovec 2015, p. 10). For a critical analysis, this gives rise to the challenge of separating the use of "diversity" from its positivist connotations in everyday social and political practice. This is why I prefer the term "difference" here to highlight unequal and socially produced stances and why I have focused on how and with what effects "cultural diversity" is articulated, and by whom, in the practice of social work.

In so doing, I have emphasised that (a) social work is over-determined by social differences. These play a prominent role in different ways and to differing degrees. Furthermore, (b) social work itself relies on differentiating clients on the basis of hegemonic social categories. However, not all differentiations are alike. Distinguishing between children and adults can be a legitimate and important distinction for social work, especially when it comes to enforcing children's rights and child protection measures. The same applies to the distinction between migrants and non-migrants when it comes to discrimination. However, distinctions that are linked to a racialised view of the world, whereby people are categorised as belonging to different and unequal groups, need to be challenged, critiqued and changed.

By assessing data from the research into a series of training programmes for social workers in the field of migration work, this paper has highlighted contradictions, ambivalences and tensions that result from the contradictory involvement of social work in social inequalities, which makes it impossible to simply overcome existing social conditions. However, if a simple overcoming of the given social conditions seems impossible and if professional social work action is contradictorily bound up with the social conditions in which it is articulated, the question arises as to how social work organisations can nevertheless offer working conditions in which client-provider relationships can be shaped in such a way that they reproduce the existing social inequalities as minimally as possible.

From the perspective focusing on the discrepancies between domination, recognition and agency in the context of cultural othering, it seems a particularly important task to create spaces where it is possible to find a reflexive way of dealing with phenomena of cultural othering and our own involvement in social inequality. The different reflexive moments, which became visible in some places in the exemplary research data and which I did not explicitly discuss in the paper, suggest that the institutionalising of (collective and regular) spaces of reflection (such as the training series) can contribute to a continuous professionalisation that does not try to overcome the contradictoriness and complexity of the social by replacing it with a simplistic either/or distinction, but rather seeks forms of both/and that are appropriate to the different contexts and situations. The task then is not one of *either* recognising *or* deconstructing "cultural diversity" but of the appropriate balance between *both* recognising *and* deconstructing it. What the appropriate balance between recognising and deconstructing social difference might be cannot be specified, neither in general nor in advance. Rather, it is a question of the specific context and situation, and can only be interpreted in retrospect. Such an othering-reflexive practice is, beyond that, not guided by an interest in whether cultural diversity exists and how to deal with it. Rather, it asks:

- under what conditions "(cultural) diversity" is utilised, by whom, how, under what conditions and with what effects?

- To what extent is it possible to contribute to critical reflection on dominant social, institutional, organisational and interactional practices of (cultural) othering?

- To what extent does one's own practice contribute to marginalised clients having to culturalise/diversify themselves in order to be able to participate in certain areas, resources etc.?

- To what extent is it possible to change the existing context so that practices of self-culturalisation/diversification are less necessary in order to establish agency and participation?

- To what extent is it possible to accept marginalised claims to participation and agency that are based on the reproduction of dominant forms of (cultural) othering?

- To what extent is it possible to create spaces for reflection regarding dominant and marginalised social positions and the opportunities for agency and participation that these might offer? (Mecheril & Rangger 2022b, pp. 114–115)

The aim of this othering-reflexive approach to one's own (institutional, organisational and/or individual) practice is not to individualise, moralise or prevent one's own practice. Rather, the institutionalisation of reflexivity is about creating collective spaces in which ones' own practice can be examined in the context of its social conditions and its ambivalences, in order to learn something for the future.

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Author´s Address:
Matthias Rangger
Bielefeld University, Postfach 10 01 31
+49 521 106-12971
matthias.rangger@uni-bielefeld.de