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"I don't attribute that to the fact that I'm a foreigner" – Female CEE migrants in Austria and their perspectives on deskilling experiences

Abstract: While workers may generally experience a non-correspondence between their qualifications and job requirements, the phenomenon of deskilling is particularly widespread among migrants. Gender, as one of the key forms of differentiation within societies, is also highly relevant to migration-related deskilling. This paper applies a qualitative approach and focuses on female migrants from CEE countries with a tertiary degree living in Austria to reveal the interaction of gender and migration-related categorisations regarding deskilling from an individual perspective. Structured around the case study of one woman, which characterises key findings for our sample, we demonstrate how the relevance of the respective categories is not fixed or stable, but instead depends both on time and context.

Keywords: labour market discrimination; East-West EU migration; deskilling; gender

Clara Holzinger und Anna-Katharina Draxl, „das rechne ich nicht dem zu, dass ich Ausländerin bin" – Migrantinnen aus CEE-Staaten in Österreich und ihre Perspektiven auf Dequalifizierungserfahrungen

Zusammenfassung: Das Phänomen der Dequalifizierung, verstanden als das Ausüben einer beruflichen Tätigkeit, deren formales Anforderungsniveau unter dem höchsten erworbenen Bildungsabschluss liegt, ist unter Migrant:innen besonders weit verbreitet. Gender als eine der zentralen Formen gesellschaftlichter Differenzierung ist auch für migrationsbedingte Dequalifizierungserfahrungen von großer Bedeutung. Unser Beitrag wendet einen qualitativen Forschungsansatz an und konzentriert sich auf in Österreich lebende Migrantinnen aus CEE-Ländern mit tertiärem Abschluss. Ziel ist, das Zusammenspiel von Gender und migrationsbezogenen Kategorisierungen in Bezug auf Dequalifizierung aus einer individuellen Perspektive aufzuzeigen. Anhand einer Fallstudie, die zentrale Erkenntnisse für unser Sample illustriert, zeigen wir, dass die Relevanz der jeweiligen Kategorien nicht starr und unveränderlich ist, sondern sowohl von Zeit als auch Kontext abhängt.

Schlagwörter: Diskriminierung am Arbeitsmarkt; Ost-West-EU-Migration; Dequalifizierung; Gender

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While workers may generally experience a non-correspondence between their qualifications and job requirements, the phenomenon of deskilling is particularly widespread among migrants. Gender, as one of the key forms of differentiation within societies, is also highly relevant to migration-related deskilling. This paper applies a qualitative approach and focuses on female migrants from CEE countries with a tertiary degree living in Austria, to reveal the interaction of gender and migration-related categorisations regarding deskilling from an individual perspective. Structured around the case study of one woman, which characterises key findings for our sample, we demonstrate how the relevance of the respective categories is not fixed or stable, but instead depends both on time and context.

1. Migration and deskilling

Deskilling[1] may be part of an adaption process in the early stages of a working career, which affects both younger workers and migrants entering the destination country's labour market (Kirilova and Biffl, 2016; Visintin et al., 2015). However, longstanding deskilling among migrants is significantly higher than among native workers (Mollard and Umar, 2013; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015), indicating the presence of migration-specific causes and mechanisms. Studies have identified the non-recognition of education, diplomas, and credentials from other countries as the primary reason migrants accept lesser-qualified positions (Cardu, 2013; Lopez-Ekra, 2013; Mollard and Umar, 2013). Besides the problematic normative and procedural aspects of recognition, hidden discriminative elements are also at work, leading many migrants to 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, 2013; Mollard and Umar, 2013; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015). Difficulties mastering the destination-country language are further obstacles that may lead to migrants' downward professional mobility (e.g. Cardu, 2013; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Visintin et al., 2015). However, language issues transcend communication problems as linguistic discrimination may limit migrants' access to certain jobs even if their proficiency or accent does not impair understanding or good performance in the actual job environment (Holzinger and Draxl, 2024; Lopez-Ekra, 2013). Also, the absence of social and professional networks in the destination country is often detrimental to migrants' attempts to validate their qualifications (Cardu, 2013; Landolt and Thieme, 2018; Ryan et al., 2008). On the one hand, a further decisive element is the need for unskilled work in certain sectors and the lack of demand for specific skills on the other (Lodigiani and Sarli, 2017; Mollard and Umar, 2013). Moreover, racial discrimination on the part of recruiters and co-workers may cause

1 For the purpose of our research, we define deskilling as the fact of exercising a job that requires a lesser qualification than the level of the highest degree obtained by the individual (cf. Cardu, 2013).

members of some migrant groups to accept positions they are overqualified for, or result in poorer opportunities for career progression than those of co-workers (cf. Christou and Kofman, 2022: 46).

1.1 Deskilling among highly educated migrants from CEE countries in Austria

This paper focuses on migrants in Austria from CEE member states who hold a tertiary diploma from abroad,[2] as research has indicated that mobile citizens from these countries are comparatively high-qualified while experiencing an above-average level of deskilling (Leschke and Weiss, 2020; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015). Embedded in a context of substantive wage differentials, extensive migration movements have taken place from the East to the West of the EU since 2004 (cf. Leschke and Weiss, 2020: 770). Even after controlling for different skill levels, migration motives, and job-finding methods, labour market hierarchies in wages and occupational status between mobile EU West and EU East workers are observable in Western Europe, indirectly indicating discrimination (cf. Leschke and Weiss, 2023: 4092). As recent publications show, Eastern European migrants in EU West countries face racialisation and racist discrimination (Kalmar, 2023; Krivonos, 2023; Lewicki, 2023; Panagiotidis and Petersen, 2024). In regard to labour market discrimination, they may be racialised and stereotyped as being most suitable for performing certain kinds of low-skilled work (cf. Christou and Kofman, 2022: 46).

1.2 Gender differences in regard to deskilling

Although deskilling affects both men and women, it must be emphasised that their experiences differ (Aure, 2013; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Jašina-Schäfer, 2023; Kofman, 2013; Purkayastha and Bircan, 2023; Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Apart from the significantly higher number of female migrants affected by overqualification (Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020; Christou and Kofman, 2022), women also face potentially worse consequences, given the prevailing tendency to overlook "private" constraints (Mollard and Umar, 2013). For female migrants, a combination of reduced occupational activity and the loss of traditional support structures may lead to increased household and childcare responsibilities, including tasks like facilitating their spouse and children's settlement as well as establishing new social networks. Furthermore, women are especially affected by the unmet demand for low-skilled workers that characterises the predominantly female care sector in many host countries (Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Christou and Kofman (2022: 46) argue that their concentration in relational work (support, service, caring labour, and health care) means women are additionally disadvantaged by a preference for local accents in relation to language skills in the host countries. Finally, family

2 For the problematisation and ideological construction of the term "skills," see Zulauf (2001), Kofman (2000, 2007), and Liu-Farrer et al. (2021).

obligations often disadvantage women in terms of being unable to invest in lengthy and costly reskilling.

1.3 Moving towards an understanding of the micro-processes of "deskilling"

Although there is a growing body of literature on deskilling, qualitative studies that address deskilling from an individual perspective are scarce. Nevertheless, there is a great need to investigate the causes of persisting disadvantages and potential discrimination, which are difficult to infer from statistics (Sirkeci et al., 2018). Qualitative approaches are necessary to capture individual motives leading highly skilled migrants to accept low-qualified jobs as well as migrant agency in coping with (the risks of) deskilling (this has been done inter alia by Aure, 2013; Cardu, 2013; Kirilova, 2016; Landolt and Thieme, 2018). For many, securing their livelihood is the primary motive for (temporarily) accepting deskilling, as is improving their proficiency in the host country's language. Studies that look at migrants' coping strategies when confronted with over-qualification have described how, aside from professional reorientation, they make attempts to reskill, i.e. seek to regain credentials or to gain new skills.

2. Research question

Our research adds a further observational angle to general indicators and explores the concrete processes leading to structural discrimination that can only be retraced from an individual perspective. In line with a qualitative–interpretative approach, our research thus focuses on meaning-making processes and agency to grasp social realities through the "actors' conception of reality" (Hoffmann-Riem, 1980: 343, own translation). We pursue an intersectional approach to place particular attention on how various discrimination mechanisms interact and to show how gendered and migration-related categorisations[3] result in the social stratification of employment opportunities and the ensuing unequal distribution of life chances. Considering the strong gendered differences regarding deskilling, this theoretical–methodological stance is essential. Thus, while focusing on structural discrimination and societal constraints, we also emphasise the importance of individual agency embedded in its social context. We consider deskilling a socially constructed phenomenon (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021), which is (re)produced through the interaction of stucture and agency.

Therefore, our paper focuses on how deskilling is experienced by affected female migrants. While less targeted by overt discrimination based on skin colour, religion, or legal background than other migrants, our interviewees from CEE countries nevertheless faced subtle processes of discrimination based on their country of origin, migration biography, and language. These discriminatory experiences were often ambiguous

3 While we assume that other social divisions such as age, class, disability, and sexual orientation are also highly important in this regard, we chose the interaction of gender and migration-related categorisations for our scope.

and hard to grasp (and admit) for both the research participants and us as researchers (Scheibelhofer at al., 2023). Thus, our paper focuses on analysing how our interviewees emphasised the significance of the "gender" and "migrant" categories in the labour market. We will show that the relevance of the respective categories is not fixed or stable, but instead depends both on time and context. The paper is primarily structured around the case study of one woman (Michaela[4]), which characterises key findings for our sample.

3. Research context and methodological approach

Our analyses are based on findings from the ongoing research project, DeMiCo[5] (2021–2025), which investigates the social construction of "deskilling" among highly educated migrants from CEE countries in the Austrian capital of Vienna. We apply a qualitative, actor- and process-oriented research approach that follows the methodological principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). To factor in the temporal dimension of deskilling, we conducted a qualitative panel study that accompanied migrants across three interview waves to uncover how deskilling processes are lived and understood by the concerned individuals and how they change or persist over time.

We followed a multilingual research design (Littig and Pöchhacker, 2014) for our interviews, which included the systematic involvement of qualified interpreters and translators throughout the entire research process. The interviews were conducted in German, English, or with the support of interpreters in Czech, Hungarian, or Romanian.

The interview data was triangulated by expert interviews with representatives from various institutions who frequently deal with deskilling. At the time of this article's completion, we had conducted 30 interpretative interviews (Scheibelhofer, 2023) with migrants during the first research cycle and 18 follow-up interviews (to date, we have re-interviewed 11 participants in the second and 7 in the third interview wave). At the time of the interviews, participants exercised a variety of jobs (ranging from working as a hotel receptionist to holding a university professorship) and some were also unemployed. Their reasons for coming to Austria varied significantly: While some had followed their spouses and partners, others sought better professional and economic conditions or international experiences. This paper focuses on the experiences and perspectives of 19 female interviewees, eight of whom were mothers (and one was pregnant at the time of the interview).

4 All interviewee names in this text are pseudonymised.

5 The research project, DeMiCo (Investigating the social construction of deskilling among 'new' EU migrants in Vienna), was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P 33633-G. For more information, see: https://demico.univie.ac.at.

4. The case study: Michaela

Our case study provides key findings for our sample by following one case, which is sometimes cross-referenced with other cases as an example of deskilling. Michaela's case was chosen because it illustrates how gender and migration-related categories intersected and interacted during her experiences on the labour market. Her example also illustrates how deskilling is an often lengthy and non-linear process. Expectations, aspirations, and strategies change over time and critical phases are visible. Additionally, discriminatory experiences related to migration and gender arise significantly differently depending on the specific time and context, as described below.

Before presenting our analysis, we will briefly sketch Michaela's story that she shared over two interview sessions (in 2021 and 2023): Michaela is a 30-something woman who grew up in a CEE country where she studied chemistry, and spent a semester abroad where she met her future husband from Austria. When we first met Michaela, she lived in Vienna, was married, had two small children, and was unemployed after having worked for several years as a kindergarten assistant. She had moved to Vienna after completing her studies to be with her future husband and planned to find a job in her field at an English-speaking company. She worked in a lab for a couple of months, but it was only a short-term (student) job that did not pay Michaela enough to support herself and she was unable to find another job in her field. She explained that this situation arose from her lack of working experience and social contacts as well as her then-insufficient German language skills. Furthermore, she reasoned in retrospect that she lacked self-confidence and did not show enough initiative.

For approximately one year, Michaela worked in low-paid, formal and informal service jobs while she continued to unsuccessfully submit job applications in her field of study. When the company she worked for went bankrupt, she seized the opportunity funded by the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) to retrain as a kindergarten assistant. After this three-month training period, she immediately found work in a kindergarten.

During Michaela's first parental leave, she completed additional training in order to be able to work as a "Tagesmutter" (in-home day care operator). Working from her own apartment allowed her to combine work and care responsibilities for her own child. However, after the birth of her second child, she could no longer work as a Tagesmutter because her husband started working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and their apartment was too small for both of them to work there. Hence, Michaela faced the challenge of finding a job with hours that were compatible with her childcare responsibilities. She was primarily looking to work in a kindergarten, but also applied for positions in her field of study. Her new long-term plan was to move to the countryside with her family and study pedagogy—a plan that she had partially realised when we met her again for the follow-up interview two years later.

By the time of the follow-up interview, Michaela and her family had moved to the countryside, close to where her husband's parents and other family members

still lived. Before moving, her husband had already found an interesting and more influential position than the one he held in Vienna. Michaela's oldest daughter started going to school, while the younger daughter attended the village's kindergarten and Michaela found a job at a nearby kindergarten. For further qualification, Michaela was trying to apply for a part-time course to become a trained educator.

Michaela's case shows a shift in aspirations and a reorientation process: Her ambitions changed from working as a scientist to working with children. In other words, she reoriented from a more male-connoted, scientific domain to the more female-connoted and less prestigious care sector where she held a position that did not require tertiary education. Statistically speaking, Michaela's case could be a clear example of deskilling; however, our qualitative analysis shows the complexities, the interaction between gender and migration-related categories, and how they both change over time and according to context.

4.1 Applying a temporal lens

Looking at Michaela's case through a temporal lens shows overlapping and entangled processes of deskilling, reorientation, and reskilling—and it is difficult to say when exactly they start and when they end. Moreover, Michaela's case effectively illustrates the presence of *critical phases* in deskilling processes. When asked about difficulties on the labour market,[6] Michaela introduced different categorisations that she experienced and considered relevant for her professional reorientation: Apart from being a "migrant," she mainly highlighted the relevance of being a "woman" and a "mother"—and we could retrace how the relevance of these two categories changed over time.

4.1.1 Early career migration

Michaela described that she migrated right after finishing her studies without having obtained work experience or German language skills as problematic: "And I was a graduate without practice. In a foreign country without knowledge [of the language] and without special recommendations."[7] Michaela thus highlights how her migrant status played a critical role in the difficulties she faced on the labour market during this phase. She had no working experience upon completing her studies, no German language skills, and no local professional networks that could help her find an adequate position for her educational background.

While early-career migration can be problematic for both men and women, Michaela's case also illustrates typical gender-specific difficulties on the labour market,

6 We typically ask interviewees if they think that they face more difficulties than others on the labour market without specifying who "others" are in order to let themselves introduce the categories that they deem relevant.

7 All quotes from the interviews with Michaela were translated into English for this publication. Our analyses are based on passages that were either translated to German from her first language (first interview) or were said in German (second interview).

and especially in science. Although she did not mention gender as relevant during this arrival phase, our analysis indicates that it is nevertheless a crucial dimension: Michaela mentioned her "personal problem" of not being self-confident and proactive enough when applying for jobs. In retrospect, by tracing doubts about her career choice back to her time at university, Michaela narratively constructed her reorientation process as beginning even before migration. She reported that she felt insecure about her scientific ambitions from an early stage:

> Even during my studies, I had the feeling that it was very stressful for me. [...] I saw that I was the weakest link, the most inexperienced link in the lab and everywhere, and that's how I felt throughout my whole career, and it was the same in Vienna. And then I asked myself whether this is right at all.

As mentioned above, Michaela described her professional reorientation using stereotypically female personality traits like insecurity, self-doubt, and a lack of self-confidence. In this vein, rather than emphasising structural discrimination factors, Michaela psychologises her reorientation and describes it as a protracted process that originated early in her studies and was ultimately triggered by migration-related difficulties in the labour market. Another female interviewee, Virag, expressed similar doubts of herself and her skills although she—also a natural scientist—now holds a professorship.[8] She explained that she required a lot of support through women's mentoring programs, assertiveness training, coaching, and encouragement from others to acknowledge her own competences and to recognise that many of her peers had the same doubts and problems.

Michaela's narration revealed that she first decided to give up her scientific ambitions when she retrained as a kindergarten assistant and started to work in that field:

> Then I thought to myself, I'm more successful there than in the lab, it's stress-free, it's a safe job and that I won't continue with [science], that I'll give that up. [...] Even at university, I was very bothered by the fact that there are no fixed working hours, never, in research. [...] When you're twenty, you're not so concerned with it, you don't necessarily imagine how you'll work, how many hours you'll work. But over time it becomes a big issue. And today, with two children, I can't imagine working in the lab at all.

Apart from being stressful and strenuous, Michaela described science as not being particularly attractive to her because it presumes a flexible and "care-free" employee. She again presented her reorientation as a process that started during her studies, when she was unsatisfied with the irregular and long working hours, and depicted her initial

8 Unlike Michaela, Virag had come to Austria with working experience in the natural sciences in Romania and never had children, which allowed her to invest considerably more time in reskilling and further education (e.g. she completed her PhD in Austria). Unlike Michaela, she had worked for several years in deskilled positions in her occupational field in Vienna, gradually working on getting her diploma recognised and re- and further upskilling in her profession.

willingness to accept these jobs as only temporal and age-specific—and not compatible with care responsibilities.

4.1.2 Incompatibility of childcare and labour

Michaela's case highlights critical gender-specific phases in deskilling processes, namely the births of her two children and the ensuing care responsibilities. When explaining the period of unemployment after her second child was born, Michaela emphasised that she had to do care work:

> Yes, and now it's a bit more difficult to find work, I don't attribute that to the fact that I'm a foreigner [...] but to the fact that I have two children and that I can't start somewhere at seven and work until five, I'm no longer flexible.

Here, she explicitly denies the relevance of her status as "foreigner" when looking for work in the kindergarten sector. However, this sector is notably very low-paid for Austrian standards and is structurally characterised by both a gendered division of labour and a gendered *migrant* division of labour—as Michaela herself adds: "when you go to kindergarten, so... um... so normally everyone has... two out of three I would say... a [migration] background [laughter]. So... I don't feel disadvantaged."

However, Michaela's depiction of not feeling disadvantaged as a migrant in Vienna was not shared by all interviewees—especially those in higher-paid sectors. Although discriminatory experiences were not usually addressed explicitly or were naturalised (in detail, see Scheibelhofer et al., 2023), some interviewees addressed instances of discrimination that were often subtle and mainly related to language competence. Having an accent was prominently experienced as a barrier by some interviewees (particularly having an "Eastern European accent"), e.g. when Corina, a single mother from Romania who works in data control at an Austrian company, applied for a position. She described how her accent and German proficiency were bluntly pointed out and commented on as "not good enough for the office"—a view not shared by a different employer who ultimately hired Corina after this incident (we elaborate more on language-related forms of discrimination in Holzinger and Draxl, 2024).

Michaela emphasised that for periods after her critical arrival phase, only gender and motherhood seemed relevant to her labour market challenges, and she seemingly assumed traditional gender roles without questioning her primary responsibility for providing childcare. Generally, our sample showed how a traditional division of care responsibilities often interacts with migration-related barriers, especially in critical phases of early-career migration. This was particularly relevant for migrants (mainly women) who followed their spouses or partners, either as co-migrants or joining them in their country of origin (concerning six interviewees). They often (had to) put previous careers on hold (or even gave them up entirely), focused on acquiring the local language while reorienting on the (new) labour market, and sometimes had to undergo a lengthy formal professional recognition process. During this period, female migrants often had the advantage of being supported by their partners, but they seemed espe-

cially prone to taking on traditional gender roles due to their dependence on their partner's income. The limited availability of affordable childcare infrastructure also played a strong role in this occupational shift. Additionally, traditional care responsibilities led to long, demanding, and stressful adaptation and reskilling phases. Florina, a nurse from Romania, vividly depicted how she took care of her son during the day and spent her nights studying to get her diploma recognised and also improving her German language skills.

While actual childcare responsibilities did not affect all interviewed women from our sample—only the mothers—even the mere anticipation of future motherhood could be experienced as a disadvantage. For example, Eugenia, a woman from Romania in her late twenties, reported asking a prospective employer for a financial advance to proceed with her diploma recognition process that involved high costs for specialised trainings and exam fees. He refused by explaining that she was still young and might get pregnant, which would result in her not taking up the position—thus constituting too high of a risk for such a hiring investment.

The COVID-19 pandemic was another critical phase from Michaela's story because of how the pandemic magnified traditional gender roles regarding the division of childcare and housework (as vast, recent literature has shown; for Austria, see Berghammer, 2022). The pandemic strongly impacted Michaela as well as many other interviewees, because she could no longer work at home as a Tagesmutter (which allowed her to combine care and labour responsibilities) due to her husband's simultaneous need to use her traditional working space for his telework. This exemplifies gendered hierarchies in terms of how important the two partners' occupations were considered.

4.1.3 Interpreting deskilling

A qualitative approach provides a closer look at the complexity of the deskilling process and how it defies an unambiguous interpretation. Rather than constituting a process of downward professional mobility, deskilling emerges as an equivocal process that was given different meanings by interviewees. Michaela primarily depicted it—positively—as a reorientation process, which she largely explained using personality traits as well as the inability to reconcile care work and labour. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed significant ambivalences, which are helpful to view through a temporal lens: At the time of both interviews, Michaela presented her deskilling process as practically completed. She had not actively sought work in her field of study since just after the birth of her second child when, upon encouragement from her husband, she sent out application to labs and research facilities:

> I sent out ten more applications, which is very little [...], but of course I didn't get an answer. And I didn't expect one either, I just wanted to try it out. You would have had to be very proactive and I can't imagine that anyone would have taken me after ten years... I think that's just no longer possible.

Michaela depicted this final application process in the field—almost ten years after her last time in a lab—as half-hearted and hopeless due to a lack of ambition and the prolonged work interruption. It seemed like Michaela needed a symbolic final attempt to find peace with her professional reorientation. During our second conversation two years later, Michaela remained ambiguous in this regard: On the one hand, she had "already given up" on her scientific career; on the other hand, she also remained open to a potential return by adjusting her statement shortly thereafter, adding that "it was still not completely ruled out" if she would again work in this field. These ambiguities reveal strong ambivalences regarding Michaela's self-perception of her deskilling process. Likewise, the analysis reveals how she perceived others as ambivalent to her professional development, which began when she first moved to Austria and—despite a university degree—worked in gastronomy. She described this as "unpleasant" and "terrible" for her parents and that her friends were "nervous" about her situation. In our first interview, Michaela expressed that she still had the impression that her parents regretted her over-qualification, but also portrayed this regret as being counterbalanced by their view "that everything is better in the West"—professional status loss thus being compensated by migration to a Western country. Similarly idealised imaginations of the "West" were mentioned by several interviewees, ascribing them either to their relatives or friends or presenting them as their own (either before or after moving to Austria). Hence, against the background of our qualitative analysis, Michaela's deskilling story appears neither a fully positive, self-determined reorientation process nor a complete personal failure, but a complex and ambivalent process.

As we have shown, applying a temporal lens to deskilling is essential when examining processes, evolving aspirations, changing strategies, and critical phases. Using such an approach for Michaela's case reveals two entangled de- and reskilling processes as well as a shift in aspirations and a reorientation process. It is difficult to precisely, retrospectively place this shift, but early-career migration and—more gender specifically, periods of parental leave as well as the COVID-19 pandemic—constitute critical phases in deskilling processes and represent risks in the career path.

Interestingly, besides illustrating the advantage of applying a temporal lens to an intersectional analysis, Michaela's case also shows the importance of context, as depicted below.

4.2 The contextuality of being a "foreigner" and a "woman"

Michaela's case demonstrates how the relevance of categories changes over time as well as by context. Unlike in the lab, she felt that being a woman and a migrant was not a disadvantage in the kindergarten sector. Focusing on context was also relevant when comparing Michaela's experiences in the city with those in the countryside. It was apparent that she emphasised and amplified both being categorised as a woman (including expected care responsibilities as a mother) and a foreigner in this new context. Michaela reported feeling like a "stranger" in this new context, which had several overlapping dimensions: She was a foreigner, an outsider, a city dweller, and did

not conform to expected gender roles. Unlike the first interview, she now questioned to some extent her ascribed role and duties as a woman and as a mother and openly spoke about her experience of being perceived as "the other"—as a stranger in the rural context (in contrast to the urban context). Although this was not a pleasant feeling, it also gave her the freedom and courage to ask for changes.

4.2.1 "I'm really the only foreigner they have to deal with"

Michaela vividly outlined how the experience of being a transnational migrant in the urban context of Vienna differed from the rural context of a small Austrian village. Although she had noticed an increase in transnational immigration to the countryside over the last ten years, she still described her status as a foreigner as something exceptional and diametrically opposite to her experiences in Vienna:

> It's also completely different from the city, because in the city it's normal that every other person comes from somewhere else and when you hear the accent, you immediately ask: Ah and where are you from? How long have you been here? I immediately have a conversation about it, but here—I saw it last year in the kindergarten where I work, er, I saw how cautious some of my colleagues were—you could really feel how they—how should they talk to me now and so on—just because I have a bit of an accent, but I think to myself, I really understand 99 per cent of everything that is said […] I noticed with some of them that I am really the only foreigner they have to deal with [...] After a few months, they realised anyway that I do everything with the children in the same way [laughs] as they do, it's like— I'm a completely normal person, but yes, I really felt the distance sometimes."

Her status as a foreigner with a slight accent seemed to cause insecurities and distance in colleagues. Only after a longer period of time did Michaela feel accepted as a "normal person"—wording that hints at experienced othering and social exclusion. While both her name and her appearance as a white woman who took on her husband's Austrian-sounding surname did not visibly mark her as a "foreigner," Michaela's slight accent constituted a crucial marker of difference in the rural context that led to experiences of exclusion. Michaela emphasised that her language competence did not hinder her understanding, with this quote typifying how language discrimination transcends communication issues (we have elaborated upon this in detail in Holzinger and Draxl, 2024).

Compared to the urban context, Michaela's categorisation as a "migrant" and "foreigner" is somewhat altered and amplified in the rural context. Additionally, it interacts with two other categories that she introduced in the second interview, namely being an "outsider" in the village (vis-à-vis the "established") and a "city dweller" in the countryside.

Michaela richly described how she felt like an outsider in the village, where life is organised according to long-established structures and unwritten rules. She lacked

access to the shared, unspoken knowledge of the villagers and her status as an outsider was reinforced by the behaviour of the others who did not feel the "need" to voice this knowledge. Referring to a parents' evening at school, she stated:

> So then you're a bit outside of what's going on and it's not because of the language or anything, it's simply because it's obvious to the others how things work and it's a- often it's no longer expressed openly or presented somewhere because everyone knows it anyway, because it's been that way for ten years, exactly, and then sometimes there are things where I don't know anything at all. [laughs]

By maintaining that her comprehension problems could not be explained by insufficient language competence, she emphasised that it was not her status as a foreigner that was crucial here, but more generally her "outsider" status. Additionally, her categorisation as a "city-dweller" intermingled with both categorisations, which she explicitly addressed struggling to disentangle:

> [Maybe] that I already expect that they look at me differently than in the city, that is probably also the case. Yes, but here there's a lot more stuff like baking cakes and gardening and that's not my thing either, I don't have a garden. I don't want to have a garden. […] I can't say how much it matters that I'm from the big city and how much it matters that I'm a foreigner, I don't know.

In this quote, Michaela discussed difficulties in distinguishing between her own and other people's perceptions as well as between othering experiences in relation to her being a transnational or a regional migrant (from an urban to a rural area). Although she modified the importance of being categorised as a "foreigner," she also illustrated how its relevance was amplified by being merged with "outsider" and "city dweller" statuses. At the same time, the two previous quotes clearly show how Michaela felt like she was made into an "outsider," while simultaneously placing herself outside the existing structures by demonstrating a reluctance to "integrate" into the new context.[9]

4.2.2 The altered relevance of gender

The data visibly shows that being a woman has different connotations in the new context that Michaela now inhabits: She attributed her female co-workers in the above quote as being interested in typically female-connoted activities such as baking or gardening and distanced herself from these by refuting their expectations to share these interests. Expected gender roles, however, go beyond ascribed (leisure time) activities. In the second interview, Michaela repeatedly addressed differences between the

9 Michaela also expressed this reluctance in regard to religion. While religion plays a minor role in public life in both her birth country and Vienna, it is—in Michaela's words—"naturally a big issue" in the Austrian countryside: Roughly twice as many people (around 60 %) declared their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church compared to in Vienna (Statistik Austria, 2022) and religious rituals, e.g. first communion lessons, take place for all children at school, relying on their parents' cooperation.

countryside and the city in regard to gendered care responsibilities and their explicit articulation—the expectations placed on her as a mother by her daughter's school especially irritated her:

> Here regularly—in letters from school comes 'dear mums' and so on, without 'parents,' without 'dads,' or that maybe someone is growing up with grandma, can also be, it just says 'mum' and 'show mum your homework' and yeah, and the- it's little things like that, but it regularly throws me off my game [laughs]

The passage illustrates Michaela's indignation toward being addressed as the sole person responsible for raising children and care work by the village school. She emphasised the "strangeness" of these gendered role expectations and stated not getting used to them.

The perceived gendered expectations and care responsibilities accompany a material lack of public care infrastructure: Unlike Vienna, where childcare facilities are generally available on weekdays from morning to the late afternoon, the village kindergarten only opens three afternoons per week (after Michaela and another woman who had moved from the city to the countryside intervened, the opening hours were extended until 4 pm instead of 3 pm). Also, commodified care and household work (Michaela mentions babysitters and home help) were not easily available in the countryside and significantly more expensive than in Vienna, thus increasing the dependence on informal—and again, gendered—family support. Michaela reported being unable to find an affordable cleaning professional and thus preferred to clean the family home herself while relying on informal gendered childcare: "I have my mum-in-law, I can take the children to her, then do things myself, right." While Michaela highlighted the advantage of the available support from her in-laws (in contrast to her situation in Vienna, where neither she as a transnational nor her husband as a regional migrant could rely upon family), she also described it as a mixed blessing that limited her desired individual independence.

4.2.3 New ambivalences

When analysing both of Michaela's interviews, we were puzzled by apparent contradictions and ambivalences, especially in regard to gender. While she was critical about others' unquestioned assumptions of gendered care and household work, she nevertheless did not openly question them in her own case: During both interviews, she portrayed childcare and household responsibilities as her task, but never as her husband's. Instead, she expressed that she was "lucky" that he "supports" her in parenting (and in regard to her reskilling plans). Michaela's choice of words indicates that she did not consider her husband's involvement as obvious and normal. In regard to support from her in-laws, a clearly gendered distribution of roles also became visible when Michaela mostly addressed her "mum-in-law." However, in regard to other villagers, she criticised the sole responsibility that (working) women had for childcare and household chores:

> It's also in our village um, yes, of course [kindergarten opening times are] orientated towards the need and uh people are just not used to expressing the need often, I think especially young women, young mums, who, yes, who are somehow used to doing the whole household and children and everything themselves, nowadays they also want to work and the child too, and if it's difficult to juggle.

Michaela's quote addresses urban–rural differences in care infrastructure and also criticises the maintenance of traditional gender roles that conflict with the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities. She positions herself in opposition to the "young women, young mums" as older and more experienced—and conversely prepared to articulate her needs. Indeed, along with another woman who had moved to the countryside, Michaela successfully urged the kindergarten to extend their opening times three days per week until 4 pm.

As shown earlier, Michaela expressed her similar reluctance to uncritically subject herself to generally accepted, unquestioned traditional structures and expected social duties like assisting with organising events at school and kindergarten—especially because she did not feel she had enough time for herself. She described how collaboration, but not codetermination, was expected in these contexts. Nevertheless, she perceived a considerable agency: Although objections were subject to social sanctions und thus required courage, Michaela experienced that she did not always have to conform with expectations or unwritten rules, but could (successfully) ask for changes:

> Then you are often looked at a bit sceptically, then often everything is taken into account anyway, you just have to dare to say that you want something else, or don't want to participate or want to participate differently.

Michaela's self-professed courage and willingness to defy established rules and traditional gender roles is—compared to her first interview with us—new. Throughout the second interview, she demonstrated a considerably higher level of self-confidence and awareness of her own agency, which can be explained by several reasons: Time had passed and the interview situation was different.[10] Additionally, Michaela reported perceiving a greater bargaining power at work due to the general shortage of (skilled) labour in the countryside. However, our analysis also indicates that *because* she specifically felt like an outsider in several regards and estranged by the traditional gender roles in this new context, she consciously used this "outsider position" to counter gendered expectations and initiate changes (for herself and others):

> When you feel so different from the others, that it's just not – not always fitting in but just showing the other way, sometimes it takes a bit of courage and (not just easy) to say things out loud, that you often help the others who don't dare to do that and that—I often think about that now [laughs] when I say something like that

10 In the second interview, both the interview situation as well as the interviewer are already acquainted and, in contrast to the first interview, the absence of a third person (the interpreter) could have fostered a more trustful atmosphere.

> out loud in kindergarten […] maybe there'll be another mum who dares to do that next time.

Clearly, Michaela requires a lot of effort to ask for changes, but she also sees these small gestures of rebellion as her task as an outsider and simultaneously a role model—a fact that also seems to give her strength and motivation to do so.[11]

To summarise, the second part of our analyses demonstrated how focusing on the contextuality of the categorisations as a "woman" and "migrant" provides valuable insights into gendered and migration-related discrimination in the labour market: What becomes apparent is that both gender and migration-related categorisations are altered and amplified in the countryside compared to the urban context. Furthermore, there are interesting interaction effects: In the city, the labour market-related disadvantages of being both a migrant and a woman seem to reinforce each other, leading to the experience of deskilling. By contrast, in the countryside, we see tensions arise and also identify a newly demonstrated awareness of Michaela's own agency that we partly attribute to the specific context and the altered relevance of gender and migration-related categorisations therein.

5. Conclusion

Applying a qualitative approach, our analysis showed the interaction of gender and migration-related categorisations regarding deskilling. Additionally, we also hinted at how other aspects (whose more detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this article) such as i.a. language-related discrimination, racialisation processes, financial constraints, or the specific circumstances of the pandemic might affect migrants' experiences on the labour market.[12] Michaela's case thus vividly shows the value of analysing deskilling and structural discrimination in the labour market from an intersectional perspective. We aimed to present the own perspective and interpretations

11 "Just showing the other way," which "takes a bit of courage" (as Michaela words it) was also a recurrent motive in another interviewee's narration: Daria, an educational scientist from Romania, came to Vienna to join her future husband from Austria. As she put it, it was expected within his high-income circle of friends for her as a "foreigner" who married "a man who earns more money" to "stay at home, make herself beautiful, and maybe go to events with the husband, but take care of the child, household and everything around and a large estate, they usually have a large estate, and definitely not work." She consciously defied this ascribed role to her as a woman, a wife, and a foreigner by being willing to "fight" for her career. Even if it meant "discussion and so on until divorce" (which did not ultimately happen), she stated retrospectively that she was "proud" of her husband for "learning" to accept her career ambitions, accompanying her to certain professional events, remaining there in the second row, as well as participating more in childcare. Unlike Michaela, Daria had come to Austria with considerable (and prestigious) working experience at an international NGO in Romania, had already earned a reputation in her field, and showed a strong level of identification with her work that she "simply loved."

12 Further aspects relevant to intersectional analyses such as class, parental financial and educational background, (mental and physical) health issues, and age were present in our data, yet did not emerge as particularly relevant in the interviews with Michaela.

of an affected woman conveying her experiences—which Michaela herself did not necessarily experience as discriminatory or unidimensional—as a "deskilling process." Following an interpretative, actor-centred approach, we face the potentially difficult task of disentangling different levels and aspects of (individual, institutional, and structural) discrimination. As we have illustrated through quotes, Michaela distinguishes between different categorisations (e.g. being an early-career migrant, a mother, an outsider) and their varying, respective relevance over time as well as in different biographical contexts. On the one hand, her case exemplarily condenses patterns of discrimination that we could broadly identify in the full sample; on the other hand, it also illustrates the structural disadvantages that seemingly privileged migrants (e.g. from an EU country, white, highly educated, from a middle-class background) might face (e.g. due to gender and ensuing expected roles regarding care, Eastern European origin, accent)—again exemplarily for the sample.

Michaela migrated right after completing her studies and was thus affected by overeducation both as a young professional and as a migrant. However, the persistence of her deskilling over time illustrates migration-specific causes and mechanisms: While Michaela does not experience problems regarding the recognition of her diploma,[13] the absence of social and professional networks (Cardu, 2013; Landolt and Thieme, 2018; Ryan et al., 2008) and difficulties mastering the destination-country language (e.g. Cardu, 2013; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Visintin et al., 2015) proved detrimental, especially in the arrival phase. While unlike other interviewees (see Holzinger and Draxl, 2024) and recent literature on Eastern European migrants in EU West countries (Kalmar, 2023; Lewicki, 2023), Michaela does not explicitly refer to experiences of racial discrimination, her narrations illustrate how language issues may transcend communication problems (Lopez-Ekra, 2013), and e.g. having an accent can lead to experiences of othering (Holzinger and Draxl, 2024).

Moreover, our case study highlights how gender, as "one of the key forms of differentiation within societies which interacts with other social divisions such as age, class, ethnicity, nationality, race, disability and sexual orientation" (Christou and Kofman, 2022: 1) is also highly relevant to migration-related deskilling (Aure, 2013; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Kofman, 2013; Purkayastha and Bircan, 2023; Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). In particular, Michaela's case vividly illustrated the impact of a gendered division of care work and labour (thus being representative for our sample) where the woman assumes the role of the primary care giver in the family. When living in the city, the (migration-related) absence of informal support structures traditionally provided by family networks limited Michaela's employment opportunities. In the countryside, however, the inadequate public and commodified

13 Due to EU regulations, our sample was less affected by the non-recognition of diplomas than third-country migrants (Cardu, 2013; Lopez-Ekra, 2013; Mollard and Umar, 2013). Nevertheless, several interviewees, especially those in health-related professions, faced important difficulties and bureaucratic barriers when aiming to get their credentials legally recognised in Austria.

childcare and household assistance led to her strong dependence on traditional family support structures.

Furthermore, Michaela's case exemplifies the high demand for migrant workers that characterises the low-paid and predominantly female care sector in many countries (Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020)–contributing not only to the phenomenon of deskilling among women who face both gender and migration-related disadvantages on the labour market, but also more broadly to a hierarchised labour market where structural inequalities are legitimised by gendered ascriptions as well as racialising processes (in the sense of racial capitalism, see i.a. Bhattacharyya, 2018; with a focus on Eastern Europe see i.a. Kalmar, 2023).

To summarise, Michaela reflects a classic example of the (quantifiable) definition of a person who becomes deskilled. However, our qualitative analysis reveals the phenomenon's complexities and ambivalences: Several dimensions shape a deskilling process, and Michaela's interpretation and evaluation is not unambiguous, as she tends to frame this process as both a deskilling experience, but also—or rather, even—as a reorientation. We thus show where quantitative analyses of deskilling fall short: Qualitative approaches are necessary to capture individual motives that lead highly educated migrants to accept low-qualified jobs, gender-specific difficulties, and migrant agency in coping with (the risks of) deskilling. Our applied analytical separation of a temporal and a contextual approach has highlighted how the respective relevance of being a "migrant" and a "woman"—but also agency—depend on the point in time and the context.

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