Christine Barwick-Gross

The (dis-)comfort of diversity – perspectives of racialized workers and diversity practitioners on diversity and race at the workplace

Abstract: In this paper, I explore the topic of diversity in organizations, combining experiences of highly skilled migrant workers and diversity practitioners. Based on interviews with racialized migrant workers who moved to Germany to work, the paper foregrounds how they experience (the lack of) diversity in German workplaces. The respondents recount various incidents of racisms, indicating the lack of awareness of companies and their white privileged co-workers towards racial diversity and inequalities. Denying race in the workplace means that racialized workers face daily racism, and that they have to perform emotional and ontological labor. This is confirmed by interviews with diversity practitioners, both self-employed and employed. The perspectives of the diversity practitioners, most of whom are also racialized and migrantized, reveal that so far, most German companies address gender in their diversity work, but not race. This is partly related to the lack of language to talk about race and racial inequalities in Germany. Together, the interviews suggest that most companies adopt a 'white diversity', meaning that race is disregarded in diversity work, and that diversity is tightly connected to comfort – of the white privileged workers, while the *dis*-comfort of racialized workers remains unaddressed.

Keywords: Diversity management, racial diversity, racism, whiteness, work, migration

Christine Barwick-Gross, Die (Un-)Bequemlichkeit der Vielfalt – Perspektiven rassifizierter Arbeitnehmer*innen und Diversitäts-Expert*innen auf Diversität und race am Arbeitsplatz

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag behandelt das Thema Diversität in Organisationen, anhand der Erfahrungen von hochqualifizierten migrantischen Arbeitnehmer*innen sowie Diversitäts-Expert*innen. Auf der Grundlage von Interviews mit rassifizierten, migrierten Arbeitnehmer*innen, die nach Deutschland gezogen sind, um hier zu arbeiten, stellt der Beitrag in den Vordergrund, wie diese die (fehlende) Vielfalt an deutschen Arbeitsplätzen erleben. Die Befragten berichten von verschiedenen rassistischen Vorfällen, die auf das mangelnde Bewusstsein von Unternehmen und weißen, privilegierten Kolleg*innen im Umgang mit *race*-bezogener Diversität und Ungleichheit hinweisen. Die Missachtung von *race* am Arbeitsplatz bedeutet, dass rassifizierte Arbeitnehmer*innen täglich mit Rassismus konfrontiert sind und emotionale und ontologische Arbeit leisten müssen. Dies wird durch Interviews mit selbständigen und angestellten Diversity-Expert*innen bestätigt. Die Perspektiven der Diversity-Expert*innen, von denen die meisten ebenfalls rassifiziert

und migrantisch sind, zeigen, dass die meisten deutschen Unternehmen bisher in ihrer Diversity-Arbeit zwar Geschlecht, nicht aber *race* berücksichtigen. Dies hängt teilweise damit zusammen, dass es in Deutschland keine Sprache gibt, um über *race* und damit zusammenhängender Ungleichheiten zu sprechen. Insgesamt deuten die Interviews darauf hin, dass die meisten Unternehmen eine „weiße Vielfalt" anstreben, was bedeutet, dass *race* in der Diversity-Arbeit vernachlässigt wird. Diversity ist somit verbunden mit dem Wohlbefinden weißer, privilegierter Arbeitnehmer*innen, während das Unwohlsein rassifizierter Arbeitnehmer*innen nicht adressiert wird.

Stichwörter: Diversity-Management, race, Rassismus, Weißsein, Arbeit, Migration

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Introduction

Diversity management[1] has become one of the main buzzwords in companies/organizations denoting a variety of measures to increase workforce diversity, raise awareness and appreciation of diversity, and strengthen the inclusion of workers from marginalized groups. While the diversity paradigm is widely used, in academic research as well as in organizational practices (Doytcheva 2020), it has also been criticized. Given its lack of precision, diversity is described as an "empty signifier" (Marten 2020), which can be filled with a variety of dimensions of diversity. Moreover, in the context of organizations and institutions, the managerial and voluntaristic use of diversity often leads to a (re-)production of white privilege, while structural inequalities related to ethno-racial discrimination remain unaddressed.

Drawing on Critical Diversity Studies, Critical Race Theory and whiteness studies, the paper is interested in how (the lack of) diversity at the workplace is experienced by highly skilled, racialized migrant workers in Germany. The workplace is a 'white space' (Anderson 2015) in which racialized individuals regularly experience discrimination. This comes in the form of microaggressions, i.e. microinsults and microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2008), but also in particular forms of emotional and ontological labor, which is not demanded from white, privileged workers (Crapo et al. 2020, Wingfield 2010). The insights from the study respondents are particularly valuable as they are potentially racialized *and* migrantized. Their experiences can thus provide information on the salience of different categories, in the context of the workplace. To expand the perspective, the paper also draws on the experiences of diversity practitioners, to gain insights on how companies fill 'diversity' with meaning, what constitutes diversity work, and the relevance of race in diversity work.

1 Also referred to as DEI – Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, sometimes also DEIB, including belonging.

The findings show how the lack of diversity and the lack of awareness towards ethno-racial inequality is experienced by racialized migrant workers, and how they are forced to do 'diversity work', such as emotional and ontological labor. The accounts of the diversity workers show that certain dimensions of diversity such as gender are more easily implemented than others (race), and that diversity work remains rather on a superficial level.

In the following, I will first give an overview of the rise of the diversity discourse, as well as the relevance of race in German public and political discourse, which has implications on how race is addressed in diversity work. After presenting my research design and methodologies, I start with the experiences of racialized workers, before moving on to the perspectives of the interviewed diversity practitioners. The paper ends with a short summary and discussion of the findings.

The rise of the diversity discourse

Over the last ten to twenty years, diversity has become the main concept to describe difference within society. Doytcheva (2020) speaks of a normalization of the diversity paradigm, as it is applied in a variety of research fields, and widely used in organizations and institutions, including in universities, city administrations and private companies. As Titley and Lentin (2008, 20) observe: "Embracing and celebrating diversity has become a prevalent aspect of the public identity of institutions, agencies, and indeed societies presenting themselves on the European and global stage". In contrast to earlier political approaches towards increased racial diversity (which is usually described as ethnic, cultural, or religious diversity, cf. Lentin 2008), such as integration or multiculturalism, diversity stresses the positive value of diversity. Its celebratory character is "central to the self-imagining of late capitalist consumer societies" (Lentin and Titley 2011, 20), and to an image of a post-racial and tolerant Europe. Diversity is also viewed as a more encompassing term, not only referring to cultural or ethnic background, but also gender, sexual identity, or disability. Despite this more positive take on difference, the use of diversity can critically be interpreted as "damage control". As Titley and Lentin argue, "diversity euphemistically stands for the recognition that Europe is not experienced evenly by all those who live here: the poor, the racialised, the disabled and the 'alien' migrant" (2011, 14).

In contrast to approaches such as multiculture or integration, which operate on the group level, diversity individualizes difference (Boulila 2021). Every individual is diverse in some way, and it is the individual who needs to become more tolerant towards difference. This subjectivized conception of difference blurs the distinction between difference and inequality (Boulila 2021). Measures introduced under the name of 'diversity' are therefore rarely able to address and change structural inequalities (see also Baro 2024).

The diversity discourse in companies has its roots mainly in the U.S., where it replaced the legally mandated Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) and affirmative action programs. As Ehret (2011, 44) explains: "the anti-discrimination and gender

equality debate of the 1960s and 1970s, which emerged from the civil rights and women's rights movements, was overlaid and replaced by the so-called management ideology", for which the discourse on diversity was central. The managerial and voluntaristic character of diversity management (Prasad et al. 1997) led companies to quickly embrace the diversity discourse. Instead of anti-discrimination, the focus shifted to how diversity can increase the performance of an organization (Yadav and Lenka 2020). In line with the management ideology, companies tend to view diversity as a 'business case', not an 'equity case'.

In Germany, measures aimed at gender equality or female empowerment (*Frauenförderung*) have increasingly been viewed with a bad reputation, particularly given companies' rejection of gender quota (Lederle 2008). According to Lederle, diversity management became more prominent in Germany through four (separate, but often co-occurring) processes: relations within companies (e.g. to the mother-company, often located in the U.S.) or networks to companies in the same sector; legal pressure, following particularly the introduction of anti-discrimination law; pressure of external groups, including evaluation/ranking societies, lobby groups, or the media; and, lastly, through the orientation towards other organizations and professional networks, often coupled with a fear of 'falling behind' if diversity was not recognized as an issue (2008, 155 ff.).

As critical diversity scholars have argued, diversity is an "empty signifier" (Marten 2020), a "site of contestation" (Ahmed 2012), hence it needs to be filled with meaning. This process of filling with meaning constructs some (groups of) people as diverse: "By defining diversity management as the management of groups, a specific relationship is first constituted between the non-diverse, normal, old group and the diverse, a-normal, new groups in the workforce (women, homosexuals, non-Germans, etc.)" (Lederle 2008, 218, own translation). Which dimensions of diversity are addressed can differ between companies and is influenced by national conceptions of societal difference, as the next section will outline in more detail.

Racial diversity and anti-discrimination in the context of the workplace

Diversity has been criticized for routinely disregarding issues of "power, discrimination and social inequality" (Lederer 2002, 257, see also Boulila 2021). However, these topics are highly relevant when trying to understand the experiences of disadvantaged groups, such as women, disabled, or racialized persons, in the workplace. The discourse on diversity in companies is influenced by wider societal debates about discrimination and inequality, and by legal and political frameworks and requirements. In this regard, Hearn and Louvrier (2015) argue that while the "management discourse crosses national borders", diversity is filled up with meaning differently, following national practices of naming and not naming, and differential conceptions of diversity. To illustrate, Doytcheva (2020) has shown how in France, even though diversity work was initially introduced with a focus on ethnic and racial discrimination, it has gradually lost this focus and instead turned into 'white diversity', meaning that race as a category

of diversity work is largely omitted – which fits France's colorblind conception of society (Beaman 2022).

Germany's (and Europe's) dominant approach towards race has long been to deny its significance. After the Shoah, which was founded on a biological understanding of race, the concept was essentially banned from public and political discourse (Goldberg 2006; Lentin 2008). Instead of race, the tendency is to talk about ethnicity, culture or religion (Titley and Lentin 2011). Given Germany's predominantly ethnic definition of national belonging, visible minorities, "Communities of color – Black, Rom_nja and (…) Muslim" are continuously othered as "non-German" (*undeutsch*) (El-Tayeb 2016, 144). Official statistics ask for 'migration background', i.e. whether the individual herself, or one or both parents/grandparents have been born abroad – which is then used for capturing ethnicity. Consequently, political and public discourse on discrimination usually refers to 'ethnic discrimination'. Studies on discrimination likewise use ethnic discrimination, sometimes also religion (e.g. Koopmans, Veit, and Yemane 2019; Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio, and Veit 2022; Veit et al. 2022). Racism is viewed as residing in individuals, instead of a result of structural inequalities (El-Tayeb 2016).

Following global social movements such as Black Lives Matter, and continuous efforts by Black German advocacy groups or societal discussions around Germany's colonial history and its effects, racial discrimination has been put on the public agenda. In 2020, the first 'Afrozensus' has been conducted, demonstrating widespread racist discrimination of Black Germans/People of Color[2]. The slowly increasing attention to the topic also helped raise awareness that racialized individuals cannot be equated with immigrants, but to highlight their long presence within Germany. How race and racism is discussed in Germany, what can be named or not, will likely influence how diversity is filled with meaning in the context of work (cf. Hearn and Louvrier 2015).

Research on workplace discrimination indicates that mechanisms of discrimination have changed from overt ones to more subtle ones. In her works on workplace discrimination in the U.S., Aidia Wingfield (2023) describes three 'grey areas' in and through which racial discrimination occurs: relationships that can influence the hiring process, networks that may help with advancing in a company, and cultural norms. Wingfield has also drawn attention to how racialized workers need to engage in particular forms of emotional labor, as certain emotions are not viewed as appropriate when displayed from racialized workers (Wingfield 2010). Relatedly, Crapo et al. (2020) draw attention to the ontological labor that is required of racialized workers, i.e. "the mundane, daily, constant effort and expertise required to bodily inhabit institutions and spaces ineluctably shaped by structural inequality" (6). The concept of ontological labor includes emotional labor, but also mental and physical labor – all forms of labor that racialized workers have to perform extra in a white workspace, and which remain undervalued and/or unnoticed (Crapo et al. 2020).

Sara Ahmed (2012) has extensively dealt with the relevance of race in diversity work, in the context of universities in the UK and in Australia. As in other 'white spaces'

2 https://afrozensus.de/reports/2020/.

(Anderson 2015), people who are read as non-white quickly become the stranger in such spaces. In her words, a "stranger experience can be an experience of becoming noticeable, of not passing through or passing by, of being stopped or being held up" (Ahmed 2012, 3). Ahmed understands whiteness not as a bodily feature, but as an orientation, which influences what objects are within reach (Ahmed 2007). For the workplace, such objects could be a job, a promotion, or the right to speak up and voice one's opinions and emotions. Whether a person is racialized as white or non-white thus influences whether the person can feel at home in a certain place and can 'do things' in that place.

Foregrounding the paradoxes of diversity work in institutions, Ahmed (2012) shows, for example, what institutions understand as 'doing diversity', such as employing a racialized person, or producing and circulating documents, such as a diversity strategy. Institutions can read these singular measures as being 'enough'. Litvin, who has done extensive work in companies in the U.S. comes to a similar conclusion: "The picture is of executives who have come to believe that 'making the business case' for diversity together with publishing it through mission statements and awareness training for all employees is 'doing diversity'" (2002, 182). This type of diversity work, which essentially consists of ticking off boxes (hiring, diversity training, diversity strategy) makes a company 'feel good' (Baro 2024), without changing the company structure and its values. To bring about real change, particularly for racialized persons, diversity work needs to be more than just "happy talk" (Wingfield 2023, 46). If past and ongoing inequalities are not explicitly addressed, the organizational culture will not change, hence racial inequality will continue to be manifest in the workplace. In her evaluation of diversity work, Wingfield summarizes that "Far too many companies take an approach where they purport to value diversity, may even hire a few Black employees, but fall short of considering how the organizational culture may be unwelcoming or even hostile" (Wingfield 2023, 101).

This is not different in Germany, a country where 'race talk' is still a taboo. Examining ethnic and cultural diversity in workplaces in Germany, Bellard and Ruling (2001) find that "The particularity of the German companies' diversity discourses lies in their emphasis on individual managers' competencies combined with the idea that diversity is something which can be found outside Germany" (21). This echoes Lederle's findings that if companies address what they term cultural diversity, it is usually conceptualized as intercultural communication, in relation to interactions with companies/professionals from other countries (Lederle 2008). Racial diversity is thus placed *outside* Germany, *outside* German companies. Viewing race and racism as something external prevents these issues from being addressed *within* a company. This links to issues of recognition and social worth. As Lamont (2023) argues, "the extent to which groups are "seen" by others, whether they have a seat at the table, and whether they feel welcomed, valued and listened to" translates into "whether groups are recognized and afforded dignity" (4). The interviews that will be recounted in the following parts illustrate how racialized workers experience racism in German companies, and

how diversity practitioners as *change agents* (Lamont 2023, 9) challenge the illusion of racism-free workplaces.

Data and Methodology

The paper is based on a project that examined the experiences of arriving and settling and the transfer of skills of highly skilled foreign workers in Germany, with a particular interest in whether and how they experience discrimination. I therefore conducted interviews with 30 individuals, who were recruited through personal contacts, and – mostly – through LinkedIn. For this latter approach, I posted on expatriate groups, but also consulted the list of persons working at various Berlin-based companies, and – based on the information provided on their CV – contacted them when they fit the profile, i.e. had a university degree, were in salaried employment, and have moved to Germany for work, at least six months ago. The sample includes twenty female respondents and ten male respondents. All were of working age, mostly between 25 and 40 years. The respondents worked in large tech companies, the music industry, universities, or start-ups in the service industry, mostly in mid-level positions, up to team leaders or managers of sub-divisions within a company. They moved from a variety of countries, within and outside Europe. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which included a biographical component, to address topics such as the respondents' educational and professional trajectories, their experiences arriving and settling in Berlin, their life in Berlin, and future professional and mobility plans. While an important focus was on experiences at the workplace(s), we also addressed other fields such as housing or social contacts. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted around 1 to 1,5 hours, all were transcribed and coded. Thereby, I followed the principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994), meaning that in addition to theory-related and pre-defined themes/codes, I used a rather inductive approach to the analysis of the material. When recruiting the respondents, I ensured a varied sample regarding respondents' self-identification and (societal) racialization. While all individuals are immigrants, and thus subject to processes of migrantization, eleven respondents are People of Color (from the U.S., France, India, Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon) and hence also racialized based on their phenotype. Only those are included in the analysis below.

In a second step, I interviewed diversity practitioners, to get a better understanding of what constitutes diversity work in companies, and the role of race within organizational diversity work. These interviews were likewise semi-structured, but more problem centered, thus focussing more on a specific theme (Witzel 2000) – in my case diversity in organizations. I initially contacted diversity workers from the companies where the respondents from the first study worked, but most did not respond back, or the company did not allow interviews. I therefore contacted diversity workers through LinkedIn, from a variety of companies and organizations, but also freelancers. In total, I interviewed seven diversity practitioners, four of whom were self-employed, two worked in companies in the social service sector, and one at a philanthropic founda-

tion. Two respondents were male, among them the only white German respondent, all others had own or parental migration history. Three respondents who had moved to Germany as adults are similar to the respondents from the previous study; we thus also talked about their experiences of migration, but the focus was on their work as diversity practitioners. All respondents had previously held different job positions before starting to professionally engage in diversity work. They mostly found their current positions through personal experience and longstanding engagement in diversity work, including reading on the topic; only two did an officially recognized training. The interviews were analyzed similarly to the ones with the highly skilled migrant workers, i.e. in constant exchange between theory and empirical material. Thus, while I interviewed different 'groups' of people, with differing interview guidelines, the interviews were analyzed in a similar way and greatly complement each other.

Except for one diversity practitioner who explicitly did not want her name to be anonymized, the names of all respondents (including the migrant workers) and the companies they work(ed) at or with, have been changed or omitted.

"Diversity ends with black people" – Racialized workers' experiences with diversity in the workplace

Most racialized workers I interviewed have experienced being the only Person of Color in a company, a situation that often comes with tokenism, microaggressions, and outright racist interactions, together with the emotional and ontological labor such instances demand. Several have suffered from racist discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization, sometimes to the extent that they changed employers.

Devin is a freelancer in the digital health sector, advising companies on how to make their products more inclusive. Originally from the U.S., he has worked at several German companies, including in Hamburg and in Berlin. Remembering his first job in Berlin, he describes himself as a "diversity hire" (own words), together with a Black woman, something that the company widely advertised: "they really made a big deal about us being hired. They showed our picture in, like, in industry newspapers, you know, all that sort of thing". However, he did not view this in a negative light, but rather appreciated the company's attempt to be inclusive. In contrast, he describes how the clients he worked with over the years, large and mostly conservative pharmaceutical companies, were clearly not as open to diversity and inclusivity. On the one hand, they often were not open to his message that they have to make their medical products more inclusive – he gives the example of a skin cancer screening that also needs to recognize a mole on Black skin. He describes how it is often the top level such has CEOs or chief medical officers who are "not fully engaged in that, even though everyone else in the company may know that it's a problem. And in the bigger companies I work in, the more corporate companies I work for, it's completely ignored. On the whole structure, yeah". His work thus gives him an insight into how diversity and inclusivity, referring to various dimensions such as racial background, but also age, are barely addressed by medical companies – hence his assessment that

"diversity ends with black people". This indicates that diversity is primarily viewed as a 'happy discourse', but that it is not used to change structures that (re-)produce inequalities, a topic that will be taken up again in the next section.

On the other hand, Devin recalls many moments in which he felt uncomfortable in interactions, talking about "strange engagements" with colleagues and clients, which repeatedly made him wonder:

> *Did they say that because of my skin color? Or did they say that because of something that I really did wrong? Or did I, like, do something in a way that was not… that I not explained it clearly enough? And I dealt with this quite a few times where I've had this kind of… not… I would never say confrontations or like bad things have happened, but kind of these situations where I'm like, I felt like that was an unnecessary amount of pushback.*

This quote illustrates how racialized workers are confronted with subtle mechanisms of racism that are hard to pinpoint and that result in repeated guesswork. Devin repeatedly asked himself whether a pushback is a result of professional disagreement, or a microaggression towards him – as a racialized worker. Guesswork, as Crapo et al. (2020) argue, is a part of ontological labor, hence labor that is only demanded from marginalized workers and that clearly remains unnoticed.

Devin's thoughts and the reactions toward the pushback also require emotional labor – labor that specifically racialized persons have to deal with. Even now, as a freelancer who can pick which companies to work with and who interacts with many start-ups, he still perceives the lack of workplace diversity: "Even when it's a young team of like… people who are in a small startup that's supposed to be like young and diverse, I'm the only Person of Color there". Meanwhile, Devin consciously chooses his clients, and he usually works with international companies, or German companies with an international orientation – to avoid being the only Person of Color and having to deal with the possible discussions and microaggressions this may entail.

Kiara shares Devin's experience of being hired to increase the company's diversity, but her experience was very negative and illustrates the problem with a top-down approach to workplace diversity, without at the same time changing the working culture. Kiara was born in India but moved to Germany during her studies and decided to stay. Before starting her current job as project manager at a German philanthropic foundation, she has worked at a public organization in the field of development. During her time there, she felt unjustifiably scrutinized and controlled by one colleague in particular. When she tried to raise her discomfort, her boss did not back her but countered that this colleague had "many foreign friends" – a typical argument for dismissing someone's racist behavior. When Kiara decided to confront her colleague directly, the colleague refused to talk to her, arguing that she (Kiara) was too emotional, hence it would not be possible to discuss rationally. Being too emotional is a common stereotype about people from the Global South, implying that they are not "as professional as Germans" (Kiara). This categorization can also be read as an instance of migrantization: by attributing Kiara with a (negatively read)

cultural trait, the co-worker foregrounds the incompatibility with local norms, hence stressing Kiara's 'otherness', as being from elsewhere, outside Germany. Evaluating her experiences, which also included many incidents of what Kiara calls whitesplaining and mansplaining, she says that the requirement to be more diverse, which likely came from ministries and other funding partners, led the organization to hire people who would tick the 'diversity box', "but they did not know what to do with these colorful[3] people".

Being the only or one of the few racialized workers in a company with a lack of awareness towards diversity can have serious consequences for the affected employees. Two respondents – Devin, who was introduced above, and Alice who is originally from France – recount severe cases of microaggressions, highlighting the extreme difficulties of navigating a workplace that is not only lacking an awareness to racial diversity, but also reluctant to even raise awareness. Devin thinks back to how a (white) German colleague was repeatedly listening to rap music in the shared office, with songs including the N-word. Devin explained to his colleague that he would prefer not to have to listen to this word during his working hours. The colleague found this demand "unfair. And I'm like, I should be allowed to voice an opinion about me hearing the N-word while I'm working in a company". His colleague replied that the word was listed in the Duden, that it was not a "bad word" in Germany, "and I have to then, like, say, you know, but it's offensive to me". The colleague's reaction shows an utter lack of understanding of Devin's perspective and misses the reality of racialized people in Germany who are affected by daily racisms. The situation also highlights how race and migrant status combine. Devin's co-worker refuses to see 'race' as he does not understand the inherent racism in his action; at the same time, he lectures him about what is acceptable language in Germany, thus categorizing Devin as not knowing local customs, implicitly placing him to an elsewhere, outside Germany.

Alice's experience in her previous workplace, a music company where she worked in the engineering department, as the only Black and female employee, were very traumatic and led her to quit the company. The hiring agent in the Human Resources Department was also Black, and had pushed for Alice to be hired, in an ongoing attempt to make the engineering department more diverse. However, Alice says the company as a whole "were not willing to commit to give money for improving the diversity and inclusion inside the company", so their stated commitment to diversity was, in her opinion, no more than lip service. While she highly appreciated her engineering team, Alice repeatedly "faced comments in the workspace that were really inappropriate. At some point the company advertised an artist with the N-word in his name. And they didn't blur it. They didn't do anything about it". The issue was addressed in the diversity working group, which explained that the use of the N-word was not permissible. However, higher management did not listen. Instead, they hired another specialist who told the members of the diversity group that they should not be

3 In German, ethno-cultural diversity is often indicated with the word *bunt* (=colorful), a very particular expression; see e.g. Baro (2024).

as sensitive, as it was "just a word". In the end, the advertisement was published, and Alice experienced gaslighting and was told by her colleagues to get over it. Following this incident, Alice describes how she suffered from burn-out and depression and left the company.

How the colleagues and higher management dealt with Devin's and Alice's naming and hence resistance of racism – which counts as ontological labor (Crapo et al. 2020) – denies them and their feelings recognition. Instead of "seeing" them, "making them visible and valued" (Lamont 2023, 6), the opposite was happening. The white co-workers felt offended by being accused of racism and hence denied it. Boulila argues that "The idea that naming racism is tantamount to an act of violence (.) functions as a strategy to conceal systemic inequalities" (2021, 87). Instead of recognizing their role perpetuating racist structures, ultimately denying their worth (Lamont 2023), the white subject sees himself in a position as the victim, by being accused of being racist. This reversal of who is affected by racism – which is one indication of how racism becomes universalized (Lentin 2008) – can have serious consequences for the feelings of well-being of the affected subjects, e.g. through the creation of fear of addressing other incidents of discrimination. Ahmed (2014, 69) describes how "fear works to contain some bodies such that they take up less space". Through such fear, racialized bodies ultimately take up less space in the workplace – meaning that they must contain their emotions, their experiences, their opinions. "In this way, emotions work to align bodily space with social space" (Ahmed 2014, 69). The experiences of Alice, Devin, Kiara, and other respondents not cited here but who share similar experiences, highlight the effects of a superficial approach towards racial diversity for the affected people. If a company is 'colorblind', Black workers and workers of color are made to feel "out of place" (Ahmed 2012, 2), as their concerns are not taken seriously, or dismissed. Learning how to take up space appropriately is a form on ontological labor, labor that remains invisible but that is necessary for racialized and migrantized workers "to simply *exist*" (Crapo et al. 2020, 20, italics in original) in a workplace that is already characterized by structural inequalities. The episodes also give an insight into how racialized workers have to manage their emotions vis-à-vis their white colleagues. Feeling rules at workplaces are "inherently racialized" (Wingfield 2010, 266). Racialized workers are not allowed to express certain emotions – such as anger or frustration at white colleagues using or listening to the N-word.

Following their experiences, several of the respondents became committed to diversity work, often as part of diversity working groups. They can be viewed as 'diversity champions' (Ahmed 2012) or 'change agents' (Lamont 2023), i.e. people (usually members of marginalized groups) "who intentionally aim to transform how we perceive differences in others" (Lamont 2023, 63). This also applies to the diversity practitioners, whose perspectives provide more insight into why the recounted experiences still happen in German workplaces and how companies address race within diversity work.

Insights from Diversity practitioners

The interviewed DEI workers also have their own experiences with racialization and discrimination, which eventually made them commit to diversity work as their prime employment. All except one respondent have own or parental migration history. Throughout their careers in Germany, they have been stigmatized and marginalized, through racialization and migrantization. Similar to the other respondents, they had to engage in the daily 'diversity work' that is part of ontological labor as described above. These personal experiences, coupled with an activist background, knowledge from university studies, or continuous self-study about the topic, led them to professionally engage in diversity work.

The perspective of the diversity practitioners reveals that, in their experience, diversity work in companies refers primarily to gender, sometimes also sexuality or age, but rarely to race. Moreover, it shows that diversity work consists primarily of measures that 'tick off the box', such as single seminars and trainings, but rarely in extensive strategies to tackle structural inequalities within the workspace.

Regarding this latter aspect, scholars have described what companies understand as 'doing diversity'. Very often, these measures are not very substantive, or as Ahmed (2012) calls it, they are non-performative, i.e. they remain without consequences. Having a person responsible for diversity, producing statements or strategy papers, organizing seminars/workshops are part of institutions' diversity work; they make the institution diverse, but rarely lead to institutional change. As Ahmed (2012, 121) puts it: "Saying diversity *as if* it is doing diversity (…) can be a way of not doing diversity". These types of diversity instruments are also found in the narratives of the interviewed diversity practitioners, who are very reflective and critical about the work they (are able to) do.

Matthias, a Black German (self-identification) from Hamburg, works as a DEI freelancer, but was previously employed at a U.S. company that was rather advanced regarding workplace diversity. This is where he first got involved in issues around diversity on a voluntary base before he took the position as Head of Social Change. From his experiences, both as employee in a company, and as a freelancer, he observed how having a diversity manager is used by companies to no longer deal with diversity. If there is not a certain level of commitment from higher management, he would not recommend to anyone to become head of DEI. In a sarcastic way, he mimics a manager who would continue 'business as usual', given that "there is Susanne [i.e. the diversity worker], she will somehow make us diverse". This matches Ahmed's argument outlined before, namely that having someone responsible for diversity at the workplace is what makes the company diverse (Ahmed 2012).

Marta, who has moved to Germany from Brazil, works part-time as diversity manager at a socially oriented company in the field of migration. Reflecting on her role, she calls herself a 'typical case' or 'cliché' of a diversity worker, alluding to the fact many diversity practitioners are female and work part-time (cf. Lederle 2008). Nevertheless, she enjoys her job, the freedom she has to fill the position, and the commitment of

higher management to change. In her work, she uses the concept of 'diversity climate'. In Marta's words, it connotates that diversity is not just about numbers, but about understanding what diversity means and that workers can voice unfair or unequal treatment without fearing negative consequences and denial. Marta often organizes mandatory trainings that address different facets of diversity, which are commonly based on racialized workers' own experiences; as she is also the first person that people can address when they feel unfairly treated, she knows first-hand about the issues the company faces in terms of diversity.

The workshops she organizes are mandatory – something that other diversity practitioners tend to avoid – hence there are always participants who are highly critical of these workshops. As might be expected, these are mostly white employees without (parental) migration history. They complain about having to go to a training while they have too much work to do. Or, more seriously, as they work in a socially oriented company, they claim that there is no racism and hence feel "personally attacked" when Marta brings up the issue. To her, these are typical cases of 'white fragility', a term defined by Robin DiAngelo as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo 2011, 54).

Stefka has made similar observations. Originally from Bulgaria, she has been living in Germany for eleven years at the time of the interview. Following her move across borders, she experienced herself how much her achievements were devalued, simply due to her origin. She now works in an organization that supports others – mostly public administration, but also startups and private companies – with discrimination-sensitive (*diskriminierungskritisch*) organizational development. Stefka is used to facing resistance from public administration, with common comments such as that they already are diverse, or that nobody was complaining about discrimination-related issues. These are common tropes to avoid confrontation with (racial) discrimination and the work it would take to recognize, dismantle and change structures that have grown over a long period of time.

These accounts confirm that emotional labor is expected of racialized workers, but that white privileged workers are often reluctant to do the (partly emotional) work that is necessary to institute change. Marten (2020), reflecting on whether diversity can be decolonized, argues that diversity is connected to "comfort, rather than hostility" (49) – of the predominantly white, privileged part of society. While the previous part has foregrounded how racialized workers are supposed to control certain emotions, Marta's and Stefka's accounts indicate how white workers are/expect to be spared from certain, *un*-comfortable, emotions. Focusing on white feelings means that the feelings of racialized and discriminated co-workers remain out of sight, hence reproducing racialized feeling rules, according to which only *racialized* workers have to manage their feelings.

If white workers confront their own role and privileges, this is interpreted as success. Stefka says that sometimes, white employees come up to her and tell her that hearing about critical whiteness has changed their view, it has "opened their eyes". Similarly, success means that diversity is truly supported by higher management and

that Human Resources and/or higher management do not view diversity as a numbers game, as ticking off boxes, but understand that company structures need to change.

Another challenge mentioned by the interviewees is that the racial dimension of diversity is very often neglected and that most German companies tend to focus on gender, sometimes sexuality, and disability. Thinking back to many of the diversity counseling she has done with companies as a freelancer, Marta says that in Germany, diversity is often translated into 'women in higher positions', completely disregarding intersectional perspectives that would also pay attention to dimensions such as origin or racial background. Giving the example of a tech company that aims to attract more women and might hire an Indian woman, she says that they are often not even aware that in such a case, more dimensions than just gender will influence this worker's experience at the workplace.

Lina, who calls herself an inclusion specialist, confirms this. As a freelancer, she works primarily with higher management and observes that gender is clearly the topic that most money is spent on. She calls it "a little disturbing" how cultural and social background are almost irrelevant. With cultural background, she refers to Germans with (parental) migration history, but also first-generation immigrants. Lina, herself half Brazilian, works with Brazilian women in her free-time and knows firsthand from their experiences how they are often called too loud, too emotional. Moreover, given her own disability, she is visually impaired, she also knows that disabled persons are rarely represented in higher management – another major gap in many companies' diversity strategies.

Focusing on gender in diversity work is, as Essanhaji and van Reekum (2023) argue, a way of doing 'white' diversity, particularly when gender is disconnected from ethno-racial diversity. The accounts of the diversity practitioners suggest that most diversity work focuses on one singular dimension of diversity, but rarely considers intersectional approaches.

Matthias mentions another issue that inhibits companies from addressing racial diversity, namely that talking about race is highly controversial, and people often lack the language to do so, or they are afraid of saying the wrong thing and being called racist, an impression that is echoed by Marta. For both, Matthias and Marta, the heated debates about gender-appropriate language have increased the fears of talking about the equally sensitive issue of race and racism. Given the quick and destructive reactions on social media – doing 'something wrong' – i.e. appearing to be racist, can have serious negative effects for the affected companies; hence there is a lot of uncertainty on how to approach the topic of racial discrimination. In Marta's opinion, the scandalization of racism makes it hard to talk about it. To be better able to address racial discrimination, she says that the topic would need to be less ashaming (*schambehaftet*) – nobody wants to be a racist – and that people would need to be allowed to make mistakes, which would then have to be addressed, to learn and avoid similar mistakes in the future.

The discomfort inherent in talking about race and racism, that Matthias and Marta observe, does not fit the affirmative dimension of diversity, its positive and celebratory

character (Boulila 2021). At the same time, it can be interpreted as a mirror of the general avoidance of 'race talk' in Germany, as well as the increasing politicization of racism (Henrichsen et al. 2022), following the rise of populist, right-wing parties and their supporters. These observations confirm that "National context intersects with the formulation of diversity, in particular, which differences are given voice, and which are silenced" (Hearn and Louvrier 2015, 75). It seems that many companies still prefer to silence the issue of race, instead of finding ways to engage with what might be uncomfortable, but which is necessary for change to be possible.

Despite these difficulties, Marta also acknowledges that, compared to 2010, the year she started working as antidiscrimination trainer, some things have changed for the better, and particularly racialized and migrantized subjects have the language to talk about their experiences, including racism and white privilege.

Summary and Discussion

Diversity work, in Lamont's words, needs to be about "'seeing others', about acknowledging people's existence and positive worth, actively making them visible and valued, reducing their marginalization, and openly integrating them into a group" (2023, 6). The accounts of the respondents suggests that diversity work in Germany, particularly regarding racial diversity, is primarily about making companies and their white workers feel good and comfortable, less about removing structural barriers and inequalities of racialized workers.

The interviewed racialized workers, all of whom have moved to Germany for work, have recounted various experiences of racisms and microaggressions at the workplace, of being gaslighted, of having their wishes and demands dismissed, which they contribute to a lack of a racially diverse workforce and a lack of awareness of the lived realities of racialized individuals in Germany. These experiences have been confirmed by the interviewed diversity practitioners – of whom all except one share the experience of being subject to racialization and migrantization in their daily lives, including in the work context.

Taken together, the experiences of highly skilled racialized migrant workers and the diversity practitioners suggest that for many companies in Germany, diversity work is an exercise of 'ticking the box(es)', through hiring practices, creating positions for diversity managers who create and circulate documents, and through offering one-off seminars or workshops. These isolated measures make a company and its white, privileged workers 'feel good' but they cannot change structures that disadvantage racialized (and other marginalized) workers. As Lea Baro argues: "From an institutional and corporate perspective, talking about diversity strengthens one's own image without changing the underlying power relations" (2024, 74). In this way, diversity is a non-performative act, it remains without consequences.

The study has also highlighted how diversity work often focuses on gender, an apparently less controversial dimension of diversity, but rarely on race. The focus on gender, with the simultaneous lack of attention to race, is an expression of 'white

diversity' (Doytcheva 2020; Essanhaji and van Reekum 2023). This type of diversity (work) serves primarily as an 'affective instrument' (Baro 2024) that creates positive feelings for those who are *not* affected by racism and other forms of discrimination. It is rarely an instrument used to address and dismantle racial (and other forms of) discrimination in the workplace (Boulila 2021). As shown through the experiences of the racialized workers, this has severe consequences on their daily work lives, in which they have to perform emotional and ontological labor, to counter the microaggressions and other forms of racism that they regularly experience in the work context.

In her 'phenomenology of whiteness', Sara Ahmed (2007) describes whiteness as an orientation, which allows how much space bodies can take up, which actions they can take. In this perspective, "'Doing things' depends not so much on intrinsic capacity, or even upon dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things 'have a certain place' or are 'in place'" (153). What or who is considered to be 'in place' has historic and racial connotations. The interview accounts show that in the workplace, racialized minorities occupy a marginalized space, a space from which it is harder to achieve things.

Instead of a celebratory diversity discourse, there is a need to approach diversity from a critical perspective – not only in research but also in organizational practice – to foreground and address continuing inequalities, based on race, but also including other categories of disadvantage. In this regard, it is worth looking further at the very specific position of racialized and migrantized diversity practitioners. Given their own biographical experiences and their activist-inspired approach, they are more aware of the structures that need to change to reduce discrimination and marginalization. However, their own marginalization does not simply disappear in their role, which might likewise influence how they do diversity and the challenges they face as diversity practitioners. This might be a reason why some became freelancers, as they can thus choose the companies they want to work with and which they feel have an intention to transform. In this regard, it might also be fruitful to continue exploring the forms and effects of emotional and ontological labor. Crapo et al. (2020) define diversity work itself as ontological labor. As racialized or migrantized individuals performing diversity work in predominantly white spaces, they might experience very specific forms of ontological labor. At the same time, while many racialized workers get pushed into doing diversity work as invisible work – making it one's profession might be a way to make the ontological labor of diversity work visible, to take ownership of this commonly undervalued work and transform it. These are open questions that need to be explored further.

A second avenue for future research consists in a closer examination of the relationship between diversity work and national discourses on diversity, on race and migration. While the accounts provide support for the argument that the two are related (cf. Hearn and Louvrier 2015), a closer examination might still be valuable. At a time when populist, right-wing parties gain votes, companies are struggling to fill positions and have spoken out publicly in support of diversity. While this might not be more than lip service, there is a continued need to analyze how companies do diversity,

and how this might change (or not) with the political context – which itself is dynamic and depends on time and space (e.g. geographic location). Moreover, this study was based on interviews with a particular group, namely racialized *migrant* workers, hence processes of racialization and migrantization partly overlapped. More work is needed to tease out the relevance of different categories, including ethnicity and culture, and how they are used in public discourse and in diversity work.

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