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Microaggressions at work: how highly qualified migrants experience individual discrimination at work settings

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to identify micro-level, interpersonal experiences with discrimination in professional work settings as recounted by highly qualified migrants in Denmark. Conceptually, the study takes as its point of departure Sue et al.'s (2007) pioneering work on microaggression, in particular their notions of microinsult and microinvalidation, and from the concept of isolate, cultural discrimination.

Thematic analysis and deductive content analysis of narrative interviews with highly qualified migrants highlight the most common microaggressions.

Microaggressions detrimentally affect psychological and physical health and trigger a cycle of insecurity and alienation from the host country. Although they are discursively framed as 'welcomed migrants' highly qualified migrants report several specific types of microaggression that they experience in work settings. The study shows that highly qualified migrants experience four types of microaggression: in addition to Sue et al.'s initial categories of 1) microinsult and 2) microinvalidation, they report 3) microexclusion, often by infinite boundary construction, and 4) microinvisibilisation, a communicative disregard of the migrant's heritage. Further, they report the microinsult by comparison (being the 'good migrant'), which is a particular form of microinsult.

The study draws attention to veiled forms of individual discrimination in the workplace and implications of such discrimination for the so-called welcomed migrants. Based on organising and speech act theory, the study argues that individual discriminatory speech acts can manifest in institutional discrimination.

Keywords: Discrimination, microaggressions, social exclusion, highly qualified migrants, labour migration

Klarissa Lueg, Mikroaggressionen am Arbeitsplatz: Wie hochqualifizierte Migrant*innen Diskriminierung am Arbeitsplatz erleben

Zusammenfassung: Diese Studie identifiziert Diskriminierungserfahrungen hochqualifizierter Migranten in verschiedenen Arbeitsumgebungen in Dänemark. Theoretisch bezieht sich diese Untersuchung auf Sue et al.'s Pionierarbeit zu microagressions, insbesondere auf die Konzepte microinsult und microinvalidation. Microagressions sind subtile, meist verbale Ausgrenzungsakte, die sich gegen Minderheiten richten und für psychologische Unsicherheit und ein Gefühl der sozialen Entfremdung sorgen. Obwohl hochqualifizierte Migranten in Dänemark diskursiv als willkommene Migranten konstruiert werden, berichten die in dieser Studie befragten, hochqualifizierten Migranten, Ausgrenzung in Form von

Mikroaggressionen zu erleben. Diese Studie unterscheidet vier verschiedene Formen von Mikroaggression. Zusätzlich zu den originären Formen 1) microinsult und 2) microinvalidation, die bereits von Sue et al. identifiziert wurden, stellt diese Untersuchung zudem fest, dass hochqualifizierte Migranten auch 3) microexclusion und 4) microinvisibilization erfahren. Microexclusions zeigen sich in Form von alltäglichen Grenzziehungen zu scheinbar nebensächlichen Angelegenheiten, während microinvisibilization durch unmaskiertes Desinteresse an der Identität der Migranten gekennzeichnet ist. Als zusätzliche Kategorie des microinsult (1) wurde microinsult by comparison identifiziert. Hier werden Migranten als positiver Kontrast zu anderen, überwiegend negativ konstruierten Migrantengruppen, konstruiert (die „Ausnahme von der Regel"), welches die so Angesprochenen in eine psychologische Dilemmasituation bringt. Insgesamt illustriert der Datensatz verschleierte Formen individueller Diskriminierung sowie ihren Effekt auf hochqualifizierte Migranten.

Schlagworte: Diskriminierung, Mikroaggressionen, soziale Exklusion, hochqualifizierte Migranten, Arbeitsmigration

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Introduction

The need for social belonging is recognised as a fundamental aspect of being human (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, Miller, 2003) and discrimination or social exclusion can have severe psychological consequences. Feelings of social exclusion have damaging effects on frustration, feelings of self-worth, mental health and self-regulation (Baumeister *et al.*, 2005, Basok and George, 2021, DeWall *et al.*, 2009). Studies suggests that the distress of social exclusion in direct interpersonal face-to-face interactions causes brain reactions similar to those of physical pain (DeWall *et al.*, 2009, Eisenberger *et al.*, 2003). This shows that interpersonal, direct and individual discrimination deserves as much attention as structural and institutional discrimination (Pincus, 1996a). One social group affected by social exclusion in the form of interpersonal discrimination is migrants. Various factors influence social inclusion and exclusion for this broad and internally diverse group, including employability (Simola, 2022), social connectedness, legal status (Vertovec, 2007), physical representation, such as skin colour (Erel, 2010), and formal and informal opportunities for participation (Oriol Romaní, 2012). While large groups of migrants suffer from exclusion from material and legal practices (such as a general exclusion from accessing the labour market), highly qualified migrants take a particular position. Once they have legal access to the labour market, they are sometimes constructed as welcomed or desirable migration by political and media discourse by means of economic parameters. At the same time, they still experience discrimination, in particular individual speech acts of ostracism. One study in a German setting describes the "deskilling" of highly qualified migrant women in STEM

professions whose lack of language proficiency is used by domestic employees to devalue their opinions or input ("You understood that wrong.") (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017). Other examples include a study of successful migrants in Switzerland who are subjected to incivilities and verbal attacks (Krings *et al.*, 2014), or derogatory snubs against skilled Turkish immigrants in Norway (Yilmaz Sener, 2022). The precise forms of these interpersonal forms of exclusion, and how the notion of being a 'welcomed' migrant feeds into these speech acts, are not extensively researched. Hence, this study centres on *highly qualified migrants* experiencing discrimination in work settings.

A migrant's sense of belonging can be profoundly affected by recurrent encounters with casual verbal discrimination. Highly qualified migrants take a privileged position (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017) compared to migrants with a fragile legal status or without a work permit. Nevertheless, privileged migrants may still be affected by interpersonal, direct and verbal exclusion that is unique to their group and is only seemingly harmless (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017).

Modern organisations flagged overt individual and institutional discrimination against migrants as illegal or socially unacceptable decades ago (Pincus, 1996a). However, scholars argue that bias against marginalised or excluded groups has not vanished (Torino *et al.*, 2018), but has simply taken other forms (Ferber, 2012). Today, negative attitudes toward groups perceived as different and as the lesser "other" (Dervin, 2012), manifest in "microaggressions" (Sue *et al.*, 2009), subtle, often unintentionally harmful slights and comments (Kim and Meister, 2023). Owen (2018) conjectures that such microaggressions occur regularly and can have cumulative and detrimental effects on migrants' health and psychological well-being. The extant literature currently falls short of explaining the fine-grained discrimination form of microaggressions against comparatively favourably discussed migrants. Therefore, my study aims to increase our understanding of how this group actually fares and whether and to what extent they experience direct, interpersonal discrimination in workplace settings. Thus, in sum, in this qualitative study, I ask

RQ: *What forms of microaggressions do highly qualified migrants experience in work settings?*

The study is situated in Denmark, where highly qualified and educated migrants are held in high esteem in the official discourse (Aragones and Salgado, 2016) and often stand in discursive contrast to sharply criticised forms of migration, such as the 'unskilled' or 'non-Western' immigration (Bubola, 2023, Hedetoft, 2006). Against the backdrop of the Danish public discourse which frames useful, highly qualified migrants as "a good business deal" (Klintefelt, 2024), this study aims to explore microaggressions as a persisting and damaging interpersonal discrimination that runs counter to the positively framed discourse. The study employed narrative interviews with 20 highly qualified migrants from various countries, conducted either face-to-face or via video application. I used thematic analysis to evaluate the data (Guest *et al.*, 2012), identifying implicit and explicit experiences of discrimination as described by the interviewees. In doing so, this study makes several theoretical and practical con-

tributions. First, I add a communicative perspective on organised inequalities and discrimination, which is an understudied field despite recent attempts to highlight the role of communication in exclusion processes (Mumby and Kuhn, 2019). Second, I advance the microaggression literature through an in-depth qualitative study which identifies four types of microaggression (one form having two sub-types) experienced by highly qualified migrants. Two of these types are similar to Sue et al.'s (2007) initial categories of 1) microinsult, which is rude communication demeaning a person's heritage or identity, and 2) microinvalidation, which excludes the lived experience of a person (Sue, 2007). For 1) microinsult, I found two sub-forms: a. the microinsult by direct degradation and b. the microinsult by comparison. Further types that go beyond Sue et al.'s initial classification are 3) microexclusion, often by infinite boundary construction, 4) microinvisibilisation, a complete disregard of the migrant's heritage and the migrant as an individual. My findings demonstrate the importance of organisations' taking seriously what is a consequential issue for migrant clients, migrant employees and migrant stakeholders and their seizing the opportunity to build a fair rapport.

Background: The Danish narrative on the good, qualified migrant

This study is located in Denmark, where sociocultural conditions provide an interesting setting to study the construction of classes involving immigrants. Denmark can be considered a unique, revelatory case (Yin and Campbell, 2018), as its migration-related politics and practices are inclusive towards the migrants that are considered desirable but outstandingly exclusive towards less desired migrant groups. In Denmark, discourse on migration has long centred on welcoming migrants depending on their estimated economic benefits to the country. Media and politics tend to equate the parameter of usefulness with the level of education and qualification and/or with cultural proximity, manifested in citizenship of a country in the European Union or a country that is considered "Western" (Danmarks_Statistik, 2022). Hedetoft (2006) observes that "Danes are far more open and welcoming toward immigrants from the EU and other Western countries" in comparison to migrants from other destinations and asylum seekers. "Highly skilled" (Klintefelt, 2024) migrants are discussed as "good business" by Dansk Industri (Klintefelt, 2024), Denmark's largest employer organisation. This economic parameter for how migration is to be considered has been echoed by many journalists over the years (Perera, 2023, Sloth, 2011). Denmark is considered one of the most successful countries in its capacity to attract the skilled employees that its organisations need (Aragones and Salgado, 2016). Denmark's public discourse is exemplary for the employability paradigm that has long had a grip on political debates and policies on migration (Simola, 2022). The praised "good business" migrants are sharply contrasted with the migrant groups that are commonly considered less useful. It is the latter groups that Denmark's strict anti-immigration policies are supposed to address and deter. Measures in this vein have been called "iconic" (Simonsen, 2016: 213) and "paradigmatic" (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017: 100). Denmark's official policy of deterrence is aimed at reducing the number of asylum seekers arriving in

Denmark (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017, Radia, 2013), e.g. by launching anti-refugee ad campaigns in Arabic-language newspapers. In 2016, a bill allowed the police to search refugees and seize their assets. Furthermore, Denmark was widely criticised for introducing "ghettoområder"(ghetto areas) (Boligministeriet, 2019). The national government labelled neighbourhoods as *ghettos* based on their crime rates, unemployment or educational attainment, but prominently on the proportion of residents who are considered to be first- or second-generation immigrants from a non-Western country. Public discourse frames non-Western, Muslim and unskilled migrants (Andreassen, 2013) and especially asylum seekers as "threats to the nation" (Whyte *et al.*, 2019). In sum, there is a clear distinction between two groups of "others" in politics and in media discourse: lowly (or regularly) skilled and/or non-Western migrants and highly educated and economically useful migrants.

Theoretical frame: Discrimination and microaggressions

Discrimination refers to the detrimental treatment of humans based on (assumed) categories of their social belonging (e.g., race, age, gender or disability). It manifests in actions, policies and attitudes that emphasise or create inequalities among individuals and groups. Pincus (1996b: 186) conceptualised individual discrimination as intentional and as a behaviour of individual group members that has differential/harmful effects on the members of another group. Today, discrimination is subtler and more difficult to identify (Yilmaz Sener, 2022) and intentional exclusion of clearly distinguishable groups is regulated and/or frowned upon. More focus is directed towards hidden and subtle forms of discrimination that do not openly classify people based on group belonging (Neto, 2006, Fibbi *et al.*, 2021). As this understanding of discrimination poses problems for measurement (Meertens and Pettigrew, 1997), researchers have resorted to employing the term perceived discrimination which is when research subjects interpret and recount events as discriminatory (Neto, 2006, Quaglia *et al.*, 2022). Another concept that takes into account the societal changes since Pincus' first definition is Dovidio's "cultural discrimination" (Dovidio, 2010) which involves privileging the culture, heritage and values of the dominant group but also imposing this culture on other, less dominant groups. Cultural discrimination means, possibly unconsciously, believing in the superiority of a dominant group's cultural heritage over those of other groups, and the expression of such beliefs in individual actions or institutional policies" (Dovidio, 2010). The particular phenomenon of *microaggressions* is located within discriminatory practices. As they are often performed unintentionally and without the speaker's awareness of their hurtful impact, they are challenging to detect. They are brought forward casually, embedded in positive rhetoric or in passing – as a consequence, they constitute a unique category of discriminatory practice. They can be classified as isolate discrimination (Neto, 2006, Feagin and Eckberg, 1980), that is, individual acts of discriminatory behaviour by one member of a dominant group directed at a member of a subordinate group when that action is not embedded in a larger institutional context (it may nevertheless have an impact on the individual

level if it occurs frequently). At the same time, microaggressions often target the cultural group to which the receiver belongs. Microaggressions were first described by Pierce (1970), according to whom they are often unintentional, yet pervasive forms of discrimination that Black Americans experience in their daily lives. Microaggressions can be so fleeting that they may go unnoticed by those who enact them, but as they accumulate, they have a detrimental impact on their recipients. Sue et al. (2007: 274) distinguish between *microinsults* and *microinvalidations*: microinsults are "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity." Although they are often unconscious and their derogatory message is "hidden", their impact is felt by the recipient, as the insult is often conveyed by the repeated experience of it and by the context. Microinvalidation means "communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue, 2007: 274). Although Pierce's and Sue's original work focused primarily on the experiences of Black Americans and People of Color, the concept has since been expanded to understand verbal aggression directed toward people with a distinct group membership (Capodilupo *et al.*, 2019). Contemporary research, including that of Sue and co-authors (Torino *et al.*, 2018), applies the term when describing how various sociocultural groups experience exclusion with regard to for instance gender and sexuality. Other experiences that have been investigated as microaggressions relate to religion, culture, ethnicity, health and practices (Freeman and Stewart, 2024, Kim and Meister, 2023). In sum, microaggressions are acts of direct, face-to-face discrimination that matter both in terms of their detrimental psychological impact on the recipient (Nadal, 2014, Auguste *et al.*, 2021) and, in line with constructivist assumptions about communication, in terms of how they co-construct the organisation and help normalising prejudiced behaviour.

Study Design

Due to the significance of personal narratives in identity construction and feelings of belonging (Loseke, 2007), I employed narrative interviews to gather the data. Participants were recruited via calls for participants which were posted on three social networking sites dedicated to migrants in Denmark and which asked how people feel as a migrant in a country with a strong narrative of equality. As a consequence, all the interviewees were selected based on self-selection and self-designation as a migrant. All the interviewees are born outside of Denmark. They all have high educational qualifications (which was an eligibility criterion): Each participant holds at least one university degree, and many have completed PhDs or occupy specialised professional roles. Two out of the 20 participants are engaged in voluntary work while awaiting visa approvals, and one recently graduated from university. Notably, none of the interviewees rely on social benefits. The interviews were conducted either as online video meetings or as in-person meetings at a university campus, and they lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. The ages of the interviewees range from 26 to 48 years. They are from: Afghanistan, Cyprus, England, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland,

India, Iran, Italy, Malta, The Netherlands and Romania. The first prompt for the interviewees' narratives was: "Thanks for talking to me. First, I would like to ask you why you volunteered for this study" which often elicited strong motives (e.g. "Because I have been here for 14 years in total. And I will never ever call myself a Dane. I will always feel like a stranger here"; Helga, Iceland). Stories about experienced microaggressions were often embedded in accounts of a broader feeling of alienation and of being excluded from the core of Danish society. The interviews were conducted in English, and although it was not made explicit in most cases (in some instances, however, the interviewees inquired about this), the researcher's status of not being Danish was probably recognised. This may have contributed to interviewees speaking more freely about issues related to their status in society.

The interviews were transcribed with the help of artificial intelligence. I employed thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2012) to identify what experiences are included, implicitly and explicitly, in an interviewee's account (McAdams, 2012, Nowell Lorelli *et al.*, 2017). Following the method applied by Sue et al. (2007) whose groundbreaking study described the details of microaggressions in the context of clinical practice, this study identifies eight themes of microaggressions that run through the accounts of interviewed migrants. I deductively sorted interview narratives using Sue et al.'s 2007 eight themes "alien in one's own land, ascription of intelligence, color blindness, criminality/assumption of criminal status, denial of individual racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, second-class status" (Sue, 2007: 275). Sue et al.'s ninth theme of "environmental invalidation" was not included in the analysis as this relates to structural macro-discrimination that does not necessarily play out in interpersonal communication. Furthermore, I used Sue et al.'s types microinvalidations and microinsults as deductive categories while inductively developing new types of microaggressions when the migrant experience (themes) differed from those described by Sue et al. 2017.

This study employs examples of interviewees who have experienced individual, interpersonal discrimination in work settings, but not necessarily at their own workplace. Discriminatory experiences can be related to and reflect the labour-market even if the victimised person is not actually employed at the organisation where the discriminatory event occurs (e.g., verbal aggression against a patient by medical/technical staff at a doctor's office, or a clerk being overly sharp with a customer during their shopping).

Results: Themes and Types of Microaggressions

The analysis showed that the most frequently recurring themes in the accounts of highly qualified migrants show some similarities to the ones identified by Sue et al. (2007) but mainly demonstrate the unique experience of highly qualified migrants. "Second class status" constituted an important recurring theme in migrants' accounts, as did "Pathologising cultural values/communication styles", here more broadly coded as "Pathologising cultural practices". Further themes showed similarities but were

nevertheless distinct. By way of example: Sue et al. (2007) identify the speech act "You speak good English" directed at an American Person of Colour as a racial microinvalidation conveying the message "You are a foreigner" (276). This twisted compliment occurs in my data as well, and as in Sue et al.'s study, it is mostly directed towards visible minorities such as the Indian interviewees. In this case, the encounter takes place in a non-English speaking country between two people (Dane and migrant), of whom the migrant speaks English as a near-mother-tongue, official language. The recurring theme is thus underestimation (probably racialised), a Eurocentric outlook on English as an *inner circle* language that cannot possibly be proficiently exercised by *outer circle* (Kachru, 1982) speakers other than Europeans. As a consequence, the speech act in this setting is not an invalidation but an insult. In total, this study revealed the following themes (see Table 1) *Second class status, Underestimation, Pathologising cultural practices, Jokes about not belonging, Invalidating opinions, Distinguishing from "second class citizens" (Sue, 2007: 276), Infinite boundary construction,* and *Selective ignorance.*

Table 1: Examples and types of microaggressions directed at immigrants in work settings

Theme	Description	Example
Type 1: Microinsults		
a. Microinsult by direct degradation		
Second-class status	Insisting on essentialist / degrading assumptions.	"… my boss, at university, said: ‚How are your kids? Well, you have daughters, no son? Isn't that what you people are supposed to have? And only two?'" (Afshane, AFG)
Underestimation	Being surprised by migrants holding certain competences, positions or assets	"People get very surprised when they hear my English and how well I can speak, which is very odd for me because I feel like I learned English as my first language. I don't speak my own. I can only speak and understand my mother tongue, but I can't read and write it. So, I get really awkward when people tell me: 'Your English is very good.'" (Bodhi, IN)
Pathologising cultural practices	Notion: Domestic practices are ideal. Other practices are a disturbance and can/ should be eliminated.	"In the attempt to be an equal, where am I going keeping this bindi right in between my eyebrows? It's a part of my culture. I cannot let this go. And I remember he [a supervisor, the author] said, I want you to be in Denmark, and I think a lot of you can contribute. But if you do not mind, can you remove this? […] He did suggest that, you know, I'm not forcing you, but just take it off.'" (Pavati, IN)

Theme	Description	Example
b. Microinsult by comparison		
Distinguishing from second class citizens	Treating migrants as "a lesser person or group" (Sue et al., 278), while emphasising positive otherness in the conversation partner	"… this story of the principal, he said that: 'You know, we don't have a lot […] kids that speak more than two languages […]?' And I was like: 'Well, that's too bad because my daughter, she speaks two languages.' […]. He just said: 'No, no, but that's not what I meant.' He meant that we are not Muslims. And that was like just, you know, very, very blunt. It's not something that you put on the table and never in a conversation because put like that is it's racism. Racism 100 percent, 100 percent." (Francesco, ITA)
Type 2: Microinvalidation		
Jokes about not belonging	Making insensitive remarks about a migrant's status or belonging, claiming to be joking	"If you, for example, criticise Denmark, you are a foreigner. I mean, you are part of (…) the group to colleagues. But as soon as you criticise Denmark (…), still, people would say jokingly: 'If you don't like it, you can just go back home, right?' And it's a joke, but every joke has a core of truth. And so (…) I felt at least that, ok, you have to watch out a little bit, you can't really criticise …" (Lucas, NL)
Invalidating opinions	Invalidating or not accepting the opinion of a migrant due to their migrant status	
Type 3: Microexclusion		
Infinite boundary drawing	Unnecessarily constructing or emphasising small/mundane differences	"… it's basically the highest praise, but still showing that you have lower status in the way of saying: 'Oh, I almost forgot you were foreign.' Or: 'I completely forgot you were foreign.' […] So they mean that as a compliment, but implicitly in it is an insult, right? You are a little bit lower status unless, you know, you are Danish?" (Lucas, NL)
Type 4: Microinvisibilisation		
Selective ignorance	Not wanting to be/not being informed about migrant experiences	"Having said that, they are not interested in other parts of me being Hungarian either, so in general, they don't really ask questions, how are things different or how do I find Denmark or they are not really interested in my different experience." (Sandra, HU)

As shown in Table 1, the eight themes are grouped into four types of microaggression. One of these forms is *microinvalidations*, as described by Sue et al. (2007). Sue et al.'s type microinsult is an umbrella term for two specific types distinguished in this study: The *microinsult by direct degradation* is very similar to Sue et al.'s *microinsult*. However, this study identifies one further form of microinsult that may represent the unique experience of some highly qualified migrants as *the favourite other,* that is, *the microinsult by comparison*. Two further forms of microaggressions seem to be particularly significant for the experience of highly qualified migrants: the *microexclusion* type and the *microinvisiblisation* type (for definitions see Table 2). In the following, I will describe the themes and their belonging to each of the forms:

Microinsults by direct degradation

First, *microinsults* are often performed utilising the themes *Second-class status*, *Underestimation*, and *Pathologising of cultural practices*. According to the definition by Sue et al., a microinsult is a "comment(s) that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (2007: 278) and all three themes fit this description. The theme *Second-class status* is derived from Sue et al.'s classification, and it means that people are treated as "a lesser group", a definition to which I add that this gaze is often inspired by (culturally) essentialist ideas, here (Table 1) the idea that people with Afghan heritage are "supposed to have" several male offspring. The theme *Underestimation* relates to when the display of competences and skills triggers a surprised reaction. Here, essentialist and degrading assumptions are also at play, but they are expressed vis-à-vis a migrant's achievements and competences. *Pathologising cultural practices* describes the notion that any culture- and heritage-related practice by migrants is a deviation and a disturbance that can and should be subordinated to standard domestic practice, if not erased. In this case, Pavati from India is asked to take her bindi off (in the context of well-meaning advice not to cause offense). Other documented examples are to "take off that veil" (Andreassen, 2013), directed at Muslim women. Such examples lead to the assumption that the underlying essentialism is not only characterised by culturally degrading notions; it is also highly gendered and thus creates unique, intersectional experiences (Crenshaw, 1991) for the discriminated people.

Microinsults by comparison

I deviate from Sue et al. with regard to the type *microinsult by comparison*. Microinsult by comparison shares its main features with microinsult by direct degradation; it may even be more upfront and confrontational. However, it is not confrontational towards the receiver's identity; instead, it degrades a third, absent party. It gains its subtlety by conveying the insult indirectly, by (often favourable) comparison. The theme in this case is that the migrant is being distinguished from second-class citizens, that is, other migrants. These communication acts demean migrants but grant the direct

communication partner the status of being an exception. Francesco's (Italy) small story about the principal who praised the absence of 'bilingual' kids at his private school but nonetheless granted Francesco's (Christian) children access to the school serves as an example. This 'exception' speech delivers a severe message: Francesco learns that, in principle, his family belongs to a broad, rather unwanted community (migrants). However, the precise character of his status (European, Christian, being a highly qualified, well-off executive) allows members of the domestic society to grant him access. In sum, Francesco's position is confirmed as being socially contingent on and subordinated to domestic parameters of social worth: he is assessed as having second class status, even if this can be lifted off of him on occasion. Francesco, by the end of the interview, sums up "I'm still an immigrant and what they call a 'good immigrant'". Whereas the explicit "good migrant" is a compliment, the implicit insinuation of a 'bad' migrant minority is an insult by affiliation. Other stories and quotes serve as further examples: Gabriella, also from Italy, retells a joke: "…sometimes they've said, 'Yeah, good, you're not from like Arabic countries.' I know it's a joke. But still." Gabriella obviously struggles ("But still") with such jokes that emphasise her relative cultural proximity as a European. At the same time, her "otherness" is equally empha-sised, as such a remark only makes sense when it is directed to a foreigner. Maie from Estonia says: "Oh, the good and the bad foreigner. I had one person actually tell me that I was a good foreigner, because I was working." Again, the compliment (to be working, which indicates employability as societal worth) is, in fact, an insult to the overall group of migrants to which Maie, after all, feels that she belongs. This specific type of microaggression seems to be most representative of the experience of highly qualified migrants (from European countries), as they are, via their qualification and often also their occupation, more likely to be in a position to receive praise for their well-adjusted otherness in comparison with less favoured migrant groups.

Microinvalidations

Like microinsults, *microinvalidations* may be produced unintentionally, and they "ex-clude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color." (Sue, 2007: 278) Two themes dominate: *Jokes about not belonging*, and *Invalidating opinions and experiences*. Both themes are best represented by the quote displayed in Table 1. When criticism by a professional with migration experience is met with a suggestion to leave the country "if you don't like it [here]", the migrant, in this case Lucas from the Netherlands, is being stripped of their knowledge and competence due to their migration status and otherness. Microinvalidations may have severe consequences: "That's not how we do things in Denmark" is reported by Maie, Estonia, as summing up her experiences with medical doctors when she sought treatment of for her chronical illness. Although she provided translated paperwork from Estonian MDs, her diagnosis was dismissed as foreign and thus invalid. She "was told, I think, three or four times, that it was in my head despite actually having papers

about having had surgery". This spiralled her into years of untreated suffering before she managed to get standard surgery.

Microexclusions

I suggest that the speech act of *microexclusion* should be considered a type of microaggression that is best represented by the theme *Infinite boundary construction*. This is when interlocutors, often unexpectedly and seemingly inopportunely, construct differences or otherness connected to the migrant status of the interviewees. Often, this happens to migrants who can physically pass as Danish, have strong social ties in Danish communities, and/or have advanced linguistic proficiency. This type of microaggression conveys the impression to the receivers that the boundaries to belonging are infinite, no matter their efforts. Lucas, from the Netherlands, considers himself passing as a Dane due to having citizenship, language proficiency and social connectedness, but he discovers that even his almost-Danishness may give occasion to boundary-drawing. When coworkers abruptly tell him they "almost forgot you were foreign", it prompts the question of why they find it noteworthy, unless, in fact, this status is never forgotten. In this case, the message is a compliment for being near-Danish, but at the same time, this mundane speech act performs social exclusion. These speech acts are so casual and unexpected that interviewees often laugh when telling their stories. This is the case with Gianna who remembers asking her (Danish) secretary to order a first-class train ticket for an upcoming travel occasion: "So, I refer to a first-class ticket. And I was right away corrected by them, letting me learn there was no such thing as a first-class ticket. There is no first class in anything in Denmark." Giana goes on to explain that there is indeed a literal first-class ticket in Denmark ('DSB 1 – travel first class'), thus, to her, the message was political rather than factual, emphasising her constructed otherness in an egalitarian Scandinavian setting. A mundane, factually irrelevant, boundary was constructed, merely for purposes of rhetorical exclusion, and not for knowledge exchange. Ruxandra from Romania says: "'Here in Denmark' – if I hear that one more time…", which means that even in situations in which no national context is required, mundane explanations are foreboded by the introduction "Here in Denmark…", a national marker that serves no other purpose than distinction and exclusion.

Microinvisibilizations

Finally, I have added *microinvisibilisation* as a type of microaggression. For this type, the main theme in the interviewees' accounts is selective ignorance. This happens when interlocutors do not display any wish to be informed about migrants' experiences. Invisibilisation goes beyond invalidation, as invalidations often occur in situations in which individuals have an eye-level exchange previous to the aggression. Invisibilisation prevents such on-par encounters; one interviewee expresses: "I feel like I don't exist". This category of speech acts or deferred speech acts is inspired by "social

invisibilisation and silencing" as described by Herzog (2018) who describes "the socially created capacity 'to look through' the other even when physically present." Invisibilisation means changing the subject (described as "Well, anyway…") when a migrant mentions anything heritage-related, thereby failing to offer the curtesy of questions, and not offering cues expressing interest when it would be common to do so with other social groups. Sandra from Hungary describes this absence of interest and/or interest cues in dialogues (s. Table 1), while Maie, Estonia, feels overlooked by the open disregard of the need for knowledge about her heritage: "You can feel it like they look down on you […] I mean, I'm from Estonia, the capital city is Tallinn [.]. They ask: 'Oh, how are things in Transylvania or how is Riga?' And I'm: 'ok, well, these little remarks actually show that […] you actually don't know where I'm from.'" Interviewees who suffer from invisibilisation also suffer from invalidations and microexclusions as well as microinsults by comparison.

Table 2: Four types of microaggressions directed at highly qualified migrants in work settings

Type (Micro-)	1.Insult (Sue, 2007)		2. Invalidation (Sue, 2007)	3. Exclusion	4. Invisibilisation
	Microinsult by direct degradation	Insult by comparison			
Description	"communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (278)	communication acts that demean migrants but grant the direct communication partner an exception status	"communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality" (278) of a migrant	Communication act that constructs or emphasises differences	Communication act, including the absence of speech or direct acknowledgement, that ignores a migrant's identity as a person

Who receives which type of microaggression?

Due to the limited sample size, no generalised statements can be made about intra-sample differentiation. It can be said, however, that the aggression extended to the interviewees seems to escalate when the receivers are visible minorities *and* are known by their dialogue partner to be from Non-Western countries. This group of highly qualified migrants are predominantly at the receiving end of *microinsults* that are degrading and pathologising towards assumed cultural practices or characteristics. In contrast, *microinvalidations* and *microexclusions* are geared toward highly qualified migrants with high cultural proximity – here, the main degradation lies in drawing boundaries based on them being "not quite" Danish, whereas such boundary drawing

may not be necessary for members of the majority group vis-à-vis Non-Western, visible minorities. Highly skilled women from Eastern Europe take a particular position, as they are the sole receivers of *microinvisibilisation*. At the same time, they do not receive microinsults, or in general other reactions than disinterest and selective ignorance. Overall, the analysis of this restricted sample indicates that gender, ethnicity and migration experience seem to constitute pathways to unique, intersectional, discriminatory experiences with microaggressions (see discussion). One particular intersection is exhibited in the example of the supervisor asking Pavati to take off her bindi (see Table 1). Since only women, more specifically South Asian women, wear this coloured dot, this qualifies as a gendered speech act and Pavati is placed in an inferior position not only as a migrant from a particular cultural setting, but also as a female coworker. In general, coworkers' overstepping towards private advice and conversation seems to be a feminine experience (see Afshane's experience of being asked how many sons she has in a work setting, Table 1) and the experience of so-called non-Western migrants, whereas English language competences are – in this restricted sample – noted with awe when exercised by male People of Colour. It seems that for highly qualified migrants, xenophobia and sexism combine with their status in particular ways.

Lastly, and again not systematically observable due to sample restrictions, non-Western migrants and Eastern European female migrants seem to experience microaggressions differently from migrants from (other) EU countries. Whereas members of the former group report physical sickness ("I was puking every morning", Pavati on how she was impacted by microaggressions at work) and poor mental health (Maie reports that her depression has worsened after she was made invisible by medical practitioners; Afshane explains that she cannot cope with returning to the places where she feels she has been insulted due to her ethnic looks), members of the latter group have a comparatively more relaxed view on discriminatory experiences and put their experiences into perspective by pointing to the status they are ascribed via their professional position or even by "privilege" (Janne, France). Notably, assaults and micro assaults are not mentioned in this study, but this does not mean that they are absent: open, sometimes physical attacks are reported by the interviewees; however, they have not experienced such attacks in work settings but in aggressive to violent encounters with complete strangers or neighbours. Numerous interviewees, including interviewees from India, Germany and Iceland, have experienced such attacks in their private lives, in which they were explicitly targeted due to their ethnicity.

Discussion and Conclusion: The specific experiences of highly qualified migrants

This study set out to investigate the micro-level, interpersonal experiences of discrimination faced by highly qualified migrants in Denmark, drawing on microaggression and discrimination theory. Through thematic narrative analysis of interview data, the study identified unique themes, which resulted in three new (sub-)forms of microaggressions. By applying Sue et al.'s typology to a Danish setting in which highly qualified migrants experience discrimination, the study has expanded the typology by

including *microinsults by comparison (as a type of microinsult)*, *microexclusions* and *microinvisibilisation*. The themes introduced in this paper are those that are commonly narrated by highly qualified migrants: *Second class status, Underestimation, Pathologising cultural practices, Jokes about not belonging, Invalidating opinions, Distinguishing from "second class citizens" (Sue, 2007: 276), Infinite boundary construction,* and *Selective ignorance.* The findings illuminate the nuanced, covert nature of the discriminatory practices that condense as microaggressions. In most cases, the microaggressions experienced seem to be the result of members of the majority group believing in the superiority of their own cultural heritage. They may thus fall into the realm of "cultural discrimination" (Dovidio, 2010: 12); however, it has to be noted that this study analyses "perceived discrimination" (Neto, 2006: 90), that is, the "perception of being discriminated against because of one's geographical or ethnic origins" (Quaglia *et al.*, 2022: 108), but does not measure observable events of discrimination in a positivistic sense. Although cultural discrimination seems to fit the migrants' overall experiences best, only non-Western migrants experience instances in which domestic cultural values are explicitly imposed on them (e.g. being asked to take the bindi off). Microaggressions seem to escalate the more culturally "other" the receiver is perceived to be. Non-Western migrants and women from Eastern Europe are more prone to being culturally discriminated or being ignored entirely than other migrants from Europe. Overall, all interviewees seem to feel confronted with the notion of being culturally inferior to Danes or Danishness. The *insult by comparison*, however, is reserved for European migrants, who are favourably compared to several types of "other" migrants, particularly Non-Western migration groups, and are sometimes even made accomplices in degrading others. By way of illustration: when the school principal advertised to Francesco (a "good migrant", see Table 1) that the future school of Francesco's daughters would be a place where most kids do not "speak more than two languages" [English and Danish, the author], Francesco decoded this as an anti-Muslim/anti-migrant message and refused to be an ally to the principal. Although assaults and micro assaults are not part of the analysis in this study, they do exist. Open, sometimes physical attacks are reported by the interviewees; however, they happen in their private lives, e.g. when walking a precinct. The absence of such attacks in professional work settings underscores the specific role of work in the life of highly qualified migrants: professional surroundings, maybe also their status as successful and repeatedly being titled "good" migrants, shields them from experiencing worse acts than microaggressions – at least in professional settings. However, because of the detrimental effects that these aggressions can have on the victims' physical and psychological health, it has been argued that microaggressions as a covert form of racism, xenophobia and social exclusion have a more "problematic, damaging, and injurious" effect than overt racism, as the latter is officially shunned and can be dealt with in terms of repercussions for the perpetrators (Sue *et al.*, 2009: 90). In contrast, microaggressions are challenging to mediate for the victims. They are often not believed when trying share their experience (Sue *et al.*, 2009), as Pavati explains: "So it looks like I am the only idiot on earth. And every single point that I had made

was counter-argued by: 'You could have misunderstood.'" Arguably, the suffering resulting from microaggressions is amplified, as work and being employable is of high importance in the identity-work of the interviewees – they are well aware that their social status is dependent on their pronounced position on the labour market. This is illustrated by Maria from Malta:

> "For a foreigner I am doing good. I have a good job, that lifts me up. But I am a foreigner, which brings me down again. […] I show status by my education, and by my job […]".

This awareness places victims of microaggressions at work in a dilemma: the subtler an insult, an invalidation or an invisibilisation is, the harder it is to speak up, in particular when they do not dare to risk the fragile status of a "good migrant" (see interviewee accounts, Table 1) that is entirely contingent on the host society's grace. Highly qualified migrants are in a constant stage of "double-bind" (Greenidge, 2017) as they are perfectly able to decode the aggressions extended to them but cannot risk their at-will status by engaging in a conflict.

Further, with regard to theory, the study contributes with the insight that highly qualified migrants suffer discrimination although their status is discursively construct-ed as useful for the job market, employable and "good business" (see earlier). Framing one group of migrants as more favoured in comparison to other groups glosses over two issues: first, highly qualified migrants are by no means as accepted as the business and economy-centred discourse in Denmark makes them out to be, particularly not those who fit the category of Non-Western. The migrants who are considered socially and economically desirable are also discriminated against, and their experiences with microaggressions do not seem to lessen with the incline of their cultural proximity – in fact, as Lucas' case shows, the pointing to differences does not decrease, it simply becomes more mundane. This shows that an overall anti-migration sentiment may outweigh even the carefully constructed argument of economic usefulness vis-à-vis a selected group of migrants. Second, highly qualified migrants refuse to be a canvas against which migration-related sentiments can be discussed, and they refuse to be instruments for rhetorically building a migrant hierarchy ranging from desirable to not desirable. Even when they receive comparative compliments (being a "good" migrant), they feel the insult and exclusion, and they neither embrace nor intrinsically accept the compliment. This insight may contribute to our understanding of how migrants construct their identity and belonging in relation to other migrant groups and to the host society. Lastly, in relation to theory, this study also points to possibilities for exploring how microaggressions and subtle discrimination is an intersectional experi-ence: Crenshaw's (1991) work on the intersection of race and gender illustrated how unique forms of discrimination are not merely additive but interwoven (s. also Nadal, 2013). In this study, migrants pose a special group of migrants, that is, highly qualified migrants, who are positioned in a unique form of otherness by microaggressions. They are praised for not being the other migrants, who are considered to be of lesser status. They are praised for mundane practices (working) but scolded for perceivably

deviant practices (from wearing a bindi to asking critical questions at work). The intersectionality framework can contribute to understanding how multiple identity factors shape experiences of microaggressive discrimination, as this study reveals the intersection of migration experience, race, and gender. Some highly skilled migrants are subjected to interrelated forms of xenophobia and sexism. Due to the limited sample size, this study cannot present more conclusive insights; it nevertheless highlights the need for intersectional analysis in addressing the full scope of microaggressions for future studies.

The practical implications of this study are significant for organisational policies and practices. The study emphasises the need for comprehensive communication training and education on microaggressions and rhetorical, direct face-to-face discrimination within organisations. Microaggressions must not be framed as singular, individual incidents, that the victims may have misunderstood. With organising theory (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015) and speech act theory (Cooren, 2000, Austin, 1962) it can be argued that microaggressions are among the practices that create, stabilise, change and represent companies and organisations (Cooren et al., 2011). This specifically includes informal and casual workplace conversations between coworkers and managers that leave way for micro-forms of discrimination ("Here in Denmark", see section: microexclusions). Microaggressions have a performative character, that is, the spoken word constructs the image of the organisation (Austin, 1962, Taylor *et al.*, 1996). Hence, microaggressive behaviour by one school principal or by one medical doctor in a clinic should not be constructed as single cases, but, due to their performative character, as co-constituting the organisation itself, which may result in institutional discrimination – actions of people in power within institutions that maintain differences (Lewicki, 2022). Communication training as anti-discrimination initiatives can foster a workplace environment that is aware of potential negative subtexts and of the detrimental impacts of subtle discriminatory practices as well as of the positive effects of bystander intervention (Bond and Haynes-Baratz, 2022). Equally important is the implementation of functioning control and correct measures, such as internal whistleblowing systems for reporting misconduct (Yeung, 2020). Organisations, in particular those that employ a diverse workforce, must recognise that discriminatory acts at the micro-level contribute to the overall organisational climate and culture. By recognising microaggressions as acts of work-related discrimination, organisations can take a first step towards an equitable professional environment.

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