'RESPECT TOWARD OLD PEOPLE'

The Commodification of Ethnicity in Migrant Care Work in Germany

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Introduction

In the international context the recruitment of foreign health-care workers is not a new phenomenon and research has already pointed out how they are subjected to de-skilling, discrimination, and exploitation (see for example Isaksen 2012 or Kingma 2007). Due to a severe lack of health and especially eldercare workers resulting from low wages, low prestige, and poor working conditions in this labor market sector, Germany has recently started to recruit staff abroad. The current recruitment of care workers from Asian countries is based on 'pilot projects'¹ by governmental actors. Even though less than 1,000 workers have been recruited from these countries, the pilot projects receive a considerable amount of attention in political and public media discourse.

During the 'guest workers' immigration' of the 1960s up until the economic crisis of 1973, Germany recruited nurses from Asian countries based on bilateral recruitment agreements. In this chapter, the detailed analysis of Asian care workers presented here can be seen in this context. The official account from the time was that foreign nurses were brought to Germany for a development program aimed at transmitting knowledge to the participating countries, and to where the foreign nurses were supposed to return again. However, these nurses were also needed to cover the lack of workers during the expansion of the German welfare state (Lee 2013; Salazar 1987). In public discourse they were often referred to as friendly and gentle "angels" (Goel 2014: 80) or "little lotus flowers" (Salazar 1987: 471), which attests to the blunt sexism, racism, and colonialism they were confronted with.

Already at that time recruited nurses experienced professional de-skilling because their assisting positions in German hospitals did not accord with their high qualifications that they had acquired in their home countries (FES 2016). Still today, in Germany skilled care workers only require vocational qualifications and cover only basic care, while in most sending countries skilled care workers pass through an academic study course. Hence, skilled migrant care workers are de-skilled once they enter the German care system. In the current media and political discourse, the recruitment of foreign workers is legitimized by presenting information about their assumed suitability for eldercare work, especially in the field of basic care.

Drawing on these data, the aim of this chapter is to investigate “the processes of subjection and the nature of power relations” (Powell and Gilbert 2007: 199) produced in discursive expectations and regulations of migrant care work in the German care system.

Following Vera Mackie (2014), it is important to investigate care migration as a biopolitical care regime that serves the reproduction of the receiving country. According to Michel Foucault (1977), the concept of biopolitics refers to the management of national populations through interventions and regulatory controls with specific attention to the processes of life. In migration studies the biopolitical approach helps to focus on how the regulation of immigration fosters the well-being of the local population (Fassin 2001; Mavelli 2017; Muller 2004).

By applying a performativity approach, previous research on healthcare, social welfare, and education (Makela 2018; Powell and Gilbert 2007; Sommerfeldt 2015) shows how discourses on professionalism and administrative structures function as regulatory regimes of care work, which constitute (local) workers’ identities in a hierarchical relation to staff members and patients or clients through reiterative, normative care practices (Makela 2018). For analyzing the constitutional processes of subject positions and expected care practices of recruited workers, this chapter also draws on the theoretical concept of ‘othering.’ This shows how power and inequality are reproduced in discourses by a post-colonial imaginary of different and unequal cultures that are assumed to impact care performativity. Hence, the chapter investigates how “power acts on a subject” by de-valuing and de-skilling recruited care workers in discourse and administration, but also how power “in a transitive sense enacts the subject into being” by constituting identities through the portrayal of care performances (Butler 1998: 13).

Discourse and Performativity of Care Migration

Care worker migration is a global economy and a biopolitical strategy of receiving countries to secure the reproduction of their national populations against the background of a care worker shortage. Biopolitical governmentality integrates migrant workers in regulatory care regimes that manage the reproductive systems. An important mechanism of biopower according to Foucault (2003) is the distancing between different groups of the population, for example, through racism. Media and political discourses play an important part in these regulatory regimes by constructing subjectivities that locate migrant workers “in a particular manner in the global economy” (Näre and Nordberg 2016: 19).

By emphasizing the suitability of migrants for care work, media and political discourses display the narrative mechanism of ‘othering’ that establishes discursive power relations by constituting individuals and groups with reference to their culture, religion, ethnicity, etc. as different and thus unequal ‘others’ (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 156; Spivak 1985). Often, othering relies on cultural essentialism, that is the “conception of human beings as ‘cultural’ [...] subjects, i.e., bearers of ‘a’ culture, located within a boundaried world, which defines them and differentiates them from others” (Grillo 2003: 158, original emphasis). These differences are reproduced in orientalizing discourses that reiterate “European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (Said 1978: 15). Narratives of othering call upon social categories that “signify subordination and existence at once” (Butler 1998: 20) and are reproduced in repetitive social acts. Judith Butler (1988: 136), who in her original concept of performativity, focuses on gender, and argues that there is no pre-existing identity prior to its social constitution in repetitive embodied practices such as acts, gestures, enactments, etc.

Care has been considered a classical field of gender performance. It includes not only practical tasks of “caring for” somebody but also “affective relations” resulting from the “care about” others’ needs and desires (Ungerson 2006: 277). Hence, care work is relational between provider and recipient of care. However, care is not only a gender performance but may also be interwoven with other categories of differentiation. This is shown in research on migrant care workers who based on their ethnicity, culture, or religion are assumed to provide care skills of empathy, trustworthiness, and respect for the elderly (Gallo and Scrinzi 2016; MacKenzie and Forde 2009; Rohde-Abuba 2020) and to display a specific physical and emotional presence that comforts the care recipient (Weicht 2010). Hence, by deploying certain ‘knowledge’ about the assumed culture-specific care skills of foreign workers, public discourses contribute to establish relational positions between them, care recipients, and local workers. This chapter scrutinizes how in these discourses “acts, gestures [and] enactments” (Butler 1990: 136) of migrant workers are described as performances of their identities in relation to care recipients and local workers. Hence, a suitable lens for investigating othering in migrant care work is to analyze “the discursively-regulated practices that inscribe boundaries between subjects and reify them in that very process” (Feldman 2005: 222).

Methodological Approach of Analysis and Sampling

The sources used in the analysis of this chapter were searched by browsing results at three different time points in 2013, 2015, and 2017 for the terms ‘(foreign) skilled workers (from abroad, from Vietnam/China/the Philippines) + (elder) care.’ Excluding short news flashes and duplicated sources, the overall sample consists of 40 articles in German online and print magazines (daily and weekly), 20 online documents of political actors (statements, reports, etc.), websites of four agencies recruiting care workers from Asia as well as six TV documentations discussing the topic of recruited migrant workers in eldercare. All sources were published between 2012 and 2017. The sample of this qualitative study is not representative but covers the most important national journals with a wider circulation, like *Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, and *Focus* as well as local newspapers of different German regions.

Constructing a Triple Win Relation Between the Receiving Country, the Sending Country, and the Individual Migrants

The media discourse on the recruitment of foreign care workers is framed by the interpretation pattern that there is a ‘care calamity’ in Germany, which can only be solved by employing foreign workers. The ‘demographic change,’ i.e., the aging of the population, is assumed to be an important reason for the increasing need of care workers. For example, in the official documents of the ‘triple-win program’—the title suggests a win for receiving countries, sending countries, and migrants—by the governmental actors *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) [German Society for International Cooperation] and *Zentrale Auslands-und Fachvermittlung* (ZAV) [Central Foreign and Specialist Recruitment], part of the *Bundesagentur für Arbeit* [Federal Employment Agency], it is explained that “until 2025 there will be a lack of approximately 150,000 additional care workers. For this reason [...] the common project [of GIZ and ZAV] was created to win 2,000 care workers from suitable partnering countries for the German employment market” (ZAV 2013: 54, own translation).

The presentation of statistics in these texts supports the interpretation that Germany currently and, in the future, will depend on foreign workers. References to the aging of the population suggest that the care crisis results from a ‘natural cause,’ is inevitable and cannot be solved with Germany’s own human resources. Hence, the recruitment of foreign workers is constructed as a biopolitical strategy to secure eldercare for the local population (Mackie 2014).

Official documents of the governmental actors GIZ and the ZAV stress that Germany does not recruit care workers from countries which are classified in the World Health Organization list as having a “lacking in the field of care”; in contrast recruitment is aimed at “reducing over-capacities” (IQ 2016: 50, own translation). As Lena Näre and Camilla Nordberg (2016: 24) argue, the discourse presents care workers as a “global commodity” and their recruitment as the “natural global order of things” because receiving countries supposedly benefit from migrants’ dependency on work outside their nation. This narrative in German discourse suggests that the sending countries depend on Germany for reducing their unemployment, which presents Germany’s recruitment policy as a form of development aid and de-thematizes dependency of Germany on foreign workers. Documents from governmental actors like the ZAV (2013: 55, own translation) emphasize the development aspect: “Above that the GIZ combines the management of this program with elements of development policy programs and supports the transfer of know-how and [...] the diaspora-engagement and remittances.”

Individual migrants in the relation between home country and receiving country are positioned as a third party, who will benefit from migration with regard to their career development as shown in the document of the *Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie* (BMWi) [Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy] (BMWi 2014: 5, own translation):

Herewith, we have come full circle. A directed, well-prepared, and executed immigration is a win for all of the parties: Young people like Tung Nguyen receive a long-term perspective in Germany. Vietnam is able to decrease the workforce surplus by purposeful emigration and the German eldercare sector wins new qualified workers. Vietnam benefits from the additional transfer of know-how.

This interpretation of a knowledge transfer sometimes also comes up in media articles. For example, in *Focus* magazine a Vietnamese care worker is cited saying that she could “learn a lot” and could “help with her knowledge” when she returns to Vietnam (Neumann 2013: 42, own translation). Similarly, it is often argued that Asian countries do not have an eldercare sector and therefore “there is a great interest in China to acquire know-how abroad because they have to build up this sector” (Callsen 2014: 1, own translation). However, it is not explained how workers could apply their knowledge of the German vocational eldercare system in the sending countries, which do not have any equivalent care systems.

Economic differences between the sending and the receiving country are constantly presented as the main motive of workers to migrate to Germany. The television documentary *Care Workers From the Far East* from channel *SWR Fernsehen BW* mentions that the Philippine nurse Roselynn migrates to Germany “because she wants to support her family” (Knobel-Ulrich 2017, 00:05:21, own translation). Also, a television documentary from *Spiegel TV* (2013, 0:11:38, own translation) describes Vietnamese care workers in training as using €200 of their salary for their own living expenses and sending home €400: “In their home country seven family members can live off it for two months.” This suggests that offering

these low-paid jobs to foreigners contributes to the improvement of living standards of their families in the home contexts, while de-emphasizing that care work in Germany is low paid and that workers in many German urban contexts will struggle to afford rent for their own apartments. This reveals the biopolitical bias of the recruitment programs that benefit from global economic inequalities. Against this background, recruited care workers are subjectified as self-responsible individuals who rationally decide to enter into labor migration and therefore have to bear the challenges of it.

De-Valuating Professional Skills to Integrate Workers into the German Care System

The question of whether foreign workers are skilled (enough) to work in the German care system is central to this discourse. It is generally purported that German standards of care are superior to those of the sending countries, even though Germany is one of the few countries with vocational, but not academic training of care workers. This means that academically trained foreign care workers are de-skilled with respect to the general skill level of the employment. Moreover, they have to go through a one- or two-year vocational training or work in assistance positions before they are able to work as skilled (but vocational) care workers in Germany.

Most articles mention that recruited workers are experienced nurses, but do not explain what kind of training or studies are required for their positions in the home countries. In *Focus* magazine, a worker from Vietnam is introduced: "She completes a shortened training for elderly care like her classmates. Nguyen already holds a kind of diploma as a nurse—but this does not satisfy German requirements" (Neumann 2013: 42, own translation).

The phrasing 'some kind of diploma in nursing' demonstrates that the academic background of Vietnamese nurses is ignored. Besides the de-valuation of foreign professional skills, the de-professionalizing of foreign workers also draws on their 'language deficit.' Preparatory and consecutive language classes are presented as the main tools of governmental actors to enable the integration of workers into the German employment market and society. While it is obligatory for all recruited workers to pass German language classes (language level B1 or B2 depending on the program), the discourse focuses on their (lack of) informal, practical language skills. In a document of BMWi (2014: 5, original emphasis, own translation), the perspective of a Vietnamese care worker on the importance of language learning is presented:

A challenge and at the same time the most important key for integration and professional success is the command of the German language, the young Vietnamese also knows this: "Care is mainly communication. I will improve my German language skills continuously. This way, I can build up my social environment and care optimally for the elderly, who are entrusted to me."

This quotation shows the neoliberal interpretation that is used to subjectify foreign care workers: The lack of German language skills is constructed as their collective deficit. While the establishment of language classes is presented as the integration support of employers and governmental actors, individual migrants are held responsible for their actual practical language skills at work. In the document of the *Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln* (IW) [Institute of the German Economy Cologne] it is argued that foreign workers may compensate for missing

language skills by providing a specific care quality. “According to statements of employers, the observed deficits can only be accepted because the foreign workers show an above-average commitment and high empathy for the patients” (IW 2015: 27, own translation).

In the nationwide newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a Vietnamese female worker is introduced who has difficulties “understanding everything” at her workplace, but she is trying to deal with these challenges with “humor and friendliness” (Eder 2014: 16, own translation). Similarly, an article in the online magazine *Sonntagsblatt* tells of a male Vietnamese worker whose “innate friendliness and respect silences any critics” (Böllert 2017, own translation).

Besides the de-valuation of professional and language skills, negative othering also refers to migrants’ attitudes and behaviors toward superiors and colleagues. The IW document (2015: 14, own translation) argues: “Vietnamese care workers often have a different understanding of hierarchy and therefore difficulties integrating themselves as full members of the team and making decisions independently.” Hence, cultural attributes of foreign workers are constructed in a way that they do not accord with their professional status as academically trained workers. Rather, it is suggested that these workers cannot function well in the German context because they fail to make independent decisions. Through the lens of orientalism, it becomes clear that foreign workers are subordinated to local workers by assuming that because of a collective ‘Asian culture’ they are not able to work self-responsibly and need direction. This seems to justify their employment as assistants or apprentices who are content with a subordinated position and are able to cover the heavy workload of basic care.

Constructing Cultural Suitability for Eldercare Work

The core narrative of the discourse about Asian care workers is the assumption that they come from contexts that are culturally different from Germany and that this cultural background impacts their relationships with co-workers and superiors as well as with patients. In *Focus* magazine Dominik Ziller, a member of the Executive Management Committee of GIZ, is cited as saying “They [in Asia] have a special culture of respect toward old people” (Neumann 2013: 42, own translation). This example shows the orientaling discourse around so-called ‘Asian respect for the elderly,’ which constructs Asia as a unified cultural zone with fixed cultural differences compared to Germany. The assumption of essential cultural differences is the basis of the subjectification of migrants as suitable workers for the understaffed and underfinanced German care system. In the newspaper *Schwarzwälder Bote*, the manager of an eldercare home says about recruited Philippine workers: “The Philippines have a very different basic attitude. They have a different respect of age and help people out of sheer charity” (Hauser and Schmid 2015: 1, own translation). The image of foreign care workers who enjoy caring for the elderly is also transmitted in political documents. For example, in the BMWi document (2014: 5, own translation) it is argued that old people benefit from engaged foreign care workers who take care of physical but also emotional matters and “keep an eye on the individual well-being of the home residents.” A Vietnamese male nurse is cited: “My profession gives me pleasure, because I appreciate older people with all of their life experience, because I can help them daily and I like to deal with them” (ibid.).

Thus, cultural essentialism is used in the form of positive othering to subjectify foreign workers as individuals who respect the elderly and enjoy caring for them. This shows that migrant workers are not only expected to provide professional care tasks but also display a specific physical and emotional presence (see Weicht 2010). Some media articles contain

descriptions of workers' attitudes, gestures, and emotions in their interactions with the elderly that support the image of a specific care quality that is performed by them and reiterates an ascribed identity of respecting the elderly. The *Stuttgarter Zeitung* reported on a Chinese care worker: Her 84-year-old patient calls her 'my darling' while the other patients call her 'Sissi'—a name the care worker has given herself, because she thought her birth name was too difficult to pronounce. It is mentioned that the patients "appreciate her warm, direct manner, her vivid and expressive gesture [that is] captivating" (Wesely 2015: 1, own translation). The magazine *Stern* wrote about how an elderly patient has difficulties chewing her food. The Philippine care worker pats her shoulder saying "No stress. Take it easy" and the patient answers, "You are so good, sister!" (Bauer 2017: 1, own translation). Very similarly, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* a Vietnamese care worker is introduced, who is taking care of a 91-year-old patient. The interaction between care worker and patient is described as follows:

In a good mood, Hang [the care worker] turns to the lady, helps her take a shower, styles her hair. "Are we seeing each other later at lunch, Mrs. Paulus?" she asks, pats the arm of the old lady and helps her to move from the wheelchair into her bed.

(Eder 2014: 16, own translation)

These examples highlight that media represents foreign workers as providing a specific care quality that does not only include basic care tasks but also the establishment of a personal relation to the elderly through emotions, gestures, and physical contact. Hence, recruited workers are not only expected to 'care for' patients' hygiene and nutrition, but also to 'care about' their emotions (Ungerson 2006). These interactions between care workers and patients represent the biopolitical bias of recruitment programs on the micro-level of interaction: Migrant workers are expected to subordinate themselves to the needs of the elderly and improve emotional well-being through the display of positive emotions and physical contact.

Conclusion

Highlighting the epistemic potential of post-colonial approaches for understanding international migration, the analyzed media discourse reproduces the continued "salience of colonial-institutionalized knowledge" in the image of Asia as a unified zone of the world with a low economic development level and low professional standards of healthcare, but a specific culture of affection for the elderly (Koh 2015: 432). The development narrative in German discourse, which already had legitimized former phases of 'guest workers' recruitment, maintains the economic and professional hierarchy between Germany—as an actor on the global care market—and dependent sending countries, even though the German care system is about to collapse. The regulations of the recruitment and integration of foreign workers in the German care system, which can be perceived as 'governmental care' for those workers, structure their care performativity by placing them in specifically low labor market positions. Recruited (academically trained) workers are subjectified through de-valuing their professional skills, determining poor language skills, and assuming a culture-specific lack of self-reliance at work. This is understood as a justification for placing them in apprenticeships and assisting positions in the vocational care system in Germany. At the same time positive othering is used to construct suitability for basic care work through the narrative of a culture of respecting for the elderly.

The biopolitical strategy of using foreign workers to solve the care problem of the German population is put into actual care practices through expectations of a certain care performance by these workers connected to their assumed cultural backgrounds. Media articles describe that migrant workers provide and embody devoted eldercare when covering basic tasks while displaying positive emotions and offering physical contact. These descriptions of migrants' care performances reiterate the image of Asian respect for the elderly that is assumed to be essential to their individuality. Media portrayals of migrants' care performances reproduce social boundaries within a globalized world. Those boundaries can be found in the systematic de-valuation of migrants' professional skills that does not allow them to adopt superior positions in the care system. Hence, the othering of recruited workers fosters their economic exploitation in the German care system. The contradictions of the recruitment programs are to be solved on the individual level of migrants, who have to deal with risks of this migration form, like de-skilling and low wages.

Note

- 1 In 2013, the German Federal Agency for Work concluded a recruitment project with the Chinese labor administration to employ 150 Chinese eldercare workers in Germany. The Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology between 2012 and 2016 executed a pilot project to recruit 200 care workers in Vietnam. About 450 workers from the Philippines have been recruited since 2013 under the auspices of the 'Triple Win Nurses' project initiated by the German Central Foreign and Specialist Recruitment of the Federal Employment Agency and the German Society for International Cooperation.

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