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DOING AND UNDOING DIFFERENCE THROUGH CHILDCARE. A CASE FROM A VIENNESE KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract

In recent years, both ‘integration’ and ‘diversity’ have become catchwords of policies and expert discourses concerning daycare institutions in Austria. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this working paper examines how kindergarten staff translate competing invocations of equality and difference into pedagogical practices within a largely state-financed kindergarten in Vienna, Austria. By tracing how the staff’s perception of a five-year-old boy changed in association with their idea that his sister was forced into marriage, my analysis illustrates how ethnic and religious labels are situationally foregrounded and silenced. In this process, constructions of cultural difference both merge and compete with other categories like age, gender and race, as well as ideals of professionalism and psychologically-informed conceptions of crisis. While the paper reflects how ascriptions of difference change over time, it also shows how hierarchies are reproduced throughout this process, continuously normalising a child’s experiences of marginalisation. It illustrates that an approach to care practices as morally charged and potentially ambivalent processes of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing differences’ contributes productively to a perspective on care as social organisation.

¹ Anna Ellmer is currently *uni:docs fellow* at the University of Vienna. An earlier version of this paper was presented and discussed at the summer school ‘Kinship and Politics. Undoing the Boundaries’ at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (ZiF) of Bielefeld University. I want to thank all the participants, especially Susan McKinnon, for their inspiring comments and questions. The paper also benefited greatly from the insightful comments of two anonymous reviewers. Moreover, I want to thank Tatjana Thelen, Evangelos Karagiannis, Christof Lammer, Nina Haberland, Astrid Baerwolf, Gerti Seiser, Milo Strauß, Deniz Seebacher and Ilona Grabmaier, as well as the participants of the Graduate Workshop at the Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. All of them took the time to discuss earlier versions of this paper with me. Many thanks also go to Irtefa Binte-Farid and her students at the University of Virginia, who diligently read and reflected on this paper during my visit there. Finally, I want to warmly thank kindergarten staff, children and families who welcomed me into their kindergarten groups and homes and invested considerable time and energy in my research.

Introduction: slipping into shoes and categories

On a cold but sunny day, the cramped hallway was noisy as 20 children tried to get ready to go out into the garden, struggling with their thick winter clothes. While some were already fully dressed, others were still fooling around and had not even put on one shoe. Johanna, the ‘pedagogue’² responsible for the ‘Rainbow Group’, was gently prompting them to hurry up, helping the younger ones slip into their boots and jackets. When everyone else was already on the way out, two boys held back, sitting on the wardrobe benches in their jackets but still without shoes. Five-year-old Sami asked me to help him put on his. I sat down next to him and tried, step by step, to help him to put on his own shoes. This process took some time, as Sami got distracted and repeatedly pronounced, in a dramatic tone, ‘I can’t do this. I just can’t!’ When Johanna came by, she said laughingly, ‘It’s not so easy to keep from thinking “Well, the youngest son of an Arab family, hm?”’ She paused and then added: ‘You know that I am only joking, right?’ Meanwhile, Sami continued to struggle with his shoes and four-year-old Karim was silently sitting next to me, waiting. When Sami was finally fully dressed and had run out into the yard, I asked Karim if he also needed my help and he nodded. As Johanna passed us again on her way out, she commented in an earnest tone: ‘Karim actually learned to do it himself half a year ago, but I think he needs the attention at the moment.’

This scene allows for a short glimpse of the intricacies that characterise categorisation in everyday situations in a kindergarten³. Johanna’s reaction to Sami’s request for help expressed considerable ambivalence. Implicitly referring to Sami’s parents being immigrants from Sudan, Johanna associated the boy’s behaviour with a stereotypical image of the spoiled youngest son of an ‘Arab’ family. However, at the same moment when she expressed this categorisation, she also negated it by declaring it a joke – a move particularly telling in what it took for granted: that we both knew that associating children’s behaviour with ethnic labels was considered morally and pedagogically wrong. A few moments later, on the other hand,

² In Austria the designation ‘pedagogue’ (*Pädagoge/Pädagogin*) is commonly used for professionals working in kindergarten. In Austrian German this term has no negative connotation. The term ‘kindergarten’ is generally used for day-care institutions attended by children before the age of six. The last kindergarten year is mandatory, but most children start to attend kindergarten before. In contrast to other countries, there is no separation between nurseries, preschool and kindergarten in Austria.

³ Most Austrian kindergartens are comprised of several ‘kindergarten groups’ made up of children of mixed ages. Each group is generally assigned to one ‘lead pedagogue’, while additional pedagogues and assistants often switch between groups. Children mostly remain with the same group during their years in kindergarten. Often the groups are assigned colors or symbols from ‘nature’ like the ‘Rainbow Group’, ‘Ladybug Group’, the ‘Bear Group’, the ‘Sunflower Group’ and the like.

Johanna did *not* relate Karim's reliance upon help to his parents being immigrants from Iran. Stressing psychological instead of ethnic concepts, she framed his behaviour as an expression of his emotional needs. Distancing this situation from the somewhat awkward ambiguity of the previous one, Johanna voiced this explanation in a tone signalling prudent assessment and clarification. Just as moral claims regarding the categorisation of children's actions became manifest in the scene, the invocation and immediate revocation of the ethnic ascription also hinted at how pedagogical practice is, in this regard, actually pervaded by ambivalences.

Like putting on shoes, categorisation is a mundane yet potentially tricky business. Tracing the complexities of kindergarten staff's relationship with Sami and his family, this working paper sheds light on this morally charged practice and its changing dynamics. By way of a fine-grained ethnographic portrayal of the institutional politics of difference and belonging, it examines processes of constructing, reworking and undoing differences in everyday practices in child care institutions, which are increasingly expected to promote both equality and diversity. My endeavor is inspired by and critically engages with Stefan Hirschauer's (2014) recent theorisation of practices of 'un/doing differences' and his call to empirically study the contingent interplay and competition of a wide range of differences and their potentially changing and gradual social (ir)relevance.

It is not news that social categories do not exist in isolation but gain social significance in relation to one another. Their interdependence has been on the agenda of the social sciences – and particularly of feminist scholars – since the late 1980s. But approaches that have been developed under the banners of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989, Winkler & Degele 2009) or 'doing difference' (West & Fenstermaker 1995) still usually focus on the entanglement of assorted 'axes of inequality' – most prominently gender, race, and class, often complemented with an 'embarrassed "etc."' at the end of the list' (Butler 2007 [1999]: 196). However, as Hirschauer (2014: 180f.) notes, zooming in on a handful of 'key' differences makes it difficult to fully grasp the contingency of processes in which multiple differences situationally intertwine or compete with one another. Not only the potential situational relevance of other modes of differentiation tends to be lost sight of, but also the possibility of the insignificance or an 'undoing' of a researcher's 'differences of choice'.

This paper traces how, in the eyes of staff, a particular child's conduct became tied up with cultural difference while other children's did not. It illustrates that the social importance of the ethnic stereotypes alluded to in the introductory vignette is both constituted through and also limited by their relation to multiple other markers of difference that get assigned bigger

or smaller roles within kindergarten life, such as age, race, gender, religion, modernity or psychological state. The nuanced ethnographic portrayal of their complex interplay furthermore points at the importance of an explicit engagement with the ambivalence of processes of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ differences. Considering the example of the introductory vignette, it seems difficult to pinpoint the exact implications of an ironic act of categorisation that has been granted presence through its negation. Was Johanna ‘doing’ or ‘undoing’ cultural difference, or engaged in both processes at the same time? While pointing out limitations on the institutional power assigned to explicit ethnic labels, it simultaneously allows for their manifestation. Following Sami’s story beyond the cloakroom, the paper engages with the contingency and temporality of processes of making and unmaking difference. It maps how the differences ascribed to children and their families are malleable, how they are made to be different things at varying points in time and how these things situationally contradict but also complement one another.

As elusive as they might be, practices of categorisation are still neither random nor inconsequential. As Boris Nieswand (2017: 1717) emphasizes, institutions promote and delimit processes of doing and undoing differences through specific institutional purposes, regulations, routines and infrastructures, and therefore contribute to the stability and continuity of some ways of doing difference and to the precariousness of others. This paper thus also reflects on how patterns of categorisation in pedagogical practice are entangled with relevant policies, organisational resources and pedagogical expert knowledge. Additionally, it aims to grasp the intended and unintended consequences these processes entail, especially regarding the question of who is understood to need and/or deserve care and support and who is not. Put otherwise: whose shoelaces do kindergarten staff decide to tie willingly, whose under protest, and whose not at all? As pedagogues and their assistants answer such questions, they establish practices of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ differences that they deem pedagogically and morally appropriate, thereby engaging in complex processes of inclusion and marginalisation.

The first section of the paper provides insight into the organisation of the Rainbow Group as part of an Austrian day care institution and sketches some of the challenges and dilemmas that staff faces due to this institution’s specific layout, its official diversity policies and pedagogical ideals. At the heart of the paper, then, are two stories. Initially, it will focus on how children in the Rainbow Group constructed difference and hierarchy, how Sami was implied in this and how pedagogues dealt or did not deal with these dynamics. A subsequent interlude will focus on an internship Sami’s sister, Safiya, did in the Rainbow Group while

training as a social pedagogue. After discussing how kindergarten staff made sense of this young woman's upcoming marriage to her cousin in Sudan, the paper will then elaborate how this fed into an increasing perception of the boy's behaviour as rooted in cultural difference. Given the ambivalent status of references to ethnicity, however, pedagogues also constructed psychological interpretations of Sami's concerns and situationally prioritised them. The final section of the paper discusses continuities and divergences between these explanatory modes and reflects on the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics they entail.⁴

Juggling 'integration' and 'diversity' in kindergarten

While care for young children in Austria was for a long time mostly relegated to the familial domain, in recent years it has increasingly been defined as a joint task of public institutions and families. In 2010, kindergarten was made mandatory for the year before a child in Austria starts school. The state's increased engagement in childcare has been routinely legitimised by representing kindergarten as a guarantor of 'equal opportunities' and a potent means for the 'integration' of children of immigrants. With lamentations of an alleged 'failure of multiculturalism' common among politicians from diverse ideological camps in Europe (Vertovec & Wessendorf: 2010), migrant family's supposed need for compensatory educational measures has specifically become a leitmotif of public debates regarding kindergarten in Austria.⁵ Having been legally upgraded from 'supporting' families to 'supplementing' them (Seyss-Inquart 2011), kindergarten is seen as capable of neutralising social and cultural differences and of producing a sense of belonging to the nation-state. At the same time, recently-established national and local standards for pedagogic practice in kindergarten also normatively conceptualise child care institutions as spaces of 'diversity', where differences are to be respected and celebrated (ibid: 32, Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009: 3)⁶. Those who provide institutional

⁴ The material presented and discussed here stems from six months of intense ethnographic fieldwork in this kindergarten in 2016 as well as a series of occasional visits and interviews which I conducted in 2017. Participant observation in everyday activities of the kindergarten was the methodological centerpiece of the project, complemented by interviews and informal talks with children and their families outside the institution.

⁵ This discursive connection of childcare and migration is by no means specific to Austria but also appears in other European countries. See e.g. Bundgaard & Gulløv 2008 on Denmark, Kuhn 2013: 17-20 on Germany.

⁶ The guidelines lay out a basic theoretical framework and pedagogical orientation. The local Viennese *Bildungsplan* was published by the municipal authorities of the City of Vienna in 2006. The national *Bildungs-RahmenPlan*, published in 2009, is the product of a collaboration of experts from the *Charlotte Bühler Institut* with experts appointed by the provincial governments and the ministry for education. The *Charlotte Bühler Institut*, which is strongly anchored in developmental psychology, is one of the important players in practice-oriented early childhood research in Austria.

childcare are thus confronted with what Richard Shweder (2008), regarding schools, designates as the 'equality-difference-paradox'. How respective political aspirations are translated into and navigated in everyday life was one of the crucial questions that guided my fieldwork with the Rainbow Group, one of four kindergarten groups in a primarily state-financed institution run by a large Austrian NGO⁷.

For the team of pedagogues and assistants working with the Rainbow Group, making all the children and their families feel 'at home' in the kindergarten was an important goal. Especially since the vast majority (20 out of 23) of its members had at least one parent or grandparent who had more or less recently migrated to Austria from places as diverse as Bangladesh, Iraq, Mexico, Poland, Bosnia and Turkey. Sami, the youngest son of parents who had migrated to Austria from Sudan more than 20 years before, was thus not necessarily conspicuous among this heterogeneous group of mixed-age children (3–6 years old). Johanna, the young woman mainly responsible for the Rainbow Group, was personally committed to not letting stereotypes guide her work. She tried to deal with differences in a respectful way and to pass on this attitude to the children. Johanna generally felt that her employer supported these aspirations, recounting to me how she and all her colleagues had signed a glossy brochure titled 'Simply Together' that laid out the organisation's diversity policy. Peppered with photographs of smiling children with various appearances and skin colours, it states primarily that kindergarten staff recognise and tolerate children's diversity and consider 'different religions, languages, backgrounds and biographies' a 'resource'. Translating this positive valuation of diversity into her own practice, Johanna connected it with a more general emphasis on children's individuality as an essential anchor point of 'good' pedagogical practice. In this spirit, she had named 'her' group the Rainbow Group. As she explained in a small speech at the farewell ceremony for those children who were starting school, 'each child is special and makes us who we are as a group, just like the different colours of the rainbow.'

These representational practices use common symbols of diversity management discourse like the rainbow which tend to 'individuate difference' (Ahmed & Swan 2006: 96) and imply images of harmonious pluralism. Accordingly, they present diversity as easily doable,

⁷ It is for the most part funded by subsidies from the City of Vienna. Parents generally pay a comparatively small monthly fee for meals, as well as 47 Euros per month for pedagogical offerings that exceed the basic requirements for state funding, such as additional language development support. Families with low incomes are exempted from these fees.

as the brochure's title, 'Simply Together', vividly illustrates.⁸ Instead of taking this rhetoric at face value or simply dismissing it as naïve or superficial appropriations of trendy buzzwords, this paper examines its complex reverberations. The kindergarten's staff actually strove to establish pedagogical practices based on these ideals, encountering frustrations and dilemmas along the way and generating both intended and unintended consequences.

Despite the convergence of institutionalised ideals and her personal idea of 'good pedagogy' that respects diversity and values individuality, Johanna, like many of her colleagues, often felt that neither her education nor current work environment offered much concrete guidance or room for reflection on how to realise these aspirations in everyday practice in kindergarten. Under the banner of individualisation as a core principle of 'good' pedagogical practice, state regulations and pedagogical standards explicitly refrain from specifying a clear-cut curriculum for kindergarten and allow wide leeway to kindergarten staff (Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009: 1, 3; MA 10 2006: 9). Although pedagogues generally appreciate this freedom, they also often express that they feel burdened by it. It was a widely shared view among kindergarten staff that to 'deal with differences' in a 'good' way and to promote a positive vision of diversity was a pedagogical task of essential importance. Yet, it also remained a markedly vague one in both its concrete meaning and its implementation.

Along with lack of training and clear guidelines regarding the diversity of their 'clientele', pedagogues also frequently decry poor working conditions as an obstacle. The high political hopes that have been pinned on kindergarten in recent years have in many areas not been accompanied by substantial structural reforms. From its inception in the 19th century, the profession of the kindergarten pedagogue in Austria has primarily been a transitional occupation understood to allow young women to exercise their motherly qualities before marriage (Gary 2006). In keeping with this history, it remains a feminised occupation characterised by a relatively low level of vocational, non-academic training, low salaries and prestige and a lack of opportunities for promotion⁹. In addition, kindergarten staff generally work in a noisy,

⁸ Many critics of the 'turn to diversity' as a meta-narrative in management and government have reflected on these tendencies (Ahmed & Swan 2006: 96, Matejskova & Antonsich 2015, Eriksen 2006: 21, 23-4). Prasad & Mills (1997) provide a critique of diversity management's penchant of presenting its goals as easily attainable.

⁹ That many pedagogues do not envision a life-long career in kindergarten, as Gary (2006) observes, was also apparent among the women I worked with during fieldwork. Their professional biographies often followed two patterns. On the one hand, those women who had started to work in kindergarten at a young age (often at 19), mostly came from lower-middle-class non-migrant families and were almost always actively building a path towards a career beyond pedagogical work in a kindergarten, either by obtaining other degrees or by striving to become a kindergarten director. On the other hand, most of the older pedagogues I got to know –

highly stressful and challenging environment. Two adults (one pedagogue, one assistant) look after up to 25 children of mixed age in confined spatial conditions.¹⁰

Still, I argue that it is not only a lack of resources and education or a low level of standardisation that engenders uncertainty regarding how to ‘do diversity’ in kindergarten: ‘integration’, ‘equal opportunities’ and ‘diversity’ are themselves potentially ambivalent goals. The prevalent emphasis on the individual within pedagogical discourses concerning early childhood, and especially the pervasive importance of ‘child-centredness’ as a guiding pedagogical principle in relevant global policies and expert discourses (cf. Miller Marsh 2003, Adriany & Warin 2014), seem particularly relevant here. As Erica Burman (2017 [1994]: 252) points out, ‘child-centred’ pedagogy in elementary education has, since World War II, become ‘synonymous with the creation and maintenance of a democratic, free and open society which could foster independence of thought and action’. In this spirit, the pedagogical guidelines of the organisation that runs the Rainbow Group’s kindergarten present putting ‘the child in the centre’ as one of its key principles. National and local standards furthermore draw an image of children as ‘autonomous’ (MA 10 2006: 10) and ‘competent individuals’ (Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009: 1) and emphasize their uniqueness as the essential starting point of the pedagogical ‘accompaniment’ they should receive in order to realise their ‘inner potential’ (ibid.: 3, 10, MA 10 2006: 30). The notion of children’s individuality serves both as a starting point and as a goal within these sketches of ‘good’ pedagogical practice.

This stress on individuality also pervades conceptualisations of diversity as another key principle of institutional child care. Defining it as a resource for learning processes, the national education plan for kindergarten notes, that ‘diversity refers to individual differences’, listing ‘gender, skin colour, physical abilities, ethnic belonging and social origin’ (Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009: 4, my translation) as examples of diversity-relevant individual traits¹¹. This formulation echoes a central tension within pedagogical discourses: they stress children’s individuality, but also highlight the importance of their social embeddedness and most prominently their kinship relations.

many of them migrants –had had trained for and begun to kindergarten work later in life. In many cases because their degrees in (school)teaching, engineering, accounting or other areas, which they had obtained in their countries of origin, were deemed inadequate in Austrian.

¹⁰ A minimum of 3 m² per child (see <https://www.wien.gv.at/recht/landesrecht-wien/rechtvorschriften/html/s2600100.htm>)

¹¹ For similar discourses in local guidelines published by the City of Vienna, see the document entitled ‘We are living diversity’ (‘Wir leben Vielfalt’): <https://www.wien.gv.at/bildung/kindergarten/pdf/diversitaet.pdf>

On the one hand, the image of children's autonomy is foregrounded. On the other, the institution of kindergarten and its pedagogical endeavor are fundamentally rooted in the assumption that children are inherently dependent on adult care and supervision. Accordingly, children's 'individual needs' and 'potentials' are also understood to emerge from their specific relationships to their 'primary caregivers', a role generally assumed to be filled by parents. Emphasizing children's autonomy and unique personalities, they are seen as separate entities. But their individuality is also conceived of as a product of families that are understood to bear and convey social and cultural belonging. That 'good cooperation' with parents is – under the banner of 'educational partnership' – assumed to represent an important precondition for the provision of 'good' care within the institution reflects the high importance assigned to children's kin ties (Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009: 4; MA 10 2006: 32). And yet, while respect for diverse ways of being a family is a central claim, children's relations to kin are also perceived as a potential source of problems and a possible infringement of their 'equal opportunities'. Such perspectives establish a split between the seemingly unproblematic production of 'proper' individuals in the 'private' realm of some families and the need for institutional intervention and compensatory measures in others, in order to promote 'integration' and 'break... the "negative social heritage"' (as Bundgaard & Olwig (2017: 212) put it regarding similar tendencies in Denmark).¹²

Pedagogical policies and principles are thus characterised by a complex interplay of values revolving around individuality and relatedness as well as difference and equality – which can converge but also come into tension with one another. This raises the question of when diversity is seen as valuable 'individual difference' and when as problematic and requiring intervention in the name of equality. In their professional everyday lives, kindergarten staff situationally legitimize, but also contest pedagogical practices in reference to these values. 'Diversity work' (Ahmed & Swan 2006) in the Rainbow Group could thus entail many different and potentially contradictory practices. It could mean pointing out the precious uniqueness of every child in the context of a farewell celebration, but also recounting proudly to me how one girl had announced, 'my parents are foreigners (*Ausländer*), but I am Austrian'.

¹² As in other countries, debates within media and politics often build upon paternalistic perspective on language and integration, stressing migrant children's supposedly lacking German skills as a major factor reproducing social inequalities. Current plans of the Austrian government to ban veils for children in kindergartens and schools in the name of integration and equality also strike the same chord.

In the hustle of bustle of everyday life in kindergarten, staff decide which of the manifold ways of ‘doing differences’ they detect are worth celebrating, which ones to silently accept, and which ones to problematise and possibly try to ‘undo’, thereby engaging themselves in complex and manifold practices of ‘un/doing differences’ (Hirschauer 2014). As Nieswand (2017: 1718) puts it: ‘how to select, construct, order, prioritize and hierarchize’ categories is ‘a practical problem for which social actors have to find solutions’. I have illustrated that they do so in circumstances characterised by limited resources, manifold societal expectations and potentially ambivalent moral claims regarding equality and difference. In the rest of this paper, shifting the focus to the case of Sami will allow for a more comprehensive ethnographic examination of these processes.

Sami’s story: Part I: ‘Sami isn’t one of the big ones yet’

It was during my second week of fieldwork, late in the winter of 2016, in the afternoon, when I sat on a couch watching a group of five children from the Rainbow Group, all of them five or six years old, playing in the entrance hall of their kindergarten. Right from the start, it was clear that Younès had the power to decide what and how the group played. He gave instructions; the others followed. The children continued playing a game they had already developed before: Sami, the youngest, had to close his eyes and count while the others hid a small toy car. Sami then had to try to find the car before an hourglass ran out. But the other children actively hindered Sami from finding it by sending him to look in all sorts of places except for where the car was. When Sami approached the hiding place, they lined up in front of it and told him, ‘No, not here, this is a restricted area.’ When the time ran out, they laughed at Sami and mocked him: ‘You’re not able to do anything, Sami, you can’t even find something.’ When I asked why they played in a way that made it impossible for Sami to find the car, Nalini simply said, ‘That’s because Sami is not our friend’. Sami did not react and they went on playing.

Soon they started to develop another game, but Sami’s position did not change much. Younès stated that they would hold a race now and started to run in circles. The others followed and Younès won. For the second race, Younès had already specified starting positions for everyone and announced loudly: ‘I’m first, second is Nalini, third is Aleks, fourth is Emre’. The children took the positions assigned to them, but when Sami placed himself right next to Younès, the latter sent him away, declaring ‘You’re the last to start, because you’re

not a preschool child (*Vorschulkind*). You are five, but you are not a preschool child. We are preschool children. You're the last'. Sami was relegated to the end of the line on the grounds that he was slightly younger than the others, who were all starting school the following year. Sami did not protest, went to the back and asked: 'Is this okay?' As they started the race and Nalini tried to overtake Younès, the latter immediately stated a new rule shouting: 'Foul, foul! You didn't stay in your place. Foul! You're out!' Not only did the children start in a predetermined order, they now also had to remain in this order during the race. As the boys went on running in circles, they began to introduce elements of Mario Kart¹³ into the game. They started to use an imaginary boost to accelerate, planted invisible bombs that exploded noisily (enthusiastically making appropriate sound effects) and threw imaginary banana peels on the racecourse to obstruct other contestants. Younès roared 'Sami slipped on the banana peel!' The children all laughed.

The children were engaged in enacting a 'competition' based on rules that ensured that the one who actually made the rules could always claim pole position. This seemed especially ironic to me considering that national law specifically states that the goal of kindergarten is to offer 'all children... the best chances for a start into their future professional life, independently of their socio-economic background'¹⁴. As I flipped through my field notes a few weeks later, I saw a pattern emerging: Sami was frequently relegated to frustrating positions or outright excluded by other children from games and activities. A consensus among 'the preschool children' that Sami's position was a subordinate one became particularly evident in the course of a conflict between two girls. They started to rearrange the personal bins where each child kept drawings and small belongings. The girls originally wanted to mark their dispute by putting distance between their own bins, but quickly realised that it was fun to rearrange them and started to work together in an attempt to reorganise them all in a way that they found meaningful. They came up with a mode of differentiation based on two categories of central importance to the organisation of children's everyday life, age and gender: the first column was for 'the little ones', the second for 'big boys' and the third for 'big girls'. Along the way, the two girls stopped talking about bins and went along simply using the children's

¹³ Mario Kart is a famous series of go-kart style racing video games developed and published by Nintendo. Its first version was published in the 1990s. I myself played it as a child, placing bombs and banana peels on racetracks in order to obstruct my competitors (Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, and the like). Nowadays, children play advanced versions of the game on home consoles and portable devices, but bombs and banana peels have remained essential tools in the race.

¹⁴ <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20006448>

names. They were no longer sorting bins, but people. Subsequently, they expanded their system, as they decided that it was also of importance who was on the top shelf, who was further down, and which boy was next to which girl. As the two girls proudly showed their 'work' to Emre, Aleks and Younès, making adjustments here and there, the children stated several times that nobody wanted to be 'near Sami', whose bin they had put on the bottom of the 'big boy's' column. When Sami simply took his bin and put it somewhere in the middle, the others protested loudly, immediately took it out again and put it at back on the bottom shelf. Sami complained for a moment but quickly gave up and left the scene.

As I started to get a clearer picture of how children in the Rainbow Group created and played with hierarchy in mundane situations and interactions, I also noted that this mostly remained a sideshow to the turmoil of a day in kindergarten, for the children, for staff and for me. When I asked Andrea, a young pedagogue who worked with this group several times a week, if Sami's position in the group was generally difficult, she was not surprised by the question, explaining that 'Last year, we had exactly the same situation with Younès. He was always playing with the preschool children, but was excluded a lot. And well, now, Sami too, he will only become a preschool child next year.' Andrea's explanation built on the same categorisation that five year-old Younès had used to legitimise why Sami had to be the last child to start the race: the status of being a 'preschool child'.

Who counts as a 'preschool child' and who does not is linked to the national compulsory education law, which states that all children turning six before the first of September in a given year must start school that same year.¹⁵ Having been born in autumn, Sami was close in age to most 'pre-schoolers', but did not fall into the category yet. Its concrete meaning for the children relies on its constant invocation in pedagogical discourse and its translation into everyday interactions in kindergarten by adults. Expert discourses, guidelines and policies concerning kindergarten all emphasize how important it is to 'strengthen the basic skills' of 'preschool children' in holistic and playful learning processes and to vigorously support them during their transition towards becoming a 'school child', which is understood to be a particularly sensitive phase of a child's development (Charlotte Bühler Institut 2009, MA 10 2006). In everyday situations and interactions in kindergarten, this general pedagogical mission is translated into specific expectations and privileges. 'Preschool children' are expected to par-

¹⁵ <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009576>

ticipate in the ‘morning circle’¹⁶ and, for example, are often given the chance to speak before all the other kids during collective activities. They are also sometimes allowed to do certain activities without adult supervision. Children are proud of being a ‘preschool child’. However, this status is also frequently referred to when ‘big kids’ are scolded, as when pedagogues tell them ‘You have to listen, you have to manage it. Next year you will be in school and there you have to sit still and listen for much longer.’

When the children appropriate the category of the ‘preschool child’ and make use of it in the production and legitimation of hierarchies among them, they thus apply an institutionalised and well-accepted form of age-based differentiation. Concerning similar dynamics in Danish day care institutions, Karen Fog Olwig (2017: 87) – drawing on Meyer Fortes – aptly characterises the kindergarten community as an ‘age grade system, where cohorts of children... advance to a more prestigious higher grade’.¹⁷ In this vein, Johanna later reflected in an interview that ‘I know Sami wanted to be part of it... but that didn’t have much significance for me because he didn’t have that category of the preschool children yet.’ Accordingly, occasional reflections about how to improve Sami’s situation were restricted to pondering how he could have more contact with ‘children his own age’. Overall, the pedagogues did not consider the hierarchy based on being or not being a ‘preschool child’ to be a problem they needed to take charge of.

Still, the pedagogues did not completely refrain from action – they sometimes told children to stop excluding Sami when he complained about it and they intervened when conflicts turned physical – with situationally more or less immediate but no lasting effects. Above all, the pedagogues involved felt obliged to interfere when children used racial slurs. Subsequent attempts to counter and delegitimise children’s constructions of racial difference, however, were themselves ambivalent, as the following section illustrates.

Sami’s story – Part II: Of ‘brown skin’, ‘purple blood’ and ‘strange smells’

Children mostly referred to well-established and accepted ways of ‘doing difference’ when creating social distance between themselves and Sami. At times, however, they also assigned

¹⁶ ‘Circle time’ is one of the most important rituals in early childhood education (Kuhn 2013: 183-5) In the Rainbow Group the ‘morning circle’ took place several times most weeks (though not every day) and was usually the only time when all the children gathered together for collective activities like singing, didactic talks or games.

¹⁷ See also Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman 1991 for similar dynamics in Israeli kindergartens.

to him the position of a racialised other, – making use of selected (real and imagined) bodily traits as means of his subordination and exclusion (Wacquant 2001: 73) and told Sami that they didn't want to play with him 'because you are so brown'. Johanna's reactions to such instances were disciplinary and didactic. She recounted one such case in which she had 'summoned the children and gone a little berserk', telling them 'very clearly' that this was 'an absolute no-go' and that she 'absolutely [didn't] want something like this in [her] group', adding that 'they stopped after that, at least openly.' At another occasion when I was present, it became clear that the issue had not been resolved and that the children approached it in ambiguous ways. During a conversation with Nalini, one of the 'preschool children', Johanna pointed out that they had recently learned about equality when they had talked about children's rights. Nalini interjected, 'But Sami is different, he is brown!' In the following conversation, Nalini flatly denied that her own skin was also brown and informed us, that, moreover, Sami's blood was not red "'like ours' but purple. In response to Johanna's comment that we 'all have our heart at the same spot' and should thus 'show consideration for each other', Nalini pointed out that often other children were not nice to her.

Johanna and her colleagues interpreted racist statements as transgressions of a moral boundary and saw it as their professional duty to make children understand that they crossed a line when they disparaged other children on the basis of their skin colour. As the issue recurred, it was usually handled by referring more or less patiently to former conversations. Pedagogues told the children involved, sometimes in an annoyed tone, 'You know that it's not right to say something like that', or 'We have talked about how it is not okay to speak to other children like that, so stop it'. What was problematised was the act of saying something morally reprehensible; what remained unaddressed was the act of exclusion and the larger power dynamic it represented. Pedagogues handled acts of racism as individual missteps rather than as an aspect of more extensive practices of claiming power and marking difference that children were not only sporadically but continuously and collectively engaged in.

Not only did the children, time and again, resist their didactic appeals, but the pedagogue's interventions themselves partially confirmed the boundaries that children had drawn. When, in the course of conflicts, children claimed that 'Sami stinks', the pedagogues understood this along the same lines as negative references to his skin colour. Yet, they tried to debunk a racialised understanding of Sami's characteristics by explaining the alleged difference as an effect of his family's specific practices and presenting them in a positive light. Andrea, for example, explained that Sami 'smells different because his family cooks differently'; Jo-

hanna told the children, that Sami smelled like frankincense and added ‘You might find that strange, but it is something very special and I actually like that smell’. While trying to ‘undo’ racialised categorisations, the pedagogues thus shifted the question of Sami’s alterity to the register of cultural difference. They attempted to ‘tame’ the difference by associating it with emblems of ‘good’ diversity like ‘cooking’ and ‘special’ sensory experiences. The labelling of Sami as ‘the other’, differing from an unmarked ‘we’, was thereby left intact and even reinforced.¹⁸

As Johanna and I discussed this topic a few months later, she further reflected how she had taken charge of children’s use of racialised difference. In retrospect, she felt like she hadn’t really taken it seriously. One of the reasons for that, she explained, was that the involved children’s appearance did not match her idea of what racism ‘looks like’. As she put it, ‘Sami doesn’t look so different from half of the other children who said these things to him’. A narrow idea of racism as something *white* people do to *black* people thus also fed into the normalisation of power relations among the children.

So far, I have pointed out that children in the Rainbow Group constructed, reworked and played with both accepted and problematised categorisations and, in doing so, constructed a social order in which some children claimed powerful positions, while others – in this case Sami – often had to navigate frustrating ones. Although the kindergarten staff were not unaware of this hierarchy, it was still not defined as an object of deep pedagogical concern. At times, Johanna worried, like Andrea, that the conflict-ridden dynamic between the children might be reproducing itself year after year. But she promptly discarded the thought, adding that it was ‘idiotic’ to think like that ‘because it means to no longer grant individuality to each child.’ That kindergarten staff largely refrained from interpreting children’s disputes and experiences of exclusion as aspects of a collective social process was thus also related to the large importance assigned to ‘child-centredness’ and its emphasis on ‘individuality’. As Erica Burman (2017 [1994]) points out, the unintended effect of the programmatic ideal of a focus on ‘individual children’ often turns out to be the perpetuation of inequalities and patterns of difference.

The child-centred approach to education also confronts pedagogues with a dilemma between their own institutional position as responsible adults on the one hand, and ‘the man-

¹⁸ In their work on the production of social distinctions in Danish day care institutions, Bundgaard and Gulløv (2006: 148) likewise point out, drawing on de Certeau, that attempts to foster understanding and thus ‘build bridges’, can in effect facilitate ‘frontiers’ and emphasize difference.

date for non-interference to promote independence' (ibid.: 253) on the other hand. The latter is evident in a widespread preference among pedagogues for letting children resolve conflicts themselves.¹⁹ In addition, the pressures of working with a group of so many children clearly also play a role in this regard, as in kindergarten each event is always only one among several matters simultaneously demanding a pedagogue's attention. Nonetheless, which issues they prioritise and take charge of and how they do so is not an accident. They classify some ways of 'doing difference' as more acceptable than others. In Sami's case, the children's construction of hierarchy was met and closely interwoven with a specific logic of pedagogical intervention and inaction that enabled the pedagogues involved to situationally support Sami while at the same time normalising the power relations between the children.

Pedagogues do not, however, only take decisions about which ways of 'playing with hierarchy' they deem normal or problematic. They necessarily also engage in categorisation of children and families as they navigate the challenges of their professional practice. That Sami's situation eventually did attract more attention from staff during the following weeks was related to such a process of categorisation, which particularly gained momentum when Sami's sister, Safiya, started an internship in the Rainbow Group. While cultural difference had barely been a topic between the children, it now turned into a core element of staff's perception of Sami's concerns. In contrast to appreciative references to their culinary and other practices, his family now became associated with negative images.

An interlude: Safiya's getting married

On the first day of Safiya's internship, it was obvious that her presence in the kindergarten caused uneasiness, and I heard sceptical comments and doubts from everyone working in Sami's group that day. Staff described the young woman as if she was a spy for her family 'who constantly complains about everything,' as one of the pedagogues put it. As I learned later from the women in Safiya's family during my first visit to their home, the feeling of being critically observed and scrutinised was mutual. They told me that when they dropped off or picked up Sami, they felt that any hint of a bad mood was noticed and interpreted as a sign

¹⁹ Two of the main tenants of 'child-centredness' are the ideal of the pedagogue as a provider of context or guidance rather than instruction or regulation of the child and a strong focus on 'free' play, understood as the best and benign way of enjoyable, self-directed and voluntary learning. (Burman 2017 [1994]: 253-5)

that something was ‘terribly wrong at home’. The father, on the other hand, felt that he was ignored or treated like a nuisance.²⁰

Still, in the following two weeks, Safiya’s internship took a different, and much more amicable course than everyone had expected. It was of great importance to this turn of events that Safiya shared her plans to move to Sudan after her upcoming graduation and marry her cousin, first with Johanna, and subsequently with most of her other co-workers and myself. While Safiya was obviously proud of and excited about these plans and spoke openly about them, she was clearly also aware of suspicions and felt it necessary to explain her decision, and especially why she was going to marry her cousin. She repeatedly stated that she knew that cousin marriage is illegal in Austria (which is a common misconception) and that it might seem strange to her colleagues and me. In contrast, in Sudan, she said, it is allowed and normal. When talking about Sudanese marriage customs, however, she also deliberately distanced herself from polygamy and stressed that she would ‘never, ever’ accept it if her husband wanted to marry a second wife.

Safiya made an effort to legitimise what was perceived as ‘strange’ by talking about and explaining her marriage in the ‘public’ space of kindergarten. This act of ‘publication’ point out how her situation as an intern in the day care centre was defined by a paradox: by signalling her awareness and comprehension of cultural differences she claimed a position as a ‘good’ and ‘modern’ citizen – a position from which she could tell her story and to which her counterparts could relate. Yet, at the same time she was also constructing a perspective on her marriage plans as profoundly ‘different’. This ambivalence of familiarity and alterity was strongly emphasized in how Verena, one of the pedagogues, recounted a conversation she had with Safiya during an outing with the kids

I was really surprised how open she was. I mean, somehow, I still find it really shocking, that she will go back to Sudan, but we talked about it in a completely normal way. And, yeah, she is marrying her cousin, but she said she actually knows

²⁰ He repeatedly told me that staff often did not greet him in the morning. He generally felt that they did not acknowledge him as the engaged father and citizen as which he saw himself. He was proud of being someone who fought for pedestrian crossings on the children’s way to school, advocated for his son’s concerns in kindergarten, and reported to staff that a child was playing with a toy machine gun in the hallway in violation of kindergarten policy, etc. Sami’s parents felt that their relationship with the institution had considerably deteriorated since Sami had had an accident in kindergarten the year before, triggering a series of conflicts during which they had felt brushed aside.

that this is not so normal in Austria. So, somehow, that was really interesting for me.

Safiya's marriage plans subsequently became a topic that attracted kindergarten staff's attention, which they discussed casually during coffee breaks and other scarce moments of quiet during the kindergarten's daily routine. For my part, I first heard about Safiya's plan from one of the pedagogues, who introduced her announcement with a pronounced 'Oh my God'. She then summarised that Safiya would move to Sudan and be 'married off there' ('und dort verheiratet wird'), using a formulation that implies that the primary agent behind this marriage was not Safiya herself but someone else.

Subsequently, kindergarten staff closely scrutinised what Safiya said and did. Contradictions in her statements concerning her professional plans were interpreted as signs that she did not really want to go to Sudan, while her style of dress and hijab – as well as her views concerning premarital romance and proper gender roles in marriage – became topics of staff's conversations and were presented to me as very 'conservative'. At the end of Safiya's internship the common interpretation of Safiya's marriage had been sharpened. I realised this when the director of the kindergarten told me during a conversation about her attempts to help families in difficult situations 'There are points where I have to accept that I cannot change anything. For example, when I hear now from my employees that Sami's sister is forced into marriage, I feel like I should do something... but what can I do to help? I don't know.' As staff had discussed Safiya's situation and passed on information, the rather vague formulation that Safiya was being 'married off' to her Sudanese cousin had grown into a clear evocation of force. The perspective on her marriage plans as foreign and disturbing culminated in a direct denial of her agency in regard to her life and its whereabouts. And, as I realised, this interpretation was surprisingly robust, with doubts and interjections rather easily cast aside.

In one conversation, I mentioned, for example, that Safiya's mother had told me that she considered her daughter rather young for marriage and was, for several reasons, also sceptical of marriage among kin. Still, she felt that she had to respect her daughter's wishes, saying 'you can't stand in the way of love.' These considerations built on the same values that implicitly and explicitly defined kindergarten staff's interpretation of the situation: 'maturity', 'individual will' and 'romantic love', a range of ideals which, understood as opposites of social obligation, have become closely intertwined with dominant notions of 'modernity' and corresponding ideals of a 'good' marriage (Wardlow & Hirsch 2006, Collier 1997). B for kin-

dergarten staff this convergence of perspectives was no reason to doubt their assessment of Safiya's family. Instead, one pedagogue told me 'mothers – and this might be the same everywhere in the world – never want such a thing to be done to their child.' Based on this essentialising understanding of a 'universal' gender difference and related conceptions of motherhood, her father was understood to be the one imposing the marriage. That Safiya was not desperate, but on the contrary, openly expressed how excited she was about her upcoming wedding, was discounted as girlish naivety or an effect of some sort of long-term indoctrination.

In addition to the construction of cousin marriage as 'abnormal' or even 'forbidden' in Austria and the denial of Safiya's and her mother's claim on interlocking ideals of modernity, conjugal love and individual will, dominant Eurocentric imaginations of a 'global hierarchy of localities'²¹ also fed into the emerging interpretation of Safiya's upcoming marriage to her cousin in Sudan as forced. During a team building exercise taking place a few months later, nearly all of the women working in the day care centre who had themselves migrated to Austria as adults (more than half of the team at that time), explained their decision to leave Hungary, Slovakia, Bosnia, Turkey or Egypt by curtly stating 'I came because of my husband' or 'I came here for marriage'. The main narrative woven out of these statements was that these women had taken the difficult step of 'leaving home for love', even though one older pedagogue stated, tongue-in-cheek, 'I will not call it love, but I got married!' Hence, the idea of a women crossing borders to be with her husband described a rather common biographical trajectory among staff. Yet to reverse the direction of one's migration and move from centre to margin, as Safiya meant to do, seemed not just difficult but incomprehensible and potentially dangerous. At least to those who voiced their opinion about Safiya's future and thus shaped the dominant mode of talking about it. That this well-educated young woman would leave Austria for a life in what they perceived as a backward country²² was only intelligible to them as a matter of force, a result of female oppression and male dominance, and thus as fundamentally 'wrong'. As the director of the kindergarten put it, 'I know very well, that it is wrong that Sami's sister has to go back to Sudan. I don't need anybody to tell me that'. In stark contrast to the constraints and pressures perceived to determine Safiya's destiny, the director po-

²¹ See also Herzfeld's concept of the 'global hierarchy of value' (2004).

²² Staff expressed images of life in Sudan that ranged from a lack of medical care and basic infrastructure to statements like 'If you are a woman there and you don't obey or you say what you think, a gun only costs five euro and she's gone.'

sitioned herself as an emancipated woman, someone who thought for herself, with no need for guidance by any authority.

In the course of Safiya's internship, kindergarten staff had started to see the young woman in a new light and relations with her became much friendlier than the rather cool welcome on her first day had suggested. After she had granted insight into her 'private' life she was no longer seen as a spy, but rather as a victim in need of 'our' help. Several times members of staff assumed that one of the reasons why I was establishing a closer relationship with Sami's family was to 'help Safiya so she doesn't have to go to Sudan.' Johanna explained to me that she had written a 'very, very good evaluation' for Safiya, because she hoped that with this reference she would apply for jobs in Austria and maybe 'wouldn't have to go to Sudan'. The kindergarten director for her part had tried to 'at least do something' by describing Safiya's manifold educational possibilities in a conversation with her father but was disappointed by the outcome. As she said, 'He just shook my hand, said thank you and left.'

Safiya was perceived as a victim of problematic foreign kinship practices and gender relations. Kindergarten staff attempted to help Safiya by foregrounding her potential to be 'like them' as they saw themselves: a professional pedagogue and thus an independent woman. That she could be all this and a married woman in Sudan was not perceived as an option, regardless of Safiya's wishes. The politics of difference that kindergarten staff was engaged in was based on a straightforward dismissal of her agency, yet at the same time it engendered not exclusion but paternalistic attempts at inclusion, or, as Sherene Razack (2004: 130) puts it, 'to assist Muslims into modernity'. However, staff's safeguarding measures did not have the intended effect. Safiya did move to Sudan, got married and had a joyous wedding celebration (which I witnessed on numerous videos her family later shared with me). Nevertheless, the association of Sami's family with an image of problematic kin practices did not remain without consequences. By resuming a focus on Sami, the next part will show that while Safiya came to be seen as a subjugated woman, the related image of problematic masculinity was not only ascribed to her father. It also shaped the construction of an emerging narrative concerning her brother.

Sami's story – Part III: 'Sami talks in such a naughty way'

As members of kindergarten staff pondered Safiya's situation and tried to make sense of what they perceived as unfamiliar and 'different', references to Sami started to pop up in these

conversations. One pedagogue added to her thoughts on what she termed ‘this family’s contradictions’: ‘Sami also talks to Safiya in such a naughty way... she says that he is not allowed to play computer games at home and he looks at her with this odd look and says “Sure, I’m going to play.”’ Three weeks later, during a conversation in the garden, Johanna told me that she felt that Sami was now also showing this provocative behaviour towards her.

He has started to be really, really cheeky with me. It’s like that since Safiya was here and he sometimes spoke in such an impudent way with her and didn’t listen to her at all, rolling his eyes, answering ‘so what?’. And now he sometimes tries that with me, speaking with me in that tone, looking at me that way, this disrespectful behaviour.

As Johanna initially problematised Sami’s demeanour, she did not relate it explicitly to cultural or religious difference, but assigned it to a gendered family dynamic that she assumed was characterised by a lack of female authority and control. She imagined that Sami was granted excessive leeway, played ‘all kinds of computer games’ and ‘at home simply doesn’t have to listen to his sister’. That Sami had started to regularly exclaim that he wanted to go home was thus interpreted as a sign that he did not want to leave what she saw as a privileged position in the family. Other staff members detected a similar problem – a spoiled boy who didn’t respect women – and straightforwardly linked it to Sami being the youngest son of what they varyingly designated as an ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘migrant’ family²³. Intertwining ethnic and religious demarcations, this produced the terminological slippages which Didier Fassin (2006) associates with the production of a fixed notion of alterity through ‘racism without race’ (see also Fernando 2014: 17f). One of the assistants, who had herself migrated to Austria from North Africa and thought of herself as a well-integrated, open-minded and modern Muslim, explained that Safiya’s marriage plans were religiously motivated and emphasized how she, in contrast, thought that it was wrong to lend so much importance to religion. She then shifted her focus on Sami, adding

²³ Kindergarten staff thereby introduced categorizations that, as far as I could tell, played no role in how children had constructed Sami as ‘different’. I rarely observed children in the Rainbow Group directly alluding to ethnicity or religion, and when they did, it was mostly in rare moments of producing a positive sense of community. For example, Younès and Sami discussed during an outing how they were both ‘Arab’, but ate what they called a ‘Chinese snack’. The category of being Muslim did in general seem to be of low importance for this group of children. At one point, Younès, Emre and Sami were sitting at the table, talking about how some children were not allowed to eat specific things. The explanation they came up with were allergies. They subsequently discussed who was only allergic to pork and who was allergic to both pork and nuts.

Sami can do whatever he wants....You know, in Arab families that is how it is. The son is king and the women have to do everything for him. He is a pasha. And I think this is wrong. Why should Austrian women here in kindergarten be treated like that? And it's not good for him too. They have to learn it doesn't work like that – for later, because we live in Austria.

The assistant positioned herself as a 'cultural expert' regarding 'Arab' families, someone who intimately knew their workings but had the capacity to critically reflect and distance herself from them. Playing an important role in facilitating an interpretation of Sami's behaviour as an expression of cultural difference, she claimed a position of authority for herself²⁴, at least in the 'informal' sphere of deliberations among staff.

Sami's behaviour thus came to be explained as a consequence of his socialisation in a familial context imagined to differ profoundly from a 'proper' Austrian upbringing, specifically in the assumed prevalence of harsh gender inequality. The notion of an unbroken cultural transmission of hierarchical and clear-cut male and female roles in Sami's family located the source of Sami's perceived disregard for female authority figures in the 'private' sphere. The staff identified Sami with – and deemed him to belong to – a monolithic 'foreign' collective, his family which they perceived in turn as representing Arab/Muslim culture. At the same time, individual responsibility and agency were attributed to the boy. Understanding him to inhabit the powerful position of being male in an Arab family, they attributed to him the power to treat others – his sisters, as well as the 'Austrian women' working in kindergarten – in problematic, oppressive ways. A whole set of behaviours, ranging from rather small gestures like rolling his eyes or his reluctance to put on his shoes to fighting with other children, could be interpreted based on these assumptions. Similarly, Sami's repeated emphasis that he didn't want to be at the kindergarten but to go home was interpreted as a consequence of his socialisation in the 'private' realm of his family and its assumed culturally-specific makeup. It was not taken as a reason to critically reflect on institutional dynamics or find out what he did not like about kindergarten. It was their image of supposedly 'private' kinship relations which primarily stirred kindergarten staff's attention, not the institutionalised practices of themselves or the children.

²⁴ This is especially important to kindergarten assistants, who generally occupy a subordinate and often frustrating position at the low end of the organizational hierarchy in a kindergarten, a condition that many continuously struggle with in their everyday interactions with colleagues, superiors (pedagogues and directors), and parents.

Although perspectives that considered Sami's upbringing problematic and associated this with his family being Arab, Muslim or migrant had also been voiced at times by individual staff members before Safiya's internship, they had never triggered much discussion or attention before. During his sister's presence in the kindergarten, however, they gained considerable momentum. The image of the spoiled Arab prince who doesn't respect woman also came to shape how Johanna saw Sami, Safiya and their family. At the same time, Johanna also felt uncomfortable and found herself struggling with this understanding of Sami's behaviour that explicitly emphasized cultural difference. Unlike the celebration of emblems of positive diversity such as food, the assertion of cultural difference here implied a problematisation of what was considered different. From Johanna's perspective, this created a dilemma: in her (and her colleagues') understanding, failing to account for 'the problem' (Sami's conduct) entailed accepting an impingement on the ideal of gender equality. But its problematisation based on the assumption of cultural difference threatened the ideal of valuing cultural diversity.

The way that Johanna subsequently dealt with this dilemma was to accept the conclusion but reject the explanation. She told me 'To be honest, I was inclined to see this macho behaviour as very gendered and culturalised, and that surely resonated from the start of Safiya's internship, and I guess the way the others [her colleagues] saw it triggered that in me too. But I tried to reflect on it'. Subsequently, she continued to view Sami's conduct as problematic, but attempted to decouple it from cultural stereotypes. Instead, she came up with alternative explanations based on psychological considerations. Judging an interpretation that focused on cultural difference as an inclination that lacks reflection, she contrasted it to psychological interpretations, which she saw as the result of a process of thorough consideration. As she put it herself:

As I thought more about the situation, I came to think that the private and the institutional got mixed up and that was too much for him, as he suddenly had to negotiate his conflicts with his sister in his kindergarten. Additionally, the private situation is not easy for him with all these changes [his sister's pending marriage and relocation to Sudan].... And I think developmentally he is also in a critical phase, as crisis, as he is becoming a pre-schooler.

The last part of the paper will trace the divergences and also continuities within this ambivalent shift from the register of culture to that of psychology. While perspectives building on the

former constituted a significant but somewhat disreputable body of knowledge, the latter was perceived as more compatible with the professional ethos of a well-considered pedagogy that empathically considered every child's individual, yet universal needs. Accordingly, 'cultural expertise' largely remained contained within the sphere of 'informal' discussions among staff, while psychologically-informed explanations gained ground as Sami's situation increasingly became an 'official' topic. This was particularly the case as Sami's family increasingly voiced concern that the boy considerably suffered from the dynamic among his peers in the Rainbow Group in kindergarten. The story thus comes full circle, as I again pick up the hierarchy between the children and broach the question of how the described shifts in staff's image of Sami informed pedagogical practice.

Sami's story – Part IV: the 'candy incident' and the 'child in crisis'

The power relations between the children that I described in the first part of the paper did not vanish during the spring. At that time, I was no longer doing participant observation primarily with the Rainbow Group, but Sami's position in the group was a key topic when I had dinner with his family a few weeks after Safiya's internship. As the family discussed why 'Sami really doesn't like to go to kindergarten', Leyla, Sami's 17-year-old sister, explained that she had lately started to suspect that the pre-schoolers 'bullied' Sami. She recounted that two days before, when she was bringing Sami to kindergarten, he had clung onto her and had said, again and again, that he did not want to go. 'He was desperate and then he asked me if I had some candy. When I said no, he explained that the pre-schoolers had told him that if he didn't bring candy, he could never play with them again. That's verging on bullying, no?'

Subsequently both Leyla and Safiya repeatedly brought up this story, Sami's general unhappiness and their impression that he was a victim of bullying in kindergarten. The pedagogues reacted by assuring them that they would talk to the children about the 'candy incident', recognising that it was problematic, but at the same time framing it as an isolated occurrence. They then stressed Sami's own part in creating the situation, saying that 'Sami sometimes just goes up to other children and says 'you idiot' or things like that.' Finally, referring to the psychological interpretations previously sketched by Johanna, the pedagogues also explained that Sami was 'in a difficult situation, because many things are changing at home and his friends will soon go to school'. Thus, after a general acknowledgement of the sisters' worries, the 'candy incident' rapidly vanished from pedagogues' attention and their

focus shifted towards Sami's own responsibility for getting involved in conflicts in kindergarten. They evoked how the dynamics within their family supposedly caused Sami to act up and concluded by referring to Sami's psychological state. Sidelineing institutional power dynamics, the pedagogues described the same children that Sami's sisters had suspected of 'bullying' as 'his friends'.

The common denominator of these psychological explanations was an understanding of changes as a trigger for 'crisis'. What pedagogues now stressed as the origin of Sami's problematic behaviour was not cultural difference, but the inner conflicts a child was supposedly subjected to when his social surroundings as well as the child itself were changing.²⁵ Nevertheless, this framing did not simply represent a complete rupture with the other narratives about the boy traced in this paper. The attestation of a 'crisis' oscillates between problematisation and normalisation. Posited as a symptom of crisis, Sami's behaviour was framed as an understandable reaction to the challenges he was assumed to face. In referring to the passage between stages of child development, staff did not present Sami's crisis as deviant but as 'normal'. However, since the notion of a 'crisis' is inevitably directed towards a norm it 'requires a comparative state of judgement' (Roitman 2014: 4). Sami's behaviour was seen as both normal and problematic at the same time. Psychological deliberations made it plausible, but at the same time, the diagnosis of a crisis also implied the necessity to overcome it. In continuation of the interpretation of Sami's actions as that of an Arab or Muslim pasha, the psychological narrative thus revolved around the perception of Sami's behaviour as disrespectful and provocative misconduct. Among themselves, staff thus still spoke of Sami's problematic 'macho behaviour', even as they pondered his psychological condition.

Ambivalently joining normalisation and problematisation, the psychological narrative wove together several main threads which had previously run through the various ways of talking about and dealing with Sami's concerns. Just as in the interpretations based on culture, an ascription of Sami's behaviour to familial dynamics was merged with a strongly individualised understanding of 'the problem' at hand, namely how Sami conducted himself. Additionally, an understanding of age-dependent developmental stages as a 'natural' and 'univer-

²⁵ How Safiya later recalled these talks also illustrated the prevalence and persuasiveness of a psychological narrative and its individualizing effects. She said about her conversations with Johanna: 'She gave me a talk about Sami's development and said that he wants to be one of the big ones and rejects kindergarten because he first has to find himself.' Safiya found these interpretations consistent with what she had learnt about child development in her studies. Leyla, however, objected to the dominant narrative as she insisted on the alternative psychological explanation that constructed Sami as a victim of bullying, exclaiming, 'Sami doesn't reject kindergarten because he has to find himself, but because the other children bully him'.

sal' characteristic of a child now further exacerbated the individualised logic of psychological interpretations.

No matter whether it was his age that was foregrounded and assumed to 'naturally' set him apart, or his 'gendered and culturally informed demeanour' that took centre stage and 'scandalously' set him apart, or his 'crisis' - the stated difference remained Sami's. Just as the didactic shift from the register of 'race' to the register of 'culture' did not deconstruct the assumption that Sami was the one who differed from an unmarked 'we', the shift from 'culture' to 'psychology' remained anchored in the problematisation of his individual conduct. Accordingly, the culturalised perspective continued to coexist with the psychological narrative. For example, when Sami was yet again reluctant to put on his own shoes at pickup time and Safiya complained how annoyingly lazy her brother was, the staff did not conclude that Safiya was engaged in a similar 'civilising project' (Gilliam & Gulløv 2017) as themselves. Instead, they took it as an indication that the narrative of cultural difference, male dominance and female subjugation – their 'initial inclination' – might not have been so very wrong after all.

To reduce the traced shifts in perspective to a superficial façade that served simply to mask contradictions and dress them up in a language deemed more professional, however, would ignore the involved intricacies. In contrast to an explanation based on cultural difference, psychological explanations allowed for a claim to universal validity and compatibility with a professional ethos of care for every child. Unlike the perception of the boy as a beneficiary of exploitative gender relations, this interpretation also made some room for explicit expressions of empathy directed at Sami. Accordingly, Johanna told me that she now tried to grant Sami more 'closeness' and to remember that he might only be giving her a hard time 'because he had a hard time himself'. This mode of thought foregrounded Sami's presumed emotional needs, thus aligning him with a position similar to that assigned to Karim in the introductory vignette. Situationally, the image of childish 'innocence', which had been stripped of Sami when he was categorised as a beneficiary of oppressive gender relations, was reattached to the boy. And yet, in line with the pedagogical ideal of child-centredness and a focus on children's individuality, the 'crisis' staff detected always remained Sami's individual 'crisis'. It never appeared as a 'crisis' of the Rainbow Group or their pedagogical approaches. Individual attempts to support Sami therefore also reflected the logic of helping a child in a difficult phase, in contrast to helping a child caught up in difficult power relations within the institution.

With the shift in the dominant narrative among staff, an unambiguously negative image of Sami was receding. Still, 'the problem' continued to be seen as external and located in the spheres of the 'private' or the 'individual'. This resulted in a normalisation of hierarchies between the children and more specifically of Sami's experiences of marginalisation, which in contrast to his familial relations and his individual conduct were never clearly identified as a serious problem that should or could be tackled in a concerted pedagogical team effort.

Conclusions

In their complex empirical interplay, multiple categorisations steadily reinforce, superpose, stabilise, fracture or silence one another. While each act of categorisation reduces complexity, 'altogether these acts allow complexity to proliferate' (Hirschauer 2014: 181). By going through Sami's story in such detail and by pointing out how multiple categorisations were used, stabilised, sharpened or questioned in its course, I have tried to illustrate this complexity and grasp its logic(s).

In the analysed case, both adults and children took part in the normalisation of age-based distinctions. At the same time, pedagogues attempted to 'undo' racialised categorisations that children used to mark hierarchies among themselves and to replace them with appreciative views on cultural difference. In their own encounter with Sami's sister, kindergarten staff made use of categorisations that lumped together cultural, ethnic, religious and gender difference, when they took into account what they saw as problematic 'foreign' kinship practices. This resulted in paternalistic gestures of inclusion towards Safiya, who came to be seen as a 'subjugated Arab/Muslim woman'. At the same time, the image of the 'dangerous Arab/Muslim man' came to inform their perception of Sami. The respective categorisations turned out to be persuasive and robust against objections, but hardly compatible with the ethos of respecting diversity and the ideal of reflective, professional pedagogical practice. Over time and moving from the realm of 'informal' deliberations among staff to interactions with Sami's sisters, psychological perspectives therefore superseded those that highlighted cultural difference.

Striving to balance moral claims to both equality and diversity, staff reflected on and reworked multiple modes of differentiation within the Rainbow Group. Still, this dynamic did not amount to a minimisation of difference, but rather redefined Sami's difference by transplanting it from the register of 'race' to the register of 'culture', and subsequently from the

register of 'culture' to the one of 'psychology'. As the paper has shown, while the interplay of ways of doing and undoing difference may be subject to changes, hierarchies are nevertheless reproduced. In the analysed case, this resulted in a continuous normalisation of Sami's experiences of marginalisation.

Overall, the role of cultural categorisations within this process can be characterised as ambivalent. As I have shown, they serve situationally as one of the mainstays of pedagogical practice. But the same actors who foreground them at one point may work towards their relegation to a more marginal position and their replacement by other categories at other times. Although they are not assigned explicit institutional power and can hardly be described as generally accepted, stable building blocks of pedagogical practice, they are part of kindergarten staff's repertoire and can potentially become a pivotal reference point for their practices. As pedagogues and assistants affirm and question cultural differences, they continuously remain within staff's horizons.

The paper also pointed out that dominant ideas of 'proper' kinship and their entanglement with narratives of modernity played an important role for the situational foregrounding of ascriptions of cultural difference. At the moment when kindergarten staff took a glimpse into the 'private' life of Sami's family and came to judge it as a deviation from unmarked, yet dominant ideals of kinship, the rather fuzzy image of a family that constantly complains was shifted towards a clear marker of alterity. At this point, the problematisation of Sami's behaviour based on cultural/ethnic/religious categorisations was turned into a collectively-shared explanatory model. The image of gendered relationships and their implications concerning obligation and force (vs. autonomy and choice), hierarchy (vs equality) and tradition (vs modernity) fed into the construction of an imaginary forced marriage. Against this backdrop, the same images were turned into a meaningful reference point for pedagogical practice.

I have thus also illustrated how everyday life in an educational institution came to engage with the sexual politics built into dominant popular discourses and policies regarding Muslims in Europe. In recent years a number of authors have emphasized how ideas of sexual freedom and equality have increasingly been evoked as core values of 'the modern West', which supposedly distinguish it from the parochial rest, and most notably from the Islamic world beyond and within its national borders. (Fernando 2014, Karagiannis & Randeria 2018) Éric Fassin (2010: 525) argues that it is primarily women who are targeted by new practices of patrolling national identity in the name of 'sexual integration' and 'sexual democracy'. However, as my analysis shows, such a paradox can also involve a five-year-old boy, whose

familial relations – or rather a specific imagination of them – became a vehicle for the normalisation of his marginalisation.

However, that otherness is constructed in conjunction with ideas of particular kinship practices as exuberant and backward is no particularity of recent anti-Muslim politics in Europe and beyond. Susan McKinnon (2013) shows that a relegation of kinship to the domestic and to ‘pockets of “backwardness”’ runs like a red thread through popular and academic narratives of social evolution, development and modernisation of the last 150 years. Anthropology has considerably contributed to that (see also Thelen & Alber 2017). In line with dominant ideas of ‘who has arrived in modernity and who has not’ (Butler 2008: 1), in the presented case kindergarten staff detected an excess of kinship obligations and a gendered lack of freedom in a family which they understood as conservative and embedded in foreign traditions. They contrasted this image with their notions of themselves as modern and emancipated woman, with corresponding ideals of marriage as an individual choice between (non-related) equals, and of kindergarten as an institution promoting individuality. Yet, as I have shown that, kindergarten pedagogues and assistants themselves were actually deeply concerned with kinship and its assessment. Creating distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, practices of institutional child care draw boundaries between the ‘private’ sphere of families and the ‘public’ sphere of the institution. But they also cross these boundaries when staff’s evaluation of kinship practices as ‘problematic’ become a pivotal point of their professional practice.

Developing an understanding of care that goes beyond dichotomies of public/private and takes account of their mutual construction and complex entanglements, Tatjana Thelen (2015) conceives of care practices as a vital element of social organisation. Such an approach sheds light on their potential to create, reproduce and dissolve significant ties and therefore to both re/produce and transform power relations. Examining how kindergarten staff translated normative notions of difference and belonging into concrete practices of institutional child care has illustrated vividly how, as Miriam Ticktin (2011: 5) writes, ‘regimes of care end up reproducing inequalities and racial, gendered, and geopolitical hierarchies.’ This paper has thus shown that one viable way towards grasping care’s complexities is to study care practices as morally charged and potentially ambivalent processes of doing and undoing differences.

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Zusammenfassung

„Integration“ und „Diversität“ sind in den letzten Jahren zu zentralen Schlagworten in politischen und akademischen Diskursen über Kindergärten in Österreich geworden. Auf Basis ethnographischer Feldforschung geht dieses Arbeitspapier der Frage nach, wie Kindergartenpädagoginnen und -assistentinnen Ansprüche auf Gleichheit und Differenz in die Praxis in einem großteils staatlich finanzierten Kindergarten in Wien (Österreich) übersetzen. Es zeichnet nach, wie die Veränderung der Perspektive des Kindergartenpersonals auf einen fünfjährigen Buben mit deren Verdacht, seine Schwester werde zwangsverheiratet, einhergeht. Dabei wird sichtbar, wie ethnische und religiöse Marker jeweils situativ in den Vordergrund treten oder stummgeschaltet werden. In diesem Prozess treten sie mit anderen Kategorien wie Alter, Gender und Race, aber auch mit Vorstellungen von Professionalität und mit psychologisch geprägten Konzepten der Krise in Verbindung und Konkurrenz. Der Aufsatz analysiert also, wie sich Differenzzuschreibungen mit der Zeit verändern. Er zeigt aber auch auf, wie Hierarchien und die Marginalisierungserfahrungen eines Kindes dabei reproduziert und normalisiert werden. Damit wird greifbar, dass die Untersuchung von Care-Praktiken als moralisch aufgeladene und ambivalente Prozesse der Herstellung und Auflösung von Differenzen einen produktiven Beitrag zum Verständnis von Care als zentrales Moment sozialer Organisation leisten kann.

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