Third-country graduates and their transition to the German labor market

Understanding dominant identity categories, strangerness and agency in context

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how non-EU university graduates (third-country graduates, TCGs) experience the intended transition to the German labor market. Through a critical analysis across multiple contexts, the authors intend to increase the reflexive scope of HRM research and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The explorative study is based on social constructivism. It relies on qualitative data, specifically problem-centered narrative-biographical interviews with ethnic Russian TCGs at three different stages of transition. The authors interpret social identity processes and related ascriptions of strangerness critically and link them to wider contexts and dominant categories of identity.

Findings – Identity processes between social self and other require (dis-) identification with larger identity categories. TCGs as an example of skilled self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) face obstacles when seeking employment, yet, might utilize ascribed strangerness for reclaiming agency. To identify exclusive practices, individual career aspirations and organizational strategy and practice need to be linked to wider societal, institutional and national contexts.

Research limitations/implications – Through a critical analysis across multiple contexts, HRM research and practice is enabled to reflect upon its own implicit assumptions. To identify critical intersections between interpersonal identity-making and dominant identity-categories, HRM researchers need to differentiate between emic self-perception and etic ascriptions, to move beyond individual and organizational levels of analysis and to consider the interrelations between structure and agency.

Practical implications – HRM practitioners performing a critical analysis across multiple contexts are enabled to reflect upon their own implicit assumptions. This allows for improved organizational strategies and practices when trying to identify and secure global talents.

Originality/value – The originality of the paper lies in providing a multi-context critical analysis of TCGs seeking employment, thereby enabling HRM research and practice to reflect upon implicit assumptions, to move beyond dominant categories and to truly identify and secure global talents.

Keywords Employment, Career development, Agency, Identity, Self-initiated expatriates, Third-country graduates

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Due to increasing migration and mobility, globally mobile professional classes have emerged, the complexities of which are increasing (McKenna and Richardson, 2007). Some individuals choose to work or study abroad; others move permanently between different locations. However, from a critical perspective, the interactions between moving individuals and the receiving society or organization are not power-free but influenced by dominant discourses and categories of social identity (Prasad *et al.*, 2006).

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As a result, moving individuals might be "othered," i.e. made more alien than they actually are, and denied inclusion.

Based on these thoughts, this paper asks the question of how non-EU citizens, specifically ethnically Russian students, experience their intended transition to the German labor market after having graduated from a German university. It investigates into the phenomenon of perceived strangerness and the intersections between individual aspirations and wider organizational, institutional and national contexts.

In official German terminology, non-EU citizens are referred to as "third-country citizens" (*Drittstaatenangehörige)*, third-country students graduating from a German university being a sub-group of this category. From a human resource management (HRM) perspective, they are an example of skilled self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), a group which has recently been understood as crucial in international HRM research (see Al Ariss, 2010). By having already moved to the country in which they later seek employment, third-country graduates (TCGs) thwart established categories of HRM research and practice, such as SIE, migrant or resident. They challenge sociological categories, such as stranger and host (see Simmel, 1971; Levine, 1977). From a practical economic perspective, they are a crucial factor for preventing future shortages of skilled labor in Germany (German Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs (BMAS), 2011, p. 7; Leszczensky *et al.*, 2011). Still, the actual experiences of TCGs seeking employment have not yet been researched upon.

Due to the explorative nature of our research question, we rely on qualitative data, specifically problem-centered, narrative-biographical interviews (Flick, 2009) with four ethnically Russian TCGs of law and economics in Germany which we interpret through the lens of the sociological/anthropological concepts of social/collective identity and processes of identification which involve dominant discourses and categories of identity.

Our immediate contribution lies in providing an analysis of the obstacles faced by a previously neglected, but relevant social group. Second, our paper links individual life experiences to wider contexts, such as organizational, institutional and national contexts. This enables HRM research and practice to reflect upon dominant categories of social identity which limit individual agency and an organization's ability to include minority individuals.

In order to make this contribution, we proceed as follows: First, we present the theoretical background to our approach, and our research design and methods. Next, the context of our study is outlined. After having presented and discussed our findings, we highlight their implications. Finally, we summarize and conclude.

Theoretical background

In this section, we introduce the concepts of social/collective identity and dominant discourse from an anthropological/sociological perspective which we later link to critical HRM research.

The making of social/collective identities

Migration and mobility involve processes of identity-making and social identification. They are characterized by the meeting of an incoming "social other" (a stranger at the receiving location) and a receiving "social self" who acts as host (Levine, 1977; Simmel, 1971), and it is from this perspective that we understand how TCGs perceive themselves and are perceived by others. When we speak of their "nomadic in-betweenness," we

understand this to be a self-perception which breaks the dichotomies of host and stranger and which moves beyond mono-directional or singular movement/migration.

From a social constructivist perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), identities are constructed socially, this means: A sense of "who I am" only emerges through interaction with others and through relating "self" and "other" to larger categories of identity. The latter is referred to as processes of identification (Lawler, 2008, pp. 2-5). Hence, identity from a social constructivist perspective always refers to "who I am (not) in relation to others" and to "who the other is (not) in relation to us." In sociology and anthropology, these mechanisms are referred to as either "social" or "collective" identity (Lawler, 2008). The making and remaking of social/collective identity involves processes of identification or dis-identification with larger categories. It is linked to a perception of others as being same or different and to larger categories of identity which in return influence an individual's interpretative scope (Lawler, 2008). It is important to note that social identity from a sociological/anthropological social constructivist perspective does not equal psychologically oriented "social identity theory" (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Social constructivism assumes that difference and otherness are not objective categories but are shaped by social expectations. This means: whenever individuals interact with each other, they notice clues as to the "strangerness" of another individual based on previous social learning of what constitutes "normal" behavior. This mechanism makes groups of individuals similar to each other and thereby helps establish social order (Lawler, 2008). However, whenever a partially "different" individual is encountered, the same mechanism might also lead to the other person being solely viewed in terms of their "strangerness," i.e. in how they differ. The meaning which is given to this difference, is ascribed to the individual from an outside (etic) perspective, without understanding the inside (emic) meaning of this behavior from the presumably "strange" individual's perspective (Hatch and Yanow, 2003).

Dominant discourse and dichotomist categories of identity

Individual (i.e. emic) sensemaking – for example, with regard to "strangerness" – does not arise in a social vacuum but is related in whatever manner to wider social discourse and structure (Lawler, 2008). In this paper, we understand discourse in its wider, anthropological sense, namely as the way in which something or someone is referred to which in return pre-structures the way in which the social world is perceived. Individual sensemaking might comply with dominant discourse or categories of identity, or individuals might resist and create new social meanings. The ability to create new meaning is called agency (based on Foucault, 1980). For example, perceived strangerness on a micro-level can be overcome through social interactions (Simmel, 1971; Levine, 1977).

On the other hand, social discourses and categories of identity provide the structural and interpretative frames to interpersonal processes of social identity-making. They might shape dominant categories of collective/social identity (Prasad *et al.*, 2006). These are often dichotomist, which means that they create "another" who cannot be integrated into perceptions of the social self anymore. If such a dominant and dichotomist category is projected upon a specific individual, there is a high danger of losing sight of the complexities of social identities on a micro-level (Lawler, 2008, pp. 2-5). As a result, even individuals who are only partially "other" will be excluded from the social self (Lawler, 2008). For example, imbalances of power and dominant categories and discourses of identity on a macro-societal and meso-organizational level

might seriously impact an individual's ability to overcome the strangerness which is projected upon them (Prasad *et al.*, 2006).

Within the social sciences, the discussion on what trumps and when – agency or its limitation through dominant social discourse and structure – has been an ongoing one. What seems clear is that individual, organizational and social identity categories, and individual agency and social structure are interrelated. For example, whenever an individual is reflecting about how their country's immigration policy should be shaped in the future, they are influenced by the existing social discourse on "immigration" and dominant categories of identity and their scope of action is restricted by existing laws and regulations. At the same time, all individuals together are the agents of the social and might change both social discourse and structural boundary conditions.

In such a way, all human beings create relative difference between perceived categories of social self and other, and of "sameness" and "difference" whenever they interact. Etic and emic perspectives will differ. This in itself is not problematic. Yet, if the construction of identity categories becomes reified, dichotomist or simplistic, individuals are made more alien than they are: they are "othered." Hence, we assume that critical HRM research intends to analyze those interrelations through which dominant categories emerge which might then be used for supporting claims to domination (see Prasad *et al.*, 2006). From a critical perspective, the relations between moving individuals, the organizations which employ them and the receiving societies are not power-free, but linked to global capitalism (Prasad *et al.*, 2006) and issues of gender (Myers and Pringle, 2005) and whiteness (Al Ariss, 2010). In this paper, we employ a critical perspective to identify those dominant identity categories and perceptions of "strangerness" which discriminate against or exclude minority individuals and place critical interpersonal interactions in their wider socio-economic, political and historical contexts.

The context of this study

This section provides contextual information to our research on resident Russian TCGs seeking employment in Germany. For doing so, it highlights labor market developments prior to 2011, the role played by third-country citizens, and relevant laws and regulations. Following Al Ariss *et al.* (2014), the presentation of the wider context is relevant for HRM research in order to understand how individual and organizational strategy and interactions relate to dominant thought which might result in exclusive thinking and practice.

Recent labor market developments in Germany

During the time of research (2011), the danger of future labor supply shortages, mainly in the area of highly skilled labor, received high political attention in Germany (BMAS, 2011, p. 6). Think tanks forecasted a labor shortage of five million in 2030 and of three million in 2015, mainly high-skilled labor (Association of the Bavarian Economy (vbw), 2011, p. 1). A major lack of graduates was expected in engineering, business administration, economics and global law (Leszczensky *et al.*, 2011, p. 9).

Current managerial thought views Germany as being engaged in a "War for Talent" (McKinsey Germany, 2011, p. 9) with its neighbors. Governmental and research institutions recommend that Germany not only avoid future brain drain at all costs (Expert Advisory Board of German Foundations for Integration and Migration (SVR), 2011, p. 20) but secure a "brain gain" via immigration of "highly qualified or talented

individuals" (Koppel and Plünnecke, 2008, p. 4). Due to low birth rates in western Europe, it is understood as being "inevitable" (Leszczensky *et al.*, 2011) that Germany look farther away and toward the non-EU third countries (*Drittstaaten*), mainly in the east and south, for gaining brain (Leszczensky *et al.*, 2011).

German public discourse on immigration

The way in which a country perceives "immigration," i.e. public discourse on immigration, shapes dominant categories of identity and social structure and therefore needs to be considered when analyzing processes of inclusion and exclusion in relation to social identity. When referring to German history, we focus on former West Germany.

Thinking of Germany as a country which might attract future citizens abroad is a very recent trend. Until 2005, German citizenship law had been solely based on Roman *ius sanguinis* ("law of the blood") which made German ancestry the only principle for being allowed citizenship (Butterwege, 2005a). In 1973, the steered recruitment of a manual labor force from abroad, the so called guest-workers (*Gastarbeiter*), which began in the 1950s, had been terminated again by the "ban on recruitment" law (*Anwerbestopp*) (Butterwege, 2005a). Subsequent laws concerning the employment of non-German citizens and later of non-EU citizens mainly focussed on restricting immigration (Butterwege, 2005b). As a major shift in policy, this general discouragement or non-acknowledgement of work migration gave way to the first immigration law ever in 2005. However, even though named "immigration law" in public, this piece of legislation is actually called: "Law for regulating and restricting immigration and for regulation residency and integrating EU citizens and foreigners" (see Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), 2004). "Foreigners" are understood in the sense of "third-country citizens."

Regulations concerning TGCs

For third-country citizens, the EU-internal freedom of movement does not apply. Third-country students require a visa prior to entering Germany. The conditions for being issued a visa are: an approval notification from a German university and proof of funding for one year of studying and living in Germany (German Ministry for Internal Affairs (BMI), 2011, p. 57). After immigration, they will be issued a residence permit solely for the purpose of studying. They can take up minor employment (as a rule up to 450 euro per month; German Federal Labor Market Authority (BfA), 2011a: §16 Abs.1 und 3 AufenthG), but any full-time work requires a change of residence title by the German Federal Labor Market Authority (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BfA*).

Prior to 2005, third-country students were required to leave the country immediately after their final exam (SVR, 2011, p. 41). However, based on the perceived need to keep skilled labor in the country (BMI, 2011, p. 64), the new immigration law allows for one year for finding a job after graduation (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2011a: §16 Abs. 4 AufenthG). During this year, 90 full-time or 180 part-time workdays are allowed without the need to notify the Labor Market Authority (BMI, 2011, p. 64 f.). Prior to 2007, companies employing a TCG needed to prove that no German citizen (Priority 1) or EU citizen (Priority 2) was available (BMI, 2011, p. 65; SVR, 2011, p. 41).

After having been offered a contract, the third-country student needs to notify the Labor Market Authority, who needs to approve of this employment (BMI, 2011, pp. 72-73). If this is approved, the third-country student will be issued a residence

permit for the purpose of paid employment (§18 AufenthG), and through this process is able to qualify for a full settlement permit after a certain time (BMI, 2011, p. 65).

Research design and methods

Our research question is how resident TCGs from non-EU countries, specifically ethnic Russian students in the field of law and economics, experience their intended transition to the labor market in Germany. Specifically, we investigate the obstacles faced by them when seeking employment and link these to wider contexts.

Relevance of our study

For understanding the complexities of social identities on global labor markets, TCGs are relevant due to the following reasons: First, TCGs are a specific type of highly skilled SIEs, moving from the "non-west" to "the west," this in itself being an under-researched phenomenon (Al Ariss, 2010). Second, they are beyond established categories of social self and other, namely (German) host and (foreign) stranger: On the one hand, they are already part of the German social context, on the other hand, structural conditions, such as labor legislation, might make them "the other." Third, they are in a delicate stage of structural transition between studying and working, and any change to how this stage is perceived, structured or practiced might considerably change their actions and future opportunities. Hence, an analysis of their experiences allows for analyzing implicit or explicit structures and practices of discrimination and exclusion (overview in Prasad *et al.*, 2006) in context. Within the field of equality, diversity and inclusion, our study is the first of its kind.

Research perspective and data collection

Our research perspective is interpretative (Hatch and Yanow, 2003), as based on the social-constructivist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Accordingly, we rely on qualitative data and derive theory from our empirical material (Flick, 2009). One author conducted narrative-biographical problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 1982; Flick, 2009) with nine third-country students at various stages of transition to the German labor market.

Narrative-biographical problem-centered interviews combine the holistic openness of an unguided interview with the topical effectiveness of a structured interview (Witzel, 1982; Flick, 2009). The narrative-biographical element allowed the interviewees to verbalize their experiences of moving, studying and seeking employment freely through biographical narratives. Based on Flick (2009), such an approach allows for gaining insights into phenomena without projecting pre-defined categories upon another individual's experiences. Rather, categories are deduced from the material gathered (Flick, 2009); hence, this approach seems an ideal means of providing in-depth insights into emic meanings.

Problem-centered interviews enable the researcher to "systematically uncover an individual's real issues within the framework of a societal problem area" (Witzel 1982, p. 67). This makes this approach ideal for the purpose of our study, namely to understand micro-individual perspectives within a wider social framework, i.e. the problem area of the study. The specific problem area for this study was outlined by our research question. Previous research on its boundary conditions provided the background for developing a problem-based interview guideline. The latter enabled the researcher to ask specific questions which were informed by previous theoretical

reasoning, to keep track of how the interview developed, to introduce new themes and to dig deeper into specific statements (Witzel 1982, pp. 68, 90, 93).

Prior to the actual interview, informal interactions were used to lessen anxiety. Eight interviews were conducted in the German language, one in the English language. They lasted from one to three hours and took place in student houses. The language chosen was based on interviewees' wishes. However, a power differential could not be avoided: German was the interviewer's mother tongue, but neither English nor German was the mother tongue of any of the interviewees. This linguistic imbalance is a clear limit to our approach. However, we assume that this situation mirrors actual workplace interactions and hence might be re-interpreted as helping the interviewees to recall certain experiences, feelings and interactions. As the interviewer was about the same age as the interviewees and just in the process of post-graduating, we assume that the interaction was rather balanced otherwise.

Methods of data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Flick, 2009). Data was coded manually and split into different sections, each of which contained a closed sensemaking unit with regard to the problem area of our study (Flick, 2009). Second, these units were then grouped within each interview in order to identify larger problem-related themes and categories. Next, this analysis was repeated across interviews. Finally, subcategories, and interrelations and dependencies were identified.

Through this process, it became evident that the interviewees' experiences are not only shaped by their TCG status but also by their field of study and region of origin. Hence, we clustered the interviews into categories of regional/ethnic origin and field of study which we related back to our material. We then chose the most relevant cluster, namely "ethnically Russian students seeking employment in law and economics." It consists of four individuals, three female and one male, at three different stages of transition: Xenia (X) and Vladimir (V) still have a student residence permit and are preparing for finding work, Lena (L) has extended her student residence permit for one year after graduation and Svetlana (S) has already found employment. All names are pseudonyms.

Presentation and inner-interview interpretation of findings

This section presents and interprets inner-interview findings. Quotations refer to personalized sensemaking units; they are numbered consecutively (e.g. V51) and have been translated by the authors.

Vladimir

Vladimir originates from Russia where he received a bachelor's degree in tax accountancy. He migrated to Germany two years ago. He named low study fees (approximately 1,200 per year in 2011, the authors) the main reason for choosing Germany over the USA or Great Britain, his two other countries of choice. Currently, Vladimir is enrolled in a master program in law with a focus on fiscal law. He has gained prior work experiences via an internship in a German tax accountant office (V6, 10, 38, 74). At this point, it has to be noted that it is very common in German business to complete internships from three to six months during one's studies, and many business-oriented study programs even make this a formal requirement. Vladimir will

be finishing his studies within the next year. During the interview, he frequently expresses the wish to work in Germany (e.g. V128).

Motivations for seeking employment in Germany. Vladimir frequently talks about the advantages of working in Germany (V128, 146, 152, 208), for example, political stability, economic growth, the German healthcare system, low levels of environmental pollution (V138), a functioning social security system (V154) and the ability to make a living without having to sacrifice family (V208). He does so in comparison to Russia, painting a negative picture of his home country (e.g. V134, 154). Vladimir also states that he misses family in Russia (V192) and that he would go back, given the right opportunities (V152). Whereas Vladimir's reasons for staying in Germany seem to be rational and economically oriented, the wish to go back seems more emotional. As Vladimir says: "my heart is in Russia, but my brain is in Germany" (V192).

Vladimir reckons that he has excellent job opportunities both in Russia and Germany, based on the fact that he will have a degree from each country and be an expert for both German and Russian taxation law (V8). In Russia, familiarity with German taxation is an asset; in Germany, familiarity with Russian law is (V48, 74). Furthermore, Vladimir believes that the Russian market is relevant to many German companies in the future (V8).

Throughout the interview, Vladimir does not express any worries regarding any obstacles he might face. Referring to his abilities in a German context, he says:

> [Russian] language is a very high potential […], your foreign mentality, your feeling for foreigners: This is your gut feeling […], you know what people think in another country, […] this is your advantage (V50).

Based on these statements, Vladimir's self-perception of being highly qualified and of even possessing an additional advantage over German graduates, namely being familiar with the Russian language and the Russian "way of doing things," seems the main reason for why he is highly motivated to seek employment in Germany. Yet, when talking about himself and his future, he always relates to both Russia and Germany, which can be considered a sign of "nomadic in-betweenness" in the sense of this paper.

Perceived requirements for successful employment in Germany. Vladimir seems very aware of needing formal qualifications in order to find a job in Germany (V88, 98). For example, he refers to his internship and his expected degree from a German university as something "tangible" which German employers will understand (V88, 98). He expects that German employers find it more difficult to judge a foreign degree and, hence, might be more cautious to employ someone directly from abroad (V46, 100). He intends to overcome this potential disadvantage through his own strategies: For example, he has completed an internship to have a first letter of reference to show. He also plans to apply for jobs only after having received his graduation certificate, which will only be issued several weeks after his final exam (V88).

Vladimir also believes that future employers try to get to know an applicant as well as possible in order to make sure to get a return on investment (V98). Hence, he invests into "making himself known." He regularly attends company tours organized by his university in order to network (V92): "Developing your personal contacts plays a very important role for increasing your opportunities on the market" (V96). Vladimir relies on these networks: "I do not seek [a job via] the official procedure, I seek one via personal contacts. I have met many people, and from my perspective, this is the best way towards employment" (V180).

Vladimir found it easy to get an internship. He approached the head of taxation during a corporate tour, and from his perspective, this was the reason for why his internship application was successful (V96, 114). When presenting himself to future or current employers, Vladimir always points to the advantages of himself being a foreigner. For example, during his internship, he had the impression that the company wanted to expand to Russia but that no one knew how to do it (V74). Hence, he was able to bring in his unique skills (V75). He says:

> They had a few projects with Russia; they wanted to know […] what has happened there […]. But they do not understand what this is about, and this is why they asked me, and I held a presentation on the Russian system of taxation. Naturally they were surprised, because they did not know what this was about. But afterwards they told me: 'great, great, great' (V86).

Vladimir reckons that his already being adapted to Germany gives him an advantage over foreigners applying from abroad whose foreignness leads to additional corporate costs (V68).

Inner-interview interpretations. From Vladimir's perspective, he combines two advantages: On the one hand, he talks about being perceived a "stranger" when speaking German (V75). Yet, he also positions himself consciously as a "foreigner," making this ascription toward him a professional asset. He seems to have a high sense of agency in all his doings.

Formal requirements and structural expectations are in his favor: He has a degree from Russia which enables him to play the "foreign expert" role convincingly. At the same time, he does his part: He pays attention to present those formal qualifications to German employers which they can understand and which reduce their insecurity of how to judge his qualifications. By doing so, Vladimir exploits all the advantages of both his "in-betweenness" and his previous nomadism, and he seems to do so rationally, maybe even consciously. Even though structural limitations in Russia (economic system, lack of social security, etc.) might have forced him to turn to Germany instead, he now deals with these conditions matter-of-factly and proceeds strategically. He has managed to re-define dominant discourse.

Xenia

Xenia is an ethnic Russian bachelor student from Belarus where she had already studied law for two years at a private university. Yet, she did not graduate, because her father could not bear further costs (X14). She then moved to Germany as an au-pair in 2001 to earn money and support her younger brother's education. Afterwards, she decided to stay in Germany and to study economic law with a specialization in financial services law. She has completed one internship and is currently applying for a second internship after which she wishes to write her bachelor's thesis (X2, 22, 36, 77). It is a major issue for her to earn enough money to finance her stay in Germany – because her parents can only support her nominally which is a visa requirement but not in practice – and due to these additional strains, her study progress is slower than normal (e.g. X14). At this point, it has to be noted that it is common practice in many business-oriented study programs in Germany that students write their final thesis while having a full-time working contract as an "intern" or "minor employee."

Motivations for seeking employment in Germany. Xenia's main reason for seeking employment in Germany seems to be the feeling of having no alternatives anywhere else. She does not expect to be able to find employment in Belarus due to the current

political and economic boundary conditions there (X131). From her perspective, Russia would provide ample opportunities, yet, she thinks she will not be given the opportunity to exploit these due to her lack of Russian citizenship (X130). She dreams of working in Canada (X134). However, Xenia also feels that finding a job there might be difficult for her, because she has studied in the German language (X202). Hence, she wants to apply for jobs in Germany (X134).

Throughout the interview, Xenia expresses high awareness of her precarious residence status. She seems very aware of the fact that her future depends solely upon her abilities of finding a job (X186). Still, due to the stated lack of alternatives, she wants to work in Germany. However, this wish has only come up after legislation changed in 2005 (X52) and graduates were granted one year to find employment (SVR, 2011, p. 41).

Perceived requirements for successful employment in Germany. Currently, Xenia is applying for an internship position (X26), yet, as was the case during her first application for an internship in Germany, she receives many letters of rejection (X100). Twice, she says: "I do not know how companies here tick (X128; X140)." And "It is a mystery to me: How to find a job, how not to find a job, why I get a rejection, why I don't get a rejection, is a mystery to me […] and I do not have a sense of it (X178)."

Similarly to Vladimir, Xenia believes that formal qualifications are crucial to finding a job, and she assumes that her formal qualifications will be equal to German applicants after graduation (X128). Likewise, she stresses the importance of personal skills: "You need to be sympathetic and create a friendly atmosphere (X80)" and of personal networks (X84).

Unlike Vladimir, however, Xenia struggles with her previous experiences of rejection. She assumes that these are based on her incapability of being perceived as sympathetic and of creating a friendly atmosphere (X90). As a reason, she does not name collective differences between Germany and Belarus, but her own individual character (X80). However, she also thinks that differences in communicative style might aggravate these difficulties (X96).

Unlike Vladimir, Xenia has the feeling that she did not perform well in her internship. Like in Vladimir's case, Russian language skills were a requirement for employment. However, when she was asked to translate a letter from German to Russian, she was not able to do so, as – having studied these subjects only in the German language – she lacked the required professional vocabulary in Russian. This resulted in her professional competencies being perceived as very low by her employer (X30, 40, 168).

Xenia invests a lot of effort and time in overcoming what she perceives as her own weaknesses. She attends university seminars for how to apply for jobs, she networks and she reads other students' CVs in order to find out what the weaknesses in her CV are (X106, 146, 148). From her perspective, one of the main negative elements of her CV is the fact that she has "not gone the straight way" (X148). She reckons that many German applicants have the same problem (X26, 120, 150), however, she feels that her studies are slowed down by restrictive German laws which force her to accept low-paid "minor employments." Hence, she has to work many hours, and this in return has negative effects on her studies (X148, 190, 204). Furthermore, Xenia has the feeling that her life experience is not valued (X 28), but that it is only formal requirements and the time to graduation which count (SVR, 2011).

Inner-interview interpretations. When compared to Vladimir, Xenia seems to perceive herself as not having agency and as having internalized ascriptions of her own "strangerness." Furthermore, she has not had the experience of being able to find a job

easily and has also not perceived her own foreignness to be an asset. In comparison to Vladimir, who has a "straight" academic career with formal qualifications from two countries to show, she might be additionally disadvantaged by the fact that she is "slow" and has no formal certificate to prove her competencies.

In summary, her case is an example of internalized ascription of strangerness on an individual level, of a perceived lack of agency and of the inability to grasp the subtleties of corporate practice and expectations.

Lena

Lena is ethnically Russian. She originates from Belarus where she graduated in business. She studied German at her home university, which led to one of her professors suggesting her for a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship for studying as a post-graduate in Germany which she was granted. Like Vladimir, Lena names the low study fees in Germany compared to the USA or Great Britain as the main reason for studying in Germany. She moved to Germany in 2008 and received her master's degree in international business and management, with a specialization in marketing, in 2011. With a stipend, and in contrast to the other interviewees, she did not have to work during her studies. Lena wrote her thesis for a German company, this being her prior labor market experience. She is currently applying for jobs and attending job fairs on a regular basis (L1, 88, 92, 98, 106). Similarly to Xenia, Lena names the uncertain economic and political situation in Belarus as her main reasons for seeking employment in Germany (L18). Like Xenia, Lena assumes that her qualification is of the highest value on the German labor market (L100).

Perceived requirements for successful employment in Germany. Lena feels that many of the vacancies which are of interest to her are filled via recruitment agencies of formal procedures such as assessment centers (L106). She has experienced difficulties when interacting with corporate HR representatives and recruiting agencies (L60). She reckons that HR people are "perfectionists" (L60) who only focus on formal criteria:

> They see a person from the outside, not from the inside. They see the person who fits best to whatever criteria which have been written down and for them it is always important that every single point can be put down on a sheet of paper (L152).

From Lena's perspective, HR people base their decision on first impressions, marks, field of expertise and language skills (L54). For making the "perfect decision," they tend to rely on assessment centers (L54). Lena feels that she, as a foreigner, is disadvantaged with regard to language abilities while having to meet the same high demands in other areas (L54). She says:

> If you have lower language skills, then you have less time for [proving yourself in the assessment center, *the authors*]. But I can do it very quickly in Russian and English, I have enough competencies to organize my time, but in German I cannot do it that fast and well (L44).

Lena feels frustrated for not being able to present herself favorably in the German language (L38). Hence, she would like to rely on recruiting agencies for making up for this disadvantage (L168). However, a friend of hers from Belarus strongly advised her against it as recruiters tend not to be familiar with the laws concerning third-country citizens (L120).

Based on these experiences and advice, she has now changed her strategy and tries to gain direct contact to line managers who – from her perspective – are more able to judge a person's true potential beyond formal criteria (L56, 156). Through this approach, she gets direct and immediate feedback which saves her a lot of time (L116). This is important to her, as she is very aware of only having a limited time for finding a job:

> In the beginning, when I heard that I have one year's time, I thought: 'Wow, that much!' But now I know, that is not that much in Germany, because normally it takes two, three months, to process the application in a company; that is really, really long. And you just sit and wait, wait, wait, and then you get a rejection (L170).

Lena has also decided to focus on German companies which wish to expand to eastern Europe and are in need of employees with advanced English and Russian language skills (L30, 140).

Inner-interview interpretations. Lena pursues similar strategies to Vladimir when seeking a job, namely networking and seeking jobs which enable her to utilize her "nomadic in-betweenness," namely her familiarity with Russian and German business, her English and Russian language skills, her degrees and her mobility. Yet, she also reflects on the difficulties which made her develop this approach and upon "HR people" as crucial intermediaries.

Svetlana

Svetlana graduated with a bachelor degree in tax accounting from Belarus. She is ethnically Russian and moved to Germany in 2002. She enrolled in a master program in international business and management and found employment after graduation via a recruitment agency. Svetlana is still working at this company (S14, 102).

Motivations for seeking employment in Germany. Svetlana paints a positive picture of the German labor market with regard to its ample opportunities:

> There are very many opportunities for why the German market is interesting […] if you have a dream or something like this, as a foreigner you have more than one opportunity here […] (S84).

She describes the German labor market as "highly developed" and as the leading labor market in Europe (S92). She thinks foreigners have good job opportunities based on high production and export rates and related international business relations (S86). Still, Svetlana seems to have chosen to stay and work in Germany mainly due to a lack of alternatives – "I do not have that many choices" (S122). She would love to be near her parents but as they live in a rural area, she believes that she would never be able to find work there (S124). Furthermore, she believes that her German degree is useless in Belarus and does not want to work in her original profession as a tax accountant (S125).

From Svetlana's perspective, Germany is only an intermediate stop in her future life, she says: "It is not my goal to remain in Germany" (S256). And: "I just wanted to work here a little, but my dreams are somewhere in the south" (S124). In summary, her motivation to work in Germany seems more a rational choice than true aspiration. For doing so, she needs to sacrifice family relations, as Vladimir and Xenia need to do.

Perceived requirements for successful employment in Germany. Similarly to Lena, Svetlana feels that corporate expectations with regard to a specific vacancy are often too high and the selection process is too rigid (S182). Yet, personally, she cannot recall any negative experiences with future employers (S116, 182). Like Vladimir and Lena,

Svetlana focussed on vacancies requiring Russian language skills when seeking employment (S168). She says:

> Working with the Russian market is my strength, this I can do well […], and I will do well for the company, and for me it is also good intellectually. Therefore, it is a win-win-situation for both, this is what I wanted (S170).

Svetlana is of the opinion that her language skills were her main asset for getting selected for her current position (S174, 176). She believes that she can meet corporate demands easily because she utilizes her strengths (S102, 158, 161). From her perspective, companies will gain highly motivated employees, if they utilize a foreign applicant's strength, e.g. languages (S176). She reckons this to be in the best interest of every company (S250).

Still, Svetlana assumes her "third-country citizen" status to have detrimental effects in general (e.g. S44, 56, 184). For example, the recruiter suggesting her for her current employment turned out not to be not aware of regulation. As Svetlana recalls, he demanded from her to prove to him that he did not do anything illegal by suggesting her employment. After she had provided proof, he told her that he would not have worked with her, had he been aware of the complexities of the procedure (S234-244).

As an intern, Svetlana had to work with internship applications. She felt that the employer's ignorance concerning the regulations for third-country applicants often leads to their rejection (S216), even on the level of minor employment (S187). She says:

> If the employer hears this, they say: 'What?! We need the approval of the German Federal Labor Market Authority?!' This is exactly the reaction of all those who are not familiar with this […]. (S188).

She feels that a company who already employs third-country citizens – like the one she is working at now – is less likely to be deterred by these legal requirements (S184, 218). To prevent this happening to her in the future, Svetlana tried to learn as much as possible about the legal requirements concerning third-country students in advance (S146). For doing so, she attended a seminar by the German Federal Labor Market Authority. She recalls this experience:

> Basically, they told us: "Go home, you do not have any choices anyway." And when we asked: "What should we do with this German degree?", they said: "What should Germans do with this German degree in the end?" (S146).

This episode strongly added to her feeling that Germans are actually "afraid" of immigration; Svetlana calls this "German Angst" and reckons that one can see this fear of immigration and foreigners on multiple levels, for example, in the media (S184). From her perspective, it is this fear which lies at the heart of many obstacles and disadvantages experienced by her as a person with "third-country citizen status" (S44, 56).

After Svetlana had secured a job offer, she asked the German Federal Labor Market Authority for approval in order to have her residence title changed from student to employee. She did not receive any feedback for several weeks and had to put off her future employer several times. Finally, she decided to visit the Labor Market Authority personally and to ask for a more speedy execution of her application (S194). She reflects on this interaction:

> That was totally bad. She [the Labor Market Authority representative, *the authors*], she almost threw me out. She really laughed and said: "Oh, yes, I already read that. What will you

> be doing? Sales and distribution, working internally, oh yes, with Eastern Europe (..) but this is not international business, this does not match your qualification." I said: "How can this not be a match? It is sales with foreign countries, this […] is international." And she said: No, it is not, it is mere office work what you will be doing there, and your salary, what is this? Only 2,500 Euro, 2,200 Euro at the beginning." I said: "I will get paid more after my probation period". She said: "But you will need more [a higher salary, *the authors*]", but she did not say how much (S200).

Afterwards, Svetlana's application was rejected on the grounds that she was too highly qualified and that enough preferred applicants (e.g. German and EU nationals) were available. However, from Svetlana's perspective, she felt that starting low and then working herself up the corporate ladder was her only opportunity (S201). Hence, with the help of another agency, she had a lawyer file an objection and finally received agency approval. She says: "I was simply very lucky that my employer waited for me; that is highly unusual" (S206).

Inner-interview interpretations. Svetlana seems of the opinion that Germany provides ample opportunities for motivated employees, and that appropriate individual strategies – for example, choosing an employer who values foreign language skills – lead to success. She seems to have experienced "othering," but also to have devised counter-strategies on an individual level. Still, she has also experienced complete powerlessness with regard to bureaucratic hurdles: Ultimately, all her competencies, motivations and career strategies cannot prevent her from the dangers of being shut out of the system by a single person in a single governmental agency. The main issue seems to be the fact that regulations require "adequate employment," i.e. employment that matches the qualifications earned, yet, do not specify this term.

Nominally, agency approval is only guaranteed by an annual salary of 66,000 euro (German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), 2012) and if no equally qualified German or EU national is available for this job. However, in "very sought after" areas of expertise, a lower salary might suffice (German Federal Labor Market Authority (BfA), 2011b). Yet, it remains unclear how and how speedily to prove the existence of other, preferred applicants (BfA, 2011b). In summary, the vagueness of these requirements might negate an individual's agency and supportive corporate practice. At the same time, the law might also be interpreted rigidly which allows for abuse of bureaucratic power.

Cross-interview analysis and wider interpretations

Following the narrative-biographical element of our approach, we have first treated each interview separately with regard to presentation and interpretation. Following the problem-centered element, we will now focus on a cross-interview analysis.

All interviewees consider themselves as internationally mobile; they might have pursued other options than working in Germany and might still do so in the future. This suggests that they perceive themselves as being in a state of "nomadic in-betweenness" which we understand as an emic identity-category which intends to break the dichotomies of host and stranger and which move beyond mono-directional or singular movement/migration.

Still, they might encounter ascriptions of strangerness and othering which are interrelated with perceived agency, corporate practice and structural boundary conditions: A highly motivated individual who has found the right strategies for positioning herself/himself on the German labor market might still fail due to structural

obstacles, such as the need to prove that the employment found meets the qualifications obtained (Svetlana). Such a rule seems overly rigid, for it is well-known that migration might limit an individual's ability to project the impression of possessing the required human, social, cultural and other forms of capital to their future employers (see Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, changing structures, such as providing more time for finding employment, might enable individuals. Furthermore, a specific corporate practice, such as having already employed a TCG, might prove to be more favorable. At the same time, some individuals might be more apt to redefine detrimental structural boundary conditions in their favor, thereby reclaiming agency. Based on our findings, we suggest that a multi-level analysis which acknowledges agency, power and structural boundary conditions is required for understanding these interrelations.

All interviewees have rational reasons, e.g. the lack of opportunities in their home countries and low study fees in Germany, for having migrated to Germany. After having obtained a German degree, seeking employment in Germany has now become the most logical career choice. Depending on the nature of their previous experiences and the level of perceived individual agency, this is perceived either a life-time or a temporary decision. These findings challenge established dichotomies such as "forced migration" and "self-initiated expatriation" (see Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013), for the motivations of third-country students to migrate seem to be a combination of both. Second, previous experiences and prior decisions influence their sensemaking processes on which future decisions will be the most favorable. Still, none of them seems to be emotionally attached to Germany; rather, they have chosen Germany for rational and economic reasons, such as low study fees or a prospering market. This leads to the question of whether Germany is a truly attractive location for highly qualified individuals.

All four interviewees recall incidents of "strangerness" as being projected upon them. However, the degree to which they feel limited in their agency by these ascriptions varies. Whereas Vladimir, Lena and Svetlana seem to have developed individual coping strategies, Xenia seems to feel powerless when facing structural hurdles and corporate rules of practice. However, she also seems to possess the least social and economic capital to counterweigh formal requirements. She is the only one without a previous graduate degree, and also the one with the least financial support.

All interviewees recall negative incidents based on an ascribed lack of language skills. However, in order to study in Germany, students must prove their language abilities, defined as C1 or high B2 level (Council of Europe, 2011, pp. 34, 36). Most master programs in Germany require C1 level (competent user), which is only one level below "near native" (Council of Europe, 2011). This disparity between actual and perceived skills suggests that it is more an ascription of "strangerness" leading to "othering" than an actual fact. It might be linked to previously homogenous German society and previous immigration history, both of which result in a low familiarity with foreign-born high-skilled employees (Heckmann and Schnapper, 2003).

To all four interviewees, German labor relations seem to be highly formalized: they express feelings of "not matching" formal requirements such as established criteria for measuring competencies. They react by trying to find individual work-around solutions which they employ with varying degrees of success. They all chose similar strategies, for example, relying on personal and informal networking. Al Ariss (2010) found similar strategies of behavior among Lebanese SIEs in France who also tend to pursue informal career strategies outside the formal labor relations systems. However, and in contrast to the rigid German employment regulations concerning third-country

citizens, Lebanese SIEs in France often choose to be self-employed, an option which is unavailable to TCGs in Germany.

All interviewees speak of structural hurdles at some point. As Svetlana is the only one who has already completed the transition to the German labor market, her recollections of the structural obstacles faced are the most vivid ones. The crucial point of (non-) transition seems to be the fact that a TCG will only be granted a residence title after having presented a contract of employment to the Labor Market Authority. Yet, as Svetlana's experiences during her internship suggest, a company will expect to see a residence permit prior to issuing a contract of employment, in order to be sure that they are not doing anything illegal. For the applicant, this might be a vicious circle. Furthermore, it can be assumed that German companies might not be eager to deal with the Labor Market Authority. Normally, this agency is responsible for integrating those German citizens who have been unemployed long-term or are challenged in finding a job. Hence, an employer might implicitly expect that someone related to this agency is certainly not a "high performer" or "global talent." Unfortunately, it is also third-country students and graduates who are managed by this agency, a fact which most companies and recruitment agencies seem to be unaware of.

Ultimately, it is the Labor Market Authority who decides on the future of a TCG. Bureaucratic process is slow, and might last longer than the one year granted for finding a job. Certainly, these are better conditions than prior to 2005 when TCGs had to present a contract of employment upon the day of their final exam. However, regulations still make them the least preferred employees on the German labor market – i.e. the other –, more so, as the employer has to prove that there is no German or EU national available who is equally qualified for this job. These complex and often unclear structural boundary conditions can be considered to have a detrimental effect on TCGs' successful transitions toward employment.

Summary of findings

Our findings suggest that TCGs often perceive themselves as being in a state of "nomadic in-betweenness" which we understand as an emic identity category which intends to break the dichotomies of host and stranger and which move beyond mono-directional or singular movement/migration.

Still, they might encounter ascriptions of strangerness and othering which are interrelated with perceived agency, corporate practice and structural boundary conditions: A highly motivated individual who has found the right strategies for positioning herself/himself on the German labor market might still fail due to structural obstacles. On the other hand, changing structures, such as providing more time for finding employment, might enable individuals or change their career strategies (Xenia). A specific corporate or institutional practice, such as having already employed a TCG, might prove to be more favorable to employment than others. At the same time, some individuals might be more apt to redefine detrimental structural boundary conditions in their favor, thereby reclaiming agency. For example, Vladimir, even though perceiving himself to be in a state of "nomadic in-betweenness" consciously positions himself as a foreigner, thereby turning dominant categories of social identity to his advantage. Yet, it seems that such self-empowerment requires possessing seemingly spotless qualifications, a high awareness of corporate rules of practices and refined individual career strategies, as the counter example of Xenia suggests. Still, anyone might be disempowered by dominant structures in the end, as the bureaucratic hurdles faced by Svetlana show.

Implications

Research implications

Our findings suggest that imbalances of power and dominant discourse of identity on a macro-societal or meso-organizational level might impact an individual's ability to overcome the strangerness which is projected upon them. For example, the German public discourse of "immigration" as linked to the concept of "ancestry" and to ethnic homogeneity has influenced the social structures, laws and regulations that make TCGs "the labor market Other." Consecutively, future employers will treat them differently and will perceive a higher risk with regard to their employment. In summary, they are disadvantaged in comparison to German and EU graduates, and their agency is constrained.

Still, as Al Ariss *et al.* (2014) have argued in their comprehensive overview on current HRM research on skilled SIEs and global talent management, most research on skilled SIEs and global talent management still focusses exclusively on individual and organizational perspectives. They demand for moving beyond the individual and organizational level which dominates current HRM research and to acknowledge how national, institutional, societal and organizational contexts influence how global talents are perceived and managed by an organization (p. 177). They call for in-depth qualitative research to make this contribution (Al Ariss *et al.,* 2014), and this paper has followed this call.

Based on our findings, we suggest that any analysis of how the social identity of skilled SIEs is made needs to involve multiple levels of analysis. These are: agency and interpersonal interactions on micro-level, corporate and institutional strategies and practices on meso-level and macro-level discourses and structures. Processes of social identity and identifying or being identified with larger categories run across these levels.

HRM itself is impacted by such categories. For example, whereas SIEs are often thought to be "white" and an asset to the receiving location, migrants are as a rule considered to be "non-white" and as possessing inferior qualifications (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013). If such implicit categories of social identity are not reflected upon, they might become dominant not only in managerial practice, but also on the level of HRM research.

These findings imply that HRM research needs to understand workforce diversity from a wider sociological perspective. A way of doing so might be to investigate how "strangerness" is made and affirmed in interpersonal relations and how these interactions are related to wider contexts. Such a perspective requires higher reflexivity with regard to those dominant identity categories that tend to pre-structure current HRM research. Only then will HRM deliver meaningful insights into processes of exclusion and inclusion and to identify those interrelations which can be understood to be critical. Otherwise, dichotomist categories such as inferior migrants or global strangers will be affirmed through HRM research.

Economic implications

Statistics show the high attractiveness of German universities for third-country students: Between 1993 and 2010, their number increased from 87,000 to 181,000. Often, they bring additional competencies to the country: Their level of formal qualification is higher than average (German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), 2010, p. 29), and they account for one-quarter of all master students (DAAD/HIS, 2011, p. 7).

After students from the PR China, students from eastern Europe are the largest group (DAAD/HIS, 2011, p. 16), and due to their relative similarity to the German context they might be ideal boundary spanners.

From a student perspective, Germany is an attractive country: study fees amounted to a maximum of 1,200 euro per year in 2011, and have been lowered to even less (about 250 euro per year) by 2013. Consecutively, the number of TCGs tripled to about 18,000 (BMI, 2011, p. 65; DAAD/HIS, 2011, p. 32) between 1999 and 2009; yet, only 8,260 started to seek or found a job in Germany (BMI, 2011; DAAD/HIS, 2011). The others leave the country, causing a brain drain. From an economic point, this does not make sense: German tax payers have already invested in TCGs by subsidizing their education at post-graduate level. To avoid this, the country should not let graduates leave who often– like Vladimir, Lena and Svetlana – bring a prior qualification in.

Increasingly so, German policy acknowledges the economic importance of TCGs, for example, annual salary requirements have been lowered by about one third to 44,800 euro in 2012, and TCGs have been given 18 months for seeking employment. Still, such decisions only address macro-level structures, and if they are not communicated, they might fail to trigger changes in corporate and institutional employment practices. Hence, it seems necessary to better inform future employers and employment agencies about current laws and regulations, in order to lessen their "anxieties" of employing TCGs. Furthermore, the TCGs should not be managed by the same agency responsible for the long-term unemployed.

However, even those structural changes made might still be insufficient. For example, TCGs in Germany are still not allowed to become self-employed – even though self-employment is a well-known strategy of success for minorities who are discriminated against when seeking employment in other national contexts (Al Ariss, 2010).

Furthermore, the dominant discourse of "immigration" still limits individual agency. More inclusive employment practices and diversity training in education and public administration might enable a shift here.

Managerial implications

The emergence and complexity of new globally mobile professional classes (McKenna and Richardson, 2007) brings about new challenges for corporate HRM. A company now needs to identify and secure their talents globally or from a highly diverse pool of employees and applicants (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). The most prominent of such "global talents" are SIEs who pursue their career while moving from one location to another (Al Ariss, 2010). SIEs are considered to be highly skilled and as seeking to market their qualifications in locations where these are scarce (Al Ariss, 2010). However, if a company or recruiting agency is not aware of its own view on future employees as being limited by dominant discourses or categories of social identity, it will not be able to identify future talents. Rather, the organization will continue employing those who fit into dominant categories of competency and qualification or who are able to acquire the required forms of capital (Al Ariss, 2010).

However, by only focussing on the individual and not reflecting beyond those contexts which shape and influence individual career strategies, an organization will lose sight of those minorities who might provide new and previous forms of social, human, cultural or other forms of capital. Only if organizational HRM is more reflexive about the wider contexts of organizational practice, will it be enabled to identify and secure those highly qualified SIEs who might be considered and who perceive themselves as global talents.

Conclusion

This paper presented the case of resident TCGs seeking employment in Germany. This group faces numerous hurdles to employment, based on critical intersections between interpersonal interactions and wider contexts. A critical analysis of the interrelations between interpersonal identity-making and dominant identity categories requires researchers to: to differentiate between emic (inside) self-perception and etic (outside) ascriptions, to move beyond the individual and organizational level and to trace intersections across multiple contexts and to acknowledge the multiple ways in which structure, agency and power shape processes of social identity and social identification.

Our contribution lies in raising awareness on these issues with regard to a previously neglected, but socio-economically highly relevant group of skilled SIEs and in analyzing processes of social identity and social identification and related mechanisms of exclusion across several contexts. However, due to the explorative nature of our study, we only studied a limited number of TCGs. Further research needs to investigate other critical intersections, such as their gendered nature, a theme which we have not investigated in our study.

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