

The use of ethnicity in recruiting domestic labour: A case study of French placement agencies in the care sector

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Abstract

Purpose: Referring to the sociology of conventions, we examine how various conventions of work coordination and employee relations affect how recruiters in the domestic labour industry use ethnic categories to match jobs to applicants in the domestic services sector and how institutional gatekeepers relegate immigrant women to jobs with poor career opportunities.

Design/methodology/approach: Case studies of a public job centre, a domestic service provider and an occupational integration service show the core conventions structuring job placement in Marseille's domestic service industry. Based on nine semi-structured interviews with representatives of the three respective intermediaries, we reconstructed conventions and compromises between them related to the use of ethnic categories as significant criteria in recruitment.

Findings: Characteristic compromises of work conventions frame the organisational use of ethnic categories in the job placement process. Market and domestic conventions are particularly crucial for ethnic criteria to become meaningful in the recruitment process as indicators of cheap and readily available labour. Intersecting with gender, they signal competence in the 'domestic world' of beneficiaries' private homes. Ethnic categories are less meaningful, however, when coordination between intermediary, clients and workers is based on the civic and industrial work conventions.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to better understanding ethnic labelling processes in the placement of immigrant job seekers in the domestic service industry. It points to the problematic fact that denying the recognition of foreign certificates in the industry works to the economic benefit of domestic service providers while it impedes the careers of female immigrant workers.

Keywords: Recruitment, Migrant workers, Gender, Employee relations, Career development

Paper Type: Research paper

Introduction

Many sociologists in the fields of migration and labour have pointed to the persistence of high concentrations of immigrant workers in low-skill industries (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Anderson and Ruhs, 2010a) in a segmented labour market (Piore, 1979). These studies have shown the importance of discrimination processes and stereotypes, which tend to systematically associate ethnic origins with individual abilities, personality and learning capacities (Pager and Shepherd, 2008). From the employers' perspective, belonging to a specific ethnic community is often assumed to provide information about job seekers' productivity, flexibility and expertise. Ethnic distinctions therefore serve to meet the needs of work organisations. In the French labour market, these distinctions are also the outcome of recruitment and selection practices in spite of the fact that the principle of equal opportunity, one of the fundamental values laid down in the French constitution, is held up as a norm (Sabbagh and Peer, 2008).

Domestic labour reflects the adjustments made between global aspects of workforce mobility and local matching and selection processes. This traditionally female occupational sector is one of the few where immigrant women are likely to find jobs (Anderson, 2007). Pursuing a career in domestic labour or moving on from here to other sectors (Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004) is difficult and remains an important issue for immigrant women.

In France, job seekers often gain access to domestic workplaces via employment services or gatekeepers (Scrinzi, 2009) of three different kinds: public job centres, agencies specialized in domestic services and social gatekeepers devoted to integrating disadvantaged job seekers via work. In this paper, we will analyse how these intermediaries contribute to the well-known segregation of immigrant workers on the contemporary domestic labour scene. What organisational processes favour high concentrations of immigrant women in this sector? How do these gatekeepers contribute to perpetuating ethnic stereotypes in their job placements? To what extent and how do they relegate immigrant women to jobs with poor career opportunities?

Here, we will focus on the ethnic labelling that often seems to underlie recruitment procedures and attempt to explain the economic and organisational logics that transform ethnic categories into decision-making criteria in the process of matching applicants and jobs. In line with the French sociology of conventions theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) and based on three case studies of placement agencies in the French domestic service market, we suggest that specific organisational principles favour the use of ethnic categories to guide decision-making in job placement practices. We examine how the various conventions of work coordination and employee relations (industrial, domestic, market, civic) affect how recruiters use ethnic categories to match jobs to applicants in the domestic services sector and how institutional gatekeepers relegate immigrant women to jobs with poor career opportunities. The organisational use of ethnic categories, which can either prevent or promote the employment of immigrant workers, explains both the fact that these workers are over-represented in the French market for domestic workers and the particular employment relations existing in this context.

The market for domestic workers in France

The ‘individual employer model’ according to which elderly and disabled persons are both the beneficiaries and the employers of domestic help is still the most frequent form of organising domestic work and home care services in France, but the market share of intermediary organisations that intervene in the job placement process for domestic work is growing (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2011). To create new jobs, fight unemployment and regularise employment relations in the market for domestic work – particularly those involving private individual employers – a “cash for care” welfare system has been deployed in France (Scrinzi, 2009). These public measures have also promoted the development of the intermediary domestic service market. The system, enabling tax exemption for the beneficiaries, allows the latter (families and elderly or disabled persons) to procure the services of authorised intermediaries (*Organismes Agréés de Services à la Personne*) of their own choice. The intermediaries in turn recruit job seekers for domestic work and allocate them to the beneficiaries. These go-betweens can either take the organisational form of *domestic service providers* or of *simple intermediaries*. The latter provide a simple interface between individual employers and domestic workers, bringing them into contact at the expense of the individual employer, while domestic service providers – either associations or private enterprises – employ the domestic workers they place.

The French market for domestic workers is publicly managed, partly by implementing “public industrial policies” (The French Inspectorate of Finances, 2008). Since 2005, the care and domestic service sector has been regulated by the “Borloo Law”. This law has greatly increased the number of officially recognised *domestic service providers*, which have become leading market players in the French domestic labour sector. The “Borloo Law” defines the possible types of services provided by duly authorised associations and private enterprises. Public policies have been adopted with a view to regulating the domestic care market, especially in the case of services to the elderly and people with special needs. One of the measures adopted along these lines consists of promoting professionalisation in the domestic service sector by obliging intermediary agencies to hold certificates of two kinds: (1) the “quality service” certificate, requiring the intermediary agency’s prospective employees to be better qualified, entitles their holders to cater for the more “fragile” clients (those under 3 or over 65 years of age, and disabled persons); (2) the “basic service” certificate – intermediaries holding this certificate are allowed to provide “comfort services” only, such as preparing meals and doing housework, gardening etc. These institutional authorisations can be obtained by furnishing proof that the agency has invested in vocational training and qualification programmes for the employees they place.

Gatekeepers can also take the form of *occupational integration services* catering for disadvantaged individuals. These “social gatekeepers” promote the occupational integration of particularly disadvantaged individuals by helping them improve their experience, skills and qualifications, and sensitising the domestic service providers, who

are their partners. The “Pôle-emploi”, as the French national job centre is now called, is another central gatekeeper in the domestic services sector. This *public placement agency* is responsible for assigning the formal status of “job seekers” to people in search of employment, which entitles them to benefit from a series of protective measures. In this way, the national job centre forms one of the links in the job placement chain. *Training providers*, who are often engaged by intermediary agencies to train job seekers to meet market requirements, complete the spectrum of institutional actors in the French market for domestic workers (see Scrinzi 2011 for a case study of a training provider). *Figure 1* shows how the different intermediaries –domestic service and training providers, the public job centre and occupational integration services– channel workers to jobs in the field of domestic services.

*** about here: Figure 1: Scheme of the French intermediary market for domestic workers ***

Whenever intermediaries intervene in the job placement process in the market for domestic workers, they form a ‘triangular employment relationship’. They recruit job seekers of two kinds: “active” ones, who can be allocated to the more demanding and responsible jobs in the “quality service” segment of the market (care services to “fragile” customers), and less qualified ones, who will be placed in jobs involving “basic services” (domestic work) for working customers (see *Figure 1*). The crucial point about intermediary organisations in the placement process is the fact that it is no longer the customers who define the selection criteria as in the ‘individual employer model’. Instead, the placement criteria are negotiated between the customers and the intermediaries. The customer-employee relationship is therefore no longer a simple two-

way process since it involves an intermediary and a regular job contract. We therefore assume that ethnic categories come into the matching process as a result of the judgmental system applied in this triangular employment relationship.

Understanding the selection practices of all gatekeepers involved seems essential to reconstruct the organisational relevance of ethnic categories in the recruitment process, which perpetuates the ethnic segregation practices in the domestic labour sector. To comprehend the relegation of immigrant women to this sector, it is important to know how the triangular employment system works and what organisational processes favour the high concentrations of immigrant women in this area. We therefore address the question of how public job centres, domestic service providers and occupational integration services interpret ethnic categories in their organisational task of matching job seekers to domestic job opportunities, and how this affects immigrant job seekers' placement and career prospects. We are especially interested in the compromises between different recruitment logics these different intermediaries refer to when they justify their selection procedures and job placement criteria.

Job placement from a conventionalist perspective

Acting in the sector of domestic work requires various forms of coordination between intermediaries, domestic workers, customers and the respective environments: handling equipment at the beneficiaries' homes; undergoing training; having friendly chats with customers; dealing with employers, employees and supervisors etc. Analysing staff

selection processes in the intermediary domestic service market therefore asks for a theory that captures its complex organisational structure and forms of coordination. The sociology of conventions, a well-known transdisciplinary sociological theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), serves this purpose well. This pragmatic approach focuses on how actors make arrangements amongst each other and in relation to their environment, and on the conventions providing a common perspective for coordinating actions to overcome situations of uncertainty. Conventions are the central principles of social relations and coordination in work organisations; as collectively established cultural codes, they organise social action and decision-making in predictable ways. As shared templates for interpreting situations, they also enable assessing the ‘quality’ of individuals and justify the selection of employees (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Imdorf and Leemann 2012; Thévenot, 2001).

Job candidates possess individual ‘quality’ (*worth*) in the eyes of prospective employers if they give the impression of ability to handle job requirements according to the multiple conventions that underlie specific situations in the workplace (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). According to these conventions, gatekeepers have diverse but limited criteria at their disposal for justifying their staff selection decisions. Boltanski and Thévenot distinguish between various ‘worlds’, each of which is characterised by its own convention, which coordinates action and defines individual worth. Four of these worlds have proved to be central to the economic system in general, and to understanding staff selection processes as well as the integration of social groups into the labour market in

particular (Imdorf, 2010; Imdorf and Leemann, 2012). These are the ‘industrial world’, the ‘domestic world’, the ‘market world’ and the ‘civic world’.

In the *industrial world*, manufacturing consumer goods and providing services require an efficient production process. In this world, coordination between workers and objects demands methodical actions based on plans, schedules, tools and technologies (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999: 362). Individuals are assumed to be ‘worthy’ if they are efficient, productive and operational. Relationships can therefore be called harmonious when they are organised, functional and standardised (ibid: 373). Vocational training and formal qualifications, which are usually geared toward ensuring the skills needed in the ‘industrial world’, do not feature very prominently in the domestic service sector (Devetter *et al.*, 2009). As such, it remains unclear to what extent ethnic categories symbolise specific competence in the ‘industrial world’ of that sector.

Furthermore, the integration of a new member into a work organisation affects existing social relations, having an impact on group atmosphere and eliciting emotions on staff (Hochschild 1983). The needs of a work organisation’s internal world, which Boltanski and Thévenot call the *domestic world*, are of key significance when deciding whom to hire. This world conceives personal relations and expectations amongst staff in line with the model of traditional family relations. Social bonds and coordination between people are based upon respect for tradition, trust and traditional gender relations (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999: 370). “It’s a neighbouring space, polarized by the opposition between what is far or close, what is here or there, who are associates or strangers” (Thévenot,

2001: 414). This type of coordination is apparent in the ‘individual employer model’ of domestic work where elderly or disabled people are both the beneficiaries and the employers of domestic help, and the employment relationship is often based on affection and interpersonal feelings (Anderson and Ruhs, 2010b). In the ‘domestic world’, the judgement of immigrant women’s ‘suitability’ may lead to an ambiguous assessment. While the social fit of immigrants in the private environment of native households might be contested, being female conforms to social expectations of being perfectly suited for household and care work.

Applied to work relations of intermediary service providers, the social identity ascribed to domestic workers (e.g. gender or ethnicity) can appeal more or less to customers. The need for harmonious work relations in the ‘domestic world’ of clients weighs on a company’s customer retention rate in the *market world* as the market convention accentuates the relational principle of price and competition. From this perspective, in the exchange with clients; domestic workers’ soft skills turn into a service provider’s productive resources. Accordingly, employers adopt their clients’ point of view when assessing and selecting new staff. More precisely, the financial return on investment in each worker counts. The salary of domestic workers is another key factor in this equation. We therefore ask how ethnically categorised job candidates demonstrate ‘quality’ either as productive workers or as a commodity much in demand yet limited in supply.

Since some of the intermediaries in the labour market need to keep national immigration and integration policies in mind, the *civic world* also plays a part in the domestic

employment market (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999: 372; 2006: 185-93). The respective convention of coordination is founded on a collective interest and the existence of a social contract that restrains self-centred business interests. In this world, social relations are organised along the principle of equal opportunity between job candidates. Ethnic group membership should not figure into the selection process, although it might even be an asset if work organisations are geared towards integrating immigrants in the labour market.

The four worlds defined here generate multiple social orders at the workplace. Their conventions (industrial, domestic, market, civic) mediate the adjustment of mutual expectations and requirements between employers, state-run institutions, employees and customers. These conventions of work coordination and employee relations affect how recruiters use ethnic categories to match jobs to applicants in the domestic services sector. We assume that employers use ethnic characteristics as indicators in assessing job candidates' qualities based on the conventions underlying the organisation of work as well as the recruitment process. This can lead to tensions between diverging recruitment principles so that compromises between them may be necessary. Hence, we ask: how are ethnic categories interpreted in the job placement process when intermediaries in the market for domestic work match job opportunities to applicants? And how do compromises between recruitment principles affect the visibility and the relevance of ethnic criteria?

Research design and methodology

We chose the case study methodology (Yin, 2009) to cope with the organisational complexity of institutional gatekeepers in the French market for domestic workers. Three intermediaries were analysed, all of them located in the Marseille area. Marseille, the most important port, second largest city and third largest agglomeration of France, traditionally harbours immigrants from North Africa, especially from the Maghreb. The city is at the same time located in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region where the number of authorised domestic service providers has increased significantly between 2006 and 2009, amounting to 1,167 organisations at the time (Sud Insee, special issue, 2010). Hence, Marseille represents a geographical and institutional context that lends itself to the investigation of our research question.

The three cases were selected according to their funding body (public vs. private), their objective (social vs. economic) and their size (large vs. medium structure). As such, they encompass the most common types of intermediary gatekeepers in the French market for domestic services. We have studied the private company *CarePro* as representing the fast-expanding market for domestic service providers and the association *Integra* as representing the service sector with occupational integration goals (both names are pseudonyms). Since domestic service providers work in close cooperation with the state-run placement agency, we also selected the *National Job Centre (NJC)* for our case study.

The data were collected in 2009-2010 based on interviews and participant observation. We conducted a total of nine semi-structured interviews (three per intermediary) with managers, counter clerks and employment advisors. The interviewees were selected on

the occasion of one-day on-site observations (one per case) which served to understand the basic structure and functioning of each organisation as well as the tasks and responsibilities of the respondents. Interviews focused on the role of respondents within the intermediary; on the social, normative and organisational context of his/her decision-making, and on the procedure and criteria of evaluation when assessing job candidates. The interview guide was adjusted to each intermediary in order to account for particular organisational features.

Data analysis was carried out in three steps. First, the organisational environment was reconstructed for each case by examining the position and interdependencies of the institutional gatekeeper in the placement network as well as the current market regulations. In a second step, we analysed the various conventions and compromises underlying the decision-making by gatekeepers as a consequence of organisational constraints. Following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 109), categories of things, of human beings and of verbs (referring to modes of relations and actions) in the vocabulary of an argument point to the justificatory register adopted by the respondents.

The reasoning why a stated selection criterion matters to the organisation comprises convention-based categories from which the main principles of coordination and personal selection can be derived. In a third step, we identified all occasions where the respondents stressed ethnic categories. We related the use of these categories and the contexts in which they provided useful information for the selection and matching process to the job placement conventions previously defined. Our case study approach aimed for analytical

generalisation (Yin, 2009): the empirical data from the three cases selected is expected to support our conventionalist model of immigrant job placement, helping to develop this model further by taking into account the use of ethnic categories in complex organisational contexts such as intermediaries.

How intermediary gatekeepers make use of ethnic categories in the domestic service industry

The National Job Centre

The domestic service industry is one of the specialised sectors with which the *National Job Centre (NJC)* in Marseille deals. The *NJC* therefore plays an important mediating role between job seekers and domestic service and training providers. This position requires special awareness of market needs in order to facilitate job placements.

The services from which all job seekers enrolled at this agency can benefit are highly standardised. The assessment of job candidates' qualities, even face-to-face, is based on highly standardised procedures and measurements, in compliance with the strong industrial convention governing the *NJC's* activities. It is worth noting that the question of language skills, which is usually raised elsewhere when considering the employability of immigrant job seekers, is not mentioned in the job requirements in this case but only as a *prerequisite* for applying the standardised measurement techniques (and thus for the agency's bureaucratic assessment activities to be carried out properly). The head of the

NJC domestic labour department stressed in his interview that “candidates must be able to read and write” to be able to take the vocational capacities and competences test.

In most other respects, the *NJC* job placement process is mainly based on bureaucratic procedures. Candidates are allocated to predefined categories according to the official nomenclature (Lavitry, 2009) and processed along systematic lines: “We check whether they have a valid work permit and place them in the category of those available to work immediately. Being available to work full-time is category one, part-time is category two”. The interviewee produced further bureaucratic arguments concerning the validity of the residence permit; job seekers whose permits have expired are no longer entitled to the services of the *NJC* and are “automatically deleted from the agency’s register”. Even though the interviewees systematically associated ethnic origins with suitability for domestic work (“it’s true, there are many Comorian women, they are very empathetic”), such ethnic labelling had no significant impact on placement decisions since those decisions are strictly based on the bureaucratic principles they must comply with. As the job centre allocates domestic workers to other intermediaries, such as domestic service providers, it does not have to bother with pre-sorting its clients according to the domestic needs of the ‘end users’ (the private homes). Ethnic considerations can therefore be replaced by legal requirements, which are processed administratively based on bureaucratic conventions.

In this bureaucratic environment, ethnic categories are hardly relevant because it is illegal for institutional job offers in France to target specific ethnic groups. Although the *NJC*

collects some ethnic data on job seekers' nationalities, use of this information has no significance in the 'industrial world': if the *NJC* places immigrant women in domestic jobs more often than other clients, it does so to maximise the number of job placements by efficiently matching its clients to categories sought after by domestic service providers and occupational integration services (see next two sections). Ethnic origins only emerged once as a problematic issue in *NJC* discourse: immigrants were said to perturb the functioning of the agency itself, especially in areas with large immigrant populations where the demand for the agency's services was much too large to be met ("the floods of people were impossible to cope with: nobody was pleased").

As a state-run bureaucratic agency whose mode of operation is based on the French constitutional principle of non-discrimination, the French *NJC* embodies a *compromise between the civic and industrial conventions*. To reach its objectives, the job centre functions mainly on the basis of industrial principles, which appear insensitive to ethnic considerations; legal requirements reflecting constitutional (thus civic) norms enforce ethnic labelling and discriminate indirectly against immigrant job seekers. Depending on their legal status, the latter are either victims or beneficiaries of the normative objectives the job centre stands for.

CarePro, a large market-driven domestic service provider in Marseille

The second gatekeeper studied is *CarePro*, a large private *domestic service provider* with 270 employees working at customers' homes. *CarePro* is a market-driven intermediary

between clients (families and the elderly) and wage earners. It acts as the employer in this triangular employment relationship. Since it has been accredited as a provider of “quality services”, the company offers both care for “fragile clients” (elderly or disabled people and children under three years of age) and basic services such as ironing, housekeeping, gardening and cooking for people who lack the time to do this work themselves. To enhance the qualification of some of its employees, *CarePro* provides various levels of continuing vocational training in its own vocational training department.

Immigrant workers of various origins feature prominently in *CarePro*'s workforce. The Managing Director estimated that 35%-45% of all the agency's employees were of foreign origin, the largest groups being from Algeria and the Comoros, “reflecting the composition of the population of Marseille”, where most of *CarePro*'s clients live. *CarePro*'s placement services therefore seem to facilitate access to domestic labour in this city.

We found the domestic service industry to be open to immigrants for two reasons: firstly, there is a general shortage of applicants for jobs in this sector because there is little competition from French job seekers: “French people are no longer interested in working in this sector. That's what I feel: the future belongs to the immigrants” (*CarePro* manager). Secondly, applicants with French vocational degrees are not recruited because they demand higher wages. The fact that immigrants' foreign occupational certificates are not recognised in France therefore makes them ideal candidates from the employers' point of view because despite any qualifications they may have obtained in their country

of origin, they can be paid the minimum wage. Offering unrivalled and cheap labour, immigrant workers top the job queue in the *market world* of the domestic service industry.

To bind its low-paid workforce in the medium term, *CarePro* invests in promoting the social cohesion among its staff, especially the immigrant workers on its payroll, by securing their loyalty. A cafeteria and an Internet corner have been set up to “create a sort of club”, a place “where they will feel at ease”, and regular appointments are organised with a psychologist. In addition, an Algerian domestic worker was promoted to the administrative level to show that “the idea of being responsible holds for everybody”. All these measures enable immigrants to feel comfortable in the ‘domestic world’ of the company. This supports the strong market-based functioning of *CarePro*, which might be repellent to domestic workers due to the low remuneration.

The job interview – a procedure that enables prospective employers to assess the social acceptability of job applicants (Jenkins, 1986) – turned out to be *CarePro*’s main tool for assessing candidates’ social and personal skills as well as their work motivation. The criteria used to recruit job seekers in this context are those pertaining to the ‘domestic world’ of the clients’ private homes (as distinguished from the ‘domestic world’ of the company). *CarePro*’s recruiters have referred to ethnic categories in connection with the domestic skills and education of immigrant workers: the services for job applicants are adjusted to match the needs of future clients. Any problems liable to arise in a domestic environment due to the workers’ ethnicity are smoothed out by training them (Scrinzi

2011) to perform domestic tasks such as cooking in the local tradition: “The customers want French cooking (...); preparing couscous or a Tajine from time to time is fine for elderly people, but not every day. Foreigners have to be trained to make potatoes into a gratin dauphinois”. As appropriate language skills are another main selection criterion and some immigrant job seekers’ poor mastery of French is liable to block their access to jobs; vocational training programmes are designed to equip them with basic language skills. In short, *CarePro* facilitates their assimilation into the private households by improving their domestic and language skills via company training schemes.

All in all, the case study reveals an organisation making a considerable effort to gear its market-based logic of profit maximisation resting on a low-wage policy to the demand for domestic skills. To reach a compromise between the conflicting requirements of the *market world* and the *domestic world*, *CarePro* employs vocational qualification in a contradictory way that works to the benefit of the domestic service provider. To keep salaries low, the company recruits unqualified employees or denies acknowledgement of the job candidates’ previous qualifications. Once recruited, low-wage employees are trained for domestic work. To bolster this project, *CarePro* invests in the loyalty of its employees with measures designed to raise their commitment to the employer. Ethnic categories are of considerable value to render *CarePro*’s strategy possible. On the one hand, immigrants represent cheap and readily available labour for performing domestic tasks. On the other hand, ethnic stereotypes provide the frame for anticipating potential problems that might arise at the workplace, which are *prevented* by providing cost-efficient training accordingly.

Integra, a large occupational integration association specialised in domestic services

The third case studied here is a non-profit *occupational integration association* that was created in order to integrate hard-to-place job seekers into the world of work. This Marseille-based association, which we call *Integra*, employs 27 permanent staff in charge of a 1,000 temporary employees, who perform 16,000 hours of domestic work per year (hence some employees work only very few hours for the association). *Integra* employs large numbers of immigrant workers, many of whom have never previously worked or earned a living in France because they lack a residence permit. *Integra's* domestic employees are mostly migrant females, many of them with young children. The organisation consists of two departments, one of which deals with the needs and demands of the beneficiaries and therefore focuses on the requirements of the 'market world'. The other division, called "The Social Department", recruits, accompanies and supervises job seekers. In the interview we conducted with the Head of the Social Department, he used two distinct types of discourse (civic vs. market) to describe the occupational integration of non-qualified immigrants.

The *civic discourse* focused on the gatekeeper's commitment to integrating immigrants based on principles such as solidarity and equal opportunity, the guiding principles in the 'civic world'. In this vein, the job offers of the association explicitly target immigrants devoid of qualifications. The aim is to provide disadvantaged job seekers with low-skill jobs in order to allow them some initial work experience and basic employability. *Integra*

mainly sends its female workers to do basic jobs for its beneficiaries such as housekeeping. To prepare employees for their low-level jobs, *Integra* works in close cooperation with several partner organisations and applies a whole battery of measures to integrate immigrant workers into the domestic service industry. For instance, it runs specially tailored language courses and training modules in laundry and housekeeping to fill the gaps in employees' domestic skills. To further promote social and occupational integration, the association provides administrative support to help its employees update their residence and work permits, and it offers social and psychological assistance if necessary.

Beyond the civic project of integrating unqualified immigrant women into paid work, the constraints imposed by the domestic service market also need to be taken into account. The civic discourse is therefore combined with a *market discourse*: "Of course I take economic issues into account because as an intermediary association, our main aim is to help people start off at work, and the customers also have to be satisfied". In the case of *Integra*, civic and market logics go hand in hand. The doors of the low-qualified domestic service industry seem to be particularly wide open for unqualified females in general and for immigrant mothers in particular. The Head of the Social Department considered the latter as almost impossible to train and not very adept at learning, making them most suitable for unskilled jobs in the domestic service industry. Hence, the allocation and integration of immigrant females proves to be functional in a market where nobody else (neither males nor French females) asks for the jobs.

Still, unqualified domestic workers need to be equipped with some basic skills demanded in the market (the ability to meet time schedules, fit into a hierarchy, read a map and speak correctly to customers, for example). However, little attention is paid here to the requirements of the ‘industrial world’ concerning future domestic workers. *Integra* focuses entirely on the social skills required in the ‘domestic world’. The vocational training programmes dispensed by this association are therefore designed to develop “feminine skills” for female workers (Scrinzi 2011).

To sum up, *Integra* can be characterised as a civically motivated hybrid between an occupational integration service and a domestic service provider. Its main mission is to integrate members of ethnic groups into the market for domestic labour by enabling them to meet the domestic and industrial requirements of the industry. It therefore depends on a *compromise* between the *civic* and *market world*. Ethnic and gender categories help identify the population that matches both the association’s civic objective and the market’s need for suitable domestic workers. Intersecting with gender, ethnic criteria actually carry positive connotations in the case at hand: immigrant women and mothers are regarded as being the most suitable candidates for the domestic service industry, partly because they are traditionally expected to perform domestic work and partly because they are regarded as a fragile group with only limited learning abilities. Table I summarises the organisational sense of ethnic labelling according to the dominant compromise represented by the three analysed placement agencies.

*** about here: Table I: Organisational sense of ethnic labelling by dominant compromise of placement agencies ***

Conclusion

This paper aimed at understanding how intermediary gatekeepers contribute to the high concentrations of immigrant women in the French domestic labour industry. In France, the recent “Borloo Law” regulation of the industry has boosted the market for intermediary domestic service providers that heavily depend on immigrant manpower. We applied case studies of three Marseille-based intermediaries – the *National Job Centre*; *CarePro*, a large private domestic service provider; and *Integra*, an occupational integration service – to analyse the organisational processes favouring the high concentrations of immigrant women in the sector and to understand how ethnic categories are interpreted in the job placement process.

Our analysis allowed applying and further developing a job placement model derived from the sociology of conventions theory. Conventions, the central principles of social relations and coordination in work organisations, are supposed to determine the basic recruitment criteria. Ethnic categories take effect in the recruitment process to the extent that they indicate the quality of the job candidates with respect to those conventions. The three case studies show that the placement activities of the intermediaries are basically governed by four conventions of work (*industrial, domestic, market* and *civic*) and that ethnic categories relate differently to each one of them.

In our analysis, we identified the *civic convention* demanding equal opportunity for all job candidates and found it to be operative in both the national job centre and the occupational integration service. Against this background, ethnic categories help identify the disadvantaged job seekers, which these intermediaries are committed to integrating in the labour market. Thus, ethnic affiliation can be an asset if work organisations are geared toward this purpose. The *industrial convention* of work coordination has proved less significant to make sense of ethnic categories in the job recruitment process. No doubt, recruiters in the domestic service industry conclude from job candidates' ethnic background as to whether they can be expected to have the skills (such as language skills) necessary at the workplace, but these conclusions do not substantially affect who gets hired. Rather, the intermediaries adjust their internal training schemes to provide the skills lacking and prepare immigrant workers to meet the demands of the workplace.

As opposed to the civic and the industrial conventions, the market and domestic coordination principles are crucial for rendering ethnic criteria meaningful in the staff recruitment process. Both principles are responsible for the overrepresentation of immigrant women in the domestic service market in the cases analysed. In light of the *market convention*, ethnically categorised job seekers represent cheap and readily available labour in a market where the demand for native workers is low and possibly existing qualifications of immigrants are not recognised. Even though one could imagine that the ethnic origin of immigrants could adversely affect their cultural suitability and social fit in the environment of private households with regard to the *domestic convention* of domestic services, ethnic criteria, intersecting with femaleness, turned out to carry

positive connotations at least as far as basic services for working clients are concerned. Recruiters regard immigrant women and mothers as the most suitable candidates because they are perceived to perform domestic work by tradition and to have limited learning abilities.

However, work organisations do not choose their employees based on single conventions only but on more or less complex compromises between some of their most significant coordination principles. The three intermediaries investigated represent characteristic compromises that frame the organisational use of ethnic categories for job placement purposes. In case of *CarePro*, the private domestic service provider, a complex compromise between the *market* convention, on the one hand, and the *domestic* convention, on the other, can only be reached through the simultaneous disregard and promotion of vocational skills: Whereas vocational degrees are unwelcome, as they render low remuneration of domestic workers more difficult, the same employer provides its employees with the appropriate vocational training to neutralise any of their cultural habits that might displease the clients. Ethnic categories facilitate the task of both identifying a cheap workforce and overcoming skill-based problems at the workplace through tailored training schemes.

The case of the occupational integration association *Integra* shows that integration projects cannot be carried out on civic grounds only: in order to succeed in accompanying and integrating ‘fragile’ populations into paid work, they have to cooperate with other market players who pursue less civic objectives. Here, another type of compromise

between the *civic* and *market* convention of work coordination has become visible in our case study. Ethnic categories are now simultaneously used to identify the clientele that enables the intermediary to fulfil its civic objective (to integrate disadvantaged job seekers) and to provide the market with suitable domestic workers – immigrant females and mothers. Finally, ethnic categories tend to be less meaningful tools for job placement purposes when the coordination between the intermediary, the client and the worker involves a compromise of *civic* and *industrial* conventions. The case study of the *NJC* revealed that its bureaucratic procedures are rather blind to ethnic categories. The latter are blurred instead by administratively processed legal categories such as being in possession of a regular residence permit.

Implications and future directions

Our findings make an original contribution to what is known about processes of ethnic labelling in the placement of immigrant job seekers. They show how intermediaries can favour the employment of immigrant women in the domestic service market, thus contributing to and perpetuating the current ethnic and gender segregation of this sector. The case of *CarePro* has revealed how immigrant women are deliberately relegated to jobs with poor career opportunities through the simultaneous disregard and promotion of vocational skills. Whereas the intermediary refuses to recognise possibly existing qualifications at the point of recruitment to keep wages low, the employing organisation tends to tailor in-company vocational training to the specific needs of their clients rather than to the improvement of job seekers' occupational prospects. Hence, the fact that

immigrant job seekers' original certificates are not recognised in the French labour market is partly responsible for the fact that they are consistently channelled into a market with clearly restricted career opportunities. The case of *Integra* in turn calls to mind that civic efforts to integrate disadvantaged immigrant job seekers are often consistent with market demand for low-skilled, flexible workers.

Our findings call for further research in support of our conventionalist job placement model. On the one hand, the case studies should be related to quantitative data of recruitment in the domestic service sector at the national level to assess the statistical generalisability of our model. On the other hand, research on intermediaries in other countries or low-paid industries (domestic service markets in countries other than France or alternative industries such as the construction industry) could further enhance the validity of the model. Finally, an intersectional approach (Yuval-Davis 2006) to our conventionalist understanding of how ethnic categories are used in recruiting labour for a highly gendered sector would further advance our job placement model.

Finally, that female workers who access the domestic service industry via intermediaries gain job security (compared to the 'individual employer model') at the expense of blocking opportunities for advancing their careers in the future has important policy implications. In particular, that denying recognition of foreign certificates works to the economic benefit of domestic service providers seems especially problematic. Policymakers in the sector need to find a sustainable solution to remedy this dysfunctionality of the current system. To establish an independent qualification system

in the domestic service industry based on credits for work or life experience might be an option. It would enhance domestic workers' occupational mobility and could be expected to put pressure on intermediaries to follow suit and make their jobs more attractive to qualified employees.

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Figure 1: Scheme of the French intermediary market for domestic workers

