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Ethnic minority professionals' experiences with subtle discrimination in the workplace

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Abstract
This qualitative study aims to explore the processes underlying subtle discrimination in the workplace. Based on 26 in-depth interviews with minority professionals of Turkish or Maghrebi descent in Flanders, we argue that subtle discrimination in the workplace is characterized by three important elements. First, subtle discrimination is ambiguous, and often involves disempowerment through apparent empowering behavior. Second, subtle discrimination is based on processes of power – normalization, legitimization of only the individual, legitimization as the Other and naturalization – which subtly, through everyday incidents, disempower minority individuals. Third, subtle discrimination in the workplace is linked to societal structures and discourses, which permeate the workplace through, and are reproduced by, workplace encounters.

Keywords
diversity, ethnicity, Islam, minority professionals, power, subtle discrimination

Introduction

On 11 May 2006, an 18-year-old boy walked through the streets of Antwerp, one of the major cities in Belgium, with a hunting rifle. He wanted to kill as many people of foreign descent as possible and shot three people. A two-year-old Belgian girl and her pregnant

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Malian nanny were killed; a woman of Turkish descent was heavily wounded but survived the attack. Belgium and its politicians reacted in shock and tried to understand how the racist shooting could have happened. Representatives of multicultural organizations (El Omari and Lahlali, 2006), however, asked politicians, and society at large, to not only worry about exceptional racist incidents but also address less visible forms of discrimination. In this article, we try to answer such a call by exploring subtle discrimination, or discriminatory micro-inequities that are ambiguous, not easily detectable and often unintentional, but that do have dire consequences for those experiencing them (Rowe, 1990).

Recently, also organizational scholars (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003; Dovidio and Hebl, 2005; Ogbonna and Harris, 2006) have started arguing that more attention should be paid to subtle forms of discrimination entrenched in everyday workplace interactions. They criticize the literature on workplace discrimination for having 'failed to adequately sample the range of discriminatory events experienced by stigmatized individuals on the job' (Deitch et al., 2003: 1300). In line with this call, studies have started conceptualizing the notion (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Dipboye and Halverson, 2004) and providing evidence for its existence as well as its detrimental effects (Deitch et al., 2003). Whereas these first studies have clearly described the notion of subtle discrimination, our knowledge remains limited about how subtle discrimination in the workplace is experienced and the ways in which incidents of subtle discrimination work. Accordingly, our research question is: what are the underlying processes of subtle discrimination in the workplace?

We answer this question based on interviews with 26 second-generation ethnic minority professionals working in Flemish, majority-dominated workplaces. Focusing on the perspective of those experiencing subtle discrimination is especially important in this context, as it allows us to capture less open and less visible discriminatory events, and to go beyond traditional understandings of discrimination. To identify the processes underlying the experience of subtle discrimination, we adopt a power perspective on discrimination (cf. Essed, 1991; Prasad et al., 2006). We understand subtle discrimination as experiences of disempowerment in everyday interpersonal encounters with majority employees and analyze how the experiences of disempowerment are micro-level inequalities that are embedded in wider structures, reflecting and sustaining intergroup power inequalities (Essed, 1991).

This study contributes to our thinking about subtle discrimination in the workplace by exposing the power relations underlying subtle discrimination. We show that subtle discrimination is ambiguous because it combines disempowerment with apparent empowerment and that experiences of subtle discrimination are influenced by the broader context, reproducing societal power inequalities.

Subtle discrimination

Subtle and blatant discrimination

Discrimination in organizations has been an important research topic for several decades (Zanoni et al., 2010). Despite its long tradition, this research primarily focuses on one

specific type of discrimination, namely the relatively open and blatant form (Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003) in which differential and unfair treatment is clearly exercised, with visible structural outcomes. A typical example of such discrimination in organizations is denial of employment or promotion because of one's ethnic background or gender (Gutek et al., 1996). Despite the continuously important impact of blatant discrimination on the lives of minorities, it is argued that this type of discrimination is being replaced, or supplemented, by new, more subtle, everyday forms of discrimination (Brief et al., 1997; Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003; Dipboye and Halverson, 2004; Dovidio and Hebl, 2005; Rowe, 1990).

Looking at the way the difference between blatant and subtle forms of discrimination is commonly conceptualized, we identify five elements on which the distinction is based: openness, intentionality, ease of interpretation, pervasiveness and the extent to which it is accepted in society. Blatant discrimination is mainly understood as forms of discrimination that are overt, intentional and relatively easy to recognize as discrimination, but that are less accepted and less frequently encountered in society. Usually, these are also the types of discrimination that can be challenged on legal grounds. Subtle or everyday discrimination, on the other hand, refers to forms of discrimination that pervade society, are less visible, often very ambiguous for those experiencing it, not easily recognized as discrimination and often not punishable under anti-discrimination legislation. It entails interpersonal discrimination that is often enacted unconsciously or unintentionally and that is entrenched in common, everyday interactions, taking the shape of harassment, jokes, incivility, avoidance, and other types of disrespectful treatment (Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003; Dipboye and Halverson, 2004; Essed, 1991; Rowe, 1990).

In talking about 'subtle' discrimination, it is important to realize that the results of subtle discrimination are not necessarily subtle (Deitch et al., 2003; Rowe, 1990). For example, Deitch and colleagues (2003) found that it is negatively associated with job-specific, emotional and perceived physical well-being. In other words, it is the manifestation that makes discrimination subtle, not the effect it has on the individual confronted with it.

Experiencing subtle discrimination

To study subtle discrimination, we have chosen to adopt a perspective that focuses on the experiences of the individuals exposed to it, rather than on the intentions of the majority. This is important, as intention does not seem to be necessary to talk about discrimination, and as lack of intention is precisely one of the elements that characterizes subtle discrimination (Dipboye and Halverson, 2004). So, adopting a perspective that goes beyond the intentions involved, allows us to capture specific forms of discrimination that would otherwise be ignored and to shed a new light on specific phenomena or interactions that might seem innocent or common-sense to the majority (Dion et al., 1978). Moreover, numerous studies have shown that perceived (subtle) discrimination has detrimental effects regardless of the intentions behind it (e.g. Deitch et al., 2003; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001). This implies that if we focus only on intentional discrimination, we might miss how unintentional acts might have the same results. Finally, focusing on the

experiences of those exposed to it gives us a better insight into the processes that influence whether a person interprets a specific encounter as problematic or not (Swim et al., 1998). This is especially important when exploring experiences of new forms of discrimination, as they are often characterized by ambiguity.

Power perspective on (subtle) discrimination

As a field, studies on workplace discrimination have been heavily inspired by social psychological perspectives (e.g. social identity theory), concentrating on individual cognitive processes (Nkomo, 2008; Proudford and Nkomo, 2006). By locating the sources of discrimination and prejudice mainly *inside* the individual, explaining it as the result of psychological processes, it has neglected and downplayed sources *outside* the individual, such as the historical, political and social context and the more structural roots of discrimination in society (Nkomo, 2008; Prasad et al., 2006; Proudford and Nkomo, 2006). In this article, we adopt a perspective focusing on power and the structural context in understanding subtle discrimination. To fully grasp the role of power in the context of subtle discrimination, we now explore the concept of power and its workings in organizations.

The traditional understanding of power involves situations in which two individuals (or groups of individuals) have conflicting interests, and one side succeeds in making the other do something he or she would otherwise not have done. In this case, one party can be said to have power over the other (Lukes, 2005). From this perspective, power involves clear, intentional, political behavior, ensuring that a visible and open conflict is determined in a particular way, favoring the interests of one group (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Lukes, 2005).

Over the years, it has been argued that this blatant and open form is only one particular expression of power. Studies on power moved beyond this traditional understanding and started exploring how power operates in more subtle ways (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Lukes, 2005). First, it is argued that power works through the mobilization of bias and designing the 'rules of the game' in such a way that they guide decisions and actions in a certain direction, systematically favoring particular interests or groups. Furthermore, power is involved in maintaining and legitimizing the current system (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Lukes, 2005). Here, power works through shaping individuals' perceptions or thoughts and naturalizing the status-quo, while de-legitimizing and marginalizing other options or positions (Fiol, 1991; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Walsh et al., 1981). Finally, power works through the discursive classification, differentiation and hierarchization of individuals. Based on surveillance and observation, individuals are tied to specific subject positions and judged on their conformation to, or deviance from, a specific norm. In this way, departures from this norm can be determined, measured and punished or corrected if necessary (Foucault, 1977, 1982).

When interpreting the discrimination literature from a power perspective, we could say that blatant forms of discrimination can be seen as expressions of power in a traditional sense. Here, individuals intentionally and openly disempower others by denying them resources or going against their interests. With subtle forms of discrimination, we are moving into the domain of the more subtle forms of power. First, like subtle

discrimination, power can work in less visible ways than through open conflict. Second, power can work unintentionally, just like subtle discrimination can work unconsciously. Finally, power, like subtle discrimination, is not only exercised in rare, open conflicts, but works more or less continuously (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Lukes, 2005). In this article, we draw inspiration from these theories and link subtle discrimination to power structures. Doing so, we follow Essed's (1991, 2002) treatment of everyday racism and Rowe's (1990) conceptualization of subtle discrimination. They use these terms to refer to systematic, recurrent, familiar encounters that are part of the everyday experience of being a minority and reproduce a system of inequality, in which the majority dominates the minority. In line with such conceptualization, we understand subtle discrimination as micro-inequities disempowering ethnic minorities, which are embedded in everyday interpersonal encounters, are relatively inconspicuous and often not punishable under anti-discrimination regulations. Moreover, as subtle discrimination can work through the creation of a hostile environment (Rowe, 1990), it can also involve more open forms of discrimination that do not target individuals personally, but affect them indirectly.

Method

We adopted an interpretative, inductive approach that gives voice to those experiencing subtle discrimination, which allows us to extend theory from the perspective of those who live it (cf. Lee, 1999). We relied on interviews to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying subtle discrimination. Interviews are in this case appropriate because they allow us to be open to new, unexpected phenomena, and offer detailed descriptions of specific incidents, giving us a better insight into the complexity surrounding such encounters (Kvale, 1996).

Societal context of Flanders, Belgium

Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, where this study was conducted, is only recently characterized by important migration inflows. The first major inflows of immigrants came after the Second World War, mainly from European countries like Spain and Italy, and since the beginning of the 1960s, from Turkey and Morocco. While these migrants were originally attracted as 'guest workers', expected to return to their home country, their residence gradually became more permanent as they were later on incited to stay and started bringing their families to Belgium. Generally, the societal position of non-European immigrants and their children, and especially those of Turkish or Moroccan descent, is much worse than that of the majority. They commonly have a lower educational attainment, and are overrepresented in unemployment and low-wage, blue-collar jobs (OECD, 2008; Tielens, 2005; Timmerman et al., 2003; Vertommen and Martens, 2005).

On a discursive level, individuals of foreign descent are commonly labeled 'allochthons' (*allochtonen*), which is derived from Greek and literally means 'from another land'. In contrast, 'autochthons' (*autochtonen)*, which literally means 'from the land itself', is used to refer to the indigenous Flemish population. In practice, the label

'allochthons' is mainly reserved for Muslim labor immigrants and their descendants, regardless of their nationality or place of birth. This excluding discourse is reinforced by the emergence of fear and distrust towards Islam, especially after September 11 2001. Allochthons are often linked to social problems, criminality, abuse of the social security system, increased unemployment, terrorism and extremism. Similarly, their weak socio-economic position is often believed to be caused by their unwillingness to learn Dutch or by 'their' values, which are said to be contrary to 'western' culture (Bousetta and Jacobs, 2006; Ceuppens, 2006; Ceuppens and Geschiere, 2005; De Raedt, 2004; Kanmaz, 2002). This discourse is also the basis of the Flemish approach to multiculturalism, which combines the recognition of cultural groups as a source of emancipation, with some assimilationist tendencies, stressing 'integration' through learning the Dutch language (Jacobs, 2004).

Recently, the Flemish Government, trade unions and employers' associations have started diversity campaigns to reduce the socio-economic disadvantages of ethnic minorities. In terms of legislation against discrimination, Belgium has a relative short tradition, with the first major laws being passed in the '80s. However, the effect of this legislation on labour market discrimination is limited, as complaints are rarely taken to court and often dismissed owing to lack of evidence (CGKR, 2010; Cornet and Zanoni, 2010; OECD, 2008).

Sample

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 26 second-generation professionals of Turkish or Maghrebi descent working in majority-dominated organizations in Flanders. Specifically, we interviewed individuals who work in white-collar jobs, and on hierarchical levels that are usually dominated by ethnic majority employees. This profile, which does not fit the stereotypical image of the low-skilled immigrant, is especially relevant for our study. Because of their token status as well as their professional work context, which is likely not to tolerate blatant discrimination, our interviewees might be more vulnerable to forms of subtle discrimination. We further focused on second-generation immigrants of Turkish or Maghrebi descent as these ethnic groups are important minority groups in Flanders, and associated with weak socio-economic position and Islam. So, our interviewees have reached a certain professional position, but are part of a group that has a low societal status.

We located 26 interviewees (12 women and 14 men) through diverse channels. We started an internet search and contacted acquainted HR managers and multicultural organizations. They were asked whether they knew individuals with this profile who might be interested in participating in a study on the workplace experiences of minority professionals or to post a call for interviewees on their website. In this way, we obtained a list of names of potential interviewees. We then contacted these individuals ourselves, without further involvement of the persons or organizations that had provided us their names. In this way, we kept the interview private and ensured that no third party knew whether, where or when the interview had actually taken place. We found additional interviewees through snowball sampling, asking interviewees to refer us to other professionals of foreign descent (Gobo, 2004). Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewees.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees[1]

Name	Gender	Background	Job
Aahil	M	Moroccan	Pricing Specialist
Altan	M	Turkish	Coordinator Education and Family
Fayza	F	Moroccan	European Operations Manager
Gamze	F	Turkish	Laboratory technician
Hasad	M	Turkish	Journalist
Hayat	F	Moroccan	Project coordinator
Hicham	M	Moroccan	Staff member
Jaleel	M	Moroccan	General Manager
Jassem	M	Moroccan	Project leader
Loubna	F	Moroccan	Vice-manager
Mani	F	Turkish	Team coordinator
Mehemet	M	Moroccan	Legal advisor
Murad	M	Moroccan	Supply Chain Coordinator
Noor	F	Algerian	Diversity coordinator
Nuray	F	Turkish	Legal advisor
Onan	M	Turkish	Management Consultant
Osman	M	Moroccan	Personnel & Organization Manager
Rashid	M	Moroccan	City councillor
Sabir	M	Moroccan	Account representative
Saida	F	Moroccan	Staff member
Salime	F	Turkish	Project staff member diversity
Saqr	M	Tunisian	Advisor to a Flemish minister
Suna	F	Turkish	Advisor to a Flemish minister[2]
Umay	F	Turkish	Therapist
Vahide	F	Turkish	Pharmacist
Zafir	M	Moroccan	Marketing manager

Notes:
[1]To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the names are altered and job titles stay vague.
[2]This is a different Flemish minister than the one Saqr works for.

Empirical material

The interviews consisted of an open- and a semi-structured part. Inspired by the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), we first asked interviewees to reflect on moments that had an important impact on their lives and careers. This open question gave us a broad overview of their life experiences and allowed the interviewees to introduce and elaborate on themes they believed were important. We then continued the interview in a more structured way, and asked questions about the following four topics: 1) whether they feel at home at work; 2) their relationship with their co-workers, supervisors, and external actors (e.g. clients); 3) the way they deal with their ethnic background at work; and 4) their sense of self. Finally, we allowed the interviewees to add final comments or reflections. The length of the interviews ranged from one to three hours.

Analysis of the empirical material

To identify the mechanisms underlying subtle discrimination in the workplace, we followed the logic of grounded theory (Locke, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We carefully went through the narratives and isolated interview parts that referred to experiences of subtle discrimination. In contrast to most studies on workplace discrimination, we did not directly ask whether interviewees felt they had been discriminated against or not. The reason for this lies in the observation that instances of subtle discrimination are attributionally ambiguous (Deitch et al., 2003; Ruggiero and Taylor, 1997). This means that, as it is (almost) never completely clear whether a specific action is based on prejudice or racism, it is commonly up to the target to interpret a specific occurrence as discrimination or not. However, there are many reasons why individuals often prefer not to label a personal experience as 'discrimination' in such uncertain circumstances, even if they acknowledge the existence of discrimination against their group on a general level (Crosby, 1984). In particular, individuals commonly have a high desire to believe in a just world, like to portray themselves as in control of their own fate and might fear that bringing up discrimination will evoke negative reactions (Crosby, 1984; Dovidio and Hebl, 2005). Moreover, as individuals usually use the intentions of specific behavior as a criterion by which to judge whether something is discrimination, they often dislike labeling something in this way, as this means they also have to pinpoint a specific perpetrator (Crosby, 1984; Ruggiero and Taylor, 1997). So, if we use an approach that only interprets experiences as discrimination if individuals explicitly define them as such, we might end up only describing instances in which it was absolutely clear to the interviewee that this occurrence was discrimination (Deitch et al., 2003; Ruggiero and Taylor, 1997). In other words, we would probably only describe blatant discrimination, not subtle discrimination. In line with these considerations, and informed by Deitch and colleagues (2003) who used a questionnaire measuring mistreatment or unfair treatment to study everyday discrimination, we identified incidents as subtle discrimination if these encounters made people feel upset, uneasy, frustrated or treated unfairly, and if these were directly or indirectly linked (or perceived to be linked) to their descent. Guided by this criterion, the first author compiled 121 incidents of subtle discrimination across all 26 interviews.

We then used a coding system in which themes were derived inductively from interviews and ultimately agreed upon by both authors. While compiling the list of incidents, the first author wrote down the initial descriptions of the incidents. These initial notes formed the basis for a more systematic process of open coding, in which the first author identified first-order themes (close to the interpretations and descriptions offered by the interviewees) (cf. Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Van Maanen, 1979), describing the way in which the minority professionals were upset by the incidents. After having coded the statements from several interviews, the second author went through this coding schema and discussed the coding with the first author. This resulted in the adaptation of some of the initial codes, leading to a list of 14 first-order themes, which the first author then used to (re)code the initial and remaining interview statements. Then, the first author started a process of axial coding, comparing the first-order themes and examining their connections and the ways in which they were experienced together (cf. Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Van Maanen, 1979). This initial grouping of first-order themes was again discussed

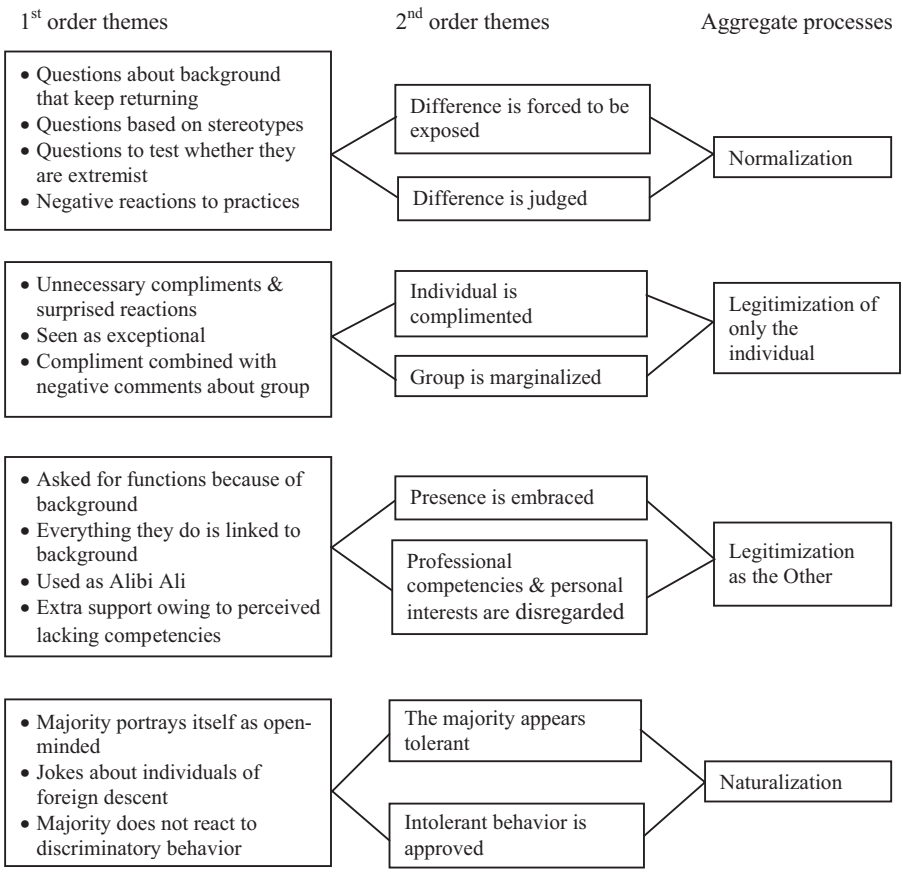

Figure 1. Data structure

with the second author, leading to further refinement. Throughout this interpretation process, we were guided by the literature on subtle discrimination, emphasizing the ambiguity of the notion (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003), and the power literature pointing to alternative ways in which power operates (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Lukes, 2005). In this way, we reached four aggregated processes that referred to the mechanisms of subtle discrimination as: 1) normalization; 2) legitimization of only the individual; 3) legitimization as the Other; and 4) naturalization. Each of these four processes is composed of two sub-themes, which collide to turn an incident into subtle discrimination. The final data structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Reflections on the material and its analysis

Before proceeding to our findings, we believe it is important to offer some reflections on the empirical material and our interpretations. Concerning the empirical material, it is important to note that all interviews were conducted by the first author – a young male

'autochthon'. The fact that he was of the dominant ethnicity and gender might have created a certain inhibition to talk about particular topics or disclose specific information (Davies, 2008; Sherman, 2002). However, the interviewer's younger age might have reduced his status advantage, creating more openness from the interviewees. Even more, that someone of the ethnic majority was interested in this topic was a surprise to many of the interviewees, further facilitating a dialogue. We also acknowledge that by interviewing individuals because of their ethnic background, we ourselves categorized them in a group, a process that is known to lead to stereotypes and prejudices. Still, we feel this is a necessary evil to gain insight into the experiences of subtle discrimination and to challenge the oppression the interviewees face.

Concerning the analysis, some might object that we identify specific incidents as discrimination even though they were not labeled as such by the interviewees. Here, we argue that research always offers a certain way of looking at the world, rather than representing it innocently or neutrally. This makes every interpretation and representation a political act, either reproducing or challenging the current status-quo (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). As Essed (1991) noted, studying everyday racism (or subtle discrimination) involves a process of de-naturalization, questioning and challenging processes that are taken for granted and perceived as normal. It is only through shedding a new light on what seems neutral (by labeling it discrimination) and exposing the power relations hidden underneath the common-sense, that we can inspire reconsideration, dialogue and a rethinking of reality (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2003).

Findings

In line with previous conceptualizations (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003) our findings strongly indicate that experiences of subtle discrimination are characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. They further show that this ambiguity arises from ethnic majority individuals' actions being ambiguous themselves, or from the combination of contradicting themes or behaviors, making seemingly innocent actions of ethnic majority co-workers and managers ambiguous. Our findings suggest four processes underlying the ambiguous experience, resulting in a feeling of disempowerment: 1) a normalization process where difference is forced to be exposed, yet judged; 2) a legitimization process of only the individual, where ethnic minority professionals are complimented as individuals, yet their group is marginalized; 3) a legitimization process as the Other, where ethnic minority professionals' presence is embraced, yet their professional competencies and personal interests are disregarded; and 4) a naturalization process where intolerant behavior is approved by apparently tolerant majority individuals.

Normalization process: Exposing difference, judging difference

Our findings indicate that experiences of subtle discrimination occur through events where our interviewees are asked questions to expose their difference but simultaneously experience that their difference is being judged. While interest in difference could be interpreted as something positive, it always ties the minority professionals to a

particular aspect of their identity (cf. Foucault, 1982) and exposes their difference to a normalizing gaze, becoming an object of qualification, classification and punishment (cf. Foucault, 1977).

Throughout the interviews, ethnic minority professionals indicated how they are often forced to talk about their cultural or religious affiliations and identifications, elements that are generally not readily detectable. These questions were experienced as upsetting because they always bring one and the same element of their identity to the fore, giving it more attention than our interviewees feel is needed, while other, general elements of their identity are neglected. For example, Mani often feels treated with more curiosity than other new colleagues would be:

> When you start somewhere new, they always wonder about the nationality that is linked to your name. You see that people are more curious, because of that name. If it's simply 'An', they wonder whether you're going to be a fun co-worker and things like that. But now there are all these extra questions. [. . .] They usually start asking these questions themselves, like: 'It's the fasting period again, is it going well?' Then I always say: 'Yeah, sure', even if it's very difficult. Simply because otherwise, you have to defend the reason for doing so for the full 100% [. . .] Sometimes it's positive that people ask about it. But after a while, it gets too much. Every new colleague again starts asking these same questions. Just leave me do my work and talk about something else. Sometimes, it's just too much, always that same story.

While Mani acknowledged that her co-workers' questions can be understood as positive, she dislikes the fact that they always pin her down to her religious or ethnic difference and that they force her to justify this difference. Other interviewees agreed that questions about their descent might be driven by the majority's interest and curiosity, but also indicated that these questions often come with a judgmental undertone. Even while probing information, the questions convey the message that the topic of inquiry is inferior. In the following example, Onan expresses how questions became more judgmental and negative after 9/11:

> The fact that someone of foreign descent reaches a managerial level, that's already new, that's deviant behavior, that's always different, exotic. And people are always going to try to understand that novelty. [. . .] What mainly happened after 9/11, is that things have become less nuanced. In the past, people tended to ask things like: 'What's the deal with Ramadan?', and simply wanted to know: 'How does this work and can you have sex during the day or not?' Now it has a bitter aftertaste, like: 'What's that all about, and why do you do that, and how can you follow a God that approves of terrorists?' [. . .] I have to admit, sometimes you know where these questions are coming from: 'This Ramadamamadam, what's the deal with that?' . . . or something like that. Then I say: 'You know, the internet is full of information, read something about it.'

Like Mani, Onan feels treated as an 'exotic' subject, evoking all sorts of curious questions about his background. However, he also feels the exposure of his difference is accompanied by condescension (referring to Ramadan as *Ramadamamadam*) and rejection (linking his religion to terrorism). Similarly, Aahil feels questions are often merely asked to implicitly reject behavior that is not in accordance with the dominant norm:

> Not drinking alcohol, for example. You always get questions about that, and often they're not asked out of interest, but rather out of disdain. You notice that these aren't questions out of interest, but rather to say: 'That's kind of weird.' Like: 'Who still believes something like that today?'

Finally, questions were sometimes experienced as a test to determine how 'extreme' one was compared with the dominant stereotypes. Such questions appear to be based on negative societal discourses on individuals of foreign descent and to be used to check where they as a person stand. For example, Altan recounts how some questions start from extreme stereotypes on Turks with the intention to determine how radical he is:

> People a priori assume that you're some sort of extremist, or that you, I don't know, have weird habits. [. . .] The idea is like: 'Do you fit in our structure, culture, organizational culture, and structure or not?' [. . .] 'Let's just see [. . .] and let him prove whether he's worth it or not. And test him from time to time by raising a certain question or a delicate issue.' [. . .] Like: 'Can a girl with a headscarf be a teacher, yes or no?' [. . .] Yeah, a test like: 'How is he going to respond to this?' Is he going to support one way of thinking, or the other. Is he going to be nuanced or not.

On the whole, our findings suggest that experiences of subtle discrimination involve a process of normalization through questions about the minority individual's background. The ambiguity arises because on the one hand, the questions can be interpreted as well-intended, and motivated by honest interest in diversity. On the other hand, such ever-returning questions become frustrating, especially because they always force one particular type of difference to the fore. This visibility then opens up the opportunity for judgment, as the particular behavior that ethnic minorities are asked to talk about deviates from the societal norm. Questions about their background, therefore, make our interviewees feel that, like in general society, they are seen as strange, and have to justify their 'deviant' behavior.

Legitimization process: The individual is complimented, the group is marginalized

A second process of subtle discrimination involves incidents in which ethnic minority professionals experience they are legitimized as individuals, whereas the entire group of individuals of foreign descent is marginalized. In this way, they individually are given a higher status by their co-workers because of their assumed exceptionality, but the lower power position of the group with whom they identify is, implicitly or explicitly, reproduced or reinforced.

This process of subtle discrimination occurred in situations in which our interviewees receive compliments, which they feel are based on traditional stereotypes and therefore unjustified. This is an ambiguous experience, because through identifying our interviewees as positive exceptions, their co-workers reproduce a negative attitude about other individuals of foreign descent. A recurrent example in the interviews involved language, about which many interviewees received surprised reactions and compliments. One example is Altan, who recounts the following 'compliment', which he feels is based on the stereotype that individuals of foreign descent do not speak Dutch well:

> From the moment that you're successful, they attribute that to individual capacities, and from the moment that it's a negative experience, that's linked to the group. That's certainly something that happens. For example, they thought it was strange that I spoke Dutch this well: 'Wow, you speak Dutch, that's great!' While I don't think my Dutch is that good. I know many people in my community whose Dutch is perfect. But nobody knows that.

Whereas in Altan's compliment, there is no explicit comparison with the entire group, in other cases, such comparison occurs. Sometimes, this comparison stays rather vague, when our interviewees are identified as exceptional individuals different from the rest. Fayza for example, describes how she once received the complement that she was an exceptional 'example' in contrast to abstract others:

> Recently, a colleague said: 'That's so fantastic about you, Fayza, there ought to be more like you. Why aren't there more allochthons who are such examples like you?' And then they think they're giving me a compliment, but that's simply an insult, you know, an enormous insult, because they're actually admitting they're generalizing about all the others. And they don't seem to realize that. [. . .] So I told them: 'You don't know the others, so why do you make a comment like that?'

Fayza not only experienced the compliment as insulting, but was also amazed that her co-workers did not realize they were offending her. In other instances, the marginalization of the group of individuals of foreign descent accompanying the compliment was even more explicit. Here, the rejection and marginalization of the group is open and clear, but still accompanied by a compliment for the individual. An example of this is given by Saida, who was considered integrated, unlike other Muslims who were considered to be extremists or terrorists:

> At that point, I didn't wear a headscarf and then you're always seen as an exception. That bothered me, as you're confronted daily with the way the average Fleming thinks about you. Or not about you, because you're the exception, but about all the others. [. . .] You know, those clichés, all Muslims are terrorists, so really the biggest clichés. But not you, you're well integrated.

On the whole, our findings suggest that experiences of subtle discrimination involve situations in which individuals are legitimized, but in which an entire group is marginalized. Such legitimization process occurred mainly through compliments. Here, ethnic minority professionals are distinguished as a sort of subtype (cf. Allport, 1954; Fiske, 1998), different from the rest of the group. This is different from traditional processes of discrimination, in which negative stereotypes about a group are also applied to an individual. Although such compliments legitimize the individual, and imply a rise of individual status and embracement by the majority (cf. Kelman, 2001; Tileagă, 2007), they are still experienced as disempowering because they implicitly confront ethnic minority professionals with the negative societal discourse on individuals of foreign descent and the fact that others are not granted the same status and continue to be marginalized. It is this combination of contradicting behaviors that makes this form of subtle discrimination ambiguous.

Legitimization process: One's presence is embraced, not one's professional competencies or personal interests

A third process of subtle discrimination involves incidents in which ethnic minority professionals' presence in the workplace is legitimized, but in such a way that only their ethnic background is recognized, and not their broader competencies or interests. Such legitimization process reduces ethnic minority individuals, in line with the dominant societal discourse, to 'an allochthon', constructing them in a singular way (cf. Foucault, 1982; Sen, 2006).

This process first of all took place in situations in which ethnic minority professionals experience that only their visible 'diverse' presence is valued. This occurs in particular when they are invited to special events or task forces, increasing the credibility of the latter. For example, Zafir recounts how he had a hard time getting his competencies recognized, but when his organization held a reception to sign a diversity charter, he was suddenly invited:

> The organization was going to sign a diversity charter [. . .] And they had also sent me an invitation [. . .] The moment I walked in, I thought: 'Now I know why they invited me.' The room was full of older men, a few women and one allochthon. So I said to the boss of HR: 'Now I know why they invited me.' 'Yeah, why?' 'I guess I had to bring some color.' And ever since that, I receive a lot of mails concerning the diversity policy, even though they don't have to do that. Perhaps they know they're not doing well.

In a similar vein, others experienced they get invited to meetings or fora just because their presence makes these less 'white'. For example, Altan describes how he was just asked for his descent, not for his competencies:

> Sometimes I think: 'I may know something about some topics, but not about other topics.' And then I have the feeling like: 'I don't have the expertise, I don't have the knowledge to be there.' So you get the feeling that you're just an Alibi Ali [. . .] Often I have the feeling that they just want you there to have an excuse like: 'See, it wasn't just a white jury, it wasn't a white meeting, you also had an allochthon, look, Altan was also there.'

Second, this process took place in incidents in which ethnic minorities are asked to work on diversity, but when doing so, their opinions and competencies are not valued. For example, Suna was hired specifically because of her ethnic background, yet does not feel her competencies are valued:

> For example, the fact that I was asked to start working as a diversity advisor, had, on the one hand, to do with the fact that they were looking very explicitly for someone with a diverse background. [. . .] People always pay more attention to you, because you're someone of diverse descent, they pay attention to all your actions, to everything you say. [. . .] The strange thing is that they keep pinning you down on your identity. While I had formulated that memo [on a diversity policy] more broadly, and had literally said that we also had to reach women, younger people, underprivileged individuals, you know. But suddenly that email [criticizing her memo for a too narrow focus on individuals of foreign descent] was only about allochthons.

Finally, legitimization of ethnic minorities' presence but de-legitimization of their professional competencies occurred through excessive helping behavior of co-workers or supervisors. Whereas our interviewees acknowledged that such behavior was probably well-intended, they experienced it as upsetting because it disregards their training and competencies. For example, Zafir recounts how his supervisor wanted to help him when he had to give a presentation and offered him all sorts of unnecessary support:

> I saw that he was more concerned about me than about others who started at the same time as me. You could say: 'He means well', but I was like: 'Leave me alone, I can take care of it.' [. . .] I do have the feeling that people sometimes think like: 'It's an allochthon, we have to support him', not like in some organizations, where they might think: 'We have to test him', more like: 'We can't lose him, we already have so few allochthons.' That's what I think, you know, that's the feeling I had. That might be completely wrong, but my instinct is usually right.

On the whole, our findings suggest that experiences of subtle discrimination involve situations in which ethnic minority professionals' presence is legitimized, but all other elements characterizing them (personality, competencies, interests, opinions) are not. The ambiguity arises as the presence of 'someone of foreign descent' is clearly accepted, but the way in which this happens makes our interviewees feel disrespected as unique individuals. In accordance to dominant societal diversity thinking, they are identified as 'allochthons', rather than as employees with a broad array of professional competences and affinities. In this way, they keep occupying their traditional low place in the ethnic hierarchy.

Naturalization process: Approval of intolerant behavior by apparently tolerant majority individuals

A fourth, final process of subtle discrimination involves incidents in which ethnic majority individuals who appear tolerant overlook and even approve intolerant behavior of other majority colleagues. In other words, it involves situations in which apparent tolerance is exposed to be only superficial, naturalizing and reproducing intolerance.

This way of subtle discrimination occurred in situations where ethnic majority individuals who seem tolerant, progressive and open-minded act themselves against this image of openness and do not react when others act in a discriminatory way. For example, Hicham, working for a progressive, left-leaning employer and hired as part of a diversity initiative, recounts how surprised he was when he was confronted with the laughter of his 'progressive' and 'intellectual' co-workers with discriminatory jokes:

> There were a lot of tolerant, progressive people, who have completely no idea of what a Moroccan looks like, what he thinks, what he feels. That's really terrible, you know. And then you have people who want to do something good in their program or want to be tolerant, but approach the topic in such a way that they indirectly contribute to exclusion [. . .] I completely agree with those who say it's often all political correctness. That's a superficial layer of tolerance, but underneath, you find the same ways of thinking as among the Flemish right. That's really the case. I once sat at a table, it was a big meeting with 25 people, and people made jokes about African kings who were really compared to monkeys and things like that. Some

> jokes might not be racism, but they are mechanisms of exclusion. Someone who starts telling a joke about African kings who are monkeys . . . and everybody laughs, you know, everyone. I'm sorry, but for me, that's a bridge too far, because I happen to come from Africa.

While this incident is triggered by a blatant joke, it involves more subtle behavior as seemingly tolerant individuals approve of it through laughing. This behavior is experienced as just as shocking as, or even more shocking than, the joke itself. In other cases, interviewees expressed how intolerant behavior is disapproved of, but yet not openly forbidden. This again often happened in the context of 'jokes', which easily can be justified as humorous exaggerations, rather than straightforward discrimination. For example, Onan was shocked when a group of managers did not clearly reject a discriminatory joke:

> In the past that would never have happened, that people with a certain position, a certain responsibility, can overtly call someone a monkey and say: 'Do we have to listen to that monkey?' Unheard of, I can't imagine a thing like that was allowed in the past. And nobody reacts! They simply laugh it off like: 'Peter, what are you saying?' But openly rejecting it? No!

Finally, some interviewees recounted how seemingly tolerant individuals or organizations justify discriminatory behavior and even accommodate to it. For example, Mehemet was even more shocked by the discriminatory behavior of a client who did not want him as her legal advisor, when his management, which appeared to be in favor of diversity, tolerated this kind of intolerance:

> At a certain point, there was a client who didn't want me because of my descent. A social worker told me: 'I wanted to refer this client to you, but she didn't want you, can I refer her to someone else?' The system was that every legal advisor was connected to specific offices in the city, but she asked for another legal advisor, while that was my office. So I presented that question to our department, that went to a more managerial level, to the meeting of the heads of department, and to the general management. And they said: 'Okay, he can be replaced by another legal advisor.' So they showed understanding for that. Yeah, that was kind of a shock.

On the whole, our findings suggest that experiences of subtle discrimination involve situations in which naturalization of intolerant and discriminatory behavior and opinions occurs. Such situations are experienced as ambiguous as it is apparently tolerant and open ethnic majority individuals who tolerate this intolerant behavior. Such naturalization process contributes to the maintenance of the status-quo, the possibility for other similar situations to occur and the prevention of real resistance to arise. This type of behavior is in line with conceptualizations of newer, subtler forms of racism and discrimination (Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn, 1993; McConahay, 1986), stressing how they are often enacted by individuals trying to uphold a non-discriminatory identity. Important is that this intolerant behavior often involves 'jokes'. A joke seems to be a potent means of subtle discrimination, as it can easily be justified by the one telling it and those listening to it, by claiming 'it's just a joke'. In this way, jokes are ways to discriminate in a safe way, and naturalize the views expressed through it (Billig, 2001; Ford et al., 2008; Gabriel et al., 2002).

Discussion

The aim of this article was to increase our understanding of subtle discrimination in the workplace through exploring it from the perspective of those experiencing it. Based on the accounts of 26 minority professionals, we extend the understanding in three ways. First, we show how experiences of subtle discrimination are ambiguous because they combine elements of empowerment and disempowerment. Second, we show how the ambiguous experience of subtle discrimination is based on four processes of subtle power, and contributes to the reproduction of power inequalities. Third, we offer a deeper insight into the way these micro-inequities are linked to, and shaped by, the societal macro-context. Overall, we argue that subtle discrimination in the workplace can be understood as micro-expressions of macro-level power dynamics that operate in ambiguous ways and are based on processes of subtle power.

Subtle discrimination as ambiguous experiences

As other authors (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Rowe, 1990) have argued, subtle discrimination is often difficult to grasp by those experiencing it, as it is characterized by ambiguity. This study furthers the understanding of subtle discrimination as an ambiguous experience by offering a deeper insight into the reasons why subtle discrimination is experienced in this way. Our study shows that what makes such experiences ambiguous is that they are often packaged in, or combined with, behavior that can be perceived as positive or empowering. However, like other empowerment schemes (e.g. see Barker, 1993; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998), such actions can lead to disempowerment through new mechanisms of control and power. So, in contrast to blatant discrimination, which involves 'pure' disempowerment, subtle discrimination can be understood as disempowerment through (apparent) empowerment.

This combination of empowerment and disempowerment makes subtle discrimination more nefarious and harder to challenge than blatant discrimination. On the one hand, it prevents individuals from reacting against it, as they can think their majority co-workers 'mean well' and do not deserve to be challenged. On the other hand, when it is challenged, majority individuals can easily justify their behavior by hiding behind its apparently well-intended nature and dismiss complaints by saying they were simply misunderstood. In other words, both the motivation to react and the expected outcomes of reacting are lowered owing to the ambiguous nature of subtle discrimination. This obviously makes it all the more important to de-naturalize this kind of apparently empowering behavior.

Subtle discrimination as driven by processes of power

Underlying subtle discrimination in the workplace are processes of subtle forms of power, namely processes of normalization, legitimization – only as an individual and as the Other – and naturalization. Like subtle forms of power, subtle discrimination can be said to permeate the workplace, always ready to be activated in everyday interactions and produce feelings of disempowerment. The ultimate effect of such small exclusionary acts can be that minority professionals will never feel at home at work,

potentially endangering their motivation, the way they perform and the way they are evaluated. In this way, subtle discrimination plays an important role in trying to push them back to the low class position they are escaping from, and in reproducing ethnic societal structures. So, in a world in which the blunt force of open discrimination is often no longer accepted, subtle discrimination can be seen as a more sophisticated tool to maintain the powerful position of the majority and to fix the barriers preventing a new generation of skilled and educated minorities to escape their weak position.

Normalization through confession A first mechanism underlying subtle discrimination is the process of normalization in which individuals are asked to confess about their invisible differences. At first sight, motivating individuals to talk about their deeper beliefs can be seen as liberating, inviting individuals to 'be themselves at work'. However, as Foucault (1998) argues, a confession is a ritual of power, in which an individual is asked to confess his or her transgressions to a person who 'prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile' (Foucault, 1998: 61–62). As invisible elements become exposed to the gaze of the majority, they can become subjected to processes of judgement, classification, comparison and hierarchization (Foucault, 1977). So, this process of normalization through confession becomes disempowering for several reasons. First, it is not the minority who are in control of the confession and the issues that ought to be disclosed, but the majority who occupy a more powerful position. Second, in this confession, ethnic minorities are forced to talk about issues that are deviant according to the dominant norm. So, like in general society, they experience being approached as 'strange'. Third, the questions often seem to start from the assumption that their sins are grave and that their practices and beliefs are extreme. Finally, these confessions often do not result in an absolution, as their sins continue to be challenged, disapproved of and stigmatized.

Individual legitimization versus collective de-legitimization A second mechanism underlying subtle discrimination is individual legitimization combined with collective marginalization. Here, individuals experience that they, as individuals, are accepted, but that the group with whom they identify is not. Again, legitimizing ethnic minorities individually can at first sight be seen as positive behavior. Through, for instance, compliments, the individual is attributed a higher status. However, as recent studies on 'complementary stereotypes' (e.g. the fact that African Americans are good at music and sports) (e.g. Czopp, 2008; Czopp and Monteith, 2006) have shown, compliments are not necessarily experienced as positive. A central characteristic of a compliment is that it entails a hierarchical comparison, in which a group or individual is evaluated positively in relation to another individual, group, or some 'average' person. So, a compliment always implies an evaluation of a reference group, which is seen as less positive than the individual. In the case of subtle discrimination, the less positive group is a group with whom the individual identifies. So, specific minority individuals are legitimized, precisely because they are believed to have exceeded themselves and abandoned their inferior group, which continues to be marginalized. In this way, compliments seem to be an ideal vehicle of subtle discrimination, as they are hard to challenge and they can reproduce negative ideas about an entire group. This also points to the fact that discrimination against an entire group might be as hurtful to an individual as individual discrimination. Moreover, complimenting a

so-called exceptional individual could even strengthen the power differences in society, as it reinforces the image of an open society that does accept minority individuals.

Legitimization of ethnic minorities presence, not of their uniqueness The process of partial individual legitimization, in which an ethnic minority individual's presence is legitimized but his or her wider individuality not, is a third way in which subtle discrimination works. Instances in which the presence of ethnic minorities in the organization is seen as self-evident can be seen as a positive evolution, as they are no longer excluded by the majority. However, if this legitimization is linked to only their foreign descent, they feel accepted as 'an allochthon', not as a unique employee with professional competencies and personal interests. In other words, they become 'othered' (Prasad and Prasad, 2002), approached and constructed in a particular way, and tied to their identity 'in a constraining way' (Foucault, 1982: 781). So, they feel approached, like in general society, as one-dimensional characters, with one particular distinction being magnified while all other important aspects of their selves are excluded (cf. Sen, 2006). This sets in motion particular relations between the majority and the minority, because the latter becomes treated based on this singular classification, as colorful pawns who can be used to make the organization look more inclusive, or as colorful dopes who are in need of extra help. In other words, ethnic minority individuals are legitimized in the workplace, but only *because* of their diversity, or even *despite* their diversity while their individuality is pushed to the background.

Naturalization through tolerance masking intolerance Finally, subtle discrimination works through the process of naturalization in which intolerant behaviour becomes accepted by seemingly tolerant ethnic majority individuals. Despite its positive connotation, 'tolerance' in itself is already based on an asymmetrical relation of power between someone who is tolerated and someone who has the power to decide who or what is tolerated and where the boundaries of tolerance are located (Hervik, 2006; Mirchandani and Tastsoglou, 2000). This power relation becomes especially visible when 'tolerant' majority individuals also tolerate behavior that is experienced by minorities as intolerant. In this way, they naturalize the actions that are experienced as problematic and the boundaries of what is tolerated at the workplace. By constructing these incidents as unproblematic and part of the 'normal workplace repertoire', they gloss over the underlying conflicts and power structures and set the stage for similar, future incidents (cf. Gabriel, 1998; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). In this sense, a lack of reaction to discrimination is as damaging as the discrimination itself, as it similarly reproduces the ethnic power structures. Important in the context of subtle discrimination is the link between naturalization and tolerance. Not only does naturalization expose the superficial tolerance of the majority, but this tolerance also contributes to the fact that naturalization of intolerance can take place, by serving as a cover for it.

Subtle discrimination as shaped by the societal context

Finally, subtle discrimination in the workplace is micro-processes of power linked to, and shaped by, the macro-context, as its mechanisms draw heavily on available societal

discourses and power structures. Through incidents of subtle discrimination, these contextual elements permeate the workplace, disempowering individuals of foreign descent, and giving them the feeling that, like in society at large, they do not have the same status as the majority. We argue that the societal context influences subtle discrimination in the workplace in three important ways.

First, the context determines who is subjected to subtle discrimination, and the divisions on which it is based. In our study, the processes of subtle discrimination simply reproduce the dominant Flemish approach to multiculturalism and diversity discourse, based on the binary of autochthons or 'original Flemings' and allochthons or individuals with an Islamic background. Other divisions, such as the class background of these individuals, are overshadowed by this discourse or filtered through the ethnic and cultural lens of this discourse. As a result, second-generation minority professionals are treated as an 'allochthon' rather than as a well-educated professional with many competencies and identifications.

Second, the context provides the discursive tools used in subtle discrimination against this group. In Flanders, central concepts in debates on ethnic diversity are language and culture, making them the main tools of subtle discrimination. Linguistic skills play an important role in the Flemish discourse and approach to multiculturalism, as learning the Dutch language is seen as an important step towards 'integration', and individuals of foreign descent are often believed not to be willing to do so (Blommaert, 1996; Jacobs, 2004). While other studies have described how discrimination can be based on *real* linguistic deficiencies or differences (e.g. Ogbonna and Harris, 2006), we found that subtle discrimination can also be based on *assumed* deficit language fluency. Even though ethnic minorities speak Dutch well, they are still confronted with the assumption they probably will not. Culture, and mainly Islamic culture, is another central element in the Flemish diversity debate. While the idea of the Islamic culture as menacing, backward and barbaric has a long history in western discourse (Said, 1978), it has become especially salient and strong in Flanders (and the rest of the western world) after the attacks of 9/11. Finally, drawing on the relatively weak educational and labour market position of individuals of foreign descent in Flanders, subtle discrimination that minority professionals experience is also sometimes related to doubts about their competencies and abilities. So, their own educational attainments do not allow them to escape the negative effects of the ethnic stratification of society. Rather, the idea that individuals of foreign descent lack skills, which tends to be explained in cultural terms rather than in class terms, continues to haunt them in the workplace, potentially undermining their chances of professional success. In other words, the achievements and training of minority individuals continue to be invalidated, denying them the equal status they thought they could attain through hard work.

Third, our study suggests that the context plays a role in determining how discrimination is understood. In line with arguments that subtle discrimination has arisen because societal values and legislation became less tolerant of blatant forms (e.g. Cortina, 2008; Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn, 1993), we argue that these same societal factors also play a role in affecting the type of discrimination that is considered as subtle and the forms subtle discrimination takes in the workplace. In contrast to countries like the USA, the Belgian anti-discrimination legislation and the (political, societal and academic)

debate on workplace discrimination are still relatively young. As a result, some of the incidents we described here as subtle discrimination might be considered as blatant discrimination in other contexts with a longer societal debate on discrimination.

Limitations and future research on subtle discrimination

The goal of this article was to explore subtle discrimination in more depth. In doing so, we mainly focused on the structural side of the structure-agency combination. Consequently, we paid less attention to agency, and the ways in which individuals engage with these structural constraints or respond to the discrimination they are faced with. Addressing this limitation, future research can benefit from paying more attention to the possibilities of resistance and agency in the context of subtle discrimination and its power effects. In this context, it has to be acknowledged that agency can take many forms and that even without clear outward responses, individuals are actively interpreting a specific act and labeling it as discrimination or not. In this way, all narratives on discrimination could be seen as purely discursive tactics to make sense of their work experiences. Even though we acknowledge this possibility, we want to avoid a position reducing everything to language and discourse. Rather, we assume that the narratives have the ability to 'convey something beyond itself' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000: 208), but are always embedded in, and influenced by, power structures and earlier experiences with discrimination.

Besides attending to the interplay of structure and agency, future research could also explore how experiences of subtle discrimination evolve over time. This could be done by approaching the topic through observations or diary studies, rather than retrospectively. Another limitation of this study is that, owing to the relative scarcity of the group we studied, we interviewed individuals working in a broad array of organizations and sectors. As a result, the possible influences of the organizational and professional context on subtle discrimination remain underexplored.

Two aspects that were important in the experiences of subtle discrimination in the Flemish context, namely religion (Islam) and language, have been relatively underexplored in research on discrimination in the workplace. Given the very negative discourse on Islam, discrimination against and the experiences of Muslim employees might be an important area for future research, not only in Europe, but also in other parts of the world. Similarly, the influence of language deserves more attention, as it can play a role in the workplace experiences of other immigrant groups throughout the world, such as Hispanic Americans.

Conclusion

As the findings of this study strongly indicate, the battle against workplace discrimination is far from over. While blatant discrimination has become socially less accepted, subtle discrimination has emerged as a new and soft tool to maintain power imbalances in society and the workplace by posing invisible barriers to minorities. Challenging such processes of soft power might be especially difficult, because they are tightly linked to the power structures in society. So, it is questionable whether organizations can ever be

freed of discrimination without structural change. What seems important is that the debate on workplace discrimination becomes broadened, going beyond what is traditionally understood as discrimination. We hope that this study contributes to de-naturalizing some assumed unproblematic behavior, and makes majority members more aware of the consequences their behavior can have on minority individuals. In turn, this broader and deeper understanding might inspire people to rethink what they perceive as normal, unproblematic and neutral.

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