

# Ethnicity – a factor?

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## 1. Background

In most of the European countries immigration is occurring since decades. Irrespectively of the reasons whether due to colonial heritage or because of economical or missing future perspectives in general the composition of the national population is changing into an intercultural mixture<sup>1</sup>. For instance in Germany: about 20% of the population has a migration background meanwhile (Statist. Bundesamt 2007). In all European countries this amount probably will increase the next years.

In Germany this cultural and ethnic<sup>2</sup> diversity is hardly visible in organisations and activities on environmental affairs: Up to now neither the scientific and public discourse on sustainable development nor research on issues referring to it have integrated the possible effects of different cultural socialisation on the realization of the concept sustainable development (Katz 2010b, Kuhn 2006). There is a lack of profound knowledge about the attitudes or every day acting of (im-)migrants<sup>3</sup> towards nature and its management, about their interests and demands regarding environmental and sustainability issues (Katz/ Kontzi 2009 a, b). Additionally the percentage of immigrants engaged in environmentally relevant activities as volunteers or as employees, e.g. in organisations of the ecological movement is very low (ibidem, Kopf 2008).

Research on the requirements of immigrants towards “natural” areas is missing as well as on the actual situation of intercultural<sup>4</sup> participation in natural management processes and on the needed preconditions for an appropriate “intercultural empowerment” in environmental planning (Katz/

<sup>1</sup> The idea of the existence of homogeneity inside of cultural barriers is a construction. As nature culture is a permanently changing historical result of differently intensive processes of adaption and separation (Hörning 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity is one possible element of culture, the overarching concept. It is a social construction led by the assumption that similarities point at a shared origin or can be deduced by one source. “In the moment when preferences, characteristics or life styles are classified to be ethnic, ethnicity is becoming the motive for social acting and for the emergence of so called cultured identities. By doing this cause and effect is reversed” (Max Weber 1922 in Bös 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Of course there is no social group called (im-)migrants. It is the name used for all those people who were immigrating to Germany during the middle of the last century until now. “Immigrants” are not even in some way a homogeneous “group” of people with **one** specific interest and **one** specific perception of nature or environmental awareness. The various forms of experienced migration and cultural backgrounds as well as the various geographical regions, people are coming from, already interdict unifications.

<sup>4</sup> Interculturality is based on a respectful and non hierarchical relation between people who belong to various cultural groups. It means more than “multicultural” but also act on the assumption that the only manner of correctly including/understanding another culture is to interpret its demonstrations in agreement with its own cultural criteria. Our own inevitable ethnocentrism makes us interpret the cultural practices which are strange for us and has therefore to be reflected.

Kontzi 2009b). Almost no data exist about the perception and esteem of nature, natural resources or landscapes or the conceptions (conditions and influencing factors) of nature management and their realisations by different ethnic groups, showing a migration background.

Due to an own first and approximate literature study there is certain evidence that it seems to be very similar in other European countries. Except of some insular activities at a local level according to committed individuals in environmental and immigrant organisations respectively, the intercultural garden initiatives and some tracks in practicing Islam while pointing at the ecological necessities especially in the UK, there seems to be little (research) efforts on linking the perspectives of immigrants with environmental issues all over Europe.

In the following the challenges and problems during analysing effects of cultural socialisation, experience and traditions on societal nature relations in Germany are scrutinized focussing immigrants for assumed to be culturally and ethnically diverse and different from the social majority. Results of a first (explorative) study on environmental organisations in Germany and their activities or problems with “acting intercultural” are introduced. Qualitative data on the conditions to and obstacles for an adequate consideration of intercultural aspects, e.g. the existing mental images and ideas about migrants’ interests in nature (management) and sustainability issues by environmental actors are presented and reflected.

A short review on the theoretical context, the dilemata of reproducing differences by analysing them and state of the art of the relation between culture and nature is in the first place.

## **2. Interrelation between Culture and Nature: Constructions of “The Other”**

Culture matters! We know this from several cross cultural studies which figured out e.g. differences in risk awareness and perception on a national comparison level (Renn/ Rohrman 2000, Krömker 2004, Hinman et al. 1993, Vaughan/ Nordenstam 1991). Additionally the variety in cultural practices, public and political engagement towards natural resource management is experienced in international regulation efforts.

Up to now only some research deals with the cultural diversity and its impact on societal nature relation *within* nations: A new study done at the university of Wageningen (NL), on immigrants’ images of nature and landscape preferences clarified that people with an Islamic background generally support the functional image of nature and show lower preferences for non-urban, wild and unmanaged landscapes in comparison to native Dutch people who are strong supporters of the wilderness images (Buijs et al. 2009). This relation is affected by the duration of residence. In Germany a few investigations on the environmental awareness and behaviour of Turkish immigrants (Kizilocak/ Sauer 2003, Maack-Rheinländer 1999) and about mundane life realities of immigrants including their norms and values (social milieu-approach, SINUS SOCIOVISION 2008, Wippermann/ Flaig 2009) describe on one hand at least similar or even higher interest in environmental and nature protection issues as the social majority. On the other hand a lack of information about complex detrimental effects on environment, about options for action and participation in environmental planning was identified at Turkish migrant groups (Kizilocak/ Sauer 2003).

Results of a diploma thesis about nature perceptions of adolescents with a migration background and being in professional education (Kontzi 2007), conducted in the context of a joint research

project<sup>5</sup> showed that images and ideas of nature are affected by the living environment and present or reminded or told nature experiences in the countries of origin. Different types of nature construction could be figured out, but could not be assigned directly to different cultural backgrounds.

But not only the just mentioned data indicates that cultural socialisation and nature relation are interconnected<sup>6</sup>. A very long lasting (epistemological) debate highlights how concepts of nature, its perception and esteem as well as the practical management of nature is interwoven with historical and socio-cultural conditions, contexts, experiences and traditions (Katz 2010a, Eisel 2004, Gloy 1995, 1996, Jahn/ Wehling 1998, Katz/ von Winterfeld 2006) and with the conception of society and ourselves (Schäfer 1994). Talking about nature means we are talking about culture and society at the same time (ibidem). Empirical research on the conception of nature and its management shows that professional actors busy in nature related affairs construct nature according to their understanding of the relation between their own individual autonomy and the social order, i.e. how the individual vs. the collective options of acting in their professional fields or their self construction as professional actors are seen (Katz 2010c, Katz/ Mayer 2006). All this is connected to the constructed relation between “The Self” and “The Other”, between subject and object, between production and reproduction, between all those pairs which are set as opposites representing a special order alongside we sort and organize reality in our modern western industrialized societies (Katz 2006). How different cultural socialisations experiences will affect these constructions and relations is not yet analysed.

Culture/ ethnicity is nothing fixed which can be easily analysed or “allocated” to people or a societal group. It is deeply interwoven with social relations and other categories structuring societies. Ethnicity is linked to the construction of foreignness and its often deprecative dissociation from the self (Dollase 1996). Doing ethnicity means a process of construction where societal power, oppression and cultural dominance are expressed, where we draw societal boundaries deciding who is in and out (Katz 2010b). We feel associated to what we consider, assume and percept to be similar to ourselves. It is part of the “struggle for normality” which means, the distribution of and access to economic and cultural assets. Each emergence of otherness is threatening the cultural dominance in some kind, causing fear and thereby articulating the claim for total determination and control of reality (Rommelspacher 1995).

Historical built power relations still influence discourses and negotiations to a certain extension. Hidden weightings due to post-colonial power constellations support the reproduction of stereotypes of “The Others”, the foreigners. Critical whiteness, as a part of postcolonial theory, scrutinizes whiteness as a system which is today part of the social reality and influences the social life in most of the countries of the western hemisphere<sup>7</sup>. In these countries whiteness

<sup>5</sup> Cooperation Project of the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (“Gender Analysis of Nature Knowledge and experiences communicated by foresters doing forest related environmental education in Germany”), which has to - among other things - identifying the nature and gender concepts transported via forest related environmental education activities (Leuphana-University Lüneburg and University of Freiburg, Hehn/ Katz 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Various (and controversial) theoretical approaches are dealing with the description of the (regulation) pattern and regime of this interrelation (Becker und Jahn 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The influence of whiteness as a normative order plays also a role in the southern hemisphere but can not be described here

means still the position of power, the norm to which “The Other” is set in relation to. *White* in this meaning is not necessarily connected with a special pigmentation of the skin.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, on one hand we know “ethnicity” is a historical, political and social construction. On the other hand the existing representative inquiries showed that specific immigrant groups prefer certain types and functions of nature. It is a matter of fact that cultural practices and traditions are influencing the options, strategies and acceptance of nature management and natural resource use. Knowledge about the impact of different cultural socialisation (e.g. due to ethnic groups) on societal nature relations therefore is required. But how can this be “measured” without reproducing stereotypes and discriminative power ratios? What is the adequate object of interest?

This dilemma reminds to discussions on gender analyses: In Germany different environmental awareness and behaviour between men and women can be identified since several years (Empacher et al. 2001, Preisendörfer 2007). These differences are measurable and statistically proved but not explainable by differences in sex. They can be interpreted solely using the gender concept.

According to this, research about the influence of cultural socialisation on - i.e. the relation of groups with a migration background towards - societal nature regulations has to be very sensitive and self critical.<sup>9</sup> It needs to considerate all factors and contexts forming and leading to oppressive socio-cultural relations. Besides such difficulties in “measuring” cultural traits of social collectives, i.e. nations, or of different cultural associations within a society, the variety in duration and intensity of people’s cultural experiences is an additional factor of complexity. In Germany for instance nowadays the so called first generation - the immigrated one - up to the third generation - their grandchildren born in Germany -, deriving from a set of different countries of origin is living side by side.

### **3. A study on German environmental NGOs**

We decided not to concentrate on the differences but to look at the construction of them in an environmental planning context: Below we introduce results of a first (explorative) study on environmental organisations and their activities or problems with “acting intercultural”. One of the main starting points was the observation that immigrants and their interests, demands or experiences are not considered in the work of environmental NGOs. The question raised which options and obstacles would exist in these organisations - considering themselves as open minded and grass-roots democratic -, in respect of powerful participation of people with a migration background and in terms of including their interests in the NGO’s agenda.

Qualitative data on the conditions to and obstacles for an adequate consideration of intercultural aspects, e.g. the existing mental images and ideas about migrants’ interests in nature (management) and sustainability issues by environmental actors are presented and reflected. The

<sup>8</sup> Wollrad (2005) shows how Irish migrants in the USA were first seen as uncivilized, wild and of black “race”. Through brutal aggression against Afro-American people and through defending slavery the Irish immigrants managed to be accepted as *white* (Ibidem: 74ff.).

<sup>9</sup> Of course ethnicity or gender are not the only categories that shape a person’s life in society. Others like class, disability, age, religion, habit, personal background, sexual orientation, family status are affecting ones possibilities in society too. So, race, class, gender are to be interpreted as interdependent (Walgenbach et al. 2007, Wollrad 2005) or articulated categories (McClintock 1995), which are seen as forms of power relations with the result of racism, class and sexism.

present status in NGOs was analysed by asking for reasons, affecting factors and contexts in regard to their organisational structures, processes and behaviours hindering or supporting interculturality.

An internet research and inquiry of the member organisations of the Deutscher Naturschutzring e.V., an umbrella group for the nature and environmental protection organisations in Germany, was used in order to investigate all existing, planned, finished activities or current projects addressing immigrants or intercultural topics. Representatives of the staff (employees and volunteers) of many of the environmental NGOs throughout Germany were interviewed (35 qualitative telephone interviews) (Katz/ Kontzi 2009a). The data was content analytical processed (Mayring 1995).

### **3. Results**

#### **What is already done – individual activities**

- The majority of the existing “intercultural” initiatives found at environmental NGOs is bound to the local level of their operation. It is concentrated on environmental protection issues relevant for the budget of private households like waste-avoidance/ -separation or energy saving. Most of these activities are initiated by the engagement of individuals (often with a migration background) and disappear with the abandonment of those persons (Katz & Kontzi 2009).
- Quite a lot of activities are conducted in the context of environmental education. This seems to be the most popular and acceptable access to nature related topics for children and youngsters with a migration background.
- Successful projects required activities either jointly conceptualized and accomplished in cooperation with migrants or those, which were pointing directly to every-day life realities (environmentally friendly clothes washing, sane nutrition or organic food, self and subsistence supply). Especially women seem to be attracted thereby – probably due to the gendered allocation of tasks in most of the migrant households<sup>10</sup>.

#### **Obstacles and problems by integrating the “intercultural perspective”**

First of all the environmental NGOs are highly interested in getting an intercultural point of view in general. The innovative potential also for nature and environmental issues is seen on one hand. But on the other hand most of the asked representatives of environmental NGOs showed a lack of knowledge and experience about migrants` interests in and appreciation of nature and environmental issues. For instance the above mentioned existing studies on the awareness and acting of migrants towards environmental protection are unknown as well as possibilities are not in mind to reach different ethnic groups and communicate interculturality.

#### *Prejudices and images*

In the interviews a set of prejudices and images about „The Migrant“ became evident:

<sup>10</sup> Before executing activities like mentioned here, it is important to consider their consequences for gender inequality thereby reproduced and maintained beforehand.

Immigrants were supposed to be not interested in nature issues because they do not show up in the working context of the environmental NGOs. The given explanations were:

- Nature events and experiences like hiking or mountain climbing are supposed to be middle class activities linked to the western culture<sup>11</sup>. Therefore such operations are not seen as that important or widespread in non western countries. That is why migrants would not feel attracted so much to those issues. In addition the Germans were supposed to be more ecologically-minded due to the environmental movement in the 1980<sup>th</sup>, which didn't occur in a similar way in those countries most immigrants are coming from. For instance Turkish people were considered by a few interviewed representatives less interested in environmental issues due to the inadequate role of environmental protection issues in Turkish policy in general.
- The asked representatives of the environmental NGOs indicated internalized images of immigrants constructing them as busy with social and integration problems deficient and extremely traditionally anchored. Accordingly they are said to be stronger bound to family structures as Germans. Therefore they would not educate their children in being curative or protective towards nature affairs. Immigrants probably are favoring other topics and appear to be more interested in private affairs and in consumption.
- Some of the interview partners distinguished Russian/ Easter European migrants and Turkish/ Arabic migrants. The so called Russian Germans were supposed to be closer to nature, because they mostly came from rural regions. For the Turkish migrants this was used as a counterargument for not being interested in an aesthetic nature perception and therefore hardly to animate for environmental activities. Additionally Russian migrants were not seen as "real migrants". Since a lot of the (German)-Russian migrants have German ancestors, hence are Germans and perceived as such. Another possible explanation might be, that most of them are *white* and Christian, so they are considered closer to the German culture.

Immigrants were supposed difficult to cooperate with: because of different cultural practices and understandings:

- A few of the asked representatives asserted that immigrants are not reliable and solid in terms of time commitments. For this scheduling was considered to be impossible or more difficult. At least bureaucratic ways of addressing seem to be merely successful.
- Communities of immigrants were noticed as "closed shops": they don't want to be integrated but separated and like to stay in their own cultural contexts. Different gender roles are complicating an appropriate addressing of issues additionally.

### *Missing intercultural competences*

Considering all the aspects mentioned above, the following understanding of reaching the public, deficiencies in intercultural communication, in cooperation skills and competences coming across and identified in the statements of many of the asked representatives are not surprising:

<sup>11</sup> It was however countered by a few interviewed persons, that interests in outdoor activities are not only influenced by a cultural barrier but also by financial hindrances – and education. People with low budgets cannot afford the costs of climbing (equipment and the use of facilities), therefore it is connected to middle class. So a lack of knowledge and a bad social standard of living were argued being main barriers for migrants' participation in environmental actions. Often the line was drawn to other "social groups" like unemployed people, who are neither visible in the organizations.

- The environmental NGOs are strongly motivated to catch more and new target groups, thus it was claimed to be open to anybody with an interest in nature. This implies that everybody who isn't taking part in their actions has no interest in nature and in environmental protection work. In addition the interviewed representatives assumed to reach everybody in equal measure with their information material. An assumption like this however ignores the results from the environmental and sustainable communication research, which state that if communication with everybody is wanted, no one is reached. Environmental NGOs obviously do not broadly reflect the own involvement in excluding specific social groups from their activities and working contexts.
- The existing material, said to be supportive for intercultural communication and cooperation respectively, like guidelines or handbooks (Kleinhüchelkotten/ Danner 2006, Kleinhüchelkotten/ Wegner 2008) is not used, normally not even known.
- Missing language skills (on both sides!) were considered to be a hindrance, which has to be relieved first and quickly. But interestingly this was not seen as the main barrier towards intercultural communication in environmental issues. Many experiences showed that language problems are not that existential and could be overcome and managed.

#### *Exclusion of sociality from nature relevant issues*

The perception of nature issues as being free of social relations is a phenomenon still widely spread in natural scientific or technical oriented working fields and amongst people professionally active in the realm of natural or environmental protection (Katz 2009, Mayer und Katz 2008, Katz/ v. Winterfeld 2006). It is changing slowly till the last 10 years due to the growing attention in the international sustainability discourse towards indigenous people's social problems and its connection to demands and existential needs in natural resource management. Despite this a separation of sociality from nature issues is still going on and also done by the staff of environmental NGOs (Fischer et al. 2006), that is mostly educated in natural or environmental sciences. Their statement "our focus is nature, not society or culture" describes quite well the understood position in terms of the relation between nature and society.

#### *A lack of supportive structures and organisation culture for cross and new topics*

Structures supporting cross topics in general are missed in most of the environmental NGOs. What is worse, the interest at the superior organisational level is focussed on promoting environmental targets in the context of parliamentary work. Financial and personal straits do not advance issues, which are not directly environmentally occupied and which would require additional skills or competences (Katz/ Kontzi 2009a). Intercultural activities therefore are dependant solely on the individual engagement. Only in one of the investigated cases the initiatives were integrated structurally. As a further difficulty identified, none of the interviewed representatives seemed to have nameable contacts to immigrant-organisations. The media, consumed by migrants, neither are included in the press distribution list of the NGOs .

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Germany the intercultural dimension in the public and scientific debate on an appropriate regulation of societal natural relations is considered insufficiently. People with a migration

background are rarely involved in nature related decision and management processes. This is the same in environmental NGOs.

In the interviews of NGO representatives the image of the “poor, not well integrated, traditional, patriarchal migrant” was stated in various forms, environmentalism and nature conservation was seen as a “typical German” topic. The organisations themselves are determined by *white*, middle class Germans. The lack of interest of migrants was explained with the differences in cultural backgrounds. The German culture is perceived as nature loving and caring, whereas the cultures of the “migrants”, since they are considered dirtying up the parks in the cities, are not appearing to be environmentally concerned.

Hereby the migrant is constructed as the imperfect “Other”, whereas the “Germans” are set as the (perfect) norm. This construction of “Self” and “Other” legitimises to judge over the “Other” (Hall 2008: 166). The “Self” and its possible imperfections and faults are not questioned. Walgenbach (2005) points out, that the German meaning of nation is strongly linked to Germany being a *white* nation. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century forward the nation building process was not based on territorial location but on biological concepts. The principle of *ius sanguinis* was manifested: not the ones born in German territory are Germans, but persons who have “German blood”<sup>12</sup>. As many authors show, the interconnection between whiteness and the image of German people still exist in Germany today (Eggers et al. 2005, Ha et al. 2007). Especially in an academic context “people of color” are hardly to find. The examples of discrimination against people of color in Germany are vast.

The research results presented above showed that practiced cooperation for instance in the frame of a joint project could contribute a lot to communicate and understand each other in a better way. But not each meeting with „others“ would lead to a reduction in stereotypes or prejudices. It is important to mind that corporate processes/ activities are not imbalanced in terms of resources and power positions. An understanding of participation and integration as a two-sided process and for which acculturation is not a coercive requirement is needed. As a first step in this direction it is necessary to reflect the own prejudices and images and to accept the own involvement. Research is needed which analyzes the exclusion and reproduction of stereotypes, where the construction of „doing ethnicity“ while „doing nature“ in specific contexts is focused and the influence of culture is studied as an interdependent category according to the intersectional approach. We need investigations on powerful participation options for migrants to invent effective communication strategies and formats.

In Order to support intercultural competences the Anti-Bias approach<sup>13</sup>, a tool to reflect on the especially implicit, hidden power relations and the own position in society, could be helpful and should be introduced. The goal is to act consciously in a biased world. Anti-Bias is to be understood as critical to the current political and societal system and trying to abolish unfair structures in society (Bovha/ Kontzi 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The *ius sanguinis* still exists today, however since 2000 the *ius soli* principle is additionally used.

<sup>13</sup> The Anti-Bias approach was originally developed in the late 1980s in California by Louise Derman Sparks, as an approach in infant pedagogic. The approach was adapted in South-Africa, where its object was to overcome racism in the heads of the people after the apartheid. In the late 1990s Anti-Bias was taught in Germany by two South-African trainers. Since then the approach has been developed further and has been used with target audiences like students, teachers, activists of NGOs, scientist, children in nursery schools and so forth. Basic assumptions of Anti-Bias-Trainings are, that each human being has biases, which he or she is learning in the early childhood. These biases are transported through images, attitudes and values in the environment of the growing child (Bovha/ Kontzi 2009: 296).



One of the essential ideas of the concept of sustainable development is solving global problems by cooperation on an equal level. The cognitions of the north might not be enough to get suited and acceptable solutions. In the last decades the industrialized “North” was set as the “role model” for the world. History indicates that this model might not be the most sustainable one. We need fair interaction and powerful participation of all actors and inhabitants to increase the diversity and thus the options for acting.

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