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## Ethnicity as skill: immigrant employment hierarchies in Norwegian low-wage labour markets

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### ABSTRACT

Immigrants are often concentrated in particular, often low-waged, segments of the labour market and employers tend to assume that immigrants posit (soft) skills which make them particularly suited for specific tasks. Less scholarly attention has been given to the real and perceived content of these skills and how employers may shift their view over time. We contribute to the literature by examining changing ethnic employment hierarchies in two immigrant-intensive labour markets in Norway. Drawing on qualitative data from the hotel and fish processing industries, we describe, first, how different ethnic groups are allocated into specific jobs forming a clear hierarchy in the eyes of employers, and, second, how employers' preferences for particular groups change as new immigrants enter the labour market. Theoretically, we develop the concept of 'ethnicity as skill', which points to the tendency among employers to equate ethnic group membership with a set of informal qualifications.

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Immigration; employment hierarchies; skills; ethnicity; inequality

## Introduction

Throughout the Western world, immigrant workers tend to be clustered in particular occupations and industries, often referred to as immigrant niches (Waldinger 1994, 2001). Immigrant niches are mostly – but not exclusively – found within low-wage labour markets, for example, in the service sector and manufacturing (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Furthermore, while often populated by a variety of different immigrant-origin groups, thus separating them from ethnic enclaves (Portes and Jensen 1989), immigrant niches tend to be structured hierarchically in ways that coincide with the social status of these groups, resulting in divisions of labour following ethnic lines (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2007; Wills et al. 2009; Ruhs and Anderson 2010).

While the literatures on immigrant niches and ethnic employment hierarchies have come a long way in documenting the processes through which immigrant niches are formed and hierarchically structured, less scholarly work has focused on the content of skills and the shifting nature of employment hierarchies. In this article, we explore the real and perceived content of the various skills immigrant workers are assumed to

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posit, and ask how employers shift their view of different ethnic groups as immigrants from new countries of origin enter the immigrant niche. We contribute to the literature by examining the changing nature of ethnic employment hierarchies in two immigrant-concentrated low-wage labour markets in Norway. Drawing on a rich, qualitative data material from the Norwegian hotel and fish processing industry we describe, first, how different ethnic groups are allocated into specific jobs forming a clear group hierarchy in the eyes of employers, and, second, how employers' preferences for particular ethnic groups change over time as new groups enter the labour market.

The Norwegian hotel and fish processing industries are particularly suited for exploring these processes, for two reasons. First, both industries have since the mid-1980s been important employment venues for refugees and other non-European immigrant groups. Second, both industries have been comprehensively transformed by the large influx of free moving labour migrants from Poland and Lithuania since the EU accession in 2004, making them suited for an analysis of how ethnic employment hierarchies change over time. While our interviews in the hotel sector were conducted in the urban Oslo area, which is located in Southern Norway, our interviews in the fishing industry were conducted in the coastal area of Northern Norway. By drawing on interviews from two different industries and two different geographical regions of the country, we are able to analyse the content and changing nature of ethnic employment hierarchies in highly different contexts.

Theoretically, we contribute to the literatures on immigrant niches and ethnic divisions of labour by drawing on theories of skills perception (Moss and Tilly 2001) and categorical inequality (Tilly 1998; Massey 2007; Ridgeway 2014). The key theoretical argument is that employers differentiate between immigrant groups and allocate them into different types of work tasks because each group is perceived to posit a unique set of informal qualifications or 'soft skills'. This mode of stratification is based on both real and perceived differences at the aggregate level. The perception of group skills is however used *categorically* by employers, in the sense that it tends to apply to all members of the group regardless of individual qualifications, reflecting broader structures of power and inequality. This categorical differentiation leads employers to equate ethnic group membership with a set of informal skills. The end result is a complex system of stratification based on enduring categorical inequalities, which nonetheless changes gradually over time as old immigrant groups adapt and new ones enter the labour market.

### Theories of skills, ethnic hierarchies and categorical inequality

According to a standard economic approach, the structuring of labour markets is based on differences in human capital, and job allocation is based on a careful matching of employees' skill level and given work tasks: Employers demand various types of skills that are needed to perform various tasks; individual workers possess various skills based on their education, training and experiences; and wages function as the price mechanism which ensures a proper matching of the two (Becker 1964). Systematic differences between native workers and various immigrant groups are thus attributed to variations in their level of basic and country-specific human capital (Borjas 1989). Such variation may in turn be attributed to variations in educational systems in origin countries or differences in the selection of migrants, or the average time in

which the immigrants have had to obtain country-specific human capital in the form of language skills and cultural familiarity.

The economic model may seem straight forward, but in reality the term on which it all hinges – *skills* – is rather vague and may refer to a wide variety of knowledge, characteristics and competencies that are not easily conceptualised or measured (Moss and Tilly 2001). Some skills, such as basic literacy, are provided by the general educational system, while others require specialised training. Some skills are taught in schools and universities and can be documented by a formal certificate, while others must be obtained through practice. Finally, while some skills are widely transferable across borders, others are country- or even firm-specific.

To complicate matters further, sociologists have argued that the allocation of labour is not just structured by skills and wages, but also by social status (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Piore 1979). According to segmented labour market theory, native workers may be unwilling to take on certain jobs not simply because they generate low pay, but also because they infer low status. Immigrants, however, may be less picky due to a so-called ‘dual frame of reference’ and limited options in the host-country labour market. This willingness will often be interpreted as a sort of skill, or ‘work ethic’ (Piore 1979; Wills et al. 2009).

The fuzziness of skills is particularly salient when we are dealing with non-formalised or ‘soft’ skills (Moss and Tilly 2001; Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Ruhs and Anderson 2010). In the low-paid and less regulated tiers of the labour markets, where many immigrant workers are found, soft or informal skills are often the only kind of skills that matter. Such soft or informal skills may refer to the ability to perform certain tasks, such as physical strength, endurance or handiness, or they may refer to one’s compliance and willingness to submit to discipline and workplace control. In many cases – as we shall see – perceptions about soft skills boil down to a question of ‘exploitability’. But soft skills may also be related to the social and communication competencies needed to interact with co-workers, employers and customers, or to more intangible personal traits, such as sociability, pleasantness or discreteness – whatever makes someone ‘fit in’ in a particular workplace and in particular positions (Moss and Tilly 2001). In the end of the day, subtle traits such as, demeanour, accent, style and physical appearance, will often influence employers’ gut feelings about which workers ‘looks and sounds right’ for a particular job (Warhurst and Nickson 2007).

Employers in low-wage labour markets tend to have limited information about individual applicants and this is particularly true for immigrants, whose credentials and references are often impossible to check. Categorical characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status or race therefore often come to serve as a proxy for skills and desirability in immigrant-intensive labour markets (Moss and Tilly 2001; Shih 2002; Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Pager and Karafin 2009; Midtbøen 2014). The results may be described as specific ‘hiring queues’, for example, a nationality based ‘shorthand’ over whom to employ for which type of jobs (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Wills et al. 2009).

The allocation of immigrants in host-country labour markets is thereby closely linked to processes of categorical inequality (Tilly 1998; Massey 2007; Ridgeway 2011), and labour market hierarchies tend to reflect the social structure of the societies in which they are embedded (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The purpose of this article is to dig deeper into how different groups how come to be ascribed different sets of soft skills,

and to explore what happens to existing ethnic hierarchies when new immigrant groups enter the labour market.

## Norway's changing immigration landscape

The Nordic countries have had an open labour market since 1954, and nationals from other Nordic countries have been present on the Norwegian labour market throughout the post-war period. However, the start of Norway's modern history as an immigrant-receiving country is usually set to the late 1960s, when a substantial number of labour migrants from Pakistan, Morocco, India and Turkey arrived in response to increasing demand for labour (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008). Norway inserted a moratorium on labour immigration in 1975, but since the late 1970s, successive groups of refugees have entered the country. Additionally, immigration through family reunification and transnational family formation have continued throughout the period. By the turn of the millennium, Norway had a significant immigrant population – mostly of non-European origin which continued to grow due to persistent refugee and humanitarian immigration, as well immigration from the other Nordic countries (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008).

By the mid-2000s, however, Norway's immigration landscape changed dramatically, as Poland, the Baltic States and three other countries in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 joined the EU and the common labour market within the EEA area, later to be joined by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. Through the course of a decade, the immigrant population from Central and Eastern Europe grew from approximately 50,000 to more than 270,000 (Friberg 2016). By 1 January 2017, immigrants and their children made up 16.8% of the Norwegian population of slightly more than five million people. Polish labour migrants now constitute by far the largest immigrant group in Norway, followed by immigrants from Lithuania, Sweden, Somalia and Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Public policy concerns related to immigration has been framed in highly diverging fashions depending on the type of immigration and countries of origin. Non-European immigration has primarily been framed as a social and cultural integration problem, as well as a challenge to the financial sustainability of the generous Norwegian welfare state, due to the relatively low levels of employment and high levels of social transfers particularly among refugees (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011). Labour immigration from Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, is not framed in cultural terms but is commonly seen as a challenge to the egalitarian Norwegian labour market, due to concerns over widespread 'social dumping' and the effects of low-wage competition on wage formation and collective bargaining (Friberg et al. 2014; Dølvik and Eldring 2016). Immigration from other Nordic countries as well as from Western Europe has not been considered a policy concern at all. When studying specific labour markets, however, one quickly finds that these different immigrant groups often operate – and to some extent compete with each other as well as with native workers – within the same industrial and occupational sectors. A major and so far overlooked question is thus how the new influx of labour migrants from various European source countries affects earlier and arguably more vulnerable immigrant groups from outside Europe.

In this article we focus on the Norwegian hotel and fish processing industries. Both industries have since the mid-1990s experienced a steady decline in native employment.

During the same period, the number of immigrant workers has steadily increased. Both industries employ significant numbers of both Scandinavian and non-European immigrants, but labour immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe now make up a major bulk of the workforce in both. By 2013, immigrants made up more than 40% of the workforce in hotels and more than 50% of the workforce in fish processing. In reality, immigrant concentration is even greater: Within both industries, managerial and technical positions make up an estimated one third of the workforce and consist almost exclusively of natives, while immigrants dominate the lower tiers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these numbers do not include the significant numbers of migrant workers on so-called temporary stay who are employed on a more or less seasonal and temporary basis, but who are not registered as settled in Norway. Nor do they include workers employed through temporary staffing agencies, which relies heavily on immigrants and make up a significant share of workers in both industries.

### Methods and data

The analyses are based in-depth interviews collected in the Norwegian hotel and fish processing industries. In total, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the fall of 2015; 19 in the hotel industry and 21 in the fishing industry. The main informants were top and mid-level managers, but we also included interviews with administrative personnel, employees with native and immigrant background, as well as trade union representatives. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and were recorded and transcribed in full-length. Interviewees in hotels were recruited in the greater Oslo area while informants in the fishing industry were recruited through intensive field work in Lofoten and Vesterålen in Northern Norway. We also gathered valuable data through informal conversations with local community representatives and workplace observations. Managers – who were the primary informants in the study – constitute a sort of ‘expert group’, and a majority of our interviewees were highly experienced and had a long history in the particular industry. Drawing on this experience, the informants were asked to reflect upon the development of ‘their’ firm as well as their industry over the past decades, with particular emphasis on the role of various groups.

There are always questions regarding the reliability of interview-based information. Indeed, talk may be ‘cheap’ (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), and when asked questions about specific ethnic groups employers may either hide their ‘true’ perceptions to appear decent to the researcher, or they may draw on widespread narratives or stereotypes about groups to make their accounts fit with what they think is expected. However, there are at least two reasons why we believe the data presented here reasonably well reflects employers’ real perceptions about the groups in question: First, in line with similar studies using employer-interviews as a source of data to study how the skills of different groups are considered (e.g. Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2001; Pager and Karafin 2009; Midtbøen 2014), the employers in this study were more than willing to share their views on the particular advantages and disadvantages characterising ethnic groups. Second, the in-depth interviews were complemented by workplace observations providing a glance into the ethnic divisions actually ‘at work’, convincing us that employers’ accounts were in fact translated into action by forming clear ethnic employment hierarchies.

## Employment hierarchies in the two industries

Before we turn to the ways employers and managers assess the qualities of various ethnic groups which inhabit the labour markets of hotels and fish processing plants, we will briefly describe the jobs and positions for which they compete. The distinctions between the two sectors in many ways reflect differences between the services and the manufacturing sector.

### Hotels

The Norwegian hotel market is dominated by a small handful of chain corporations, and day-to-day management at each hotel is usually performed by one or two management positions, which are almost exclusively held by natives. Given Norway's high labour costs, lower manpower functions are usually rationalised to the bone – one rarely finds bell-boys or parking valets in Norwegian hotels. However, there are three main functions which cannot be entirely rationalised away: reception desk, kitchen and housekeeping.

The main distinction within lower level hotel functions is between frontstage and backstage positions. The reception desk – the key front stage function – represents the main point of interaction with guests, and was commonly referred to by managers and workers as the 'heart' of the hotel. The reception is closely associated with management, both in terms of daily functions (e.g. by allocating guests, measuring occupancy rates, etc.), career paths (hotel managers often work their way up from the reception front desk) and worker identification (receptionists tend to identify with the corporation and rarely unionise).

Although formally on the same level, receptionists enjoy higher social status within the hotel as well as the authority to instruct housekeepers and kitchen staff. Not all hotels have their own kitchen, but those that do distinguish between frontstage functions, such as waiters, bartenders and others who interact with customers, and backstage functions that do not, such as kitchen helps, dishwashers and people commonly referred to as 'producers', who make sandwiches, arrange buffets etc.

Housekeeping is the primary back stage function within all hotels. Highly labour intensive, housekeeping is usually the largest occupational group within the hotel. It is also the main target of rationalisation, in the form of constantly increasing demands to efficiency in terms of the number of rooms to be cleaned per day. Housekeeping is considered to be strenuous work, with high rates of sick leave, strain injuries and early retirement. Moreover, there are few upward career paths from housekeeping.

Due to fluctuations in demand, hotels utilise a variety of strategies to obtain flexibility, especially among the cleaning staff, including temporary contracts, outsourcing to specialised subcontractors and hiring workers from temporary staffing agencies. The most common type of contract for house-keepers is a combination of part-time and 'on-call' contracts.

Importantly, the distinction between frontstage and backstage positions tends to follow ethnic lines: Frontstage positions are primarily held by natives, Scandinavians or Western Europeans. Especially Swedish youth have become popular among employers. Backstage positions – primarily housekeeping, but also kitchen work – are almost exclusively performed by immigrants from either non-European countries or from Central and Eastern Europe. In the recent past, housekeeping positions within the Oslo area were



dominated in particular by women from Thailand and the Philippines, but have in recent years seen a fast-growing presence of Poles and Lithuanians.

### **Fish processing**

The fish processing industry is located along the Western and Northern coastlines of Norway and has long historical roots. Parts of the industry is based on wild fish, such as the arctic cod caught on the spawning grounds off the coast of Western and Northern Norway, while increasing parts of the industry are based on more technologically advanced and capital-intensive fish farming. As the wild-caught fish industry tends to be seasonal and unpredictable, it requires large numbers of flexible workers who are willing to work long hours on temporary contracts. The farm-based fish production is far more stable, and the industry thus also offers far more stable working conditions.

Besides the relatively small set of positions within management and administration, the primary job distinction within this industry is that between key functions and manual labour. Key functions are typically related to communication with fishermen and buyers, product quality control or technical supervision of machinery. In the more automated farmed fish production, key functions are often related to supervision of expensive machinery. Both managerial positions and key functions within the fish processing industry are almost exclusively held by native workers.

Despite increasing automatisisation – in particular in the processing of farmed fish – the industry still relies on the substantial input of non-skilled labour to perform tasks related to stacking, slaughtering, filleting, sorting and cleaning. Manual work in the fish processing industry is relatively low paid, and often performed under cold, wet and unpleasant conditions. Strain injuries are common and high rates of sick-leave are considered a major challenge. Traditionally, these tasks were filled by a labour reserve of native women and youth, who would normally have their main occupation elsewhere, but were drawn into the production during high season. However, in coastal communities heavily affected by depopulation, it is now considered impossible to staff the least desirable jobs locally. Since the late 1980s, manual and non-skilled work has instead gradually become dominated by immigrants. The lower tiers of the fish processing industry consist of a mix of different immigrant groups, but over the last decade, Poles and Lithuanians have become the by far largest groups.

Workers in the fish processing industry have a variety of contractual affiliations to their employers. For the stable parts of production, permanent employment contracts are the norm. However, due to seasonal fluctuation in demand and unpredictable supply of fish – especially in the wild-caught fish industry – there is a considerable need for flexibility. As in hotels, temporary and seasonal, as well as combinations of part-time and ‘on-call’ contracts are common. In recent years, however, more and more fish factories have turned to temporary staffing agencies.

### **Ethnic hierarchies**

We will now turn our attention to how employers and managers view different categories of workers as being more or less suited to fill different roles. As became evident throughout our interviews, ethnicity and immigration status were key features in the employers’ perceptions of workers. In the following section, we describe the ways in which employers and



managers evaluate the suitability of natives, Swedes, Lithuanians, Poles, refugees and other non-European immigrants, respectively. Throughout our interviews a pattern emerged, pointing to a consistent, yet continually changing ethnic employment hierarchy.

### *Natives: spoilt and lazy, yet indispensable*

Managers in both fish processing and hotels routinely lament the lack of work ethic among native Norwegians. With practically no exceptions, our informants would speak at length about how Norwegian youths have become too 'spoilt', 'lazy' and 'demanding' to seek out low-status manual work in the two industries. In the laconic words of one owner of a fish factory: 'I guess they don't like to get fish goo in their hair styling.'

However, employers in both industries tend to see natives not just as unwilling to take on low-status jobs. They also explicitly stated that those natives who in fact *are* willing to accept such jobs, are actually unwanted. By most interviewees, native Norwegians were considered to lack the work ethic required to handle the physically hard, manual and routine job tasks involved. At the same time, many employers suggested that willingness to take on this type of work could imply that there was 'something wrong with them' and that they could be unreliable, for example, in terms of sick leave.

Nevertheless, for certain key positions, many employers considered it desirable or even necessary, to retain native Norwegians. In the fish processing industry, these key positions typically relate to operating expensive machinery, or requiring particular knowledge about products and quality. For example, at one large farmed salmon-processing factory which was going through a rapid process of technological upgrade and automation, the manager explained that they now needed to hire more native Norwegians:

Recently we have tried to recruit a few more Norwegians. Our industry is technologically automated to such a point now that in order to get proper training, and make sure we maintain both safety and product quality, and just getting all the machinery and equipment to run smoothly, we need a base of proper Norwegian skills among our staff.

In the wild-caught fish industry, which is less technologically advanced than processing-farmed salmon, natives invariably hold positions related to communication with fishermen, quality inspection and grading of product. One manager explained how his local staff holds certain key positions which cannot be staffed by migrant workers:

[Native Norwegians] hold key positions that deal with purchasing and contact with fishermen. Both in terms of understanding how to handle fish properly and evaluating its quality, it takes years of experience to understand, to properly know the product, you know.

The experience and understanding required to 'properly know the product' was particularly highlighted in stock fish factories. Stock fish producers export their products based on a complex system of quality based categories of fish going to different markets at different prices. The fish is sorted manually based on the sight, smell and feel of the product. The so-called 'wreckers' who are trusted with this task have high status, based on their intimate knowledge about the fish, and their embodied skills which distinguishes them from other workers. No-one we spoke to had ever heard of an immigrant 'wrecker'.

Similarly, in the hotel industry, certain key positions seem to be reserved for natives, or at least Scandinavian, workers. As in fish processing, these positions typically relate to

technical and communicative jobs, which depends on a smooth interaction with customers. As the manager of a hotel in Oslo stated:

The technical support-people have to know what they are doing, they have to know computers and they have to be able to calm people down and inspire confidence. If there is a conference or people are giving presentations, you know, they can be a bit stressed out. They have to feel that they are in good hands, that we are in full control. So these workers are usually Norwegian, or at least from Sweden. We have had talented foreigners applying – university students from Africa or whatever – but that would create uncertainty, so we can't do that.

From the point of view of employers and managers, native Norwegians are thus portrayed in a dual fashion. On the one hand, being Norwegian is associated with laziness, and a lack of work ethic. On the other hand, however, Norwegians are associated with responsibility, trustworthiness and technical skills needed to fill key functions.

### *Swedish youth: cultural affinity and subservience*

Swedes are the third largest immigrant group in Norway, following Poles and Lithuanians. In Oslo, which is relatively close to the Swedish border, Swedish youth make up a significant share of the workforce in customer-related services. In hotels, they are commonly found working in the reception or other front stage functions. In the following excerpt from an interview with a hotel manager, he explains, first, what kind of skills are required by someone working in the hotel reception, and second, why he considers Swedish youth to be perfect for the job – making a clear boundary vis-à-vis native Norwegians.

An introvert who hardly makes eye contact will never function in a reception, no matter what your formal skills, because the guests won't get that connection with you. But if you laugh and joke around, flirt a little bit – as a guest, you know, I would just love that kind of person. A bit of personality, a sense of humor ... [...] The Swedes are generally just so much better when it comes to service. They haven't lost themselves as we have during these economic booming years. I just love coming into shops and restaurants these days and you get a big smile and a cheerful 'good morning'. I love it – give me more Swedes!

Most informants considered Swedish youth to be less spoiled than Norwegians, due to higher unemployment and a slower economy in their home country. The excerpt above also illustrates how relatively intangible personal traits and social skills are the essence of what employers seek in a receptionist. This is one of the reasons why many other immigrant groups, who may be even less 'spoiled', are usually not considered suitable for receptionist work. Partly this has to do with language skills, as the Scandinavian languages are quite similar, and it is considered okay to speak Swedish with customers. Partly, however, it also has to do with Swedes' cultural affinity and ability to socialise with customers, which other immigrant groups are considered lacking, even if they are fluent Norwegian speakers.

Consider, for example, the following excerpt from our conversation with a hotel manager in a city outside of Oslo who had hired a woman of Turkish origin in the reception, but who later reassigned her to a backstage position:

I had a really talented and skillful young girl, from Turkey, working in the reception. Always correct, never did any mistakes; she was diligent, polite, answering mails, and helping guests. Still, she never received any positive guest feedback. So she asks me, 'what's wrong?'. And I had to tell her, 'You know what, this just doesn't work. You do everything right, but it's just too close and personal for you'.

According to our informants, Swedes have just the right amount of subservience due to their immigrant status and less desirable economic options back home, combined with the cultural affinity inherent in their common Scandinavian background, which allow them to interact socially with customers and guests in a friendly and relaxed fashion. According to managers and employers, this combination makes Swedish youth perfect candidates to fill customer-related service functions.

### *Lithuanians and Poles: the perfect manual workers*

Swedes may be considered ideal for frontstage service positions, but when it comes to basic manual work that do not require direct contact with customers or sophisticated language skills, they cannot compete with Poles and Lithuanians in the eyes of most employers (unlike in hotels, managers in the fish industry were only moderately enthusiastic about Swedes). The positive standing of Poles and Lithuanians is primarily attributed to their willingness to work hard and do what they are told without complaints. As one manager of a fish factory explained:

[Poles and Lithuanians] have such a great work ethic. They are really reliable, they show up when you tell them to, and there are never any complaints if they have to work three hours extra.

Many of our informants both in the hotel and the fish processing industry, explicitly compared Central and Eastern European labour migrants with other immigrant groups, to whom they were generally considered superior in terms of work ethic. In the following case, a hotel manager compares Eastern European room maids to 'older' groups of immigrants from the Balkans and East Asia:

The Eastern Europeans work so hard, you know. They are hungry for work and they are really diligent. I can compare the Lithuanians who clean rooms with the 'Serbian queens', if I can call them that, who are more experienced, but who are so proud. A pride in who they are, not pride in what they do, you know? They [the 'Serbian queens'] clean and do exactly what they are required to do. But the Lithuanians, they go the extra mile, you know. Never taking sick-leave – that's a big difference! Some of the Asians are also a little bit like that, but I have more mixed experiences with them. They do what they're supposed to, but they are not giving their full effort all the time.

Despite the overall positive assessment which employers had about Polish and Lithuanian workers, most were quite clear that they were not able to fill all roles. Compared to native Norwegians, for example, they were considered to lack the autonomy and discretion needed in many key functions. And compared to Swedes, they were seen as lacking the social skills needed in frontstage service functions, or – as this hotel manager sees it – to ever really succeed in Norway:

The Eastern Europeans work really hard, but they don't have the service attitude. They work for 14 hours straight, they don't have to smile or think, they are like horses, you know. In many ways that's good, but it can be a bit much. They are too hard. The social part is also important, right? I have noticed that the Eastern Europeans, they just don't have that. That's why they will never do really well here in Norway. The Swedes have done really great. I don't think the Eastern Europeans will ever get to that level.

In the eyes of Norwegian employers and managers, Polish and Lithuanian workers were thus considered ideal for manual labour and superior to both natives and other

immigrants groups in terms of work ethic. At the same time, they were not considered to be very suited for work that involved direct customer relations, communication or independent decision-making.

### *Refugees and non-western immigrants: last in the hiring queue*

The employers interviewed in this study find that native Norwegian, Swedish and Eastern European workers, who all make up large shares of the workforce in both industries, are suited for different, but specific types of work. However, there is also a large and highly varied group of non-European immigrants present in both the hotel and fish processing industries, consisting of pre-1975 labour migrants, refugees from various conflict regions and family migrants within both groups.

Compared to the exuberant praise with which employers and managers usually spoke of Swedish and Eastern European migrants, depending on the task at hand, employers seemed less enthusiastic about non-Western immigrants. Some groups were considered directly undesirable. And while some informants were reluctant to talk about which groups were seen as least desirable, others – like the following manager of a major fish factory – made it quite clear who were at the bottom of the employment hierarchy:

We have been a little cynical and said that we don't want to take in refugees, because their basic skills are so bad. Some of them hardly know how to use the bathroom! So the level of skills is just too low, and when they don't speak the language properly it just gets too difficult to get them integrated into the factory. Some of those Africans are kind of lazy workers; they don't have that 'engine', you know. Especially compared to the Lithuanians – hardworking, polite people – we only have good experiences with them. But of course, they come from a totally different place. I guess it is the most resourceful and motivated among Lithuanians who travel abroad to make money and build a new life. Somalis and others who have fled war and conflict – I guess they didn't want to be here in the first place.

Refugees and non-Western immigrants constitute a category that consists of many different groups, who have highly varied immigration histories as well as cultural and socio-economic characteristics. This was also reflected in the fact that different groups of refugees and non-Western immigrants occupied highly varied positions within different firms. However, a consistent theme was that these groups – although to a varying degree – were regarded as less desirable than both Swedes and Eastern Europeans, and that their positions – both in the firms and in the moral imaginations of employers – appeared to have been negatively affected by the large inflow of Polish and Lithuanian workers over the last few years.

### *The revolving door: when workers become 'house warm'*

At first glance, the ethnic hierarchies described so far may seem fixed and unchanging, but a more detailed investigation shows that the positions which various immigrants groups occupy, as well as employers' assessments of their respective qualities and workers, change over time. As new immigrant groups arrive and old ones become more established, employers' preferences seem to change.

In the fish processing industry, Tamil refugees were a popular source of labour from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s and beyond. Today, however, there are hardly any Tamils left in the industry. Bosnian refugees arriving in the mid-1990s also enjoyed a

brief period of popularity among employers, but few of them have stayed. For a long time, East Asians – mostly Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese – were a major source of labour in the fish industry and enjoyed a reputation as docile, diligent and hard workers. But over the past decade, labour migrants from Poland and Lithuania have taken their place, both as the major source of immigrant labour, and as the ‘model immigrant worker’, in terms of displaying the right kind of work ethic, in the eyes of employers. In hotels a similar process has taken place – although only backstage – as Central and Eastern Europeans gradually have replaced the various non-Western groups and in particular East Asians who previously dominated these positions.

This ‘revolving door’ of new groups of immigrant workers, who replace old and more established ones, is among employers and managers often attributed to the notion of becoming ‘house warm’. This refers to the process whereby workers over time acquire a sense of entitlement which detracts from their willingness to perform the way employers prefer. Today, this process can be observed within the new group of Central and Eastern European labour migrants. Poles were the first and largest group of post-2004 labour migrants. However, their superior status now seems to be challenged by the more recent arrivals from Lithuania. In the following excerpt, a manager of a fish processing factory explains why:

I would probably prefer the Lithuanians. The Poles have started to figure out the Norwegian system, in terms of knowing how to exploit it and what kind of rights they have, and by making demands. A colleague of mine told me, if you want to have good workers you need to replace them every four years, because then they start getting house warm – then they have learned all the systems and the loop-holes. They try to acquire things that are perhaps not exactly the way we want it. The Polish in particular, I have noticed, they look at the Norwegians and learn how things work and how they can try to exploit things.

There is little doubt that the Central and Eastern European labour migrants over the past decade have come to occupy a central place in the imaginations of employers, as the ideal source of labour to fill certain positions and perform certain tasks. The present analysis would suggest, however, that this may be a relatively temporary phenomenon, and that Central and Eastern Europeans, like other groups before them, in the future may be replaced by new immigrant groups as the first pick among employers looking for cheap, willing and docile workers.

## Discussion and conclusion

Ethnic employment hierarchies are expressions of systems of stratification in society at large. As Waldinger and Lichter (2003, 8) have put it: ‘Any national or local economy bears the imprint of the social structure in which it is embedded.’ Although the ethnic hierarchies described here quite certainly reflect arbitrary stereotypes and prejudices on behalf of employers, it is important to acknowledge that they also reflect real-world differences in the distribution of relevant skills and characteristics; the political and negotiating power of different groups of workers, as well as the different structural positions they occupy in the social system.

On the aggregate level, immigrant groups differ along several dimensions that have a direct bearing on their ability to match the preferences of employers. First, immigrant groups do in fact differ in their average level of education and basic schooling, due to

variations in the quality and prevalence of educational systems in different origin countries, as well as in the selection of migrants within various migration flows. For example, according to Statistics Norway, 70% of African refugees in Norway do not have any education beyond elementary school, compared to only 17% of European labour immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

Second, immigrant groups do also differ in their cultural proximity to native Norwegians. Swedish immigrants share a similar language as well as most cultural references with Norwegians. Other European immigrants may experience language difficulties, but nevertheless share important social, cultural and religious references. In contrast, immigrants originating from non-industrialised societies, and who have a different religious and cultural background may have more difficulties forming social and professional relationships with Norwegian employers, co-workers and customers.

Third, immigrants differ in their attachment to Norway. Because different groups have arrived at different points in time, they differ in their average length of stay and thus in the time they have had to acquire country-specific skills such as language and cultural codes. As we have shown, however, lack of integration may in many cases be a certain advantage: Recently arrived immigrants who maintain strong transnational bonds or who perceive their stay as being temporary and plan to move back home, tend to operate with a 'dual frame of reference' (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Gelatt 2013). Their willingness to accept conditions that natives refuse, can make them very popular with employers who are unwilling to raise wages or improve working conditions to staff unattractive jobs.

Fourth, immigrants have different legal statuses that affect their ability to engage in circular and transnational migration. While Nordic and EU citizens are free to move back and forth, refugees and many other non-European immigrants are not. As a result Swedish, Polish and Lithuanian workers have the opportunity to adapt their pattern of migration to temporary variations in labour demand, which makes them appear highly suitable as a flexible reserve labour in industries marked by seasonal and cyclical fluctuations (Friberg 2012; Ødegård 2014; Bratsberg et al. 2015). For example, in many fishing communities along the Northern coastline, Polish and Lithuanian workers arrive in large numbers during the cod fishing season from January through April, only to disappear as soon as the season ends. For most refugees, such adaptations would be impossible because they are 'stuck' in exile.

Taking all of these dimensions into account, it may not be such a mystery why ethnic employment hierarchies in these industries have come to be established: Young Swedes are viewed as suited for customer-related services due to their relatively solid educational backgrounds and shared linguistic and cultural references with Norwegian customers. Poles and Lithuanians appear attractive for employers because they often have vocational training and experience, tend to apply a dual frame of reference when evaluating their opportunities in Norway, and have the opportunity of adapting their migratory patterns to fluctuations in labour demand. Finally, refugees have a hard time competing with these two groups as they often lack education and relevant work experience, tend to come from societies very different from Norway in terms of language, culture and religion and do not have much flexibility in adapting their migratory patterns to fluctuations in labour demand. These differences can be conceptualised as differences in the ability to perform tasks at hand, or as variations in terms of how 'exploitable' they are as workers due to lack of power. But in practice, the two are often indistinguishable.



Of crucial importance, however, is the fact that all of these differences are based on aggregated group characteristics. Individuals may have very different skills and characteristics than such broad generalisations would suggest; plenty of refugees, for example, are well educated, mobile and speaks Norwegian fluently.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in the context of low-wage labour markets where hiring is based mostly on perceptions about workers' soft skills, group characteristics tend to override individual traits when jobs are allocated. Rather than establishing formal criteria for selection and hiring, employers build their hiring decisions on approximations and general 'rules of thumb', which tend to reflect broader systems of power and stratification in society at large.

These findings are consistent with similar studies of how ethnic and racial minority groups are perceived by employers in countries such as the U.S. (e.g. Moss and Tilly 2001; Waldinger and Lichter 2003) and the U.K. (e.g. Wills et al. 2009; Ruhs and Anderson 2010), and also resemble processes identified in important work on the racialised and gendered nature of work in the global economy (e.g. Bauder 2001; Erel 2010; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). In sum, it seems increasingly clear that ethnicity has become a signifier of suitability for particular jobs, or even as a skill in itself, which workers must signal to employers when competing for jobs. Applying for a job as a hotel receptionist? Your 'Swedishness' may signal the ability to provide friendly and pleasant service. Applying for a job as a fish packer? Being Lithuanian assures employers that you will work hard and not complain about long hours. In many cases, the 'skills' that makes people attractive as workers are indistinguishable from the characteristics that define their position in the broader ethnic hierarchy. More specifically, the key characteristics that employers interpret as 'soft skills' are directly related to workers' structural power and cultural affinity. And because different ethnic groups social status in society at large also tends to reflect their structural power and cultural affinity with the dominant majority, 'ethnicity' and 'skills' become almost interchangeable properties when brought to the labour market.

Theorists of categorical inequality have pointed to the enduring character of such status-based differences that we have discussed here (Tilly 1998; Massey 2007; Ridgeway 2014). Massey (2007, 5–6), for example, states that 'all stratification processes boil down to a combination of two simple but powerful mechanisms: the allocation of people to social categories, and the institutionalization of practices that allocate resources unequally across these categories'. The present study may serve as a powerful empirical substantiation of this claim. However, what is less discussed in the theoretical literature on categorical inequality is what happens to systems of stratification when new categories enter the playing field. Building on employers' descriptions of recently arrived Eastern and Central European labour migrants who over time have come to replace previous groups of refugees and family migrants working in the Norwegian hotel and fish processing industries, we suggest that increased attention to the changing nature of social categories is necessary. Of course, we do not propose that new groups of people alter the system of stratification altogether; rather on the contrary, it may seem as increased labour market diversity in fact may enforce the structuring power of social categories. However, the content of group stereotypes change over time as existing groups change behaviour and new groups enter. East Asians, for example, were until recently described in surprisingly similar terms as Eastern Europeans. However, once the latter arrived in great numbers, the former were increasingly seen as being too 'entitled' and 'passive'. We propose that such changing ethnic employment hierarchies – reflecting the changing social hierarchies as



new migration patterns bring new groups into the labour market and old groups change their positions within host societies – needs to be scrutinised more carefully in future research.

## Notes

1. Numbers collected from Statistics Norway on 1 April 2017: <https://ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/innvbf>
2. Own calculations based on data from Statistics Norway.
3. Numbers collected from Statistics Norway on 3 April 2017: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/utniv/aar/2016-06-20?fane=tabell#content>
4. According to Statistics Norway, 1/5 of all refugees in Norway have higher education, compared to 1/3 of the population as whole (see: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/utniv>).

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