Understanding career experiences of skilled minority ethnic workers in France and Germany

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Understanding career experiences of skilled minority ethnic workers in France and Germany

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Human resource management literature pays little attention to the agency of skilled ethnic minorities in Europe in terms of explaining their career choices and outcomes. As a step towards addressing this gap, we draw on two field studies based on qualitative interviews. One of these studies draws on interviews with 49 participants in France, and the other is based on interviews with 30 participants in Germany. Through a Bourdieuan analysis, we contribute to the human resource management literature, and demonstrate the varied forms that the agency of highly skilled ethnic minorities takes, in terms of their work experiences, in the context of structures of inequality in both countries.

Keywords: agency; career; diversity; France; Germany; highly skilled ethnic minorities; work

Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) scholars widely acknowledge the importance of managing ethnic diversity in organisations (Forson 2006; Noon 2010); yet, existing theory and research focus mainly on the barriers that minority ethnic workers experience (Pio 2005) rather than the agency that they deploy. Congruent with Tatli and Özbilgin (2009), we define agency as an individual’s power and influence to affect changes in their lives and work, as permitted and legitimated by their position in webs of social and economic relations. Hence, agency of ethnic minorities implies their ability to shape their career choices and outcomes. We target this knowledge gap by comparing the agency of highly skilled minority ethnic workers in France and Germany. Specifically, the following research question is addressed: What forms does the agency of highly skilled minority ethnic workers take in France and Germany? To achieve this, we mobilise a Bourdieuan analysis to show how the concepts of capitals, field and habitus facilitate a relational understanding of the agency of ethnic minorities and how their agency is shaped by the contexts of the two countries.

We contribute to the HRM literature in two important ways: first, we focus on the agency of skilled ethnic minorities in terms of understanding their work choices and outcomes, and second, we offer a comparative perspective on this agency in the context of work in France and Germany. We begin with a brief overview of the extant literature in HRM studies concerning the agency of ethnic minorities, before outlining how a Bourdieuan (1998) perspective offers a framework for analysing the agency of highly skilled ethnic minorities. We then discuss national history in France and Germany, to account for the way integration of ethnic minorities has been shaped in both countries. This contextualisation is important in
understanding minority ethnic workers’ career choices and chances in their situated settings (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer 2011). Our analysis and findings draw on a rich qualitative investigation of 79 interviews with ethnic minorities and diversity actors in both countries. While our participants were highly skilled, the majority belonged to the groups that are negatively stereotyped, namely Arabs and Turks in France and Germany, respectively. Our findings demonstrate the significance of context in giving shape and meaning to the agency of minority ethnic workers in two countries with different histories of receiving migration. In particular, we demonstrate that, in France, minority ethnic workers exercise their agency in their career experiences by resisting, blending in with and subverting structures of inequality. In Germany, however, exit from the labour market and the country appears as an increasingly common form of agentic choice for minority ethnic workers. Finally, we conclude by offering HRM implications for policy and practice.

Understanding the agency of ethnic minorities at work

To position our theoretical contribution, our review builds specifically on the framing of ethnic minorities’ agency at work, as portrayed in HRM studies. Issues of ethnicity are increasingly considered under the banner of managing equality and diversity in this literature. A recent special issue on ‘Global Diversity Management’ in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (Nishii and Özbilgin 2007), concludes that there is an absence of recent empirical evaluations regarding issues of managing diversity in organisations. Similarly, the active agency of skilled ethnic minorities in European labour markets remains under-explored in HRM studies (Baruch, Budhwar and Khatri 2007; Al Ariss 2010; Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin and Suutari 2012).

More recently, however, a small number of HRM studies have begun to investigate the agency of ethnic minorities under the umbrella of managing diversity in the workplace. Healy and Oikelome (2007) explain that this literature stresses the importance of acknowledging cultural differences to enable a rich, creative and productive workplace. Other studies focus on the career challenges faced by ethnic minorities. For instance, Pio (2005) has drawn on qualitative interviews with ethnic minority Indian women, working in New Zealand, to illustrate the difficulties encountered both in entering the workforce and in sustaining work, and how these difficulties delayed successful integration into New Zealand’s labour market. In another study, drawing on qualitative research with Turkish Cypriots in Britain, Inal and Özkan (2011) argue that further research is needed if we are to understand the dynamics of the work experiences of ethnic minorities. For example, ethnic minorities often have to deal with additional cultural demands (Kamenou 2008).

Other HRM research elaborates on the institutional and organisational barriers faced by ethnic minorities, and the way this influences their agency. For example, administrative barriers, such as visa and work permit authorisations imposed on migrants, are known to negatively influence their career choices and outcomes (Syed 2008). In addition, organisations and institutions are able to discriminate against ethnic minorities (Laer and Janssens 2011) and discredit their education and professional experiences, leading to their underemployment and even unemployment (Pringle and Mallon 2003; Carr 2010). For example, in the USA, Bell, Kwesiga and Berry (2010) highlight the discrimination, exploitation and abuse of low-skilled Hispanics. In Europe, drawing on the experiences of Bangladeshi, Caribbean and Pakistani women working in the public sector in the UK, Healy, Bradley and Forson (2011) examine how inequalities are produced and reproduced in the workplace context. Notably, such studies are mainly conducted in the context of a single country rather than adopting a comparative perspective.
The preceding discussion highlights the need to explore more fully the agency of highly skilled ethnic minorities, in the context of a range of constraining factors. We now turn to an explanation of Bourdieu’s theory and its unique usefulness in understanding highly skilled ethnic minorities’ agency as situated in the context.

**A Bourdieuan framework for understanding the agency of ethnic minorities at work**

Bourdieu draws attention to the ways in which social structures and the dispositions of individuals offer (or do not offer) spaces for agency. In particular, he explains agency through an examination of an individual’s resources, strategies and activities, over time, within the organisational and macro-context (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer 2011). This promises to overcome the reduction of reality to either structural or agentic explanations, allowing for a more balanced account of agency and structure together (Schirato and Webb 2003). By linking social, cultural, economic and symbolic forms of capital, Bourdieu offers a relational perspective that does not underplay differences in power, resources and status, in framing the agency of ethnic minorities (Al Ariss and Syed 2011). We focus on their mobilisation of capitals, as a form of resistance to inequalities and exclusion. We also draw on the concepts of habitus and field. We introduce our key concepts below, beginning with capitals.

Bourdieu’s theory of capitals combines social, cultural, economic and symbolic resources that individuals accumulate and use (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Social capital refers to personal and professional relationships. Cultural capital includes professional experience, education and qualifications. What distinguishes this form of capital from Becker’s (1993) and other economists’ understanding of human capital is its sociological dimension. For instance, Bourdieu draws attention to the unequal distribution of the instruments needed to appropriate the different forms of capitals in a society and in the job market. Economic capital may take the form of financial resources and property (Bourdieu 1986). Finally, symbolic capital refers to the value attributed to all forms of capital in various contexts (Ožbilgin and Tatlı 2005). Symbolic capital enables agents to have power, status and influence in society to cope with the constraints and opportunities that frame their activities (Doherty and Dickmann 2009). Symbolic capital can be gained, or inherited, by individuals through the accumulation and deployment of any form of capital whether economic, cultural or social. Bourdieu explains that an exchange exists between forms of capital. For example, economic elites can afford to attend prestigious universities, thereby converting their economic capital into cultural and symbolic resources. Hence, the way capital is mobilised by an individual is also framed by their socio-economic setting. Bourdieu’s concepts of capitals are therefore helpful in understanding the complexity of the distribution of resources that facilitate or limit the agency of ethnic minorities.

To understand Bourdieu’s framing of capitals in a way that reveals the dynamic and relational nature of human agency, it is also important to study his concepts of habitus and field. Habitus refers to internalised assumptions in routines, of which individuals often remain unaware, in life and work. Established social order in society, or in other words habitus, is problematic when it reproduces inequalities (Bourdieu 1998) by rendering invisible injustice in the distribution of capitals, through methods such as social ties and economic wealth. Questioning habitus in the accumulation and deployment of capital can serve to reveal such inequalities that might often remain invisible or appear natural to the ethnic minority workers themselves.

The concept of the field contains the instruments necessary for capital production, such as academic institutions producing cultural capital, organisations generating economic
capital, networks creating social capital and state institutions regulating power in the field. Examples of fields include the academic, artistic and medical fields. This study is situated within the field of ethnic diversity in the French and German contexts. In both countries, ethnic diversity constitutes a field shaped by history, migration, sociopolitics and diversity legislation among other various contextual forces. The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways: On the one hand, it is related to conditioning: the field structures the habitus, in such a way that individuals develop unquestioned habits proper to the context in which they live (Schirato and Webb 2003). On the other hand, habitus contributes to constructing the field as a meaningful world in which it is worth investing one’s energy (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Each field has its own way of functioning, a set of spoken or unspoken rules, which become part of the habitus that is routinely observed by the actors in that field. For those in a particular field, their actions must observe the rules relative to that field or else they risk exclusion (De Clercq and Voronov 2009). Agents in a field, individually or collectively, use strategies to safeguard and improve their positions (Özbilgin and Tatli 2011). We propose that such concepts are relevant for explaining how the agency of minority ethnic workers in France and Germany emerges within their national contexts.

Bourdieu defines the field of power as mainly the power of the state (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Thus, in this research, the field of power is broadly located across an ensemble of administrative structures, such as commissions, including bureaus and boards of diversity and immigration in France and Germany. In particular, in France and Germany, historically there has been legislation, regulations and administrative measures to control and shape the agency of minority ethnic workers.

To summarise, using the concepts of capitals, field and habitus highlights questions of agency as situated in the broader social context. Bourdieu can therefore bring to the study of skilled minority ethnic workers, in HRM studies, a compassion and commitment to reveal the spaces available for their agency, in the context of their circumstances. In the next section, before presenting our empirical evidence, we briefly introduce the French and German contexts.

Agency of minority ethnic workers in the context of France

French Republicanism is one of the main inspirations underpinning the way the French state responds to ethnic minorities in France. We focus on the Lebanese, as a target group of Arab ethnic minorities that has a long history of migration to France. This history is shaped by a French colonial past in Lebanon. To contextualise the experiences of the Lebanese ethnic minorities in this study, we first explain the history of Lebanese migration to France. Next, we briefly discuss migration and the employment of ethnic minorities in France.

The historical relations between Lebanon and France have been characterised by periods of colonisation and migration. Following the First World War, France invaded Lebanon as a mandated country until Lebanon gained its independence in 1943. Since 1943, power-sharing problems between religious groups in Lebanon have been an issue, and in 1975 they partly led to a civil war that lasted 15 years. Throughout the last decade, the Lebanese have rarely enjoyed peace and economic prosperity. Since 1975, many Lebanese have emigrated in search of work opportunities and better life prospects (Al Ariss 2010; Al Ariss et al. 2012).

In the analysis that follows, we discuss how the agency of ethnic minorities is manifested in France. The French context of labour migration and management of ethnic minorities is closely linked to France’s colonial history. For instance, after the First World War and until 1962, the French claimed that Algeria was part of France (Brubaker 1992). This resulted in citizenship rights being offered to thousands of Algerians and opened the
doors to migration and the presence of ethnic minorities in France (Weil 1991). Prior to 1970, migrants came to France from Europe and Africa to fill unskilled and semi-skilled job vacancies. During the 1970s, as a result of the French mandate, the French continued to grant the Lebanese certain facilities to travel to France. During this period, economic recession led to reduced demand for labour migrants. Migrants from ex-colonies stayed in France and brought their families through reunification migration.

The contemporary French model of diversity has its roots in France’s sociopolitical context. In France, it is unlawful to discriminate against people according to their ethnicity (Osler and Starkey 2005). Our Bourdieuan approach to study the Lebanese in France is important for questioning such taken-for-granted assumptions of ethnic blindness as a republican ideal. Perceptions of inequality and injustice, among other factors, resulted in clashes in 2005 between police and ethnic minorities. These clashes, alongside progressive legislation from the EU, have galvanised a set of new government initiatives that target equality, diversity and inclusion in France. These initiatives included the creation, in 2005, of an official authority against discrimination (Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l’Égalité – HALDE) to promote anti-discrimination practices (HALDE 2007). Our literature research has drawn a relative blank in explaining if, and how, the agency of ethnic minorities in France is manifested.

Agency of minority ethnic workers in the context of Germany

Space for the agency of ethnic minorities in Germany appears limited. In 2010, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared that foreign workers, despite earlier expectations, are not likely to leave Germany (BBC News Europe 2010). Her statement underlined the prevailing view that migrants in Germany were simply guests. Germany’s long-standing social policy on guest workers was based on this simple assumption (Meier-Braun 2002). Furthermore, German studies on ethnic diversity and migration have been dominated by an assimilative notion of integration (Esser 2006), rather than a focus on the agency of migrant workers. Unlike other countries, such as France (Al Ariss and Syed 2011), the Netherlands (Vasta 2006) or the UK (Parekh 2000), the German government has never officially declared a multicultural society.

Currently in Germany, there is consensus among the public and politicians that the integration of ethnic minorities has failed (Berlin-Institute für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung 2009). This is particularly said of ethnic minority Turks, and Muslims in general. Although, statistically, people of Turkish ethnicity are not the largest ethnic minority group, they appear to be the most problematised. In particular, much is made of their alleged unwillingness to integrate into German society (Sarrazin 2009), even though the homogeneity and cohesion of German society remains unquestioned. Moreover, ethnic minorities, again particularly ethnic minority Turks, are held personally responsible for their failure in building the human capital needed for success in the German labour market (Berlin Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung 2009).

Additionally, Germany’s anti-discrimination policies have often been criticised for being weak and under-developed, particularly by trade unions and NGOs (DGB 2006). The majority ethnic group, owing partly to collective guilt over the Holocaust, avoids engaging in debates about ethnic discrimination, unlike their counterparts in other European countries such as the UK. In the absence of public debate on ethnic difference, there is little scope for discussion of the agency of minority ethnic workers in Germany.
Methods

In-depth, qualitative interviews are appropriate in this study because they allow new insights into the interplay between agency and structure in these two countries, and the complexities of such encounters (Laer and Janssens 2011). In the French and German cases, we adopted an inductive approach, which allows us to extend theory by voicing ethnic minorities as well as those who shape diversity policies and actions at the meso and macro levels.

Participants

Our study draws on 79 qualitative in-depth interviews to gain a better understanding of the agentic experiences of participants. In France, we conducted 43 interviews with Lebanese professionals living and working in Paris and an additional 6 qualitative interviews conducted with diversity actors. In Germany, we conducted 30 interviews with diversity actors. By diversity actors we mean individuals involved in structures such as state institutions, NGOs, as well as diversity and equality committees that influence the management of ethnic diversity in the context of these countries. In Germany, 15 interviewees belonged to ethnic minorities (10 of them of Turkish ethnicity) and 15 were native-born German. A potential limitation of our design is that one sample (in France) focuses mainly on employees, and less on diversity actors, while the other sample (in Germany) focuses more on diversity actors. Nevertheless, this also has the advantage of allowing a multilevel analysis of the agency of ethnic minorities at individual and organisational levels. The importance of such a multilevel approach is increasingly acknowledged in the HRM literature (Duberley, Cohen and Mallon 2006; Tatli 2011).

To achieve an informed group of participants, we used a purposive sampling strategy in selecting interviewees (Maxwell 1996). Our participants did not fit the stereotype of low-skilled ethnic minorities. Specifically, we aimed to interview managerial and professional level participants. The reason for selecting this profile was that skilled ethnic minorities in France and Germany are under-researched compared to unskilled minority ethnic groups. While all participants had achieved professional occupational status, the majority of them belonged to groups that are negatively stereotyped (Arabs and Turks) in both countries.

In France, participants had attained higher education qualifications and/or were professionals, from different religious backgrounds. Table 1 shows demographic details of the skilled ethnic minority participants.

Also in France, six qualitative interviews with policy actors made it possible to explore issues that were unwritten in policy documents. The six interviewees included: (1) a senior manager at the Higher Council for Integration (HCI), (2) a senior manager involved in developing policies at the International Labour Organisation (ILO), (3) two diversity specialists working with ethnic minorities in France, (4) one interviewee cooperating with the French government regarding diversity issues and (5) an eminent French academic specialising in HRM, with expert knowledge in diversity in the context of the French institutions. Table 2 shows demographic details of the diversity actors in France.

In Germany, all participants held at least a Master’s degree (26 interviewees), or a PhD (4 interviewees). All ethnic minority participants were therefore highly skilled, and this was reflected in their job positions. Table 3 outlines the demographic profile and job descriptions of all participants in Germany.
Empirical material

All interviews were semi-structured and discussed work experiences (important with ethnic minorities) and ethnic diversity matters (important with diversity actors). After eliciting demographic information in both countries, interviews focused on a range of themes pertinent to understanding participants’ experiences of agency in their respective contexts (important for ethnic minorities in both countries) and the management of ethnic diversity (important for policy actors). Topics included: education and career experiences; the match

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<td>Masters</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Yolla</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
between the ethnic minorities’ qualifications and their jobs; discrimination experiences; career plans and strategies; key people/networks/organisations that had influenced careers; evaluation of career success; name changes (important in France); attempts to help ethnic minorities (important in Germany); religious affiliation and its influence on participants’ careers; participants’ coping strategies with inequalities (where appropriate); links and relationships with countries of origin (where appropriate); and diversity and equality matters (important with diversity actors in both countries).

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and most were conducted in French or German, as appropriate. The order of topics addressed varied. Hence, as the interview progressed, participants sometimes answered questions before we had asked them, and additional issues could be introduced naturally where they fitted in the course of the discussion. In all cases, observational notes were also taken. Relevant diversity policies were also collated and analysed to provide additional contextual information and enable triangulation of interview data.

**Data analysis**

We adopted Layder’s (1998) approach to analysis that involves considering existing theory and allowing interpretations to emerge from the data. QSR NVivo software was used to code the material collected. Coding was iterative – each interview transcript was read several times and relevant segments of text were sorted into themes. We included large segments of the text so that the meanings were easier to contextualise and therefore to understand and interpret. Working with the nodes involved immersion in the transcripts, creating initial and new nodes, organising nodes into trees and linking themes where required. To draw

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**Table 2. Demographic attributes of participants in France.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Expertise in diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alain Alexy</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Senior manager at the HCI advising the French government on making and implementing integration policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Louis Mitsoura</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Senior manager at the ILO working on employment policy issues regarding migrants in Europe and having an expertise in diversity and anti-discrimination matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sophie Le Duc</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Senior manager at Humanity in Action, working on diversity and promoting the rights of minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Stéphane Bourgoies</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Manager in a diversity and anti-racism NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kamilia Oger</td>
<td>Old aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>French-Lebanese</td>
<td>Manager in a diversity and anti-racism NGO promoting cultural diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Emile Bola</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Researcher, lecturer, trainer, consultant specialised in diversity and HRM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A. Al Ariss et al.
Table 3. Demographic attributes of participants in Germany.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Associate of a trade union, diversity trainer and consultant. Previously: member of the PR department of the lower house of Parliament. Worked on the development of the German equal treatment law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elke</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Researcher, lecturer, Trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Werner</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Consultant and diversity trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Head of anti-racism NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Takuya</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Researcher, lecturer and diversity trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Researcher, lecturer, trainer, consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gülsener</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Municipal Integration Delegate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jasmin</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Afghan</td>
<td>Head of a Mentoring program for ethnic minority females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sabine</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Member of the Federal Equality Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mustafa</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Member of governmental department, responsible for ethnic minority issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Member of diversity management unit at a university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ingeborg</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Professor of intercultural pedagogy. Research focus on structural race discrimination of young people in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Murat</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Researcher, lecturer, politician Green party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Özlem</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Head of antidiscrimination office NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Member of trade union, project manager of the unit integration of people with migration background into the labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Cem</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Head of a research team in a Research centre concerned with race related issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Researcher, University lecturer, diversity trainer. Owner of a research institute (main focus on ethnicity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Associate of welfare organisation, integration and migration unit. Politician SPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Lawyer, labour law specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Turgut</td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Head of federal integration advisory board and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tanja</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Member of Federal ministry, head of federal fraction of the SPD and responsible for integration and migration issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gülderen</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Associate of federal chamber of commerce, head of a project concerned with ethnic minority chamber members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Thorsten</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Associate of a research institute, focused on ethnic minority Turks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Middle aged</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Associate of a trade union</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
conclusions from the data, we compared individuals’ subjective accounts by examining common issues, as well as differences, across their experiences (Fendt and Sachs 2008). Observation notes were integrated into the analysis, and literature and policy documents were also critically read and analysed. Upon the completion of coding and analysis, selected quotes were translated from French and German into English for the purposes of this article.

Reflections on the data and analysis
Before proceeding to the findings and analysis sections, it is important to provide some reflections regarding the data collection and analysis. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), scholars should be conscious of their own positions in the field of social inquiry.

On the basis of this, we recognise the subjective nature of research participants’ accounts rather than taking these as an absolute objective truth. This required us to question participants’ as well as our own presuppositions and attitudes, and the way these might influence research design, analysis and findings. Being reflexive entailed us to be aware that full objectivity remains unattainable in this study and, consequently, being mindful that the results should not be over-generalised. We practised a reflexive approach by maintaining a research diary of the researchers’ own impact upon research design and analysis, documenting observations during data collection, and keeping a record of how participants’ meanings were handled during coding and analysis. The quality of the research was therefore supported by our commitment to rendering as transparent as possible the subjectivities that might influence our analysis and findings (Nadin and Cassell 2006).

Findings
We present below the ways in which ethnic minorities’ agencies, in terms of their work experiences, were shaped by national structures in France and Germany. We also discuss how minority ethnic workers demonstrate their agency. We framed the agency of ethnic minorities in terms of their experiences of accumulating and deploying salient forms of capital in their careers in France and Germany.
The field of managing ethnic diversity in France and Germany

In this section, we discuss the field of ethnic diversity to illuminate the context in which minority ethnic workers exercise their agency in France and Germany. The findings show some striking cross-national similarities. One similarity between France and Germany is that the notion of integration is the dominant concept that frames the agency of minority ethnic workers. A further similarity is that interview evidence from both countries suggests that policy interventions do not yet offer suitable support for highly skilled ethnic minorities to exercise their agency. In particular, actions guaranteeing fair access to employment for ethnic minorities are missing in both countries.

In the case of France, the interviews conducted with a senior manager at the HCI, an advisory committee for the government regarding ethnic minorities’ integration, a senior manager at the ILO and an eminent French academic with expert knowledge in the topic of diversity in the workplace confirmed that no active measures exist to help highly skilled ethnic minority workers to exercise their agency in the job market. One interview with a senior manager working in Humanity in Action, a global network defending the rights of minorities, highlighted the inconsistencies between the official discourse regarding recruiting labour migrants and the ways in which ethnic minorities face exclusion in education and work in France. Interviews with two specialists working with ethnic minorities confirmed that policies are very restrictive when it comes to the work of migrants, particularly from developing countries. One of the participants explained that many of the highly skilled ethnic minority workers she meets take unskilled jobs because they face legal barriers in France. Furthermore, both interviewees indicated that government policies do not promote effective inclusion of ethnic minorities in France. They explained that government policies are increasingly discriminatory and thus getting state funding is very difficult for ethnic minority individuals.

A similar picture emerged for the context of Germany, where integration measures concentrate on low-skilled minority ethnic workers rather than on highly skilled ones, despite the fact that the need for highly skilled migrants has increased in recent years. This was reflected in the interviews. For example, diversity actors of native-born German origin tended to refer only to ‘under qualified’ ethnic minority individuals when speaking about ethnic minority workers in general. In 2006, a ‘National Integration Summit’ took place, coordinated by the Federal Government’s representative for Migration, Refugees and Integration, Maria Böhmer. This event brought together representatives from different fields, such as politics, business and society in general, as well as a number of immigration organisations. The aim of the event was to work out a ‘National Integration Plan (NIP)’ that was introduced in the same year (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2007). However, the resulting NIP did not contain any support measures for highly skilled ethnic minority workers, and omitted issues such as discrimination and race equality in employment. Several interviewees argued that the German government, as well as the German public, denies the existence of highly skilled ethnic minority workers and the labour market discrimination that they are facing.

From our discussion of the field of ethnic diversity in France and Germany, our findings suggest that structural factors may constrain ethnic minorities in accumulating and deploying capital, and consequently exercising their agency in navigating their career choices. However, the analysis presented below suggests that, within this macro-contextual adversity, highly skilled Lebanese in France in fact have agency in shaping many aspects of their work and lives. In contrast, the agency of ethnic minorities in Germany emerges as less resistant to structural inequalities.
Agency of ethnic minorities in France and Germany

In this section, our focus is on the scope for agency shaped by the extant field of ethnic diversity. Drawing on interview data, we illustrate how our participants evaluated their agency in both countries. We demonstrate that, in France, Lebanese participants engaged with the barriers they faced and attempted to advance their careers by resisting, blending in and subverting structures of inequality. According to Özbilgin (1998), resisting is an agentic strategy involving active non-compliance with social routines. This may occur when individuals exercise their differences of identity and daily routine against the normative rules of their location. Blending in is a strategy in which the individual chooses to render themselves invisible through imitating or simulating the normative practices. This enables individuals to benefit from resources afforded by compliance (Özbilgin 1998). Subversion as an agentic strategy involves changing, reinterpretation and manipulation of the normative structures and routines by the minority ethnic worker. Subversion occurs if there is room for reinterpretation of local norms (Özbilgin 1998). In our data, these strategies were not mutually exclusive – rather, they emerged as complementary.

In contrast to the situation in France, minority ethnic workers in Germany did not recognise discrimination practices and therefore accepted them as normal. However, the picture is complex. Although our participants in France viewed themselves as resourceful agents with diverse capabilities and positive choices, they were also aware of the constraints that are placed on their chances and choices for no reason other than their ethnicity. In the case of Germany, the agency of minority ethnic workers was constrained by limited access to social and cultural capital and the devaluation of their economic and symbolic capital by the ethnic majority group. We first present findings that show how Lebanese participants in France evaluated their endowment of social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital, as part of their agentic resources. Next, the agency of ethnic minority participants in Germany is considered with reference to cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital.

The agency of ethnic minorities in France

The agency of Lebanese in France emerged in the form of resisting, blending in and subverting as they mobilised their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capitals in France. The social location of Lebanese in France influenced their ability to capitalise on their skills and educational qualifications (among other forms of capital). They engaged in social and kinship relationships with the Lebanese who were already living in Europe. Participants were able to secure work permits, enrol on university courses and find accommodation, especially in the early stages of their migration. Over time, most of the participants began to rely on newly developed relationships and consequently needed less family support. Family, friends and professional contacts emerged as salient for finding jobs, starting up their own business and advancing careers. Family and friends were also crucial in participants’ experiences of work. For example, after completing her Arabic studies, Mirna was unable to find a job that suited her qualifications. She decided therefore to work in a bookshop owned by her family. By taking up family entrepreneurship, Mirna overcame the traditional routes of entering the job market.

Relationships with influential people in France were also helpful for securing career advancement. Samir believed that the good reputation he held among French policymakers helped him obtain French citizenship earlier than his counterparts. Becoming a French citizen was vital for his career since he could not practise medicine in France as a Lebanese doctor. Similarly, relationships in the workplace also served as important resources for some of the participants. For instance, Christelle, who was on an industrial placement, was first
employed in France due to the positive relationship she developed with colleagues and superiors. Those who took the entrepreneurship route also banked on professional relationships. This route allowed them to resist and exercise their differences against the inequality structures that they encountered in the French labour market. Tomasso mentioned that he learned how to manage his clinic from Jewish North African doctors in France and benefited extensively from his membership of professional associations in the country.

Tomasso: ... I was influenced by many people ... I have seen people, North African Jewish people, who managed their clinics very well, doing things that made their business work well ... Jewish medical doctors from North Africa helped me very much ... other people taught me plenty of things ... not in medicine but rather in management, managing client relationships ... [these were] very good professional relationships.

Cultural capital, in terms of education and commensurate professional experiences, is a resource that the Lebanese found hard to access. For example, work in elitist professions such as law and medicine was not always available to them. Attempts to deploy cultural capital and subvert certain obstacles along career paths required greater time and creativity.

Over time, participants developed an understanding of the systemic constraints they faced, and through the continued strategic accumulation and deployment of cultural capital, they were able to subvert some of the organisational and macro-contextual barriers. For example, despite his good education, qualifications and six years of professional experience, Patrick, a Lebanese engineer in his mid-40s, was underpaid when he first started working in France because the work experience he gained in Lebanon was not valued. However, by frequently changing organisations, he was more successful in making his cultural capital recognised and legitimate in France. In time, Patrick was eventually able to overcome inequalities and secure lucrative employment that he perceived as commensurate with his qualifications. Another example is Souad (a 39-year-old woman) who acquired her PhD in France in history of international relations. She worked for four years in academic research but later spent most of her career working on promoting diversity issues. One of Souad’s strategies to subvert employment inequalities was to organise career events to help skilled ethnic minorities secure jobs. In the quote below, Souad refers to such inequalities but at the same time to her subverting strategy. In particular, she discusses a career event that she organised to promote hiring people from ethnic minorities, with the cooperation of diverse organisations. She reported that, in such events, she was able to bridge contacts between French companies and ethnic minorities. She felt that this was useful to break down some of the discrimination barriers that would have otherwise prevented such an encounter. In this way, Souad mentioned being able to help many skilled ethnic minorities to secure jobs.

Souad: ... The system in France needs to be changed! In France, [the system] is outdated now! It must be changed, everything ... by including everybody in society ....

In the last career event I organized ... I saw excellent CVs, those people were highly competent, but still they had been unemployed for more than two years! ... Why can’t organisations and migrants meet on common ground? Because there is a sort of fear, an obstruction ... why is there such an obstacle? Because of the system ... this system needs to be reviewed!

Economic capital was essential for settling and pursuing studies in France. For example, after secondary school, Antoine worked for a few years. His savings allowed him to travel for the first time to France. With the financial help of a French family he knew from his first visit to France, Antoine left for France a second time and commenced graduate studies. There were also participants such as Mathilde, Patrick and Wissam who used their
families’ resources to secure accommodation in Paris. Other participants like Max, Jean-
Jacques, Mahmoud, Sylvain, Farida and Wael benefited from bursaries to pursue
undergraduate and graduate studies in France.

Mahmoud, among 12 other participants, found entrepreneurship to be a better
alternative to resist unemployment and underemployment. Mahmoud started running his
own bookshop and at a later stage bought other businesses. Participants did not have access
to entrepreneurship choices immediately upon their arrival in France. First, they had to
acquire symbolic capital such as administrative authorisations. Second, they had to
accumulate and draw on their education, training and work experience in France. Third, they
accumulated financial resources and secured key contacts that were helpful for their careers.
Over time, these 12 participants accumulated the resources that allowed them to launch their
own businesses. The case of Kamal, now a successful entrepreneurial medical doctor,
illustrates some of these steps (Al Ariss 2010):

Kamal: … [career] Opportunities are reserved for French nationals; it is less the case
nowadays because they [in France] need more medical doctors. I always felt that I had
difficulties getting everything I have now. I have always put in twice as much effort …
compared to a French citizen … In the end, I decided to create my own medical clinic …
once this was done there were no more difficulties.

Regarding symbolic capital, French citizenship and work permits had a symbolic value
that allowed participants to resist and subvert inequalities in France. Participants in the
study reported working harder than the native-born French to progress in their careers, even
when they held equivalent qualifications, and had obtained French citizenship and work
permits. This was the case for Tomasso, a 44-year-old radiologist who came to France and
later successfully became a specialist, co-owning a clinic. Similarly, after marriage to a
native-born French woman, Samir, a 55-year-old medical doctor, obtained French
citizenship and was able to practise and progress his career in France. Samir’s work
experience not only illustrates the complexity of the ethnic minority migrant experience but
also demonstrates the scope for agency – she now occupies one of the highest positions in a
public hospital in Paris:

Samir: When I got French citizenship … after that, I had to find a job … so I worked at the
hospital and in other clinics. First, I started to work half a day per week in 1987, then, in ‘88,
I was able to work 55 hours per week after that! Just one year after that! … . And at that time
I used to work in temporary [medical] jobs … after that they [employers] got to know me
more, they saw how I worked, so they were more confident about me … now I have a
permanent job [with one of the highest positions in French public hospitals] ….

Imane, a 54-year-old woman, initially pursued studies in engineering at a well-known
university. This was an opportunity for her to realise a dream. Drawing on symbolic
capital, the reputation of her school gave her the chance to experience a successful career
in France: she managed projects with teams of 600 people; she also held the post of general
director of a company of 300 people for several years. However, Imane found that women
are offered limited access to career advancement in France. After experiencing barriers to
upward career mobility, she was compelled to set up her own consulting business to
overcome this obstacle.

A quarter of the interviewees changed their Arabic names in France to French ones. They
reported that this agentic strategy of blending in prevented them from being discriminated
against. For example, Christelle, a 34-year-old woman, abandoned her surname and took
that of her French husband. She felt that doing so would mean that the French would not
question her about her ethnic origins. Sylvain, a 39-year-old man, also adopted a French
name, believing that the French government encouraged this practice. In fact, during French
citizenship procedures, applicants are encouraged to change their foreign names to French ones. François also reported difficulties in his career in France because of his Arab Lebanese surname, and adopted a French surname. With his new French name and citizenship, he was more successful in his job applications.

The agency of ethnic minorities in Germany

In the case of Germany, we frame the agency of ethnic minority workers mainly in relation to cultural and social capital and less in terms of economic and symbolic resources. This is because, unlike the French context discussed above, economic and symbolic capitals were mobilised less in Germany because they were subject to domination by the ethnic majority. Instead of the resistance, blending in and subverting strategies that were adopted in France, exit from the labour market appeared as a more common agentic option in the case of Germany. Exit strategy may be described as an individual’s effort to leave current labour markets and social settings in pursuit of better alternatives. Exit strategies are commonly reported among dissatisfied workers in the HRM literature (Özbilgin 1998).

In terms of cultural and social capital, education and social networks emerged as important resources for access to jobs and economic capital in the German labour market. Participants’ accounts suggested that ethnic minority workers in Germany face institutional barriers, very similar to the Lebanese in France, in their attempts to deploy their cultural capital, such as their educational credentials. However, unlike France, in Germany exit appeared to be an agentic choice for many minority ethnic workers who felt pushed to the margins of the labour market. Overall, all minority ethnic participants reported that it was difficult to use their cultural capital, in the form of education, in attempting to advance their careers. Mustafa, a member of a governmental department (male and of Turkish ethnicity), stated:

Higher education creates better chances, but higher education does not automatically lead to better integration in the labour market. The resistance gets greater in higher social classes. Well, the problems of distribution are getting bigger when the resources, particularly in the upper social class are getting scarcer. Well, in particular the people who are aware of it and who have the chance and the potential to emigrate [from Germany], are doing it. They do not bother themselves with this situation.

This comment shows how ethnic minorities faced major obstacles when attempting to deploy their accumulated cultural capital. A similar statement was made by Eleni, editor of an online platform for diversity management (female and of Greek ethnicity):

It is the case that even well-educated and qualified young ethnic minority individuals do not get access to the labour market. Well, many are going abroad now and are leaving Germany. Yes, this is a fact. So the exclusion from the labour market is not only connected with the qualifications, even competent people have problems. . . . So, education does not lead automatically to labour market integration. It is an important requirement but not the only one. The essential requirement would be the majority group opening up to the fact that our society is diverse and that along with this diversity comes a potential which is also a benefit for the majority group.

In Germany, cultural capital is salient in terms of access to jobs in the labour market. However, interviews with diversity actors revealed that this was not always applicable for minority ethnic workers. The above statements suggest that, in Germany, cultural capital in the form of education alone does not guarantee labour market inclusion for ethnic minority workers. In contrast to the French case, devaluation of multiple forms of capitals positioned ethnic minorities at a disadvantage in respect to ethnic majority employees and constrained their agency. While the mainstream debate in Germany is dominated by the
idea that education is the key to better integration of ethnic minority workers (Esser 2006), our findings contradicted this key assumption.

There were differences between minority ethnic participants and those who were native-born German in how they explained racial inequality and marginalisation in employment. For native-born participants, inequalities experienced by ethnic minorities in Germany were solely due to a lack of educational credentials or German language fluency. In contrast, for ethnic minority participants, the mode of explanation focused instead on more structural issues such as racial discrimination.

For example, Gülderen, an associate of the federal chamber of commerce (female and of Turkish ethnicity), explained that because of race discrimination, minority ethnic workers are not able to access leadership positions, even if they are highly skilled:

The question is now, even if you have higher education, do you really have the chance to work in a comparable position? If I have a qualification as a baker, then I can surely work here as a baker. However, let’s say I had a qualification as a professor, can I hold a professorship here? Or if I have the qualification to be a Chief Executive Officer can I become a Chief Executive Officer? I do not think so. This is because of discrimination.

Clearly Gülderen viewed race discrimination as the reason for the labour market marginalisation of ethnic minority workers. Whether discrimination is indeed the reason why ethnic minority workers are not found in leadership positions is difficult to answer, since there is a paucity of data regarding discrimination cases in Germany. Additionally, literature on highly skilled ethnic minority workers is almost entirely absent, which makes it impossible to locate highly skilled ethnic minority workers in the labour market.

A further issue that emerged in accounting for the labour market marginalisation of highly skilled ethnic minority workers in Germany was lack of social capital, in particular access to social networks. Several interviewees perceived lack of social capital as a constraint on the agency of ethnic minority workers. For instance, Jasmin, head of a mentoring programme for female ethnic minority academics (female and of Afghan ethnicity), argued:

I think that networks play a very important role in why people with migration backgrounds cannot get access to particular jobs, because the networks are missing and, as we know, networks are necessary in order to get particular jobs.

Elke, an academic and diversity trainer (female and native-born German), shared this opinion, and specifically related social capital to the exclusion of highly skilled minority ethnic workers:

Yes, education is a precondition, but there are also other relevant factors playing a role such as networks. The exclusion happens through networks, knowledge of and access to networks. Connections enrich human capital, just by using connections to get a better job, a better internship, etc.

Membership of groups, involvement in social networks and the social relations arising from such memberships can be used in efforts to improve the social position of the actors in a variety of different fields. Examples of such groups include trade unions, political parties or secret societies, all of which embody social capital. Group memberships, which generate social capital, have a multiplier effect on the influence of other forms of capital. However, according to Elke’s statement, such networks can be also utilised to exclude ethnic minority workers, constraining agency and in turn preventing full participation in the labour market.

Ingeborg, a university professor for intercultural pedagogy (female and native-born German), elaborated Elke’s argument by relating it to Bourdieu’s work. She explained that the ethnic majority group creates indefinite criteria and attributes that ethnic minority
workers should hold to exclude them from the labour market, and in particular from highly skilled positions. She further argued that this is done to secure the process of reproduction of the power of the ethnic majority.

The agency of skilled ethnic minorities in Germany related to economic and symbolic capitals was constrained due to symbolic violence exercised by the ethnic majority group. We define symbolic violence as a mainly unconscious mode of domination imposed upon subordinated groups (Bourdieu 1998). Such domination conserves inequalities in matters of gender, nation, religion, age and social status among other determinants (Bourdieu 1986). In particular, ethnic minority Turks were predominately portrayed negatively, and as being in deficit in terms of economic production. For example:

A large number of Arabs and Turks in this city, who have increased in number as a result of wrong policies, have no productive function other than the fruit and vegetable trade. (Sarrazin 2009, p. 198)

Such portrayal of ethnic minority Turks not only disparages the diversity of their experiences and limits their agency, but also devalues their economic and symbolic capital and limits their career advancement. These same insights were also reflected in the interviews with diversity actors in Germany. Such depreciation of the economic and symbolic capital held by minority ethnic workers made it difficult for ethnic minorities to mobilise either form of capital. Evidently, there was minimal room for agency in this regard.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore and compare the forms that agency takes, in terms of shaping work experiences, for highly skilled minority ethnic workers in France and Germany. This issue is important because the extant HRM literature is underdeveloped regarding agency, and tends to focus on the constraints imposed upon ethnic minorities rather than on their choices (Tatli 2011). A Bourdieuan reading of our field studies reveals two key findings. First, our data show that the agency of ethnic minorities is shaped by an array of structures through which the French and German states assert control. In both countries, skilled ethnic minorities receive very little support in terms of HRM, with more attention being given to the unskilled. Second, our findings suggest that when faced with labour market structures, skilled ethnic minorities are able to mobilise their resources, differentially in France and Germany, to exercise varied forms of agency. In the context of French Republicanism, Lebanese workers have been able to use their agency, although in a limited way, to resist, blend in with and subvert structural controls on their work and life choices. However, in the case of Germany, such forms of agency were not evident since the cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital of minority ethnic workers were devalued and constrained in their careers.

Our analysis of agency and field shows a complex picture: despite a contemporary official discourse of managing equality and diversity in France and Germany, there is in practice little space for the agency of ethnic minorities to fully materialise. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has found that race discrimination in employment is a major obstacle for ethnic minority workers in French and German contexts (Osler and Starkey 2005). Nevertheless, our findings show that to develop an authoritative account of managing ethnic diversity at work, the agency of minority ethnic workers should not be underplayed. A Bourdieuan reading of the capital accumulation and deployment strategies of skilled ethnic minorities enabled us to understand their agency, as situated in the field of ethnic diversity. Such agency might otherwise be obscured by approaches that focus solely on the constraints imposed on their choices and chances (Kamenou 2007).
The French and German contexts reveal clear differences in the scope for agency of ethnic minority workers. Ethnic minorities have been able to question inequalities, recognise them, and therefore navigate within them more effectively in France than in Germany. In France, our interview findings reveal that, in the face of a myriad of institutional barriers and ‘dominant cultural practices’ (Prasad, Pringle and Konrad 2006, p. 4), skilled ethnic minorities accumulate a wide range of capitals and deploy them with creativity and ingenuity to realise their career choices. For example, once participants’ Arabic names were changed, this provided them with a symbolic capital to blend in with the context of French organisations. Many decided to set up their own business, thereby resisting the structural barriers that would otherwise have obstructed career progression. Participants like Souad attempted to subvert inequalities in employment by actively organising encounters between business and ethnic minorities, ultimately leading to many of them being hired. Thus, resisting, blending in and subverting allowed many of the participants in France to realise their career ambitions.

In the case of Germany, the picture was bleaker. There appeared to be little scope for the agency of minority ethnic workers who found themselves located within rigid structures of employment and work. Habitus, that is, internalised assumptions regarding the field of ethnic diversity in Germany, was problematic when participants themselves contributed to reproducing inequalities in HRM practices either by failing to recognise the inequalities, or by rendering them normal (Bourdieu 1998). In particular, highly skilled ethnic minority Turks in Germany were said (by the diversity actors interviewed) to be either leaving, or thinking about leaving, for destinations such as Turkey to realise their career choices. It could be argued that the constraints and limitations on them are so strong that leaving the country is a promising way out of the German context of inequalities. Therefore, exit appears to be an active strategy for minority ethnic workers in Germany in search of better career prospects.

Within the field of ethnic diversity, the difference between the agency of ethnic minorities in France and Germany can be explained by the different colonial histories and integration policies of the two countries. France’s colonial history has led to waves of migrating individuals who were supposed to ‘integrate’ by denying their differences. By mobilising their capitals, the Republican values of equality in France have allowed ethnic minorities to enjoy (to a certain extent) career resources, choices and better outcomes. Germany did not have a long history of migration from ex-colonies. Instead guest workers were introduced. They were supposed to ‘integrate’ by giving up their differences and ultimately expected to return to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, even when they denied their differences, they have not enjoyed equal opportunities in terms of career choices, and outcomes. Unlike Germany, the ‘Freedom, Equality and Fraternity’, values of the French republicanism, opened the way for minority ethnic workers, albeit in a limited manner, to engage with inequalities and advance their careers.

Conclusions and implications for HRM

The agency of skilled ethnic minorities in the labour market is under-represented in HRM studies (Syed and Pio 2010). Furthermore, the focus has been on the barriers to, rather than the agency of, ethnic minorities with very little comparative research on ethnic minorities in Europe. Our study contributes to the HRM literature by voicing the dynamics of skilled ethnic minorities’ agency, in terms of understanding their career choices and outcomes, from a cross-national comparative perspective. We have adopted a Bourdieuan approach (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer 2011) in recognition of the explanatory power of his work.
in accounting for the agency of ethnic minorities. On the one hand, a Bourdieuan approach has been helpful in illuminating social inequality and exclusion, and how these are reinforced in the context of the management of ethnic minorities. On the other hand, using this approach it has also been possible to show that, despite taking some time, skilled ethnic minorities’ agency came into play in shaping their work experiences. In France, this agency has resisted and subverted to a certain extent the pecking order of French Republicanism. In contrast, in Germany, minority ethnic workers have been unable to renegotiate inequalities in the broadly silent context of ethnic relations.

We recognize that our study has limitations. Given its exploratory nature, it is not representative enough to allow generalisation of our findings. However, our research has important HRM implications, in terms of policy and practice, for the management of ethnic minorities in European countries. Diversity actors need to better recognise and tackle the fact that skilled ethnic minorities, despite their high level of human capital, face strong barriers that prevent them from fully progressing in their careers. Furthermore, policy and organisational discourses on managing diversity need to move away from a short-term, performative perspective towards accommodating ethnic minorities in a more sustainable way. For instance, once career challenges are acknowledged, there is a need to fully recognise the talents of ethnic minorities rather than maintaining a discourse of victimising them. In this way, talent management policies and programmes, at the national and organisational levels, can help organisations to recognise and make better use of the currently under-utilised forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital that minority ethnic workers possess.

References


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