

Practises and Processes of Symbolic Reproduction of Racial, Ethnic and National Boundaries in Low-Waged Workplaces



NJMR NORDIC JOURNAL OF
MIGRATION RESEARCH

**SPECIAL ISSUE
EDITORIAL**

JOHAN FREDRIK RYE

METTE ANDERSSON

KAREN O'REILLY

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

The introduction present key research questions addressed by the Special Issue: What is the character of the symbolic reproduction of racial, ethnic and/ or national boundaries and how are they interwoven into international migrants' practices, experiences, and strategies within Europe's low-waged workplaces? The four IS papers address this question from different perspectives; three of them by drawing on materials from the food production industries in the Scandinavian countries and the UK, the last discussing how Polish labour migrant in Norwegian society are objects of 'gray racialization' setting them apart from the majority population. A main contribution of the SI lies in the bridging of disparate literature in the fields of labour markets, migration, and social and symbolic boundary processes: The in-depth qualitative analysis demonstrates how migrants working in low wage, low skill labour markets are the object of ongoing processes of othering along racial, ethnic and national lines. Various agents representing the majority society – the state, employers, trade unions and local communities – each in their own ways contribute to these processes and thereby to the reproduction of social inequalities. Combined, the SI papers also demonstrate the role the migrants themselves play in the production and reproduction of these dynamics.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Johan Fredrik Rye

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology, NO
johan.fredrik.rye@ntnu.no

KEYWORDS:

Symbolic boundaries; Class;
Race; Ethnicity; Low-waged
work; Europe

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Rye, JF, Andersson, M
and O'Reilly, K. 2023.
Practises and Processes of
Symbolic Reproduction of
Racial, Ethnic and National
Boundaries in Low-Waged
Workplaces. *Nordic Journal
of Migration Research*, 13(2):
1, pp. 1–10. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/njmr.677](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.677)

INTRODUCTION

The Special Issue analyses the symbolic reproduction of racial, ethnic and/or national boundaries and how they are interwoven into international migrants' practises, experiences and strategies within Europe's low-waged workplaces. We ask how a diversity of agents – the state, trade unions, employers and others, but also the migrants themselves – collectively but unconsciously – engage in processes upholding labour market dynamics that continuously channel migrants into low-waged job positions. Specifically, how are concepts of race, ethnicity and nationality mobilised to reproduce symbolic boundaries at the workplace?

Combined, the four papers in the Special Issue give insights into the diverse and complex processes of boundary making that work to set low-waged migrant workers apart from others at the Western European labour markets, and in effect, in larger society. Three of the papers detail how employers and other agents, in shifting ways, conceptualise migrants as 'good workers' willing to do manual labour tasks detested by 'locals.' These conceptualisations are supported, and legitimised, by the intricate othering processes of the migrants with reference to their nationalities and ethnicities. The final paper argues that these boundary making processes, due to their origins in the labour market, in combination place labour migrants in incoherent positions in the racial hierarchy; they are objects of 'gray' racialization processes.

As such, the Special Issue's main contribution is to provide a theoretical framework to understand the continuous reproduction of migrants' precarious position at Western Europe labour markets and, in effect, marginalisation in larger society. By anchoring the analysis in properties of the labour market, it further shows how the 'othering' of labour migrants in important regards stands out from those experienced by other categories of international migrants.

This is achieved by combining different strands of literatures – on labour markets, international migration and symbolic boundaries – and thus the papers are also an illustration of the need for and benefits of the integration of theoretical perspectives.

THE CONTEXT: LABOUR MIGRATION TO LOW-WAGED WORK PLACES IN WESTERN EUROPE AFTER 2004

The Special Issue focuses on international labour migrants in low-waged workplaces across Western Europe. These are typically found in industries that have a high demand for manual labour and require few/no formal educational qualifications, mastery of the majority language or other specific cultural competences. Examples are jobs in service industries, hospitality industries, cleaning and domestic services, agriculture and construction, which – as well as low wages – are characterised by poor labour conditions, exposure to health hazards, informal, short term and uncertain labour contracts, few prospects for promotion and low social status of jobs. In consequence, migrants employed in these 'precarious' positions in the labour market also experience 'precarious' overall life situations (Kalleberg 2018; Standing 2011, 2014; Valestrand 2021).

As noted by Piore (1979) and later observers, migrants are particularly prone to be recruited to these industries. In labour market research, this is explained both by 'demand' and 'supply' side arguments: on the demand side, employers tend to prefer migrant employees as they provide cheap, flexible and docile labour; on the supply

side, migrants are often in a poor bargaining position, have few alternatives and are willing to take up jobs in place of better opportunities.

As a result, we have seen the creation of ‘immigrant niches’ (Waldinger 1994) in European labour markets, with workplaces and industries defined by a strong presence of migrant labour. In some instances, employees of the same national/ethnic backgrounds become numerically dominant in a given workplace, a process reinforced by ‘locals’ starting to leave the workplace (Martin 1993). In many regards, these processes run parallel to the formation of ‘ethnic niches,’ where particular types of businesses are disproportionately owned and/or staffed by ethnic minorities, and the development of ‘ethnic enclaves (neighbourhoods)’ observed in research on residential segregation (Zhou 2013). A related key concept is that of ‘hiring queues’ (Waldinger & Lichter 2003), whereby employers and entire industries recruit manual low-skilled employees according to stereotypical assumptions that rank prospective workers based on their group belonging.

There are long traditions of labour migration from the global South to Western Europe and other industrialised regions of the world. However, the downfall of the Communist regimes in 1989–1990 and the later 2004/2007 EU enlargements led to unprecedented large-scale flows of migrants from the Central and Eastern European ‘economic peripheries’ to the more affluent Western European labour markets. These intra-European labour migration streams are largely related to labour market imbalances, where Central and Eastern European nationals have been motivated by jobs with far higher wages than at home, even though wages are lower than average in receiving countries, and the migrants – from the perspective of receiving countries – find themselves trapped in low-waged workplaces.

The four papers in the Special Issue all relate to the North-Western European labour market context, with three of them addressing migrants in the food industry. We argue this provides an illustrative case for all low-skilled and low-waged industries in which poor working conditions pertain for migrant workers, and thus serves as a theoretically productive context for the study of practices and processes of symbolic boundary reproduction of racial, ethnic and national boundaries in low-waged workplaces.

CONCEPTUALISING THE INTERSECTION OF MIGRATION, RACIALIZATION, WORK AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

Debates about the range and fluidity of the concepts of race, racism and racialization have a significant trajectory in racial and ethnic studies, often related to how these concepts signify processes of race-making towards different ethnic/national groups and to historically varying racisms (Solomos 2023). Research on how different groups of labour migrants to the United States and within Europe in the early 20th century were racialized and seen in a racial lens, shows for example, that both Italians and Poles were understood as specific races at the time (Kushner 2008; Meer 2019; Roediger & Easch 2012). Other research on racism in Europe in the 19th century illustrates how not only colonised people outside of the mainland were described in race terms, but also how different national peoples within Europe, such as the French and the British, talked about each other as different “races” (Gilroy 2000). Such historical forms of race-making were informed by colonialism, capitalism and

the popularity of race science at the time, but they also illustrate a more general point, namely the family resemblance between the concepts of race, ethnicity and nation. As such, they prefigure debates on cultural racism in the 1980s and 1990s, noting that immigrants and their descendants are racialized also in cultural terms. The focus on family resemblance between the concepts of race, ethnicity and nation underlines how all three concepts can be used to underpin categorization processes separating insiders from outsiders, as well as ideas of primordial groupness and rigid collective identities.

The family resemblance between these three concepts and their intersections with regard to processes of racialization has been duly noted by many prominent race and ethnicity scholars, among them Hall (2017) and Brubaker (2009). Miles (1993) was, however, among the first to combine a focus on racialization processes with a political economy perspective on migration, opening for the possibility that also white immigrants could be racialized. Miles drew attention to the generic process of racialization marking those seen as cultural or ethnic outsiders to the nation as more “fit” for capitalist exploitation. And he was specifically attuned to how the labour market was central as a driver of racialization processes in that various markers of otherness could be utilised to fill the most dangerous and lowest-paid jobs. In a similar vein, Michel Wieviorka (1995) noted the specific anchoring of one type of racism in the labour market. In distinguishing between what he labelled ‘difference racism’ and ‘inequality racism,’ Wieviorka noted that certain unskilled jobs were filled by specific ethnic and racial minority groups, whereas skilled jobs were suitable only for white majority workers. Inequality racism, as different from difference racism (that determined immigrants as total outsiders of society), signified a process drawing on the structures and power relations within the labour market itself.

Within migration studies, understanding migrants’ socio-economic position in labour markets has been an ongoing central theme since its inception. In the Nordic context, Schierup and colleagues’ research on ethnic boundaries in a Swedish car factory in the 1990s is an early example (Schierup & Paulson 1994), and in this period we also got a broader literature on ‘immigrant niches’ in the labour market. These early studies and theoretical developments were important in prefiguring the contemporary focus on the racialization of immigrants in various segments of the labour market. Since then, a major bulk of studies on migration has focused more narrowly on immigrants’ entrance to and integration in the labour market, often from a broad perspective of structural integration or assimilation. This research paid less attention to varying forms of racialization in different jobs and *vis-à-vis* different minority or immigrant groups. In the course of the last decade, however, such a focus has again been strengthened. Empirical studies of labour migration within the EU have, for example, confirmed that also white immigrants are confronted with racialization processes, and that intersections between ideas about race, ethnicity and nation are central in status hierarchies and degrees of precariousness in the labour market (e.g. Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine 2022; Friberg & Midtbøen 2019). We argue that this research trajectory is promising in deepening the literature on migration and racialization by focusing on one specific arena, the labour market, and we see this Special Issue as contributing to this. There is a need for more research on segregation and racialization processes affecting those migrants who formally are seen as structurally integrated, and we argue that focusing on precarious jobs fulfilled by different groups of immigrants adds nuance and deepens the increasing literature on racialization and symbolic boundary making processes in migration studies.

Our overarching focus on the family resemblance between the concepts of ethnicity, nation and race, also adds to the increasing critique of the ethnic lens that dominated in many earlier migration studies (O'Reilly 2023). Here, the literature on social and symbolic boundaries, as introduced by the work of Michele Lamont and colleagues (Lamont 2000; Lamont & Molnár 2002), has made important advances for our understandings of racialization and the location of migrants in labour markets. The main focus in this literature is on the social and symbolic boundaries that are constructed between people and groups on a daily basis. These boundaries indicate broader patterns of socio-economic inequality and cultural distance between groups anchored in cultural grammars at the macro level (e.g. in industries, states or broader regions). Cultural grammars that distinguish between insiders and outsiders at the macro-level inform micro-level cultural repertoires that enable hierarchical boundaries to be drawn distinguishing status and moral worth. The literature on social and symbolic boundaries has often been used comparatively, focusing, for example, on how people in different social classes and different racial groups draw symbolic boundaries between each other in daily life. It has also been used to compare patterns of boundary drawing across nation states, such as in Lamont's study of how race/ethnicity is invoked in different ways in the United States and France (Lamont 2000) and in a later study of how minorities experience and relate to racialization in countries with different histories of racism (Lamont et al. 2016).

This Special Issue advances the work outlined above with a special focus on migration, labour markets and processes of symbolic boundary and border making along lines of race, ethnicity and nationality. We witness how diverse migrant populations are constructed in different ways and have distinguishable experiences in the labour market. For instance, the stereotypical 'white' Polish labour migrant stands out from the typical 'non-white' non-European refugees, both in terms of personal resources, integration in host societies' labour markets and in the 'locals' perceptions and treatment of them. Various migrant categories generally share experiences of precariousness, marginalisation and othering. The Special Issue identifies how migrants at Europe's low-waged work places are subjects of employers' and other's narratives of 'the good worker' with exceptional qualities ('strong minds' and 'strong physiques') and less deserving of – and in need of – the same conditions as 'locals.' We ask: what is the relevance of, and internal interconnections between, concepts of race/racialization, ethnicity and the nation for the understanding of low-waged migrant workers' experience at work and in society at large?

THE SPECIAL ISSUE PAPERS

The Special Issue articles respond to these questions from diverse conceptual and methodological angles. Jakobsen and Saether draw on qualitative research in horticulture in Norway to show how employers (farmers) engage in continuous work to maintain their shifting narratives of what constitutes 'a good worker.' They draw on the concept of moral economy together with the symbolic boundary concept of Lamont and colleagues, to argue that employers claim, and mould, the category of the good worker (perhaps unintentionally) to legitimise whom they wish to hire and when, all within their own class interest. By rationalising the decision to hire migrant workers by appealing to who is supposedly most skilled for the job, employers are enabled – or enable themselves – to legitimate using a low-wage migrant workforce with reference to a broader moral economy of employability and thus avoiding the language of class exploitation.

As in the other articles, the social praxis of symbolic boundary work draws and redraws the shifting category of the good worker. Jakobsen and Saether's paper note how the specific nationality deemed to possess this special work ethic is subject to constant revision as conditions change (the availability of certain groups at certain times, cost issues, recruitment and so on). The association between this migrant work ethic and the criteria needed for employment is particularly malleable, adaptable and stretchy.

O'Reilly's and Scott's paper expands Jakobsen and Sæther's analysis of legitimation by showing how the symbolic boundaries are related to class dynamics. They examine the case of the UK harvest labour market between 2020 and 2021 under the shadow of Brexit and COVID-19, drawing from a wide range of qualitative materials: interviews with employers, migrants and locally based workers, as well as media analysis. Theoretically, this article extends the concept of symbolic boundaries as elaborated by scholars such as Yuval-Davies et al. (2019) and Anderson (2013). Their article highlights that bordering and othering are practises in the sense of everyday banal actions, thoughts, ideas, and decisions. These practises serve to not only cast the harvest worker as 'other' and different but, in the process, mask the exploitative nature of much of this work and its precarity.

Attention to the intersectional, dynamic and fluid nature of contemporary inequalities is overlaid with a focus on what are essentially class-based divisions. The symbolic nature of bordering as a practise is important, as it highlights how the notion that harvest work is 'work that others do' invokes a constantly shifting other. It refers to diverse groups across time and space, and adapts to social change (e.g. Brexit and COVID-19). But nevertheless, the work offer doesn't need to change, just those who do it and how they are portrayed. The article outlines three key bordering tropes that are in operation. 'Work that others do' distances harvest work from the insiders of employers and locally based workers. The 'good neoliberal agent' is the worker who is not being exploited but is doing what needs to be done, and can include local workers as required. The 'community of shared values' is invoked when locally based workers are cast as the group that needs to be the good neoliberal agent and do the work that others normally do.

In the article by Olofsson et al. in this Special Issue, the agents themselves are included in the analysis of the construction of symbolic boundaries, as they analyse how employer federations, trade unions and the Swedish state symbolically construct seasonal migrant workers to work in agriculture, forestry and wild berry picking. Here, symbolic boundary construction draws boundaries between Swedish workers and others ('work that others do' in O'Reilly and Scott's paper) and also hierarchically within and between groups of seasonal migrant workers.

As with the other articles, migrant workers are portrayed as vital and necessary, but this masks a more comprehensive demand for inexpensive and flexible labour. Employers want continuous access to inexpensive and flexible labour, and migrant workers are part of the logistics of making industries profitable. This is despite unemployment rates locally. These authors link this ongoing situation to the assumption of the spatial fix that is written into global neoliberalism — that it is natural and normal for workers to move (temporarily) to higher-wage countries (invoking the good neoliberal agent as in O'Reilly and Scott's paper). As such, the article is also interested in the inclusion of migrants from non-EU/EEA region (third nationals, namely Thai berry pickers). Again, parallels between the various migrants discussed in each of the Special Issue papers, whether Thai, Polish or of other nationalities, are more striking than differences in

how migrants are one-dimensionally constructed as 'good workers' and 'others' as conceptual tools in the making of symbolic boundaries.

The final paper, Andersson and Rye, looks at the more general case of Poles in Norway, building on a growing body of empirical work, especially since 2004. Their problem is to explain how it is that these migrants often experience the degradation and stereotyping more usually noted as suffered by non-white minorities. They contend that the way they are constantly portrayed (and identify) as different than both Norwegians and others is linked to their marginal position in the labour market as low waged and low skilled. In other words, symbolic boundaries spring out of and serve to reinforce socio-economic boundaries. They propose the concept of 'gray racialization' to conceptualise the discriminatory situation of the Poles as an immigrant and minority population, as they argue the concept of race is better suited to understanding power relations and social inequalities than its conceptual alternatives, including ethnicity. However, the 'gray'-ness reflects race as a 'gliding signifier' (Hall 2017), shifting over time and subject of negotiation and modification. In the case of Poles in Norway, the paper identifies what Wieviorka (1995) denotes as 'inequality racism'; the ascription of skills or even specific jobs to particular national backgrounds, which clearly has a race-like character.

As demonstrated in the other Special Issue papers, the migrant workers' marginalisation and othering – how they are set apart from the majority workers, including those sharing their working-class position – cannot be understood without also understanding the migrants' structural position in low-wage low-skilled industries.

CONCLUSION

The point of departure for the Special Issue is the boundary making processes that uphold labour market dynamics, which work to continuously channel migrants into low-waged job positions. We ask: what is the role of the concepts of race, ethnicity and nationality as they are mobilised to reproduce symbolic boundaries at the workplace? In each of their own ways, the papers bring important theoretical nuts and bolts to the understanding of these processes, detailing how a diversity of agents – the state, work life associations, employers and also migrants – co-construct migrant workers and migrant work, both persons and processes, as different. They are on the other side of the symbolic boundaries that draw the, often blurred and negotiable, lines between standard and non-standard labour.

From this backdrop, there are a number of ways in which the articles in the special issue contribute fresh insights to more general debates in related fields. The main contribution lies in the *bridging of disparate literature* in the fields of labour markets, migration and social and symbolic boundary processes. The in-depth qualitative analysis demonstrates how migrants working in low-wage, low-skill labour markets are the object of ongoing processes of othering along racial, ethnic and national lines. The articles analyse how various agents representing the majority society – the state, employers, trade unions and local communities – each in their own ways contribute to these processes and thereby to the reproduction of social inequalities. The articles also demonstrate, however, the role the migrants themselves play in the production and reproduction of these dynamics.

Further, the papers shed new light on *labour migration dynamics* within the European context. Migration literature has traditionally been marked by addressing either one or

the other of two apparently opposing poles in a continuum of migration. On the one hand, research focuses on the 'victims' of migration, such as forced migrants escaping their home countries due to wars, political persecution, natural disasters or absolute poverty. The research addresses their lack of resources, their poor integration in receiving countries and their experiences of marginalisation, othering, discrimination or even outright racism. On the other hand, there is much research on the beneficiaries of a globalising world, the cosmopolitans and the globetrotters. Many key analytical binaries employed in migration research reflect this divide, e.g. forced vs. voluntary migration (O'Reilly 2023). Crucially, the articles in this special issue are at pains to draw attention to an interesting in-between position of the migrants at the centre of this dimension; agents not outrightly forced yet responding to structural material strains beyond their manipulation to find labour opportunities providing better life opportunities – yet often precarious ones – by migrating to Western European labour markets.

The articles further document the emergence of labour migrant niches in Scandinavian labour markets since the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements. The so-called 'Nordic work life model' is characterised by standard employment contracts and generally orderly and good arrangements for workers. In contrast, the low-waged migrant dominated branches discussed in this Special Issues are typically characterised by their sub-standard wage and working conditions and, in effect, also precarious overall everyday life conditions.

While three of the current articles focus on food production, we contend the conceptual advances are more generally applicable. As Andersson and Rye's article in this Special Issue suggests, Central and Eastern European labour migrants, in their case study represented by Poles in Norway, are objects of 'gray racialization,' also emphasising these labour migrants' in-between and often blurred position between majority populations and other migrant populations (e.g. 'black' refugees).

Note that despite the empirical emphasis on the UK, Sweden and Norway we are not saying that these are specific processes – they are general processes with specific instantiations – and we argue that the articles in their totality advance our scientific understanding of how practises of selection and deselection are legitimised over time through symbolic boundaries. The articles draw attention to the power of symbolic boundary making processes to shape-shift to suit changing times and to encompass diverse 'others' as systems require. They highlight how symbolic boundaries are constructed as part of a moral economy that moulds the concept of 'good' (and thereby not so good) workers to justify hierarchies and to mask the class interests that are actually at play in such processes. They illustrate the extent to which categories, conceptualisations and labels of work, workers and others are stretchy, malleable and adaptable. This is illustrated, for instance, by the concept of 'gray racialization' to conceptualise the non-determinate and varying discriminatory situation of the Poles and other white immigrant and minority populations in Western European labour markets and societies at large. The articles demonstrate how the social praxis of symbolic bordering, via disparate agents, draws and re-draws the shifting category of the good worker and migrant work. A focus on history and change highlights how, as specific migrant/worker categories and experiences may change, the fact of class-based exploitation continues. The papers also reveal the crucial role of ideas and representations in shaping actions. As such, the papers, each in their own way, draw attention to the various ongoing practises and processes of symbolic construction and reproduction of racial, ethnic and national boundaries in low-waged workplaces.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The Special Issue and this introduction are composed as part of the ‘Global Labour in Rural Societies’ (GLARUS) project financed by the Norwegian Research Council (Grant no. 261854/F10).’

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*Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*
DOI: 10.33134/njmr.677

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Johan Fredrik Rye  orcid.org/0000-0001-5252-359X
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway

Mette Andersson  orcid.org/0000-0001-5062-3992
University of Oslo, Norway

Karen O'Reilly  orcid.org/0000-0002-5887-9279
University of Loughborough, UK

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Rye et al.
Nordic Journal of Migration Research
 DOI: 10.33134/njmr.677

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Rye, JF, Andersson, M and O'Reilly, K. 2023. Practises and Processes of Symbolic Reproduction of Racial, Ethnic and National Boundaries in Low-Waged Workplaces. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(2): 1, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.677>

Submitted: 14 February 2023

Accepted: 09 March 2023

Published: 07 June 2023

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