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Migration meets disability. Approaches to intersectionality in the context of a disability rights organization

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ABSTRACT

Despite the proliferation of intersectionality in academic research and political activism, the intersection of disability and migration remains neglected in academic research. With this paper, we contribute to exploring this interlinkage. Drawing on research in a disability rights organization, this paper explores different positions concerning the intersection of disability and migration. Proposing a typology of three different modes, we shed light on individual approaches towards this intersection and thereby explain the reluctance to change of an organization in correspondence with a slowly-moving field. Placing this analysis in a broader context, we contribute to an understanding of the construction of the category of disability and its intersections with other categories, in this case migration within the organizational context of a disability rights organization. We show varying perceptions of this intersection within one organization and highlight their underlying organizational and personal logics. By doing so, we identify forces of organizational inertia and resistance to diversity-related change. Finally, this paper encourages discussions on the incorporation of migrants in the field of disability more widely.

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Disability; migration; intersectionality; universalism; civil rights organizations; social organization of difference

Points of interest

- This paper studies how a disability rights organisation in Germany deals with the topic of migration. We refer to the concept of intersectionality. In the qualitative interviews with employees and volunteers of the organisation, we identified three different positions.
- One group expressed that the organisation should only focus on disability-related issues and treat all people alike. Migrants or migration-specific topics should not be specifically addressed.
- Other people consider it to be the organisation's duty to respond to migrants' needs and to adjust their services.

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- Another group of people expressed that not only migration, but also categories such as gender and age affect the needs and experiences of disabled people. The organisation should be sensitive to specific needs of all kinds.
- We show that different positions can prevail in one organisation. It is challenging for organisations to deal with this. It is important to better understand the field of disability and migration.

1. Introduction

For us, the person with a disability is the focus, and it does not matter what nationality the person has and where the person is from.

The above statement was made by a board member of a civil society organization for disability rights, founded by parents of children with impairments after World War II. Located in Germany, this organization finds itself in the midst of an increasingly diversifying society – largely due to migration (Vertovec 2019). The quote reflects a specific position towards intersectionality which has been described as a ‘universalistic approach’ in organizational research (e.g. Alberti et al. 2013). It reflects the organization’s principle ‘It’s normal to be different’. In our analyses, we found this position to be prominent, yet we could identify several positions diverging from this dominant claim, suggesting that the topic of migration and the incorporation of migrants in a disability rights organization are contested.

Accordingly, with this paper, we aim to contribute to the growing field of studying the intersection of disability and migration (Burns 2019) by addressing the questions of how intersectionality is approached in the field of disability and how we can understand the treatment of migration inside a civil society organization. Our case study focuses on Germany’s largest disability rights organization, a major service provider and political voice and lobbyist in the field.

While migrants are present as clients in many local service provisions, they rarely become members of or functionaries in the organization. Migration-related policy issues have as yet been marginal in the organization’s activities. Throughout our fieldwork, we encountered a wide spectrum of positions towards migration-related issues. Here, we show how individuals inside the organization position themselves in relation to the topic of migrants and migration. What are their approaches and reasonings? In order to shed light on this, we take a closer look at these differing positions vis-à-vis the topic of migration, predominantly with regard to the inclusion of migrants and their families and, to a lesser extent, the advocacy of migration-related disability policy issues, which we have done elsewhere in depth (Baykara-Krumme and Rau 2022).

We focus on micro-level encounters and analyze different positions (Rodriguez and Freeman 2016) inside this specific organization. In so doing, we parallel Lépinard's research agenda and analysis on 'intersectional repertoires' (2014). Cultural repertoires are 'schemas of evaluation mobilized at the discursive or interactional level' (Lamont and Thévenot 2000, 8), they are important in the process of drawing symbolic boundaries between social groups.

Through an in-depth analysis of individuals' reasoning around the particular intersection of disability and migration, we unpack the relative reluctance of an organization to adopt intersectional approaches concerning the incorporation of migrants and the topic of migration more broadly. Analyzing the different approaches towards the intersection, we identify three different positions: 'disability first', 'intersectional recognition out of necessity' and 'professional intersectionality'. Across these different positions, we also find a division between professionals, and their professional relationship to the issue of disability, and parents and disabled people who are personally affected by and entangled with the topic of disability. We shed light on these different and sometimes contrasting positions and offer explanations for the difficulties in seeing disability as an intersectional category.

Starting with an overview of existing research on this intersection, our analysis provides insights into a slow-moving academic field. Theories of intersectionality as well as insights from organizational studies serve as the theoretical background for our analysis of individual actors and their approaches towards this intersection. We suggest that our analysis is not specific to this organization, but may exemplify dynamics inside this field more broadly.

2. Intersectionality – practice and tool of analysis

Intersectionality developed among feminists and Black activists as a political intervention intended to radicalize the way that positionality and discrimination are conceptualized with the aim of capturing the way, multiple discriminations are produced and reproduced and thereby also challenge privileged positions (Crenshaw 1989; McCall 2005). It is not surprising that it is often met with resistance by organizations (Lépinard 2014; Lépinard and Evans 2019).

The concept, which has become a 'buzzword' (Davis 2008), tends to rely on categories that are, in and of themselves, social constructions and that are constantly negotiated and reconstructed in social life. Empirical research on intersectionality, thus, comes with the inherent risk of reifying constructed categories (McCall 2005), and potentially essentializing the group at hand (Hearn and Louvrier 2015). While scholars of intersectionality have been particularly interested in how individuals are affected by intersections causing specific forms of discrimination, instead, we are interested in how actors in the field recognize and approach such intersections, in light of increasing

societal diversification, as well as normative expectations in the organizational field to respond to such change.

Scholarship on organizations suggests that organizations may respond to changes by adopting practices of other actors in the same organizational field. As neo-institutionalist approaches argue, organizations adjust to formal and informal pressures in the organizational field and to cultural expectations in society (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 1995).

The dissemination of diversity management in the past decades has been described as such an example of organizational change (Süß and Kleiner 2008; Skaggs 2009; Dobbin et al. 2011; Dobbin and Kalev 2021). Research suggests that, with its focus on structural constraints and group membership (dis)advantages, diversity approaches require incorporating the multiplicity of identity categories for a better understanding of the experience of people at specific intersections (e.g. Cronin and King 2010). Furthermore, studies need to go beyond the discursive level and analyze how diversity measures are implemented (Ahmed 2012).

In her study on 'repertoires of feminist practices' in France and Canada, Lépinard addresses the 'doing of intersectionality' and seeks to capture the various ways in which women's organizations understand and include the identities and interests of ethnic minority and immigrant women vulnerable to oppression beyond the category of gender (Lépinard 2019, 881). In her analysis, she identifies four different repertoires. The 'gender first' type reflects a universalistic approach in which other differences are subsumed under gender differences and thereby, to some extent, erased. The three other types acknowledge specific intersectional oppressions and related interests, but with varying consequences for the organizations. One type explicitly focuses on intersectional interests and advocates representation by ethnic minority or immigrant women ('on our own'). Another type implies some kind of intersectional recognition but from an individual rather than a group perspective ('on her own'). A fourth type aims at integrating minority women's interest into mainstream feminist issues ('intersectional solidarity'), placing them high on the political agenda, for the sake of diversity awareness, even if not all women are equally affected.

In a similar manner, we present organizational positions on the intersection of disability and migration. The microperspective allows us to understand actors' points of views vis-à-vis this specific intersection and thereby capture intra-organizational dynamics to better understand the organization as well as this specific field.

3. The intersection of disability and migration

In a recent paper, Watermeyer and Swartz (2022) draw attention to 'lazy intersectionality' when it comes to disability. They suggest the existence of a

'hierarchy of suffering' where disability is often considered a subordinate identity which adds to oppression through other identity markers, namely gender or race, 'but has no unitary standing of its own' (Watermeyer and Swartz 2022, 2). Similarly, Frederick and Shifrer (2019, 200) had previously argued that 'disability appears to be an uncharted area in intersectionality research, particularly in the discipline of sociology'. Indeed, disability is a disputed category and often tied to a monolithic understanding. Medical connotations are common that see disability as physical and intellectual damage (Schillmeier 2007). Degener criticizes that disability is thus constructed as a problem that requires treatment (2009). For a long time, critical disability studies have advocated the idea of the cultural and social construction of the category that dis/able the individual with a physical or intellectual impairment due to the domineering ableist structures in societies and their norms.

Since its emergence, scholars of disability studies have sought to emphasize the social construction of the concept and bring forth the idea that individuals are 'disabled' by the norms and structures and categories of the society surrounding them (Linton 1998). Recent works have further challenged monolithic understandings of disability by arguing that the concept does not translate into different contexts (Livingston 2005); others have stressed the socio-economic conditions that shape the term and its implications. In line with this is Bell's argument that disability studies often present a Western perspective and could even be considered 'White disability studies' (Bell 2006). This is relevant, as the intersection of disability and migration can, but need not, relate to racial discrimination.

Similarly, others have pushed the idea that disability as a concept has become hegemonic and reducible to the Global North (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011, 2013). With regard to intersectionality, Goodley argues that disability studies may start with disability but will necessarily end with other forms of oppression and revolutionary responses (Goodley 2013). This suggests that disability in and of itself involves many other dimensions of society and reflects the various ways in which critical disability studies inherently require intersectional analyses (ibid, 2013, 636, 638). Similarly, Jacob and colleagues, propagating the agenda of 'Gendering Disability' (Jacob et al. 2010), argue that disability always intersects with gender as with other dimensions of difference and subsequent discrimination. Langner addresses intersectionality in the context of intellectual disability and gender. She argues that intellectual disability is generally understood as a medical condition and personal problem rather than a societal structure of being 'disabled' (Langner 2010, 155). Further, Frederick and Shifrer emphasize (2019) that the fields of disability and race and migration haven been slow to communicate with each other. With a specific focus on the negligence of the intersection of race and disability, they claim that treating race and disability as an analogy ('disability

is like race', Frederick and Shifrer 2019, 203) in US disability rights activism has hampered the adoption of an intersectional lens. Moreover, they argue that the 'minority model' framework of disability rights and its underlying notion of disability essentialism, has contributed to rendering race, social class or gender invisible or at least to divorcing disability from other forms of oppression. At the same time, the minority model has been racialised in ways that 'centre the experience of white, middle-class disabled Americans' (Frederick and Shifrer 2019, 201). They point to a history in which disability and race were deeply intertwined in the construction of notions of the worthy citizen, resulting in the emphasis on distancing racial minority groups from disability. This, however, has effectively 'marginalized the experiences of disabled people of color and has masked the processes by which whiteness and able-bodiedness have been privileged' (Frederick and Shifrer 2019, 201). While US-American scholarship has started to address intersections of race and disability, scholarship in Germany has been slower to do so.

In the European context, discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity is often linked to international migration experiences. Migration can be conceptualized as the transgression of cultural, juridical, linguistic and geo-politically relevant borders (Mecheril 2012). By way of migration, borders and boundaries become apparent, which are not only of territorial but also of a symbolic kind relating to belonging. The 'migrants' are a highly diverse group and strongly vary in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic and class background, age, gender, sexual identity and others (Vertovec 2020). Unlike Anglophone contexts, Germany does not necessarily refer to ethnic minorities but rather individuals with a migration biography. Furthermore, context reveals stark differences in perception and treatment of migrants. These differences do not strictly follow a North-South divide, but – alongside legal categorizations, with EU- and non-EU-citizen being the most dominant – follow a grid of ethnicity and religion, as well as class and gender, often in the guise of alleged cultural differences.

Returning to scholarship on this intersection, Burns claims that migration studies have given little attention to disability, whereas disability scholars have shown more interest in studying the experiences of disabled migrants (Burns 2019). Accordingly, 'two issues familiar to disability studies arise within the context of migration: the dominance of the biomedical model and resulting conflation of health and disability within administrative systems; and the construction of disabled people as a burden on society' (Burns 2019, 305). Hughes further shows how migrants and disabled people are addressed in similar ways in public discourses. He argues that ableist and ethnocentric 'fantasies and ideas about strangers bring the history of disability and migration onto the same terrain of disrepute (Hughes 2017). Like Frederick and Shifrer (2019), Hughes points to the overlapping characteristics of ableism and racism,

especially related to the legitimization of discrimination through biology. Anglophone scholarship has addressed the intersection of disability and ethnic diversity regarding, for example, the presence of ethnic minorities in special education (Gabel et al. 2009), the intersection of disability and race in Australia (Soldatic and Fiske 2009), or autism within immigrant families in the US (Welterlin and LaRue 2007). With a specific focus on access to services, the 'color-blind' approach or the assertion that 'we treat everyone the same' has been described as a common approach within organizations. In a study on service providers' views on early support for families and ethnic minorities, Temple, Young, and Bolton (2008) identify three different patterns, namely the 'no-problem', the 'it's too big a problem for us' and the 'discriminatory provision' approaches. Whereas the first assumes the effects of a service to be the same whoever is concerned (reflecting the universalist idea), the second suggests an acknowledgement of specific needs which, however, are perceived as difficult to address by the services on their own. The third recognizes an inflexibility on the side of the services and discriminatory practices, when, as in this case, information is not provided in different languages (Temple et al. 2008, 228–230). Bonilla-Silva (2014) equally criticizes color-blindness and argues that it often presents a privileged perspective that disregards structural racism in society.

A certain tardiness of research at the intersection of disability and migration and related ethnic diversity or racial difference can be observed in the German context as well (Wansing and Westphal 2014b). Gummich has argued that migration and disability are categories which equally describe individuals supposedly outside a norm, who present a numeric minority and are excluded from societal participation. According to Gummich, activists of both fields are not so present in the respective other field (Gummich 2010, 142). One of the few scholars who have addressed this intersection in the German context is Dinah Kohan, whose study analysed Jewish families with children with impairment from the former Soviet Union who had migrated to Germany (Kohan 2012). Similarly, Donja Amirpur used an intersectional lens to research families from Turkey and Iran (Amirpur 2016). With the growing arrival of refugees with impairments, the intersection of migration and disability gained further prominence in the German context (Wansing and Westphal 2019). However, studies remain largely focused on the legal as well as the medical conditions among migrants or refugees with impairment (Lüders 2019; Schülle 2019; Welti and Walter 2019), or migrants in the care and educational system (Amirpur 2019; Wischer 2019). Contributions largely focus on the existing structures or deficits in the care and provision system (Kaiser-Kauzcor, 2019) or show the experiences of migrants with impairments and their needs (Kim 2020). What becomes apparent is how institutions struggle to fully acknowledge and consider the specific needs of migrants with impairments and their families. Amirpur (2015)

shows that, rather than the cultural or religious background, the discriminatory structures of the support system hinder migrant participation. Furthermore, organizations for the 'disabled' themselves struggle to take an intersectional lens when it comes to migration (Temple et al. 2008). By analyzing a disability rights organization and how it incorporates the topic of migration, we seek to achieve a deeper understanding of how actors inside the field make sense of this intersection. Aiming to add a micro-perspective to the literature, we focus on one specific disability rights organization with its member organizations and their approaches to migration-induced changes, particularly concerning intra-organizational representation of migrants, specific service provision and migration-related policy for the advocacy part of the organization. Understanding the micro-dynamics will help identify barriers to intersectional approaches on a broader organizational level.

4. Methods and case study

This paper draws on the results of a three-year research project on civil-society organizations and their responses to migration. The research design focused on organizations representing the interests of disadvantaged groups in German society (Unger et al. 2022). Our research sub-project selected a disability rights organization that was founded several decades ago by mainly middle-class non-migrant parents for their disabled children (Baykara-Krumme and Rau 2022). Today it is the largest German organization for intellectual disability rights. The organization is a political lobbyist as well as a family self-help organization with over 120,000 members. Local member organizations have a dual structure as associations and enterprises running e.g. kindergardens, family support services and firms employing people with a disability. The federal association exclusively acts as an advocacy organization and political lobbyist for disability rights. Though founded by parents as an organization 'for disabled people' rather than by activists 'with disability', self-representation of people with disabilities is an issue that has been pushed over the past years. Their voices are increasingly acknowledged, yet people with disabilities are (still) rarely present. The notion of 'self-help', which constitutes a main foundational principle of the organization, still mainly refers to the parents who raise their voice and organize support. Within the large and heterogeneous field of disability organizations in Germany and internationally, our focus thus lies on a specific case which has parallels in other countries, yet stands out due to its long history, size, visibility, expertise and influence both in the social welfare and in the political arena.

The fieldwork took place within the federal office of the organization and in three local member organizations which were involved in a migration-related project organized by the federal office. This paper largely draws on thirty qualitative interviews, conducted between 2018 and 2020 with members of

staff as well as volunteer members of committees (often parents of children with intellectual disability) on the federal and local level. We also rely on one focus group with members of the federal board and a mapping workshop with members of staff. Three of the thirty interviewees were themselves of immigrant origin. In the interviews, we addressed the organizational development, its structure, identity and dynamics, and, specifically, migration-related issues, activities, attitudes, internal debates, representation and advocacy. We deliberately did not specify the meaning of 'migration' or 'migrants' in order to broaden rather than narrow the focus and allow for open responses. The interviews were conducted by both authors, mostly individually, some jointly. During the interviews, the first author almost always positioned herself as a sibling of a person with an intellectual disability, a fact that may have increased openness particularly among parents of a disabled child but seemed to less affect the communication with professionals. Our different positionalities regarding disability also affected our analysis and seeing the field from differing angles, which enriched analysis and our discussions to arrive at nuanced interpretations of the data. We analyzed the interview data using interpretative methods and content analysis.

In the following, we briefly outline the (slow) development of an intersectional agenda over the past decade. We then present our main analyses of the different positions on the intersection of disability and migration in the organization. Proposing a typology of three different modes with differing internal logics, we explain the reluctance to change and thereby shed light on this slow-moving field.

5. Facing intersectionality

Until 2022, the notion of intersectionality had hardly found its place in the organization. Conceptually, the organization is focused on disability as its major concern. Nonetheless, there are certain traces of migration-related openness, concerns and activities focusing on migrants and their specific needs. The local member organizations, in particular, were already addressing migration-related problems in the 1980s. In 1994, the federal office organized a large conference for 'foreign' parents of children with a disability, which sought to call attention to the special needs of this group. While this shows sporadic awareness of the topic and the intersection, the conference did not instigate a more general organizational effort to address migrants' needs. In its programs and core policies the organization long remained silent on migration. The issue was first prominently addressed in 2012 when the federal agency signed a declaration on 'intercultural opening', an influential concept in German social policy at the time (Bundesregierung Deutschland 2007). The organization committed to opening up to migrants but by doing

so at that point, it responded much later than other major organizational players in social welfare in Germany.

However, still today, we observe significant inertia within the organization in reacting to migration-related diversity and intersectional concerns. While the federal office recognizes this subject area, particularly in statements where leadership figures demanded that the organization [should become] 'more colorful', the topic is not prominent. Meanwhile, migrant parents and their children with a disability have been making use of the services offered by the various local organizations. Professionals at the local services often face respective challenges, for example language barriers. Overall, the organization shows a significant discrepancy between the presence of migrants as clients, and their limited visibility within the membership, as well as on local boards and among professionals. Moreover, board members, functionaries in leading roles and members of staff more broadly tend to consist of mostly middle-class Germans who are not positioned at the intersection themselves; our research participants, for the most part had personal experience with disability but, generally, not with migration as part of their own biographies.

When exploring and analyzing strategies that different organizational actors use in addressing (or avoiding) the intersection of disability and migration, we speak of 'positions', analogous to Lépinard's notion of repertoires. Thereby, we refer to the standpoint vis-à-vis the topic that is formulated or manifested discursively or in actions. We distinguish three positions and related logics. **The first, 'disability first'** sees 'disability as the primary cause and other topics are subordinate'. It follows either the logic of a 'universalist understanding' of diversity or a 'competing recognition' and (non-)prioritization of time and resources when it comes to migration.

The second position 'intersectional recognition out of necessity' entails the selective acknowledgment of intersectionality and the recognition that disability intersects with migration. It follows the logics of responding to migrants and migration as a matter of 'normative obligation' or 'pragmatic acceptance' in daily encounters.

The third position 'professional intersectionality' holds the view of disability as necessarily intersecting with a variety of other categories. This response to migrants and migration either entails a logic of 'essentializing group differences' or occurs as a matter of 'individual recognition'.

5.1. 'Disability first'

One approach vis-à-vis migration and the topic of intersectionality we found in a number of interviews is a position we call 'disability first'. This position entails that interview partners insist on the primacy of disability as the central and predominant focus of the organization, that means individuals within

this position are first and foremost concerned about disabled people, as illustrated by a local board member:

We all come from the field of disability. Well, the disabled person, the intellectually disabled person, is the centre of our interest and everyone who is around this disabled person, who can also become a member, those are the ones who we like to see here.

In this position, disability is not viewed as intersecting with other social categories and instead presented as 'the primary focus'. Disability is supposed to serve as the unifying dimension of the organizational identity that unites individuals in the organization. Further differentiations, such as ethnicity, migration biographies, gender or age are acknowledged, but should be subordinate to the primary cause.

And as I said, inside [the organization], it does not matter whether someone has black skin color, yellow skin color, green skin color or anything, I would strongly object against that. And nobody here sees it that way. Everybody here is on the page, that it does not play any role. And we do not, from my point of view, pay special attention to this.

This quote expresses a universalist vision and a commitment to 'color-blindness'. While this position intends to treat everybody equally, it downplays and disregards the potential needs of specific groups (migrants, women, trans and gender diverse people, lesbian, gay and bisexual, older people etc.). According to this view, families of all kinds are invited to become members of the organization, to participate or use the services as long as they themselves appreciate and support the organization's goals and identify with them. At the same time, positions that potentially deviate from what is perceived as 'we' ('we all come from the area of disability') and related barriers to participation, are not acknowledged or addressed.

In the interviews we identify two different logics behind this position of 'disability first'. The first is an institutionalized logic and reasoning that could be summarized as '**universalism**'. While this position is not opposed to acknowledge that migrant groups may need additional services, on an organizational level migrant families are expected to '*just naturally participate*'. In this logic, migration-related issues and the concomitant multiple discriminations can be addressed but should not be made into an overall organizational issue. Categories intersecting with disability are not specifically dealt with, an approach summarized in the statement '[migration] it's not a big issue for us'. This position of placing 'disability first' implies that everything attached to it is 'welcome to co-exist'. It manifests itself in the reluctance to put efforts into the search for members among specific societal groups, such as migrants. Focusing on migrants as potential new members would rather distort the intention of this organization, as another member of staff states:

'We all come from the topic of disability'. But I would never specify a specific group in order to recruit them as members and win them over specifically. I want it to reflect society and not just win people who are easy to win over. They'd have to be convinced. They must see that what the organization does is good and important and I can fully support that and I can identify with it and that's why I become a member.

The statement posits that disabled migrants or their families should not have to be convinced as potential members. Given that the organization suffers from a decrease in members and resulting reduced membership contributions, this is remarkable. While this position allows the idea that the organization's members should be 'a reflection of society', it disregards that almost a third of the population in Germany is either a migrant or has a migration biography.

This position does not consider specific migration-related barriers, such as the lack of language skills and familiarity with institutions or experiences of discrimination to be a necessary cause for action, although these factors may prevent disabled migrants from participation in or gaining access to disability services. Instead, the organization's identity should not be distorted, in this view, by 'selling' the idea to individuals who are not familiar with the system and would not be able to take part easily. This view of disability entails the conceptualization of disability as a personal, rather than a social category and thereby essentially also moves away from the idea that individuals are disabled by the social environments.

The second logic of the disability-first position we find is '**competing attention**'. In attempts to explain the lack of specific migration-related concepts, interviewees point to the general disadvantages due to disability, the difficulties of caring for disabled family members and of obtaining financial and service support. This hardship and the constant fear of social budget cuts are described as overwhelming for the families with children with impairments as well as the organization itself. Concerns and advocacy for general disability policies are seen as competing with targeting disabled migrants and migration-related diversity, instead of seeing them as part of potential target groups and members:

Because many members feel that they are grossly disadvantaged. And they are. It's no walk in the park, it has to be said. You do have a comparatively luxurious system and can get an incredible number of benefits, theoretically, but actually fighting through it, getting them, is incredibly arduous, even for Germans. This is also very formative for the parents, and many would not necessarily understand that we are now turning to another target group [the migrants].

This suggests that the organization's member families and members of staff feel primarily responsible for the existing clientele which is predominantly 'German'. Consequently, migration-related issues are not considered to

be the organization's concern. Following this logic, disability and migration are considered competing demands. This perception is also expressed by professionals referring to the complex legal issues that can be involved. Accordingly, political claims on legal issues of refugees with a disability are not a priority, which is justified by the lack of resources and expertise in this field. An intersectional lens would require devoting resources which would then not be available for the 'main concerns'. Consequently, this position is marked by the notion that 'disability' has to be given priority and should be protected against competing claims. This approach thus constructs disability as competing with other groups, in this case migrants.

Personal experiences of exclusion due to disability do not necessarily lead to activism in this field. This position also acknowledges that there has been little *'cultural change inside the organization [so that we'd] say, that for us it is a self-evident cause, since we ourselves experience exclusion, that we don't exclude anyone, but instead actually promote openness and offer room for families of all kinds'*. In other interviews, migration-related barriers to participation are not acknowledged or are even actively denied. Moreover, the justification of competing demands can be seen as a way of resisting this topic which can have multiple causes including stereotypes, prejudice or even racism. When these statements come from a white non-migrant positionality, this approach of 'color-blindness' may – even though possibly unintended – effectively serve to secure white privilege (Petts 2020).

5.2. Intersectional recognition out of necessity

A second position we identify selectively acknowledges the need to address the topic of migration and incorporate migrants within the organization. This position recognizes the necessity of taking action, as migrants are part of the clientele and are confronted with specific challenges, and that the organization lags behind in establishing migration-related programmes. At the same time, culturalist assumptions of difference and 'otherness' can be implicit in this position and hinder further intersectional acknowledgement and activity. This position often includes a critique of general practices and approaches of the organization. Individuals see the need for change, but articulate organizational obstacles towards intersectionality:

I think it was already clear to the association's top management that it [migration-related issues] would have to be dealt with again and again. This is an important topic, but it is not an issue. How can I put it? It's an issue that you have to address again and again. It's not a topic that takes you along in its own dynamic. (...) It's quite an effort. I'm not saying you can't, but it's hard.

This position points to the persistence with which migration would have to be addressed. Yet, despite being acknowledged, this position stresses that

the topic repeatedly falls out of sight, although it requires constant attention. Unlike the previous position, this one stresses the need 'to do something about the topic' – showing understanding and recognizing the need for an intersectional approach and the need to act. The person herself, however, does not consider it to be within her realm of responsibility. This position thus shows recognition, but ambivalence when it comes to the responsibility: individuals in the organization often do not see themselves in the position to initiate change and to facilitate access for disabled migrants and their families by gaining better knowledge.

Again, we can identify two different logics. One is a **normative** approach: referring to debates on equity and diversity, it is acknowledged that the organization has to address the issue, at least in terms of 'window-dressing' to maintain legitimacy in the field. Migration is regarded as an inevitable topic in the future. With regard to the organization's board, a member of staff states:

They will not get around the topic, whether they want to or not. Because the topic of migration becomes more and more relevant. Not only because of the refugees and the people who come, but because the share of people with migration background also increases because of birth rates. That's not... I mean we are a mixed people, we will always mix, that is impossible to deny. So, prospectively, this will definitely be an issue.

The position acknowledges migration as a topic and societal dimension that the organization will not be able to circumvent. Another complementary logic of this position is expressed by a **pragmatic acceptance**. Confronted with specific needs, professionals identify the necessity of actively reducing existing barriers, and instigating the organization to act in different settings and forms in order to allow migrant families with disabilities to acquaint themselves with organizational structures unfamiliar to them. Rather than the executive boards on federal level, this position predominantly gathers professionals at the local level of service provision, where structural changes are vital in order to cater for a migrant population:

We said, what can we do? That does not work, let's do something different, let's eat together, that's always good. And then as a team we organized a meal and talked to the people. They needed counselling, but the setting was different. We had to change the setting, in order for them [migrant families] to come, it had to be something where they could feel comfortable. We also realized that for some it was easier to go to their homes in order to speak with them. [...] I often asked until I fully understood what was going on. Exactly, one has to learn. And then at the breakfasts for families, we collected, what they [the families] wished for.

In the course of their work, professionals may find themselves in challenging situations but resolve them, aiming for tailored solutions. It is recognized

that an intersectional lens is required, i.e. certain adjustments have to be made due to increasing demands and specific needs of migrants. Intersectional approaches here are pragmatic responses to changing conditions. This includes the development of brochures in different languages, when such a need is observed, or ad-hoc-translations on occasions when language barriers appear. In a focus group, one self-representative, a member of the federal board remembers an event in which people of immigrant background were present and actively involved and translation was provided:

I was at an event last year, and I know that there were also people who didn't speak German. [The local organization] had already introduced people who they include in the programme or who work there in the evenings. I also introduced myself and said to them, as casual, as I am: 'Nice that you're here', and: 'We'll manage'.

This kind of openness and subsequent migration-related adjustments and activities are rare and only seem to occur spontaneously. Highlighting the homogeneous composition of the various boards in the organization, one member of staff critically points to the limited number of migrants and the general homogeneity of the organization concerning class, age and ethnic/migration background. The following statement indicates intersectional awareness on the part of the professional paired with skepticism concerning the organization itself.

So, when we look at the board, it is composed of men and women over 60, who are predominantly German [...] and do not have a migration background, but rather come from an academic background or have an academic degree. And I think it is difficult, when we look at the hierarchies, that this topic [migration] becomes relevant. Because these are parents of children with impairment, who do not have a migration biography, who partially have a good or even extremely good salary and consequently do not see other problems. And the question is of course, whether they in their circles come into contact with those people [migrants].

This critical position sees the reason for the neglect of the topic in the absence of migrants in the lives of non-migrant parents. Due to their presence in some local services, migrants' needs become more visible, leading to selective recognition and, in some circumstances, pragmatic responses. The statement suggests that a diverse representation could potentially instigate change. However, one should not assume that organizational change would come from the mere presence of a minority (Ahmed 2012). Notwithstanding this acknowledgement, we often encountered difficulties in response to this question in our interviews. Interviewees expressed doubts about the capacities of migrants to join the association due to lacking language skills as well as 'cultural differences' and alleged ignorance about the organization.

Thus, an intersectional lens is applied, but can entail a process of othering. Often, migration and migrants were associated with religious differences, predominantly Islam:

Well, we have found that the cultural differences, are, well, very significant, like... how disability is viewed. That is like typical in Islam that it is viewed as God-given and it'll sort itself, somehow and in doubt the 'hodja' will sort it. [laughs] But he can't do anything. Only the people won't believe that. That is clearly a different understanding. Then you realize, with our understanding of disability, that is, speaking in modern terms and following the UN disability convention, that it is a societal problem. That can't be simply communicated to the people.

This statement suggests that different cultural understandings of disability, rooted in culture or religion, make it difficult to reach migrant (Muslim) families and become their advocate. The assumed cultural differences are considered to present specific obstacles for inclusion. To some extent, this supposed 'cultural otherness' of migrant families serves to justify the slow pace of change. Thus, in spite of a recognition of specific needs of people at the intersection of disability and migration and of the relevance of migration-related issues for the organization, this acknowledgement has little practical consequences.

5.3. Professional intersectionality

A third position views disability as necessarily intersecting with other categories. It implies an awareness of the multiple dimensions of disability and the acknowledgement that specific actions need to be taken by the organization, in this case, with regard to migration. In the interviews, this position coincided with a status as a trained professional and either a deeper awareness of scientific or public discourses on matters of migration or intersectionality, or a personal migration biography. This position sees the organization as ignorant of the potential needs of migrant families as well as their potential 'double(d) marginalization' (Hughes 2017). This awareness was not seldom paired with a critical view of the organization:

Often I am missing an intersectional lens. So, we are an interest group for people with disability, that's for sure. Nonetheless, I have the impression that the topic is not really taken to be addressed, since people with a disability can also have a migration background or can be homosexual, can be women... sexual violence is also an important topic. And these are topics which are underrepresented. Because, I think, they have that lens: we are an interest group for people with disability and only see this one dimension, let's say. If we consider this diversity, we only see this one dimension.

This statement laments a general lack of intersectional approaches in the organization and representation. Other interview-partners expressed that the incorporation of migrants in the organization, and the field of disability more generally, had to go beyond a mere acknowledgment of the problems and instead required the active reduction of existing barriers in terms of language, the establishment of culturally sensitive approaches to counselling and consultation of relatives and family, as well as different ways of

organizing events and gatherings in order to overcome mistrust in institutions: in short, a more pro-active focus to include people who are not so familiar with the provision and support structures in the country of residence.

Again, two logics can be identified. First, in an attempt to adequately take account of intersectional concerns, **group differences** may become **essentialized**. One staff member who offers migration-related diversity training within the organization, critically observes this logic when talking about the kind of trainings attended by colleagues:

Very dominant in disability services is this discourse of 'They're so different'. 'It's all in the culture'. And then they always want further training, where you then deal with how it is with disability in the countries of origin or in Islam. These are the typical stereotypes. Very strongly fixated on Islam. Of course, many immigrants are of the Islamic faith, but not exclusively. We have a relatively large Vietnamese community there. They are so out of sight that there is not even a stereotype.

This statement disapproves of intersectional approaches that rely on the essentialization of (ethnic, national or religious) group differences. It presents an observation of other colleagues 'who essentialise' and follow the idea that certain understandings vary by ethnic or religious group, and that by learning about 'how this is perceived in this group', provision and support structures can be adequately prepared for a migrant clientele. This quote shows the varieties of understanding intersectionality: professionals acknowledge intersectional concerns and search for ways to adequately respond to questions related to migrants and migration and, at times, lack language and adequate tools of how to do so. Essentializing differences is one approach to tackle the issue. A different logic takes account of migration-related and cultural differences, yet follows a more **individual recognition**, stressing the need for mutual understanding and a search for individual solutions. Being confronted with a novel situation, the inexperience with specific cultural backgrounds and customs are first resisted but then reflected upon, as the following statement of a professional shows:

It is not only about speaking one language, but there are also other perspectives on living together and on the role of family members, the role of people with disabilities. But what is clear is that [in our work within the organisation] it must first and foremost be about understanding actions, in order to also try to transport the perspective that we have on the subject. Knowing this and changing one's own actions accordingly and perhaps also working together on goals and saying: Yes, this could also be a perspective. The goal for us must always be the best possible life for people with disabilities and their relatives. If people say 'I want to live like this', then that's how it is.

This perspective expresses an acknowledgement of the needs of the individual and a sensitivity towards what is at stake on an individual basis. It

presents an ability to put oneself in perspective to the other person and thus a specific logic of professional intersectionality.

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the intersectional study of disability and migration by addressing how intersectionality is approached in a parent-led disability rights organization in Germany. While intersectionality has become a prominent 'buzzword', we observe an academic and practical gradualness in the advancement of this specific field (Gummich 2010, Frederick and Shifrer 2019, Watermeyer and Swartz 2022). Accordingly, disability-rights organizations have been slow to adopt intersectional approaches. In order to understand inertia and reluctance in this field, we analyzed individual approaches within a disability rights organization.

Drawing on Lépinard's concept of 'intersectional repertoires' in womens' organizations (2014, 2019), we identified different 'positions' that comprise understandings, approaches and actions concerning intersectionality, (1) 'disability first', (2) 'intersectionality out of necessity' and (3) 'professional intersectionality'. These positions include different logics. While the first position puts disability first and regards it as the most important issue to focus on it is based on a 'universalist logic'. Its intention is to be inclusive of everybody, yet by doing so, it may have exclusive consequences as it can neglect specific discriminatory barriers. Within this position often lies the fear of 'competing recognition'. This means, that migration-specific issues are considered to detract attention from the organization's core identity. The second position, by contrast, displays a level of intersectional acknowledgement. Individuals display this position based on a normative or pragmatic logic. The third position expresses a strong sensitivity and awareness of migration-related issues in the field of disability. Issues of membership and representation as well as specific services are considered of crucial importance. Cultural issues are mentioned from different angles; the perceived 'otherness' is tackled and reflected as a matter of mutual understanding and intercultural learning. The two underlying logics express an 'essentialist approach' or 'individual recognition'.

The analysis of our case study thus revealed different and ambivalent approaches towards the intersection which reflects the absence of a general organizational agenda, a situation which may not be unusual for large organizations and civil society organizations in particular. At the same time, this indicates that societal diversity/intersectionality discourses are ongoing, with different positions prevailing. A combination of different factors may explain this. One is related to the socio-historical context of Germany and trajectory of the organization itself: the legacy of the persecution and murder of

people with disabilities by the Nazis turns disability into an extremely sensitive category. Against this backdrop, we understand the persistent tendency to place the concerns of the disabled before other, possibly competing, categories as part and parcel of the history, trajectory and legacy of this organization within German society. In this particular organization, this largely entails the representations and concerns of predominantly non-migrant German parents. In other parts of the world, such as the US and Australia, disability rights more quickly became part of the civil rights movement and issues of social justice. While the concern of competing interests might relate to their fear of societal neglect of the topic, it can also be caused by and entangled with stereotypes and prejudice towards the 'other', as we have shown. Considering disability as not intersecting with other categories presents a reductionist view of people with impairments, viewing disability as a personal, rather than a social category. At the same time, it seems a bitter irony that, despite the organization's historical background, different categories of exclusion are not necessarily interlinked, even though racial discrimination was at the heart of the Nazi ideology and subsequent persecution.

Our analysis further reveals that professionals may be more open to intersectional approaches, owing to their professional training, biographical background on the issue or a certain personal distance many of them keep to the demands of disability. The absence of migrants in executive functions, together with the reluctance to actively invest in intersectional issues, in our view partly explains the differing positions. Moreover, our findings suggest that individuals often acknowledge the necessity to include migrants and the topic of migration but do not see it as their personal task. This may – perhaps unintentionally – secure a position of white privilege as an organization (Wooten 2019). It would be worthwhile to study the causal factors for the different positions within a larger framework and to follow-up on organizational developments, including conflicts over diverging positions and related challenges to the organization's identity.

A broader research agenda should also include other disability organizations as well as an international comparison. Given the highly heterogeneous organizational field, the presented case may be characteristic for some, but likely differs from disability-led, activist and even from smaller and younger parent-led disability organizations. The intra-organizational perspective towards intersectionality on the different meanings and the contested nature of intersectionality deepens our knowledge of the forces of organizational inertia and resistance to diversity-related change. This knowledge is particularly relevant in the field of disability and migration, but could further contribute to the civil society sector, academic research and society at large.

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