

**BRIDGES** A **toolkit** for **diversifying knowledge** and **tackling discrimination** through **civil society participation** in universities.

# EUROCENTRISM

# DEFINITION / DESCRIPTION

**E**urocentrism can be understood as a crosscutting, yet invisible paradigm that organizes society, social relations and perceptions of the world on an everyday basis. Its strength and reproductive power lie in its normative and performative force. It is set as a norm through iterative practices. Within these practices, Europe – Western Europe in particular - is created and centered as a historical, political and cultural agent. Thought as the vantage point of Enlightenment, Industrialization and Modernity, Europe is set as the point of measurement for moral, political, economic, educational and juridical development globally. At the core of Eurocentrism is the belief that ‘European society’ and ‘European population’ are at the forefront of human rights and civility. This perspective omits the underside of European prosperity and its foundational history: that European wealth and the expansion of capitalism is built on colonialism, the enslavement of populations from Eastern and Western Africa, the expansion of the plantation economy supplying the industrial North and the establishment of settler-colonial societies. Along with these historical processes, Eurocentrism will operate on the basis of the racialization and produce social hierarchies.

# P R O C E S S

## M E T H O D O L O G I C A L   A P P R O A C H

**J**LU and an.gekommen e.V. organized two participatory and interactive place-based workshops in January and February 2020, engaging with local pathways to education. The participants were Migra\*/BPOC students (B.A. and M.A.), doctoral students and post-docs, as well as persons in the process of applying for asylum and international exchange students.

All were enrolled as regular or guest students at Higher Education institutions in Giessen. About half of the participants are regular attendees at an.ge.kommen e.V. In the workshops, they shared different stories regarding access to education and experiences with discrimination based on gendered, racialized, and economic inequalities, religious beliefs and geographical belongings.

The first workshop was held on January 30th, under the title «How do you feel about your academic experience in Germany?». Here, the group was invited to make a collage with the question «How do I feel about my university/my academic experience in Germany?». The second workshop, on February 27th, aimed at fostering empowering dynamics that deindividualize discrimination experiences and rather identify possibilities for institutional change. This workshop had the title «What gives you energy?»

Both workshops addressed two dimensions: first, creating awareness (conscientizar) about the interplay of everyday individual experiences of discrimination; second, sharing strategies of self- and collective care as well as support structures of empowerment, on the other. For this, in a first step, an individual reflection of everyday situations and the feelings attached to it took place. Methods used here were a combination of visual, creative individual work and a collective reflection on these individual experiences. The latter included an analysis of these situations on the collective and structural levels in order to understand the underlying causes and structural processes leading to moments of discrimination (problemposing). The last part focused on the structural changes that need to happen in order to stop racism in the university.

After each of the workshops, a smaller group met in order to reflect on the main observations, analysis and assumptions made in the workshop. A mind-map connecting the different examples was elaborated and final theoretical elaborations were made.

## FINDING THE CONCEPT

**T**he relevance of including Eurocentrism in the toolkit emerged from two group dialogues with Migra\*/BPoC<sup>1</sup> students, PhDs and postdocs in Giessen, Germany. In both workshops, participants quickly started recounting specific stories of their studying experiences in Germany as well as everyday experiences. While the participants did emphasize positive experience related to their intrinsic motivation to study or be part of HEI, they shared negative experiences around being “othered” or having difficulties with the institutional parts of studying and working in HEI. They also articulated mechanisms that other them as Migra\*/BPOC on the interpersonal, group, and institutional level. During both workshops, stories relating to the difficulties encountered with institutions and the persons employed in them would appear. Their accounts reflected how they were disciplined and reprimanded by authorities in regard to their language skills, their academic faculties, and by making them aware of the established rules and customs in place. Although all of the participants had different biographies and migration histories, they could relate to and often share the stories told by others in the groups, and connect these stories to their own lives. They also identified and explained the differences in experiencing discriminatory behavior due to ascribed group memberships e.g. along with gender and religion.

After these workshops, a smaller group (Migra\*/BPOC students and doctoral students) worked with the material and shared their impressions and reflections, and identified three central dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in HEI along Eurocentrism in Giessen, Germany: 1), everyday practices of othering, often build on racist imaginaries. 2), ethnocentric mechanisms shaping the potential of success or failure in HEI. 3), HEI reproduce silently a nexus between education and whiteness. This mind-map was then again discussed in the smaller group and embedded in a theoretical framework.

<sup>1</sup> Migra\*/BPOC refers to persons in Germany, that have or are ascribed migration biographies or have migrated themselves due to economic, political, social or personal reasons, and/or self-identify as Black and People of Colour or are labelled as such.

In the following we will use Migrant\*/BPOC to denote the heterogeneity of these persons and their lives while stressing the different yet similar experiences of discrimination.

## E L A B O R A T I O N

**E**urocentrism can be understood as a crosscutting, yet invisible paradigm that organizes our society, our relations and our thinking on an everyday basis. Its strength and reproductive power lie in its unspokenness and in that it is reproduced unconsciously. «Eurocentrism» refers to how society's values, perceptions and predicaments are shaped by constructing Europe as the motor of technological advancement, modern futures and civility. This includes: (a) the principal agent of history; (b) the producer of scientific and technological pieces of knowledge; (c) the creator of universal ethical principles, norms and values; (d) and as the central point of measurement for aesthetic quality and artistic expression. This omits the foundational history, that European wealth and the expansion of European capitalism are built on colonialism, settler colonization and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, legitimized through a binary of superiority/inferiority by constructing «Europeans» as 'superior' and their former colonized territories as 'inferior', as 'Europe's exteriority' (Dussel 1995). This put forth a racialized, gendered and geographic system of social hierarchies (Quijano 2006) that regulated the division of work in capitalism, and required the control of the racialized/gendered population through physical violence including genocide, and epistemic violence, such as through neglecting the historical resistance of oppressed populations and their agency and by capitalizing on the knowledge transferal from other regions to Europe (e.g. through migration, exploitation and knowledge theft, and brain-drain from other regions) until today. This also led to exteriority within Europe (Lewis 2000; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010), marking Black and Brown racialized Europeans as Non- Europeans (El Tayeb 1999; 2011), and setting Europe as shaped mainly by Protestantism and Catholicism, minoritizing Jewish, Muslim and Christian Orthodox past and traditions in Europe (see, for instance, Attia/Popal 2016). As a consequence, many persons living in Europe will not be considered «European», although having a European passport and/or being born on the continent (see, for instance, Brah 1996; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1999). This is one of the many paradoxes that make Eurocentrism so powerful and a potential site of racism. Shaping our common sense, Eurocentrism becomes a normative matrix informing our behavior, thought and social relations in and out of Europe. This leads to structural, physical and symbolic violence on bodies, identities, minds and souls constructed outside that matrix.

In Germany, higher education is still shaped deeply by postcolonial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as "universities reflect the inherent social inequalities within the nation-state [and are] privileged sites for the reproduction of White national elites" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2015: 3). As Gutiérrez noted, in 2012 only 6% of total professorial positions in Germany had a migration biography (while that same year, the population with migration biographies was 20%, BAMF

2012: 135), and 80% of that percentage were white Europeans and 43% either Swiss or Austrians (Gutiérrez 2012: 4). While the first figure proves a predominance of cultural and racial whiteness, the latter points to language as a possible tool for selecting the educational elite. Institutional racism, Gutiérrez affirms, "is recreated through subtle institutional practices favoring the access of the White national affluent population [...] and [experienced] in particular by everyday practices and imaginaries" (ibid.: 5).

## **EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF OTHERING, OFTEN BUILD ON RACIST IMAGINARIES**

In one of the workshops, one participant had chosen a broken heart in her collage to depict situations of disadvantage and racism she had experienced at the university. Through that symbol, she described the pain that she feels when she is being gazed at and objectified in seminars due to her headscarf<sup>1</sup>. She voiced the feeling that she was being portrayed as "the person who had to go through all of it", referring to the gendered violence others believe she must have suffered as a Muslim woman. Her headscarf became a symbol of the demonizing rhetoric attached to Islam. Within the context of HEI that meant that she was addressed as 'the oppressed Muslim' and attention was drawn to her person as belonging to a problematic group. Similarly, Muslim male students or male students proceeding from Muslim countries reported in our workshops about how they were addressed as 'experts' on topics connected to violence (the war on Syria, for instance). These examples demonstrate that anti-Muslim racism works on the basis of Eurocentrism in intersectional ways, creating the «Brown Islamic body» along gendered and racial lines (Attia/Popal 2016: 654)<sup>2</sup>. Both of these narratives position the "Brown Islamic body" as an outsider to Europe by perceiving it in hostile ways and constructing the 'Muslim woman' as in need of saving (Attia/Popal 2016: 654).

The participants also felt that "white"<sup>3</sup> students were reacting differently towards the racialized body when the discussion about discrimination turned towards experiences made in Germany. In this regard, two female students with a headscarf said they were tired of their white colleagues turning their faces towards them in classes when topics around racism emerged – expecting them to speak. In line with Karima Popal and the students who participated in her group discussions (2016: 239f.), this is one of many points, where the migrant/BPOC students experience everyday violence in form of a transgression, where Migra\*/BPoC students are forced to disclose very private aspects of their life, including traumatic events. Similar to questions about their "background", such as "Where are you really from?", 'turning their faces' can be seen as symptomatic of a power imbalance that clearly identifies those who can request a clarification (either by asking or by gazing), and those who need to respond to the inquisition. In this sense, Battaglia has pointed to the discourse about

the origin of a person as a central element of the discourse on racism (Battaglia 2007: 188f., in Popal 2016: 240). This is especially difficult to handle when institutional hierarchies complicate the relationship when the interrogator/onlooker is a teacher and the respondent/objectified a Migra\*/BPoC student.

In line with Popal (2016: 242ff.), we can identify these moments of turning their faces as one of many not only harmful but also dilemmatic situations for racialized students in the class room. They always need to be prepared in the classroom to quickly decide how to react and are not allowed to just be "listeners" (see also Golly 2006: 396, in Popal 2016: 243f.). This is in line with our students, some of them who said they would deliberately not take any classes on discrimination, to avoid being an object of study (see neoliberal compliance).

Situating Migra\*/BPoC academics outside Europe/Eurocentric order includes not only their de-individualization, but also turns them into an object of study in HEI: They are being depersonalized, objectified and gazed at in seminars, either as geographical outsiders (from a foreign country), or as ontological outsiders (subalterns who come from a milieu in Germany, that is culturally outside "real Germany").

<sup>1</sup> As "all areas of knowledge (what today we describe as natural sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and the professional schools [medicine, law, engineer, business, computing])" emerge "from the lived experience of white and Christian males who lived and studied in the six countries and languages [Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and English]" (Mignolo 2011: 111), Eurocentrism has been described as "an epistemic rather than a geographical issue" (Mignolo 2011: 54).

<sup>2</sup> Several authors have shown a stereotypical representation of Muslim women and men in German mass media, political debates and in the public space in general. Muslim women are represented as victims of gendered violence and war, and oppressed by patriarchy, while Muslim men are depicted as patriarchal perpetrators and potential 'terrorists' (Attia 2009; Attia/Popal 2018; Popal 2016, Nachtigall/Bewernitz 2011, Brunner 2011). Muslim participants in the workshop also reported about this daily violence of representation, hitting their bodies and configuring their everyday in HEI in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> "White students" refers here to students who are read as (phenotypically) white and have no migration biography from the Global South nor discrimination experiences.

# ETHNOCENTRIC MECHANISMS SHAPING THE POTENTIAL OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN HEI

In the second workshop, a participant expressed a general feeling that systemic change is difficult as the institution is formed by people who reproduce sexism and ethnic discrimination<sup>1</sup>. In Thompsons and Zablotsky's words regarding racist, queer- and/or trans\*-phobic forms of violence, "this everyday violence is construed as exceptional. The rhetoric of diversity is contributing to the silencing of these forms of institutionalized violence which operate within the neoliberal university" (Thompson/ Zablotsky 2016: 89). Hierarchies, peer pressure and structures of dependence put change actors into a dilemma of »putting themselves out there« (see Popal 2016). Persons who face everyday practices of discrimination face even more hostile forms of discrimination if they are perceived as disrupters or intruders – by asking to change a system they do not equally belong to (see concept Migra\*/BPoC)<sup>2</sup>.

As a consequence of the fear to be sanctioned, Migra\*/BPOC seeks less regularly to negotiate assignment criteria and deadlines with their teachers than their German counterparts. Also, students with migration and exile experience exclaimed a lack of information regarding institutional learning, material and emotional support structures. White students from a middle- or upper-class background seem to navigate better the university, finding more often access to student representation units and to the material and symbolic infrastructure of support in place. These mechanisms re-stabilize again the university as the fortress of eurocentrism.

<sup>1</sup> This is also in line with the participants' feelings that the university does not fight against discrimination effectively: Official channels were felt to be difficult to access – especially as an overwhelmed and possibly intimidated migrant student [see concept of "compliance"] – and the climate at university made them not believe in change, independently of whether they know white students and staff who would support them.

<sup>2</sup> As Vanessa Thompson and Veronika Zablotsky (2016: 86) note: "With the resurrection of the German distinction between "guests" and "hosts", German subjects with »migration background« become potential ambassadors of integration and diversity in order to prove their allegiance to »democratic« values, which, in turn, is always already in question."



# HEI SILENT DYNAMICS THAT REINFORCE A NEXUS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WHITENESS

**E**urocentrism thus also becomes palpable through inaction and invisibility. This reverses the invisibilization of migrant needs which can be and often are different from those without migration biography: »German universities tend to reproduce themselves as mono-lingual, -cultural, -ethnic and -racial entities« (Xian & Yi, 2011, in Gutiérrez 2015: 7). This became visible as a central burden for migrant students and employees. Not only because it situates both BPOC and migrant students as non-fitters outside that entity, but also because they are mostly denied a 'special treatment', such as writing papers in English instead of in German. Eurocentrism can then be perceived at HEI through a paradoxical process that, on the one hand, othered Migra\*/BPOC and objectifies them, and, on the other, simultaneously expects their assimilation to the often unwritten and unexemplified German norms.

German welcoming culture ("Willkommenskultur") seems to be very selective and as intersecting with class and postcolonial hierarchies. The participants stressed the lack of a welcoming culture for "foreign" students and emphasized how they felt alone in the process of understanding the complex system of the university in Giessen, its bureaucracy and regulations<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to note here the interplay between institutional "diversity" initiatives, the neoliberalist culture at university and Eurocentrism at the interpersonal level. According to a participant, there was a discrepancy between institutional rhetoric and practices of guiding and sheltering the newcomers. Members of the hegemonic white national group often reproduce a culture of ignorance (Mills 1997, Tate 2012). This reflects in the are little information they have regarding bureaucratic burdens and labour that students and university staff without permanent residency and citizenship have to endure when dealing with visa procedures, local bureaucracy, and language requirements, among others – all elements of structural racism (see tool).

Through the example of name pronunciation in Germany and by using the process of collective conscientization, the students started to question these many double-standards. For example, when it comes to the right pronunciation of names, students felt that very little effort was done to approach them in a respectable and dignified way by at least asking how their names might be pronounced. On the other hand, they were often advised to pronounce German names correctly by

<sup>1</sup> As Gutiérrez summarizes: "Germany has also introduced a specific residency title for international students. In order to enter the country, international students need to apply for an initial student visa in order to be able to apply for the study residency title, officially authorizing the student to pursue the program of study. For the approval of study residency, the student needs to fulfill certain prerequisites, such as confirmation of a place for study in a German university and a bank statement demonstrating a year's income of approximately 8000 Euros. [...] [E]ven if the language of study required is English, [international students] still need to acquire German language proficiency during their academic registration."

the teachers and German students, getting said that they should train regularly the pronunciation. Again, Eurocentrism was articulated by setting the burden on the ones, defined as the 'outsiders', while the insider seems not to care and draw the single attention at them.

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