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Being an Ethnic Minority: Belonging Uncertainty of People Without a Migration Background

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Abstract

We delve into the implications of the national ethnic majority being a minority in local settings by examining their daily experiences when they find themselves outnumbered by other ethnic groups in their neighbourhood. Drawing on the theory of "belonging uncertainty," this article explores the variety of ways in which people without a migration background cope with such situations. Belonging uncertainty is the feeling that "people like me do not belong here." Based on in-depth interviews ($n = 20$) conducted in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Vienna, we argue that the experience of belonging uncertainty results in two different coping strategies: avoidance of spaces numerically dominated by another ethnic group or learning to overcome belonging uncertainty. Some people without a migration background often perceive spaces where another ethnicity is the numerical majority as exclusionary, even if they are not explicitly excluded, and accordingly, they avoid such contexts. Others develop strategies that allow them to establish a feeling of belonging in spaces where they initially experienced belonging uncertainty. As such, some individuals overcome the feeling of belonging uncertainty.

Keywords

belonging uncertainty; ethnic diversity; inter-ethnic contact; majority–minority; reflexivity; Vienna

1. Introduction

What happens when the national ethnic majority is an ethnic minority in the local context? We explore this question by looking at the daily experiences of people without a migration background, that is, people who were born in the country of residence and have both parents born in the same country, in situations in which

they are a numerical ethnic minority in their neighbourhood. Thus far, little attention has been paid to such encounters and previous studies have neglected such experiences, as it is commonly assumed that "one of the hidden advantages of being a member of a privileged group...is that questions about the standing of one's group, or oneself as a member of a marginalized group, rarely come to mind" (Walton & Brady, 2017, pp. 273–274). As people without a migration background generally belong to the ethnic majority, they may rarely encounter situations in which they question their social belonging in terms of their ethnic identity. Many cities and neighbourhoods in Western Europe, however, have become numerically superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007). Often, however, this numerical diversity is not reflected in neighbourhood spaces. Even though many ethnic groups reside in the same neighbourhood, they co-exist with little interaction (Atkinson, 2006; Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Butler, 2003; Jackson & Butler, 2015). This potentially leads to the presence of spaces in a neighbourhood where one ethnic group is numerically dominant. Previous research investigating social life in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods often focusses on different ethnic groups living together in one neighbourhood (e.g., Hoekstra & Dahlvik, 2018; Oosterlynck et al., 2017; Peterson, 2017; Wessendorf, 2014a, 2014b, pp. 102–120) but further in-depth attention needs to be paid to the experiences and feelings of people without a migration background in contexts in which they are a numerical ethnic minority while another ethnic group dominates. How do people without a migration background cope with such places? Being an ethnic minority is a meaningful experience that can trigger numerous emotions, one of which is commonly known as "belonging uncertainty" (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Minorities often express the feeling of belonging uncertainty as "people like me do not belong here" (Walton & Cohen, 2007). To investigate how people without a migration background participate in contexts in which they are a numerical minority, we draw on the concept of belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

While previous research has focussed on the reactions of White Americans to becoming a future numerical minority on the national level (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014a, 2014b; Craig et al., 2018; Outten et al., 2012, 2018) or on understanding the attitudes of people without a migration background living in majority–minority neighbourhoods towards multiculturalism (Kraus, 2023; Kraus & Daenekindt, 2021), there is a lack of in-depth information on how people without a migration background understand and experience places where they are a numerical ethnic minority locally. To fill this gap in the literature, we examine how such situations play out and how people without a migration background participate in neighbourhood contexts in which they form a numerical ethnic minority.

Our contribution is two-fold. On the one hand, identifying the feeling of belonging uncertainty as an explanation for the avoidance of spaces expands our knowledge of the underlying mechanisms of ethnic interactions or the lack thereof in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods from the perspective of people without a migration background. On the other hand, we show how people without a migration background develop feelings of belonging to spaces encountered in their everyday neighbourhood life. As Blokland and Nast (2014) point out, a number of authors (e.g., Good et al., 2012; Savage et al., 2005; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011; Watt, 2009) have shown the vast impact a sense of belonging can have, yet little is known about how individuals develop a feeling of belonging through practices. We contribute to closing this gap in the literature by empirically demonstrating how, through reflexivity and the development of strategies, some individuals manage to overcome the feeling of belonging uncertainty.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Participation of People Without a Migration Background

To understand how people without a migration background participate in contexts in which they are an ethnic minority, we find inspiration in theories on acculturation. Acculturation refers to changes in culture and behaviour among people with and without a migration background as a result of inter-ethnic contact (Berry, 1997). The various reactions individuals may have to cultural change are referred to as acculturation strategies (assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation; Berry, 1997). It is widely acknowledged that migrants culturally influence members of the majority and that members of the majority influence people with a migration background. Most research, however, focusses on the acculturation strategies of people with a migration background or examines the majority members' expectations towards people with a migration background (e.g., Kunst & Sam, 2014; López-Rodríguez et al., 2014; Roblain et al., 2016), while the adjustments that people without a migration background supposedly undergo are often ignored (for an exception see Crul & Lelie, 2021; Jimenez, 2017). Recently, the focus on the migrated population in the study of acculturation strategies has been challenged. Crul and Lelie (2019) argue that majority–minority contexts, i.e., contexts in which the national ethnic majority is a numerical minority at the local level, upend the idea that minorities adapt to the ethnic majority, as no majority exists within such contexts. Instead of focusing on the extent to which the migrated population adapts to the former ethnic majority, Crul and Lelie (2019) rephrase the question: How do people without a migration background adapt to the multi-ethnic city and to what extent do they engage in acculturation processes?

Jimenez (2017) offers one possible answer to this question. In his book *The Other Side of Assimilation*, he argues that assimilation works the same for people without a migration background as for first and second-generation people with a migration background. One of the main findings of Jimenez's research is that people without a migration background and first and second-generation people with a migration background influence each other equally and current acculturation processes are about mutual adjustment. He claims that immigrants have changed the societal climate of the United States, which "forces America's most established individuals to undergo an assimilation of their own" (p. 19). Further, Jimenez (2017) suggests that people without a migration background attribute a certain "normalcy" to living in ethnically diverse contexts and that over time, new groups become more similar to people without a migration background through interactions in their neighbourhood, local schools, or the workplace. The idea of ethnic diversity being something "normal," aligns with the findings of Wessendorf (2013), who developed the notion of "commonplace diversity." Commonplace diversity refers to ethnic diversity being experienced as an ordinary part of social life in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Jimenez acknowledges that this normalcy does not come with a limitless feeling of comfort, yet, similar to Alba and Nee (2003), he claims that this process of adapting happens "to people while making other plans" (Jimenez, 2017, p. 80).

Drawing from Jimenez' (2017) research, Crul (2018) proposes that although the people without a migration background in Jimenez's study may respect a plurality of cultural habits and views, they do not adapt their practices to this plurality (Crul, 2018, p. 2261). Crul (2018) observes that the reactions of the people in Jimenez's study are characterized by disengagement rather than adaption. For instance, Jimenez (2017) gives the example of students of Asian descent outperforming White students academically. Instead of trying to compete with these new educational standards, White Americans abnormalize the

accomplishments of students of Asian descent without further engagement. Such inability to react to changing circumstances is what Crul (2018) terms the "paralyzed white identity" (p. 2263).

In sum, there is an agreement in the literature that people with a migration background influence people without a migration background and vice-versa. Yet, when it comes to the participation of people without a migration background in ethnically diverse contexts, there is a debate about the level of their participation. Crul (2018) argues that such participation efforts of people without a migration background often do not go beyond acknowledging the presence of ethnic diversity.

2.2. People Without a Migration Background and the Feeling of Belonging Uncertainty

Understanding concepts such as intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), anxiety about dominance (Pratto & Walker, 2004), and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989) is vital for grasping the dynamics of social interaction, particularly in ethnically diverse contexts. These concepts illuminate the intricacies of intergroup relations, revealing the psychological, emotional, and social barriers individuals face when engaging with members of other social groups.

For this research, we focus on the concept of belonging uncertainty (Walton & Brady, 2017) to examine the daily experiences of individuals without a migration background when they find themselves outnumbered by other ethnic groups in their neighbourhood, as it offers insights into the multifaceted nature of identity formation and social integration. While fear, insecurity, anxiety about dominance, and vulnerability focus on specific aspects of individuals' experiences within intergroup contexts, belonging uncertainty acknowledges the nuanced interplay of internal and external factors shaping individuals' perceptions of belongingness. It encompasses not only the fear of rejection or marginalization but also the quest for validation, acceptance, and recognition within diverse communities.

Upon entering a new setting, individuals evaluate their sense of belonging, defined as the alignment between oneself and a social environment (Walton & Brady, 2017). This evaluation relies on personal characteristics and group identities. Previous studies on minority experiences reveal that being a minority can trigger feelings of belonging uncertainty, often expressed as a concern about not fitting in (Walton & Cohen, 2007). If individuals feel that their social identity, like ethnicity, is marginalized, they may feel uncomfortable or avoid the setting altogether (Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, White residents in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods may withdraw from spaces they perceive as unwelcoming (Wise, 2005).

In general, the sense of belonging of people without a migration background remains largely "beyond question" (Skey, 2011, p. 2). Usually, people without a migration background move around and navigate spaces effortlessly as they are perceived to be the natural occupants of spaces (Puwar, 2004). The internalized sense of power within a social system is a critical aspect of intergroup relations that manifests subtly yet significantly in individual behaviours. Racial and social hierarchies are often internalized, resulting in an embodied understanding of one's place within structures of domination and subordination (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). This internalization can influence the dynamics of intergroup contact, where dominant group members may exhibit behaviours that reflect their unspoken sense of superiority. Being an ethnic minority challenges this internalized dominance, as they were born into a culture they belong to (DiAngelo, 2019). In spaces where people without a migration background become a numerical minority while another ethnic group dominates, they feel they become "outsiders" (Kraus & Crul, 2022).

There are various ways to transition from an "outsider" to an "insider" position. Valentine (2008) emphasises that sustained intergroup contact enhances understanding and reduces bias, which is essential in the process of becoming an "insider" within a new context (cf. Paolini et al., 2018). Additionally, Leary (2010) suggests that behaviours that encourage others to want to affiliate with one can increase the likelihood of acceptance, a fundamental precursor to the feeling of belonging. To engage in such behaviours, it is necessary for an individual to be both aware and reflexive about their social standing. For individuals without a migration background, finding themselves in a numerical minority may act as a catalyst for reflexivity, particularly as such reflection is frequently spurred by moments of "crisis" (Bourdieu, 1990)—a state induced by a disjunction between one's ingrained dispositions and the demands of a new social context.

In summary, for those with a migration background, being in an ethnic minority position leads to belonging uncertainty and, subsequently, avoidance of spaces where such uncertainty is felt. This concept, typically applied to historically devalued groups, may similarly apply to individuals without a migration background in situations where they are an ethnic minority despite belonging to the dominant group at the national level. Their minority experience may evoke unease and foster reflexivity, allowing some to become "insiders."

3. Method and Data

To explore the participation of individuals without a migration background as a numerical ethnic minority, we utilized data from the Becoming *a* Minority (B*a*M) project. The study involved 20 face-to-face interviews conducted in Vienna by the first author between November 2019 and February 2020. The participants, aged 25 to 54, and their parents were all born in Austria, aligning with the commonly used definition of "without a migration background" (Arends-Tóth & Van De Vijver, 2003; Crul & Lelie, 2021; Martinović, 2013). For an overview of research participants' demographic and occupational information see Table 1.

Focusing on neighbourhood life, social relationships, and inter-ethnic attitudes, the interviews took place in Vienna's ethnically diverse Neulerchenfeld, specifically Yppenviertel and Brunnenviertel. Neulerchenfeld, situated in Ottakring's 16th district, is home to 14,576 inhabitants, 54% of whom have a migration background, mirroring Vienna's average. Noteworthy is the transformation of Neulerchenfeld from a working-class district to a sought-after residential area, anchored by iconic public spaces—Brunnenmarkt and Yppenplatz. Brunnenmarkt, Vienna's second-largest market, dates back to the 18th century, while Yppenplatz plays a central role in observed gentrification processes (Baldauf & Weingartner, 2008). In recent years, Neulerchenfeld has emerged as a lively and multicultural neighbourhood, known for its diverse population and vibrant community life. Urban renewal projects and initiatives have also played a role in Neulerchenfeld's development, aimed at improving infrastructure, public spaces, and amenities.

Recruitment of Neulerchenfeld informants involved the first author's personal network, snowball sampling, and a social media group of local residents. An additional five interviews were conducted in other ethnically diverse Vienna neighbourhoods, targeting individuals who had previously participated in the B*a*M project. All research procedures were conducted in alignment with ethical principles to ensure participants' rights. Participants were explicitly informed of their entitlement to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any repercussions. For the consent process, prior to the interviews, participants were provided with a printed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality measures implemented. In order to ensure the anonymization of respondents, identifying

Table 1. Overview of research participants' demographic and occupational data.

ID	Name	Neighbourhood	Gender	Age	Year moved to neighbourhood	Occupation	Education
1	Johann	Neulerchenfeld	M	33	2014	Administrative lawyer	Master, Magister[1]
2	Thomas	Neulerchenfeld	M	46	1995	House technician	Apprenticeship
3	Hans	Neulerchenfeld	M	38	2004	Educational policy	Magister
4	Manuela	Neulerchenfeld	F	38	2013	Social worker	Bachelor
5	Ursula	Neulerchenfeld	F	54	2020	Retail sales	Apprenticeship
6	Martin	Neulerchenfeld	M	37	2016	Sales manager	Apprenticeship
7	Marcel	Neulerchenfeld	M	49	2014	Sales manager (IT)	Magister
8	Valerie	Neulerchenfeld	F	29	2019	Medical doctor	PhD
9	Hermine	Neulerchenfeld	F	42	1978	Advertising	Matura[2]
10	Jessica	Neulerchenfeld	F	30	2015	Self-employed editor and yoga teacher	Matura
11	Karolin	Neulerchenfeld	F	25	2019	Student (MA)	Bachelor
12	Klara	Neulerchenfeld	F	37	2012	Author children's books	Magister
13	Walter	Neulerchenfeld	M	44	2008	Director of a trade fair	Master, Magister
14	Ellen	Neulerchenfeld	F	43	2014	Management assistant	Matura
15	Claudia	Neulerchenfeld	F	34	2013	Employed at the Chamber of Labour	Magister
16	Alexander	Favoriten	M	31	2009	Sale of telephone subscriptions	Matura
17	Greta	Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus	F	29	2010	Assistant manager	Master
18	Robert	Leopoldstadt	M	47	2008	Corporate lawyer	Magister
19	Maximilian	Brigittenau	M	46	2019	Clerk	Matura/apprenticeship
20	Josef	Favoriten	M	43	2010	Communication manager	Bachelor

Notes: [1] Former equivalent to today's master's degree; [2] general higher education qualification, which entitles one to study at all Austrian universities.

information such as names, locations, and specific demographic details were removed from the transcripts. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant any potentially identifying information mentioned during the interviews was omitted to maintain confidentiality throughout the analysis process.

All interviews underwent coding and analysis using ATLAS.ti software. The initial analysis employed theory-driven coding based on the concept of belonging uncertainty, serving as the sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2006). Themes were then clustered into key themes related to the experience of belonging

uncertainty. To understand how individuals without a migration background navigate belonging uncertainty, we employed a data-driven, inductive approach, engaging in an interactive analysis among the authors and incorporating reflections from other researchers in the B*a*M project.

Lastly, we want to mention that we are aware of the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries when distinguishing between individuals with and without migration backgrounds (Dahinden, 2016) and that this binary classification risks oversimplifying social identities and neglecting the diversity within these groups (Vertovec, 2007). Yet, as Klarenbeek (2019) argues, abandoning these terms does not eliminate the underlying relational inequalities. Ethnic categorizations resonate with the social realities and national identities (Brubaker, 2010), and are reflective of the ways our respondents understand their social environment. Thus, employing an ethnic framework is not only methodologically pertinent but also sociologically relevant, despite its limitations in capturing intragroup diversity.

4. Results

4.1. Belonging Uncertainty and the Avoidance of Spaces

Entering spaces where individuals without a migration background become a numerical ethnic minority, while another ethnic group dominates, elicited discomfort and prompted a revaluation of belonging for many informants. Some participants admitted avoiding neighbourhood spaces where another ethnic group is dominant, fearing that their presence might be deemed "inappropriate" or they may not be warmly welcomed. Ursula (54), for example, shared her daily experiences in the neighbourhood, highlighting her sense of being a minority. She specifically mentioned restaurants often associated with Turkish or Serbian migration backgrounds and conveyed her uncertainty about belonging in these spaces:

> I don't go to the restaurants there now, I admit that, yes, I don't go around the corner to these restaurants. I probably would not like to either….I don't necessarily have to go there, [the fact] that I would be the only Austrian sitting there, I don't know….I don't even know how they would react. (Ursula, 54)

Ursula experiences belonging uncertainty and this prevents her from visiting restaurants where she is perceived as an ethnic minority. Her statement prescribes which spaces are seen as being for whom and that crossing this imagined boundary implies going to spaces where she does not belong. Similarly, Robert (47) told a story about an evening out in his neighbourhood with his friends. While walking around, they passed a bar in which they only saw Turkish men sitting and joked: "Well, I don't think they allow us in there."

Many informants shared comparable experiences of belonging uncertainty in situations where their ethnic identity diverged from the norm. Ottakringer Strasse, a specific location in Neulerchenfeld frequently cited as triggering belonging uncertainty, stands out. Positioned in the north end of the neighbourhood, marking the boundary between the 16th and 17th districts, Ottakringer Strasse is often dubbed "Balkan street" (*Balkanstrasse*), associated with individuals of Serbian and Croatian descent. People without a migration background often view the street's bars and cafés as exclusionary to their ethnic group, fearing potential ostracism if they were to visit. This ensuing quote illustrates the discomfort some respondents feel when contemplating a visit to Ottakringer Strasse:

> I have the feeling that Ottakringer Strasse is in our neighbourhood, but I have zero, zero access [to it]. I've never been to a place like this. Um, I don't even know what's stopping us. We keep talking that it would be interesting to go there. I just have the feeling that no Austrians go there. Maybe I'm also a little bit afraid that we will be looked at suspiciously. (Hans, 38)

The quote demonstrates that the informant is uncertain about their belonging in the restaurants and bars on the Ottakringer Strasse. Being "looked at suspiciously" and wondering whether places along the street are "for them" are signs of belonging uncertainty and we can see how this feeling leads to the avoidance of said spaces.

The origin of this feeling of belonging uncertainty is diverse. Beyond a numerical underrepresentation among co-ethnics, participants pointed to various other factors. Disparities in cultural practices related to the interior design of shops, cafés, lighting, and the type of social gathering spot triggered a sense of belonging uncertainty among individuals without a migration background. Language barriers, distinctions in lifestyle and clothing, and cultural preferences, including specific music styles, were also identified as factors contributing to the experience of belonging uncertainty.

In particular, informants mention the experience of a perceived unwelcomeness which is expressed in different shapes and forms. Whereas Thomas (46) said that in "90% of the places [they] entered, [they] were stared at as if they were extra-terrestrials," Greta described how, when she walks into a Serbian restaurant to pick up her takeaway food, "there is a moment of astonishment" on the part of the staff working there. Manuela (38) shares a similar experience as she and her friend once unintendedly visited a Serbian café and thought that others in the café looked at them thinking "ok, what do they want here now?" which caused her noticeable discomfort. This discomfort made her conclude that this café "won't become [her] regular haunt."

Based on such perceived reactions of people with a migration background, Ellen (43) explains that she would rather go "to ten other places," where people without a migration background are the dominant ethnic group. The idea that such places will not become their regular haunt because they have other places to choose from is also expressed in Thomas's (46) statement. Thomas talks about Brunnenmarkt, a local marketplace where the stalls are predominantly owned by people with a migration background, and points out that he does not "have to" go to Brunnenmarkt. He is willing to try "three times [and] then say 'that was it'" if he does not feel at ease. Both of these expressions make it clear that, on the one hand, if people without a migration background feel that they do not belong in a particular space in the neighbourhood, they have the option of withdrawing from it. On the other hand, this behaviour hints at the "paralyzed white identity," showing the inability to negotiate such a setting comfortably and thus leads to withdrawal from the space.

The presented quotes reveal that individuals without a migration background often encounter belonging uncertainty in spaces where they constitute a numerical ethnic minority. Despite no explicit exclusion, they perceive such spaces as unwelcoming, highlighting how their ethnic identity stands out in environments dominated by individuals with a different ethnic background. This not only underscores the common experience of belonging uncertainty for this group in such places but also emphasizes their typical sense of welcome, belonging, and inherent dominance in everyday life. Throughout the interview, they did not describe such uncertainties in any other instance. These informants either steer clear of spaces where they are a numerical ethnic minority or try them briefly but refrain from returning. This underscores that some individuals without a migration background are uncomfortable in a numerical ethnic minority position and

possess the privilege of avoiding such spaces, given the availability of other spaces where they belong to the dominant group. A possible coping mechanism for dealing with belonging uncertainty is to avoid spaces where one anticipates encountering this feeling.

4.2. Overcoming Belonging Uncertainty

In the preceding sections, we demonstrated that the anticipation or actual experience of belonging uncertainty might prompt individuals without a migration background to steer clear of spaces in neighbourhoods where they constitute a numerical ethnic minority. Nevertheless, not all informants choose to avoid such contexts, even when experiencing initial discomfort. On the contrary, several informants continue to visit these spaces. Johann (33) provides insight into his reasons for regularly going to the Turkish hairdresser in his neighbourhood:

> Well, because it's the best hairdresser and because it's cheap and because I—[unintelligible], and because I—uhm yes—probably because I want to prove something to myself, too. Because I think it's cool or important that I can do these things in my neighbourhood....Maybe I'll work a little on these success stories even if they don't all work out. But I like to do that, also to support my own worldview. (Johann, 33)

Other informants provided additional reasons for consistently visiting spaces in the neighbourhood that trigger the experience of belonging uncertainty. These motivations can be categorized as moral, curiosity-driven, quality-focused, or economic. For example, some participants patronize restaurants owned by individuals with a migration background due to the quality of the meals or their economic affordability. In other cases, people find value in the experiential aspect. Johann, for instance, describes his visits as a "short journey, [which] brings the world into the neighbourhood." Martin (37), exposed to ethnic diversity from a young age, considers engaging with ethnic minoritized groups as normal, similar to Jessica (30), who grew up in an ethnically diverse district of Vienna and sees interaction as inevitable.

By persistently visiting spaces where they initially felt belonging uncertainty, some respondents have learned to cope with this feeling and no longer avoid spaces where they are a minority. Greta, for example, continues to frequent places where she is a minority, initially feeling "a little out of place," but with repeated visits, she claims to "handle it better" and has become "braver." Notably, two informants managed to overcome the feeling of belonging uncertainty and establish a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood context where they are an ethnic minority.

As the coming paragraphs demonstrate, overcoming feelings of belonging uncertainty can be understood as a process. In order to outline this process, we will delve into two narratives. The first narrative is provided by Johann:

> This is my Turkish hairdresser and—because I'm really the exception there—I believe that few people go there without a Turkish migration background, or even a migration background at all. And the first few times it was a bit like "huh, what do you want? You know where you are, right?" [laughs]...I think I was there once and another guy came in and he got his turn before me, yes. And, of course, I didn't make a fuss because I wasn't sure whether he might have called [to make an appointment

beforehand] or something, but I probably thought to myself: Yes, ok, they are now thinking the *Ösi* [colloquial, sometimes jokingly, sometimes derogatory for "Austrian"] should wait now….But now, I am respected after I've come for a long time. I know the people, that's the way it is, after the fifth time you suddenly get a handshake….The other time, I was the best man and brought the whole wedding party there and now we are just full-on homies, yes. (Johann, 33)

Johann's story demonstrates how the feeling of belonging uncertainty can be overcome after exposing oneself to the same numerical ethnic minority context multiple times. His journey progressed from feeling uncertain about his belonging ("huh what do you want?") based on the marginalization of his ethnic identity ("I'm really the exception there") to an acceptance which, to him, is indicated by a personal greeting he received after entering the hairdresser ("suddenly get a handshake").

A similar story is provided by Martin, who also underwent the process of overcoming belonging uncertainty:

For a while, I went to the hairdresser on Ottakringer Straße….I don't know if it's Serbian or maybe— I don't know—in any case, it seems very Anatolian anyhow—let's put it like that. And you come in…if you walk in there as an Austrian, it's dead silent at first. There really is silence. Yes. Everybody darts a glance at you and if you then say, "*Servus* [traditional, friendly greeting, common among friends and good acquaintances], haircut?"—[they say:] "Haircut. Sit down. Wait." All of the customers are waiting and there is the standard haircut [laughs]….At some point, it was my turn. A few people just walked in, they were acquaintances, and they were helped first [before me]. I didn't say anything about that, that's just how it was. Yes. They came in and had their turn immediately. Yes. Yes, that was a very interesting experience. My advantage was that I earned a certain status there after having waited three times and the fourth or fifth time I also had my turn right away! (Martin, 37)

We were intrigued by the motivations driving these informants to navigate the uncomfortable process of overcoming belonging uncertainty. Generally, people seek acceptance from others because it is linked to positive outcomes, such as positive social relationships that are functionally crucial and come with rewards (Leary, 2010). For Johann and Martin, the rewards of forming social relationships include a sense of belonging in previously perceived inaccessible neighbourhood spaces, which may still be so for other Austrians without a migration background (cf. Kohlbacher et al., 2015). Overcoming belonging uncertainty results in a heightened comfort level in specific neighbourhood spaces, and for Johann, expanding his social network serves another purpose. Johann sees it as "cool or important" that he can engage in these activities in his neighbourhood. Using the relationship with people in the Turkish hairdresser as a demonstration of cultural capital, he invites his friend's wedding party to the hairdresser, showcasing to his friends that he has successfully bridged the gap between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority. This action can be interpreted as Johann "showing off" his ethnically diverse network and his ability to engage in activities in his neighbourhood that may seem unattainable to other Austrians without a migration background. Johann's capacity to invite the wedding party indicates that he has become an insider in both groups.

4.3. Strategies to Overcome Belonging Uncertainty

While only a few informants in our interviews discussed overcoming belonging uncertainty in neighbourhood contexts, we wish to explore their experiences more deeply. Existing literature on belonging

uncertainty has generally overlooked methods for overcoming this feeling, particularly in demonstrating the process of establishing belonging through practices in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, as noted by Blokland and Nast (2014).

To cultivate a sense of belonging and access associated benefits, Johann and Martin adopt a highly reflexive approach to their social position when interacting with individuals from different ethnic groups. They scrutinize their position in the social structure, are mindful of their appearance, consider the message conveyed by their demeanour, and anticipate how it will be received. For instance, Johann is conscious of not wanting to be perceived as an "ass Austrian" and understands the importance of his appearance in specific environments. By being cognizant of their ethnic identity paired with their appearance, both Johann and Martin employ strategies to secure acceptance from the Other.

Three strategies employed by Johann and Martin in their neighbourhood to establish bonds and increase acceptance are identified. The first strategy involves adopting a pleasant interpersonal stance, with Johann avoiding being perceived as an "ass Austrian" and adapting his behaviour to imitate others in certain contexts. This strategy is evident in their patient waiting at the hairdresser without asserting themselves when observing other customers receiving preferential treatment.

The second strategy focusses on downplaying social status, especially concerning ethnic identity, in contexts where acceptance from the Other is the goal. Both Johann and Martin are aware of the counter-productive nature of displaying status, considering their internalized sense of power and understanding their place within structures of domination. Martin, for example, feels discriminated against when wearing a suit and adjusts his appearance to receive a more informal and friendlier treatment at places like the Turkish bakery.

The third strategy involves the use of cultural capital, specifically employing vocabulary from another language. Martin incorporates a few words from another language with humour to overcome the boundaries of ethnic difference and enhance social acceptance:

> I learned their language—yes, well, not really—not in the sense that I can [speak it fluently] now, but I [am the best at cursing] [laughs] and, yes, that is the point yes. If you pick up on that a bit and play along a bit, then....I can also [say] "thank you," "please," and "give me that," or "hold on," that works!... And that is just this, yes, I'd say, counter-integration, let's call it that, that you also integrate into it all....If you accept that and if you just play along and crack a joke like *Haydi* [Turkish for "let's go!"], "hurry up!"—then he gets it and you are accepted in a different way, I think, yes. (Martin, 37)

To establish a social relationship, Martin employs little jokes which lead to an increase in acceptance (cf. Van Praag et al., 2017). He is well aware that his humour is directly linked to gaining acceptance and he uses it strategically ("if you just play along and crack a joke...you are accepted in a different way").

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has offered an in-depth exploration of the experiences of individuals without a migration background who find themselves as a numerical ethnic minority within their neighbourhood (predominantly at restaurants and the barbershop). It uncovers the complexities and nuanced realities of intergroup relations

and the varied manners in which individuals navigate their sense of belonging ethnically in environments in which they are an ethnic minority. The central concept of "belonging uncertainty" has been instrumental in understanding these experiences, providing a novel perspective on the dynamics of social inclusion and community life.

We found that people have different ways of coping with the experience of belonging uncertainty. One coping strategy is to avoid spaces where they experience belonging uncertainty (cf. Good et al., 2012; Wise, 2005). Many of our informants feel uncomfortable in situations in which they are or may be a minority and their reaction is to avoid such situations. Some scholars (Jimenez, 2017; Wessendorf, 2013) have argued that people without a migration background adapt to ethnically diverse environments. But usually, such research refers to contexts that are either highly ethnically diverse or where people without a migration background constitute the largest group. In this article, we investigated the context in which another ethnic group is dominant and in such cases many of our informants decided to disengage from these particular contexts to avoid interaction.

This finding has two implications. Firstly, we demonstrated that feelings of belonging uncertainty are especially prevalent when people are confronted with a situation where another ethnic group is numerically dominant. The experience of belonging uncertainty is thus one potential explanation for why people without a migration background generally have fewer interactions with people with a migration background in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Crul et al., 2012). Secondly, the avoidance of such spaces cannot be reconciled with the idea that ethnic diversity is experienced as a normal part of social life (Jimenez, 2017; Wessendorf, 2013). As we have seen in this research, ethnic difference does matter, and frequenting and interacting with people of a different ethnicity in a context numerically dominated by that group may trigger belonging uncertainty (cf. Crul & Lelie, 2019, pp. 193–194). Rather than actively developing a strategy to handle such situations and learn about the cultural repertoire of people of colour with a migration background to advance themselves and their children, they seem to withdraw (cf. the concept of "paralyzed white identity" in Crul, 2018).

At the same time, we find that not all people without a migration background withdraw from spaces in which they are an ethnic minority. Some of our informants overcome the feeling of belonging uncertainty by repeatedly exposing themselves to spaces (cf. Valentine, 2008) where they are a minority and, in some instances, they build social ties with people with a migration background as a result. This demonstrates, on the one hand, how people without a migration background develop feelings of belonging to spaces encountered in their everyday neighbourhood life through their practices and, on the other hand, that there are exceptions to the "paralyzed white identity." Some individuals seem better equipped to adapt to the ethnic difference in their neighbourhoods, engage with people with a migration background, and adjust their behaviour to a particular context accordingly.

The feeling of belonging uncertainty can only be overcome if people without a migration background take the initiative to actively engage with people with a migration background in that context. Limited awareness or information about one's own social standing or people from another ethnic background can hinder or block such engagement. Establishing belonging is a complex process that involves the strategic adaption of people's behaviour and potentially involves uncomfortable situations which they will need to navigate until they reach a feeling of comfort. So while we agree with Jimenez (2017) that some people without a migration background adapt to changing circumstances, we do not agree that this happens to them "while making other plans" (p. 80).

Our data show that participation in such contexts requires people without a migration background to make an effort. This adaption process is complex and requires the employment of social strategies, which means that it does not "simply happen."

We have presented some first answers to the question of why some people are more inclined than others to overcome the feeling of belonging uncertainty. Future research endeavours could benefit from adopting an intersectional perspective to delve deeper into the complexities of belonging uncertainty. While our study focussed primarily on ethnic difference and its association with belonging uncertainty, it is imperative to recognize the intertwined nature of ethnicity with other social markers such as class, religion, and gender. For instance, during the analysis of the interviews we noticed that women experience increased belonging uncertainty when they are confronted with spaces that are dominated by men of a different ethnicity. If we aim to further expand our understanding of on-going social processes in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, future studies should examine such contextual effects.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information and the need to protect participant privacy as per confidentiality agreements.

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