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Recruitment in public administrations: diversity policies and selection practices in a French city

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic study of recruitment processes in the public service of a French city. It begins by engaging with the existing literature on representative bureaucracy and discrimination of members of minority groups and then surveys some of the existing literature on French exceptionalism in this domain. Based on an analysis of gatekeeping practices and recruitment, set off against the numerical under-representation of candidates with an immigration background, the paper argues that a series of seemingly minor mechanisms help to explain why so few of these candidates are being selected. It concludes by arguing that the empirical study of these mechanisms provides avenues for strategic interventions in selection processes aiming to create more genuine equal opportunities for members of minority groups.

KEYWORDS

Discrimination; recruitment; local administration; France; representative bureaucracy

Introduction

Two broad paradigms exist to study and critically think about the situation in which people with an immigration background continue to be relatively disadvantaged in politics and public administrations. First, one can understand this in terms of social inequality and discrimination, focusing on the ways in which disadvantages and an unequal distribution of resources (economic, cultural, educational, and social networks) tend to intersect with ascriptive identities (gender, ethnicity, race, and religion) (Alba and Nee 1997; Veenman 2010). In Europe people with an immigration background continue to be structurally disadvantaged: on average they live in more deprived neighbourhoods, their children perform less well in school, they are poorer, less healthy, less well situated on the labour market, over-represented in crime statistics, and so on. The lack of social mobility across generations not only connects with many social problems, it also contradicts basic normative notions about equality and non-discrimination: the belief that one’s skin-colour, religion, ethnicity, gender, class- and family-background should not decide one’s life chances and societal position (Phillips 2004). Second, when it comes to politics and public administrations, the lack of equal representation of people with an immigration background is not only a question of how power and resources are distributed, but also a question of how power and resources are legitimized.
background can also be framed as a violation of democratic values, because the ideal of political equality demands that members of minority groups can participate as equals in the political system and become voters, elected politicians and holders of office (Dahl 2015). Ideally, in a democracy citizens of diverse backgrounds are equally represented in the institutions of the state (the bureaucracy, the judiciary, local government) and in the public service (schools, the police, public broadcasting agencies). Consequently, administrations and public service organisations have a twofold exemplary function: first, they should illustrate that in a given society equal opportunities for all exist and no-one is being disadvantaged or discriminated against. Second, the openness of the political system and of public administrations should show that all citizens have equal access to the state and equal opportunities to accede to the rights, public goods and services it provides (Selden 2006, 911).

The notion of ‘representative bureaucracy’ expresses the idea that public service organisations should be sufficiently representative of the populations that they serve (Bradbury and Kellough 2008; Peters, von Maravic, and Schröter 2015). A more representative bureaucracy is expected to increase the likelihood that the interests and ideas of all groups in society will be articulated and taken into account in policy development, policy implementation and public service delivery. If public service organisations are more representative they can also become sources of identification for members of minority groups and they can foster acceptance of the various forms of diversity characterising our societies.

Ideologically, France prides itself on being extremely well equipped to provide equal opportunities to immigrant newcomers because of its allegedly ‘colour blind’ model of immigrant incorporation and because of a meritocratic system of recruitment based on qualifications and state exams (the so-called concours, see below). Yet, it is quite difficult to establish empirically whether it is indeed successful in this respect because of the legal and cultural obstacles to the direct collection of data on ethnic background (Brouard and Tiberj 2005; Simon 2005). This also holds for data on public service organisations (la fonction publique) which represent one fifth of the French labour market (Meier and Hawes 2009; Baradji, Idmachiche, and Schreiber 2012). In addition, recruitment processes and career development in public service organisations are usually highly confidential. Especially in the context of discussions about discrimination and ethnicity, organisations tend to be reluctant to allow outsiders a look over the shoulders of recruiters. In France this is particularly complicated given the sensitivity of the entire issue of minority representation in the public sector.

This article presents results of an ethnographic study in one French city. It aims to reconstruct the obstacles immigrant-origin candidates encountered and the mechanisms that can explain their continued exclusion. We will focus on immigrants from Africa and Asia and their descendants, because these groups are commonly seen as particularly disadvantaged and discriminated against in France. There are important differences within these groups, not only in terms of geographic origins, gender and class but also between generations. For example, on average the first generation immigrants had less human capital (in terms of education, French language skills and social networks) than members of the second and third generations who were raised and educated in France (Cusset et al. 2015; Shahrokni 2015). Because our goal is to contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms of exclusion that are relevant across the various immigrant-origin
groups, we will not be directly concerned with differences between the groups in this article. We begin by introducing the broader context of recruitment and ethnic diversity in the French public service. We then discuss the main theories and some of the relevant studies in this field, before providing more information on our own empirical case study. The second part presents our empirical findings and the results of our analysis. This part is then followed by a conclusion.

**Municipal recruitment practices and ethnic diversity in France**

In the French fonction publique people with immigrant background are underrepresented both with regard to their number (compared with their relative size in the local population) and their position in the organisational hierarchy (see Pouget and Fougère 2004; Versini 2004). According to a study by Pouget (2005, 156), a mere 4.1% of all civil servants had one parent with immigrant background, whereas 3.9% had two immigrant parents (the percentage of immigrant-origin people in the French labour force was estimated at 9.2 in 2012, Contrepoints 2014). Of the civil servants with two immigrant parents, 2.4% had both parents with ancestry in Europe and 1.3% had both parents with North African ancestry. Studies on immigrant employment in the Ministry of the Interior (Heran, Meurs, and Eberhard 2009), and on civil servants and career development in Paris and Nantes (Eberhard, Meurs, and Simon 2008; Eberhard, Meurs, and Simon 2009), concluded not only that there were relatively few employees who were immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Africa, but also that almost all of them were working in lower level positions (Eberhard and Simon 2012).

Recruitment into the French fonction publique is based on a system of concours, consisting of a variety of professional exams organised by the state and aiming to evaluate the qualities of those who aspire to working in the public service. Only candidates who have successfully passed the relevant exam can apply for a position in the public administration. Until 2012, this requirement applied to all functions in the public sector, but since then it has been dropped for operative functions, like gardener or waste collector. Candidates who have not passed a concours but who consider themselves qualified, for example because of their experience, can ask for an exemption (derogation). Importantly also, the French bureaucracy is based on a lifetime ‘career model’ in which people who are employed in the civil service can gradually move up the ladder.

One guiding idea behind the concours is the meritocratic idea that genuine equality of opportunity arises if each individual is evaluated on the basis of his or her performance, without social or cultural background, gender or religion being taken notice of. That same idea is of course also central to the legitimation of the ‘French model’ of integration (see critically Bertossi 2012). State institutions and services (such as the public schools, the police, the army and the public administration) are expected to exemplify this French approach to equality and difference. Symbolically the concours thereby functions as an institution that should simultaneously represent the French integration model and genuine equality of opportunities. Enhancing the labour market participation of immigrants via some form of group-based intervention or positive action is regarded as alien to the French model, as morally unwanted and practically unnecessary.

Over the past two decades cracks have begun to appear in the hegemony of this Republican discourse, fuelled by stagnating socio-economic integration and an increasingly
polarised debate about cultural diversity and Islam. A new tone could be heard in the private sector where concepts such as ‘diversity’ and ‘diversity management’ came into vogue in Human Resource Management discourses. These concepts were relatively new in the French context and they allowed thinking about ethnicity alongside gender, sexual orientation, religion as an aspect of a person’s identity that mattered for professional relations within organisations.\(^1\) Major companies such as Accor, PSA Peugeot and Axa that were operating in an international environment began to incorporate sensitivity to ‘diversity’ in their organisational culture (Sabeg and Méhaignerie 2004). Gradually, this type of discourse was diffused into the public sector. For example, in 2008 a so-called Charter of Diversity Action was introduced that encouraged public and private organisations to take action in order to make their staff more diverse and to think about ‘diversity’ in relation to their organisational culture. In primary and secondary schools and in some of the Grandes Écoles initiatives were taken to stimulate a more equal presence of descendants of immigrants (Long 2004; Hargreaves 2015). Later on in this article, we will discuss in what ways these shifts in ways of thinking about diversity, non-discrimination and organisational culture in France played a role in recruitment practices in the city of Pessac.

**Understanding and analysing discrimination in hiring decisions**

A great deal of research on discriminatory behaviour in recruitment and selection is based on field experiments where ‘researchers resort to fictitious candidates with equivalent and thus exchangeable qualifications’ (Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016, 2). This type of research is extremely helpful in understanding why discrimination occurs (for France see Cédiey and Foroni 2008), but it offers little information on *how* it occurs, especially not in real-life day-to-day organisational practice. Other research strategies can be employed, such as an ex post reconstruction of hiring decisions and recruitment procedures on the basis of interviews and questionnaires, or the more difficult path of ethnographic observations.

In experiments, qualifications and profile of candidates can be held constant, whereas gender, phenotypical characteristics and family names can vary. This allows the researchers to establish to what extent discrimination plays a role in hiring decisions. However, in reality, we need to take into account various inequalities of the candidates, especially if these inequalities strongly correlate with the ethnic background of candidates. Second, we need to be sensitive to professional preferences and ambitions, which may also correlate with particular characteristics of groups, for example social class and profession of parents.

In France, people with immigrant background are on average less likely to have the educational qualifications that are asked for in specific job advertisements, at least for the higher positions. In terms of inequalities with regard to education, for example, recent figures show that between 2007 and 2012, 39% of the male pupils with African ancestry left school without a diploma (Cusset et al. 2015, 6). While 64.2% of youth of immigrant background managed to obtain the high school diploma (*baccalauréat*), this number is significantly lower for pupils with Turkish background (32.9%) and with North African background (50.8%). Most youth of immigrant background opt for a vocational education, but in that sector school dropout is particularly high. In addition, youth of immigrant descent also have more difficulty than native French youth to obtain an internship,
which in vocational education is central for labour market opportunities. Among those migrant-origin youth who do begin higher education after the baccalauréat, 38% finish without a diploma (for non-immigrant French the share is 22%).

Descendants of immigrants constitute about 9.8% of the total labour force in France. About 10% are employed in the public sector (including all kinds of public services, such as hospitals) as opposed to 14% of the population without an immigrant background (Baradji, Idmachiche, and Schreiber 2012). No numbers are available on the achievements of descendants of migrants in the various state exams. In their sample of candidates applying in the city of Paris, Simon et al. found that the proportion of immigrant-origin candidates who had participated in a concours was about 10% lower than for non-immigrant candidates (Eberhard, Meurs, and Simon 2009, 61–62).

The goal of this study is to understand how and why a series of steps and decisions in selection procedures result in the exclusion of candidates with an immigration background, taking into account that they are often perceived and assessed as less suited or less qualified. We started from the assumption that routine and seemingly rational ways of doing within an organisation are shaped by an unequal social structure and (often unintentionally) help reproduce inequalities. We conceptualise selection in terms of a ‘gate-keeping process’ and look at ‘social practices within recruitment where the processes of inclusion and exclusion by gatekeepers are constantly occurring’ (Husu 2004; van den Brink and Benschop 2014, 463). The transition from one stage to the next is conceptualised as a ‘gate’. Focusing on ‘gate-keeping practices’ allows seeing how ‘ascriptive identities’ (based on race, ethnicity, looks, gender, sexual orientation, cultural membership, religion, and so on) intersect with discussions among ‘gate keepers’ about the qualifications of candidates and attempts to assess whether they will fit in the municipal organisation. In such a process tracing approach we can study how disadvantages for members of immigrant minorities are constituted.

In the remainder of the article, we will discuss the findings of a study carried out in Pessac, a neighbouring city of Bordeaux in the South West of France. In many respects, Pessac stands for cities in France that developed as satellites of larger neighbouring cities and where substantial numbers of immigrant families began to settle since the late 1970s. Even though we do not claim Pessac is representative for what happens everywhere in France, we also have little reason to expect that the practices and mechanisms we will be focusing on will differ radically from what happens elsewhere.

The empirical research was conducted between September 2011 and September 2014. It included 55 semi-structured interviews with ‘gate keepers’ (37 interviews with Human Resource Managers, heads of departments, elected officials, mayors and other actors), on the one hand, and people of ‘immigrant background’ who were employed in the administration or had unsuccessfully applied for a job, on the other (18 interviews). The researcher also conducted an internship in two different public service organisations and was allowed to attend selection meetings and discussions about candidates as well as a number of meetings concerning efforts to develop policies of diversity and strengthen those of non-discrimination. She was also given access to all documentation about the selection procedures in the period of the research (2012–2014). Names and positions in the following text are fictitious for reasons of anonymity. The ethnographic observations were collected as notes in an ethnographic diary.
Ethnic diversity and municipal administration: a case study

At the beginning of the research period, in 2012, Pessac had a total population of 59,223 inhabitants, which makes it a relatively small city in France. Socially and geographically it functions as a suburb of Bordeaux, which has a population of approximately 250,000 people (Compass 2012). As of the 1970s, the city grew rapidly with the influx of Spanish, Italian and Moroccan immigrants, who were mostly housed in the public housing projects that were developed in new urban zones all over France in this period. At the beginning of this century, the largest immigrant groups originated from Portugal (about 25% of the total number), Morocco (about 19%), other EU-countries (14%) and Spain (14%). Since then, new groups from Asia and Africa have arrived in the Bordeaux region and Pessac. Statistics are only available for the number of non-nationals (étrangers), which was 4.4% in 2014, but the percentage of ‘descendants of immigrants’ is substantially higher. Youth unemployment is high (18% of the unemployed are younger than 25 years). Most people in search of a job only have a diploma in vocational education or a professional qualification (such as the Brevet d’études professionnelles (BEP) or a Certificat d’aptitudes professionnels (CAP) (Compass 2012).

The municipal administration of Pessac is divided into four departments and has 20 public service sections (including Town Planning, Housing, Culture and Recreation, Public Works and Transport, Public health, Education, Employment, Youth). The number of employees grew from 975 in 2009 to 1110 in 2014. 81% of the employees have a permanent contract. In 2011, the largest number of employees was working in the ‘technical’ services, kindergartens (ASTEM), administrative jobs and in the medical-social services. From 2009 to 2014, the city recruited around 20 persons per year in permanent positions and about 35 for internships or projects. Of these, approximately 15 a year were recruited at the professional level of operative functions (City of Pessac 2014).

Until about 10 years ago, the city of Pessac did not have any clearly defined strategy with regard to recruiting candidates of immigrant descent. Things began moving when, in 2010, youth ‘des quartiers’ (that is, from the suburban social housing projects) revolted against their exclusion and what they framed as a ‘lack of recognition’ in the field of municipal employment (Le Sud-Ouest 2010). A project was set up to help recruit more youth and adults from the urban renewal (politique de la ville) neighbourhoods. An internal guideline4 was introduced in 2011, without being formalised, which basically consisted of efforts to build partnerships with individuals and associations in the neighbourhoods to allow members of some groups (mostly defined in terms of age and residence, rather than in terms of ethnicity) to enter subsidised jobs and, if possible, to subsequently have access to a temporary or even permanent position. Central to this unofficial programme was also the attempt to systematically inform inhabitants des quartiers (literally ‘from the neighbourhoods’, one of the many ‘replacement categories’ (De Zwart 2005) used in France to target immigrant-origin populations) about job openings by involving institutional and associational partners, tracking potential candidates for available job profiles, and by supporting potential candidates in preparing an application. A centralised service is responsible for the publication of the job advertisements and distribution through formal channels, notably official websites and journals such as La Gazette.5

The starting point for our empirical analysis was an estimate of the numbers of employees with an immigration background. There are legal restrictions to the collection of
statistics on the basis of ‘ethnicity’, but a city can collect data on the nationality of employees. However, the city of Pessac did not have a statistical overview of its employees according to nationality and did not grant access to the personnel files (which include nationality). Hence we decided to create our own estimates of the number of employees of African and Asian immigrant-origin. In order to create a reliable estimate, we compiled a list of all employees in Pessac between 2011 and 2013 in all services and administrations, and then counted those whose surname and/or first name plausibly suggested a (relatively recent) immigrant background. We categorised these by coding surnames and names (please note that all names mentioned here are fictitious, none of the people in our sample actually had one of these names) with Sub-Saharan African background (Abdulla, Massamba, Fatou, Kara, Adulla) North African background (Mourad, Khiera, Ayad), Asian and other background (Yi, Nurul, Fu and Luu). We are confident that we thus included most persons with an immigrant background in Africa or Asia, because people born in a foreign country but married to a native French person would be included (because of their first name and/or because of their family name) as well as most children of immigrant-origin parents and/or ‘mixed’ parentage. We admit that this method may result in some ‘over-inclusion’ (e.g. French parents without an immigration background may decide to give their child a first name originating in (North) Africa or Asia) and ‘under inclusion’ (e.g. a mixed couple with a French family name and one parent born abroad may decide to give their child a name that we coded as ‘French’, such as Mireille, Olivier, Emmanuelle).

As table one illustrates, the number of employees with a North African background increased between 2011 and 2013 (2 percentage points more than in 2011, 40 persons in 2011 and 61 persons in 2013) and the percentage of employees with a Sub-Saharan African background rose from 1.4% to 2% (14 persons in 2011, 20 persons in 2013). The total of employees of immigrant background was 8.6% (or 105 persons) in 2013 compared with only 65 in 2011. Other indicators of their relative position include the level of the position or function, the type of employment (also per sector) and the type of contract (temporary or permanent). In Pessac in 2013, 97.2% of the employees with an immigration background were employed in operative functions corresponding to the lowest salary scale (the level of exécution). Only 1.9% were working in functions of policy advising or policy development (élaboration), and in 2013 no-one was working in a managerial position (direction). Most of the employees with an immigration background in Pessac are working in education, property and gardening, and in these fields their presence is quite substantial compared with the total number of employees (approximately 35%). The majority of the employees with an immigration background had only temporary contracts and worked on a ‘project basis’, and only one third had been recruited in a permanent position (City of Pessac 2014).

**Ethnicity and recruitment in practice: ‘gate keeping’ and selection in Pessac**

From the numbers presented in Table 1, it becomes clear that immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Africa and Asia are underrepresented in the municipal organisation and public services in Pessac, and especially in the higher echelons of the municipal
bureaucracy. We now move to the discussion of the results of our ethnographic and qualitative research into recruitment practices.

The recruitment and selection processes analysed here involved in total 37 people directly, and all of these were interviewed. They included 9 people who were holding a political office, such as the (city-district) mayor, members of the local government or the municipal council, 7 respondents from the Human Resources Department and 21 managers of services or heads of departments. They were mostly 45 years old or older, white, and had a high level of education. Many of them had a typical French ‘civil servant CV’: they were graduates of one of the Grandes Écoles and had been working exclusively in the public sector. None of the civil servants involved in recruitment in Pessac had an immigration background, but among the elected municipal councillors (who also have a voice in recruitment) there were three with a foreign background. The relatively homogeneous nature of the pool from which selection committees are constituted seems to provide substantial opportunities for discrimination in hiring processes, especially given the well-known tendency to select applicants from ‘in-groups’ (Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016, 4). And yet, in Pessac no specific measures were taken to address the risk of (unintentional) discrimination, such as quota or positive discrimination, consciousness-raising among selectors, or guaranteeing that the procedures were as objective as possible (e.g. with the help of standard assessment forms or by making selection criteria and the way candidates should be ranked transparent in advance).

The first gate: the application

Our analysis of the applications for jobs in 2012, 2013 and 2014 shows that few candidates with a foreign name applied. In the whole of 2012, for example, there were 33 jobs available, but the candidates of immigrant origin only represent a very small part of all those who submitted an application (approximately 5%). This held for all functions and jobs (not only those in managerial functions) and both for permanent positions and for temporary contracts (Table 2).

For the 15 (out of a total of approximately 90) job openings between 2012 and 2014 that were studied in more detail only 47 out of the 560 applications were of candidates with an immigrant background. For the vacancies in the field of education, sport and green spaces, which all belonged to the lowest level of operative functions, there were more candidates with an immigration background. However, only a small number were shortlisted for an interview (see below). It is difficult to estimate the pool of potential candidates with an immigration background, because it would require knowledge about interest in the available positions, educational background, the exact proportion of people of immigrant origin in the regional population of working age. Still, it seems safe to conclude that,

| Total number of employees in entire administration (all services included) | 2011 (1017 employees) | 2012 (1032 employees) | 2013 (1054 employees) |
| Employees with African and Asian ancestry | (54) 5.70% | (58) 6.00% | (81) 8.60% |

Source: Authors and Human Resources Archives Pessac.
given the diversity of advertised positions and requirements in terms of qualification (from operative functions such as gardening, unto management), the number of immigrant origin applicants was small. The fact that the municipality informally launched a project to attract more youth from les quartiers in collaboration with migrant organisations suggests there was concern about the lack of applications. Anecdotal evidence further suggests that formal information channels, such as the earlier-mentioned Gazette or the official municipal website, are less known and hence less accessible for members of immigrant minority groups. Furthermore, people with an immigration background are far less likely to have family members who are already employed by the municipality (see also Meziani-Remichi 2013). Thus, given their smaller number, people of immigrant origin are disadvantaged not only for ‘internal’ job openings (i.e. that are open to those already employed in the municipal organisation), but also when it comes to being informed about job openings that are advertised publicly. The news about

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Level of position</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Candidates with African or Asian ancestry</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Candidates with African or Asian ancestry</th>
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<th>Candidates with African or Asian ancestry on short list</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1 Professional gardener</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Leisure organiser</td>
<td>O</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>58&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Educational organiser</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Supervisor in green service</td>
<td>PS</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5 Technical instructor</td>
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<td>7 Receptionist</td>
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<td>8 Manager youth localities</td>
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<td>9 General assistant</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>11&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Documentarist</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>160</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Technical agent</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>12 Coordinator in youth</td>
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<td>13 Director of economic</td>
<td>management</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>14 Management assistant</td>
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<td>15 Manager</td>
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</table>

Source: Authors based on recruitment archives of the city of Pessac.
Notes: O: operative (FR: service); PS: Policy/Supervision (FR: Elaboration).
<sup>a</sup>In this case all applications were discussed in order to compose a shortlist.
<sup>b</sup>All candidates who applied were invited for an interview.
<sup>c</sup>All candidates that were shortlisted were invited for an interview.
these often travels by ‘hear say’ and in France also via family members employed in la fonction publique.\(^7\)

**The second gate: shortlisting**

The first phase of genuine selection begins when a shortlist is made, normally in view of the interview phase for which a relatively small number of candidates will be invited. In Pessac, the shortlisting was done in a small team and based on the CVs and cover letters. During the research, the researcher was allowed to attend these meetings as an intern and researcher. She could take ethnographic notes, which were then discussed in subsequent qualitative interviews. In order to make the ethnographic observations as comprehensive and precise as possible, an observation guide was used including different aspects (such as use of particular terms or expressions when files were discussed, whether committee members were discussing candidates outside of the general discussion). These observations and notes, in combination with the interviews, were then used to carefully reconstruct how in practice this phase of the selection procedure was unfolding. The aim was to identify what maybe seemingly minor actions and mechanisms amount to the effect of decreasing the likelihood that candidates with an immigration background were shortlisted.

The shortlisting team usually consisted of one or two managers and one or two directors of the services or departments that were involved. The same procedure was being followed for job openings at all levels: all members of the team had studied the files beforehand, but because no scheme was distributed in advance each member of the committee would use his or her own system and his or her own interpretation of the criteria (and their relative weight) to classify the candidates. Before the meeting started everyone would have a list of their six to seven best candidates. One feature that surprised the observing researcher was the speed at which applications were being processed (about 15–18 applications were processed per hour). Different aspects were taken together in order to assess an application with ‘+', '+/-' or '-'; but it was not clear how positive evaluations that were mentioned in the discussion (e.g. for ‘diploma’, ‘expertise’) were balanced with critical points (e.g. ‘sloppy presentation of CV’, ‘does not clearly express what qualities (s)he has for the job’). Besides issues of form (language used, layout and style), in all pre-selections two ‘benchmark-criteria’ (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997) quickly emerged: education (training, degrees, diplomas) and (professional) experience. Candidates who scored high on these two criteria were considered of ‘guaranteed quality’. Terms used during the meetings and discussions to score the candidates on these benchmark criteria included: ‘knows the municipality’, ‘is experienced’, ‘has experience with acquisition’, ‘is knowledgeable with regard to operational management’. Given the speed and the lack of reflexivity in applying the seemingly self-evident ‘benchmark criteria’ to individual candidates, the chances were very high that few dossiers of descendants of African or Asian migrants were retained. This was not because they were discarded while having similar qualifications, but because they were scoring less on these criteria. There was no critical reflection about the criteria and how they structurally disadvantaged candidates with less education and experience, even for positions as gardeners and assistants in education. In addition, given that the vast majority of these candidates were living in the urban renewal areas of Pessac (district of Alouette, Saige, Chataigneraie), it is not
unlikely that subconscious forms of discrimination occurred as ‘foreign name’, ‘resident of that area of the city’ and ‘lack of sound qualifications’ may together raise negative feelings towards the candidate (Meziani-Remichi 2015, 421). Counterfactually, we think that a procedure that would, for example, ensure that a number of applications of immigrant-origin candidates will be maintained, even if they do not score high on the standard criteria, and that would allow consideration of other, additional qualifications, would result in different outcomes (Dhume and Sagnard-Haddaoui 2006, 145).

Paradoxically, our respondents often expressed a sense of frustration about the fact that the applications were so poor that even with the best intentions they could not be retained, because as members of the selection committee they should strive to select ‘the best candidates’. But it also became clear that in the procedures and given the time pressure in which a shortlist was being made, style and form of the application (cover letter and CV) became disproportionately important in making a judgement, even if writing skills or computer skills were not part of the required qualifications for a particular position. Great attention was being paid to spelling, layout and readability of the documents and to the way the documents were presented:

When there are an incredible number of mistakes, even if we are aware that this is not very important for someone who wants to work in cleaning, it still bothers one as a reader …, and then the candidate loses points compared to others. (HR Manager)

25 among 37 recruiters told us that orthography and grammar were central in reaching decisions about applications in this phase.

Good writing skills and care in preparing an application may rightfully be seen as a proxy for qualities of a candidate that are relevant to the job. But considering that candidates of immigrant background may on average have less social or cultural capital they can use to get their application in good shape, could help avoid that this aspect is overrated in the shortlisting. Again, our respondents tended to be aware of this problem, but simultaneously saw it as inevitable and defendable in a fair selection process:

Either the application [of a candidate with an immigration background, authors] does not fit the job description in terms of the skills that are being asked for, or their CV is so much standardized that it does not really fit with the job description. (…) The problem is that they have not been taught to edit their CV in such a way that skills are being articulated in a way that makes them come across as suited for the job (…) We will prefer someone who has made an effort to really respond to the advertisement in a specific and appropriate manner (…). Our job is not easy, most of the time we receive only a few applications that are in good shape: often the poor quality of writing in the cover letter and in the CV makes it inconceivable that we will continue with the candidate. Sometimes we do not even have the basic information needed: dates are missing, or former employments, or some information about where the candidate was employed so that we can check. So they are already excluded by this first reading of their case. (HR Manager)

Candidates of immigrant background had difficulties passing this stage of the process. This was noted by Karim who was repeatedly rejected: ‘I know that I need help to write any CV, I have the help of a social worker, but I cannot always go there to ask them to read and correct my letters. So I did it by myself’ (Karim, candidate for a position as assistant). When his CV was discussed, the committee members said they believed he had good oral skills and would be helpful in communicating with particular groups, but they raised
doubts about his writing skills and general qualifications and therefore decided not to invite him for an interview.

The third gate: the interviews

The next stage in the recruitment procedure consisted of an interview for which a small number of candidates were invited. Depending on the type of position two basic forms were employed: for a temporary position or for lower level jobs (e.g. service) the candidate(s) would have an interview with their prospective manager, and sometimes with managers higher up in the hierarchy (e.g. the head of the service or the department), for instance, if the duration of the temporary contract was longer than six months. For permanent contracts and for higher level positions (policy advising, policy-making, and management), a larger committee was constituted in which key managers and HRM officials participated.

As explained above, we observed seven job interviews. Procedurally the interviews followed a similar structure. They were divided into four parts, and they lasted about 20–30 minutes. First, the candidate was invited to present him or herself without specific instructions being given in advance. Then there would be a round in which the education and training of the candidate were discussed based on the CV. The interview committee would seek to get a sense of the skills of the candidate with regard to the position. Finally they would ask more detailed question about the motivations of the candidate. As one municipal council member said, the goals were to get a sense of whether the candidate had the right ‘state of mind’ for the public service and sufficient basic knowledge about the city and its administration. Again no use was made of standardised or objectivised assessment forms, which, as we know from the literature, creates a risk that recruiters who believe to be evaluating skills objectively, are in actual fact (and sometimes unconsciously) collecting observations and clues that confirm their personal judgement, which is shaped by pre-existing ideas and stereotypes (see Heath and Cheung 2007; Gracia, Vázquez-Quesada, and Van de Werfhorst 2016). The absence of a pre-structured interview guide also creates more opportunities for individual committee members to steer the interview. Because the rules for selecting one candidate above another are usually also not specified in advance, the selection process becomes prone to many indirect forms of bias and discrimination. By proceeding in this way, the role of the individual recruiters becomes more important and their general ‘feeling’ that is emerging during the interview, and which includes appreciations of physical appearance, body posture, expression and speech, may become leading in the assessment (Amadieu 2002). Our ethnographic observations as well as the interviews revealed that recruiters simultaneously denied that physical appearance (e.g. skin colour) played any role, but then confirmed that the general ‘presentation’ of the candidate was very important and that ethnic markers such as accent, hair-do, dress or religious signs were being noticed during the interview, usually to the disadvantage of candidates with an immigrant background. Recruiters also admitted that there is an inherent tendency to prefer candidates who appear to correspond to the organisation in order to perpetuate it, an effect known as the ‗mechanism of homophily‘ in theories of relationship formation and networking (van den Brink and Benschop 2014, 464). This mechanism plays a role in relation to the recruitment of future colleagues, but it becomes even more important when someone is being recruited who will represent the
organisation to the outside world (e.g. as a communication officer, or to work at the service desk). At this point, ideas about what the typical civil servant should look like create extra barriers for descendants of non-western migrants, which may then de facto be excluded on the basis of their appearance and habitus. Religious dress by female candidates of the Islamic faith worked to their disadvantage, even if more ‘modest’ forms of the headscarf were being worn. One director insisted that it was inappropriate for the candidate to display a religious identity, and that it would decrease the chances of the candidate to be selected. Another respondent, a deputy HR director, explained after a meeting of a selection committee:

There is always this subjective dimension: I just ask myself if I would want to work with her, if there will be a good relationship. This involves things that go beyond her skills, obviously it is about … a feeling … communication … appearance. Given the number of candidates, it is inevitable that some attention will be given to the general appreciation of the person, as it comes across during the interview … In the end we will choose what we like … or someone who resembles us …. (HR manager)

These comments, in an amazing lucidity, demonstrate how, especially in a situation in which there is a lack of objectivised and predefined selection criteria, stereotypes and prejudices can play a big role in selection processes. The fact that institutions and organisations tend to recruit ‘the same people’ is thus likely to result in discrimination unless very deliberate measures are taken to avoid this from happening.

**Conclusion**

In France, municipal administrations and public service organisations do not fulfil an exemplary role when it comes to equal participation of people with immigrant origins, especially not for those with North African or Asian ancestry. This article has described some of the mechanisms that explain why candidates from these groups have difficulties in entering these organisations, and it has highlighted in what ways practices of gatekeeping and sequences of seemingly minor drawbacks in selection end up producing additional obstacles for candidates, who are often already at a disadvantage in terms of qualifications, experience and social capital. The ethnographic material has allowed us to show the more subtle dynamics of exclusion within organisational practice. However, a comprehensive account and solid explanation of the under-representation of these groups should include an analysis of inequalities in terms of human capital and of the professional preferences of people belonging to these groups.

We have identified six mechanisms around recruitment and selection procedures in Pessac that contribute to the reproduction of inequality and exclusion: (1) overall, candidates with an immigration background have more difficulty knowing about job openings, both through informal networks (e.g. family members or friends already employed at the municipality) and via regular channels (such as the official Gazette); (2) these candidates had more difficulties in presenting their application in a form and style that corresponded to what was being expected (3) in terms of human capital (education, experience, relevant internship, communicative skills) candidates of immigrant origin on average seemed less qualified; (4) in the recruitment processes we studied we found little reflectivity about criteria for selection, and how they (sometimes unconsciously) developed during the procedures and played out in the course of the procedures and in relation to specific
candidates. The same lack of reflexivity was visible when it came to differences between recruiters in applying criteria and ranking candidates. We identified many instances of ‘path dependency’, when negative judgements at an early stage, for example with regard to the presentation of an application, resulted in bias at a later stage of the recruitment process; (5) the relative lack of standardised procedures and formalised assessment in the shortlisting and interview phase created ample opportunities for unwanted bias among individual recruiters, as well as interaction effects between recruiters, which negatively affected the opportunities of immigrant-origin candidates. Finally (6) the general tendency to select candidates corresponding to the ‘occupational identity’ in terms of background, education, habitus and presentation (including visible markers such as skin colour, religious signs and hair-do) combined with a lack of ‘mixed’ selection committees, created an additional risk that immigrant-origin candidates would not pass the interview phase.

In our view, studying this type of mechanisms, and especially cumulative effects over time, is crucial in furthering our understanding of social exclusion and discrimination, which is important both for scholarly and for political reasons. This article has shown how inequalities of human capital, prejudice and discriminatory attitudes among recruiters as well as process factors (such as lack of formalisation, speed of procedures) in interaction and over time contribute to the exclusion of immigrant-origin candidates. In our view, this is too often overlooked in the ‘experimental studies’ that dominate the field. Here, qualifications and human capital of candidates are held constant, and studies risk over-emphasising the impact of ‘xenophobic attitudes’ and prejudices.

The findings of our study call for a reorientation of policies and strategies to address exclusion in recruitment and selection. We conclude by pointing to three main avenues for change: first, this study has demonstrated the importance of making procedures and criteria in selection and recruitment as objective and transparent as possible (by having lists to score candidates, transparent criteria and rules for balancing between criteria, and standardised interview protocols) and to constantly be reflective of the way criteria and procedures may play out in practice. Second, in selection procedures, and especially in the context of a very developed professional field such as the French fonction publique, there exists an idea of the perfect fit between an individual and a position. Ashcraft has dubbed this idea the ‘glass slipper’ and has shown how it aligns occupational identities with embodied social identities, specifying expectations with regard to the habitus and looks of suitable candidates (Ashcraft 2013). To address the exclusionary effects of these preconceived ideas, one can both promote more reflexivity among those involved in recruitment processes, and deliberately create more diverse organisations and selection committees (e.g. via quota). Third, by highlighting the ways in which seemingly small decisions and judgements taken by recruiters negatively affect equal opportunities for candidates with an immigration background, an opening is created for these actors to become more reflective without simply being attacked as ‘racists’. As Steele (2010, 215) has argued, the goal should be to make candidates with immigrant ancestry feel safe from ‘identity predicaments’. Helping recruiters become more aware of ways in which group identities and differences are constantly at work in our social and professional lives seems a better avenue for intervention than simply repeating that the real problem is their ‘deep rooted racial prejudices’. These types of adjustments and interventions could, and in our view
should, form part of more robust policies of diversity and equality, helping to overcome exclusion.

Notes

1. The fieldwork and research on which this paper draws have been conducted by Yamina Meziani-Remichi as part of her PhD project Diversifier l’organigramme? at the University of Bordeaux 2, supervised by Eric Macé and Marcel Maussen.
2. Another key event that mattered for debates about diversity and representation was the so-called Parité Law of 2000 concerning more equal participation of women in politics and government (Scott 2005).
3. About half of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, whereas interviews conducted in a more informal way were transcribed in the form of notes and summaries.
4. The French name of the project was ‘Projet d’exemplarité du recrutement des jeunes et adultes des quartiers politique de la ville’. A plan to develop a so-called Charter of Diversity (Charte de la diversité) figured on the policy agenda between 2012 and 2014, but with the arrival of a mayor of the Right (UMP) in 2014 these plans were aborted.
5. The official journal of the national government in which all job adverts in France are published. See: www.lagazettedescommunes.com.
6. This method was developed along the lines of the inquiries by Felouzis, Liot, and Perroton (2002) in French schools.
7. Audier (2000) found that having parents who are public servants is a key factor predicting the chance that someone is employed in la fonction publique.

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