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Discrimination in hiring revisited: How firms use ethnicity to avoid organisational troubles

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Going beyond economic and social psychological arguments to explain discrimination in hiring, this paper refers to compatible work of organisational studies (behavioural theory of the firm, neo-institutionalism, Luhmann's organisational theory) and to a theory of justice (Boltanski & Thévenot's Economies of Worth) to understand personnel selection. Hence the firm can be conceptualised as a social body of interweaved (industrial, domestic, market, civic etc.) worlds. To allow for the firm's further existence, each world tends to reproduce itself by claiming its own hiring principles of justice and of personnel valuation. Thus any promising candidate has to prove in the selection process his/her industrial, domestic and market suitability from the firm's point of view.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, the paper argues that the main selection logic in hiring is not to choose the most skilled candidate, but the one who suits best to avoid organisational troubles in multiple worlds. Ethnicity serves as an organisational symbolic resource for trouble expectations, especially in the domestic world of the firm.

Empirically, the paper refers to a special case of hiring: The case of trainee selection in Switzerland where immigrant students face substantial problems to access apprenticeship places. Using content and argumentation analysis, an interview-based investigation in 65 small and medium sized firms shows that firms take for granted to get into organisational troubles in various worlds by hiring students who are regarded as 'foreigners'.

Options and limits for policy making on the municipality level to avoid their professional exclusion will be reconsidered.