Towards a theorisation of diversity: The configuration of person-related differences in the context of youth welfare practice

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in youth welfare offices in Frankfurt and Stuttgart the talk proposes a pathway towards a theorisation of diversity. It is argued that not least due to bureaucratization, medicalization and juridification a proliferation of person-related categories has occurred. The spread of formal organizations covering almost all aspects of life and the resultant production of person-related difference is an important driver of diversification in the contemporary world. The problem how to select, produce and configure these abundant amount of potentially relevant differences became a wide-spread practical problem with which among others street-level bureaucrats have to deal with on a daily bases. I suggest that diversity offers a conceptual imaginary that connects the larger societal process of proliferation of person-related differences to the situational practice of configuring them. It also offers analytical perspective for studying the situational organization of various person-related differences of different scale and scope. Thereby, diversity goes beyond notions of identity, on the one hand, and intersectionality, on the other. In the second part of the talk, the outlined framework is applied on cases of youth welfare practice. The focus of the case analysis is on migration-related categories and how they relate to larger configurations of person-related differences in the field of youth welfare practice. I argue that the quality of opaqueness and ambiguity of some person-related interactional categories, like ethnicity, culture or ‘race’, in contrast to more concisely defined categories explains why we find largely differing accounts of how racist bureaucracies are and what impact ethnic differences have on their operation.