At the margins: renegotiating skills and exploitation of minority groups in low-wage SMEs

Hannah Vermaut & Patrizia Zanoni
Hasselt University
SEIN – Identity, Diversity & Inequality Research
Agoralaan
3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium
hannah.vermaut@uhasselt.be

KU Leuven
Organisation Studies,
Naamsestraat 69
3000 Leuven, Belgium

Work in progress, please do not quote without authors’ permission.
Introduction

Labour market statistics show that traditionally subordinate groups such as women and ethnic minorities are persistently overrepresented in the most de-skilled, de-valued jobs in sectors with little or no opportunities for improvement. While it has been emphasised that their structural overrepresentation at the bottom of the labour market gets reproduced at organisational level by individual employers, up till now not that many studies specifically look at how employers organise this exploitation.

Theorisations on the processes leading to the segmentation and exclusion of women and ethnic minorities have been extensive. Particularly in relation to processes of de-skilling and de-valuing jobs done by these groups, explanations are found in labour process theories and feminist theories. These theories have given us insights in how capitalist forces have fragmented and de-skilled jobs such that they could be carried out cheaply by those with the least bargaining power (Bonacich, 1972; Reich, Gordon & Edwards, 1973; Braverman, 1974), in the way workers’ organisation has protected certain jobs from competition by cheap labour (Rubery, 1978) and in the way patriarchal relations have specifically constructed women workers and pushed them to work in de-skilled, de-valued jobs (Hartmann, 1979; Milkman, 1983; Cockburn, 1985; Philips & Taylor, 1980; Acker, 1989; West, 1990). These theories mainly provide explanations on the aggregate level of labour markets, industries, sectors and occupations, yet, at organisational level, they reveal little about how individual employers approach and organise de-skilled jobs for these groups. Few empirical material, mostly studies on diversity management and migrant labour, provides further indications on employers’ work-specific constructions on women’s and ethnic minorities’ skills (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Mackenzie & Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012; Moriarty, Wickham, Krings, Salamonska, & Bobek, 2012), however, in turn, they reveal less on how these
constructions inform to shape the organisation and exploitation in low-skill jobs.

In this study, we want to integrate insights stemming from these different domains in order to expand understanding of employers’ role in perpetuating the exploitation of workers from subordinate groups at the bottom of the labour market. Through three case studies of Belgian companies employing a large share of women and ethnic minorities in low-skill jobs, we want to study how employers actively construct and organise skills of subordinate groups, as well as how these both shape the conditions of exploitation in low-skill jobs.

The article is organised in four sections. We first provide a brief overview of the insights we get from labour process theories and feminist theories on the use and position of women and ethnic minorities’ skills. Second, we address research that empirically investigates constructions on minority workers’ skills in organisations, mainly from diversity management literature. In the third section, we describe the methodology and the case selection, and include some background information on the cases. Next, we present case study analyses results. In the final section, we discuss some theoretical reflections on employers’ constructions and organising of minority groups’ skills and how both influence exploitation and negotiation in organisations.
Theoretical background

The disadvantaged position of women and ethnic minorities in segmented labour markets, where they are overrepresented in low-skilled or highly de-skilled and low valued jobs, has been well documented since the 1960’s. Recent research indicates the persistency of these phenomena in different labour market contexts, looking for example more specifically at pay gaps along workers’ gender (for example: Aláez-Aller, Longás-García, & Ullibarri-Arce, 2011; Millward & Woodland, 1995) and ethnicity (Brynin & Güveli, 2012; Sa’di & Epstein, 2002), differences in employment conditions (Kalleberg, Reskin & Hudson, 2000; Turner, 2010) and ethnic differences in women’s employment (Phizacklea, 1987; Holdsworth & Dale, 1997). Latest data from the European Union show that labour market segmentation is not declining, that especially ethnic minorities are involved in the most vulnerable working conditions and that women keep being underprivileged in undervalued and low-paid jobs (Frazer & Marlier, 2010).

Debates on labour market segmentation and minority groups’ segregation

Explanations for these outcomes can be found in long-going debates stemming from industrial sociology, labour process theories and feminist theories. Theories of segmented or dual labour markets have set out the overrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities, including migrants, in the so-called secondary segment of the labour market, characterised by low-skill, low-wage jobs and limited opportunities for upward mobility, and further segmented within the primary sector jobs in the lower-ranked gender- and/or ethnic-typed jobs (Bonacich, 1972; Reich, Gordon & Edwards, 1973; Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Piore, 1986). This segmentation and exclusion along gender and ethnic lines has been explained in terms of capital’s attempts to reinforce its power position by gradually fragmenting the working class, creating internal antagonisms and thus undermining its possibilities to organise common opposition (Bonacich,
1972; Reich, Gordon & Edwards, 1973). In LP’s foundational work “Labor and Monopoly Capital”, Braverman’s (1974) explained this segregation through the Marxian idea of a reserve army of labour: because of their previous status of unemployment, women and ethnic minorities are in a weak bargaining position towards capital and are left with no other option than to accept the low-paid, de-skilled jobs with little autonomy. Others emphasized besides capitalists’ power position the role of workers’ organisation in creating and maintaining labour market segmentation. Workers themselves organise against competitors to their jobs, i.e. female and migrant labour: by controlling entry into occupations, they consolidate their skill status and thus exclude those with less bargaining power from undermining their skilled status (Rubery, 1978).

Feminist theorists put forward that since patriarchal relations in the capitalist system were previously neglected, specific trends in men’s and women’s different labour market outcomes could be insufficiently explained (Liff, 1986; West, 1990). Gender-blind Marxian economic concepts were found lacking in that they are unable to reveal the social construction of women within the capitalist system (Anthias, 1980). Emphasizing that besides class relations, gender relationships are inextricably part of the design and maintenance of the labour process, feminist theorists have set out the material and cultural processes that lead skilled work to remain the sole preserve of men (for a review, see Acker, 1990; Smith, 1994), creating gendered divisions in the labour market, gendered jobs and differences in pay. The segregation of women in the most de-skilled jobs and sectors and their exclusion from organisational power, has accordingly been linked to both (male) employers’ and (male) labour organisations’ use of patriarchal family roles and of gendered ideological constructions to maintain power relations (Hartmann, 1979; Milkman, 1983; Cockburn, 1985). Some feminist theorists have emphasised that, other than women being employed in the unskilled jobs, it is particularly the misleading definition of skill as gender-neutral that obscures the
systematic construction of men performing skilled and women performing unskilled work (Philips & Taylor, 1980; Acker, 1989; West, 1990).

Overall, the previous theories assign the vulnerable position of women and ethnic minorities to the capitalist nature and the gendered structuring of the labour market, shaping industries, organisations and labour processes such that they exclude subordinate groups from power positions and deploy them in the jobs that require little or no skills – or that are constructed as being unskilled - and therefore devalue the labour of these minority groups. Acknowledging that the referred theories are crucial to understand women’s and ethnic minorities’ subordinate position in low-skilled jobs, we highlight however that they reveal little about the specific approaches of individual employers towards the skills of minority groups. As these theories mainly focus on the aggregate level of labour markets, industries, sectors and occupations, they can portray the segregation of women and ethnic minorities as an over-determined, predictable process that is merely being reproduced by individual employers (cfr. Thompson & McHugh, 2009). Yet, while interests of individual employers within their specific economic context might differ from those of collective capital, unveiling employers’ role in constructing and organising minority groups is deemed essential to get a more nuanced understanding of perpetuating skill segregation. Following calls to include the role of individual employers as active agents in using workers from minority groups (i.a. MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012), this article aims to expand the understanding of women’s and ethnic minorities’ segregation in low-skilled work by drawing on recent insights from organisational studies on diversity management and migrant labour.
Organisational constructions of skill

In-depth case studies in companies employing minority groups show that, dependent on how company owners or managers construct their business, employers either construct the skills they relate to minority groups such as women and ethnic minorities as valuable to their organisation, or as hindering their organisation. The latter is even more pronounced when employers are considering skills in function of higher company levels (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). Largely, these in-depth accounts indicate how minority groups are seen as valuable because their different perspectives are found to contribute in improving work processes (Ely & Thomas, 2001) or because they own inimitable skills to improve the service for more diverse clients (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Moriarty et al., 2012). However, more research evidence can be found on companies praising minority groups for their soft skills and their superior work ethic compared to majority groups: they are said to be disciplined, committed and motivated for jobs that majority groups are unwilling to do at low pay or in unfavourable working conditions (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Holgate, 2005; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012; Moriarty, et al., 2012). At the same time, some of the same employers construct minority employees to be hindering business’ functioning because of the inability to live up to majority norms, i.e. male and ethnic majority norms, or because of a lack of language skills (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Jansssens & Zanoni, 2005; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006).

These case studies further show how different economic valuations of minority workers’ skills correspond with the jobs minority workers are organised in. In one case, minorities were deployed all-round in the organisation and they were acclaimed for generally improving work processes (Ely & Thomas, 2001), or they were used specifically to service diverse clients (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Zanoni & Jansssens, 2007; Moriarty et al., 2012). Yet,
more empirical evidence stems from low-road low-pay manufacturing companies, outlining how minority groups (especially migrant workers), the ones that are acclaimed for their superior work ethic, are deployed flexibly in the lowest skilled jobs. These work contexts are found to be the most exploitative: employers attract subsequent waves of new coming migrants in highly unskilled, low-paid jobs, often in temporary contracts to fill labour shortages, and often characterised by high turnover and little investment in workers (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006, MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012). These are characteristically ways of organising that segregate minorities persistently in the typical female or ethnic minority type of jobs. While workers are capitalised on their acclaimed soft skills and extraordinary work ethic, at the same time a lack of language skills and cultural norms are conveniently used to justify minority groups’ position in the lowest ranked jobs with little prospect for internal improvement (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006).

Yet, despite being exemplary for very exploitative conditions, some companies revealed to provide few opportunities for minority groups at the margins: employment practices were found that raised migrants’ competencies, such as language skills, and their competitive advantage in the external labour market (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009) or created a certain degree of mutual gain between employers and employees in their use of temporal flexibility (Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012).

Overall, studies taking a more in-depth look at workplaces employing minority group workers indicate a heterogeneity of ways to construct these workers’ skills and show how this underpins in which jobs minority groups end up. Empirical evidence from organisations shows that the construction and valuation of minority groups’ skills acquires its meaning in the specific organisation of skills in the capital-labour relationship (Zanoni, 2011). We find this to reflect the idea that the concept of skill in organisational practice consists of both an
objective and a constructed component (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004). However, the available empirical studies seem to approach this from the idea that these low-skilled jobs are preconceived: minority groups are constructed as unskilled or having some valuable skills and subsequently these constructions become substantiated through deploying them in the low-skill jobs – i.e. mainly the jobs that majority workers are unwilling to do. Yet, feminist theorists have argued that it is both the social construction of certain groups (i.e. women) as unskilled as well as through the constitution of the real material and technological skill aspects of work that concurrently enable exploitation and exclusion of these groups (cfr. Wajcman, 1991). So far, we find little empirical material of how both occur concurrently at organisational level. By empirically investigating the role of individual employers in constructing and organising skills to exploit vulnerable groups in low-skill and low-paid jobs, we aim to further this understanding at organisational level.
Background and methodology

In this study we analyse in-depth case study material from three low-skill, low-wage companies employing a large share of women and ethnic minorities: a floriculture company, a cleaning company and a gas stations company. Focusing on low-skill, low-wage companies is in the first place indicative for ethnic minorities’ position within the Belgian (and so also the Flemish) labour market as this is - compared to its other European countries (OECD, 2008) - highly ethnically stratified (Tielens, 2005; Verhoeven, Anthierens, Neudt, & Martens, 2003; Vertommen & Martens, 2006). Immigrant workers and Belgian workers of foreign descent can be more frequently found in the occupational areas dominant in the secondary segment of the labour market (Ouali & Rea, 1999): jobs that feature heavy and unhealthy work, unfavourable working conditions and/or under less favourable working conditions in terms of status, wage and working hours (VDAB, 2012). The companies under study are also indicative for the overrepresentation of women in certain female-typed sectors and jobs (Van Woensel, 2007).

Moreover, the Belgian socio-economic context provides an interesting empirical contribution: compared to the neo-liberal Anglo-Saxon context, where most of the work and employment literature on these type of low-skill, low-wage work environments stems from, the co-ordinated market economy of Belgium (Hall & Soskice, 2001) is more regulated and constraining: it is characterized by a highly protective labour legislation and high labour costs, and a generous welfare system (characterized by long-term unemployment benefits, health coverage, low-cost schooling, social housing). Compared to more neo-liberal countries, in the Belgian context companies have less discretion in how they organise their production systems, their workforce and their skill levels (Grugulis & Lloyd, 2010). The most exploitative sectors, which our case study companies come from, are more constrained by collective labour agreements setting minimum wages and minimum working conditions.
Combined with the guarantees of the welfare system, companies offering the least attractive jobs are designated to rely on the ‘least wanted employees’, i.e. disadvantaged women and ethnic minorities, to fill their jobs as a large part of the labour supply is not prepared to do this type of work because it is socially and economically low-valued work.

The three companies under study are middle-sized and employ between 63% to 88% women and 29% to 44% ethnic minorities. All case study companies employ women and ethnic minorities in low-skill, low-wage jobs with very little or limited internal career prospects. The study’s main data source are 13 semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author with the owner(s), managers and supervisors of the three companies. The questionnaires consisted of open-ended questions on respondents’ own background, the company’s history, strategy, product/service and work organisation, employee relations, and personnel practices, including practices aimed to manage minority groups. A total of 32 employees were also interviewed, working in various jobs, both male and female, and with ethnic majority as well as minority backgrounds. Occasional participant observation during hours spend at the companies in between interviews complements the interview data.

The data analysis is based on interview accounts and observations indicating 1) constructions of minority groups’ skills by owners, managers and supervisors; in other words, how they assign skills – or the label ‘unskilled’ – to their minority group employees (Vallas, 1990; Wajcman, 1991; Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004); and 2) constitutions of minority groups’ jobs in terms of the skills that are required of the job (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004).
Findings

GreenCo: a floriculture company

GreenCo is a middle-sized company that breeds and grows indoor plants. It was founded in the 1980’s as a micro family business and grew to become an international business with two branches abroad. It produces a whole line of indoor plants and specialises in breeding different variants of one ornamental plant. The plants are sold to retailers and to a few big auctions. In recent years, GreenCo has seen its annual business turnover decrease. It has reduced its workforce in its Belgian branch but has enlarged its workforce at its Chinese branch as China is their fastest growing market. The company is lead by a board of directors. In its Belgian branch, it employs about 110 employees, of whom twenty are in managerial and administrative functions and another 90 are workers in the greenhouse. All managers are men with a Belgian background, except for the personnel manager, a woman from the family formerly owning the business. The administrative staff is almost entirely female. Among the greenhouse workers, about ninety percent are women and one in three has an ethnic minority background.

Company management emphasised its non-discriminatory idea on recruitment and employment as a reason for employing many women and ethnic minorities. Except for basic literacy and numeracy, they said to not apply any specific recruitment criteria. They indicated that they mainly attract women because “it’s mostly fine work. There are men who want to do this, who like to do this, but most of them don’t.” (female personnel manager with Belgian background) and “women are more available for the [low] wages set in the floriculture sector” (male director with Belgian background). Ethnic minorities are considered to have always been working in the floriculture sector, and recruiting them is not part of an explicit recruitment strategy as “we need people, and there are good people among them” (male director with Belgian background) and “once you employ some, they find some space left in
their cars and so, one of their neighbours can come along with them. Part of it is just simple logistics” (male director with Belgian background).

At GreenCo, women and ethnic minorities are thus constructed as available workers, of whom especially women are found to be prepared and able for the dexterous work at the greenhouse with a salary close to minimum wage. The managerial discourse on ethnic minorities further praises cultural diversity for being personally fulfilling, although management admitted that ethnic minorities’ lack of language skills can be found problematical in the labour process because “it can be annoying when people have to work together who don’t understand each other” (male director with Belgian background) yet “they have to do the same tasks over again every day, so it’s actually only a problem when they first get started” (male director with Belgian background).

Except for two supervising workers, all greenhouse workers work in manual, low-skilled and repetitive jobs. With their workforce ranging in size over the years and becoming more ethnically diverse, the company has systematically divided its labour processes for growing and breeding plants into narrow, repetitive tasks that are highly simplified and can easily be learned on the job. The personnel manager explained us: “The work used to be organised in teams with a team leader. But we’ve changed that. Everyone gets trained so they can be deployed everywhere. And these tasks are actually not that difficult. So when everybody can be deployed everywhere, they’re also easily replaceable” (female manager with Belgian background). With recent personnel downsizing, this process of de-skilling jobs serves the company to easily reduce and increase working hours with occasional periods of temporary unemployment (a flexicurity measure for blue-collar workers used in Belgium) and to flexibly rearrange workers from one job to another according to fluctuating demands. Two female supervising workers are in charge of holding track of the labour process and the targets set by management. They are responsible for dictating the working pace and using
administrative lists of which worker performs which tasks in what time. The latter are used to
evidence performance evaluations and decisions on downsizing.

At the same time, company management motivates this highly flexible work organisation in terms of accommodating work-life balance for a female and ethnic workforce: “you can come and work here by a half day, so to speak” (male director with Belgian background). And indeed, we found that varying flexibility arrangements make it possible for workers to match their work with different personal and cultural needs: they can choose from different working schedules to match with their private needs, they can negotiate last-minute adaptations and they can take extra weeks off during summer, for example to visit family abroad. When interviewing workers, these measures resounded as a great benefit to them as well. One woman explained us: “whenever there’s something going on, you suddenly need a day of or something, that’s never a problem […] They’re so flexible here, I don’t think I’ll ever find a job where they’re more flexible than here”. Another female worker from Turkish origin explained us how she arranges to systematically work overtime on Wednesdays so she can take extra days off to take a longer visit with her family in Turkey.

Overall, GreenCo’s organisation of skills is exemplary for a classic Taylorised approach. We found management to construct women or minority workers as available, but not specifically contributing or hampering its organisational goals, which they can easily sustain by organising workers in highly simplified, repetitive jobs with minimal discretion. Due to recent downsizings, the company conveniently used these de-skilled jobs to extend arrangements for temporal flexibility and push workers in regimes with varying working hours and periods of temporary unemployment. At the same time, it was evidenced that this creates a certain degree of mutual gain for employees, as it serves workers to combine their work with personal and cultural needs and gives them room to negotiate flexible arrangements according to personal preferences.
CleanCo: a cleaning company

CleanCo is a medium-sized cleaning company located in a middle-sized town and founded in the 1970’s. It offers regular cleaning services for other companies, for public services and for families as well as a specialised service for window cleaning. The company is run by the founder and his wife, and they employ three middle-managers in managerial support and supervisory functions. The company further employs about seventy workers: ten of whom are male window cleaners, all others are women in regular cleaning job. About thirty-seven percent of workers have foreign backgrounds; they are all employed in regular cleaning jobs.

The company owner explained us he does not actively recruit for diverse workers, but that he pursues a non-discriminatory recruitment strategy based on the company’s expectations rather than socio-demographic characteristics: “If someone with a Belgian nationality offers to come work here, and we assume that person will live up to our expectations less than a foreign candidate, we will prefer the foreigner. It’s as simple as that” (male company owner with Belgian background).

At CleanCo, women are constructed as workers that are available to do this type of jobs as “they are part-time jobs and it is still a little bit part of our culture that a man is the bread winner and that he’s the one looking for a fulltime job” (male company owner with Belgian background), and who are able to clean as “it’s not that necessary to give them training. If we provide them the basics, and we guide them a little bit, that gives us enough positive results” (male supervisor with Belgian background). Women are further constructed as unsuitable to work full-time as window cleaners, because “you seriously need some physical strength to handle [a ladder] at that height and for most women that’s impossible. Plus, most guys wouldn’t feel at ease when a women showed up at their team. That plays a role as well” (male supervisor with Belgian background). Ethnic minority workers are constructed as lacking necessary Dutch language ability and as lacking appropriate cultural
characteristics, which is found to be problematical both in communication with customers and with management. For example, Thai cleaning ladies were depicted as “being easily venomous” so that their supervisor said “to be careful with what I say because they easily misunderstand” (male supervisor with Belgian background).

We found these constructions on female and minority cleaners to be reflected in the way the company organises workers’ skills. The female regular cleaning jobs are mostly part-time, and vary in working hours with daytime and evening work shifts. Jobs are paid close to minimum wage, with some wage premiums for cleaners working in difficult to clean spaces, such as sanitary facilities or extremely dusty or greasy spaces. CleanCo previously organised these jobs in teams, supervised by senior cleaners who divided work among team members. Since a few years, the company owner decided to stop engaging supervisory cleaners and to organise work for the regular cleaners such that cleaners all work individually at separate, delimited areas. This way, cleaners work alone most of the time, they are expected to independently clean their area from A to Z within a given time period and conform to the different standards contractually determined between the company and its client. The company’s specific structure of organising cleaners this way turned these women’s cleaning jobs to become highly autonomous and consisting of a broad range of cleaning tasks. This gives cleaners back some discretion in fulfilling their job and some room to decide their work pace.

We found this specific organisation of women’s skills to link with how the company constructs women as able to perform cleaning work without further need for training. As two middle-managers handle all contact with clients and intervene when any difficulties arise between customers and cleaners, working separately also exempts the employment relationship from most difficulties related to a lack of language and cultural skills. This suits the way the company owner defines the employment relationship as a mere business
transaction, or in his own words: “I think we have a mere employer-employee relationship. I expect their working hours to be determined correctly, that people can work at a normal pace. I just expect them to show up and do their jobs! That’s actually very boring, huh” (male company owner with Belgian background).

This organisation of workers’ skills is prompted by a “divide and rule” strategy, particularly used by the company owner: since workers are all working separately, they hardly have any contact among each other and this enables management to handle both company’s and workers’ demands for flexibility. The company occasionally calls on cleaners to do extra work or temporarily replace an absent colleague. In return, workers are allowed to call on some flexibility arrangements, for instance to rearrange their working schedules in order to be available for family caring responsibilities or cultural needs. These arrangements are negotiated one-to-one between management and cleaners. By making them work separately, the company can individually control these granted flexibilities without having to justify these arrangements to other workers. For example, talking about giving certain employees the opportunity to take a longer holiday leave to visit their family abroad, the company owner told us: “[...] then you favour someone over someone else, and then you get tensions [...] If people work on sites alone, it’s much easier. You can replace them. And then you don’t have to avoid conflicts.”

One of the supervisors mentioned how this work organisation permits cleaners to reschedule in order to attend a religious holiday: “When there are holidays for certain religions, then they often take up leave days, or something like that. [...] Or they work a few hours more each day and divide these over the other days. And I don’t bother about that.” (supervisor with Belgian background). As such, the organisation of cleaners at separate work sites stemming from the owner’s “divide and rule” strategy gives back these female cleaners a degree of autonomy and discretion to organise their work. The following quote from a female
cleaner with an Algerian background exemplifies: “So last Tuesday was the Feast of Sacrifice. So I said to [middle-manager]: ‘I won’t come to work. Because everyone is at home, I’m not coming to work’. And [middle-manager] understood. [...] And those hours I divided them over the other days of the week. I worked an hour extra every day, so no problem.”

In sum, at CleanCo, cleaners are assigned delimited working sites where they individually perform according to site-specific working standards, subject to contractual agreements with customers. As women and ethnic minority women are constructed as available and able for part-time cleaning, they are found to fit these type of jobs. In turn, organisation of jobs and accordingly their skill content is adapted to the owner’s specific strategy for working with minority groups: by deploying cleaners separately, work can be flexibly adapted to both the company’s and employees’ needs for temporal flexibility and at the same time, workers’ ‘hinderen’ characteristics, such as lack of language and cultural skills, are taken out of the employment relationship. This results in broad, highly autonomous jobs with a certain degree of discretion to schedule work tasks. Since this divides workers, bereaves them from any opportunities to connect with colleagues and mutually defend their interests, it facilitates the employer to push exploitation of minority groups at different work sites to its maximum. Yet, it was also evidenced that precisely due to the individuality of the employment relationship, a degree of mutual gain between the company and its female workers is created as workers can individually negotiate temporal flexibility for personal reasons.
GasCo: a gas stations company

GasCo is a medium-sized company exploiting thirteen gas stations. GasCo is a family company founded in the early 1980’s. Besides selling gas, the stations sell a wide range of products such as food, drinks, magazines and car supplies, and offer services such as car rental and carwash. Every station also has a food corner serving sandwiches, pizzas and drinks, and a coffee bar. All stations are open 24/7 every day of the year. The company is founded, owned and lead by two brothers with Italian background. The company further includes six staff members in the main office, 19 shop managers running the gas stations, and 132 employees in the shops. Sixty-three percent of all people working for the company are women; forty-four percent of the personnel has a foreign background. Remarkably, the company is not segregated along gender or ethnic background: women and ethnic minorities can be found among staff members, managers, cashiers and workers at the food corners.

According to GasCo’s management, the company attracts many women and ethnic minorities without explicitly searching to recruit these groups: “We don’t specifically address certain groups, men or women. We don’t do that” and “they [ethnic minorities] are the people that offer to come work for us. We don’t attract anyone” because “those are the people that are still in need for an income” (male company owner with Italian background). However, at the same time, the same manager expressed his own conviction of a non-discriminatory recruitment in his company, and his encouragements towards gas station managers to hire ethnic minorities as they can “connect with the different communities in the station’s neighbourhood”.

Women and ethnic minorities are thus constructed as available workers for the type of jobs offered by GasCo: low-skilled service jobs in nonstandard working hours (daytime and night time shift work) that are paid close to minimum wage. Ethnic minorities are further constructed as holding specific cultural skills that benefit the contact with ethnically diverse
customers, for example to “solve conflict situations which often have to do with aggression and racism”, however at the same time they are constructed as lacking certain cultural skills, for example “sometimes it can be a problem [...] when a Turkish guy won’t obey a women, that he won’t accept the leadership position of a women, although he can be a very good employee”. Likewise, ethnic minorities are applauded for bringing in additional languages which “if you can use those [different languages] to be helpful or to work more customer oriented, is fantastic” (male station manager with Turkish background), while at the same time they are constructed for possibly lacking Dutch language proficiency, for example “if your cashier is unable to express properly what s/he’s doing with your credit card [...] that invokes some racism, some irritation”. By and large, constructions of minority workers are twofold: they provide the company with unique assets that serve its business well, while lack of cultural and language skill can be found problematical in working with colleagues and serving clients.

Although workers’ skills are constructed at group level to fit the type of jobs offered, a more individual approach of workers’ skills, including minority workers, is further indicative for the way GasCo’s constitutes its jobs. The gas stations are minimally staffed by two people: according to the size of the station and to peak hours, one or more workers serve the food corners, and one or more workers work at the cash register. While we found some evidence that ethnic minorities are deployed at stations were they can serve people from their own community, the predominant logic for deploying workers in teams appeared highly individualised, organised along an individualised consideration of workers’ abilities. Workers are organised in pairs or in teams where they complement for each other, resulting in jobs that range from very narrow, simplified tasks to broader tasks requiring more specialised knowledge, and jobs with variable levels of responsibility. For example, a manager of a highly frequented gas station explained us how he deploys workers with “certain
shortcomings, who are less able to organise work” to work together with people that he finds able to work autonomously: “for example, there’s somebody who has a short memory and who is short-sighted, you name it. Usually I schedule him with a capable person he can always fall back on whenever he has a tough time” (male station manager with Turkish background). Another manager explained how he applies this organising principle to deploy workers with limited Dutch language skills. For the duration of the worker taking a language course, paid for by the company, workers with limited Dutch language ability are scheduled to work with colleagues who communicate with customers: “as now they have to work at noon or evenings with three people, I deploy [a Russian employee] as the third worker at the food corner” (male station manager with Belgian background). Numerous other experiences were shared of this organising principle for working together with newly starting employees or student workers.

The organisation further has a similar individual approach to workers’ development. Besides job trainings offered to all employees, people receive tailored trainings such as language courses or on-the-job computer training. Especially gas station managers, who are nearly all recruited from long-term committed employees - regardless of qualifications - receive an individualised training path with several tailored trainings and individual guidance from company owners. Overall, it was evidenced that GasCo organises its workers not merely along the broad lines of how women and ethnic minorities are constructed, but more along an individual consideration of workers’ skills and ability for skill development.

Besides trying to individually assess workers skills and potential, management has a clear strategy of assessing workers on their commitment to the company culture, based on a pervasive family ideology. This strong ideology is put forth by company owners and taken over by station managers “in order to make it enjoyable to work. If it is a pleasant environment to work in, than you pass that feeling through to customers. [...] The customers
feel that [...] and they will come back” (male company owner with Italian background). We observed how company owners and managers spread this ideology through an informal non-authoritarian leadership style and by being personally committed to employees. Company owners further organise a big party each year for all personnel and encourage workers to spend some leisure time together. This ideology serves to control workers’ personal commitment to the company. It calls on employees’ flexibility, for example to take on extra work shifts to stand in for absent colleagues or to take on extra tasks during colleagues’ trainings. In addition, workers who are perceived to have untapped potential and who demonstrate strong commitment to the ‘family’ are given opportunities to enter a preparatory track to become a gas station manager. In this way, an all-encompassing family culture is an explicit strategy to sustain the company’s approach of mutually complementing workers.

Taken together, minority employees at GasCo are constructed as available for the type of jobs offered at the gas stations, and in particular a classic ‘business case’ argument is emphasised, praising ethnic minorities’ skills when serving an ethnically mixed customer base. Contrary to our previous case studies however, we see at the gas stations company how constructions on minority groups are superseded by constituting jobs primarily based on an individual estimation of workers’ skills and potential. Both majority and minority groups workers are thus organised to complement each other’s skills, which is strategically underpinned by committing workers through an explicit family ideology. This way, the gas stations company creates interdependencies that push the exploitation of ‘strong’ profiled employees who compensate for the perceived lacking skills of ‘weak’ profiled employees, without correspondingly differentiating wages. Yet, while pushing their exploitation, women and ethnic minorities who are strongly committed are offered opportunities to advance to higher echelons in the organisation—irrespective of their formal qualification. As such,
through this individualised approach on skills and skills’ development GasCo creates an organisation that rearranges traditional skill segregation patterns.
Discussion

This article has sought to expand understanding of how individual employers organise minority group workers in low-skilled employment. The article has drawn on three case studies of employers using a substantial share of women and ethnic minorities in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. It has exposed that both employers’ constructions on minorities’ skills and their constitution of jobs’ skill content co-create the exploitation of minority groups at the bottom of the labour market (cfr. Wajcman, 1991). Given the many insights from previous decades on women’s and ethnic minorities’ continuous overrepresentation and segregation in low-skilled jobs and the recent understandings on employers’ role in perpetuating this, our findings contribute to a concatenation of these different – previously loosely connected - insights and a more complex understanding of them. We have shown that at organisational level, not only do employers construct minority groups’ skills such that they are recognized as able for low-skilled low-paid employment, at the same time employers shape and re-shape jobs’ skill content such that they can continue deploying and exploiting minorities in these jobs. In what follows, we discuss some implications of the very distinct approaches we found employers to use. We also reflect on our findings in the light of labour process and employment relationship literature and in the light of the Belgian socio-economic context.

We found three employers to constitute very different constellations of skills that exploit minority groups in low-skilled jobs: the floriculture company organises minorities in thoroughly Taylorised, de-skilled jobs, such that they can flexibly deploy anyone anywhere; the cleaning company broadens jobs’ skill content and through returning jobs autonomy and discretion minority workers are divided to push their exploitation further; and the gas stations company individualises jobs’ skill content such that it can differentiate who to exploit more. Rearranging jobs’ skill content and changing the organisations accordingly thus pushes exploitation of subordinate groups further: in all three cases it is incited by a need to deploy
minority workers flexibly, for example in times of labour shortages, when downsizing or to take over extra workload from colleagues. And thus, either by capitalising on minority groups’ skills (such as cultural skills to serve an ethnically mixed customer base or skills to perform dexterous work), or by avoiding a lack of skills to hamper organisational goals (such as lack of language skills to communicate with clients), minority groups are exploited in the lowest paid jobs and the organisation of skills is adapted to keep doing so.

These rearrangements of jobs’ skill content evidence how constructions on minorities’ differences inform changes in the organisational make-up. However, as such, these adaptations do not guarantee a conflict-free cooperation of subordinate groups. Different workers’ interests interrelating with i.a. gender and ethnicity have entered workplaces and they are recognised to play a crucial role in workplace conflict or collaboration (Delbridge, 2007). We found these employers to allow minorities’ differences to become part of the effort-reward bargain and serve as a basis for renegotiating the conditions of exploitation. So, flexibility arrangements at the workplace become negotiable and create to a certain degree mutual gains in the employment relationship – which we found especially to benefit work-life balance for women and ethnic minority women (cfr. Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012). Given that these employers stick to paying the lowest wages and that they provide little or no room for workers’ organisation, through making concessions towards workers’ personal and cultural interests they thus succeed in fostering workers’ long-term engagement and attaining workplace consensus (cfr. Edwards, Bélanger & Wright, 2006; Bélanger & Edwards, 2007). It evidences that individual employers’ approaches on skill should not be seen as mere translations of wider capitalists’ strategy to exploit and exclude but more as pragmatic reactions of which the outcomes are negotiable (Hyman, 1987).

The approach at the gas stations company further evidences how adapting jobs’ skill content to minority workers is not necessarily based upon constructions of majority or
minority workers at group level – as they shape jobs individually. This can be interpreted as further creating workplace fragmentation (Delbridge, 2007), and thus a source of increasing control and breaking workers’ common base to organise themselves (cfr. Bonacich, 1972; Reich, Gordon & Edwards, 1973). However, considering that widespread stereotyped constructions on women and ethnic minorities as doing unskilled work perpetuate segregation, an individualised approach to workers’ skills might be able to break these stereotypes and – as is evidenced at the gas stations company - rearrange patterns of segregation.

Finally, we reflect on these outcomes in the Belgian socio-economic context. Compared to case study evidence from the UK (Holgate, 2005; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome & Commander, 2012), Belgian employers recruiting from the most vulnerable employees have less room for manoeuvre in shaping conditions of exploitation as they are constrained by labour legislation, collective labour agreements and minimum wages. Because unemployment benefits and roughly the whole welfare system provide more guarantees for the unemployed, employers who recruit from the ‘least wanted’ groups might - in order to retain these groups - be forced to make accommodations that create a degree of mutual gains in the employment relationship. Especially in the cleaning sector and in retail, persistent labour shortages reinforce these constraints on individual employers. Also the size of these companies – all three are middle-sized - might influence the type of exploitation and mutual gains we found. As SMEs are less competitive in recruiting from the labour market (Storey, 1997) and as they tend less to engage in latest management fashions, their specific approach might be prompted by trying to retain subordinate groups without making extra costs. In addition, the higher prevalence of informality and face-to-face contacts between employers and employees might favour a need to harness workers’ consent (Ram & Edwards,
2003) and foster hierarchical relations that are not so congruent with society-wide class relations as in larger organisations (Acker, 2006).
References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill – social construction</th>
<th>Floriculture company</th>
<th>Cleaning company</th>
<th>Gas stations company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- availability</td>
<td>- women apt for doing fine, dexterous work</td>
<td>- availability</td>
<td>- availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- lack of cultural skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>- lack of language skills</td>
<td>- cultural skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- (lack of) language skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- (lack of) language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- individualised</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- individualised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill – job characteristic</th>
<th>Floriculture company</th>
<th>Cleaning company</th>
<th>Gas stations company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- narrow, simplified tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td>- autonomous work</td>
<td>- individualised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- on-the-job training</td>
<td></td>
<td>- broad tasks</td>
<td>- from narrow, simplified tasks to very broad tasks with leadership responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- little/ no training</td>
<td>- on-the-job training and professional training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>