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Discourses of belonging in contemporary Germany

This research addresses the concept of national belonging in Germany; is it possible to ‘become German’? Or is the question of belonging not about Germanness but about the acceptance of Otherness in German society? The theoretical underpinnings of this research lie in social constructionist perspectives on the linguistic construction of social identity (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 2008) and work on discourses of national belonging (Hansen-Thomas 2007, Horner 2009, Wodak 2009).

This research examines two data sources; interviews with emergent adults living in the Berlin area, and comments on newspaper articles addressing integration in Germany. Competing discourses about belonging in Germany emerge: on the one hand the discourses reflect Germany’s official move away from *jus sanguinis* criteria for citizenship, on the other they reveal a continued preoccupation with ethnicity as an essentialized trait which prohibits integration.

An examination of the terms used for groups within society, in particular *Personen mit Migrationishintergrund* (‘people with migration background’) and *Biodeutsche(r)* (literally, ‘organically German’), illustrates the continued focus on ethnic background. The term *Personen mit Migrationishintergrund* was introduced to include ‘ethnic German’ migrants from the former Soviet Union, but has come to be used to refer specifically to certain migrants, usually Turks. Thus the term *Biodeutsche(r)*, originally used in a mocking way, is beginning to be used as a straightforward label for non-migrant ‘ethnic Germans’ and indexes the pinnacle of national belonging.

However, some data from newspaper comments also reveal that the discourses about the lack of belonging of certain migration-background groups (Muslims and especially Turks) are so strong that labels are not necessary; mentioning specific behaviors (e.g., not learning German, men refusing to shake hands with women) suffice to make the reference clear. This study examines the consequences of these varied linguistic strategies in reproducing inequalities.