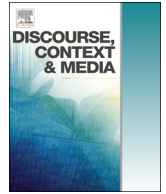




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Ethnicity and social categorization in on- and offline interaction among Copenhagen adolescents



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate how adolescents living in late modern Copenhagen use and organize identity categories related to ethnicity in everyday interaction. From a perspective of linguistic ethnography we analyze exchanges where ethnicity is explicitly addressed in activities such as creating and maintaining friendship ties, teasing, flirting, etc. We show how ethnicity is brought about in media trends on *Facebook*, how it becomes associated with hip hop culture, how it is used in constructions of beauty and desirability, and how a societal discourse of ethnocentricity have consequences for patterns of identification, but also make up a resource in everyday interaction. We present data from one year of fieldwork among a group of pupils all attending the same school class with a special focus on two individuals and analyze three thematically interrelated key cases against the backdrop of the patterns we observe in the year-long data material. We show how our participants treat ethnicity as something to play around with, negotiate, transcend and create new versions of. At the same time though, we also find in our data instances in which our participants bring into play traditional “old-school” ethnicities and thereby mobilize fixed categories ideologically associated with authenticity as an actual aspect of ethnicization (Brubaker, 2004. *Ethnicity without groups*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge). In line with Otsuji and Pennycook (2010. *Int. J. Multiling.*7(3), 240–254) we therefore argue that fixed and fluid ethnicity categories are not brought into play as dichotomies but rather as symbiotically (re)constituting each other.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate how two Copenhagen adolescents, together with their peers, use and organize identity categories related to ethnicity in everyday interaction. The data we use have been collected from a group of pupils all attending the same class at a public school in Copenhagen. The school is placed in a heterogeneous area with respect to the inhabitants' migration histories and linguistic backgrounds and the cohort of pupils reflect this demographic composition. During our time of field work, which we conducted together with a large team of researchers (Madsen et al., 2013, see also Stæhr this volume), we witnessed how the use of categories related to ethnicity played a significant role in everyday interaction. The diversity of the pupils in relation to language, family backgrounds, migration patterns, skin color and so on were on a daily basis used for playing with affiliations/disaffiliations and alignments/dis-alignments with various linguistic resources and towards different ethnic relationships. Furthermore,

these practices seemed to open up room for the adolescents to discuss and reflect upon questions of affiliation and authenticity in relation to different ethnicity issues as well as negotiations of ownership and rights for the usage of different labels. Earlier studies have shown how such “ethnic labels” were used as resources among the adolescents for organizing their close friendships and wider social relations (Møller, forthcoming a; Nørreby, 2012). What we address in this paper is the interrelatedness between on the one hand the participants' playful way of handling and (de)constructing ethnicities and, on the other hand, their investments in, recognitions of, and claims to “inherited” ethnic identities in their daily interactions. In order to examine how these two types of behavior intertwine we draw on one year of fieldwork conducted during the pupils' 9th grade school year (summer 2010–summer 2011). From this period we include classroom observations and exchanges on the social media platform *Facebook* which were collected systematically throughout the year. This allows us to analyze representative cases on a micro level against the backdrop of the patterns we observe in the year-long data material.

Our contribution to this special issue is constituted in particular by our analyses of the use of traditional authenticity and the practices of (de)authentication. The concepts of authenticity and

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authentication viewed in relation to ethnicity and ethnicization provide us with tools to describe how anti-essentialistic and dynamic ways of dealing with ethnic identities intertwine with mobilization of what we might call “traditional” ethnicities as our participants handle their social relations in off- and online contexts.

2. Late modern Copenhagen

In late modernity Western European cities are characterized by mobility, hybridity and change resulting in increasing demographic complexity. As a consequence people’s affiliations to religion, language, ethnic categories, etc. become increasingly complex and difficult to predict (Vertovec, 2006, 2007; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011). In these environments “belonging, loyalty and attachment are not parts of a zero-sum game based on a single nation-state and society” (Vertovec, 2007: 5). The city of Copenhagen is no exception to this. In the public schools for instance over 25% of all pupils have family backgrounds outside of Denmark (according to Danish Statistics—www.dst.dk) and in the class, the participants in our study attend, the percentage is approximately 75 (Madsen et al., 2013). Because of this cultural and ethnic diversity, the theme of immigration and its societal consequences are of great prevalence in Danish politics, as is also the case in many other Western European contemporary nation states (Jaspers, 2005; Rennison, 2009; Extra, 2009). Within the debates on immigration in Denmark there is a tendency to project an ethnocentric view on the population in which individuals who are not considered to be “real” Danes are treated as one more or less homogeneous group. This image is constructed through the use of categories such as *bilinguals* or *immigrants* who are then opposed to the (*ethnic*) Danes (e.g. Nørreby, forthcoming; Møller, forthcoming b) or in other cases *people with non-Western backgrounds* who are then opposed to *people with Western backgrounds*. For obvious reasons it can be quite a challenge to position yourself in this macro discursive binary image of reality, if, for instance, you were born in Denmark but by parents who have non-Western backgrounds – which happens to be the case for one of our two key participants (the other one has lived in Denmark since he was 2 years old).

A related issue to the ethnocentric discourse is the societal demand for integration (Madsen, 2012, forthcoming; Møller, forthcoming b), meaning that all immigrants who come to Denmark are both expected and (according to most policy makers) obliged to adopt the majority Danish culture and “contribute” to society. Bearing in mind that most of our participants have a family background outside Denmark, this demand plays an important role in their everyday lives. This is because it is something they are constantly confronted with in their encounters with media, policy makers and public institutions. Other studies involving the same cohort of adolescents have also shown that the adolescents are well aware of this societal discourse. Not surprisingly they distance themselves from the societal demand for them to “integrate” (Møller, forthcoming b) and some of them also target it in jocular ways in rap performances (Stæhr and Lian Malai, 2015).

Among the pupils with an immigrant background, it is generally treated as an insult to be called “white” or an “integrated Dane”. The experience of being categorized as “the other” that needs to integrate to be of societal value might be part of the explanation to this. Furthermore, the rejection of the “white”/integrated Dane identity shows us that the adolescents orient to a sense of “staying real” and “being true to who you are”. A similar quest for “realness” seems to be at stake in some of our participants’ long-term investments in the constructions of the “traditional” ethnicities. At the same time, though, the same participants

on a daily basis play around with ethnicities and their “realness”, and negotiate norms for who can use what ethnic labels about whom. Before we analyze this in more detail, we introduce our view of ethnicity and authenticity and the derived concepts of ethnicization and authentication.

3. Ethnicity and ethnicization

In our approach to the concept of ethnicity, we draw on the work by Brubaker (2004) and Bradley (1996) who describe ethnicity as a social psychological phenomenon that is used by individuals to perceive, interpret and represent the social world. As Brubaker (2004: 17) notes, ethnicity is not a *thing in the world* but a *perspective on the world*. Although Bradley’s overall focus lies on social class and intersectionality, she offers a definition of ethnicity which is close to Brubaker’s when she describes the concept as a social categorization process linked to a highly complex set of territorial and historical relationships (Bradley, 1996: 19). Both Brubaker and Bradley advocate for an understanding and conceptualization of ethnicity as something that is socially constructed, i.e. as something that we should seek to explain and not something we can use to explain things with Brubaker (2004): 9. Using an ethnographic approach makes us able to investigate how ethnicity is constructed, negotiated and ascribed to individuals through social action, which then allows us to look at *ethnicization*, that is, ethnicity as a political, social, cultural and psychological process (Brubaker, 2004: 11).

This approach to ethnicity is also reflected in newer interactional sociolinguistics which shows how these processes are expressed and reflected discursively. An important example is Rampton’s (1995) work on crossing. Crossing describes a speaker’s situational and intentional use of ways of speaking that are unregistered (Agha, 2005, 2007) as associated with a specific ethnic category to which the speaker does not belong; like for example a word in Panjabi used by speakers of Anglo or Afro-Caribbean. Thereby crossing involves speakers’ distinct senses of situated movement across social or ethnic boundaries, which raises issues of legitimacy that the participants, in one way or another, negotiate in the course of their encounter (Rampton, 1995: 276). So apart from being a means for negotiating social relations, crossing also has consequences for processes of ethnicization. Another example of the discursive outcome of ethnicity processes is seen in Harris’ (2006) study of emerging new forms of social and cultural formation in Britain among young people of South Asian descent. Harris shows how these young people are “[...] active participants in, and co-constructors of, communities of practice which are dominated by their British inflections at the same time as incorporating elements drawn from, cultural practices symbolically associated with the residual/traditional originating from the global South Asian diasporas” (Harris, 2006: 168, *italics in original*). What these studies show is that understanding ethnicity as a social construct is not just the privilege of the analyst, but also of the participants who treat ethnicity as something one can play around with, temporarily inhabit, transcend and create new versions of. Furthermore, the conceptualization of ethnicity as a practical category represents an important move away from discourses that assume that ethnicity is a one-sided natural attribute, i.e. some kind of inescapable cultural heritage, and this move is reflected in much newer sociolinguistic research (see also Ortner, 1998; Bailey, 2002; Kang, 2004; Jaspers, 2008).

In our study we deal with ethnicities as socio-cultural (and political) *interpretations located in practice*, and study how ethnicity is constructed, negotiated and ascribed as identity markers through social action in a specific situated time and space. As already mentioned, we align with the awareness within

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