Intercultural Communication and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract

This study's main objective was to identify reactions triggered when individuals partaking in an intercultural communication interaction believe that there is a discrepancy between the way they identify themselves ethnically and the way they are perceived. In addition, I examined how their reactions can influence the interactions in question.

The study showed that reactions caused by perceived misconceptions of one's ethnic identity are context-dependent. While evaluations of the counterpart's attitude are of importance (whether it's positive, neutral, or negative) the reactions are also influenced by circumstances such as one's former experiences with the problem, language skills, and the nature of the relationship with the other party involved. The course of the interaction is, among other things, affected by the counterparts' personality and their response to being reprimanded.

Keywords: perceived ethnic identity, stereotypes, prejudice

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

In the course of the past few decades the field of intercultural communication has blossomed. Researchers across disciplines with divergent epistemological and methodical approaches have contributed to the field with theories about numerous topics. Intra-cultural, inter-cultural and cross-cultural communication issues have been investigated with culture having been defined as characteristic of countries as well as smaller groupings based on gender, social class, age et cetera (Gudykunst & Kim 1997: 18-19). In this study I have adopted the definition of intercultural communication employed by Iben Jensen. She characterises the phenomenon as involving individuals from the same country but with different ethnic or racial backgrounds (Jensen 1998a: 39).

I find it relevant to look into this particular form of intercultural communication because as opposed to two decades ago encounters between individuals of diverse ethnicities are common in Denmark today. According to Eriksen and Sørheim (2003: 23) in 2003 approximately 150 million people resided outside of their native countries – a figure which is expected to have risen since. When opportunities provided by tourism and modern communication technology are added the to the above, it is of little surprise that the majority of Denmark's population has in one context or another communicated with someone with a different ethnic background.

This study was prompted by an interest in ethnic identity – a sense of belonging and loyalty to one or several ethnic groups, defined by citizenship, religion, race, language or another ethnic marker (Eriksen & Sørheim 2003: 58). The issue of ethnic identity has received attention from numerous theorists within the discipline of intercultural communication. Several studies have focused on the influence of communicative processes and language on ethnic identity formation and maintenance (Ting-Toomey 1993; 2005; Hecht et al. 2005; Gumperz 1982). Others have concentrated on identity challenges caused by migration (Berry 2004; Kim 2004), while a number of studies have investigated the issue of cultural identity which is inter-connected with ethnic identity (Collier & Thomas 1988; Collier 2005; Jensen 1998a).

The main objective in this study is to investigate misunderstandings concerning ethnic identity which occur in intercultural communication encounters. More often than not, people seem to know who they are, who others are, and what to expect from each other (Jenkins 2006: 157). Sometimes, however, individuals find that their counterpart in a certain interaction has presumptions about their ethnic identity which is not consistent with their self-image.

My interest in this particular problem emanates from personal experience. When communicating with individuals whose cultural backgrounds are different from mine, occasionally I find that they do not realise how I wish to be perceived ethnically in that specific interaction. In the course of several years these conjectures have produced a substantial body of reactions. Predominantly, they have had little or no influence on the interaction. In certain encounters, however, my response has had unfortunate consequences as the interaction has transformed into an argument or such. I often wonder about these different outcomes and whether the negative ones could have been avoided.

Driven by these contemplations, I aim to create awareness about the problem in question. Specifically, I seek to identify reactions which are provoked when people find that their counterpart in an interaction has assigned values and/or significance to their ethnic identity which are dissimilar to their self-image. In addition, I will examine the consequences which these reactions can have for the interactions in question.

1.2. Research questions

How do people react when they believe that their counterpart in an intercultural communication context has assigned incorrect values and significance to their ethnic identity? How do these reactions influence the interaction?

1.3. Delimitations

In this study I have chosen to focus on the issue of *perceived* misconceptions of ethnic identity. Thus, the question whether the counterpart in fact has incorrect assumptions about one's ethnic identity will not be examined here. The fact that the respondent/interviewee perceives it as such is adequate for the purpose of this study. Consequently, the question why incorrect assumptions occur and how they are triggered will also be omitted. Although I recognize the significant role of appearances, language and other factors which can affect an individual's assumptions about the person with whom they are interacting, for the purpose of clarity and focus, these triggers will not be elaborated on in this article.

In order to increase the level of readability of this article, the terms 'incorrect ethnic identity', 'incorrect values', 'misconceptions of ethnic identity' and the like will be used liberally throughout this article. However, the reader will be reminded sporadically that the misconceptions/incorrect values et cetera are only perceived as such by the respondent/interviewee and therefore not necessarily factual.

2. Theory: Ethnic identity and intercultural communication

In this section, I will present the theoretical framework for this study, focusing primarily on the post-modern approach to identity and the terms *ethnic identity values* and *ethnic identity salience*. Furthermore, the issue of stereotyped and prejudiced assumptions will be touched upon as well as a normative ideal suggesting how to avoid ethnic identity misconceptions.

2.1. Identity

I adhere to the post-modern understanding of identity which is entwined with socio-constructivism (Burr 1995: 12) and differs from the formerly prevalent essentialist thought, which holds that people have an inner core or essence which dictates one's identity (Pedersen 2004: 471; Jensen 1998a: 50-51). According to post-modern beliefs the self is fragmented and contains multiple, often contradictory identities, which do not constitute a coherent self (Jensen 1998a: 49-50; Fornäs 1995: 222; 233).

In the post-modern tradition identity is considered a social construction. Jenkins (2006: 43) clarifies that identities are products of human social interactions and are defined and redefined throughout a life-time. Therefore, he argues, the term 'identification' is preferable to 'identity' as it rejects the notion that

identities are a fixed variable, 'a thing' (Jenkins 2006: 29). Correspondingly, Carbaugh (1996: 23) emphasises that identities are something one *does*. They are invoked, applied, and implemented in social scenarios (Carbaugh 1996: 25-27).

The changing nature of identities allows the individual identities to be of more significance in some situations than in others. Thus, Roosens (1989: 16) reasons that in certain contexts, an individual will view him or herself as Belgian first, then Flemish, then a conductor, then a Catholic, et cetera. The order in which one's identities are arranged is contingent upon time and context. In a Flemish demonstration the Flemish identity will be prioritised over the identity as a pilot, a vegetarian, or a baker. Jenkins (2006: 108) maintains that different identities are also mobilised as a reaction to similarities and dissimilarities, e.g. when individuals of lower social status find themselves in a group of people of a higher social status (Gudykunst and Kim 1997: 88-89).

2.2. Ethnic identity

The main focus in this study is a specific identity – ethnic identity. Similarly to other identities, from a socio-constructivist perspective ethnic identity is not a fixed entity as it is a product of social interactions (Jenkins 1997: 166-170). Ethnic identity is often linked to national differences (Jenkins (2006: 124). In addition to nationality, ethnic groups can be defined based on various other ethnic markers. Eriksen and Sørheim (2003: 58) accentuate language, skin-colour, religion, and dialect.

Functionalists believe that specific values can be ascribed to different cultures. Based on a survey conducted in a multinational corporation in more than fifty countries in the 1960ies Hofstede (1999: 33) developed a four-dimensional model involving aspects of a culture which can be measured against other cultures. It encompassed power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. According to his results, Hofstede (1999: 137) found, among numerous other things, that the Danish culture is individualistic and feminine while the Mexican culture is collectivistic and masculine.

Similarly to Hofstede, Ting-Toomey (2005: 216) also considers values such as collectivism and individualism as being characteristic of specific ethnic groups. She exemplifies this in a quotation on the subject of major ethnic groups in the USA:

> "*Most Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latino(a) Americans, for example, who identify strongly with their traditional ethnic values, would tend to be group oriented. Those European Americans who identify strongly with European values and norms (albeit on an unconscious level) would tend to be oriented toward individualism*." (Ting-Toomey 2005: 216).

According to the quotation, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latino(a) Americans are collectivistic while European Americans are individualistic. Ting-Toomey's conception of ethnic identity, however, deviates from Hofstede's on a number of points. Most importantly, she focuses on heterogeneity within the different ethnic groups. Ting-Toomey (2005: 216) believes that ethnic identity values (or content) are interconnected with *ethnic identity salience*, which is the subjective allegiance and loyalty which people hold toward the groups to which they belong. Thus, individuals from collectivistic ethnic groups who have strong ethnic identity salience are prone to acting in accordance with collectivistic values. However, if their ethnic identity salience is weak, ethnic identity values to which they adhere can be individualistic (Gudykunst & Kim 1997: 98-99). This is expressed explicitly in Ting-Toomey's (2005: 216) quotation, as she underlines that only the Asian, Native and Latino(a) Americans *who identify strongly* with their traditional ethnic values would tend to be group oriented.

I support Ting-Toomey's and not Hofstede's interpretation of ethnic identity whereby I contend that some members of an ethnic group have stronger ties to their ethnic group than others. In addition, I recognise that these bonds are time and context-dependent.

2.2.1. Immigrants and mixed ethnicities

The multifaceted nature of ethnic identity is evident in context with immigrants and children of parents with different ethnic backgrounds (Eriksen 2002: 62-63). In the case of immigrants, Eriksen (2000: 5-6)

explicates that migration has created complex cultural affiliations. For this group of people ethnic identity has two dimensions – how they identify in relation to their ethnic heritage and how they identify in regards to the host society. Berry (2004: 176-179) holds that ethnic identity salience can be viewed as a fourfold model according to which immigrants who identify strongly with their ethnic traditions and weakly with the values of the dominant culture subscribe to the traditional-based or ethnic-oriented identity option. If the opposite is true they tend to practice the assimilated identity. If they identify strongly with both cultures they internalize the bicultural identity or integrative option, whereas they can be considered as being in the marginal identity state if they identify weekly with both cultures (Berry 2004: 176-179). According to Daniel (1996: 135-137), children of parents with different ethnic backgrounds often deal with similar issues.

Alba (1990: 24) states that the different elements of complex ethnic identities can be activated separately in different situations. In an example about a German-Irish-Italian American he explicates that the person in question can feel Irish on Saint Patrick's Day, Italian with one side of the family and German when choosing a foreign language to study in school.

2.3. Stereotypes, prejudice, and mindless behaviour

According to the Togeby (1997: 136) decades ago, populations of different countries' were often depicted as having a specific national character. All Germans were labelled as aggressors, Danes as democrats and pacifists, and the Finnish as fond of carrying knives. Today, the term 'national character' is seldom used. However, people still generalise based on simplistic notions of cultural traits – *stereotypes*. This often leads to generalisations about all members of a group based on characteristics which one believes are integrated in the group's essence (Jost & Hamilton 2005: 213).

Stereotyping is commonly used in interactions involving strangers (Gudykunst 2005: 285ff). When people categorise, they tend to assign positive or negative evaluations to these categories. Often, groups with which people identify are evaluated positively and other groups negatively (Turner 1982: 35ff). This is regularly recognised as biased/ ethnocentric attitudes or prejudice (Togeby 1997: 16; Brown 1995: 8). According to Tajfel (1978: 74-75), these negative evaluations can create problems in an interaction as people generally need a positive self-image.

Although everyone can be subject to ethnocentrism, it is the majority in a society that constitutes the normative 'we'. Thus, individuals who are distinct from the dominant group in the society are subject to prejudice and discrimination more often than the majority. This applies, among others, to immigrants, as they have a weaker social status than the host population (Gullestad 2006: 241). According to Togeby (1997: 59) it has been well documented that ethnic minorities in Denmark are frequently exposed to discrimination at their work place and as guests at clubs and restaurants. This is problematic, as discrimination can hinder assimilation due to fear of rejection (Berry 2004: 176-179). The problem in question – the element of power in external categorisation – is also documented by Jenkins (2006: 110-114).

2.3.1. Mindless behaviour and intercultural competence

Similarly to Ting-Toomey (2005: 216), Bennett and Bennett (2004: 151) hold that ethnic groups are heterogeneous and that conclusions about all members of an ethnic group based on tendencies are simplistic generalisations (Bennett & Bennett 2004: 151). Thus, stereotypical and prejudiced assumptions often hinder 'intercultural competence', defined by Collier and Thomas (1988: 101) as interactions where identities assigned to someone are in harmony with they self-image.

According to Langer (1989: 154), *mindless*, automatic behaviour is to be avoided. In context with intercultural communication *mindlessness* entails making use of wide categories like people's culture, ethnicity or gender to predict their behaviour (Langer 1989: 154; Langer & Moldovenau 2000: 2). This is common in intercultural communication situations especially when people are assumed to be typical members of their group (Gudykunst & Kim 1997: 88-91; 173-175). As broad categorizations can have a negative influence on the interaction it is advised to make multiple categories, differentiate more (Langer 1989: 154). In regard to ethnic groups this entails not only viewing someone as German, Muslim or black, but also keeping in mind that the person in question is a man, a father, a doctor as well. Thus,

incorrect presumptions such as the notion that someone's ethnic identity is crucial for their behaviour when in fact it is their gender or class identity can be evaded (Gudykunst 2005: 299).

2.4. Summary

In this study, the terms '*ethnic identity salience'* and '*ethnic identity values*' are defined from the post-modern perspective and in accordance with Ting-Toomey's position (2005) in particular. As argued in section 2.2, this viewpoint entails that members of one or several ethnic groups can have a sense of attachment and loyalty toward these groups which varies in significance depending on time and context and in relation to other group members, i.e. divergent '*ethnic identity salience*'. Furthermore, people can have different understandings of which characteristics are associated with their specific ethnic group or groups. This is referred to as '*ethnic identity values*'.

It is on the basis of these deliberations that I seek to examine misconceptions concerning ethnic identity values and salience in intercultural communication interactions. In this study, including the analysis of the collected data, I will place an emphasis on what is perceived as stereotypical and prejudiced assumptions, and to a point also *mindless* behaviour, as recognised by Langer (1989) in 2.3.1

3. Methodology

As stated in section 1, the objective here is to examine the respondents' *subjective* experiences with what they perceive as misconceptions of their ethic identities. Thus, the accuracy of their perceptions is not an issue. Accordingly, how they define themselves in a given intercultural communication context: on the basis of their nationality, religion, skin colour or a mixture of the above is irrelevant for my purpose. Therefore, I allowed the participants to associate ethnic identity with what they themselves found pertinent.

To elucidate the research questions, I chose to conduct both a quantitative survey consisting of questionnaires with fixed response categories and a number of semi-structured qualitative interviews. As the objective is to gain access to in-depth information about processes set in motion by ethnic identity misconceptions and grasp their influence on interactions, the qualitative interviews were a priority (Kruuse 2003: 133).

A quantitative survey was included for the purpose of gathering background information and identifying patterns which can contribute to the quality of the qualitative interviews. Clarifying whether specific sections of the population encounter the problem in question more often than others, for instance, can insure a more advantageous selection of interviewees for the qualitative section of this study. For these reasons, the quantitative survey was conducted prior to the qualitative interviews.

The results of the qualitative survey can be found in appendices 3, 4, and 5. The transcripts of the interviews have not been attached here but can be obtained by contacting the author.

3.1. The quantitative survey

As the quantitative survey is subordinated to the qualitative interviews I assessed that a non-representative population sample would be sufficient. Over 200 questionnaires were handed out at schools and companies, either personally or electronically, and filled out by individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate.

The questionnaire is divided up into three sections on an equal number of sheets (see appendix 1). The first page aims to collect the respondents' demographic data. Contextual questions concerning the circumstances and situations in which the problem in question occurs are included on the second page of the questionnaire. On the third and final page the respondents are asked about the actual reactions triggered when incorrect values and salience are assigned to their ethnic identity and their significance for the interaction. This section is comprised of two kinds of questions – those that seek to identify emotional responses such as 'I was upset' and 'I was angry', and behavioural responses like 'I said/did something' and 'I did not say/do anything' (see appendix 1). As respondents' reactions can consist of being angry, sad, and frustrated, *and* be accompanied by an action such as confronting the counterpart, it was stressed that more than one response box could be checked in this section. The pilot survey,

however, showed that the respondents seemed to overlook this remark, resulting in non-coherent data. Thus, the validity and reliability criteria for a quantitative use of this section of the questionnaire were not fulfilled (Kvale 1981: 181; Hansen & Andersen 2000: 146).

In light of these developments I decided to use the third section of the questionnaire qualitatively rather than quantitatively. This meant that I could not generalise on the basis of the collected data. However, by examining whether at least one respondent would check every response category I was able to investigate whether the reactions and influences included in the questionnaires in fact occur in context with the problem in question. In addition, a category labelled 'other' was added which enabled the respondents to add in an answer which they deemed more fitting than the fixed response categories already incorporated in the questionnaire.

A total of 145 questionnaires were collected. Despite the fact that geographically dispersed people of different nationalities and levels of education were approached, the respondents who decided to fill out the questionnaires were primarily well educated Danish citizens residing on the island of Zealand. Specifically, the demographical data show that 91,1 percent of the respondents are Zealanders (including residents of Copenhagen), 86,9 percent of the respondents have a higher education diploma (ranging from two year higher education to Ph.d. and MD), and 71 percent of the respondents are Danish citizens. As for the respondents' sex, 57,9 percent are female. Furthermore, 38,6 percent of the respondents are 25 to 34 years of age. Of the remaining 51,4 percent, 50 percent are distributed rather evenly on the age groups 15-24 and 35-64, with 1,4 percent of the respondents being 65 or older (for tables, see appendix 3).

3.2. The qualitative interviews

On the basis of the data collected in the quantitative survey I decided to interview eight individuals. While two are ethnic Danes, five of the interviewees are first generation immigrants who have resided in Denmark for ten years or longer. The last interviewee moved to Denmark for an internship less than four months before the interview was conducted. The decision to interview six individuals with foreign backgrounds and only two native Danes was based on the questionnaire results which indicated that foreign nationals experience misunderstandings concerning their ethnic identity more often than Danes (see appendix 3). Six of the interviewees were interviewed individually and two together. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices or homes at their choosing and lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. Six interviews were conducted in Danish, one in English and one in Serbo-Croatian.

In regard to age, geography, and education the interviewees and the respondents who partook in the quantitative survey have demographic characteristics which resemble those of the respondents who partook in the quantitative survey on a number of counts. For instance, the interviewees are between 25 and 65 years old, the majority are either currently enrolled or have graduated from a higher education institution, and they live in Copenhagen or elsewhere on the island of Zealand. Detailed comments and demographical data of the eight interviewees are included in appendix 5.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Context

The quantitative survey revealed that 43,5 percent of the 145 respondents only rarely or never find that incorrect values are assigned to their ethnic identity when they communicate inter-culturally. For incorrect salience, the figure is 46,9 percent. A sum of 16,6 percent feel that they are subject to incorrect values often or every time while 13,8 percent believe that their counterpart has assigned incorrect salience to their ethnic identity. Thus, while the problem is absent in many intercultural communication interactions, it occurs frequently enough to warrant closer analysis (see appendix 3).

According to the questionnaire results the problem in question occurs in social/informal encounters as well as in work-related/formal ones. The nature of an interaction – whether it is formal or informal – does not seem to be a significant factor of influence for the occurrence of ethnic identity related

misunderstandings, as the questionnaire results reveal that they take place at nearly equal intervals in both contexts (see appendix 3). How well individuals are acquainted with the person with whom they are communicating, however, is of substantial relevance. The questionnaires showed that people tend to register misconceptions concerning their ethnic identity more often when interacting with strangers than with friends and acquaintances (see appendix 3). This can be related to the fact that people who know each other are in possession of a larger body of knowledge about each other than strangers involved in an interaction. To compensate for their lack of knowledge, thus, strangers tend to make use of stereotypes when trying to predict their counterpart's behaviour which in turn can lead to erroneous assumptions (cf. 2.3.).

Another pattern disclosed in the quantitative study is the fact that ethnic minorities – non-Danish citizens – experience the problem in question on a more frequent basis than ethnic Danes (see appendix 4). It is plausible that this is interrelated with the fact that foreign citizens communicate inter-culturally more often than Danes – another fact drawn from the results of the questionnaire results (see appendix 4). It is also possible, however, that immigrants are generally more aware of their ethnic identity than the Danish majority population. Thus, they would tend to register inconsistencies between the way they identify themselves ethnically and the way their counterpart perceives them more consistently than Danes. As stated in 2.2.1., being an immigrant necessitates facing the choice of integrating, assimilating, separating, and marginalizing in relation to the host culture. As the host population is not confronted with the same issues, it is a logical assumption that, consequently, the majority are less aware of their ethnic identity than the immigrant minorities (cf. 2.2.1. and 2.3., Berry 2004: 176ff). This hypothesis was confirmed in the interviews. While the interviewees of non-Danish origin commented on a number of experiences with ethnic identity misunderstandings which took place *within* the Danish boarders, the two ethnic Danes were only able to recall episodes which occurred *outside of* Denmark. Thus, the interview results indicate that ethnic Danes primarily register ethnic identity discrepancies when abroad and thus themselves 'ethnic minorities'. The fact that the questionnaires reveal that more foreign nationals than Danes experience misunderstandings concerning their ethnic identity, therefore, can be due to respondents' misassumptions that they were being asked about their experiences in Denmark specifically why fewer Danes were able to recall encountering the problem than non-Danes.

4.2. Interpretations of the research question

The interviewees' interpretations of what it means to have someone attach incorrect values or salience to their ethnic identity can be divided up into three groups. The first one entails being placed in a category with which they can not identify – i.e. a Catholic being mistaken for a Muslim or the like. The second group applies only to the interviewees who have immigrated to Denmark. The interviews revealed that these individuals tend to consider their being immigrants an ethnic identity equivalent to being a Muslim, a Dane or a Croat. The third group is the most comprehensive of the three and involves stereotypical perceptions about the interviewees' ethnic groups – i.e. assuming someone is passionate because they're Italian or such.

The three categories have a lot in common. For instance, in all three groups, stereotypical notions are what the interviewees draw forth as problematic. In the first group simplistic ideas such as that all Bosnians and all dark-haired people are Muslim, are the reason why two Christian interviewees are placed in a category in which they do not belong. In the second group, the stereotype that all immigrants have poor Danish skills, among others, is the reason why immigrant interviewees feel that their identities as immigrants have been assigned incorrect values. In the third group, stereotypes of Muslim interviewees as being rapists, and others resembling it, act as catalysts of misunderstandings and communication difficulties.

These stereotypes are all uncharacteristic of the interviewees' ethnic identities, as the interviewees do not view them as applicable in their particular situation. Thus, the Christian interviewees in the first group stress that they are not Muslim, and the immigrants in the second group point out that they do indeed speak Danish. Similarly, the individual in the third group who was confronted with the stereotypical notion that all Muslims are rapists rejects the suggestion that this applies to him personally – to name a few examples. By dissociating themselves from these stereotypes the interviewees support the argument that not all member of an ethnic group are alike. Here, I draw a parallel to among others Bennett and

Bennett's (2004: 151) conclusions in section 2.3.1., that ethnic groups are heterogeneous why one cannot jump to conclusions about all members of an ethnic group based on tendencies.

Another feature shared by all three groups is the fact that, due to the aforementioned stereotypical categorisations, the interviewees are forced to contemplate the issue of their ethnic identity. As stated in 2.3., categories determined externally are not always consistent with the individuals' ethnic identities. They can, however, influence self-identification as they tend to instigate reflection about personal identification and thus cause either acceptance or rejection of the imposed category (cf. 2.3., Jenkins 2006: 111-114).

This is evident in the previously mentioned Christian interviewees' reactions to being categorised as Muslim. Although they did not explicitly present themselves as ethnically Christian, both the interviewees in question did so indirectly by proclaiming that labelling them as Muslim is inaccurate. The same applies to the immigrant interviewees who were subject to the assumption that being an immigrant implies having poor Danish language skills. By informing their respective counterparts that they understand and speak Danish, they rejected the category 'immigrants who do not speak Danish'. Thereby, they identified themselves as immigrants who do speak Danish – which can be assumed to have been an important aspect of their self-identification in the interactions in question. Similarly, the Muslim interviewee who was faced with the stereotypical notion that Muslims rape young girls rejected the categorisation as a 'Muslims rapist' and thus identified himself the way he wants to be perceived: as a Muslim individual who does not conform to that sort of behaviour.

4.3. Reactions to stereotypes and their influence on the interaction

This study revealed that inconsistencies between people's self-images and their counterparts' perceived beliefs about their ethnic identities can provoke a wide range of reactions. The quantitative survey, for instance, confirmed that all the reactions which were included as response categories in the questionnaire occur in the above specified context, as every response category was checked by at least one respondent. Thus, it was verified that these discrepancies can trigger surprise, sadness, irritation, frustration as well as anger. All of those reactions were also identified in the qualitative interviews. One Muslim interviewee was surprised, irritated, as well as angry when it was alleged that all Muslims are rapists, while another was sad when she was labelled a prostitute based on her Polish origin. In the category 'other' a respondent pointed out that she was puzzled when her counterpart assigned incorrect values and/or salience to her ethnic identity and another remarked that he was happy. In addition, a number of respondents noted 'I do not care' in relation to the same question.

How people react depends on evaluations which they think that their counterpart assigns to the stereotypes they use. As observed in 2.3., categorisation often leads to attributing positive or negative assessments to groups (Tajfel 1978: 62). It is not possible to conclude whether people's reactions differ as a result of positive, neutral or negative stereotypes based on the questionnaire results only. However, judging by Tajfel's (1978: 74-75) remark that everyone desires a positive self-image, it is safe to assume that the respondents who checked the response category 'I don't care' as well as the individual who added 'I am happy' were not referring to their reactions to negative evaluations – prejudice (cf. 2.3.).

This was confirmed in the interviews. Not caring was brought up only in context with neutral and positive stereotypes, such as the notion that all Polish individuals are diligent, and all Danes are fond of the band Aqua. None of the interviewees expressed indifference in relation to being subject to negative stereotypes – prejudice – although a few did note they have learned to ignore them. Thus, I assess that the man who noted 'I am happy' was in all probability exposed to a positive stereotype in the particular situation which inspired his remark – assuming, naturally, that his response was serious and not a sarcastic remark.

4.3.1. Passivity

The questionnaire results confirm that some individuals choose to say or do something when confronted with incorrect stereotypes while others prefer to remain passive. This is reflected in the interviewees' comments where a number of factors of significance to this choice are emphasised. Thus, one interviewee stressed that her subordinate position and her minority status at her work-place kept her from confronting her prejudiced colleagues, who judged her on account of her ethnicity. Her decision not to act was also

based upon her prior experiences with her manager, who when approached, had dismissed her complaints. Judging by this interview, a minority status as well as prior unsuccessful experiences which both suggest that acting would be pointless can prevent someone from confronting their counterpart, despite the fact that they disagree with them. The hypothesis that expectation of failure can lead to passivity is confirmed by another individual who, under the option 'other' in the questionnaire, noted: 'it's hard to say but I choose not to comment on the misconception because it doesn't lead to anything anyway'.

Another interviewee observes that the fact that her previous actions in a number of occasions have lead to an argument or a fight, today she tends to ignore misconceptions of her ethnic identity. Linguistic proficiency is also a factor of relevance when people choose not to act. An interviewee who was called a prostitute based on her Polish origin notes that she wanted to correct her counterpart but was unable to due to her insufficient Danish skills at the time. Others point out that the relationship with the counterpart is of importance. An interviewee explains that he rarely chooses to say something when a taxi driver expresses incorrect assumptions about his ethnic identity as he is a stranger and their paths are unlikely to cross in the future. Another interviewee supports this by referring to a stranger in a train. When she overhears a prejudiced comment about her ethnic group, she remains silent as she finds that people have a right to say whatever they want.

Thus, a number of conditions can affect the decision to act when confronted with what is perceived as incorrect ethnic stereotypes. Consequently, in situations where action is deselected, the findings indicate that the actual communication interaction is influenced only marginally or not at all.

4.3.2. Reactions to neutral and positive stereotypes and their effects on the interaction

When confronted with stereotypes which they evaluate to be neutral or positive, the interviewees' reactions tend to be rather restrained. Thus, one interviewee simply said 'thank you' when she was assumed to be diligent on the grounds of Polish background, while another modestly accepted the compliment when his counterpart attributed his good manners to his Arab origin. Similarly, the interviewees who chose to correct their counterpart did so in a subdued manner. One interviewee noted that he was somewhat irritated by the fact that it was assumed that he likes the band Aqua simply because he's from Denmark. However, he stated that as he didn't find the counterpart's remark malevolent, he simply pointed out that he knows of but does not like Aqua. It is implied in the interview that the topic of conversation changed shortly hereafter. Similarly, when another interviewee was called 'a Viking' based on his Danish heritage, the stereotype had an insignificant impact on the interviewee and the interaction. Believing the comment to be a compliment the interviewee chose to remark that he does not consider himself a Viking and that he does not find the notion of Danes as Vikings factual. Thus, he moved the focus of the conversation to Vikings as a historical people and the interaction proceeded without further ado.

The same applies to incidents when a woman mistook an interviewee of Christian faith to be a Muslim and another inaccurately assumed an interviewee coherent in Danish to have poor Danish skills. Both mistakes were perceived as harmless. As a consequence, in the first case the interviewee simply made a joke about the misconception. In the second case, the interviewee corrected the counterpart in a friendly manner. As the interviewees do not discuss the incidents further other than to observe that they have had good experiences with their particular choices of action, I find it safe to assume that their reactions did not have unfortunate consequences for the respective interactions. Thus, in relation to neutral/positive stereotypes the abovementioned interviewees seem to view the counterparts' misconceptions as honest mistakes, which influences their reactions and the interactions' further progress minimally.

This, however, is only valid in situations in which the mistakes do not have unfortunate consequences. An interviewee recalled an incident at a pharmacy when a female sales clerk assumed that he did not speak Danish. Probably assuming that it would make it easier for him to understand her, she chose to speak loudly. Consequently, everyone at the pharmacy was able to hear the conversation which provoked a somewhat offensive comment from the interviewee. As the interviewee did not explicate how his reaction influenced the specific interaction it is not justifiable, on these grounds only, to conclude that positive or negative stereotypes can have negative consequences for an interaction. I assess, however,

that this is likely, if only in situations where the neutral/positive stereotypes result in actions which are perceived as offensive.

4.3.3. Reactions to negative stereotypes/prejudice and their effects on the interaction

As argued in 2.3., in intercultural communication interactions the parties involved tend to evaluate each other negatively, which every so often entails communicating prejudiced notions (cf. 2.3., Togeby 1997: 16). To judge from an interviewee's remarks concerning assumptions that Bosnians are primitive, when he expresses his disagreement politely, people tend to listen. The interviewee in question assigns the negative ideas about his ethnic group to ignorance and explains that, when corrected, people usually show interest in learning about his Bosnian ethnic identity. Thus, some interactions develop into information-exchanging conversations about the interviewee's ethnic identity. However, the interviews show that friendly reprimands do not guarantee a positive outcome. The aforementioned interviewee pointed out that he has also interacted with individuals who were not willing to acknowledge his opinion. The same is stressed by the English interviewee who was not taken seriously when she complained about being subject to prejudice by her Irish colleagues. Both interviewees relate their counterparts' behaviour to their personalities. How the interactions in question progressed is not possible to conclude based on the interviews. However, it appears that both interviewees eventually gave up trying to get their opinions across to the individuals involved. As effective, satisfactory communication necessitates knowing how people identify themselves (cf. 2.3.1.., Gudykunst 2005: 299) both interviewees must have found the interactions in question disappointing. This is confirmed by their later negative image of their respective counterparts, involving attributes such as 'a bully', 'uncultivated', and 'intolerant'.

Unlike the abovementioned interviewees, a few individuals admitted to correcting their counterpart in a less friendly manner. The interviews indicate that especially when subject to unusually negative stereotypes/prejudice people have a tendency to react rather strongly, which in turn can have significant influence on the relevant interactions. One interviewee remarked explicitly that he once got angry and scolded his counterpart – which only intensified when the counterpart failed to listen to him. Similarly, the discriminating behaviour exhibited by an interviewee's male friend who pointed out that being a Polish immigrant she can be deported from Denmark also had a serious consequence. Despite the fact that the interviewee did not specify how the interaction in question ended, the relationship with the counterpart was significantly affected as she chose to distance herself from him.

Thus, depending on a number of factors, people react to misconceptions about their ethnic identity in various ways. Most of these reactions' consequences mentioned in the interviews are also confirmed in the questionnaires, as all the response categories were checked by at least one respondent. Thus, it was determined that the interaction can develop into a personal conversation about ethnic identity, a civilized discussion about the same as well as a misunderstanding and an argument. In addition, one respondent noted that, the first time she experienced the problem, the interaction ended quickly due to her frustration while the same kind of misunderstandings now generally have a positive outcome. Another respondent pointed out that his reactions have long-lasting consequences as he does not wish to stay in touch with his counterpart.

4.4. Ethnic identity salience: reactions and the effects on the interaction

The questionnaire results show that misconceptions of ethnic identity values are experienced only slightly more often than those of ethnic identity salience. In the conducted interviews, however, only few individuals had comments regarding the latter. Perhaps the majority of the individuals who participated in the interviews never or rarely experiences problems related to their ethnic identity salience or finds it difficult to pinpoint incidents involving their ethnic identity salience.

The comments of an interviewee indicate that incorrect ethnic identity salience can be related to being categorized based on ethnic identity only. As shown in 2.3.1. Langer (1989: 154) refers to viewing someone as German, Muslim or black only, and disregarding the fact that the person in question is also a man, father, and a doctor, as *mindless*. This entails neglecting the fact that people can attach more or less importance to their different identities depending on time and context (cf. 2.1 and 2.3.1, Roosens 1989: 16; Jenkins 2006: 108).

The fact that people do not want to be judged based on their ethnic identity only is evident in the questionnaire results as well as the interviews. For instance, one interviewee pointed out that when she worked in Ireland, her identity as English was seen as crucial while other aspects of her identities were overlooked. It is implied in her remarks that she wanted her Irish colleagues to pay attention to her other identities as well. Similarly, another interviewee recalled an incident when her ethnic identity was given priority over her identity as a being a new employee at a firm, which was more important to her in the situation in question. In the questionnaire, one respondent stressed that he does not necessarily wish to keep in touch with people who do not see him for who he is as an individual but only for being Danish, Scandinavian, or white.

Assuming that someone's ethnic identity is determining for their behaviour can have negative consequences. The respondent who does not want to be seen as Danish, Scandinavian, or white only emphasised that he does not want to keep in touch with his counterpart. Similarly, the interviewee who wanted to be recognised as a new employee rather than a Bosnian immigrant was so frustrated about the episode afterwards, that she had a talk about it with a colleague.

In addition to having someone prioritise their counterpart's ethnic identity in situations when other identities are preferred, misunderstandings related to ethnic identity salience also occur in another context. One interviewee, who has spent half of her life in Bosnia and another half in Denmark, pointed out that she feels both Danish and Bosnian. Thus, she falls into the category of mixed identities as discussed by Eriksen (2000: 5-6) in 2.2.1. As noted by Alba (1990: 24) for these individuals, different aspects of their ethnic identities are activated in different situations. In regard to the particular interviewee, her identity as a Dane is actuated when too much significance is assigned to her Bosnian identity. Despite this, she only chooses to confront the person who is mistaken when she finds it important to state her position. In other situations she makes a humorous remark about it or does not comment on it.

Misconceptions about someone's ethnic identity salience, thus, are related to the post-modern understanding of identity which entails that people have several identities which are activated in different situations. This encompasses situations when someone's ethnic identity is wrongfully assigned too much importance as well as episodes where one aspect of someone's multifaceted ethnic identity is given priority over another. As with ethnic identity values it is evident that reactions triggered by perceived incorrect ethnic salience depend on the relationship with the counterpart, the situation, and the context.

5. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this study aims to shed light upon the processes set in motion when actors in intercultural communication interactions feel that their counterparts' perceptions of their ethnic identity do not match their own. The objective was to identify reactions triggered in the aforementioned situations and examine how those reactions can influence intercultural communication interactions.

The collected data show that the reactions are numerous and range from indifference, surprise, sadness, irritation, frustration to anger. Whether they are acted upon depends on situational and contextual circumstances. Passivity is often chosen as a result of former unsuccessful experiences with addressing the issue, a superficial relationship with the other person involved, bad timing, and/or poor language skills. Furthermore, the reactions are interrelated with the attitudes which individuals find are suggested or expressed by their counterparts. Negative attitudes tend to provoke reactions ranging from subtle corrections to scolding of the counterpart, while positive or neutral stereotypes only result in reprimands when they are expressed in a manner which is found offensive.

Consequently, how an individual's reaction affects the interaction depends first and foremost on whether the individual in question reacts actively or chooses to ignore the perceived misconception. When the issue is addressed, the personality of the counterpart and his response to being corrected play an important part in the further development of the interaction. It is not, on the basis of the results of this study, possible to deduce whether the manner in which one confronts the counterpart – politely or offensively – has an effect on the counterpart's responsiveness and thus on the interaction's further development. It is, however, plausible and therefore a relevant issue to be examined in future studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire in English

Appendix 2: Comments noted under 'other'

Appendix 3: Questionnaire results for sections 1 and 2 (questions 1-14)

Appendix 4: Comparative figures

Appendix 5: The interviewees

Appendix 6: Tables for questionnaire results (questions 1-14)

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