

A Comparative Look at Scandinavian Cultures: Denmark, Norway and Sweden and Their Encounters with German Refugees, 1933-1940

Frank Meyer

Professor in Diversity Studies, Oslo University College, Norway

Abstract

This article is a comparative study that points to the differences between national cultures in Scandinavia, as they are reconstructed from source material left over from the encounter between Scandinavian insiders and German outsiders in the pre-World War II period. This article uses a variety of memoirs, notes, interviews, and other records produced by German refugees in Scandinavia, and by Scandinavians who encountered German refugees in the period 1933-1940. Danes, Norwegians and Swedes characterise and are characterised by the German refugees. Thus, in-group and out-group mechanisms highlight patterns that help to constitute national cultures. This article provides a few examples that show the comparative differences in the ways in which German refugees were seen and treated by the Scandinavians who encountered them. It also provides a few examples that show the comparative differences in national culture in Scandinavia, as those differences appeared to German refugees.

Keywords: Scandinavia, culture, comparison, encounter, German refugees.

In this paper, I will try to contribute to the comparative study of cultures, more specifically, to comparisons between the Scandinavian cultures. I am inspired, but not completely seduced by the work of Geert Hofstede in this immense field of inquiry (Hofstede 1991). The comparative concepts I have chosen to use lean upon the work of sociologists, particularly, Max Weber, Erving Goffman, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. Careful readers will also recognise my indebtedness to the social historian, Michel Foucault and to the social anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz (Meyer 2001).

When comparing national cultures it appears to be crucial to acknowledge that the construction of an imagined national community is founded upon the dichotomy of insiders and outsiders. Every construction of *us* presupposes the existence of *them*. There can be no *in-group A* without an *out-group B*, and no *Ego* without an *Alter*. Thus it seems obvious that the typical traits of a national culture will become clearly visible in the encounter with strangers. In the case of the Scandinavian cultures, the German refugees that arrived in the years 1933-1940 were in a unique position to observe and report their observations. As other foreigners, the refugees were outsiders, and this position enabled them to see what insiders could not see. But compared to other foreigners, the German refugees were culturally more competent to formulate anthropological insights. The refugees had a cultural background which was neither too distant from, nor too close to the Scandinavian cultures.

Travellers from Asia or Africa would experience difficulties understanding the cultural patterns in Scandinavia and the differences between them. Most likely, the foreigners from distant lands would merely experience the Scandinavian cultures as being 'exotic' (Harbsmeier 1994). On the other hand, basing an investigation entirely upon reports from very close foreigners, other Scandinavians who travel through their neighbouring countries, for example, would not likely provide satisfactory results. There have been too many conflicts between these three nations in the course of their histories and we must presume that the conflicts have left an imprint and shaped stereotypes and prejudices. Thus, everyday life experiences and observations by the German refugees can, if handled with the usual scrutiny and with a regard for source criticism, render an almost anthropological insight into the differences between the national cultures in Scandinavia.

One of the metaphors I used in approaching this study was the litmus paper test. Perhaps the encounter between German refugees fleeing the Hitler-regime in the period 1933-1940, on the one hand, and the Scandinavian peoples, on the other, would be able to clearly distinguish between the national characteristics of Danes, Swedes and Norwegians in the way that a litmus paper test can distinguish between acids and alkali. The German refugees were the litmus paper - so to speak- and Denmark, Sweden and Norway were societies composed of three different fluid substances. I imagined that the German refugees would be able to identify a specific mixture of cultural elements in these three societies.

In contradistinction to many other cultural encounters, this one has left behind a huge supply of historical records. Scandinavians have written memoirs, letters, notes, and other records of their encounters and experiences for refugee support groups and for the authorities tackling the flow of refugees. The German refugees wrote accounts of their experiences and made analyses of the Scandinavian cultures in memoirs, letters, and papers written for political parties. The refugees were also interviewed and their interviews were recorded. Consequently, the historian has a unique opportunity to reconstruct the mutual images of the encountering participants and to compare them.

One last matter concerns the way I have applied the term *culture*. In this paper, culture is disclosed by uncovering everyday life patterns and the application of symbols, e.g. the ways in which people behave and the meanings embedded in their behaviours. Since the space available to me for this article is very limited, I will only provide two examples taken from a more thorough examination (Meyer 2001). I am a historian who was born in Germany, and it seems plausible to me to attempt to explain the differences between the Scandinavian cultures by making an assessment of the different social formations that ruled these three societies in pre-modern times. A classic court-centred society (as in France or Austria) did exist in Sweden. Norway did not have a class of nobles after the middle ages. Aristocratic behaviour could not have any influence upon the national culture in Norway, while it dominated Swedish society. Denmark was, in many ways, a society which did have an aristocracy, in contrast to the Norwegian case, but the aristocrats did not play a decisive role in Danish society as they did in Swedish society.

Scandinavian Cultures as They Are Seen by German Refugee Outsiders

The first image I would like to reconstruct is the outsider's view of the three cultures. According to the personal and official documents that refugees themselves wrote, and to the interviews that were recorded by others, there were considerable differences between the cultures. Typical Swedish behaviour seemed to be particularly influenced by aristocratic symbols and is easily distinguished from the more rustic Norwegian behaviour and from the petit-bourgeois Danish way of living. According to the experiences of the German refugees, Swedes generally tended to behave in a purposeful and rational way (Weber 1922), far more so than is true for Danes and Norwegians. This observation seems to disclose a Swedish affinity for organisation, system and formalism. The usual Swedish way of conducting oneself appeared to be particularly formal, instrumentally rational, unemotional, and disciplined in the eyes of the German refugees. Everyday culture in Sweden showed more signs of social distinction. It seemed as if Swedes had a greater need to set up barriers against one another and against strangers. Gender roles were more pronounced in Sweden than in the neighbouring societies.

The Norwegian national culture was characterised by nearly opposite traits. Little is found that describes Norwegians as being purposeful and rational. On the contrary, they are described as typically exhibiting affective behaviour. Emotional outbursts were, to a lesser degree, regulated – or in Freudian terms- sublimated - by social conventions, etiquette, and the general understanding of suitable behaviour. The occurrence of affective explosions discloses a less developed sense of organisation and less reliance upon system and formalism in the human interactions within Norwegian culture than in the Swedish. It was typical for the expression of Norwegian everyday life that mechanisms of social distinction were less marked than in Swedish culture. There were only basic interactions between people and these interactions were not always clearly marked, either for insiders or outsiders. Finally, the differences between the sexes were also less clearly marked in Norway, than in Sweden.

Danish national culture was characterised by a high degree of value rationality, when compared to Norwegian counterparts. Nevertheless system conformity and formalism were not values per se, as they often appeared to be in Sweden. Danish officers allowed themselves to violate the rules of the Civil Servant Act, because their hearts required them to do so. The signs of distinction were more clearly

marked in Danish society than in Norwegian society, but they were never as clearly distinctive as in Swedish society. The distinctions referred to include visions of the other as an enemy (*Feindbilder*), the distinctions used to categorise other Danes, gender roles and strangers. A prominent trait that was often used to describe Danes referred to their ambivalent natures. The habitual mask that Danes wore in everyday encounters gave expression to a funny and easy-going personality. According to the German refugees, behind this pleasant mask was another face with distinctive and manifest interests and world-views. Danish people were perceived as being false, deceitful and unreliable.

These descriptions are abstract and general and I would like to illustrate the cultural differences with a few examples from everyday life. The different customs expressing social distinction can be seen in the forms used to address others. Most cultures have a variety of ways to express social distinctions in society. A common way to express social distinction is to employ a particular word rather than use an alternative one when addressing others in spoken and written language. In most languages, the choice of form one uses when speaking and writing to another depends upon norms of status and intimacy. In contrast to the modern English language, most of the European languages have taken over the Latin pattern by using the pronoun in the third person plural to mark status, social distance and a lack of intimacy. Originally English had a similar distinction between the more formal *you* and the more informal *thou*. Gradually, especially after the Civil War in the 17th century, *you* took over alone. In German and Spanish, the respective pronouns *Sie* and *Ustedes* fulfil this function. The equivalent words for the English personal pronoun *thou* can be used to mark inferiority. However, whenever there is an atmosphere of intimacy, words like *Du* and *tú* can also be used.

The Swedish language had differed from this pattern from the time of King Gustavus II Adolph (1611-1632). The Swedes had no specified pronoun like the French *Vous*, the German *Sie* or the Spanish *Ustedes*. Instead, the Swedes addressed one other by using titles and indirect speech. The importance of titles is well documented and their use continued until the end of World War II. "*The era allowing people to address one another with the word you had not as yet arrived in Sweden*", according to one German refugee who continues "*when people did not use titles to address one another they did so by using the third person*".

Alfons Heising, another refugee, recalled: "*You are addressed in the third person. 'Does Sir mean this? Does my Lady mean that? It is impolite to address people directly. It's difficult to translate it into German. It seems so impolite and so inauthentic to translate the forms literally. But they were just being polite ...'*" It is only a slight exaggeration to state that one was not allowed to speak to a person without first being introduced to him or her, i.e. to learn the person's name and title. Usually, it is proper to use both when addressing someone. In Danish, one is able to unceremoniously say: "*Will you come back soon?*" This was not possible in Swedish. Swedes said: "*Does Director Johansson believe that Director Johansson will be back soon?*" The formula "*Director Johansson*" might appear as many as five times in an otherwise short sentence.

In Denmark and Norway, it was not a common practice to use titles to such an extent. The Danes and Norwegians lacked the formality and the stiff postures that many foreign travellers regarded as typical for the Swedish way of life. The German social democrat Otto Friedländer had lived in Norway and in Sweden. He summed up his notions about Norwegian forms of address by stating that "*most of the Norwegians are not people of etiquette. They don't like to shake hands and feign emotional distress when they say good bye. At best, they nod their heads, and they are, for the most part, rather taciturn.*" Another refugee in Norway, Max Strobl, reacted in accordance with "*his German love of order (...) against his Norwegian comrades' tendency to what he called gipsydom.*" In Denmark, German refugees did not refer to special conventions concerning the use of titles. This indicates that there were no contrasts to the German patterns. Intimate friends were addressed with one pronoun – *Du* –, while strangers and people interacting in official capacities are addressed with another – *Sie* and *De*.

The Swedish way of living differed from the Danish and the Norwegian ways by the high standard of affect control. In all cultures, members internalise rules for expressing emotions, and in addition, they learn a specific way to interact. Rational behaviour and the control of emotions were highly esteemed in Sweden. All in all, being kind was not seen as being a typical Swedish trait, according to Stefan Szende. "*A Swede is usually not kind to someone that he does not know.*" It should be noted that there is an important distinction here between the words '*not kind*' and the word '*unkind*'. Swedes were not

characterised as being unkind. 'Not kind' is neutral or indifferent, 'unkind' is hostile. A German refugee recalled *"the cold and reserved attitude of the Swedish public, the labour movement included"*. The Swedes responded to the refugees in a *"neutral, not unkind"* manner. They were *"just annoyed since they (the refugees, FM) all were considered alien elements"*. When the same refugee came to visit Oslo, Norway, he noticed with surprise the nearness of top and bottom in Norwegian society. Oscar Torp, then Minister of Social Affairs and the secretary of the Norwegian Labour Party sat down informally at a stranger's table and participated *"in the discussion as if he himself were a journalist or an anonymous civil servant in an authority"*.

In contrast to the Swedish control of conduct, one can observe a relatively high degree of formlessness and the use of emotions in public affairs in the two other countries, and this is especially true in Denmark. The German refugees did not ordinarily consider Danish formlessness to be a positive characteristic. The Danish way of life seemed to be somewhat anarchistic to the Germans. German exiles complained about the Danish *"rhubarb language"* where the indistinct articulation symbolised the typical Danish way of *"dawdling"*. The Danish manner had its advantages and its disadvantages. Thus, what the Danes considered to be sarcasm irritated the refugees, because they were unable to find a reason for the sarcasm or a satisfactory understanding of the meanings Danes were communicating with sarcasm. As a consequence, many of the refugees did not know how to deal with the Danes. *"The Swede suspects (that the Danish words and tones mask some other meaning) and seeks a different meaning behind the Dane's sarcasm, (...). The Swede understands that there is some distance between the literal meaning being expressed and the intended meaning, but he is not really able to explain this manner of expression. The distance may point to some kind of elasticity, and elasticity can easily be considered an unreliable characteristic."* (Vogel-Jørgensen 1943: 35.)

One can understand the so-called *Danish skull* in a similar manner. Today the term in Sweden means direct physical assault using the head as a weapon, but in the 1930s it meant a sudden and unforeseen change of mood. *"In a wider sense this term means an unmotivated revulsion from intimate friendliness to the complete opposite, and its expression can be very rude or coarse."* These problems often put an end to any closer acquaintance with Danes. The cosy and jocular manner of speech often appeared to be affected and artificial when it was suddenly replaced by a dark and deadly earnest mood and subjects of serious concern. To the German refugees, this conduct seemed capricious and Danes were viewed as being somewhat superficial. The gap between intimacy and formality was narrower in Denmark than in Sweden. Danes seemed to lack a differentiated spectre of reaction patterns. There was no way for them to mark great contrasts, like *"being overwhelmed"*. Danes *"can, amongst other things, feel impoverished and uneasy when they find that they have run out of words. When they want to express strong admiration, they long for the grandiose form that is found in the Swedish language."*

Both the Norwegian and the Danish societies lacked the strict, bureaucratic, hierarchical, aristocratic and somewhat military structures which were so typical for Swedish society. The symbolic language in Sweden indicated that Swedes envisioned the performance of social practices as if they were parts of a complicated and perfectly run machine. One looks in vain for examples showing similar experiences or reports from the German refugees in Sweden and Denmark. A typical comment from a refugee in Denmark follows: *"When we saw the Danish military, the way they looked, the way they walked, we agreed that you could never fight a war with these fellows"*. Another typical comment: *"Well, there is, with the exception of Vienna, no other place in the world where so much phlegm, so much navel contemplation, so much clumsiness and stubbornness can be found as here"*. These were the ways in which the German emigrants described the Danish way of life.

The pronounced Swedish inclination to keep order bore strange fruit. A German refugee who stayed in Norway in the 1930s, fled to Sweden when Norway was occupied in 1940. He was arrested in Sweden and the encounter with the police there differed a lot from what he was used to from the Norwegian police. *"What I supposed was meant to be a routine series of questions and answers, ended with my being arrested. My declarations did not seem to satisfy the officers. The examination was repeated during the following days. (...) The cell was so clean, it shined. It literally smelled as if it had been sterilized."*

Perhaps this jail cell was an extreme example. Still, in a wider sense, it does reflect the experiences of the German refugees in Sweden, who felt unwelcome and abandoned to the whims and dictates of arbitrary bureaucratic rule. The encounters they had with the Swedish bureaucratic apparatus led to very

disempowering experiences. "*Swedish was the name I gave to all of the bureaucratic experiences I had in the following years*" was the concluding remark from one German refugee who now lived in Denmark. He told a story about his experiences of being arrested and being placed in a Swedish internment camp where it was forbidden to write. All of the German refugees complained about the rule forbidding them to write. The Swedish authorities running the camp finally hit upon a solution. "*Some wise men in the Department of Social Affairs had, in an extraordinarily bureaucratic manner, managed to prepare a form letter to be signed by individuals who were interned in the camp. (...) I am, at present, a refugee in Sweden. I am fine. If you want to write to me, send your letters to the Department of Social Affairs, Stockholm.*"

Controlling, Supervising and Monitoring Others

Having concluded the portrayals German refugees made of their host Scandinavian societies, I now return the compliment and provide a portrait showing how the Scandinavian hosts viewed their uninvited guests. What images did Scandinavians have of the German refugees in their midst? Did Danes, Norwegians and Swedes consider these people to be their friends or their foes? Did these Germans generate feelings of suspicion, fear or hatred in the Scandinavians they encountered? Or did their presence stimulate sympathy, compassion and solidarity? If these Germans were seen as being a threat, what were the threats that came to mind (images of the enemy) in the Scandinavian bureaucrats that were forced to deal with the refugee problem? I emphasise that the imagined threats might differ considerably from the real menace and that people cope differently with the images and ideas that circulate in their minds. We know very well from everyday life experiences that people do experience threats (a possible nuclear World War III, terrorism, airplane crashes, etc.) in different ways. While some people live unconstrained lives, others spend much of their lives in constant fear.

In a nutshell, the differences between the three societies were very significant. Suspicion and fear were most prevalent in Sweden, while there was less of it in Denmark, and an almost naïve and easy-going laissez-faire attitude in Norway. The Norwegian refugee authorities did very little to hinder the free movement of the Germans who escaped from Nazi rule. There were few restricted areas, where the Germans were not allowed to move or travel. Those who had acquired a residence permit were not obliged to regularly appear at local police offices or before immigration authorities. The opposite was true in Sweden, where bureaucrats developed a finely-meshed network of controls. The first restrictions identified forbidden areas where German refugees were not allowed to enter. The suspicion was that these people were potential enemies and as a consequence their movements had to be monitored and controlled. Large areas were forbidden territory for these refugees, including the entire northern part of Sweden, the Kattegatt coastline and the archipelago in the Baltic. Harbours and cities, where Sweden's war industry was located, were off-limits. Until 1938, Swedish authorities required many German refugees to regularly appear at local police offices, a practice which mirrored the Danish policy. How regularly these refugees had to appear depended upon how dangerous they seemed to be to police authorities. Those who were deemed to be a danger had to appear on a daily basis. Others were required to appear once a week. Still others had to appear on a monthly basis, or every six months, or once a year. In 1938, the system was abandoned in Sweden. It proved to be inefficient in controlling the large number of potential propagandists, secret agents and terrorists. After 1938, the Germans were formally classified into three categories, according to the potential risk they represented. Those who were deemed to be totally harmless were not controlled at all. This freed resources which could be used more efficiently to monitor people who were placed higher-up in the risk classification system (Meyer 2001: 81-120). Those who were considered to be most deviant were jailed in two internment camps that were near the town of Falun. Before April 9th 1940, when German troops occupied Denmark and Norway, Sweden was the only country in Scandinavia with an internment camp system (for an international *tour d'horizon* on internment camps in the Western world see Kotek & Rigoulot: 432-441). In Denmark and Norway, people were also accommodated in collectives, but the systems developed there were never similar to the Swedish internment camps, which emphasised systems of control, management, discipline and the like. The collective lodgings that were provided in Denmark and Norway were spontaneous, improvised and short-lived undertakings. The Swedish camps, on the other hand (and borrowing a phrase from Max Weber), expressed *the rationality of an iron cage*.

Swedish authorities established an internment camp at Långmora, Dalarna in the first weeks of 1940. The institution had formerly been a work house for social misfits, i.e. negligent providers, criminals and

alcoholics. A punitive culture of discipline had already been created and its spirit festered within the walls of the institution when it was transformed to house the refugees. Essentially, the previous regulations were maintained and the staff of the work house reluctantly grew accustomed to the new category of internee. At issue was the social habitus of internees. The aim of internment was to assimilate these people into a pattern that fit in with the ideal conception of a typical Swede, from the perspective of the Swedish authorities. There were two camps, the one at Långmora and another at Smedsbo, where different categories of deviates were placed. As Jörg Lindner (1994) has underscored in a path breaking article, the Swedish authorities were less concerned about the internee's political viewpoint. What made internment necessary was that these people were homosexuals, kleptomaniacs, alcoholics, fathers who did not pay alimony and child support, or people who seemed to shy away from the work-world, etc. In addition to these deviances, many were either social democrats or communists. In fact, both camps were reformatories and the people who were interned in them were disciplined in order to adopt the Swedish norms and values. The camps were almost what Erving Goffman (1961) and Michel Foucault (1977) referred to as total institutions. They made use of four techniques in their efforts to change individual behaviour: 1. The rules of order in the camps deprived the internees of all distinguishing personal marks of identity. The individuality of internees was simply not allowed. As in all total institutions, the inmates had to wear uniforms and cut their hair to prescribed lengths and styles, etc. The German refugees who were interned in the Swedish camps felt that they were being treated unjustly by Swedish authorities. "*We are punished, but we have not been informed about what we are accused of (...). This is a form of treatment that even criminals are able to avoid....*" German refugees were systematically degraded, discriminated against, disciplined and punished. There were body searches, a ban on correspondence and visits, and the routine subjection to a degrading regimen. In addition to the camp leader and his staff, there were uniformed and armed guards patrolling the camp grounds. 2. Rigorous time schedules were enforced. The internees were to learn how to live an ordered life that was synchronised to ideal Swedish time patterns. 3. A work regime was established in order to habituate the internees to the (supposed) expectations found in the Swedish work-world. What we might identify as German eggheads were to be transformed into hard-working lumbermen, and this sometimes meant being required to cut wood at – 30°C. 4. Work behaviour and work results were keenly monitored and reported. The idea was to document the individual internee's progression according to prescribed plans, and to correct unintended deviations from those plans by systematic observation and record-keeping. The internee's progress in cutting wood was written down on paper designed for logarithmic calculations. The record was to document the internee's progress or stagnation on the path to becoming a disciplined worker. Reviewing the day-to-day notes kept by a camp leader in one of the Swedish internment camps, one finds a long list of characteristics to be instilled in internees. The list clearly identifies the core Swedish values in focus. The reform work was to produce people who were quiet, decent, proper, obliging, pious and well-behaved. All contrasting behaviour was described negatively (Meyer 2001: 140-156).

After the outbreak of World War II, Swedish authorities extended the number of internment camps that were established to reform German refugees, in the years between 1939 and 1945. To a growing degree, a network of functionally specialized internment camps emerged which seems quite unique among the democracies in the Western hemisphere before and during World War II (Kotek & Rigoulot 2001). The camp system aimed to isolate potentially criminal German refugees from Swedish society and in some instances, from the Nazi regime during their stay in Sweden. Some of the camps that were created were specialized to discipline Wehrmacht-deserters, who were isolated until they were extradited to the German troops. Other camps were specialized to deal with female refugees, mentally ill refugees and so on.

What does the data provide concerning the collectives that were established in Denmark and Norway? The picture is very different in these places. No reformatory of any kind was ever created. In Copenhagen, liberal citizens established a home for refugees at the town hall square. Room and board and entertainment was provided. "*Lessons in Danish and English were given there. There were parties and 'Bierabende' (...). The main task of the Danish leader was to arrange contacts between the emigrants and Danish families all over the country, in order to provide housing for the refugees. In Addition, money was raised from these families.*"

In Norway, German exiles from Bohemia, who resided in the woodland cottages used by Labour movement officials during their holidays, praised the quality of their lodgings and board. "*We had a fine time at these holiday cottages, even an exceptionally fine time, and a lot of our comrades had never had*

it so good before. Food was sufficient and there was also some pocket-money, so that we would be able to have a calm and holiday-like experience and recover." German refugees reported that Norwegian workers came almost daily to visit, and they brought flowers and fruits with them on those visits. Sometimes the refugees were away, enjoying their wooded surroundings when visitors came. They were surprised to find that visitors broke into the locked hut, to deliver cakes and sweets and a note expressing the hope that the tasty delights would please their guests.

Summary

This article is a comparative study that points to the differences between national cultures in Scandinavia, as they are reconstructed from source material left over from the encounter between Scandinavian insiders and German outsiders in the pre-World War II period. There already exists a certain amount of historical studies documenting the lives of refugees in Scandinavia in this period, but very few of them provide any seriously comparative data on cultural traits. There also exists a certain amount of social-anthropological literature on the peculiarities of Danish, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish national culture, but few of them are systematically comparative. This article uses a variety of memoirs, notes, interviews, and other records produced by German refugees in Scandinavia, and by Scandinavians who encountered German refugees in the period 1933-1940. Danes, Norwegians and Swedes characterise and are characterised by the German refugees. In-group and out-group mechanisms highlight patterns that help to constitute national cultures. This article provides a few examples that show the comparative differences in the ways in which German refugees were seen and treated by the Scandinavians who encountered them. It also provides a few examples that show the comparative differences in national culture in Scandinavia, as those differences appeared to German refugees. Thus, the mutual images of the other are used as a means in order to reconstruct the peculiarities of the three Scandinavian cultures.

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About the author:

Frank Meyer, b. 1964 in Liesborn, Federal Republic of Germany, studied history, sociology and Scandinavian literature and languages in Bochum, Essen, Göttingen and Oslo. Ph.D. in Greifswald 1997, and in Oslo 2001. Author of *Schreiben für die Fremde. Politische und kulturelle Publizistik des deutschen Exils in Norwegen und Skandinavien 1933-1940* (Essen: Klartext 2000), *Nordic Historiography in the 20th Century* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2000), and «*Dansken, svensken og nordmannen ... Skandinaviske habitusforskjeller sett i lys av kulturmøtet med tyske flyktninger. En komparativ studie*», (Oslo: Unipub, 2001).

[Journal of Intercultural Communication](#), ISSN 1404-1634, 2006, issue 12.
Editor: Prof. Jens Allwood
URL: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/>.