

Interview without a subject: The Russian doll question and cultural encounters

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Abstract

This article contributes to the rethinking of qualitative interview research into intercultural issues. It suggests that the application of poststructuralist thought should not be limited to the analysis of the interview material itself, but incorporate the choice of interviewees and the modalities for the accomplishment of interviews. The paper focuses on a discussion of theoretical and methodological considerations of design, approach and research strategy. These discussions are specified in relation to a project on gender and ethnicity in cultural encounters at Universities. In the paper, I introduce a research design named *Cultural interviewing*, present an approach to the design of interviews named *Interview without a subject*, and offer an analytic strategy directed towards the analysis of interview transcripts named *Interview on the level of the signifier*. The paper concludes that even though it is relevant for research into intercultural issues to focus on gender and ethnicity, it has to de-center both, gender and ethnicity.

Keywords: cultural encounters, qualitative interview, poststructuralism, ethnicity, gender

Introduction

How do I conduct interview based research on intercultural issues without reproducing a respective 'foreign other'? How do I conduct interview research in cultural encounters without engaging in otherization? How do I investigate cultural encounters without making individual experiences the effect or the outcome of the difference of a respective other? And how do I at the same time stick to my empirical research interest in ethnicity and gender? These questions are closely related to the question: What is culture?

The major focus in this contribution is to present and discuss my approach to the design of '*interviews without a subject*'. I developed this transdisciplinary approach on the grounds of poststructuralist theories in the fields of cultural studies, philosophy, gender history and intercultural communication. This transdisciplinary theoretical starting point impacts the conceptualization of interviewees, transcripts and experience. In the following, I address, specify and exemplify these questions with outset in an interview based project on cultural encounters (Kultur møder) in public Danish research institutions (between 2001 and 2003 financed by the Danish Research Council). On this account, I open this contribution with an interview extract.

In the beginning is a voice

In the beginning of this discussion is not the word. Rather, it is a voice.[2] I commence by making a voice heard. The voice was recorded during the interview project. It is telling a story on how it was welcomed at a - by then - new workplace:

"Well, I mean when I got here [...] I was very surprised and to a certain extent shocked by the kind of treatment I got because, I will give you two examples.

One was, my office was in [...] the post room, so the post room had a door with a [...] slit in it and with a basket inside where my colleagues would shove in their mails and the secretary would come three or four times a day and collect them, and some colleagues who had, misposted a letter would come and, collect it as well, sometimes not knocking at my door because they thought it was the post room, and I had been there for some time.

So I, I dropped a lot of hints, saying that, you know, this was an unacceptable situation because that door could have been shifted and put in one of the secretaries' offices. Anyway, obviously the secretary didn't want that. So I thought that was not a way to welcome a scholar, you know, I was quite upset by that and, I did a lot of things to attract attention that, I mean, made jokes about meeting the post-man, obviously I had been hinting, I had to do post-colonial studies so I, you know, come and returned post many times, but it didn't quite go down.

That was one example, the other example is that the [...] first day I was shown to my office and, I was told that [...] you even have a computer! And, I didn't quite understand what [...] that meant, [...] as a scholar and teacher I did expect that, you know, to get a computer in my office.

And, well, the shock was furthered, [...] by the fact that the computer was, 286 computer in [the late 1990's], [...] it run an old version of WordStar, and you couldn't send e-mails from it, [...] it had the very old system where the screen was blank and you have to do this [...] thing, you got the dollar sign and then you had to type [] and, you know, you had all that code.

So, there was that, and I basically said that, you know, this is a bit old-fashioned, isn't it, and I was told that, well, you know, I could convert all my work files into WordStar and, you know, and things would be all right, and, and the funny thing was that in [name of a country] there had been a student who had, you know, much better facilities, I mean, you know. That was [...] Pentium time, you know, and a few days later I discovered that in the corridor of the institute you had, many computers that had been thrown away because the students don't use them, these were 286, 386 machines, you know, some 486 as well, still in operation I suppose.

And, I'm telling this because, I had to fight for that, I think six months before I got a computer, which was not a new computer, but it was a, a computer that was passed on to me by a colleague who got a new computer because, the institute had to acquire a new computer, because of that, but that new computer went to somebody senior and then [...], I had to wait for weeks before the files could be transferred on to the new one, and then, you know, the old one could be cleaned and could be given to me.*

So, I think there was a certain attitude problem, but, you know, here was a scholar who has come in from [a certain part of the world], and who'll be grateful that, you know, he was

receiving all these facilities, that, you know, how lucky I was to get to work in the first world, in a country like Denmark, of course the most liberal country in the world. So, I'm just giving you these examples to say that, my welcome here was, it was not easy, and, but I survived it."

**By senior, the voice does not refer to a level of qualification, but refers to a time scale, a person who has stayed at this particular institute for a longer time.*

This voice of an employee tells a University workaday life story as well as a story on the start into a new job, in a new organizational environment and in a new country.

I deliberately choose to present this interview extract as "a voice". This choice is consistent with the approach to *Interview without a subject* I want to introduce and discuss here. I deliberately chose NOT to present this story as the experience of a man or a woman; in doing so, I would have both, made my interviewee a representative of a certain gender, and the particular experiences a function of this gender. Similarly, I deliberately chose NOT to represent this story as the experience of either a foreigner or a Dane at a Danish University; in doing so, I would have made my interviewee a representative of either a national community or of 'the other' in terms of ethnicity. The told experience would then be a function of this otherness.

The story I chose to tell here is a "snapshot", a narrative on one out of three themes I used in the course of the interview conversations. This particular theme is how universities welcome new researchers by the time of their arrival in a new appointment. Since I develop my theoretical approach with outset in the considerations on a specific project, I want to proceed by giving a brief general outline of the project itself.

I do this for two reasons: One, theoretical and methodological issues are made easier accessible when the interested readers are presented for empirical examples. Two, the theoretical and methodological issues I encountered while working on the specific project turned out to be fundamental for interview based research into intercultural issues in general.

The structure of the article

Interview without a subject was developed out of the acknowledged need to rethink the approach and the research design of a specific project. I briefly introduce the initial project itself. Then, I develop my approach to interview research into intercultural issues in the course of a critical discussion of this initial project design and the problems that occurred from that. In the next part of this article, I introduce the project design *cultural interviewing*. After that, I briefly return to the voice I made heard in the beginning of this article and discuss the excerpt to exemplify the application of selected analytical criteria. Also, I discuss the potential benefits of this approach for the improvement of the workplace environment at Universities as public institutions. Finally, I both, briefly summarize the major benefits of *Interview without a subject* for interview research into intercultural issues, and conclude this paper.

The project

The project itself is an investigation into cultural encounters in Universities located in Denmark. Ethnicity and gender were my major research interest.

Initially, I had two intentions with the project: one was to unveil that Universities are organizations which are not entirely about rational choices and objective evaluations of the quality of work and of qualifications. The other intention was to dismantle ethnicity and gender, and to show that whatever I found is happening in these workplace environments, can neither be legitimated by nor traced back to the inherent characteristics of either ethnicity or gender. The aim of the project was to provide results which eventually could be a starting point for actions which could improve working conditions at universities.

The idea of the project was to escape the apparent unambiguousness and clearness that enclose our everyday perceptions of researchers in terms of both, men and women, and Danes and foreigners, by making heterogeneity visible: the heterogeneity of stories on everyday work life in universities; the heterogeneity of social practices in universities; the heterogeneity of signifiers used by the interviewees in order to organize and to make understandable what is going on. The idea was to create data that show that not everything can be reduced to questions of gender or ethnicity. I intended to achieve that by interviewing men and women, foreigners and Danes holding research positions at Danish Universities.

Let's start with identifying the initial problems

At some point, I recognized a lack of consistency in my research design. On the one hand, I wanted to interview men, women, foreigners and Danes. On the other hand, I wanted to dismantle gender and ethnicity. I identified the problems as both, a clash between modern and postmodern elements in the initial project design, and a clash between critical research and post-structuralism. Even though I engaged in poststructuralist informed interview research, the methodological tools inspired by discourse analysis and deconstruction were adopted solely for the analysis of the interview transcripts. The recognition of these problems entered the project when I had to select researchers employed at Danish research institutions for interviewees.

I intended to follow two criteria with regard to the choice of interviewees for the project. One criterion was the diversity of the interviewees in terms of age, status, professional field, descent, type of position. The second criterion was the selection of an identical number of men and women on the one hand, and foreigner and Danes on the other hand. In other words: I planned to make symmetrical choices on equal numbers of interviewees from each of the two categories of my interest, ethnicity and gender. However, by approaching the selection of interviewees this way, I was following a structure of hierarchical binaries.

It was here that it occurred to me that I had a problem: On the one hand there were the heterogeneous criteria for the choice of interviewees, as well as my conception of Universities as heterogeneous organizations. On the other hand I intended to put a matrix of binaries on top of this heterogeneity and organize the selection of interviewees in a dichotomous way.

In effect, and quite unintentionally, I would have reduced heterogeneity to binary differences. Moreover, in case that I would have followed this initial approach, I would have chosen a

method for data collection which is built on a "*thereness' of culture*": a thereness of a gender culture, a national University culture and an ethnic culture. This would have "*deflected my attention from how meaning actually is locally and situatedly assembled*" (Ryen 2001:347). In other words, I would have built the initial project on an investigation of what happens at Danish Universities when men and women of foreign or Danish origin, holding research positions, meet and deal with each other.

Had I chosen women and men, Danes and foreigners for interviewees, I would have engaged in a modern research practice. I would have both, determined and reduced the interviewees before even knowing them. Whatever happened in Universities would turn into a function of the interviewees' gender and ethnicity, just as well as gender and ethnicity were assumed to be at stake at all times and in all situations at all places.

I as a researcher, I would a priori – even before the interviewing, and even before I did the analysis - bring the categories of my research interest, e.g. ethnicity and gender, to the interviewees. I would have identified the interviewees with these categories. I would have made them "members" of these categories (West & Fenstermaker 1995). I would have made ethnicity and gender the a priori central categories for university working life. Moreover, I would have made the ethnicity and the gender of individual subjects the starting point of the knowledge I wanted to gain from the project. Somehow, ethnicity and gender would have become the authors of the stories told in the interview sessions. I would have done so for the simple reason that, and here I use Belsey's (2001) phrasing, it suited my interest as a researcher. But that does not necessarily make gender and ethnicity the central or all important thing in university organizations.

To my own surprise, I, as a critical researcher, suddenly found myself engaged in the processes of 'doing difference' (West & Fenstermaker 1996) and otherization. No matter whether the interviewees identify with a gender or/ and an ethnicity or not, their story would have ended up to be explained by 'the myth of their shared history' (Eriksen 1996) as a member of a gender and/ or as a representative of an ethnicity. However: Not only are gender and ethnicity something you do, rather than something you are or have. Gender and ethnicity are situated and context related signifiers and effect the doings of difference.

The initial design also posed a problem with regard to the aim of the project. This problem is well identified in poststructuralist informed gender research. With outset in Joan W. Scott (2001), I want to phrase it this way: It is impossible to protest against a group of people being excluded (from research positions, or from certain benefits, or from resources within organizations, or from published statements on research) without reproducing exactly the difference – in the case of this project, the difference between Danes and foreigners, between women and men – I sought to dismantle and overcome.

To summon up so far: The problem with my initial project design was that I, despite my intentions, would have made the difference of nationals and ethnics, of men and women in Danish research, the governing principle of both, the research design and the result of the analysis. My initial intercultural research design engaged in otherization and the doings of difference. Related to that, another problem occurred: How was I to decide on what is most important? How could I decide whether gender or ethnicity would be the primary category determining the interviewee's membership in a workplace and research community? This

problem is distinct when it comes to the criteria for the selection of interviewees. This brings me to the Russian doll question.

The Russian doll question

In order to illustrate the problem at stake I take myself as an example. From the point of view of feminist researchers, I am a woman at men's University. From the point of view of the nationalist public debate, I am a foreigner employed in Danish research. From the point of view of my students and my younger colleagues, I am a permanently employed associate in a public organization firmly relying on part time and temporarily employed scholars. This list could be continued. It easily develops into a 'Russian doll' kind of question: Am I first and foremost a woman who works as researcher in a foreign country? Am I above all a foreigner who also happens to be a highly educated woman conducting qualified work? Or am I a qualified researcher whose gender and ethnicity only matters – if at all - in private life?

With regard to the project on cultural encounters, the problem came down to the questions: Would I have to choose Danes and foreigners who also happen to be women and men? Or was this about women and men from different countries? These questions are closely related to the question: What is culture?

The Russian doll question is linked to an essentialist or "large culture" understanding of culture and denotes an onion skin relationship with parent cultures (Holliday 1999: 239). The Russian doll or onion skin relationship corresponds to an insider – outsider problem; as Ryen (2001) points out, cross-cultural and intercultural research[3] often is organized around this problem. The research design *cultural interviewing* presents a solution to these problems. This suggests that the design is applicable to research into intercultural issues beyond the specific research topic of cultural encounters at Universities, and that it may be a valuable contribution to the further development of the field of intercultural research.

In the initial design, I a priori would have decided what it is that is central to the interviewees and their work-life experiences, and what it is that determines their academic working life independent of situation and context. This design, however, was reductive for several reasons. One reason is, that no space was left for the possibility that neither gender nor ethnicity might be of any importance at all. A second reason is that no space was left for the possibility that the interviewees share or partly share patterns of meaning and interpretation which abrogate the boundaries of difference - and consequently those of different genders and different ethnicities. A third reason is that in the initial design, I would have treated my own perception of Universities as if it was a true copy of reality – instead of a product of informed sense-making processes.

These problems raised the principal question on how to conduct qualitative interview research into intercultural issues without reproducing a respective 'foreign other'? In the case of the specific project, I found myself confronted with the question on how to conduct interview based research on cultural encounters in Danish Universities without reproducing women and foreigners as the respective 'foreign other'? And how could I at the same time stick to my research interest in issues of gender and ethnicity? This brings me to the next part of this contribution, where I present the outcome of my efforts and introduce the project design *cultural interviewing* and the related approach to *Interview without a subject*.

The solution: Postmodern interview research

In poststructuralist informed interview research, the methodological tools inspired by discourse analysis and deconstruction may not be adopted solely for the analysis of the interview transcripts. In order to be consistent, poststructuralist strategies have also to be applied to the choice of interviewees and the development of interview guidelines.

Ethnicity and gender do not denote physical entities in 'a real world'. Rather, ethnicity and gender are conceptualized as concepts. Scholte (2000) puts it this way: Concepts denote ways of thinking and perceiving. Concepts signify and make locally situated social practices understandable. This implies that gender and ethnicity are brought to these practices. This way difference is created. However, as West and Fenstermaker (1995) could show, gender and ethnicity are not the only means of doing difference.

With outset in a non-essentialist approach to culture, I make multiplicity the starting point of the choice of interviewees. I neither choose the selection criteria for the choice of interviewees from self-evident categories, nor do I choose individual subjects: individuals of a gender, of an ethnicity. I choose to interview "di-viduals"[my translation]. The Norwegian term "di-vid" is invented by Thomas H. Eriksen (1996). While 'in-dividual' denotes a modern understanding of subjects as unified entities and with a homogeneous story of individual experiences, 'di-viduals' identify in heterogeneous ways and in relation to situation and context. I take Eriksen's thought further.

It is not different cultures which encounter each other in University settings. Rather, in a dynamic understanding of working life at Universities, University is the effect of an ongoing interplay between social and cultural practices. Di-viduals organize social practices and give them directions as they engage in the cultural practices of interpretations and signification/meaning-giving. Di-viduals share that which creates situated and context-related working-life cultures.

I apply Söderberg & Holden's (2002:112) emergent and dynamic understanding of culture as "made up of relations" and "based on shared or partly shared patterns of meaning and interpretation" (Söderberg & Holden 2002:112). I understand these patterns as a "radical-system or fascicular root" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:5), or as discourse systems. All di-viduals share or partly share patterns of meaning and interpretation by which they, situated and context related, identify, interpret and signify certain practices.

In consequence, postmodern research in intercultural issues in general has to apply an emergent understanding of culture. Specifically, postmodern research in intercultural issues concerning ethnicity and gender has to stick to its research interest, yet to de-center both, gender and ethnicity.

The new project design: an overview

Cultural Interviewing has an adjourned focus on ethnicity and gender. I conduct *Interview without a subject*, the name of the approach I choose. As a research strategy, I choose to conduct interviews and to analyze transcripts *on the level of the signifier*.

Cultural interviewing: The design

The adjourned focus of this design does leave the investigating researcher in charge. However, *cultural interviewing* neither gives control (a modern delusion) to the researcher, nor predictable answers. It does not give the researcher the power to effect modern subjects, e.g. ethnicities and gender, by a priori imposing "*category membership*" (West & Fenstermaker 1995). I stick to my research interest in gender and ethnicity. But I do not make either of them the starting point for the project or the governing principle for the choice of interviewees and the analysis of the transcripts.

Cultural interviewing facilitates an investigation into "*how meaning actually is locally and situatedly assembled*" (Ryen 2001:347). This includes the investigation into whether and, in case, what situations the categories of my research interest come into play. As researchers into intercultural issues we then have to be open for the possibility that neither category of our interest will be used at all by our interviewees. In the case of the specific project, I have to be open for the possibility that no or not all interviewees apply gender and/or ethnicity to signify workplace relations and practices. We therefore also have to investigate how and with regard to which situations these signifiers of our research interest come into play. Which relations and practices do they signify in the context of University settings?

Interview without a subject: The approach

I take a process related approach to the selection of interviewees, which means that I do not employ the modern concept of the subject. I select interviewees with outset in relevant di-vidual practices and processes which – depending on situation and context – might be signified with either ethnicity or gender. I can do that with outset in Söderberg & Holden's (2002) dynamic and emergent understanding of culture (the above), and by understanding interviewees as di-viduals (Eriksen 1996). As di-viduals, interviewees are no unified entities who tell their 'history', but voices given to the narratives. In consequence, the interviewees neither tell 'their' story, nor are they authors of the narrative itself (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Eriksen 1996; Scott 1991).

Rather than subjects, relevant social practices are made the outset for the selection of interviewees. Such a postmodern approach to the selection of interviewees is none-reductive, dynamic and does allow for heterogeneity also at this stage of the interview research. This approach neither allows for investigations into subject-object relationships (e.g. women and universities, foreigners and Danish universities), nor for dealing with rational accounts of subjects on their experiences as those of their gender or ethnicity in academic life. I will take that on below when I discuss the status of the interview transcripts.

As mentioned above, the crucial criteria for the choice of interviewees is di-vidual agency. Therefore, I define practices or actions as the criteria for the choice of interviewees. Interviewees are selected with outset in relevant di-vidual practices and processes. The foci for the choice of interviewees are on the following: action and processes, not category membership; movement, not territorial belongings; the localization of employment and residency by the time of the interview, not the di-vidual interviewee's origin or descent; being on the move (here: between or/ and within academic organizations), not a territorial starting point (here: of their professional career). The sample of selected di-vidual movements has multiple directions in terms of countries, academic position, academic organization, institutes, departments, universities, research groups, field of work, etc...

I think it is a good idea to finally bring in the term "localization" which I use in order to indicate that these practices transcend large culture understandings and the boundaries which unavoidably arise from any kind of territorial thinking. If I used the phrasing "Danish University", country names in general, or phrasings such as "country of origin", I would switch into a modern large culture understanding and somehow, even if not intended, place at least part of the explanation in territory and in the imagined nature and characteristics of national communities and their representatives. Thus, the narratives told in the interviews are localized at university settings in Denmark, but are not necessarily exclusive to them.

In the specific project, I conducted 14 in depth interviews in three languages with researchers employed in academic organizations located in Denmark who were or had been engaged in the following actions: moved to research institutions located in Denmark; moved between several research institutions in diverse countries; moved for a job, a life, an education located in Denmark; moved between different academic organizations in one country to an University located in Denmark; double moved between different academic organizations and positions all located in Denmark; double moved from one position to another one at an academic organization located in Denmark; shifted between moving to and away from Universities located in Denmark; multiple moved between professional fields as well as academic organizations, positions and locations.

These practices and processes create situated relations. These relations are interpreted and giving meaning to, following shared or partly shared patterns. The signifiers, ethnicity and gender, are elements in these patterns, but are neither the only nor the central means of meaning creation.

All individuals selected for interviews had, at the time of the interview, to be employed at Danish Universities (no matter which University, faculty, institute, center or department), conduct research (no matter what field or approach) and have permanent residency in Denmark (because there exist different published discourses on guest researchers and resident researchers). All information relevant for the selection on interviewees was partly derived from the information available on institutional homepages, partly mouth to mouth information given to me by various contacts.

Interview on the level of the signifier: the research strategy

When I designed the interview guide, I did not phrase any questions on neither ethnicity nor gender. I used "theming"[4] in order to point out specific situations when I did the design of the interview guide. Since I did not interview subjects, I did not aim at collecting the histories of individual researchers. Rather, I aimed at collecting narratives, stories on situations of university every day working life. I chose three themes: (1) The arrival and welcome at the place of employment the interviewees inhabited by the time the interviews were conducted. It is on this theme the voice in the beginning of this contribution is telling a story. (2) The social climate, working environment and atmosphere at the work place. (3) The professional relations to their researcher colleagues. To conduct *interviews at the level of the signifier* means to let go control and leave it entirely to the interviewees how they narrate these themes, and the way these themes and related situations were signified.

In the beginning of the interview sessions, all interviewees got the same opening theme: the welcome and/ or arrival. The terms ethnicity and gender were not mentioned by me at all. If they come into play, it is the interviewees own choice of interpretation and meaning giving by adding either one or both of these signifiers. There also is a comparative aspect: whatever stories they told me on these three themes, I asked the interviewees to compare their story to stories on previous employments.

The transcripts of the interviews are treated as snapshots and as such not as rational accounts, but as accounts on both, situated social and cultural practices. Neither do they reveal experiences. The concept of experience is closely linked to the modern concept of the unified and rational subject and the myth of its history. The narratives told in the interviews are not rooted in individual experiences. Rather, statements on experiences are representations of what already has been known and on what is recognizable to us: "Experience is... not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (Scott 1991:797).

In the analysis of the transcripts, and in relation to the three themes, I investigate in whether, and in case, in what ways the signifiers ethnicity and gender are applied, and what kind of situated social practices they interpret and give meaning to. In other words, I deconstruct the environment within which ethnicity and gender – eventually - develop. Do patterns emerge, either within the transcripts, or across the transcripts?

The result: What can we gain from *cultural interviewing*?

As for research into intercultural issues in general, *cultural interviewing* gives insights into narratives and patterns of signifying practices, and how they interact with situated social practices in a given context. Moreover, it gives insights into the shared-ness or partly shared-ness of cultural patterns which cross the a priori boundaries of gender or ethnicity. This way, the design may contribute to dismantling large culture understandings of cultural encounters. As for the specific project, *cultural interviewing* results in a dynamic and emergent understanding of University work place culture. The localized doings of gender and ethnicity at Universities may then be treated as context related and situated effects of these interplays.

The interpretation of a voice

The goal of this article is to present, discuss and exemplify conceptual and methodological issues of intercultural research, not to offer a complete analysis of patterns of social and cultural practices in the body of interview transcripts and its results. It therefore cannot offer results on the workings of gender and ethnicity in a University context, but merely exemplify the application of selected criteria for *cultural interviewing* established above to the analysis at the level of the signifier of the 'voice' reproduced above. Nevertheless, I want to conclude the way I started this piece, by returning to the voice which I have made heard at the beginning of this contribution.

A conventional reading of the story told would be one of an intercultural difference, maybe even discrimination, of a foreign researcher employed in Denmark. What happens – the denial of suitable office, the denial of a suitable computer – is then a function of the distance between the representatives of different cultures, a clash due to the meeting of two different cultures, resulting in an 'inter-' cultural conflict.

However, in order to 'have' difference, in order to have two 'cultures' and a 'distance' between them, this difference has to be made. It is here *cultural interviewing* comes into play: we have to look at the interplay between social and cultural practices: How does the interviewee narrate the welcome at his workplace? Which social practices are narrated on this situation, and how are they signified? What is it the interviewee wants to explain?

We need to keep in mind the interviewee has been chosen on the basis of its actions, not on basis of a however defined 'foreignness'. In other words, there is no foreign-ness and no 'nation-ness' which gives directions to and provides an orientation for an understanding of what is told on the situation of the arrival. Moreover, the voice does not communicate its experience, neither is it the author of the story. Rather, it communicates that what the individual interviewee wants to explain about the welcome.

It is the end of the excerpt which reveals what it wants to explain: That in order to be able to conduct work related tasks a scholar and teacher is in need of equipment which is to be provided by the employing organization. If this is not the case, this definitely is in need of an explanation. This story is told as a clash between on the one hand working conditions suitable for conducting research work, and on the other hand the working conditions provided by the members of the employing organization.

This narrative imparts knowledge on context related (University organization; institute) and situated (welcome of new employee) social practices in an interplay with cultural practices. The clash between expected and provided working conditions is signified as a clash between professional status and respectability on the one hand, and the treatment by the organization and the colleagues on the other hand in the first half year of an employment; a clash between countries of different continents. Country and continents are important signifiers; they give a direction to the actions, and an origin ("here was a scholar... who'll be grateful"). These practices are added meaning to by identifying them as humiliating practices rooted in the membership of an ethnicity. Following this direction, these practices may be interpreted as 'ethnicism' [Danish: etnicisme, my translation] (Horst 1991), that is as cultural discrimination of an employee. However, this thinking turns the narrated social practices into practices exceptional to University organizations.

Apart from those concepts of ethnicity, also gender is applied as signifier, though, however a signifier of minor importance ("post man", "he") in the excerpt. Ethnicity and gender are applied to make the situation understandable and to make sense of it. This means that cultural patterns of perception and interpretation which include the concepts of ethnicity and gender are (partly) shared within and outside universities. And that this specific interviewee does share this cultural pattern. Whether several signifiers are at stake as means of doing difference is not possible to tell from this excerpt alone.

These practices are localized at a University in Denmark – yet they are not "Danish". Therefore, knowledge on institutional practices does not add anything to a perceived parent culture. The practices told in the transcript might add to the imagination of national communities, but do not derive from a specific "nation-ness" (Anderson 1991/ 1983).

The social practices giving meaning to and interpreted by the voice may be categorized in the following way: There are organizational practices, and those of the colleague researchers.

What makes them specific is that they occur at the beginning of an employment. However, this does not make them typical practices with regard to new employees. Seen with the newcomer's eyes, the practices might be strange, but they still might be institutional routines familiar to those who have been employed there for a while. This point becomes more evident if we keep in mind that signifiers are brought to the "experience" of a new start as employee. The theme of the welcome situation does not make these practices directed towards – or rather against – new employees. The voice does not tell how colleagues got hold on their equipment. In other words; having to ask for suitable equipment in terms of updated PCs or appropriate offices might be a general working condition. From this excerpt alone, we do not know that.

The following social practices can be identified: Both, an appropriate office and appropriate tools (computers) are denied. The newly employed is ignored by colleagues. Justified complaints are ignored and not acted upon by colleagues and administrative staff. Snail-mail routines are not changed even though they no longer seem appropriate. Support and assistance is inappropriate to the problem at hand and given very late. Research work and teaching is therefore made difficult to conduct in the beginning of the employment.

Brought to the point, these practices create differences and basically are practices on giving and denying access to resources of varying value. In effect, these practices create hierarchical differences between employees and signal the minor or major value and importance of employees in relation to the organization. These practices, however, contribute to the creation of University environments.

This narrative reveals something about signifying practices. In this case, these practices are made sense of, understandable and giving meaning to by applying the concept of ethnicity. A clash between status and respectability on the one hand and treatment on the other hand is given meaning to by adding gender and ethnicity. Professional status and respectability of profession is signified with gender, more specifically the personal pronoun "he" at the end of the excerpt. The bad treatment on the other hand is signified with ethnicity (none national; none 1st world; none Dane). The clash is signified as a clash between situated (high status) gender and (low status) ethnicity or a clash between gender and a parent culture.

It is not the purpose to engage in a complete analysis or to provide substantiated analytical results; therefore, I do not engage in the entire narrative on the welcome, and I do not include the stories told on the two remaining themes. Neither is it the purpose of this contribution to engage into the analysis of social practices and signifying patterns across transcripts. However, I want to conclude the analytical considerations by bringing a comparative aspect to the voice. The comparative aspect stresses the points I want to make.

I am familiar with similar practices of not giving access or immediate access to an appropriate office, a computer and even a telephone, both from my project and otherwise. Some of these practices are located outside Denmark and can therefore not be rooted in a national culture. These practices are located in other universities and can therefore not be rooted in a culture specific for the particular workplace or professional field. Organized on a time-scale, these practices have taken place over two decades and can therefore not be rooted in a specific decade or period. And in interpreting and giving meaning to them, both, identical and different genders are involved, as well as different ethnicities and ethnicities

corresponding to those of the countries where these practices were located. With regard to the voice, this would mean that situated cultural discrimination is an effect created by the interplay of social and signifying practices and neither caused by nor rooted in a certain ethnicity or a gender.

In terms of using the results of this project for initiating change within the University organization, this sample analysis indicates that it could be potentially problematic to initiate special programs for non-Danes, for a specific gender. That would not improve things, but might cause unintended change: It could create those boundaries and differences between foreigner and Danes, women and men which the programs want to overcome. Mainstreaming activities therefore have to take off in ways clearly distinct from those of equality politics. They have to concentrate on the strategic change of inappropriate organizational practices in order to lessen the effects they have in terms of, for instance, gender or ethnicity.

Cultural interviewing as a research design redirects attention from self-evident perceptions of causes and effects of organizational life and has the potential to open up for new ways of understanding thus for mainstreaming strategies which do not reproduce ethnicities or gender. Not only do Universities still create gender difference when appointing professors and full professors. The approach is equally important, taken into consideration the recent transformation of Danish Universities into industries (Juhl & Christensen 2008) as well as the internationalization strategies at most European Universities and the impact they may have on University workplace relations and practices.

Conclusion

In this article, I present, discuss and exemplify conceptual and methodological issues of research into intercultural issues. I briefly sum up the major elements of this contribution to qualitative interview research into intercultural issues. Finally, I conclude on my findings.

Cultural interviewing is a design for research into intercultural issues which does not allow the investigating research(s) to engage into otherization and the doings of difference. *Interview without a subject* means that di-vidual interviewees are chosen on the basis of processes and activities. *Interview on the level of the signifier* denotes the construction of a questionnaire based on themes relevant to the project. The *analysis on the level of the signifier* denotes the way in which the interview transcripts are approached: as context specific narratives of selected situations and the interplay of situated social practices with shared or partly shared patterns of meaning creation and interpretation (including signifiers).

The general conclusion of this paper is that research into intercultural issues needs to de-center its respective research interest. Even though it is relevant for interview based research into intercultural issues to focus on gender and ethnicity, it has to de-center both, gender and ethnicity. The de-centering of the research focus may be achieved by both, taking an emergent approach to the understanding of culture, applying theming to the development of the interview guidelines, and by making multiplicity and practices the governing principle of the entire research design, including the choice of interviewees.

The outcome of interview based research designed as *Cultural Interviewing* is a dynamic understanding of the respective social environment as the effect of an ongoing interplay

between the localized social and cultural practices of individuals. The localized doings of gender and ethnicity may then be treated as context related and situated effects of these interplays. This way, research into intercultural issues may contribute to dismantle large culture understandings of cultural encounters. This opens up for new understandings of intercultural issues which – where needed - might contribute to the development of culturally sustainable solutions.

Notes

1 This is an elaborated version of the presentation I gave at the international conference "Cultures in Translation", The Nordic Network for Intercultural Communication, December 4-6 2008 in Reykjavik, Island.

2 The voice of the interviewee is made anonymous.

3 The terms "cross-cultural" and "inter-cultural" are often used synonymously (Ryen 2001). However, the first term refers to the crossing of cultural boundaries and the second term refers to the interrelation between two different cultural entities without violating these boundaries. Both approaches share the presupposition of clearly defined cultural units with clear boundaries.

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Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 23, June 2010.
URL: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/>.

4 By theming, I do not refer to one out of four dimensions of the "Disneyization of Society" (Bryman 2006/2004), where the concept refers to the differentiation of businesses within an industry. Theming refers "the application of an external narrative to institutions, locations or objects in order to provide meaning and symbolism which transcends what they actually are". Examples are the tropic designs of indoor swimming pools, or safari designs of family amusement parks.