Although we live in an era of multiple identities and belongings, origins still seem to matter. For most people origins are obvious and transparent. We all come from somewhere. Yet talking about one’s origins can be highly sensitive and problematic depending on our roles, emotions, interlocutors and contexts. This volume problematizes the relativity, instability and politics of the concept in the field of education. The authors examine how origins are played upon in many and varied educational contexts and propose alternative ways of dealing with – see reinventing – origins.

This volume is original in several senses. It is one of the first books to deal directly and honestly with the thorny concept of origins in education. Balancing arguments for and against the advantages and drawbacks of origins, the volume will appeal to confirmed and novice researchers, practitioners and decision-makers who struggle with these elements. The volume is not a ‘recipe book’ to be followed as such. It offers fresh and sincere perspectives to current discussions on multiculturalism, intersectionality and social justice in education around the world by tackling a somewhat taboo subject.
Origins: A Sustainable Concept in Education
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In
no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Origins: A Sustainable Concept in Education

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. (Michel Foucault, 1982)

Let us start with an anecdote that illustrates the main message of this volume on origins in education. At the beginning of a summer school that he had organised Fred explained that, as was his practice, he would not ask each student to introduce themselves and to tell the group about where they came from, their interests, etc. He preferred that they got to know each other in a less formal and somewhat less tedious way during class activities or, over coffee or tea. Fred introduced his work but said nothing about his own life story; where he came from, where he had lived and worked, the languages he spoke, etc. At the end of the first lecture, a student came to see him and said: “you didn’t tell us where you come from; now you have to tell me”. Asking the lecturer about his origins at the beginning of a course on interculturality could appear to be ‘normal’ and a way to get to know him/her. Yet Fred got somewhat irritated by the tone of the student (“you have to…”) and answered that it was irrelevant and that he would prefer not to mention his ‘complex origins’ as they would most certainly become obvious during the month-long course. The student then told Fred about both his ‘ethnic’ and ‘religious’ identity and said that he was very proud of them. Fred replied that it was his right to ‘expose’ his origins – and to feel proud of them – but that he did not want to go through this about himself in a few seconds at the end of a lecture. Surprised (and probably annoyed), the student then asked Fred if he had something to hide about his origins or if he was ashamed of them… By refusing to declare his origins Fred shared Foucault’s view in the quote above: he didn’t feel that it was necessary to know who he was. Though Fred reacted in a certain way in this specific situation, in another context he might have felt confident about ‘revealing’ and discussing his origins. As we can see here origins seem to matter to some people while they appear to be irrelevant for some others. At some point in one’s life, origins can be perceived as rosy, positive and something to boast about, and sometimes they can also be very personal, political and distressing. The first message of this volume is thus that our sense of origins is relative, depending amongst others on our roles, emotions, interlocutors and contexts of encounters.

The volume explores these issues in different ways, especially in relation to the context of education. The idea of origin is knotty. Most people use it as if it was an
evident and transparent notion (“we all have roots”), without always realising that questions of origins can be unstable, highly sensitive and problematic, and that they are very much dependent on issues of power. The etymology of the notion derives from the Latin word originem (nom. origo) “rise, beginning, source,” and from the stem of oriri “to rise, become visible, appear”. The idea of origins, which has been central in global education where people have been ‘made’ to belong to Nation-states/ethnicities, has been criticised for being both an ‘intellectual simplifier’ (Sen, 2005) but also an ‘anthropomorphic concept’, which seems to substitute real and concrete persons and rid them of their agency (Heinich, 2009: 39). Although the word has been around in many languages for many centuries and used, abused and overused in Modernity to determine ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’ in nationalistic discourses and actions, talking about origins is a very postmodern subject too. As such, even though we live in “liquid times” (Bauman, 2004), where identities are said to be unstable, hybrid, plural and opportunities for altering the Self unlimited, sticking to, being relegated to or attempting to find one’s origins are thriving. The renewed interest in genealogy in many countries, the revival of certain languages and traditions from the past, the unearthing of one’s “heritage”, etc. all contribute to re-create and sometimes reimagine origins in order to deal with the pressures of postmodernity and globalization. According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 20), such endeavours, which are very much related to identity-seeking, are “born out of the effort (…) to bridge the gap between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’”. Liquidity unsettles, amongst others, national identities and “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1992) but also origins...

FOR OR AGAINST ORIGINS?

In order to answer this somewhat rhetorical (but important) question, let us start by being positive about the notion of origins. It is undeniable that origins, be they national, social or regional, can help people to feel good about who they are. This is why people should be entitled to identify their own origins as they wish – as long as they do not denigrate others. For people who have migrated to another part of the world, origins can serve as a way of reassuring themselves when they feel threatened or marginalized as minorities in a host society. Globalisation and the feeling of emptiness and threat that it can trigger can lead to a wish for origins. The legal remnants of Modernity, e.g. the passport, also promote the importance of (good/bad) origins: not everybody has the power to cross the same borders. Certain accents when speaking a language can also tell about one’s origins and have an impact on how one is perceived and treated. This is why sometimes some migrants want to either keep or get rid of their accents in the majority language.

Once a border is crossed, origins can also serve the purpose of promoting the ‘Other’. Certain origins are considered better than others. Some societies – in the ‘East’ and ‘West’ – have resorted to positive discrimination to promote certain origins: e.g. an individual can get a job thanks to her race, ethnicity, religious
INTRODUCTION

background, etc. At a recent event a colleague of Indian origins referred to herself as one of the only black professors in her field in the UK. To us the colleague was not black but something else… Her field being diversity in education, it made us wonder if the choice of this identification was intended to make a stronger impact on an audience to whom she was talking about racism in education. Also we started wondering if she would have described herself as black had she been speaking to e.g. relatives or friends.

Explicit or implicit positive discrimination can also ‘boost the ego’ of certain institutions and members of the majority: from “we have done so much to support the other” to “we are so international; we have a large number of foreigners or speakers of other languages”. This is what could be labelled as origin as a token.

Origins can be highly political.

Should we fight to support origins then? There is another side of the coin: Origins can easily serve the purpose of creating categories that are considered useful for e.g. administrative purposes or even for research to simplify complexity. This characteristic of origins contributes to the fact that today’s individual is, volens nolens, a homo hierarchicus. For de Singly (2003: 52) the ‘powerless’ have less opportunities to question their (imagined/projected/imposed) origins than those who do not need to discuss, defend or present theirs. He sees a danger in what he calls the ‘myth of origins’ (ibid.: 58) since it easily creates unjustified hierarchies and comparisons which can be abused by the powerful. He even goes as far as calling the ‘origin-labelling’ of the powerless totalitarianism (ibid.: 91).

Just like the concept of culture, origins can be used for justifying some practices, behaviours, attitudes, discourses, opinions and even values (ex.: I am from Italy and this is why I do this or my roots are in Karelia, the area between Russia and Finland, and in Karelia people are quite talkative). Many anthropologists and sociologists have noted the tendency for origins to emerge when people are faced with problems (in “the tumult of battle”, Bauman, 2004) or when they need to explain what they do or think, through the use of words such as culture, identity, tradition, roots, community, etc. They also highlight the dangers of putting origins at the forefront in some situations (putting people in “boxes”), especially when they contribute to injustice, prejudice and even dreadful political acts (Wikan, 2002, cf. also outside anthropology e.g. Sen, 2005).

Finally it is important to remember that behind every individual lay complex experiences, stories, and origins. This is where the concept of intersectionality matters immensely. Intersectionality represents the crossing of different identity markers or different systems of race, gender, social class, age, etc. in order to analyse how origins are ‘practiced’ in education. As asserted before, one essential feature of origins is that they are unstable, negotiable and can change – in other words they are not static. This is not a new idea but it is important to state it again. Besides origins are not just one (e.g. ethnicity) as they intersect, they multiply. For example it is not the same to be e.g. a veiled Muslim woman at Harrods in London and a woman wearing a burqa in Southhall, West London, UK. The same doors do not open for
these two individuals; the same encounters are not possible, etc. Though they appear to share origins (for the ignorant: they are both Arabs and Muslims), ethnically, socially, economically, etc. they probably differ much.

In summary, the points made in this section tend to give a rather negative image of origins. It is important to bear in mind that we are not suggesting that we should do with them. So the question For or against origins does not make sense. We believe that it is important that people are made aware of the instabilities of origins and of their political aspects and that only they should be allowed to negotiate their origins in the way they want and create, instead, a sense of origins (or ‘originisation’, see below).

**Occam’s Razor and the treatment of origins**

When one discusses origins – especially in the singular – one can only deal with the tip of the iceberg, i.e. one very limited and limiting characteristic of an individual. For Peter Wood (2003: 37) this form of ‘concocted diversity’ “imagines the world as divisible into neatly defined social groups, each with its own thriving cultural traditions”. For the scholar (ibid.), and as discussed earlier, this cannot but lead to “pinning down and labelling”. In what follows we would like to explore further the problems with the idea of origins by discussing the principle of Occam’s Razor, which seems to prevail when it comes to origins. According to this principle the simplest explanation is reached by shaving away the unnecessary. As a meta-theoretical principle, Occam’s razor can be summarized by these two maxims: *Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate* (plurality must never be posited without necessity) or *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily). Yet when it comes to origins the simplest solution (e.g.: one origin is basically one origin) does not work. For instance, Spector (2012) reminds us that “while we are readily biased by the colour of someone’s skin when predicting their physical or intellectual abilities, surprisingly skin colour is controlled by just a handful of genes, and is a poor guide to the other 25,000 underneath. Indeed there is more genetic diversity in one small area of Africa than there is in the whole of Europe”. Can such an argument be ignored and ‘solid’ origins take over in a simplistic fashion? What about considering like Leibniz (1714) that “Each portion of matter can be conceived as like a garden full of plants, or like a pond full of fish. But each branch of a plant, each organ of an animal, each drop of its bodily fluids is also a similar garden or a similar pond”?

Occam’s razor appears to be a fallacy when it comes to origins. This fallacy is summarized in the following excerpt from a BBC radio programme entitled *In the psychiatrist’s chair* (2014) during which the British writer and scholar Hanif Kureishi, whose father was from Pakistan, discussed the idea of origins:

(…) when I was a young man in the suburbs I walked up the streets meeting people who’d ask me where do you come from? and I’d say from the house
over there and they’d say no but where do you really come from? and that would really bother me because I would really come from that house over there and there was nothing else I could say. But of course my father was Indian and of course and the question why you have a brown skin, who you are and how you put together with different notions of yourself to make what is commonly known as a self.

The question where do you really come from?, a typical question based on the principle of Occam’s Razor, is a question that is often submitted to people whose origins are ‘dubious’ or uncertain – e.g. so-called second generations or people who hold multiple nationalities. Of course there are exceptions to the rule. For instance in Iceland, a country of 325,000 inhabitants, where many people are interested in genealogy and in how Icelanders could possibly be related to each other, the question of origins is problematized in a different way.

FROM ORIGINS TO ‘ORIGINISATION’ IN EDUCATION?

Education tends to be imperfect, because it has to serve two opposite tendencies with all of its acts: to liberate and to bind. Georg Simmel (2013)

In education, origins are omnipresent – be they social, ethnic, cultural, etc. On the one hand, they are considered useful for equality and equity and inclusion purposes. On the other, Bhatia (2010) argues that discourses on e.g., “minority students” often based on nationalistic educational policies and curricula can contribute to simple, unproblematized and limited uses of the idea of origins and can easily lead to institutionalized racism and categorizing. Besides these also can often create volens nolens hierarchies between people, in the sense that there sometimes hides implicit moralistic judgment behind discourses of origins, cultures and identities (Holliday, 2010). As Simmel asserts above education is meant to liberate but it also binds… Let us listen to Hanif Kureishi (2005: 15) again as an illustration:

When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: ‘Hanif comes from India.’ I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers?

The mistreatment of his origins in school had a terrible impact on the young Kureishi (ibid.):

From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else.

It is of course easy to generalise about teachers from one literary example. Many educators do try to move away from such appalling behaviours. Yet through our
experience we have also witnessed such ‘bad’ behaviours. We need to say that researchers themselves can also add to these painful experiences by starting from a solid indicator of origins such as national identity or social class in their work (Bauman, 2004; Dervin, 2011). Most of the time we are unaware of what we are doing to our research participants when we do research on their origins…

For all these reasons we propose to move from the idea of origin(s) to the neologism originisation, a more dynamic version of origins which accepts instabilities and intersubjective negotiations. The following principles also matter in this definition of origins.

First we believe like E. Said (1993: 33) that

With regard to the consensus on group or national identity it is the intellectual’s task to show how the group is not a natural or a God-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it, that it is sometimes important to represent.

In other words, it is our duty as researchers and practitioners to move away from Occram’s Razor and to consider ‘originisation’ processes. We thus amend its two principles: plurality must never always be posited without necessity and entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily. Through these principles, and in agreement with de Singly (2003), we promote an approach to origins which is ‘emancipating’: students should be given the means and tools to appropriate a sense of origins, to refuse/reject/modify them and to feel, in some cases, ‘freed’ from solid and imposed origins. We don’t believe that it is up to an institution or to one of its representatives to decide on someone’s origins and to ask them to play out origins as can be the case in schools (see Niemi et al., 2014).

ABOUT THE VOLUME

This international volume, which contains 7 chapters, examines the discourses and uses of the concept origins in various educational contexts, adopting a critical stance. The volume asks the following questions:

• Who uses the word origins or its “synonyms” in education? For what purposes?
• What explicit and implicit statements about origins are made in education?
• Who isn’t allowed to talk about (whose) origins? Why?
• Are the statements that are being made about origins empowering or oppressing the groups or individuals involved (which ones and how)? Are origins imposed on children or students?
• Do some students reject ‘their’ origins? Why? How?
• Is it necessary for students to know “what” they are (cf. Foucault at the beginning)?
• What origins seem to be privileged in education (class, ethnicity, language…)?
• Are some origins “staged” in schools (e.g. “multicultural days”)? Who organizes them? For what purposes?
INTRODUCTION

• Are origins taken into account in pedagogy, school administration, architecture, etc.?
• Do discourses and actions related to origins in education allow pupils, students and teachers to “meet”?
• What are the advantages and drawbacks of working with origins in education? Do origins contribute e.g. to injustice, marginalization or “racism without races”?

The volume contains two sections. The first section examines how origins are played upon while the second one proposes ways of reinventing the use of origins in education.

The first section opens with a chapter written by Kirsten Lauritsen. The author draws on anthropology and other social sciences to answer the following questions based on data collected in a kindergarten in Norway: Are the statements that are being made about origins empowering or oppressing the groups or individuals involved in this context? Are origins imposed on the children? Do some children reject ‘their’ origins? Why? How? In the second chapter entitled “(De)Constructing Origin in a Stratified Classroom/Society: Israeli Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and Palestinian Arab Students in a Multi-Origin Educational Program” Dalya Y. Markovich proposes an ethnography of a special Israeli academic program that aimed to explore the origins of and the power relations between ‘Mizrachim’ (an underprivileged group of Jews from a Middle Eastern and North African origin), ‘Ashkenazim’ (a hegemonic group of Jews from a European origin) and Palestinians in Israel. Her study re-examines the ways the process of mutual recognition was worked out by the Mizrachi members in light of the ethnic/national divisions in the class/society. In their chapter Bobby Harreveld and Kristy Richardson, using a self-reflexive lens, adopt an auto-ethnographic methodology to suggest that the identity of an academic is now so removed from its historical origins that the notion of being an academic and belonging to an academic community no long fits the ‘little boxes’ to which they were consigned and is more reflective of Bauman’s (2004) ‘liquid times’. The first section closes with “Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Medical Students’ Perspectives on Willingness to Serve in Underserviced Communities”, co-authored by Rhonda G. Craven, Alexander Seeshing Yeung, Bingyi Li and Ian Wilson. The authors present the findings of a study that aims to explicate what seeds success in willingness to serve in underserviced communities in Australia, especially in relation to non-Indigenous and Indigenous medical students who were asked to identify the contribution of their identity and sense of origin to critical decisions including their intention to serve in underserved regions.

The second section proposes ways of reinventing the use of origins in education. In the first chapter, Bruce Allen Knight advocates the use of a capability approach (Sen, 1992) as a framework to enhance students’ educational outcomes. The scholar is critical of labelling which can result in children being defined by their disability. He also discusses the fact that these children are not considered to have a problem, but they are referred to as the problem. Knight thus argues that education practice
needs to focus on capability not origin. In the second chapter Thor Ola Engen takes on a somewhat opposite direction by asking the question should origins be taken into account in Norwegian education? Within a theoretical framework based on nation-building, literacy teaching and socialization theory, the author argues that whenever the linguistic or cultural origins of students are explicitly overlooked by the school, someone’s origin will still be implicitly favoured by the school. He thus draws the conclusion that there is no such thing as a pedagogy without origin. The final chapter was written by Robert Berman and Elena Makarova. Entitled “Being George: ‘I Am Now What I Am Right Here’”, the authors study the significance of origins to a Holocaust survivor who lectures in public schools on surviving the Holocaust. Berman and Makarova analyse the significance of his memories of his origins in establishing his postwar self-identities. They further illustrate the use of origins in education as a transmitter of collectively shared representations of history across generations and national borders.

The topic of origins has not finished to surprise and stimulate researchers, practitioners and students too. We hope that this volume will convince our readers of its value for discussing and debating issues of identity, otherness, culture, and power in education. We also hope that origins will be treated less lightly and with more ethical consideration in schools and in research around the world.

REFERENCES

SECTION 1

DECONSTRUCTING ORIGINS
STRATEGIES IN ‘CROSS-CULTURAL’ DEALINGS – REJECTING OR HIGHLIGHTING THE MATTER OF ORIGIN

INTRODUCTION

In the field of social sciences the past thirty years’ increase in immigration in Norway has led to a renewed focus on matters of identity and origin. Matters of identity, origin and culture raise questions of who belongs to a given society or group and why. In her research the Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gulthestad found that ancestry and descent are vital sources to understand the complex ways in which race thinking feeds into and is nourished by everyday life and that

the racial coding of the new focus on ‘culture’ is based on ideas about descent as a form of imagined kinship. (Gulthestad, 2006, pp. 33-34)

The questions raised by Gulthestad have shed new light on some of my own research, and caused me to question both the Norwegian self-perception as inclusive and open-minded, and triggered an interest in the complex processes of constructing and negotiating ideas of ‘origin’, about ‘who we are’ and ‘where we come from’. This chapter will provide a contribution to understanding the matter of origin through presenting and analysing examples where ideas about cultural differences and origin – in the sense of perceptions and constructions of ancestry – are played out and negotiated in everyday life in different contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA SOURCES AND FOCUS OF STUDY

The main questions addressed in this paper are: How do kindergarten staff discourses and actions regarding minority children’s and parents’ origins empower or oppress the groups or individuals involved? How and why do individuals negotiate or even reject their origins? In answering these questions I am interested in the processes that seem to place origin in such a salient position in social encounters across (imagined) cultural borders and in the negotiations going on in social interactions.
The chapter is based on data collected through several studies, the most recent of which is fieldwork carried out in two Norwegian kindergartens in 2009. The main focus of this study is on the staff in these two kindergartens and how their varying approaches to the matter of origin seem to influence their relationships with immigrant children and parents and their way of talking about and relating to cultural diversity. The data was collected through individual open-ended interviews with staff and through observations of their interaction with children, taken down as notes immediately after. Secondly, I draw on data from open-ended interviews with informants with a background as Iranian and Somali refugees (Berg & Lauritsen, 2009; Lauritsen, 1996). This data provides a contextual background for analysing how individuals and groups relate differently to their own origin and how negotiations about origin are linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion. The data has been analysed with a special focus on understanding what is being played out whenever the matter of origin surfaces, whether spoken – or in other forms of action.

THEORETICAL APPROACH: DATA, METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical approach in this paper draws on anthropology and other social sciences and is based on a phenomenological approach that uses direct observation of actions and statements, and tries to interpret these phenomena by sensing reality and describe it in words (…) [and] that emphasizes the common experience of all human beings and our ability to relate to the feelings of others. (Bernard, 1994)

The current study thus presents one anthropologist’s attempt at understanding ‘origin’ and one possible reading of the cases presented and their contexts and historical conditions.

In his famous book on origin and nationalism, Benedict Anderson provides us with important tools for understanding how human ideas project themselves on human practice in a way that creates both unity and conflict (Anderson, 1991). He proposes an anthropologically inspired definition of a nation as an imagined political community. The societies are imagined because no individual will ever come to know or even meet his or her fellow members, but they will still support an image of belonging to the same unity.

In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era – all those things one cannot help. And in these ‘natural ties’ one senses what one might call ‘the beauty of gemeinschaft’. (Anderson, 1991, p. 143)

Languages are – still according to Anderson – one of the features that appear more rooted than almost anything else in contemporary society. He claims that through learning another language, it is possible to a certain extent to be invited into the imagined community of a nation.
Gullestad, asks if a nation has to be imagined in terms of ancestry or

...if it can be imagined as a political community of conversation across overlapping multiplicities of origin and identification. (Gullestad, 2002, 2006)

She continues to discuss aspects concerning Norwegian-ness, and also the phenomena of class migration. When people move from one class to another, for example through education and geographical movements, many of them (or us as it happens) live with ambivalence, where matters of ‘origin’, ‘home’ and ‘where I come from’ play a central role all through life. The feeling of being foreign and not blending in either at home or in the new environment has been documented in class migration studies (Ambjörnsson, 1996; Ehn & Frykman, 2007). It is an experience that, according to Gullestad, may create a cultural self-reflection that might help us understand immigrants’ experiences. The emphasis on equality – often understood as ‘sameness’ in the Norwegian society – is closely connected to this rootedness, and might be understood as a border marker, resulting in those who are visibly different being subjected to discrimination or avoidance. Gullestad (2002, 2006) emphasizes that people don’t choose the family or nation they are born into, but they do choose how intensely they embrace these identities.

The social psychologist Erving Goffman laid the foundation for a theory of impression management, claiming that every individual is an actor on a stage performing for an audience (Goffman, 1971). The front stage is where the performance takes place, using various impression management tools to articulate particular images to the audience, and the backstage, he argues, is where the protected self resides. The anthropologist Harald Eidheim was clearly influenced by Goffman in his fieldwork among Sami people in the North of Norway, when he described the practice of speaking the Sami language at home and Norwegian in the public space (Eidheim, 1971). Several of the cases I will present in the following might profit from being analysed with these perspectives in mind.

ORIGIN AND LANGUAGE AT PLAY

In one kindergarten I observed four-year old John, who has a mother from the Philippines and a Norwegian father, playing with two other boys, one Norwegian and one with parents from Palestine and Lebanon. It was right after the summer holidays, and the boys were telling each other where they had been to during the vacation. John’s mother works in the kindergarten, so it was known that the family had been to the Philippines to visit relatives during the holidays. John did not offer to tell about this at all. When one of his playmates asked if he had been to the Philippines, he denied this vehemently, and tried to redirect the playmates’ interest towards playing by showing some artefacts that they had been studying. One of the employees was sitting next to the boys, and also tried to ask him if he knew anybody in the Philippines. He reluctantly answered that he would not say it.
In another episode Samir, four years of age, denied understanding or speaking any other language than Norwegian when asked by Nina, a staff member sitting beside him, playing with cars. She followed up by speaking a few words that she knows in Arabic, and praised him for knowing more languages than her. When Nina some time later asked him what the word for car is in Arabic, he answered somewhat reluctantly. Again she praised him for knowing several languages and over a period of some days it seemed that he was less reluctant to reveal this knowledge.

A third example regards Lisa, a teacher in one of the kindergartens, who borrowed books from the library in one of the minority languages represented in the kindergarten. She tried to read to the children familiar with the language in the books, but Lisa says that

…they didn’t want to listen (…) they did not want to, they did not understand.

In this example the staff acknowledged the fact that there were minority language children in the kindergarten and considered it good for the children to be read to in ‘their own’ language. Lisa’s explanation is that either the children were not interested or they did not understand. But there might be yet another possible interpretation: Some of the children, whose parents have an immigrant background, were born in Norway. Some of them speak their first language with their children; others use the Norwegian language, reasoning that they are going to stay in Norway, and that their children should learn Norwegian first and foremost. Linguistic studies during the last decades have emphasized the importance of a well-developed vocabulary in their first language when learning a second language (Thomas & Collier, 2002). This is not common knowledge, either among parents or for many teachers. The parents’ good intentions are to support their children in order for them to succeed in life. The teacher’s intention was to support the children in developing the first language and she was surprised when the children did not wish to attend these readings.

Lisa organized language training classes for smaller groups of minority children once a week (with Norwegian as the unquestioned ‘language’). After some initial experiences with these weekly group activities, she decided to expand them to include some of the Norwegian children as well. She found this expansion fruitful for several reasons: Some of the Norwegian children needed language training as well, it became easier to have a conversation and the children could learn from each other. One may object that ‘learning from each other’ most probably would turn out to be a one-way process, given that the language the children were supposed to learn, was Norwegian. But the argument may still hold that this was useful to the minority children. A final argument Lisa presented for including some Norwegian children in the training program, was that she did not want ‘to put them in a box’. By including Norwegian children, she hoped to avoid the minority children feeling subjected to special treatment. She wanted them to feel included, that they were just like the rest of the children.

Lisa observed that at times the children were not particularly happy to be taken out in smaller groups for Norwegian language training. Her interpretation was that
this kind of exclusion from the larger group of children, who were involved in play and free activity, had a low status among the children. In search of an answer to why these language-training groups were not seen as attractive, we need to focus on both staff and children. In several kindergartens it is not the most trained educational staff that are given the responsibility of these activities. The quality of the training and the educational tools available, as well as the relationships between the teacher and the children are thus just as relevant. However, gathering children assumed to belong to one language group, may also have the unwanted effect of making these children stand out as being different from the other children. The imposed role of Arabic-speaking or Persian-speaking may signal a belonging to what is considered an out-group, instead of being an integral part of the in-group. The children may understand and speak their parents’ first language, but are not interested in using this knowledge in the kindergarten. They may however use this language at home, when only the family is present. This may be interpreted as an example of Goffman’s ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ practice. The kindergarten represents the front-stage, where Norwegian is the preferred language, signalling a belonging to the ethnic-Norwegian majority, whereas the home represents the back-stage, where belonging is signalled through the use of Arabic or Persian. In these cases it seems that there is an underlying ranking of Norwegian as being better than Arabic or Persian, at least in the public sphere. The children negotiate their position as Norwegian through not using their parent’s first language, or like John, refusing to be connected with anything Filipino. In some cases, however, such a front stage – back stage-analysis might seem too simplistic.

Mohammed, four and a half years of age also denies knowing which language his parents speak or where they come from. He clearly did not wish to be associated with anything other than Norwegian. When the researcher later on asked the teacher, Anna, how she would interpret Mohammed’s response, she replied that it was probably because he was born in Denmark and had later moved to Norway with his parents. He has never been to his parents’ countries of origin, Palestine and Lebanon, where his grandparents still live. So to him, asking about which country he is from is really a difficult question. His connection to his parents’ countries of origin is at best a weak one, and above all something connected to his parents and not to himself.

Let’s look at another example of identity negotiation and the role of languages, conveyed by Professor Robert Berman at a research meeting in Iceland in 2012. Professor Berman originates from Canada, and lives in Iceland with his Icelandic wife. Going shopping at a mall in Reykjavik, he says that he chooses to speak Icelandic with his wife in this public domain, whereas they speak English among themselves at home. Berman says that he does this to blend in, to avoid standing out from those surrounding him. I found the example of Professor Berman’s negotiation of his identity in the public sphere (the front stage) very interesting. One question that arises if we compare with the examples of John and Samir is if the strategies they all use are motivated equally and have the same possible effect. Is ranking of
languages and origin a dimension of all these interactions? Is Professor Berman too trying to better his position in the social field of the public sphere, signalling a belonging to the Icelandic majority?

People negotiate their identities by presenting themselves in what they perceive of as a more favourable position in different social settings, like the children in the cases mentioned above (Blackledge et al., 2008). Both John and Samir are trying their best to negotiate their positions into being Norwegian, by avoiding speaking their parents’ first language or having family in the Philippines. Children of minority background also protested against being taken out in groups for language training. They are so to speak trying to move to a position among the majority, downplaying their positions as belonging to a minority. This gives meaning, considered on a background of a ranking in the Norwegian society, where being a migrant is considered a less favourable position. Professor Berman’s use of Icelandic to his wife in the public sphere certainly has a dimension of wanting to signal a belonging to the Icelandic society, to blend in towards the majority surrounding him at the mall. In a way he might be said to down-play his other position as an English-speaking native, fluent in the dominant language of communication world-wide and also the common language for academic exchange. He shares the wish to blend in with the majority with the kindergarten children. But there are also important differences between Berman’s negotiation of position and the children’s: At any time he wishes to do so, Professor Berman can enter into other (public/front stage) social fields, and there take on a different position through switching to English, and signalling his position as someone respected and high-ranked (Crystal, 1997). This is not an option for Samir or John. Their negotiations to a higher position involve downplaying their parents’ origin in any public/front stage setting. Their possible other belongings and their (or their parents’) first language is referred to the private sphere – back-stage.

Some of the kindergarten children are put into the category of ‘from another country’, being of a different origin and the staff highlights languages that might be unknown to the child in question. That a cultural identity is inflicted upon a child may increase some of the cultural and linguistic differences between children that define themselves as Norwegian in the first place. The child in question may know that his parents have a background other than Norwegian, he may well understand his parents’ first language, but in several cases it was observed that minority children did not want to connect to the parents’ language or background. By focusing on where his parents come from or which languages he knows, the staff emphasizes that which makes him different, rather than what he shares with the other children in the kindergarten. The well-meant focus in connection with a project that tries to present the cultural diversity in the kindergarten, risks increasing differences, rather than reducing them.

However, the staff also reports that parents have approached them after a period of focusing on different countries in the kindergarten, stating that they were so happy that their children had the opportunity of seeing their parents’ countries presented along with information about Norwegian culture. Children proudly dragged their
parents into their own department of the kindergarten, to show them the poster from
their parents’ country of origin. Lisa comments that:

When we focus on them, they feel more welcome. Rather than delivering the
child in the hall, the outer hall, they started coming into the next room, or
even into the department where their child belonged. This is a big step for
them, and it probably costs them a lot, because the further they come into the
kindergarten, the more we probably talk to them and they must answer (…).
It is important to the parents, and to the children, too.

After such a project, some of the parents seemed more open towards the staff, both
in encounters in the kindergarten and in casual meetings. They felt that the staff
had made an effort to appreciate the cultural differences and took an interest in the
parents’ cultural background and language.

STRATEGIES OF AVOIDING OR EMPHASIZING ORIGIN OR HERITAGE

In a society or in educational institutions where linguistic and cultural differences
are welcomed, and where this is not seen as contradictory to constituting a
community across a variety of differences, belonging seems an accessible option
for everybody. Gullesstad asked if it is possible to belong to several communities,
in different contexts, without this effecting our loyalty and sense of commonality
(Gullesstad, 2006). In interviews with people who have a background as refugees,
from Chile, Iran, Somalia and Vietnam, the question seems to be highly relevant
(Berg & Lauritsen, 2009). They express a feeling of being viewed as different in
the Norwegian society, of not belonging, of being seen as ‘other’. They are tired of
always having to explain about their ‘origins’, where they ‘really’ come from. The
question seems to have a possible effect of increasing the distance between the one
asking and the one asked, and provides a signal that you do not ‘really’ belong here.

However, between persons of Norwegian-ethnic origin, you may often find that
a conversation is initiated with questions of geographical origin. ‘Where do you
come from?’ is a common question, intended at situating each of the interlocutors
according to the dialect or other markers observed during the initial contact. The
findings of common origin may, in turn, be used strategically, emphasizing the
importance of the connection, or in other cases such connections may be sought to be
avoided. One example from my research on refugees is when Amina from Somalia
tries to avoid information about the fact that she is trying to divorce her husband, get
through to other relatives in Norway or other countries. She wants this to be her own
decision and to avoid interference that she is certain would take place if the relatives
knew about the situation.

So what is the difference between focusing on origin when you belong to the
majority (whatever your social class), and when you are viewed as belonging
to a cultural or religious minority? Why is it difficult to mobilize resources and
strengthen bonds for all? What is the impact for a person of immigrant background
when people around you insist on focusing on your ‘origin’, rather than on who you are here and now? Let us look at a few more examples. For many of the migrants I have interviewed, bonds connected to a common origin where they were able to exchange confirmation about Who they are and a sense of belonging have been cut or considerably reduced in frequency and as an element of their daily activities. Many have left behind relatives and networks in the country of origin, and it is not easy to build up new networks to replace the old ones. To those belonging to larger networks of immigrants in exile, there is a greater possibility of confirmation of identities and roles, and of continued social exchange and negotiation about identity and social position. For two individuals involved in a conversation where both belong to the ethnic majority in a society, the probability of finding links or networks that may (or may not) be mobilized is certainly much higher than it is if persons originating from different countries strike up a conversation. Questions such as “Where do you come from?” may therefore have different effects – either to highlight similarities or – in the second case – differences in origin, for instance between a person born in Norway and a person born in Somalia. In the second case, differences in language, education, visible differences like skin colour or clothing, might enhance the feeling of being different. The context in which the meeting takes place (a university class, a conference, a common work place, a social club or other social settings) might however provide some common ground and emphasize commonalities in education, academic affiliation or interest, rather than only the differences.

BOTH EMPOWERING AND OPPRESSING PRACTICES IN SCHOOL

The staff in one of the kindergartens reported on different ways of trying to solve the communication problems they experienced with minority parents. Several examples were presented that showed how the staff operated from assumptions about differences or similarities in the various languages and cultures represented in the kindergarten. One of the staff told that in her experience it was much easier for her to understand a Russian mother who tried to communicate some words in Russian, than she imagined it would have been to understand if a Chinese- or Arabic-speaking parent tried to present something in their languages. There are some obvious differences in writing, that would make it impossible for a Norwegian who does not know Chinese or Arabic writing to understand what was being written. Quite interesting here, in my opinion, is that the informant voices an imagined distance between Norwegian language and Arabic or Chinese languages, as being much greater than between Norwegian and Russian. There is of course a geographic distance to support such a view. But such imagined differences are recurrent throughout many interviews, and thus are significant in creating a feeling of difference that increases the greater the distance from Norway. This ranking of countries and languages from ‘near’ to ‘far’ may have consequences in the social life in the kindergarten: Imagined differences seemed to increase the staff’s reluctance towards communication and dealings with parents from ‘far off’ countries.
Lisa has been a driving force in one of the kindergartens, trying to develop knowledge and practice on cultural diversity. She has put together binders on different countries and more general information on culture and communication. This made some educational data available to the staff. Producing special issues on Iran or Afghanistan, might however also contribute to enhancing and essentialising differences between minority and majority children and parents, especially if reading the material is not followed up by discussions and reflections on incidents and experiences with ‘real people’.

Several informants in the two kindergartens reported incidents where they developed a greater understanding of the life situation of some of the minority parents overtime. This increased understanding was explained as having different sources: increasing time and contact with minority parents, preparations and contact related to arrangements like International Day or other local projects and increased cultural competence among some of the staff members. There are efforts to make minority parents and children feel at home and that they belong in the kindergarten, like welcoming phrases from different countries on the kindergarten walls. On arrival the staff interview the parents on where they originate from, and mark the result on a map with all the countries in the world. They sometimes copy flags from these countries that are hung by each child’s clothes hook. In the beginning there was only one flag from Iran at Samir’s place. His father reacted to this, and said that Samir was born in Norway, so he was Norwegian, too. After some discussion the staff thought that the father’s reaction was fine, and they put up two flags.

The staff started out with a wish to highlight the minority children’s country of origin as different. They wanted to point out to the minority children that they could be proud of their (different) backgrounds. Their goal was expressed as working for inclusion or integration, through acknowledging that there are children of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the kindergarten. The visible result is often a celebration of differences. Based on the kindergarten’s goal of seeing and confirming every child’s identity as something all children need, their initial plan may be interpreted as part of a positive, well-meant initiative. In doing so – in focussing on where the minority children’s parents originate from, they came to highlight the differences between the Norwegian-ethnic and the minority-ethnic children. After taking in the reaction from a minority father, the staff ended up negotiating this side of the children’s identities as complex and multiple – both Norwegian and Iranian. And in the name of equality they also included the same practice (of two flags) for children that they usually would not have marked as very ‘different’, like the Danish girl. Eventually the staff accepts the possibility of having mixed identities and mixed nationalities. This was seen by the staff as a very positive and important development of their cultural understanding. The focus on flags as a sign of cultural competence among the staff and important identity markers for the children, might however be seen as reductionist – reducing the complexity of each child’s identity to a question of nationality markers.
K. LAURITSEN

NORWEGIAN CULTURE AS ‘NATURAL’

The staff’s understanding and interpretation of the minority parents sometimes seem to work both to empower the parents, but at other times constitute a basis for oppression. In the interviews the staff often expresses all the best intentions, and over time their reflections seem to move in a direction of greater understanding and thus a platform where minority parents are given a voice in the dealings with the kindergarten. But alongside this development, a strong tendency towards retaining a division into two groups – ‘us’ and ‘them’ – seems to prevail.

The teacher Astrid describes how a Somali mother shook her head when the staff put the small children to sleep in their strollers outside during winter time. She says that the staff discussed the mother’s scepticism afterwards, and tried to put themselves in her shoes:

What if we had come to a different country and so totally different cultures and entrusted our children to them and somehow did not understand why they do it this way or that…

The strategy the staff uses here, to take on the other’s perspective, is a way of trying to allow ‘the other’ the same right as oneself to react to changing circumstances. In this respect it is an attempt to negotiate a kind of equality. But the quote also reveals a view of their respective backgrounds as ‘totally different cultures’ that emphasizes the differences. Another of Astrid’s statements points in the same direction when she refers to the minority parents as being very concerned that the children should be clean and orderly when they pick them up from the kindergarten. She says that we have a different attitude towards the kids being out playing and muddying their clothes and looking very fresh. (…) And we have learnt that they are like that, it is their culture…

The use of a cultural explanation and enhancing the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ reflect a tendency among several of the staff members to construct and to rely on an imagined divide between majority Norwegians and minority parents. Later in the interview Astrid says that she feels that the staff’s attitudes towards parents and children have changed:

…they blend in so well eventually that you scarcely notice that they are children from other cultures. (…) If you look around outside, it is a natural part of the kindergarten, like.

Astrid states that now there are no differences, due to the fact that the children whose parents have a non-Norwegian origin ‘blend in’, and become a ‘natural’ part of the kindergarten. The question is what do they blend into? It seems clear from the statement that it is the children of Norwegian-ethnic origin that constitute the ‘natural’, that which the minority children will eventually blend into. Astrid describes having minority children as an enrichment to the kindergarten, to the staff and the
STRATEGIES IN ‘CROSS-CULTURAL’ DEALINGS

(Norwegian majority) children. But the prerequisite for this seems to be that the children of minority origin ‘blend in’. And even though becoming a ‘natural’ part; that is ‘majority Norwegian’, is not stated as a goal the staff has for their work, it is something that they see happening anyhow, and that makes the staff’s work easier.

The quote also indicates that Astrid has a clear understanding of who among the children in the kindergarten has a Norwegian background and who has not. Still it is important for her to present all the children as having ‘no differences’ and ‘blending in so well’. It seems that differences are under-communicated and that the majority culture therefore is allowed to dominate. This makes it not so attractive to stand out from the majority of children, and may provide us with an understanding of why some children negotiate or reject ‘their’ origins by under-communicating the fact that they are bilingual or have a parent or parents originating from another country.

STRATEGIES: BLENDING IN BY CHANGING NAME

In Norwegian society, immigrants seeking jobs and social contact are often met with a demand that they need to adapt to the society; learn Norwegian language, adjust to or at least learn Norwegian customs – and preferably receive a Norwegian education. This is supposed to ensure their position in line with Norwegian employees. Per, an Iranian young boy, who arrived at a small town in Mid-Norway, changed his name soon after the arrival, from Rahmatollah to the very common Norwegian name Per. He had seen that people with a name that seemed unfamiliar to Norwegian employers, had difficulties getting a job, even not being invited for a job interview. Several cases have been presented through Norwegian media where people with an immigrant background have sent hundreds of job applications, and are not once asked to attend an interview. For Per, changing his name gets him past the first hindrance and to the interview, where he is able to present himself as an individual with certain qualities and not some imagined and estranged ‘other’. Changing his name to a Norwegian name in order to get a job, might be seen as a strategy to try to escape his origins, entering into or at least a chance of being taken for belonging to a different category, the majority. But the other side of the coin is that he might profit from the name change, and improve his position in the Norwegian society. We do not know if his strategic choices imply a loss of some of the association to his origin as an Iranian. He may still practice his Iranian name at home and with friends, ‘back-stage’. Even if he might not pass as Norwegian-ethnic based on his language skills and physical appearance, his strategy seems to be working.

When one family from Africa were expecting a boy, they asked the kindergarten staff to give them examples of common Norwegian names. The parents decided to give the boy two names – one Norwegian name and a name that is common in Muslim countries. The parents provided their child with a more ‘Norwegian’ identity, perhaps based on an idea that it would make life in Norway easier for him. They also gave him an Arabic name, and thus covered both symbolic ties to Norway and to the parents’ country of origin. The teacher telling this stated that she valued this
as an attempt at integration. Official goals of inclusion of minorities are described as becoming a part of Norwegian culture and at the same time retaining their own. The example may however also be interpreted as a degree of assimilation. Naming a child is something many parents give a lot of time and attention to. When this boy gets a Norwegian name, and this is even put before the Muslim name, one can interpret it as a concession to living in Norway, where becoming accepted implies becoming (at least a little bit more) equal.

NEGOTIATING THE MEANING OF SKIN COLOUR

Gullestad (2006) asked if family background, a name and a physical appearance that signal a non-Norwegian origin is more important than citizenship. In one interview an assistant, Lena, describes the employees in the kindergarten as “ordinary people (…) reading newspapers, whether about Sami people or… The problem is, however, when we get to work after reading about someone dark that had robbed her or something, we bring it with us in a way, I think. (…) and if we are not pure racists many of us here, there are many among us that are afraid of it”.

The quote has several interesting elements that may serve to illustrate what Gullestad called the complex ways in which race thinking “feeds into and is nourished by everyday life”. There is an attempt to excuse prejudices by normalizing them as something ‘ordinary people’ have, something ‘everybody’ has. The staff are ‘ordinary people’ who do as ordinary people do in their spare time. Lena tries to show how ‘ordinary people’ often use one bad example to generalize about a whole group of ‘dark’ people. Another interesting aspect of Lena’s story is how Norwegian indigenous people – ‘Sami people’ – seem to be paralleled with news about ‘dark’ people. What she wishes to say in doing so, seems to be that they are both subject to generalization or racism, and that this has to do with anxiety among ‘many of us here’, that is ordinary people like the staff. They are not ‘pure racists’ but they are ‘afraid of it’, ‘it’ being criminal actions among ‘dark’ or ‘Sami’ people.

The staff also reported on incidents where majority children expressed scepticism towards minority children. The staff took this very seriously. A little girl, four years of age, told her parents that she had overheard a boy in the kindergarten saying that “we don’t play with blacks”. The teacher sharing this incident found the incident strange, because it involved two boys from Iran and the Philippines that used to play together every day. But all of a sudden, the Filipino boy didn’t want to play with ‘blacks’. The day after the girl’s father told about the episode to the kindergarten staff, they agreed to address it at once, gathering the children and introducing ‘friendship’ as a theme, reading about it, and talking about it. And the two boys continued playing together, so the informant telling about the incident concludes that it was just a whim. Still, difference in skin colour is available as a possible pattern, ready to be activated, for instance in situations of conflict.

Another incident was presented by one of the teachers, Nora, who overheard a dialogue between an African mother and her four-year old son. The boy told his
mother that the other children had commented to him that he had dark skin colour. The mother’s answer was:

Yes, but you do have dark skin, you know.

The teacher’s interpretation of the situation was that it seemed like he wasn’t quite sure about how to react to this, but he ‘sensed something’ and it made him feel different from the other children. The teacher thought that the mother’s reaction was ‘very wise’, maybe because she didn’t make a fuss about it, but tried to make it something normal, everyday-like in a way. Through her interpretation of the boy’s reaction, that he ‘sensed something’, Nora constructs a story where the difference in skin colour between him and the other children is a difference that matters, and that he is unsure about whether or not to feel sorry. A ranking of children by skin colour thus exists as a possibility that he has encountered in the kindergarten, and the fact that he might feel sorry for having a dark skin colour, gives the direction of the ranking, with dark as possibly less attractive than light. And the way it is told by Nora, this is a ‘normal’ interception, a fair interpretation. It signifies that in this kindergarten it is considered as normal to be sorry that your skin colour is dark.

What is characteristic about skin colour is that it is a body sign that we are born with, and unlike some other characteristics we cannot choose to change it. It tells about a state of the art in the Norwegian society, where it is not yet considered ‘normal’ that citizens appear in both pink, brown and other variants of skin colour. Nora interprets the mother’s answer to her boy as an input into a negotiation about normality, in which she tries to normalize and neutralize skin colour as a “difference ‘that makes a difference’”, to quote Bateson (1979, p. 99).

In several of the cases reported in this paper, we have met people who try to negotiate their position in different social fields in an attempt to blend in and make differences invisible/inaudible or less salient. As social scientists we know little about people’s motivations and what their negotiations of identity or origin do to them, whether it is felt as harmful or not. Grown-ups interviewed may offer to tell about their reflections, and in some of the stories they express a deep concern both for themselves and for their children. For some, being seen as different seems to be a serious matter and inflict upon them almost a kind of shame of being different or even self-hatred, like in an episode from the American author Toni Morrison’s childhood in 1930s America, told in an interview (Mollerin, 2012). Morrison has written extensively about Afro-American history and reflects on what race hatred can do to a young, vulnerable girl. A friend of Morrison is made into a character in her first novel, “The Bluest Eye”. The two of them, nine- or ten- years old, are having a deep discussion on whether or not God exists. Morrison claims that He does, but the other girl, whom Morrison describes as beautiful, with high cheeks and very dark, beautiful almond eyes, says:

No, He doesn’t, and I’ve got proof: I have prayed every night for two years to have blue eyes, and I haven’t got them.
That was her proof. As a grown-up Morrison started thinking about this incident: How did she get there? Why did she get to a point in her nine-year-old life where changing her eye-colour was seen as bliss for her? That self-hatred, where did it come from? – asks Morrison.

ASKING GOD FOR BLUE EYES

Matters of origin, identity and belonging are the cornerstones of any community, national or other. It might be imagined – as suggested by Benedict Anderson (1991), an imagination that supports a feeling of belonging to a community with all other Norwegians, despite the fact that we will never meet all of them or even have very much in common. But it is still a vital part of our existence as human beings that we have a feeling of belonging, of being accepted and to have a natural, non-negotiable position within the society where we live. A feeling of not belonging is painful on an individual level, and as human beings we strive towards acceptance in most of life’s dealings. Small children grow up; they become young people and grown-ups. It is vital to understand what it is that constitutes the glue that holds us all together as a society, and what mechanisms separate us – and makes it necessary for some of us to choose being invisible or assimilated into the majority. We need to understand the processes that allow individuals and groups of a non-Norwegian origin to feel that they belong to the society where they now reside – focusing on a commonality of sharing a territory here and now, rather than our different origins. These processes are connected both to each individual’s personal orientation and actions, as well as to the society and educational institutions and how they think and act. As suggested by Gullestad (2006), modern individuals in complex societies need to relate to a multiplicity of places, identities and environments. In order to strengthen democracy we need new symbols and new common imaginations that highlight the existing diversity and complexity. Equality in civil rights and duties needs to be combined with a fundamental acceptance of differences in family background, ways of living and religious faith. Over time, repeatedly failing to negotiate an identity as Norwegian may have a detrimental effect on an individual’s feeling of self-esteem, dignity, belonging, and on the glue holding the society together as a whole. By ranking origin or heritage over citizenship, ‘we’ create a border where ‘we’ are safe in an inherited belonging that we did not have to do anything to achieve. We were born into such a position, symbolically speaking we don’t need to ask for blue eyes. We still have a choice as to how important a role we wish to give this belonging, and to what extent we insist on origin and not for instance just the sharing of a common territory as being the most salient criteria which makes us Norwegian – or any other nationality for that matter.

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(DE)CONSTRUCTING ORIGIN IN A STRATIFIED CLASSROOM/SOCIETY

Israeli Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and Palestinian Arab Students in a Multi-Origin Educational Program

INTRODUCTION

The conjunction of academic activity with processes of recognition of disadvantaged and stigmatized origins has become a widespread phenomenon (Darling-Hammond et al. 2002; Puckett et al. 2007; Lagemann & Lewis, 2011). Such programs are based on the assumption that acknowledging and respecting the origin of the “Other” is a basis for fighting oppression and marginalization. Exploring origins (culture, identity, history, and collective memory) is thus perceived as the site where the construction and re-construction of mutual respect is taking place. In the long term it is also assumed that these processes will contribute to the reduction of social tensions among groups as well as prevent racism and oppression (Taylor, 1994; hooks, 1994; Banks, 2010).

The present study calls for a renewed discussion of the unproblematized and decontextualized ways in which educational programs tend to use origin as a venue of recognition and empowerment, especially the limited attention paid to the ways agents from hegemonic and disadvantaged background employ and position their own origin during multi-origin encounters. Drawing on ethnographic research at a special Israeli academic program in teacher counseling (2007-2012) that aims to deepen the participants’ understanding of the origin of the “Other”, I will examine how students from different ethno-national groups make sense of and position their origin in light of the Israeli ethnic and national divisions. Moreover, by exploring how students from three different ethno-national origins which are located in different social positions within the Israeli power structure – “Mizrahim” (Israeli Jews from a Middle Eastern and North African origin), “Ashkenazim” (Israeli Jews from a European origin), and “Palestinian Arabs” (Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 and became Israeli citizens) – relate to their origin, I will further explore the role of origin in shaping processes of recognition and empowerment. Hence, by exploring the “politics of origins” as it was acted by participants from different origin groups, this case study suggests that in a multi-origin and stratified context, learning about one’s origin can not only serve as a venue of recognition and empowerment, but can also reflect and even reproduce hierarchies, boundaries and power relations between...
groups. These findings carry great importance in light of the growing diversity of the student population worldwide, and the special educational programs needed for teaching and learning in multi-origin environments. Thus, delving into the different roles origin plays in the perceptions of students from hegemonic and disadvantaged groups will shed light on the possibilities and limitations embedded in educational programs that strive to foster process of recognition and empowerment between participants from different origin groups.

ORIGIN, HIERARCHIES, AND POWER

The extensive research literature dedicated to the issue of origin grants it a central role in constructing social meaning, a collective identity, and a focus for emotional identification, and in establishing social, political and moral boundaries. Whether perceived as the product of a natural process of crystallization which relies on common culture, language, myths and symbolism (Smith, 1981), or as the product of social construction (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990), origin has gone through processes of reification and essentialization which have helped it to produce clear distinctions between “us” and “them”. These oppositional identities (such as East versus West) present and reproduce power relations and hierarchical structures that diminish the social, cultural and political capital of the disadvantaged origin groups (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Borrero, Yeh, Cruz & Suda, 2012). The constitution of these binary distinctions rely simultaneously both on the active action of social players from various origin groups (Nagel, 1996), and on the power of the state apparatus and of economic and political interests (Hechter, 1975). The asymmetrical placements and contexts (and the power differences deriving from them) have become central to understanding the ways in which individuals are categorized, classified, normalized and supervised (Foucault, 1991), and to understanding the blocks and restrictions facing the project of constituting the modern subject (Butler, Laclau and Zizek, 2000).  

In recent years sociologists have developed a phenomenological approach to origin that seeks to examine personal identification and use of origin, while exposing the interface of power, society and culture (Lamont, 2000). Examining the different ways origin is articulated and reconfigured by different subjects from various social groups exposed origin as a heterogeneous concept that reflects different compositions of ethnicity, race and nationality as well as the denial and even erasure of origin.  

In light of these assumptions, this chapter wishes to examine origin as a socially constructed category that is being articulated through participants’ constant and differentiated interpretative work that is embedded in ethnic, socioeconomic, and other social and political divisions.

Origin, Hierarchies, and the Power Structure of the Israeli Society

Jewish nationality was consolidated and shaped on the basis of a Jewish ethno-religious origin and of belonging to the Jewish people (Avineri, 1981). The
Jewish origin was consequently defined as an essentialistic, primordial and stable identity. Drawing from this notion, the Israeli social structure was characterized by processes of inclusion and exclusion on the basis of origin (Kimmerling, 2004). These processes operate on several levels. Firstly, nationalizing the Jewish ethnoreligious origin and turning it into one of the conditions for belonging to the Zionist group excluded the Palestinian Arab group living within the borders of the Israeli state (Shafir & Peled, 2002). The Arab group, itself split along lines of religious origin (Muslim, Christian and Druze), has consequently suffered from inequality in the areas of employment, housing, development and access to public resources (Ghanem, 2001; Haidar, 2005), and has populated the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder (Semyonov & Lewin-Epstein, 2004). Furthermore, the Jewish group and the Arab group have also been differentiated by symbolic borders nourished by the continuing Jewish-Arab conflict, which labels the Palestinian Arab group as a “fifth column” and as an enemy. This reality has also been reflected in the averagely low achievements of the Palestinian Arab group in the educational system and in their relatively low representation in higher education institutions (Al Haj, 1994).

Secondly, nationality has also contributed to the stratification of Jewish ethnic groups of non-Western origin, who mostly immigrated from Muslim countries and were called Mizrahim. Although unlike the Palestinian Arabs, the Mizrahim were included in the national collective due to their Jewishness, their Jewish-Arab culture and identity posed a constant challenge to the validity of the modern-Western Zionist national narrative (Forum, 2002; Shenhav, 2003; Shenhav, 2006). The Mizrahim were therefore judged in the light of orientalistic perceptions and a stereotypical labeling which was characterized by the group’s simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (Hertzog, 1984; Khazzoom, 2008). In light of this, the Mizrahim and the Mizrahi cultures were placed in a non-hegemonic status and sometimes even pushed to the margins of the dominant national society and culture, in comparison with the social and symbolic placement of Ashkenazi Jewish groups from a European origin (Smooha, 1987; Yonah, 2005). Although today these historical injustices form part of the public agenda in Israel, and have even given rise to public apologies (Amir, 2012), Mizrahim mostly belong to the lower classes. This ethnic inequality has endured to the second, third and even fourth generations of Mizrahim (Swirski, 1999; Stier & Shavit, 2003; Haberfeld & Cohen, 2007), and particularly with regards to access to Israel’s structure of opportunity (Ayalon & Shavit, 2004; Semyonov & Lewin-Epstein, 2004; Cohen et al., 2007). Due to their social position, the majority of the pupils who occupy the non-academic tracks in the Israeli educational system are Mizrahim (Yonah & Saporta, 2002), a division which has had a crucial effect on Mizrahi pupils’ achievements and self-image (Mizrahi et al., 2009).

Thus, while the Palestinians are marginalized from the Israeli-Jewish national collective due to their non-Jewishness, the Mizrahim are positioned within the national collective, but are marginalized due to their Jewish-Arab culture. These
symbolic and real boundaries expose the central role origin still plays in constructing the stratified social structure in Israel (Lisak, 1990; Kimmerling, 1993; Butler, 2007). The Israeli stratified social structure/context is constantly affecting the educational sphere. The effect can be seen in the polarization and extremization of views of both teaching and counseling trainees’ regarding the origin of the “Other” in recent years (Kaplan et al. 2001; Oren, 2010). This study seeks to examine the students’ own interpretations of their origin and the ways these interpretations affect multi-origin educational programs that strive to foster process of recognition and empowerment.

SETTING AND BACKGROUND

The program began its activities in 2006 at a major teacher training college in Israel which serves Israeli citizens from Jewish (Ashkenazim and Mizrahim) and Palestinian Arab origin. Relying on the assumption that educational environments can serve as safe space for the “Other” (Kumashiro, 2000), the program aims to set in motion processes of recognition and empowerment of disadvantaged and stigmatized origins in the Israeli society. The program includes a weekly classroom seminar dedicated to three of the major origin groups in Israel: Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and Palestinian Arabs. Discussions held in class wished to challenge the common ways disadvantaged origins, especially Mizrahim and Palestinians, are being perceived in the Israeli society while analyzing the implications of stigmatization and marginalization of certain origins for the educational sphere. According to this process students were asked to examine the ways in which the counselor might apply this knowledge in his daily work in school. By virtue of their nature, the seminars entail active discussions that give the students a broad basis for self-expression which is grounded in “real life”. Students were asked to reflect upon their own origin (history, identity and culture) and its social positioning, and share their reflections with their interlocutors.

The program was attended by 36 participants. This group consisted of 25 Jews: 9 from a Mizrahi origin and 16 from an Ashkenazi origin, and 11 Palestinian Arabs. All of the participants were women, due to the fact that most of the trainees in teacher training or counselling programs in Israel are female. More Jews participated in the program than Palestinians. This fact is attributable to the disproportional presence of Palestinian students in Israeli academia. All the students finished their bachelor degree at least 2 or 3 years before starting their masters in counselling. All the participants, except three, were working as teachers in various subjects in elementary schools and high schools throughout Israel.

METHOD

The classroom seminar consisted of 14 meetings; each lasted one-and-a-half hour and was conducted in Hebrew. The meetings were facilitated by me – a Jewish
lecturer trained in sociology of education. This 12-month auto-ethnography began in the spring of 2012. During this period all the 14 meetings that were held in class were taped. Recording started several minutes before the meeting began officially and ended a few minutes after it ended, enabling the documentation of the informal conversations which were not part of the facilitated discourse. In addition, once it ended, each meeting was accompanied with a written field journal which documented in a detailed and meticulous manner the major events that took place during class meetings, and in particular the ways in which the participants interpreted and positioned their origin. These data sources allowed me to identify multiple perspectives that evolved over a length of time by agents from different origins. All data sources were translated into English.

The analysis located key events in which the participants’ attitude to the definition of their origin took center stage. The analysis of the events was done on three levels: (1) Pinpointing central themes concerning the meanings the students gave to their own origin (2) Sorting and categorizing the themes while examining the discursive practices through which the participants sought to define and position their origin (3) Analyzing the socio-political meaning embedded in the differential perceptions of origin. The juxtaposition of the different interpretations of origin and its implications for the three groups helped to identify the effects of these perceptions on processes of recognition and empowerment.

Denying Ethnicity and Emphasizing Individuality: The Ashkenazi Case

The Ashkenazi participants, the most established of the three groups on the basis of their ethno-national origin, almost sweepingly regarded and positioned themselves as a “non origin” group. The students especially objected to being presented during class meetings as a distinct social category on the basis of their ethnicity. Most of them denied the existence of the “Ashkenazi” ethnicity in the current Israeli society. In an event that took place during discussions concerning the over-representation of the Ashkenazi group among the decision makers in the state of Israel, a number of
students from an Ashkenazi origin passionately suggested that Ashkenazim do not and cannot be defined as such:

Ashkenazi student A: (asking the facilitator) What do you mean by saying that the “Ashkenazim” are the most dominant group in the Israeli society? There is no such thing as Ashkenazim, it doesn’t exist anymore
Mizrahi student A: What do you mean by that?
Ashkenazi student B: It’s obvious, I mean… who can tell these days which European country my grandma emigrated from… It is so not possible to tell, this thing (ethnicity) is long gone
Ashkenazi student C: It is not relevant. I didn’t even know until recently that I am an Ashkenazi!

The students claim that ethnicity cannot play a central role in determining their group definition since they have simply lost their ethnicity (“I didn’t even know until recently that I am an Ashkenazi!”). Furthermore, some of the Ashkenazi participants even sought to deny the existence of ethnicity as one of the salient foundations underpinning their definition as a distinct origin group by blurring and dismissing the role of physical characteristics in defining one’s origin:

Mizrahi student B: What do you mean by saying that you didn’t know your origin group? Haven’t you noticed that you do not share the same ethnic origin as people who immigrated to Israel from, let’s say Yemen? (The students are laughing)
Ashkenazi student D: Come on, we have so many mixed marriages, these things (physical characteristics) are not so obvious anymore.

Although the participants agreed that it was impossible to deny the existence of ethnic characteristics (the students were laughing at the possibility that one will not identify a Yemenite), the Ashkenazi students dismissed the existence of a clear attendant physical characteristic. As a none existing variable, origin was to play no role in determining social position and life chances:

Ashkenazi student C: Can you tell every time you see someone whether he is Ashkenazi or not, whether he is from a Polish or Hungarian or Russian origin? It is quite impossible nowadays. Israel is a big melting pot. The differences disappeared a long time ago. I am what I am, that’s it! I am successful not because I’m an Ashkenazi.

In order to strengthen their claim that the ethnic characteristics have become invisible and thus a group cannot be defined on the basis of origin, the Ashkenazi participants objected to ascribing their relative social power to their origin and to the dominant position it gained in the Israeli society. Although they did not deny the existence of a European ethnic origin of a certain kind (Polish, Hungarian, Russian), they preferred to emphasize the discourse of individualism (“I am what I am, that’s it!”). Using individual terms and liberal meritocratic discourse as a way to explain success is
common among white hegemonic groups (DiAngelo, 2010). This phenomenon is widespread among the Ashkenazi group in Israel (Sason-Levi, 2008). It owes its existence to the hegemonic status of the Ashkenazi ethnic culture within the Israeli nation state, which enables Ashkenazim to identify themselves as just “individuals” – one of many who constitute “Israeliness” (Shafir & Peled, 2002).

Only on a few occasions did the Ashkenazi participants strengthen the individual explanations by using nationality. Turning to the all-inclusive national definition, the participants claimed that Israeliness is blurring distinctions and power relations between origin groups, and thus paving the way to mobility for every individual:

Ashkenazi student G: I succeeded because I made the effort. It wasn’t because of anything else
Ashkenazi student F: I agree. It doesn’t matter if your family came from there or there... I feel that we are all Israelis; each one of us can make the effort if he wants to in the context of the Israeli nation state. I’m sorry, that is (blaming origin) not an excuse for being unsuccessful. Failure is a much more complicated phenomenon than that.

Replacing ethnicity (Ashkenazi), with nationality (Israeli), served as a way to emphasize the role of individuality in determining social dynamics and mobility. Furthermore, blaming origin for shaping the Israeli stratified social structure was perceived as limiting the agency of the individual and subverting his status as an autonomous and independent subject. When the students did choose to explain social differences and gaps between groups (gaps they could not ignore), they turned more to class differences and the economic status of the individual than to belonging to a certain origin group. Replacing origin with alternative variables, while denying the existence of origin as a distinct and privileged social category, cleared the Ashkenazi group of social “guilt”:

Ashkenazi student H: Why do you always blame the Ashkenazis for their success? Don’t you think that there are some other factors that contribute to it rather than one’s origin group, like if the person is poor or disabled?

In sum, most of the Ashkenazi participants refused to define themselves as a distinct origin group, claiming that their ethnicity could not be recognized anymore as a social category. Members of the Ashkenazi group wished to define themselves as individuals or as belonging to an all inclusive Jewish-national origin group that was perceived as the only legitimate origin for Israeli-Jews. Thus, by denying their ethnic origin the Ashkenazi participants also denied and dismissed their socio-cultural power and privileges and protected and reproduced their relatively established position in society.

**Denying Ethnicity and Emphasizing Nationality: The Mizrahi Case**

The participants from a Mizrahi origin are underprivileged in relation to the Jewish Ashkenazi group due to their ethnic origin, and established in relation to the Palestinian Arab group due to their national origin. The Mizrahi participants displayed great
ambivalence regarding their definition as a distinct ethno-national group. In most cases they chose to deny their existence as an ethnic group while emphasizing their existence as a national group. In the following discussion the participantsdismissed the Mizrahi origin by using the cultural model of communal existence and solidarity represented in the Israeli concept of the “melting pot”, and the concept of individuality that characterizes the modern Israeli democratic nation-state:

Mizrahi Student B: I live in a little town with people from all kinds of ethnic origins, and no one thinks it’s an issue
Mizrahi Student C: I agree. I don’t feel that I’m different from any other person who came from a different origin, we are all together here (in Israel)
Mizrahi Student D: In a free democracy like that (Israel) it’s like… it is not about were you came from but about your personality and your expectations in life and the effort you are willing to put in to get to… I mean… we are all Israelis; it is not determined by stuff like the country you immigrated from.

While manouevring between different interpretations of their ethnic origin (“people from all kinds of ethnic origins”; “I don’t feel that I’m different from any other… origin”; “we are all Israelis”), the participants emphasized the importance of the national component:

Mizrahi Student C: What does it matter (the ethnic origin)? We never talk about it. All this Mizrahi thing is long gone, we are all one unified nation, and that’s what’s important
Mizrahi Student A: Yea… so… talking about ethnicity is only weakening the Israeli nation. We have enough enemies, don’t we?

The blurring of ethnic origin was explained in terms of preserving the unity of the Jewish nation against the Arab enemy. This notion is based on the logic that posed Jews and Arabs as cultural and political antagonists while positioning the Jewish Mizrahi culture on the margins of the Israeli society due to its resemblance to the Arab culture (Shenhav & Hever, 2012). Clinging to national identity became a normative practice for different kinds of Jewish “outsiders” who wanted to gain a sense of belonging to the Israeli society (Rapoport & Lomsky-Feder, 2002). By emphasizing nationality, most of the Mizrahi participants claimed that ethnicity is a fictive definition that negates the nation and therefore should be perceived as a thing of the past:

Mizrahi Student E: There is no one such thing as Mizrahim, it’s an invention. Mizrahi identity maybe existed when we immigrated to Israel. We (Mizrahiim) emigrated from different places in the Middle East and North Africa and were labeled as one group… but nowadays that is a false identity that serves the interests of those who want to label us and damage Israeliness
Mizrahi Student B: All of that happened in the past. Now it only works against us being a strong unified nation
Mizrahi Student A: If we are separated by these stereotypical labels (Mizrahim), one cannot claim that we are one nation but all kinds of different people from different groups who have been stuck together for 5 decades in one place.

Although blurring and dismissing the ethnic component (“There is no one such thing as Mizrahim”) simultaneously revealed its presence and existence, the participants were willing to recognize the existence of Mizrahim only in order to negate it and the motives that brought about its constitution. Therefore, the definition of Mizrahianness as a group is presented as a historical injustice and as a means for labeling and creating stereotypes that can sabotage the nation. Ethnic origin was explicitly acknowledged only in relation to the lives of Mizrahim from poor backgrounds (as opposed to Mizrahim who have integrated in the middle class):

Mizrahi Student D: Mizrahim is more like being poor and living in a disadvantaged neighborhood or in those peripheral towns. It is about a lack of education and good manners. It is a term that accounts for those who are not successful. If you do succeed, you wouldn’t want to be recognized as Mizrahi…

The participants understood the Mizrahi ethnic origin as a definition that owes its existence mostly to stigmatized social groups. Thus by differentiating the Mizrahi group across economic lines, the participants distanced themselves from the term Mizrahi claiming that this social category did not refer to them and to their life stories. Mizrahim was only acknowledged when referring to a group which was distinct from them on the basis of low status, lack of education and poor area of residence – signifiers that were seen as identifying the “real” Mizrahi group.

In sum, for the Mizrahi group, the process of recognizing the “Other” exposed the ambivalence they displayed regarding their ethnic origin. Like their Ashkenazi counterparts, most of the Mizrahi students disagreed with their definition as a distinct origin group, but their refusal stemmed from different reasons. The participants’ refusal owes its existence to the non-hegemonic status of the Mizrahi ethnic culture, which labeled and marginalized the group while drawing symbolic borders between them and other origin groups. Denying the Mizrahi ethnicity (identity and culture) due to their marginality is common among Mizrahim in Israel (Mizrahi & Herzog, 2012). In light of these notions, the Mizrahi participants suggested that ethnicity and ethnic divides were weakening the Israeli society and nation. In order to avoid that, they chose one imagined origin (national) over the other (ethnic), suggesting that the geopolitical reality preceded the ethnic one, i.e.: the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi conflict had much less presence in the participants’ lives than the Jewish-Palestinian one. Thus, the struggle around defining external borders (the Israeli identity) was perceived as more important than defending internal borders (the Mizrahi identity). In other words, by dismissing their ethnic identity while emphasizing the European based Jewish-national identity, the Mizrahi participants reproduced their relatively marginalized position and power within the Israeli society.
Palestinian participants were the most disadvantaged of the three groups within the Israeli society based on their ethno-national origin. During class meetings, most Palestinians agreed to and eagerly supported their presentation as a distinct ethno-national origin group. The Palestinian students characterized and positioned their origin as distinct due, to a large extent, to their exclusion by the Jewish group. In other words, Palestinian Arab participants tended to define their origin on the basis of their disadvantagedness:

Facilitator: The Arab educational system in Israel suffers from all sorts of problems, including the lack of professional teachers in major subjects
Palestinian student A: (interrupting the facilitator) It is true! We didn’t have a suitable Maths teacher in our village for quite a long time
Palestinian student B: We also suffer from a lack of English teachers… (Other Palestinian participants agree with student B)
Jewish student F: (interrupting student B) We all suffer from a lot of problems in our educational system. We all have to cope with difficulties and budgets that are too small for our needs, for example we had someone who was teaching in my community and who wasn’t suitable at all for the job and it was very difficult to replace her
Palestinian student B: But we suffer from things because we are Arabs! Yes, simply because we are not Jews.

While the Jewish participant was trying to create a universal framework through which the Israeli educational system will be judged and interpreted, the Palestinian participants emphasized the uniqueness of the Arab educational system within this framework. From the Palestinian Arab participants’ perspective, it is not just that the problems of the two educational systems do not overlap, but the Arab educational system is conceived as suffering from the Jewish system. Constructing their origin through their ‘disadvantagedness’, for example by emphasizing differences and boundaries between groups (“different from the Jewish group”) or through the use of the plural form (“we”), was also demonstrated by linking the Palestinian group to a wider pan-Arab collective:

Palestinian student C: As Arabs, we are struggling for our rights in the Israeli society although we are Israeli citizens
Palestinian student D: Because we belong at the same time to the Arab nation as well
Palestinian student A: Yeah, they identify us only as Arabs. One can’t just be a citizen or something.

Recognizing the affiliation with the wide pan-Arab community as a means of explaining their marginalized position in the Israeli society not only reiterates the central role origin plays in the Palestinian participants’ perceptions, but also
criticizes the absence of the individual discourse. Being just a citizen who claims his/her own rights regardless of his/her ethno-national origin is perceived almost as an impossible option. On the other hand, to be perceived just as an individual was not a good enough solution for the Palestinian participants, since this identification blurred the social effects of their ethno-national origin. The next example illustrates how ignoring the origin of the Palestinian Arab participants while emphasizing the individual/personal sphere is interpreted as ignoring the particular socio-historical conditions that have marginalized the Palestinians as a group, and thus as racism:

Facilitator: We still have achievement gaps between the two national groups
Jewish student B: Couldn’t this be a result of a lack of interest in education in certain pupils? Why is everything that happens to every individual in this country the state’s fault?
Palestinian student E: What do you mean by that? If it is not the state’s fault then… whose fault is it? Are you suggesting that all the Arab pupils are to blame? Are they all lazy or, I don’t know, does this sound reasonable… this is… it is simply racism!!!

By claiming that individuality is overruling processes of collective stereotypization and marginalization, the students sought to re-anchor their explanations and self-definition in their origin. Rejecting explanations concerned with personal disadvantagedness even strengthened the use of origin since it enabled the group to define itself as a victim of systematic racism:

Palestinian student E: You (Jewish participants) choose not to see us as a collective because you don’t want to admit that we are the victims of this situation… like… that our situation is not our own fault but a big issue. You must see that, see the whole picture.

As a victim, the disadvantaged group distinguished itself from the majority group on a moral basis, demanding that the majority group linked their self-definition with processes of marginalization of certain groups. Thus, origin played a central role both as a definition that led to the Palestinian participants’ exclusion and as a way to gain power. In other words, origin was perceived as an asset through which the Palestinian Arab participants achieved a sense of “togetherness” and belonging, and as a reason to distinguish and even isolate them from the Jewish Israeli group. Either in its local or “pan-Arab” version, origin was the channel through which participants wished to design and redesign their place in the Israeli society while combating their position as a discriminated minority.

In sum, the Palestinian Arab group enthusiastically agreed to its definition as a distinct origin group and even sought to unite its identity with that of the Arabs in general. Blurring the ethnic borders between Palestinians who are citizens of Israel and the Arab world, and imagining them as one entity, enabled the members of the group to strengthen their distinct national identity. This notion owes its existence to the recognition of national borders and the marginalized
position of the Palestinian-Arabs within this structure (Al-Haj, 2004). In other words, by emphasizing their distinct and even isolated ethnic and national origin the Palestinian-Arab participants echoed their lack of integration and marginal position in the Israeli society.

DISCUSSION

How did participants from different origin groups define and position their origin during an educational program that aimed to foster processes of recognition between members of different (and even hostile) origin groups? Participants deal with the concept of origin by differently using ethnicity and nationality in light of the stratified Israeli social structure: denying ethnicity and emphasizing individuality (Ashkenazim), denying ethnicity and emphasizing nationality (Mizrahim), and emphasizing ethnicity and nationality (Palestinian Arab). These strategies were used in order to re-define the groups’ positioning within the Israeli society. Members of the Ashkenazi group replaced origin with the individual discourses in order to dismiss their hegemonic position; Members of the Mizrahi group identified origin with nationality in order to challenge ethnic stigmatization; Members of the Palestinian Arab group identified origin with distinct ethnic and national affiliation in order to emphasize their marginalization.

But in so doing the different interpretive tracks used were also reproducing existing borders and power relations and thus sabotaging the process of recognition. For example, the Ashkenazim’s perception of origin did not allow them to recognize processes of stratification and exclusion that they engendered for other origin groups, the Mizrahim’s perception of origin excluded non-Zionist groups, while the Palestinians’ perception of origin marked them as the outsiders of the Israeli society.

The different ways the conceptions of origin mediated power relations shed light on the blind spots that are embedded in educational programs that seek to foster processes of recognition. Firstly, the findings suggest that the experience of different agents/groups within the concept of origin is connected to social structure and power relations. As a context-bound position that derives from certain structures and interests, the participants’ perception of their origin cannot be easily dismissed in the framework of the class. Secondly, the findings question the perception according to which social actors hold a pre-packaged, monolithic, and solid conception of origin that should be worked out during the program. Participants’ manoeuvres between different definitions and compositions of origin suggest that origin is constructed in relation to other perceptions of origin as well as to the perceptions of the “Other”. Educational programs that seek to challenge and deconstruct the definitions and positioning of disadvantaged origin groups must understand the discourse and social structure in which all participants are embedded. We have very few data on the ways participants from hegemonic and disadvantaged group understand and position their origin during multi-origin/multi-cultural encounters. Hence, by providing researchers and practitioners with yet another lens through which to understand
the complex dynamics that take place in multi-origin educational programs we will better understand how to use origin as a transformative tool. The more clarity we have about how origin is perceived in relation to other origin groups, the more prepared we will be to address multi-origin dynamics and its potential influence on boundaries and positioning of different origin groups.

NOTES

1 Recently, the traditional borders of origin have been crossed by transgressive identity politics which break through “agreed” collective boundaries and produce new common definitions: juxtapositioned, hyphenated, hybrid and performative (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1990); meta-national global identities (Appadurai, 1996); and fluid and dynamic definitions which refuse stabilization (Bauman, 2000). However, even in light of such moves origin has not undergone an absolute relativization and is not perceived only as a fictive, temporary, and changeable term.

2 It is important to note that Western culture prioritizes the notion of a stable and unitary self, whereas definitions which rely on fluidity and multiplicity are often interpreted as a lack of origin/identity.

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(DE)CONSTRUCTING ORIGIN IN A STRATIFIED CLASSROOM/SOCIETY


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