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Jensen, Iben

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The Practice of Intercultural Communication

- reflections for professionals in cultural meetings

Iben Jensen,

associate professor, M.A. & Ph.D.,

Department of Communication,

University of Roskilde, Denmark

Abstract

In this article I will argue that the globalisation process has carried two major implications for intercultural communication research: 1) It has provided a new target group; professional practitioners in multiethnic societies. 2) It has made 'cultural identity' one of the most important concepts in intercultural research. The challenge for intercultural research today is to provide analytical tools for the practitioners - tools which are developed in relation to the complexity in multiethnic societies.

Intercultural communication research has got a new target group due to the globalisation process: The professional practitioners in multiethnic societies; the nurses, the social workers, the lawyers, the teachers etc., who in respect of their professionalism are responsible for a successful intercultural communication. Traditionally the professional practitioners have been left with handbooks and readers mainly based upon functionalistic theories (Martin & Nakayama 2000, Samovar, Porter & Jain 1981, Asante & Gudykunst 1989, Hofstede 1980, Okabe 1983, Prosser 1978). Lots of answering has been given. However more and more professional practitioners have experienced that simple answers to cultural differences do not work in multiethnic societies.

The complexity in society demands more complex questions and answers. I will argue that a poststructural approach is able to handle the complexity of the concepts, which are necessary to describe the multiethnic societies. I will also argue that it's both necessary and possible from a poststructuralistic, approach to develop analytical tools, which refer to the practitioner's everyday experiences. The functionalistic approach has already proved that practitioners want practical tools, they can use in praxis in everyday life. In respect of this need I find one of the challenges in the field of intercultural communication to develop analytical tools on the basis of the complex concepts describing complex societies (Bauman 1999, Jensen 1998/2001).

The article is divided in three parts. In the first part I will discuss how the field of intercultural communication research can contribute to professional practitioners in multiethnic societies. In the second part I will present four analytical tools for intercultural communication as seen from a poststructuralistic perspective. These analytical tools sum up into a model for intercultural communication. The third part will discuss the concept of cultural identity in relation to intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication in a global context

Intercultural communication research has by definition been related to the understanding of national cultures as the fundamental principle. Cultures were nations. Apart from the curiosity that most intercultural readers began with a short passage telling that sometimes people inside a nation could be more different from each other than people across cultures (Samovar, Porter & Jain 1981), the whole idea of intercultural communication was linked to national culture.

However already 10 years ago Ulf Hannerz argued, that rather than talking about different national cultures, we should see all cultures as creolised societies (Hannerz 1992). Hannerz grasped early the discourse that continued in new discussions about globalisation. Globalisation normally refers to two opposite processes: a) The globalisation process, in which we are all getting closer and closer to each other by consumerism, ideology and knowledge about each other. b) The localization process, which makes us focus intensively at our local nation or local ethnic group (Featherstone 1990, Hylland Eriksen 1993).

In the debates about globalisation it is intensively discussed, whether globalisation is a new process or not. Jonathan Friedman suggests that there is nothing new. He argues that the mobility, which is seen as central to globalisation, primarily applies to the elite (Friedman 1994: 23). Zygmunt Bauman agrees, but he adds that it makes sense to see the mobility as the *idea* of society. Bauman also argues that the mobile society is not open to everybody. Globalisation has, according to Bauman, caused a new polarisation in societies that divides people into two groups: tourists and vagabonds. The tourists can travel free with few restrictions. The vagabonds are forced to travel caused by war, poverty or hunger. The vagabonds are not welcomed like tourists, but are met with high walls of customs duties and barbed wire (Bauman 1999). Although Bauman can be criticized for making up a too simplistic picture, I think he points to some of the most important discourses in Western societies, significant to the

intercultural communication process: The discourses telling whom to include and whom to exclude, which I find is a social practice crucial to research in intercultural communication.

It's often argued that there is no difference between intercultural communication and other kinds of communication (Gudykunst 1994, Sarbaugh 1979). However in multiethnic societies, one of the differences is exactly that in intercultural communication it is a legal discourse to discuss who of the participants in a communication process 'really' belongs to the majority culture. Intercultural communication in a globalized world is forced to take that circumstance into account and include questions of globalisation and cultural identity.

What does the 'classic' research field offer practitioners?

In short, the field of intercultural communication research can be divided in two main traditions. A tradition based upon a functionalistic approach and a tradition based upon a poststructuralistic approach. The functionalist research tradition has tried to *predict* how culture would influence communication. Focus has been on identifying *culture as a barrier* against a more effective communication (Samovar, Porter & Jain 1981¹, Samovar & Porter 1972/1991, Brislin 1986, Gudykunst 1983, 1994, 1995, Hall 1959, Sarbaugh 1979). In these works practitioners are offered tools to describe how they can expect the intercultural communication to appear. The functionalist research tradition also includes competence research that tries to establish criteria to determine which characteristics a person needs in order to acquire intercultural competences (Gertsen 1990, Söderberg 1994, Kincaid 1987).

The Dutch management researcher Geerd Hofstede's work, *Culture's Consequences* (1980), have had an enormous influence on the research tradition in intercultural communication. Hofstede investigated the relationships between employees and managements in forty different cultures, and on this basis he developed four dimensions like power-distance (small/large), uncertainty avoidance/anxiety, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity. The dimensions are all based on the idea that cultures are homogenous national cultures that do not change in time worth mentioning. Most often Hofstedes dimensions are used uncritically in spite of the fact that they were developed more than 20 years ago². William B. Gudykunst who is one of the pioneers in the field of intercultural communication, is one of the influential researchers who legitimise the use of Hofstedes work in newer times. "Anxiety/uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory: Current status" is the title of an article in

¹ From 1972 to 1995, functionalist communication research has monopolised the practice of education in intercultural communication in USA and in almost all other Western countries with the highly influential textbook by Samovar and Porter, *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, which has been published in 6 editions.

² See Jensen & Løngreen 1995: 40-42 for a critique of Hofstede's work and Jensen 1998: 180-183.

which he presents his new theory of intercultural communication. It's written in 1995, and builds upon Hofstede's dimensions, developed from the perspective of nations as homogeneous static societies. However, Hofstede's model is an offer. An offer to categorize the world in some very simple categories that we can recognize from everyday life. Hofstede offers all interested in intercultural communication an immediate explanation of how the communication in management is influenced by culture.

William B. Gudykunst and Yun Kim took by their book, *Communication with strangers* (Gudykunst & Kim 1984), a very important step in their attempt to describe the intercultural communication process. They argue (like Yoshikawa) that we shall see intercultural communication as a dialogical process, in which both persons involved are both addressee and addressed. Their model describes interpersonal intercultural communication as person A and B message/feedback influences with psychocultural, sociocultural and cultural filters. Framing the whole communication process is environmental influences (Gudykunst & Kim 1984:14). The authors explain their model as follows: "*Without understanding the strangers' filters, we cannot accurately interpret or predict their behaviours*" (Gudykunst & Kim 1984: 35). Related to the poststructural approach the model is missing the aspect of power. You could however argue that the aspect of power could be in every part of the model, but somehow it's not mentioned at all. The model gives a possibility to think in social differences, but it still leaves the possibility of categorization with national cultures as the dominant and most relevant in every communication process.

Poststructural offers?

Compared to the functionalists' offers, the poststructuralistic approach at the first glimpse does not appear very useful. Most of the researchers working with a poststructuralistic approach are either philosophical (Applegate & Sypher 1983, 1988, González & Tanno 1999, Jandt & Tanno 1994, 1996) or discussing issues related to theory of intercultural communication (Collier & Thomas 1988). Collier & Thomas discuss e.g. intercultural communication from the perspective of the individual. They define intercultural communication as "... *who identify themselves as distinct from one another in cultural terms*" (Collier & Thomas 1988: 100). This definition differs from the then dominant thinking by taking its point of departure in the actor rather than in the culture. It is the interpretations of the participant that determine what culture the person belongs to.

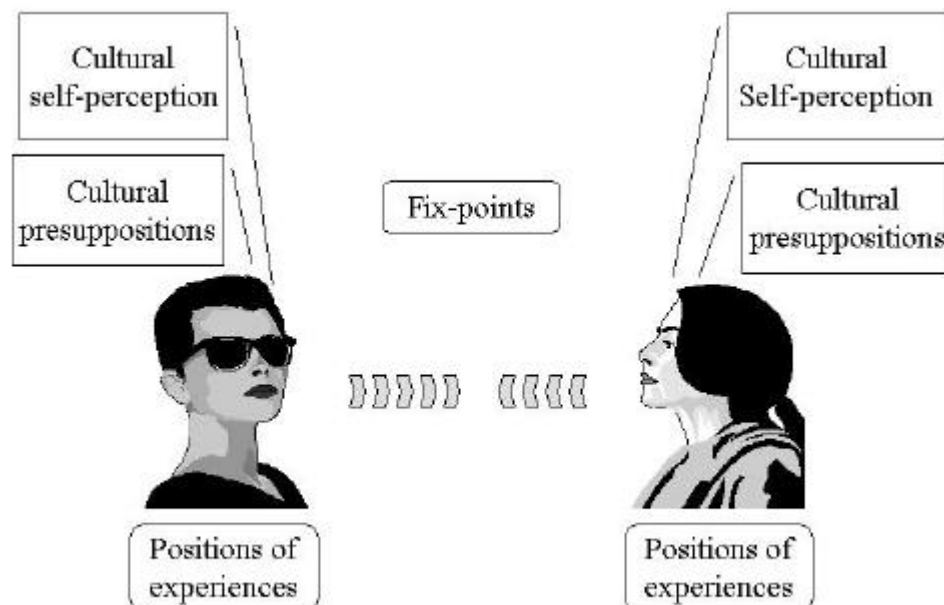
From a poststructuralistic approach Fred Jandt and Dolores Tanno wrote some very important articles about ethics and methods (Jandt & Tanno 1996) the articles were outstanding theoretical and philosophical work which address the importance of labelling and constructing 'the other' in

intercultural research. In 1995 Jandt published a reader in intercultural communication, in which students are introduced to a poststructuralistic approach (Jandt 1995). Jandt's reader is the first, and most competent reader to intercultural communication from a critical perspective. Jandt takes a part of the functionalistic researchers into account but is always using it related to context and research methods.

From another tradition, but as part of a constructionist thinking, the Japanese-American Muneo Yoshikawa does a study of intercultural dialogue. Yoshikawa published a short article (1987) in which he presents 'The Double Swing Model'. The model is a sign of infinity³. Yoshikawa is inspired by Martin Buber who works with a duality in the relationship between 'you and I'. With this model Yoshikawa emphasised that both parts in the communication play the role as addresser and addressee. In the double-swing model, communication is seen as an infinite process and the two participants will both change in the meeting. Yoshikawa underlines that the goal for a communication is not to eliminate differences, but to use the dynamics that arise through the meeting (Yoshikawa 1987).

Intercultural communication model

In a study of intercultural communication in complex, multiethnic societies (Jensen 1998), I developed a model for intercultural communication from a poststructuralistic approach through 4 analytical tools.



³ To be correct it is a Möbius band, which can be illustrated by a cut rubber band, twisted around once and put together in a shape like a sign of infinity. By following this shape you change sides over and over again.



With this model I want to a) give a description of an intercultural communication process between two actors, who are both addressers and addressees, b) to emphasize the inter connectedness between the participants in the communication process and 3) to show that the communication process is an infinite, ongoing process (Yoshikawa 1987).

The aim of the model is to let the practitioner or student think through an intercultural communication process and reflect upon it from a new perspective.

Positions of experiences

The concept of '*Positions of experiences*' refers to the fact that all interpretations are bounded in individual experiences, but although the experiences are subjective, they are related to the social position of a person.

From an everyday perspective, theoretically represented by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the term experience is central. In intercultural communication we have to respect that our communication partner might have other experiences, and are socialised to experience his or her world as real (Berger & Luckmann 1966). It is impossible to ignore one's experiences. That is an important fact in intercultural communication. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer has been occupied with the meaning of understanding. Gadamer sees interpretations as being related to the experiences of the actor. 'Positions of experience' is inspired by Gadamer's term, horizon of experience.

“The Horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer 1975/1989: 302).

Understanding is based upon experience. We understand the world on the basis of our own experiences, and our experience of the world is limited by our vantage point (ibid.). In relation to intercultural communication this means that we cannot only see cultural differences as the only differentiation to interpretation, but we have to take the horizon into account. As I will argue later on, the horizon could be limited by the social space of the actor. In that case actors' experiences will be different, not only related to their different cultures, but also related to their social position in society.

The development of the concept of 'positions of experiences' is also inspired by the awareness of the concept of 'positioning'. The social constructionists Davies and Harré (1990) describe positioning as follows:

"Positioning, as we will use it, is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines. There can be interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another, and there can be reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself. However it would be a mistake to assume that, in either case, positioning is necessarily intentional. One live one's life in terms of one's ongoing produced self, whoever might be responsible for its production" (Davies & Harré 1990: 40).

Positioning in between ethnic majority and ethnic minorities are often produced along national and ethnic differences. The minorities often have a hard time to get another positioning from the majority, not only in the media but also in the everyday position they are given (Hussain et al. 1997, Jensen 2000).

Seen as an analytical tool, positions of experiences gives: 1) an awareness of how different positions are crucial to the interpretation of the communication, 2) a reflection that persons in intercultural communication always have different opportunities to give different positions of themselves. Essential to a critical intercultural communication perspective is, that social positions and experiences are not floating in space, but are created in social structures. Experiences and positionings are made in the social space on the given conditions of the individual. This point of view resembles Bourdieu's term *habitus* (Bourdieu 1986, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992/1996).

3) The tool focuses upon the individual differences, but is interconnected with structural differences. In the case of intercultural communication ethnic background always is a part of a person's experience, but the actual role played in the communication is negotiated with other relations.

If we use 'positions of experiences' as an analytical tool the following questions are relevant to ask:

Where and how in the communication does the actor tell about his/her primary experiences⁴?

How does different subject positions influence the actor's way of positioning him/herself in relation to culture?

In which ways does the actor's social position influence the actor's experiences and his or her interpretation of the communication process?

⁴ All primary experiences are registered, even if they do not directly relate to culture. The intent of this collection is that the researcher can validate interpretations later on by comparing with how the actor argue about other topics.

Cultural presuppositions

‘Cultural presuppositions’ refers to knowledge, experience, feelings and opinions we have towards categories of people that we do not regard as members of the cultural communities that we identify ourselves with.

‘Cultural presuppositions’ is also inspired by Gadamer’s work. The aim of this analytical tool originates from my interest in finding a term for ‘understanding across cultural communities’. I found a piece of the answer in Gadamer’s simplified doctrine: “All understanding is a matter of presuppositions” (Bukhdal 1967). No matter what kind of knowledge we have about other groups, no matter how lacking and prejudiced it is, this knowledge is the basis for the interpretations we make. The cultural presuppositions of an actor will always be part of available discourses in society.

“A discourse is a particular type of representation. A discourse is a group of statements, which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed” (Hall 1997: 201).

The intention of the concept of ‘Cultural presuppositions’ is to create awareness about the ordinary process that people outside our own social community often are characterised (negatively) on the basis of our own values. This explains why ‘they’ (very often) are described as ‘the inadequate others’ while our own culture is idealised. While the actors’ understandings are constructed on the basis of discourses in society, cultural presuppositions could be described as the actors’ actual use of discourses in society. In an analysis of e.g. an intercultural interview, and an interview with a topic of intercultural issue, it is also possible to find discursive formations.

“Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever ... one can define a regularity ... we will say ... that we are dealing with a discursive formation” (Foucault in Hall 1997: 202).

Cultural presuppositions is a very simple but practical tool to be aware of the discourses and discursive formations in everyday life. At the everyday level it’s a help to be aware of how e.g. a client is categorising ‘others’.

In general you could find the cultural presuppositions in communication or texts, by asking:

How are 'the others' described?

*How does the description and interpretation of the others tell something about our own values?*⁶

Cultural self-perception

'Cultural self-perception' is the ways in which an actor expresses a cultural community as the one he or she identifies with.

Cultural self-perception is strongly connected with cultural presuppositions, as it is through the construction of 'the others' we construct narratives about ourselves. 'Cultural self-perception' can point out the idealisation that often occur when the debating parts represent different values or different cultural communities. Cultural presuppositions and cultural self-perception will also be tools to grab ethnocentrism, as ethnocentrism is the way you see your own culture as the natural centre, and comparing others cultures with your own sovereignty.

The analytical goal of this tool is to gain access to the ways in which the actors understand their own cultural communities. Cultural self-perception can describe social communities like e.g. national, ethnic or gender contingent communities. In this connection it is primarily used in relation to national cultures. Depending on which cultural community is emphasised it can be linked to different identities. Cultural self-perception is often hidden as "the right way" to organize life. In practice this tool enables the researcher to ask: *What cultural communities does the actor identify with? Does the actor identify him- or herself as distinct from other cultural communities? Does the actor idealise his or her own cultural community?*

Cultural fix points

'Cultural fix points' are the focal points that arise in the communication between two actors who both feel they represent a certain topic. For a topic to be seen as a 'Cultural fix point' it requires that both actors identify with this topic, and that they position themselves in a discussion. Cultural fix points are not entirely arbitrary, but they relate to societal structures. Intercultural communication is normally related to misunderstanding and conflicts – although most of all intercultural communication is without any problems (Jandt 1995). To be able to focus more upon the exception I see fix-points as a way to sharpen our views.

⁵ Where in the text do we find descriptions of groups in the plurals? Where is the word 'they' used? What do 'they' do? Are there patterns for what 'they' do? What words are used in the descriptions, do the words have positive or negative connotations?

⁶ Is something seen as obviously right? Is an explicit value expressed? Is it taken for granted that some actions are rational?

In relation to intercultural communication the aim of the 'cultural fix points' is to identify some patterns in the conflicts that are characteristic of given periods. In Denmark in the 90's we could e.g. point to gender roles, arranged marriages, education of children and scarfs. It is impossible to predict whether these aspects will have significance, but we can investigate whether they are significant in the actual situations, because cultural fix points demand that both actors identify with a topic.

In practice a researcher can ask: *what topics provoke emotional statements?* In practice the researcher listens for or reads for a deviation from the opponent's rhythm, speech turns, interruptions, vocal pitch, word constructions, slip of the tongue, eagerness, uncompleted sentences, argumentation pattern, etc. *Is it possible to identify a point of disagreement?*

With these four tools for analysis 'positions of experiences, cultural presuppositions, self-perception and fix-points,

the researcher can encircle how the actors interpret each others' expressions in everyday life. The tools for analysis offer a systematic work method in general analyses of what is going on in intercultural communication processes. I see the analytical tools as a possible way for practitioners to get a vocabulary of 'the others' which make them reflect upon their own everyday reaction to their clients, patient etc. However are also closely linked to the construction of identity in relation to 'others'. Cultural identity is, as I have argued earlier in the article, a very important part of intercultural communication.

Cultural identity in intercultural communication

I have always wondered why intercultural communications always have called for so many emotions. With the concept of cultural identity I think we get closer to at least a part of an explanation to that phenomenon.

Stuart Hall shows in his work that the game of identity is played everywhere in society, that's why we have to include the major significance of identity within intercultural communication (Hall & McGrew 1992, 1996). In relation to cultural identity the work of Arjun Appadurai is interesting. Appadurai argues that within the global we have developed a number of 'scapes' with a larger structural and identity-caring significance than the national communities. Appadurai mentions the following 'scapes': 1) ethno-scapes which are about integration; 2) mediascapes, dominated by mass media; 3) techno-scapes, referring to global technological development; 4) finance-scapes, that draw attention to the autonomous cycle of finances and 5) ideo-scapes that illustrate how ideologies are developed across

national borders (Appadurai 1991: 192-193). Appadurai points by his 'scapes' to a new form of imagined communities (Anderson 1983), that could take over from the imagined communities of the nation.

Different meanings

Like the term 'Culture', the term 'cultural identity' has many different meanings. And just as with 'culture' different paradigms prefer certain meanings of the term. Thus we can point at a functionalist based understanding of cultural identity where the goal is to find a national mind, a particular characteristic identity of the population as a whole (Røgilds 1995). Within the humanities the term cultural identity also exists, but with another meaning. That is, a form of identity created by a uniform use of texts and exchange of and use of symbols as parts of identities (Fornäs 1995: 240). From this perspective it is investigated how e.g. young people use and read symbols in fashion magazines etc. Within the constructivist perspective it is a general understanding that cultural identity is a form of social identity constructed in relation to other people in a given period of time.

“Cultural identity is a core aspect of this welter of phenomena that confront us. The term refers to a social identity that is based on a specific cultural configuration of a conscious nature. History, language and race are all possible bases for Cultural identity and they are all socially constructed realities” (Friedman 1994: 238).

With this, Friedman argues that cultural identity is a social identity based on specific cultural forms that are all socially constructed. One of the most characteristic features of cultural identity today is the meaning of politics. We have moved from broader politics based on universality such as Marxism to politics where gender, ethnicity and local identity have been given central significance. This has created new social categories and new identities and new political groups (Friedman 1994).

Stuart Hall, who has been working with cultural identity from a cultural study-tradition agrees however only in very general terms with Jonathan Friedman. Like Friedmann, Hall also regards cultural identity as social identity and he also agrees that it has to do with nation and race. Hall defines cultural identity as follows:

“Cultural identities – those aspects of our identities which arise from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and, above all, national cultures” (Hall & McGrew 1992: 274).

Contrary to Friedman, Stuart Hall works with a decentralised subject or multiple identities. Identity, Hall argues is historically rather than biologically defined. The self is fragmented and does not contain one identity but several and often contradictory identities. The subject's identity is not given, but the subject occupies different identities at different points of time (Hall & McGrew 1992, Gergen 1985, 1991, 1997).

“Identity becomes a “moveable” feast formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surrounds us ... Within us are contradictory identities pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about” (Hall & McGrew 1992: 277).

According to Hall the reason why we see ourselves as coherent persons is the narratives we construct about ourselves. “If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves” (ibid. 277).

In continuation of Collier and Thomas' (1987) use of cultural identity, Hall's use of the term is very interesting for the development of intercultural communication in complex societies. By working with multiple identities we develop skills for pinpointing the identities that e.g. young people who live in diaspora express. The young people do not express that they are torn *between* two worlds, but that they live *in* two worlds. Multiple identities are also relevant in relation to intercultural communication because it provides us with an explanation why certain topics create heated discussions (fix-points). If certain topics actualise different identities the communication will have connotations that the participants might not be prepared for.

When identity is formed in relation to others it also gets a political twist (Gergen 1991, 1997). This happens e.g. when the majority fixes the minority in the idea that ‘they’ are different, have another religion and e.g. lack national linguistic qualifications, it's part of the social process of ‘othering’, in which the majority constructs and normalises distances to other groups (Kelly 1998, Razack 1998, Kitztinger & Wilkinson 1996). E.g. a Turkish-Danish girl is constructed as traditionally Turkish by Danish girls and seen as inauthentic or confused if she chooses to position herself with more features in common with Danish girls (Jensen 1998). The girl can choose between being in the group by positioning herself as Turkish like the ethnically Danish girls expect or otherwise having a lower status in the group. In both cases the Danish girls are the defining group. Through their construction they maintain the right to include or exclude the Turkish-Danish girls.

In everyday life's intercultural conversations this means that the ethnic minorities have to invalidate the majority's simplified understandings of them.

Cultural identity as an analytical tool

Although Hall's definition of cultural identity is interesting it does have an important weakness in relation to intercultural communication: It assumes that national identity always will be the primary identity. This means that we have not dissociated ourselves from the intercultural research's underlying reducing way of seeing national culture as the most important explanation in a communication situation (Jensen 1998: 16-19). To solve this problem I will suggest that the actualised identity depends on the topic, what the participants are talking about. Some conversations will actualise national identity while other conversations will not concern national ideas at all. However, the conversation still has to be seen in an intercultural context.

Thus I propose that we use an understanding of cultural identity which is not delimited by race, ethnicity or nation but as a figure which holds different kinds of identity such as gender, work, hobby. By doing this we do not create a hierarchic structure and avoid having one certain identity as the determining one. Figuratively speaking, we can see cultural identity as a yellow dandelion. Every little yellow leaf symbolises a fragment of our identities. In practice all identities are in the flower all the time. It is only analytically that we can distinguish, fix the floating identities – only in a short moment it is possible to point out specific fragments of identities (Jensen 2001).

In practice the concept of cultural identity can be used in two ways:

- 1) as training to professional practitioners to see users as more than ethnic minorities. Focusing on e.g. age or gender gives the social worker a possibility to be conscious of her or his cultural presuppositions of the client.
- 2) to be conscious of one's own cultural identity. When does the nurse actualise her gender identity? When does she use her professional identity?

In relation to professional practitioners their professional identity is of certain interest. In the Nordic countries it is my guess that most of the educations are national, and not multiethnic in their basis. An everyday consequence of this fact is, that it takes a lot of reflection and discussion for the professional practitioners to find a multiethnic professionalism.

The professional cultural meeting

I have argued that the global changes has made it important to work explicitly with intercultural communication in relation to professional practitioners in multiethnic societies. After a short presentation of my theoretical perspectives I have shown how I see intercultural communication in everyday life. By presenting a model of intercultural communication, I also showed four different analytical tools, which were all part of the model. The last very important part of intercultural communication for practitioners are the concept of cultural identity. By making an operationalisation it's possible to be more aware of one's own identity, e.g., national.

To be a professional in multiethnic societies involves different degrees of intercultural awareness. To have intercultural competence as a practitioner is to have a professional knowledge about e.g. the analytical tools in intercultural communication I have presented and concepts like globalisation, the concept of culture, language, intercultural communication cultural identity – and work with anti-discrimination and equal ethnic rights as the basic assumption.

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