

Organised cultural encounters and social integration

Translated from Danish by John Irons

A number of EU member states rely on voluntary grassroots initiatives to facilitate the adjustment period for asylum seekers and refugees (Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002). These are essentially organised cultural encounters characterized by an ethnically diverse set of participants, including local residents and migrants. The primary goal of these initiatives is to promote multiethnic interaction but also provide various opportunities for self-development for asylum seekers and refugees. Academic papers and media portrayals of such grassroots initiatives seem to evaluate the initiatives from the perspective of implicit ideological and normative ideas about integration.

Since my interest is in what people at such sites actually do and say in their face-to-face encounters, I set up a small interactional study of one reoccurring event at a grassroots initiative in Denmark, without taking on a particular vision of successful integration. Inevitably, however, I found the data bringing up questions related to social integration (among other things), that is, the establishment of social relations between local residents and migrants (Ager & Strang 2008). By turning the focus from ideological and normative discussions on integration to the actual interactions between people at one grassroots initiative, one can have a much more empirically grounded discussion about the dynamics, possibilities and limits of social integration at such initiatives. This discussion article therefore invites practitioners at grassroots initiatives to reflect on the



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encounters and relations they (are able to) have at such sites in relation to social integration.

The central question here revolves around whether some forms of organised cultural encounters may only hold the potential to provide meaningful contact and exchange as opposed to social relations which are maintained beyond the specific time-space of the encounter, and which transcend any perceived socio-cultural differences among the participants. The specific challenge lies, based on my data, in the frequent turnover of participating people, adding an element of transience to their encounters. In other words, conditions of transience may provide few opportunities for repetitive encounters and establishing deeper social relations.

To exemplify the discussion I analyse two extracts of recorded interactions which represent a common occurrence in the recorded organised cultural encounter. They show the volunteers making efforts to find commonalities, or in more interactional terms – co-membership (see next section for explanation of term) – with asylum seekers/refugees. However, they do this in response to a particular difference which has been brought up in the interaction. Since organised cultural encounters are premised on differences between people, perhaps in conditions of transience addressing these differences is as far as the potential of these encounters can go?

Investigating an organised cultural encounter from a social interactional perspective

The two extracts are part of a collection of a reoccurring scenario from a dataset of 8 hours of audio-recordings of six English conversation meetings between local residents as volunteers and asylum seekers/refugees as language learners. At this grassroots initiative, English conversation meetings were designed as an informal opportunity for asylum seekers/refugees to practice speaking in English for 1-2 hours with local volunteers once a week. The volunteers typically prepared a topic for conversation with supporting questions which would inspire further discussions. However, the meetings were not formal language classes, lacking both clearly defined learning goals and requirements for English skills. The language learners were typically male, with one exception, from various Middle Eastern countries, while the volunteers were all female, originating from Denmark and Estonia. Different language learners attended the meetings anywhere from 1 to 3 times over the course of five months

while three volunteers rotated in conducting the meetings. Each meeting typically consisted of a group of 3-4 people.

The analysis is informed by Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis (EM/CA; Sacks 1992), which states that from detailed transcriptions of interactions (Jefferson 2004) one can trace how people organise and make sense of the social world around them in and through their interactions, and by Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA; Antaki & Widdicombe 2008; Hester & Eglin 1997; Stokoe 2012), which seeks to uncover categorization processes in interactions. Furthermore, the concept of co-membership (Tranekjær forthcoming) has been brought in to highlight the identified phenomenon. Establishing co-membership refers to an instance where people establish a shared identity or knowledge in and through interaction. Finding commonalities with other people can be powerful in establishing social connections and can also be used for strategic purposes at e.g. job interviews (Erickson & Schultz 1982; Johnston 2008; Kerekes 2006; Kirilova 2013). But in order to seek co-membership, one inevitably engages with membership categorisation processes. This is a rather common everyday interactional phenomenon in which people name and describe other people – directly or indirectly - or refer to others through particular language choices and add (sometimes evaluative) meanings to these descriptions. For instance, referring to someone as Middle Eastern in a Danish context can bring up a range of ideas about mobility, migration and integration, depending on the content of the rest of the utterance. What is the common sense knowledge to which any particular categorisation refers in a given moment is what the analytic tools of MCA seek to uncover.

Two cases of seeking co-membership

The following two extracts show how the volunteers seek co-membership with the language learners in an effort to manage any differences in perceived or assumed membership categories among the participants. Since the examples only focus on how the volunteers seek co-membership, this does not indicate a lack of interest from the language learners' side as in this dataset they typically appeal to Denmark-specific knowledge (rather than differences between themselves) when seeking co-membership. Finally, while social interactional analyses typically require a great deal of attention to detail, simplified versions focusing on the main points are provided here.

Have you learned some Arabic

In the first example, the volunteer VL2 brings up a difference in ethnic category memberships among the participants and uses that as a resource for seeking co-membership. This is met with a potential challenge from one of the language learners (STF), and works to reveal a lack of full co-membership.

Example 1

- 1 *VL2: yeah ehm my name is [name] and I am 24 years old↑ and I live here in::
2 in Copenhagen↑ (.) e::h and I have taught English previously↑ in:: in China↑
3 *STF: mmhm
4 *VL2: and ee [hheh]
5 *STF: [heh] £nice£
6 *VL2: £yeah it was ee quite an experience£ (.) and then I have done some ee
7 dia↑logue workshops
8 *STF: a[ha]
9 *VL2: [mai]nly in the Middle East (.) and those were also conducted in (.) in ee
10 English (.) so I'm really interested in just like talking and yeah hopefully
11 improving our language but also getting to know each other 'n' like (.)
12 talking about some interesting topics
13 *STF: have you learned some £Arabic£ eh heh heh
14 *VL2: no: unfortunately not=
15 *STF: =ahh=
16 *VL2: =I I'm only (.) I have had translators when [I do the workshops]
17 *STF: [yeah yeah] okay
18 *VL2: yah (.) but I think I have to now [like] now it's=
19 *STF: [hhe]
20 *STF: hhe he he
21 *VL2: it's getting a little bit embarra£hssing£ [.hhh]
22 *STM: [°he he he°]
23 *VL2: £so I'll start to try and learn yah£
24 *STF: yah

In line 9, VL2 mentions having worked in “the Middle East”. Since both of the present language learners, STM and STF, had previously introduced themselves as being from the Middle East, the reference to “Middle East” is not random. Tranekjær (forthcoming) has argued that claims to shared knowledge can be heard as claims to co-membership. In other words, when VL2 reveals her work experience in the Middle East, she can be seen seeking co-membership with the Middle Eastern language learners on the basis of knowledge she claims to share with them about the Middle East.

In response (line 13), STF addresses the Middle East reference by asking whether VL2 has learned any Arabic, which ties “Middle East” with the language “Arabic”. In this sense, STF somewhat ratifies VL2’s seeking of co-membership, but challenges her claim to knowledge on the basis of whether she has competence in speaking Arabic. What is interesting is how STF smiles when saying “Arabic” and shortly laughs after that. The placement of the smile voice and laughter

at the end of the sentence indicates that STF could be toning down the possible criticism implicit in her question (Norrick & Spitz 2008). In other words, it could also be read as an attempt to explore the extent of their co-membership, rather than as a challenge.

VL2 does not match the laughter and treats the question as something to defend and account for (lines 14, 16, 18). STF continues to produce more laughter (lines 19, 20), which could be to lighten the situation. In line 21, VL2, most notably, evaluates her lack of Arabic skills as ‘a little bit embarrassing’. It is here that she also produces laughter which, judging by the placement of the laugh and content of her talk, indicates true embarrassment (Norrick 1993, 42). VL2’s reception of STF’s question therefore aligns with its implicit criticism. Finally, she promises to ‘try and learn’ Arabic (line 23), which speaks of a continued interest in seeking co-membership with the Middle Eastern language learners.

By way of a summary, VL2 is only partially successful in seeking co-membership. While STF does not deny VL2’s experience in the Middle East, her question about Arabic skills is not received as a matter of exploring further commonalities but rather as a challenge. When VL2 treats the question as criticism, she positions herself as someone who has overshot the mark in trying to establish something in common. In this particular example, the participants seem highly aware of and focused on aspects that make them different from one another.

I have experienced war, don’t experience that

In this example, the volunteer (VL1) seeks co-membership with the language learner (STJ) after a difference in membership categories is determined. In contrast to the previous case, here the participants manage to establish co-membership by way of shared knowledge.

Example 2

- 1 *STJ: when I see war↑
 2 *VL1: mm
 3 *STJ: tomorrow (.) some country: (0.2) people are killing and all there are some
 4 people some terrorist another kill somebody↑ (.) I:::h (.) is VErY negative
 5 *VL1: mm
 6 *STJ: and I: (.) I: get conFUsed
 7 *VL1: mm
 8 *STJ: a::nd (.) I try:: I try I (0.2) I::: (0.2) I try I:: don't listen nic- (.) eeh
 9 *VL1: you try not to listen to it
 10 *STJ: listen to WAR
 11 *VL1: yeah
 12 *STJ: don't (0.2) because I:: I know what is:: s::ee war I::
 13 *VL1: yeah (.) you know you [know]
 14 *STJ: [a lot of] a lot of () a lot of (maybe)

15 *VL1: yeah
 16 *STJ: for me (0.3) bu::t
 17 *VL1: yeah I think I have [to agree] (.) I think it's (0.2) I think
 18 *STJ: [and you]
 19 ((20 seconds removed when someone asks what they are doing and wants to listen in))
 20 *VL1: uhmm yeah I think the hardest news or most negative news (.) is eeh (.)
 21 is is also that (.) because that's something (0.2) eeh I haven't experienced↑
 22 *STJ: ooh okay I expe[rienced that] [don't £experi]ence£ [heh heh he]
 23 *VL1: [so:: it's] [yeah you have] [yeah]
 25 so it's hard for me to:: it's even more painful to::
 26 *STJ: yeh↑
 27 *VL1: to realise that some people have to go through that (.) ehm (.) my own
 28 country is a bit in a difficult situation because the neighbor is Russia↑
 29 *STJ: yee:h
 30 *VL1: and they're not a very good Eneighbor£ heh
 31 *STJ: °I know°
 32 *VL1: so: (.) £it's eeh£ I think war is by far the most negative news (.) *yeah*

The extract starts in the middle of the language learner responding to the question of what is negative media news for him. Throughout lines 1-16, STJ shares that hearing about war is very negative for him. Until line 15 the volunteer VL1 only seems oriented to encouraging STJ to continue through short acknowledgments while STJ works on formulating his thoughts. It is in line 12 that STJ takes on the membership category of “war witness” when he claims to know war. This self-ascribed category is accepted by VL1 in the next turn, line 13.

In lines 17 and 20-21 (after a brief side sequence), VL1 responds by affiliating with STJ and says that she too finds war (“that” in line 21) the most negative kind of news because she has not experienced it. With this, VL1 has claimed the membership of “not a war witness”, for lack of a more simple identifier. Interestingly, STJ expresses surprise at this with “ooh okay” in line 22 and in a laughing manner suggests that VL1 shouldn’t experience it. The volunteer, however, does not treat the topic as a joking matter and continues to explain (lines 25, 27-28, 30) her side of things.

In line 28 and 30, VL1 introduces personal information about her worries of her home country’s safety due to Russia as the neighbor country. In this sense, she can be seen seeking co-membership on the basis that there is a potential for her to take on the membership category of “war witness” in a hypothetical scenario. STJ affiliates and aligns with VL1’s statement regarding Russia in line 31 by simply saying “I know”. It could be argued that his agreement is due to STJ’s origin from Afghanistan (established prior to this extract) and its problematic history with Russia. As a result, the two interactants find co-membership through shared knowledge and opinion of Russia as an aggressor, despite the difference in whether they have experienced war or not.

What is central in this example is the reactive seeking of co-membership by VL1 after a difference in membership categories – war witness vs not – is determined. The reactivity is a sign of the volunteer’s heightened awareness around minimising differences between herself and the language learner. Similarly to the previous case, it is the volunteer who seeks co-membership as a result of a difference in membership categories. What turned out differently in this instance was that the language learner, STJ, accepted the volunteer’s seeking of co-membership, whereas in the previous example the language learner, STF’s, response worked to undermine the establishment of co-membership. Alternatively, STJ could have chosen to focus more on how the volunteer has not experienced war, but instead he responded with surprise and a small joke (line 22).

An island of social integration?

These two extracts from a larger collection of similar instances go some way towards showing how these English conversation meetings may be intended for practising English, but they are also used as sites where differences between the participants are addressed and dealt with on a situated, interactional level. This points to the ‘organised’ aspect in organised cultural encounters – they are setups in which people have come together precisely because they are somehow different from one another.

Since it is the volunteers who hold the interactional authority to guide the interactions, it is noteworthy that they use this authority to try and manage differences that come up and use these instances to seek commonalities instead. One explanation is indeed that finding sharedness with people is central to establishing new relations, despite whatever differences there may seem to be. As much as this serves the purpose of organised cultural encounters such as this one, the transience of these meetings makes building social relations a challenge in the long run.

Indeed, the aspect of transience begs the question of whether these interactions have the power to radiate outside the immediate encounter. In other words, in the case of such organised cultural encounters, are we dealing with islands of social integration? Or does the knowledge or experience these participants gain from addressing differences between them pave the way towards greater understanding in future encounters with other people? It would be too ambitious to conclude a whole lot based on two extracts of interactions, but they do work to bring a more empirical quality to the discussion

of what is it that grassroots initiatives aimed at asylum seekers/refugees, or organised cultural encounters as a whole, can achieve in terms of social integration.

The point here is not to discourage organised cultural encounters, as exchange and contact between people who consider themselves different from one another is quite important in opening the minds of all of the participants. Indeed, the extracts show that these are relevant sites for addressing any perceived or assumed differences. But rather, one should remain critical about the long-term potential of these time-limited, fleeting encounters.

Notes

Transcription conventions:

[] overlapping speech

(o.2) numbers in brackets indicate
pause length in seconds

(.) micropause

: elongation of vowel or
consonant sound

- word cut-off

↑ rising intonation

= latched utterances

CAPS notably louder

°° notably softer

.hh in-breath

££ hearably smiling voice

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