

Guest editors' introduction

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All but one of the articles in this special issue stem from presentations held at a symposium at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) in October 2014, as part of NOFIK's series of annual conferences. NOFIK (the Norwegian Association for Intercultural Competence, or *Norsk forening for interkulturell kompetanse*), is an organization that seeks to promote interest in intercultural issues and to stimulate research-based knowledge of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in Norway.

The theme for this special issue of FLEKS, as well as for the symposium it is based on, is *Ambivalence*. When we first started planning this symposium, this title came up quite quickly. Reflecting both our multi-disciplinary research approaches and the fact that our societies, in Norway as well as other places, are intercultural and multicultural, this title, we hope, serves as a useful starting point.

Modern intercultural societies are pervaded with ambivalence. Lots of it. For instance, sooner or later everyone will encounter societal processes that, while positive to some, are negative to others. Some societal processes – whether they concern attitudes, values or feelings – may invoke simultaneous positive and negative reactions in the same individual. For instance, you might find individuals, who are somewhat torn, and caught betwixt and between various, and even conflicting, sets of values, norms, discourses, cultures etc. You might come across people who simultaneously identify with and feel estranged from cultural groups, and even society at large. One example is immigrant youth, who simultaneously experience both exclusion and inclusion vis-à-vis the culture and values of the majority. Another has to do with the tensions between personal, religious identity and the role as a “secular” professional. Yet another example has to do with the increased tendency towards extremism and dissociation from mainstream society, and even animosity and hatred, in Norway and Europe in general. These examples all attest to the fact that processes of integration and inclusion often run parallel to, and even incite, processes of exclusion, segregation and othering. Identity formation is seldom easy, and government policies can sometimes contribute to enhancing the paradoxes and uncertainties involved.

Ambivalence is also a key feature of people's views of cultural diversity in general. While public debates are prone to polarization, people's attitudes are seldom reducible to simple dichotomous positions. Ambivalence has thus to do with the construction and reification of boundaries that ultimately are not – or should not be – stable and static, and that for most people are continuously contested, created and deconstructed, and that vary with situations and areas of life and society. As such, by highlighting this concept, we promote moving beyond the rather simplistic dichotomizations of “for or against” that pervade questions of cultural diversity, inclusion, integration and religious pluralism in the public media.

The articles in this special issue cover a wide range of perspectives and topics that all shed light on various aspects of ambivalence, uncertainty, boundaries and paradoxes in modern intercultural societies. They range from empirical investigations to more conceptual and theoretical discussions. They deal with a range of topics, from children, young people and the educational system, to professional groups, to issues of individual and cultural identity more generally, and to religion.

The issue starts with three articles that deal in various ways with cultural diversity among children and young people. In the first of these, Hildegunn Schuff discusses how one might support children and young people in their development of cross-cultural identity. Her starting point is the ambivalence and challenges faced by children and young people who regularly deal with multiple cultural frames of reference, norms and expectations during their upbringing. In the next article, Frédérique Brossard Børhaug aims to challenge the tendency to culturalize differences in educational settings. By drawing on the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, she opts for a more fundamental exploration of intercultural teaching

and practices. We then move on to Mattia Baiutti, who, against the backdrop of empirical studies of high school students who have spent one year abroad, aims to rethink the concept of intercultural conflict.

The next three articles deal with various professional groups. In the first of these, Shamsiyya Mustafayeva and Astrid Schnitzer-Skjønsberg discuss how diplomats, representing their governments abroad, approach intercultural diversity and how they manage their personal ambivalence in order to cope with conflicting and unsettling emotions. In the next article, which is in Norwegian, Inger Daae-Qvale, discusses professional identity in the increasingly multicultural Norwegian health care system. She focusses particularly on the ambivalence between, on one hand, the health care system's goal of developing intercultural competence, and the actual implementation of such competence on the other hand. In the third article, Tatjana Radanovic Felberg examines interpreters' perceptions of impoliteness in interpreter-mediated interactions in public sector settings in Norway. Finding that impoliteness in the public sector is more widespread than might be expected, she argues for the importance of developing and systemizing strategies that can help interpreters better cope with these work-related challenges.

The next two articles deal with identity and attitudes. In the first of these, Anbjørg Ohnstad explores how ambiguity can function as a coping strategy for individuals facing oppressive gender and ethnic discourses. We then move on to an article written by Vibeke Moe, Cora Alexa Døving, Irene Levin and Claudia Lenz, which is also in Norwegian. Here, the authors explore contemporary perceptions of Jews and Muslims in Norway. The analysis focusses, among other things, on differences regarding traditional stereotypes of, and prejudices against, the two minorities and the ways in which these stereotypes and prejudices are linked to (perceived) contemporary conflicts and tensions – both within Norwegian society and internationally.

The final two articles of this issue discuss aspects of extreme Islam in Norway. In the first of these, Ida Nord Holmer aims to explain the appeal of militant Salafism. She bases her findings on interviews with representatives of the Salafi movement in Norway, and compares their motivations with findings from international studies. In the final article, Marius Linge writes about the growing polemics between Sunnites and Shiites in Norway and explores the international background for the developing schism between the two main interpretations of Islam.