

## Othering, identity formation and agency

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**Abstract.** The article examines the potentials of the concept of othering to describe identity formation among ethnic minorities. First, it outlines the history of the concept, its contemporary use, as well as some criticisms. Then it is argued that young ethnic minority men in Denmark are subject to intersectional othering, which contains elements of exoticist fascination of the other. On the basis of ethnographic material, it is analysed how young marginalized ethnic minority men react to othering. Two types of reactions are illustrated: 1) capitalization on being positioned as the other, and 2) refusing to occupy the position of the other by disidentification and claims to normality. Finally, it is argued that the concept of othering is well suited for understanding the power structures as well as the historic symbolic meanings conditioning such identity formation, but problematic in terms of agency.

**Keywords:** Othering; agency; ethnicity; gender; intersectionality.

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### Introduction

From a social science point of view, identities are in some sense always social. This means that ethnic minority identities are always situated within specific social contexts and conditioned by them. One theoretical concept offered to explain such processes is *othering*, originally coined within post-colonial theory. But can this concept help us understand the processes of identity formation in everyday life?

Danish public discourses on integration, migration and ethnic minorities constitute a specific case of situatedness for ethnic minorities, including young ethnic minority men. Media discourses have to a very high degree problematized the presence of 'others' in Denmark as well as pathologized their alleged 'culture' (Yilmaz, 1999; Wren, 2001; Røgilds, 2002; Hervik, 2004), and young ethnic minority men in particular have been subject to pathologization by discourses which link ethnic minority backgrounds to crime and/or problematic and aggressive sexuality (Andreassen, 2005; Jensen 2007). The non-white and non-Danish is then equated with the savage, uncontrolled and deviant as opposed to orderly and civilized Danishness (cf. McLaren, 1994, p. 60). These discourses may be understood as othering.

Following the adaptive theory research strategy outlined by Layder (1998), the aim of this article is to confront the theory of othering with ethnographic data about young marginalized ethnic minority men; not in order to test the theory in a narrow sense, but to create a dialogue between theory and data in order to assess the limitations and possibilities inherent in the concept, while at the same time shedding light on an empirical field.

The article analyzes empirically how othering is met with agency by these young men. By doing so, the article raises questions about the structuralist understanding of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering on two levels: Firstly, the idea that the power to construct identity lies with the powerful. Secondly, the idea that identity formation can be grasped as a dichotomous relation between self/first and other.

The article starts by outlining some theoretical considerations about othering and identity formation. The next part of the article analyses ethnographic data in order to examine whether these young men are 'becoming the other self'. First, strategies which capitalize on othering are analysed. Next, strategies which can be interpreted as refusal of the category of the other are analysed. Finally, the conclusion sums up the empirical results and discusses the limitations and potentials of using the concept.

### **Theoretical considerations about othering and identity formation**

Although first coined as a systematic theoretical concept<sup>i</sup> by Spivak in 1985, the notion of othering draws on several philosophical and theoretical traditions. Significantly, the concept draws on an understanding of self which is a generalization of Hegel's master-slave dialectic as developed in *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hegel is often – in what Heartfield (2005) calls a dispirited version of Hegel – read as a theory of *self and other* in which the juxtaposition towards the other constitutes the self.

This understanding of self and other is prevalent in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1997). Here, de Beauvoir describes how men are regarded as the norm and women as the other. With reference to Hegel, de Beauvoir universalizes a theory of self and other in relation to both gender and other hierarchical social differences (1997, p. 16). She furthermore argues that the otherness of women produces subjectivity since 'women exist – and are only conscious of themselves – in ways that men have shaped' (Hughes & Witz, 1997, p. 49).

Early postcolonial writing is another theoretical reference point (Said 1995/1978). Said writes of an imagined geography, which constructs the Orient as other in a reductionist, distancing and pathologizing way. At the same time as being exotized, the Orient is incorporated and fixed, as the function of orientalism is 'at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, managers and actors are *for* Europe, and only for Europe' (pp. 71-72, emphasis in original).

A third stepping stone is the ideas of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Two important points can be derived from Lacan: Firstly, that language plays a central role in constituting identity. This understanding of identity later led Althusser to coin the notion of interpellation (1971), a notion grasping how individuals are hailed by ideology to occupy specific subject positions, thereby achieving identity. Secondly, Lacan stresses that identity is fundamentally gained in the gaze of the powerful (Gingrich, 2004, p. 11).

Drawing on the sources outlined above, Spivak was the first to use the notion of othering in a systematic way. Although Spivak uses the concept in a review of Derrida as early as 1980, it is not until 1985 that the concept is used systematically in her essay "The Rani of Sirmur"<sup>ii</sup>. Here Spivak analyses three dimensions of othering present in archive material of the British colonial power in India.

The first dimension is illustrated by the English Captain, who travels around Sirmur on horseback to tell the natives, who their masters are. He describes in a letter how he journeys around colonial India to make the people aware 'who they are subject to' (Spivak, 1985, p. 254). In sociological terms, this dimension is about power, making the subordinate aware of who holds the power, and hence about the powerful producing the other as subordinate.

The second dimension is illustrated in a letter from a General who writes about 'these highlanders' that 'I see them only possessing all the brutality and purfidity [sic] of the rudest times without the courage and all the depravity and treachery of the modern days without the knowledge of refinement' (Spivak, 1985, pp. 254-5). In sociological terms, this dimension is about constructing the other as pathological and morally inferior.

The third dimension is illustrated in a letter from *the Board of Control* in the British East India Company which argues that the Indian Army in Colonial India should not be given access to knowledge and technology, i.e. 'the master is the subject of science or knowledge' (Spivak, 1985, p. 256). This dimension of othering implies that knowledge and technology is the property of the powerful empirical self, not the colonial other.

It is worth noting that othering is described by Spivak as a multidimensional process, in the sense that it touches upon several different forms of social differentiation, and that othering as a concept can therefore be combined with what has later been conceptualised as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; 1991), or interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 1989) in feminist theory (see Collins, 2000; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Gans, 2008). According to Spivak, in the case of the Rani, the process of othering is classed and raced as well as gendered. Importantly, to speak of othering is then not an alternative to speaking of racism(s)/sexism or class, but a way of addressing an aspect hereof (Wren, 2001, p. 144). Hence othering concerns the consequences of racism, sexism, class (or a combination hereof) in terms of symbolic degradation as well as the processes of identity formation related to this degradation.

To sum up, the theory of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering assumes that subordinate people are offered, and at the same time relegated to, subject positions as others in discourse. In these processes, it is the centre that has the power to describe, and the other is constructed as inferior. It should be noted that the concept in Spivak's version does *not* focus on the fascination of the other, as it does not evolve around ambivalence or the exoticism of the colonial gaze. The other is always the other as in *inferior*, not as in *fascinating*.

Spivak's conceptualization is in accordance with contemporary uses of the concept: For instance Andersson uses the concept in relation to racialization processes that affect first generation Europeans (2010, p. 7); Lister defines othering as a 'process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between 'us' and 'them' – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained' (2004, p. 101); Schwalbe as '...the defining into existence of a group of people who are identifiable, from the standpoint of a group with the capacity to dominate, as *inferior*' (2000, p. 777), or as '...the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group.' (Schwalbe et al. 2000, p. 422). Othering at the same time produces difference and problematizes it, in the sense that the group which is othered is also in the process defined as 'morally and/or intellectually inferior' (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 423). 'The others' are reduced to stereotypical characters and are ultimately dehumanized (Riggins, 1997, p. 9; Lister, 2004, p. 102). Such processes imply reduction and essentialization in the sense that those who are othered are reduced to a few negative characteristics. Consequently I define othering as *discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate* (see also Jensen, 2010a).

While the understanding of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering can be productive, it also raises certain objectives. It has thus been argued that the concept of othering is binary as it is based on the dichotomy of the first and the other, rather than that which transcends these binaries (Gingrich, 2004). Such an understanding of identity is parallel to an understanding of language in which signs become meaningful in opposition to what they are not. Or in the words of Diken, 'the marked term is in fact necessary for the primary term to be defined' (1998, p. 41). Generalizing such structural thinking to matters of social identity can be problematic since it sets up a frame of reference which fails to see the in-between, or the 'thirdspace', to borrow a term from social geography (Soja, 1996). Furthermore those who are othered do not appear as active subjects. Consequently Bhatt criticizes postcolonial theory for being 'a kind of heroic, narcissistic victimology that cannot name itself as such', and notes that '[i]n postcolonial theory, the subaltern is simply voiceless' (2006, p. 101). Other writers have, with explicit reference to Spivak's use of Lacan, spoken of a 'psychoanalytical fatalism in critical disguise' (Gingrich, 2004, p. 11). Hence Gingrich argues that in Spivak's theoretization, othering is something done by the powerful majority, and those who become 'the other' are objects in a process of colonial interpellation (2004).

These critiques call for theoretical considerations about agency, which I here define as *the capacity to act within as well as up against social structures*. I am in particular interested in what McLaren calls oppositional agency (McLaren, 1994) whether or not it takes the form of explicit political stance. In other words resistance is central to my analysis.

One could argue that identifying resistance requires consciousness and explicit purpose among those who are said to resist. As Raby has pointed out, this criterion would however hinder us from grasping resistance among young people who often act less from explicit and conscious motives and more from an only partially conscious feeling of injustice (2005). Hence a wider understanding of resistance as oppositional agency is applied here.

My analysis focuses on two forms of agency, which can both be argued to have a dimension of resistance. The first I have termed *capitalization*. This form of agency, which is explained further below, relies not on refusing othering discourses per se, but by appropriating (elements of) them in an attempt to imbue the category of the young ethnic minority man with symbolic value. Resistance here takes the form of refusing to be devalued. However this form of agency also has a dimension of reproduction as it draws on stereotypical images. The other form of agency I term *refusal*. This form of agency relies on articulating distance from the category of the ethnic minority young man, explicitly or through irony, and on refusing to occupy the position of the other.

While admittedly such a distinction could be theoretically deconstructed it here serves the purpose of grasping empirical variation in reactions to othering.

### **Becoming the other self?**

The rest of this article will use othering as an analytical starting point for understanding cultural processes of identity formation in everyday life. I address how and to what extent othering conditions identity formation by analyzing how a specific group of actors react to the othering they are subject to.

While a full documentation of the discursive othering of the category of young ethnic minority men falls outside the limits of this article, Andreassen has demonstrated how public Danish

discourses about these young men draw heavily on cultural racism (2005). Hence, these young men are successively being portrayed as highly problematic.

Andreassen has analyzed how media stories revolve around a representation of dangerous 'young visible minority males' involvement in what newscasters and journalists labelled gangs or groups' and 'how they gather in city centres, how they commit crimes and violence' (2005, p. 77, see Alexander, 2000 for British examples). Andreassen has also shown how minority men are portrayed as having a 'dangerously high libido' (2005, p. 215), and how 'the media looked at the visible minorities with a gaze embodied with fear and myths about hyper-sexuality' (p. 221). Such discourses about sexually dangerous black Muslims draw on historical Western fetishism and sexualisation of the black male body, which ambivalently combine fear and fascination (Mercer & Julien, 1988).

Drawing on Andreassen, it is therefore possible to argue that these young men are subject to intersectional othering, which is explicitly related to race, ethnicity and gender, and implicitly to generation and urbanity.

The following analysis of how these young men react to othering is based on qualitative ethnographic data from a fieldwork among marginalized young men with ethnic minority background in Denmark. The data was collected as part of my PhD project investigating the meaning of gender, ethnicity and style in the everyday life of these young men (Jensen 2007). The fieldwork took place in three youth clubs and a social project for excluded youths in three Danish cities. Two were ordinary Danish youth clubs (one attended May-December 2001 and September 2003, the other October-November 2005), another a youth club assigned a special role in work with troubled visible ethnic minority youth (attended April 2004-September 2005) and the last a social project working with marginalized young people offering an alternative way to finish school (attended October 2003 to April 2004). A total of 126 participant observations were conducted. Most observations took place during the evenings (typically 3-4 hours). In addition to informal conversations, a total of 23 young men aged 15-25 were interviewed in 18 taped semi-structured qualitative interviews with the duration of between 30 minutes and 2 hours. In addition to interview and observation data I draw upon material from magazines, music as well as the internet, so that my empirical material makes up what Löfgren refers to as an 'empirical bricolage' (1987). Since it is impossible to present the full material in this article, the fragments offered here should only be considered illustrations of motifs that appear often in my data.

Given the nature of fieldwork, the timing and phrasing of the invitation to participate in the research varied, but all informants were informed that I was visiting the clubs to do research. The young men were typically informed that the research was about 'the culture that young people make themselves' (reflecting an interest in cultural agency and distancing the research from cultural essentialism), and that it was 'about possible differences between boys and girls' (reflecting an interest in gender). Informants who participated in formal interviews were given a more detailed description of the research.

All interviews and observation data were coded in Nvivo. The analysis presented in this article cannot, however, be described as simply stemming from the empirical data in any positivist sense. My approach has been inspired by Willis' idea of the theoretically informed ethnographic study (1997) and Layder's adaptive theory approach (1998) implying that analysis develop

through a dialogue between theory and data, but also that there can be no obligation of loyalty towards pre-given theories.

Admitting the risk that such a description can in itself be othering, my sample can be described as follows: The youth clubs and the social project were chosen because of their locality and/or their social work with young people. The young men I interviewed and/or focused on in my fieldwork were marginalized in terms of different dimensions: Many had problems with school, most were considered by social workers to have social problems, and many were criminalized to varying degrees. Most of the oldest men in the sample had problems finding work/apprenticeships, and all had parents who were on the margin of the labour market. The young men had different ethnic minority backgrounds, with parents from Somalia, Turkey, Kurdistan, Palestine, Iran, Pakistan, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Ghana, Gambia and other national contexts. All names used in the text are pseudonyms.

It should be noted that my situatedness as a white, ethnic majority, middle class man played a role in the in the social logic of my research. I consider field work a meeting of (complex) social positions as well as a meeting between unique individuals. This means that in some situations the young men would speak to, and react to, my position from their position rather than react to me as an individual person. Consequently my relations to the young men varied a great deal during the fieldwork. Sometimes I was explicitly considered a 'friend' at other times I was positioned as member of a powerful majority resulting in more troublesome field relations. I consider this to be largely due to contemporary Danish discourses framing the field relations. A full analysis of this problematic falls outside the limits of this article (see Jensen 2009), however it should be emphasized that some of the data analysed in this article, most notably the motif of claiming normality, were in my interpretation produced as the result of the relational interplay of social positions in the interview situation (see below).

### **Capitalizing on othering**

As argued above, the category of young men present in my sample are subject to intersectional othering in current Danish discourses. My ethnographic material showed, however, that these discourses could sometimes be appropriated in collective, cultural processes, which could be termed subcultural in the neo-Birminghamian sense (Carrington & Wilson, 2004; Jensen, 2010b), i.e. processes that in some sense *answer* a collectively shared situation. Sometimes such answers can take the form of constructing subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Below, the term *capitalization* and the verb *to capitalize* are used to emphasize that the creation of capital is an active process involving agency. However, such agency is socially situated, and I therefore agree with the critics who advocate rethinking the concept of subcultural capital, situating such capitalization in relation to hierarchical differentiation and power (Skeggs, 2004; Carrington & Wilson, 2004; Jensen, 2006). As mentioned above it could be argued that capitalization as a form of agency has a dimension of resistance as well as a dimension of reproduction. In my material, it is by mediating otherness through elements of style taken from hip hop that othering can be capitalized upon, so that the self can be stylized<sup>iii</sup> and become attractive. In other words, the position of the other can become imbued with value if versioned through a hip hop iconography of black masculinity.

In my fieldwork, this was illustrated by the way some of the young men presented themselves on a Danish Internet chat site called Arto. Admir had chosen the username *Thug-gangsta*. This name is inspired by the rapper 2Pac, who has been pictured time and again with the word 'Thug' tattooed in gothic letters across his naked muscular torso. Hirsi had chosen the name *lil'*

*gangsta'*, referring to the fact that he was rather short. Abdilatif had chosen the name *8210-cent*, a clever amalgam combining the local zip code for Århus Vest – the stigmatised part of Århus<sup>iv</sup> where he lived – and global hip hop culture in the form of the popular rapper 50-cent. Nadim had chosen the name “Perker4Livet”, meaning Perkerforlife. The term ‘perker’ is a strongly derogatory Danish term for immigrants from the Middle East or North Africa sometimes appropriated by the young men themselves in their slang<sup>v</sup>. The name Perker4livet is clearly inspired by the name of the Danish perker rap group ‘perkerforlife’, who spell their name P4L. This, again, is a reference to the Los Angeles based gangster rap group NWA’s second album *Niggaz for life* (Ruthless Records, 1991). However, Nadim later changed his username to ‘HotPerker’, which does not entail any specific reference to hip hop, instead accentuating the latent sexualization inherent in the specific othering that these young men are subject to. During my fieldwork, I have seen the profile pictures uploaded by Nadim and Abdilatif. In the pictures they pose like Afro-American rap or R’n’B stars, in street-wear with bandanas under their baseball caps.

These usernames and self-made photos illustrate that, given the opportunity to version identities in a virtual space these young men often pick a hip hop identity. Identifying with hip hop is quite common in the contemporary youth cultural terrain. However, the identification has two specific dimensions: 1) Marginality is important as a basis for identification, and 2) hip hop makes it possible to ascribe value to racialized bodies marked by black hair and brown skin. The combination of usernames and self-made pictures points towards a stylization of self, a situated agency building on elements from hip hop to ascribe positive value to their position as others.

Similar ways of versioning the self can be observed among young men producing rap music. In recent years, the Danish hip hop milieu has seen the emergence of a subgenre often referred to as ‘perker rap’. Highly controversial, this subgenre can be said, on the one hand, to reflect marginality while on the other to stage marginality so that marginality is turned into a brand, in an attempt to locally capitalize on othering. One of the representatives of this genre was the rap group Pimp-A-Lot<sup>vi</sup>.

One of the rappers affiliated with Pimp-A-Lot was ‘Niggeren i slæden’, which roughly translates into ‘The nigger in the ride’. He later changed his name to Johnson, referring to his real name Marc Johnson, but also to a slang word for phallus. When interviewed about the name change in *Döner* – a lifestyle magazine targeting young ethnic minority men – he explains that the name change is related to him ‘not getting a hard-on every time I smell pussy’. The interviewer then jokingly asks whether Johnson might suffer from erectile dysfunction; something Johnson dismisses with an ‘I wish so’, implying that his problem is the reverse (Interview in *Döner* no. 1, 2003). By doing so, he stages himself as a young virile black man – a staging that connotes and draws upon the Western sexualisation of the black male body present in the current Danish representations of young ethnic minority men as sexually dangerous. Staging oneself as virile and libidinous is then a form of sexualisation of the self made possible by historical and contemporary discourses about black male hypersexuality. Later in the interview Johnson also stages himself as a sexual object in a way that is closely linked to dangerousness, when he states that ‘I only meet those girls who look at me, and then they know that I’m a player’ and explain that ‘they think I look like a criminal and that turns them on.’ (Interview in *Döner* no. 1, 2003). These accounts illustrate the relation between being dangerous and being sexy. Johnson speaks of himself as a man – young and black – who is sexy because he is (perceived as) dangerous. As a person who is read off as dangerous because he looks ‘like a

criminal'. Looking like a criminal is about style, and about style being perceived in a specific way when combined with certain bodily signs of race and ethnicity. The combination of hip hop style, dark hair and brown skin makes it possible that Johnson is perceived as dangerous, and therefore sexy. Johnson as an icon or sexual object comes to carry the connotations related to Western imaginaries of black men as sexually dangerous and genitally well-endowed, which parts of US hip hop has appropriated. By stylizing the self using elements taken from the subcultural universe of hip hop, Johnson accentuates the latent positive dimensions inherent in the Western imagery of the black man, and thus capitalizes on othering.

It is obviously impossible to know what the young women Johnson has sexual relations with think of him – if they exist. However, here it is enough to observe that it is possible for Johnson to tell about his self in this way, and that in doing so, he draws upon a historical conception of the black man, with colonial roots. As Mercer & Julien has pointed out:

Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect. Imperialism justified itself by claiming that it had a civilising mission – to lead the base and ignoble savages and 'inferior races' into culture and godliness. The person of the savage was developed as the Other of civilisation and one of the first 'proofs' of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of his sex. This led Europeans to assume that the savage possessed an open, frank and uninhibited 'sexuality' ... (Mercer & Julien, 1988, pp. 106-7).

In colonial thinking the black man is constructed as hypersexual. This historical idea of the sexy black man can be actualized by stylizing one's self using elements from hip hop<sup>vii</sup>.

The empirical examples above illustrate a type of reaction to othering, which can be termed capitalization. This type of reaction works not by resisting to occupy the position of the other *per se*, but by resisting the devaluation and attempting to capitalize locally on being in the position of the other, by accentuating those dimensions within the ambivalent gaze of the majority which can be ascribed value. As Sandberg has noted, such strategies draw heavily on public stereotypes (Sandberg, 2005). Similarly, Vestel has pointed out that the sign of the 'dangerous foreigner' is one of several available for the staging of self (2004, p. 449). What can be observed is a stylization of self, a form of cultural agency which allows these young men to capitalize on othering, to become sexy and dangerous and to see themselves as having social value, perhaps even as being superior, as opposed to the inferior other.

It is worth noting that the strategies analyzed here are distinctively masculine (Prieur, 2002), if not masculinist. Therefore they are highly controversial, and, in US debates about hip hop and rap, parallel strategies have been criticised by feminists (Armstrong, 2001; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Rap is however also a reflection of the marginalization and alienation experienced by its founders at the racialized and socioeconomically deprived margins of urban USA. Here it plays a role as a medium for critique. Consequently, much hip hop – including perker rap – has political and antiracist contents (Sernhede, 2009), and hip hop constitutes ambivalence between antiracism and feminism.

### **Refusal**

Whereas the form of agency analysed above can be thought of as capitalizing on othering, strategies which can be interpreted as refusal towards occupying the position of the other are



also present in my material. Such strategies articulate distance from the category of the other explicitly or through irony.

One evening I accompanied a group of 10-12 young men and a social worker (Manou) from a youth club in Århus to the nearby smaller town of Skanderborg. We shop at a supermarket:

The boys are kidding around and making a lot of noise. (...) We head towards the checkout. The boys start joking by seemingly accusing each other of having stolen. 'Hey, that guy's taken something', one of them says in a twisted, squeaky voice. Samir and Kawan are throwing the American football they brought along back and forth across the refrigerated display counter with this week's special offers and careful arrangements of fruit and vegetables. The boys get in line at the checkout and continue to seemingly accuse each other of having stolen some of the shops' products. 'Have you taken something, have you taken something?' they ask each other in caricatured, high-pitched voices, as if imitating an imagined officious shop assistant. The women at the cash registers take it with a smile and get them through the checkout.

Memo, 27 October 2005

In this episode, the young men seem, at first glance, to be mocking each other. However, on my interpretation, there is more going on, since the caricature of the officious shop assistant is played out in front of a larger audience: Manou (ethnic minority), me (ethnic majority), the women at the cash registers and the other customers (all ethnic majority). To make a caricature of an officious shop assistant can be interpreted as a way of saying: *We are well aware that you are probably thinking that kids like us have something that is not theirs in their pockets*. Hence the mocking carried out by the young men can be understood as a comment, talking back to the othering gaze, resisting and at the same time playing with the image of the criminal 'immigrant' young man. There is of course no way of knowing what the staff and customers actually thought. But it is not unlikely that the young men have experienced being accused of criminal activities by police and other social control agencies because of their bodily markers of youth, visible ethnic minority background and maleness (Wellendorf & Cakmak, 2007; Ansel-Henry & Jespersen, 2003). Other examples of refusal were articulated in the interaction between the young men and me. The following interview exchange takes place in the social project:

[Interviewer asks about the division of labour in Tahir's his family]

Tahir: ... of course my little brother doesn't help my mother with the cooking, like.

SQJ: What do you think about this way of living, do you like it, or...?

Tahir: What do you mean?

SQJ: That stuff, like some, the women do some things and the men do other things.

Tahir: It's also like that in Danish families.

SQJ: Certainly, certainly. Yes.

Tahir: It is. It's often the mother who cooks and the father he...I've often seen that, like.

SQJ: Yes.

Tahir:...It's not...

SQJ: No, but I didn't say.

Tahir: No-no, no-no, but it's often like that. It's pretty normal.

SQJ: Yes.

Tahir: I don't see...it's pretty normal.

SQJ: Yes. I think it's fair enough. Ehm, when you grow older, would you like to live in the same way or...

Interview, 16 December 2003

The excerpt illustrates how the field relations were sometimes conditioned by the ways gender and ethnicity intersect in Danish debates on migration and integration. By a subtle underlying mechanism the researcher is positioned as a representative of legitimate culture. Simultaneously Tahir is positioned as an illegitimate other, and his answers are articulated from this position. It is not only a matter of (mis)understanding each other, but also a matter of positions being shaped by the relational interplay between two actors bodily marked as respectively minority and majority in a specific societal context. This explains why Tahir reacts from the position as the ethnified other, illegitimate in terms of gender relations such as division of domestic labour. In other words, questions about gender are asked by a researcher already positioned as white and Danish, to a young ethnic minority man already pointed out by public discourse as a representative of inappropriate gender inequality<sup>viii</sup> (Jensen, 2009). Tahir, however, refuses being positioned as the other. He protests against the othering of him and his family. He disidentifies<sup>x</sup> with the identity he is offered, and *claims normality*, while at the same time accepting the implicit premise of not being Danish. In other words, he exercises power by refusing the identity the situation offers him.

Other exchanges touch explicitly upon media representations and knowledge production. The following episode took place in a youth club:

AbdiRahmane and Thomas are in the room. Suddenly AbdiRahmane says loudly [referring to me]. *'Hey, what is it that he's doing, that guy?' (...)* *'He's a writer. He's written that book, you know'*, Abbas answers: *'Hey, what are you writing about us?'*, Ousamah asks [...] *'Hey writer'*, AbdiRahmane says and continues. *'Where do you want to go with that? You're on the wrong track. You need to become a doctor' (...)* *'That's where the future lies. Not that writer stuff'*. He begins walking around the room. *'What do you want to write about us. What is there to write?'* He sits down beside me. *'Okay'*, he says, *'Let's say this is a talk show. You only get 5 seconds, and I'll ask you about something: What do you want to say about these young people here in [X-City]. Remember, you've only got 5 seconds'*. *'Then you can't say anything'*, I start. *'Come on, say something'*, he says and continues, *'About the young people, they're in such a bad place and there's so much crime'*. *'Shut up, AbdiRahmane'*, someone says, laughing. *'You're confusing yourself'*, someone else adds. AbdiRahmane continues, still in his mock talk show host voice. *'There is a lot of crime, what do you want to say?'*. *'There isn't that much'*, I reply and continue, *'You're not gangsters or anything like that'*. *'Yes. it's true... there is'*, says AbdiRahmane. *'Not as much now as there used to be'*, Abbas adds and continues: *'We used to do a lot, but we're not doing as much now'*. *'Yes'*, I say, *'but it's not as much as it says in the papers'*. Abbas answers, *'The papers have written about us before, but that was then. Then we did a lot'*. AbdiRahmane ends his show. *'No'*, he says. *'That writer stuff is no good'*. In a slightly more serious tone he adds: *'It is okay, you're on the right track. But you have to come up with something else'*.

Memo, 4 September 2003

In the episode, AbdiRahmane is 'having a laff' (Willis 1978), joking with the researcher at the same time as entertaining the other young men in the room. In a subversive way, he confronts the researcher with the fact that he as a writer has the privilege of producing authoritative descriptions of the young men. In other words, he seizes power and subverts the privilege of description. Accordingly, I have difficulties giving a qualified answer when AbdiRahmane takes on the role of a zealous journalist pressuring me for an answer by repeating the words *'What do you want to say'*. All I come up with is a somewhat quiet pointing out that they are not

as criminal as they are often described. At the same time, AbdiRahmane is mocking the media's representation of the young men and the neighbourhood they live in, when, assuming the role of a talk show host, he insists that the young men '*are in such a bad place and there's so much crime*'. AbdiRahmane's joking can be interpreted as an ironic comment on the overall discursive context of the research. This is important because, as shown above, Spivak addresses the privilege of controlling representation as the property of the powerful. However, AbdiRahmane resists those who have the power to position him and his friends as criminal others living in '*a bad place*' by reclaiming the role of the '*representer*', the producer of knowledge.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Generalizing the substantial empirical findings outlined above to all ethnic minority young men, or even all marginalized ethnic minority young men, would itself be othering. Therefore it must be emphasized that the concrete reactions outlined above cover only one specific cluster of reactions to othering among a specific group and in a limited number of contexts. It is also necessary to emphasize that the refusal of othering analysed above can be understood as a specific variant of a common tendency to refuse negative categorizations imposed by others. Claiming normality, insisting that one is not that different, can be a strategy for humanization. Constructing oneself as a normal, ordinary person is therefore also a way of appealing for sympathy and understanding (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2006, p. 237).

Now, to return to an assessment of the limitations and potentials inherent in the concept of othering, the analysis has shown that othering is not a straightforward process of individuals or groups being interpellated to occupy specific subordinate subject positions. On the contrary, agency is at play, and actors far from always accept becoming the other self. Othering can be capitalized upon or disidentified from.

It is worth dwelling on the type of agency which has been termed capitalization. This type of agency illustrates how othering discourses can, in a paradoxical way, be part of the symbolic raw material of agency. Elements of othering discourses may be appropriated, because such elements can be given local value as part of a subcultural style. That is possible because the specific discourses of othering relevant here are latently ambivalent in their gaze upon the other, as they also contain implicit exoticism and fascination of the other. For some young ethnic minority men, the public stereotype of the black male can be used as a resource – an element in the '*pool of styles, meanings and possibilities*' (Willis, 1978, p. 59) at hand for producing styles – offering them a way to capitalize on othering. Othering discourses, even if they are experienced as painful, also open a space for agency. In a paradoxical way, agency as capitalization illustrates the continued relevance of the concept of othering: Thinking in terms of othering allows us to grasp how power structures condition agency and to reflect on how historical symbolic meanings frame the possibilities at hand for negotiating identity. Capitalization has dimensions of both resistance and reproduction, because it can be interpreted as an attempt to challenge the devaluation of the other, although it does not disrupt the category.

Another type of agency in relation to othering has been termed refusal. This strategy is based on rejecting the category of the other. Thus in many instances, informants refuse to occupy the position of the other, whether in relation to the researcher or in relation to third parties. In such situations the young men often claim normality.

It is also worth dwelling on the motif of claiming normality, which appears quite often in my material. Although these young men often claim normality, there is not one case of informants explicitly categorizing themselves as Danes. This can be explained by the character of the Danish discourses about migration, as these discourses block the way to 'Danishness' for anyone not part of the imagined Danish kin (cf. Fangen, 2007). Furthermore, aspiring to become Danish would imply aspiring to exchange one particular identity for another, to exchange firstness for otherness. The fact that the young men do not aspire to 'Danishness', but do claim normality, can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to carve out a space in-between, a *thirdspace*, which is not defined by firstness and otherness, but transcends the dichotomy: simply as a normal human being - *not Danish, but also not different from the Danish*. It may have some overlaps with Danishness as this third position could sometimes have some of the same attributes as those ascribed to Danishness. However, it is not synonymous with (an aspiration to) Danishness. This attempt to carve out a third space which transcends majority and minority problematizes the binary thinking inherent in the concept of othering. That, however, does not mean that the concept of othering should be discarded. On the contrary, the concept seems well suited for grasping a specific type of space for agency. Its merits furthermore lies in its potential for understanding contemporary discourses in the light of history, its openness towards intersectionality, and its understanding of identity formation as a process. However, when used in an analysis of concrete identity formation, the concept of othering works best when used in a dialogue with concepts more suited for grasping agency.

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## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> The word othering was used sporadically in philosophical texts as early as the 1920s and 1930s, meaning *change* or *analytically distancing oneself*.
- <sup>ii</sup> Sirmur is a region in the lower Himalayas. The Rani is the Rajah's wife, who becomes the formal leader after he is dethroned (Spivak, 1985).
- <sup>iii</sup> Stylization here covers the double meaning: 1) that an aesthetic style is created *and* 2) that something simple is created from something complex in the sense that a complex and ambiguous person is staged in a somewhat stereotypical way.
- <sup>iv</sup> Århus is the second largest city in Denmark.
- <sup>v</sup> In some youth milieus, the term *perker* has been turned into a badge of honour, in much the same way as the word nigger (often spelled nigga) in some parts of black urban US culture.
- <sup>vi</sup> Pimp-a-Lot is a reference to the US rap record label Rap-A-lot.
- <sup>vii</sup> Some of the young men in my sample are not literarily black. Said, however, argues that a similar erotic fascination is inherent in the Western gaze upon the Orient (1978).
- <sup>viii</sup> I argue that such mechanisms do not rest on the characteristics or skills of the researcher, since similar mechanisms occur in parallel research projects, in different institutional settings, by other researchers, but in the same national discursive context (Andersen, 2005; Hviid, 2007; Staunæs, 2007).
- <sup>ix</sup> The concept of *disidentification*, and the verb *to disidentify* (Skeggs, 1997), denotes an intentional and marked distancing from identity categories. It is therefore different from a mere absence of identification. See also Goffman on the related concept of *disidentifiers* (1963, pp. 60 ff.).