

# Identifying Outside the Box

## An analysis of identification patterns among members of the German minority in Denmark

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### **Abstract**

On the basis of six qualitative interviews with members of the German minority in Denmark, the article addresses different ways according to which individuals identify themselves as members of the German minority. The analysis shows that the identification with the minority varies from individual to individual. Identity in the German minority is therefore very multi-layered. Furthermore, the analysis illustrates that members of the minority identify beyond national categories on a rather regional level while comprising both German and Danish linguistic and cultural traits.

**Keywords:** Identity, national minority, borderland, regional identification, language

*Are you German or Danish? and Who are you rooting for when Denmark is playing football against Germany?* are common questions that members of the two minorities in the German-Danish borderland, the Danish minority in Germany and the German minority in Denmark, are likely to face when they interact with people outside the minority context. The answers to these questions vary and are often much

more diverse than anticipated, indicating that identification within the German minority is complex and might go beyond the national boxes of German and Danish.

Therefore, the following article addresses the question of identity within the German minority or more accurately focuses on identification mechanisms - since identity is not a fixed thing but an active and flexible process (Hylland Eriksen 2010, 70/71) - along which individuals identify themselves as members of the German minority. Special attention is paid to the national categories of German and Danish and how members of the minority combine them into their identity. However, it is important to keep in mind that the individuals' identification with the minority is likely to be influenced by a variety of different aspects. The identification mechanisms presented in this article should therefore be seen as a small part of the interplay of factors that play a part in the identification process of minority members.

The study is based on six qualitative narrative interviews with people who consider themselves a member of the German minority.

### **The German Minority as Research Subject**

The German minority has been the subject of several studies from different research disciplines over the last century and has been addressed from various angles, for example in terms of language (Pedersen 2005) and education (Byram 1986), from a more legal or political perspective (Kühl & Pedersen 2006) or from a historical point of view (Thaler 2009). Especially since the 1980s there has also been a growing interest in characterizing the minority (Toft 1982; Zeh 1982). Greater attention has also been given to the matter of identity itself either as a by-product of or in relation to the specific research focus, as is the case in all the beforementioned studies, or as the centrepiece of the research as in the study *Nationalt tilhørsforhold i Nordslesvig* by Jørgen Elklit, Johan Peter Noack and Ole Tonsgaard from 1978. Another paper that specifically focuses on national identity within the German minority was brought forward by Günter Weitling in the context of Det sønderjyske Forskningsforum in 1994. He described the identity of the members of the German minority in Denmark with the term "Zweistromigkeit", which he understands as the ability to understand and to feel the two people and the two cultures from within (Weitling 1994, 31).

Another study relevant for this paper because of its findings in terms of identity is Karen Margrethe Pedersen's contribution to the book *København-Bonn Erklæringerne 1955-2005* edited by Jørgen Kühl. In her article she discusses the connection between language and identity within the German minority. She picks up on the term *Zweiströmigkeit* and argues that this term would not imply a dual national affiliation but instead indicate a "trans-ethnic German and Danish identity with a German national identity as superstructure" (Pedersen 2005, 368; my translation). The German and Danish language function thereby as a prerequisite of this dual ethnic identity as German-Danish (Pedersen 2005, 368).

A joint article from Pedersen and Kühl published in Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark's *International Obligations and National Debates: Minorities around the Baltic Sea* from 2006 combines the findings from the two beforementioned studies. On the basis of *Zweiströmigkeit*, Pedersen and Kühl argue that the German terms "deutsche Nordschleswiger" or simply "Nordschleswiger" are used by many minority members to describe themselves, but there is also an upcoming trend, particularly among younger minority members, to "define themselves as tyske sønderjyder (German Southlanders), which is a regional Danish identity with a German dimension" (Kühl & Pedersen 2006, 73). They thus conclude that members of the minority may have a German national identity, but a dual ethnic identity, "as the members feel home in both a minority and a majority context" (Kühl & Pedersen 2006, 74).

In contrast to that, Michael Byram suggests in his book *Minority Education and Ethnic Survival: Case Study of a German School in Denmark* from 1986 four categories to describe the identification within the minority: "German, German North Schleswiger, Danish North Schleswiger, Dane" (Byram 1986, 135). However, he further argues that the actual distinction between minority and majority is drawn by a "symbolic switch from a German word to a Danish word" (Byram 1986, 136), meaning that the German term *Nordschleswiger* implies an identification with the minority, whereas the Danish term *Sønderjyder* implies a belonging to the majority.

One last study that should be mentioned here is Peter Thaler's *Of Mind and Matter: The Duality of National Identity in the German-Danish Borderland* from 2009. The book sheds light on the identity of both the German and the Danish minority of the border region but

derives primarily from a historical perspective. Thaler's main findings are that the German minority "does not define itself predominantly by language" (Thaler 2009, 159), but instead that "identification with the minority derives from family tradition" (Thaler 2009, 159) and is "subjective, but with an objective component" (Thaler 2009, 159). He therefore concludes that "several layers of identity coexist within individual communities" (Thaler 2009, 160).

Even though there are many more interesting and relevant studies regarding the identity of and identification within the German minority, this short literature review should already have given a first insight into the complexity of identity within the German minority and thus laid the groundwork for the research focus of this paper.

### **The Sample**

Identity itself is hard to grasp, since it is not only non-static and multi-layered but also a very personal and individual matter. In regard to the German minority in Denmark it is even harder to assess a common identity, as it "derives its origins predominantly from a sense of self and not from visible physical or cultural markers" (Thaler 2009, 42). Membership as well is purely based on "Gesinnung", as it is stated in the Bonn-Copenhagen-Declarations in Chapter II.1 of the Copenhagen-Declaration in regard to the German minority that "the confession of German nationality and German culture is free" (Kühl 2005, 660; my translation). Due to this, participants for the interviews were recruited based on the single criterion that they considered themselves a member of the German minority.

In total, six people, three men and three women, were interviewed in November and December 2019. By the time of the interviews, all interviewees were living in North Schleswig and their ages ranged from 16 to 64. Since the German minority is a comparatively small community, in which most people know each other personally, a more detailed description of the interviewees' individual minority backgrounds cannot be provided, as it would not guarantee the interviewees' anonymity that was promised to them in advance of the interviews. However, some general comments about the sample of this study can be made. All participants can be considered more or less active minority members, as they all showed some kind of engagement, whether it is a voluntary com-

mitment, working in one of the minority institutions or both. It is likely that this is owed to the fact that the interviewees were recruited through some sort of purposive sampling, as I reached out to the umbrella organisation of the minority, the Bund Deutscher Nordschleswiger, and the German high school, Deutsches Gymnasium für Nordschleswig, to distribute my call for participants among their members.

Even though all members would identify themselves with the minority, not all of them were born and raised in the minority. One interviewee for example was raised in Germany and joined the minority as an adult due to work. Two other interviewees attended the minority's educational institutions but had no family roots in the minority. In one case the parents were however involved in the minority, while in the other case the parents did not consider themselves members of the minority. Two interviewees came from families that had their roots in the minority. Another interviewee had one parent with and one without a minority background. The citizenship status of the interviewees varied greatly as well. While some interviewees had dual citizenship, others had either German or Danish citizenship.

Despite the great diversity among the interviewees, it must be noted that with a sample size of six interviewees the study can neither provide data saturation nor represent the minority as a whole. Instead, the purpose is to shed light on the mechanisms and elements that contribute to the individuals' identification as a member of the German minority and to give a deeper insight into the different ways of identification among the members of the minority. In this context, and by bearing in mind that minority membership is solely based on „Gesinnung“, the diversity of the six interviews can be seen as an advantage, as it is likely to reveal more mechanisms and elements relevant for an identification with the minority. However, this article neither claims to present all factors that potentially influence an identification with the German minority, nor that all factors presented in this article are equally relevant in the identification process of each minority member.

### **One Minority – Several Layers of Identity**

Regarding their identity, several interviewees pointed out that they were neither Danish nor German but that they rather identify as

both. One interviewee stated for example: “So that’s when I am saying, no, I am not just German. (...) I am bilingual. I am neither the one nor the other. I am BOTH.”<sup>1</sup> What further becomes clear in this context is that ‘being both’ does not refer to the individual categories of ‘being German’ or ‘being Danish’ taken together to what could be called a dual national identity but rather to a new category that primarily encompasses German and Danish traits mostly in terms of language and culture. Even though the feeling of ‘being both’ might match the individual’s citizenship status like in the case of one interviewee, who had dual citizenship and stated that this would also express how he feels (“I am now a German and Danish citizen and that’s what I tell people, because I also feel that way”), it cannot be assumed that this is generally the case, as several other interviewees made clear that identity and citizenship are two separate aspects. One participant for example explained that she formerly had German citizenship but when she moved abroad for her study, she became a Danish citizen, which made no difference for her, as she explained: “But it didn’t matter for me, because you can’t express that feeling with a passport.” Nevertheless, being both does also not preclude the possibility of feeling drawn to or identifying with one of the two categories more than the other, as the same interviewee explains in another statement: “It is always possible that you feel more drawn towards one side than the other, but you are both somewhere.” Although ‘being both’ was a comparatively common description of their identification and mentioned by four out of six interviewees, it is by no means that all participants identified as both. One interviewee for example specifically stated that he identifies as Dane. I originally asked him what citizenship he had and he replied that he had Danish citizenship but added unsolicited that he also identified as Dane (“And I also feel like a Dane”). In his case, citizenship seems to play a role for his identification, as he stated later on in the interview: “But more a Dane than a German. Because I grew up in Denmark. And I also have a Danish passport.”

Another participant, on the other hand, did not identify himself along the lines of German and Danish at all. He only identified himself on a regional level as “German Nordschleswiger”. He is not the only interviewee, who identifies himself on a regional level as “Nordschleswiger”. However, he is the only one describing himself specifically as German North Schleswiger. German here could ei-

ther refer to the minority, as it is the German minority he identifies with, it could be an emphasis of German traits or it could refer to his family roots, as one of his parents is from Germany. A similar question arises in the case of the interviewee who previously identified himself as Dane, since he does not use the attribute German or Danish to describe his identification on a regional level, but instead primarily uses the Danish term for the region: "Or more Sønderjyde, if you can say so. I also grew up with Sønderjysk and so it's more the place itself then. That you are Sønderjyde or Nordschleswiger." This could on the one hand stress his orientation towards the Danish language and culture and his identification as Danish, as the term is usually used by the Danish majority (Byram 1986, 136). On the other hand, it could also simply be a matter of language, as he is primarily using Danish in his daily (work) life. The latter is supported by the fact that he also uses the German term Nordschleswiger at some point, which leads to the assumption that he uses the terms Sønderjyde and Nordschleswiger interchangeably and that they do not necessarily imply a distinction between minority and majority. Despite the identification on a regional level as Nordschleswiger being very common among the participants, not all interviewees explicitly identify as such. What is interesting about that is that the two interviewees who did not refer to themselves as Nordschleswiger, did not grow up in the region. Consequently, this leads to the assumption that one's origins and upbringing play an important part for the identification on a regional level. At the same time this also raises the question if the identification as Nordschleswiger is predominantly an identification on the regional level or if it simultaneously implies an identification with the minority. For at least one interviewee the latter seems to be the case, as she stated: "I belong to the German minority in Nordschleswig, I am Nordschleswigerin." Nonetheless, the two who do not refer to themselves as Nordschleswiger clearly identify themselves as members of the minority as well. It therefore gives the impression that identifying as Nordschleswiger implies an identification on the regional as well as the minority level, but it cannot be seen as an ultimate minority identity, because people who do not explicitly identify as Nordschleswiger, for example because they joined the minority later on and did not grow up in the region, can still be and identify as full members of the minority.

### **An Identity Outside the Boxes of Danish and German**

Whereas Peter Thaler already concluded in his study that “identities in the German-Danish borderlands displayed many variations” (Thaler 2009, 158) and that “several layers of identity coexist” (Thaler 2009, 160) in the German minority in Denmark, which my analysis re-emphasises as well, Michael Byram attempted to give more clarity in regard to the minority’s identity by suggesting four different categories of minority identity, as mentioned above. The categories were “German, German North Schleswiger, Danish North Schleswiger, Dane” (Byram 1986, 135). Byram already reflected on the difficulties his categorisation entails, particularly the two categories German or Danish North Schleswiger (Byram 1986, 136). He concluded that these two categories were somewhat contradicting, since the difference between German and Danish in regard to a North Schleswig identity is expressed by language rather than attributes like Danish or German. Thus, German North Schleswiger would be a pleonasm, as the term North Schleswiger would already imply a minority identity due to the German origins of the term, whereas the term Danish North Schleswiger is contradicting in itself and would actually translate into Sønderjyde, implying a majority identity (Byram 1986, 136). But already the few cases in my study have demonstrated that a categorisation is not that simple and that Byram’s categories are hardly selective. One interviewee for example specifically referred to himself as German North Schleswiger to describe his identity, without being asked to do so. It thus gives the impression that there is indeed a distinction between North Schleswiger and German North Schleswiger. At the same time, another participant, who clearly identified himself as a member of the German minority, referred to himself as Sønderjyde, showing that the Danish term Sønderjyde is not necessarily referring to the majority population. It thus supports more Kühl & Pedersen’s conclusion that the Danish term Sønderjyde is also used by members of the minority and can be understood as an indicator of their dual ethnic identity. However, it must be noted in this regard that Kühl & Pedersen actually referred to the term *tyske Sønderjyder* as an illustration of the members’ “regional Danish identity with a German dimension” (Kühl & Pedersen 2006, 73).

Another aspect of Byram’s categorisation that is in conflict with the findings of my study are the categories ‘German’ and ‘Dane’.

With the exception of one interviewee, who identified as Dane, although he stated later on in the interview that he was more Sønderjyde, all interviewees emphasised that they were neither German nor Dane. At best they were both but even then, they referred to themselves as 'being Danish' as well as 'being German', encompassing thereby more linguistic and cultural aspects than national categories. This differentiation is furthermore important as the participants expressed several times that their identity cannot be equated with national identity or citizenship. This corresponds with Kühl & Pedersen's interpretation of Günter Weitling's concept of "Zweistromigkeit" as a dual ethnic identity, which implies that members of the minority "feel at home in both minority and majority" (Kühl & Pedersen 2006, 74), but that still allows them to have a German national identity.

Because several layers of identity can coexist within the German minority, as Thaler pointed out, I am not going to suggest a different categorisation of minority identity. Besides the sample size of my study being way too low for concluding on a categorisation, it was never the purpose of this study to do so. However, I consider it legit to propose two rather general mechanisms or ways in which members of the minority seem to identify. On the one hand there is a regional-minority level, meaning that members of the minority link the region Nordschleswig, Sønderjylland or even the border region in general directly to the minority and thus identify as members of the minority through the region they feel connected to e.g., because they grew up there. The region represents hereby mostly bilingual and cultural aspects. On the other hand, some people identify just as members of the minority without specifically linking it to the region, which seems to be predominantly the case for those members of the minority that were not born into the minority and/or did not grow up in the region, or the minority. It would be interesting to examine the latter aspect more thoroughly in studies with bigger sample sizes.

## Conclusion

The paper has outlined different ways according to which members of the German minority identify themselves with the minority as well as some aspects that are likely to be driving factors for the identification process. The key findings are that as members of the

minority, people often encompass Danish and German traits, particularly in terms of language and culture, instead of identifying themselves along their citizenship or national categories like German or Dane, which corresponds to the concept of “Zweistromigkeit” as interpreted by Kühl & Pedersen in 2006. Additionally, identification with the minority seems to be linked rather to the region where the minority is located than to a nation, be it the host-country or the mother-state of the minority. It can thus be concluded that identification within the German minority goes beyond the national categories of German and Danish.

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### Notes

- 1 All quotes from interviews are translations by the author, since the interviews were originally conducted in German.