

## **The Social Meaning of Skin Color: Interrogating the Interrelation of Phenotype/Race and Nation in Norway**

### **Academic Summary (PhD Thesis)**

In recent years, young Norwegian writers of color have increasingly called attention to everyday experiences of racism and to the relative silence that surrounds this topic in Norway. Hegemonic societal narratives claim that 'race' is not a relevant category of difference in Norway because it is not verbalized through an explicitly racial vocabulary, and that Norway used to be a very homogenous nation that has only more recently become 'diverse' with the advent of non-European labor migrants starting in the late 1960s. A look at Norwegian history, however, makes clear that these narratives overlook the historic racialization of national and indigenous minorities (and their potential extension into the present).

Against this backdrop, this thesis asks how phenotype functions as a marker of difference and as a category of difference in Norway today. It further poses the question what phenotype means for understandings of Norwegianness and migration-related difference. The reason for making 'phenotype' the main object of research in this thesis is that race is projected onto individuals' bodies via phenotype and that race can manifest itself via phenotype even when no explicitly racial vocabulary is in use.

The project draws on life story interviews with 33 parents of young children who live in Oslo and vary in terms of migration background or lack thereof. Based on an understanding that phenotype/race is intertwined with other aspects of migration-related difference, the interviews focus broadly on participants' experiences with and reflections on 'ethnic diversity'. The interviews cover the participants' entire life story with a specific focus on their childhood/youth, working life, and parenthood. Further, the interviews contain a discussion of a range of categories that are used to situate individuals vis-à-vis the nation (Norwegian, immigrant, foreigner, minority) or with regard to ethnicity and phenotype/race (ethnically Norwegian, white, dark, brown, black).

Theoretically, the project is grounded in a standpoint theoretical approach. It also draws on several concepts from the literature on race and racism, which it treats as 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer, 1954), so as to remain open to the empirical context. These concepts are race, racialization, whiteness, racism,

and color-blindness. The thesis further makes use of the literature on boundaries and processes of categorization.

It is organized into six analysis chapters. The first among these, chapter 4, starts by presenting three constructed, 'typical' life stories that grant the reader a glimpse into the data material. The rest of the chapter analyzes how participants speak about experiences with 'ethnic diversity' they have had throughout their life course. This forms the contextual backdrop for the rest of the analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on how participants understand and use the categories that were explored in the interviews. This allows for examining to what extent understandings of national belonging and of phenotype/race interrelate. Both chapters also discuss anxieties around language as well silences and hesitation that are present in the material. Chapter 7 builds on this and explores how participants without a migration background explain that they find phenotype difficult to talk about and which terms are used to refer to phenotype. Chapter 8 focuses on experiences of racism and discrimination that were reported by participants. It also discusses to what extent participants feel that they can label their own experiences as 'racism'. Chapter 9 attempts to describe phenotype as a marker of difference in a systematic manner and explores intersections between phenotype and other categories of difference.

While all the analysis chapters follow an inductive, empirically driven logic, the concluding chapter returns to the sensitizing concepts presented the theory chapter and discusses them in light of the empirical findings. It finds that the concepts of 'race' and 'racialization' can explain a dynamic in the data material that would otherwise be hard to grasp and explain. The fact that a differentiation in 'white' versus 'non-white' resonates throughout the material can be understood in reference to the category of 'race' as one that was constructed during the colonial period in order to instate and maintain differentiations between European/non-European, civilized/backwards, superior/inferior, and Christian/heathen. Even though the term 'race' fell out of use in Norway after the Second World War, the empirical material that forms the basis of this thesis illustrates that ideas of European/non-European and white/non-white are still socially significant in Norway today.

The conclusion further engages the concept of color-blindness to discuss how superiority and inferiority can be implied without being articulated through an explicitly racial vocabulary. A central argument is that 'ethnicity' as an every-day term performs a racializing function in Norwegian. Finally, the concluding chapter draws on Philomena Essed's (200) concept 'everyday racism' and Ghassan Hage's (1998) 'white nation fantasy' to explore how racism functions without referencing an explicit racial ideology. Essed's concept proves apt at explaining repetitive stories of harassment in public space and at exploring how experiences of denigration, exclusion, and alienation draw on multiple markers of difference to construct minorities as non-belonging, culturally inferior, and overdetermined by their culture.