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# Joking Relationships and National Identity in Scandinavia

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies the joking relationships among the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Based on joke collections from books, the Internet and other sources, we find that Danes tell jokes about the Norwegians and Swedes, while Norwegians and Swedes tell jokes about each other, but not about the Danes. In general, the Danes tell jokes in which the butt, or object, of the jokes is a stupid Norwegian or a Swede whose values differ from those of the Danes. The Norwegians and the Swedes tell jokes in which the object is stupid – either a Norwegian or a Swede. The different values/stupid characterizations can be found in other contexts. The character of the jokes can be explained in part by the countries' respective national habitus, as they have been shaped by the types of conflictual and co-operative relationships among the countries.

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## 1. Scandinavian stereotypes

Two Danes, two Finns, two Norwegians, and two Swedes are shipwrecked and cast upon a deserted island. By the time they are rescued the Danes have formed a co-operative, the Finns have chopped down all the trees, the Norwegians have built a fishing boat, and the Swedes are waiting to be introduced. (Connery 1966:18)

This joke illustrates some commonly held national stereotypes often shared among Scandinavians.

Among the Scandinavians themselves . . . it is popularly held that the Danes are fun-loving, easygoing, shallow, shrewd, not altogether sincere and not inclined to too much exertion; the Norwegians are sturdy, brave, but a little too simple and unsophisticated . . . the Swedes are clever, capable, reliable, but much too formal, success-ridden and neurotic . . . It is only after getting to know the Scandinavians close up that one can see how true these descriptions are – and how untrue. (Connery 1966:18)

These stereotypes form one basis for the construction of national identity. Stereotypes are shared cultural descriptions of social groups, and jokes are one of the narrative forms that the Scandinavians use among themselves when they describe what is typically Danish, Norwegian or Swedish. Other types of narratives can be seen in school textbooks (Linde-Laursen 1998), in commercials and in everyday language. Characterization of the other Scandinavian nations is quite often teasing or derogatory. For instance, in the winter of 1998 the pop music channel of the Danish public service radio station (*Danmarks Radio*) held a competition among its listeners, who were asked to nominate Danes who really should have been Swedes. The nominees were persons who had done something ridiculous that would fit the Danish stereotype of the Swedes.

This example shows one important element of national stereotypes: other nations usually are considered inferior to one's own nation. As argued by Tajfel (1981), social

groups tend to define their boundaries by trying to show that the others around them are inferior. Groups divide the world into 'us' and 'them'; in this way, a nation constructs its unique character. When 'we' characterize 'them', we refer not only to the special characteristics of the other nation, but also to social traits that 'we' do not possess.

Such narratives involving national stereotypes serve to reinforce the relevance of the nation as a social entity. The jokes confirm that we live in a world of nations, and that the nation is a stable social unit with social meaning and consequences for the people within it.

National stereotypes are part of what Billig (1995) has termed 'banal nationalism', the kind of nationalism that relates to everyday life. Billig argues that nationalism is often ascribed to 'primitive' nations and is understood as something passionate. Giddens, for instance, understands nationalism as an extraordinary phenomenon that occurs when 'a sense of ontological security is put in jeopardy by the disruption of routines' (1985:187). For Giddens and many others, nationalism as a sentiment is mainly attributed to earlier phases in national development, and therefore cannot be found in contemporary Western societies. Nationalism has become an obsolete social category in modern, stable societies. The idea of banal nationalism argues against this conception. Nationalism is not just an extraordinary, or fiercely projected, phenomenon. It is constructed and reproduced through everyday life – in the news, in conversation, in public ceremonies where we display national emblems such as flags. Banal nationalism is expressed in symbols and myths. Although it can take dispassionate or even playful forms, it includes the same ideas as passionate nationalism: (1) the nation is an important social characteristic and forms a meaningful part of the individual's identity; and (2) one's own nation is superior to other nations.

National stereotypes – both the perception of one's own nation and the characterizations of other nations – are part of banal nationalism. Such stereotypes confirm many myths about Scandinavian people. Some of the most common narratives concern the consumption of alcohol. In Norway and Sweden, the availability of liquor is much more restricted than in Denmark. Norway and Sweden have state monopolies for liquor distribution, and the state-controlled retail outlets have relatively short business hours. In Denmark, liquor is

sold in normal supermarkets during regular business hours. The prices of alcoholic beverages are much higher in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark, and the Danish state is much less coercive in relation to alcohol than the governments of the other two countries (Mäkelä 1987; Thorsen 1993; Hauge 1998).

Drinking habits in Scandinavia also differ. To rely on a crude generalization, in Norway and Sweden the so-called 'Nordic drinking patterns' prevail. People have a low overall level of consumption. They drink on relatively few occasions, but when they drink, they drink to get drunk. Denmark is characterized by the so-called 'continental drinking pattern': total consumption among Danes is high, and alcohol is drunk regularly, but with less inclination to drink as a way to lose control.

Many of the jokes among Scandinavians refer to these differences. The following Danish jokes (found on the Internet) refer to the fact that Swedes are sometimes seen drunk in the streets of Danish border cities:

Two men are sitting on a bench. One of them is a drunk, and the other one is also a Swede.

What's the difference between Swedes and mosquitoes? Mosquitoes are annoying only in the summertime.

These jokes imply that Danes are able to control their liquor consumption better than their Swedish neighbours, but they also refer indirectly to the differing social institutions and welfare policies in the two countries. They also illustrate the close relationship between the two nations, which is one of the prerequisites for the existence of joking relationships.

## 2. Joking relationships

Since the beginning of this century, anthropologists have been fascinated by the existence and functions of joking relationships. Originally, most of the studies concerned kin-based societies. The seminal work on joking relationships is Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) article on joking relationships in various African tribes. Radcliffe-Brown defines a joking relationship as 'a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some cases required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to make no offence' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:195). Radcliffe-Brown interprets the functions of joking relationships in a functional-structural theoretical framework. Joking

Table 1. Preference for other nations 1990 (as percentage).

Preference	Danes	Norwegians	Swedes
Denmark	–	20	19
Norway	28	–	32
Sweden	16	41	–
Other nations	30	20	
Don't know/none	26	19	6 <sup>1</sup>
Total	100	100	100
Number of survey respondents	1030	1239	1047

<sup>1</sup> Due to slightly different wording in the Swedish questionnaire, the number of 'don't know' answers is very small in the Swedish sample.

relationships are ways meant to control the strain between conflicting groups. Joking relationships diminish conflict where there is social disjunction, thereby helping to maintain social equilibrium. The criticism of this functional-structural theory is well known and documented. Here we shall note only one of its drawbacks: it is more concerned with the functions of the joking relationship than with the contents of the actual jokes.

As argued by Apte (1985), jokes and joking relationships can be studied as social phenomena without reference to functional-structural theory. They can simply be studies of specific types of social relations. Apte (1985) argues that joking relationships are completely different in kin-based and non-kin societies. In industrial societies, joking relationships are not tied to the social structure and (contrary to the situation in kin-based societies) do not have to be highly institutionalized. In industrial societies, joking relationships are often connected to friendship and occur often in work settings, especially between men and women or between members of a group and a newcomer. In general, joking relations are characterized by three factors: (1) the joke-teller and the butt (object) of the jokes are related by some kind of structure or social relationship; (2) the joking relationship is a relatively permanent feature; and (3) joking relationships 'help define and redefine the boundaries of socially differentiated groups' (Apte 1985:55).

Ethnic jokes are jokes that members of an ethnic group tell about another ethnic group or even about their own ethnic group. Such joking relationships are to some extent institutionalized because they reflect the nation-state. Joking relationships strengthen national identity because they illustrate the national stereotypes nations assume about each other. Joking relationships are social relations where citizens

of two nations tease one another by employing stereotypes. Therefore, a joking relationship can only be established between nations that are somehow related to each other. Joking relationships require some affiliation.

There is a strong affiliation among the Scandinavian countries. People from abroad often perceive the Scandinavian countries as a unity and, while Scandinavians would deny such a contention, the fact is that Scandinavians have strong historical connections and cultural bonds. People of Scandinavia can, for instance – albeit with some difficulty – understand each other when they speak their mother tongues. Data from the European Values Study 1990 (Table 1) support this feeling of mutual affiliation. In the survey, people of Scandinavia were asked which country they would prefer to belong to were they not a Dane/Norwegian/Swede.

Table 1 shows that it is not merely geographic proximity that accounts for perceived similarities among nations. Denmark shares a boundary with Germany, but only 6 percent of the Danes surveyed chose Germany as their preferred nation. The cultural similarities among the Scandinavians are decisive. The Scandinavians are closely related, and their populations feel close to one another. Several Nordic institutions, in particular the Nordic Council, illustrate this cultural closeness.

In short, the Scandinavians have the potential for establishing joking relationships, and this article has already cited several such jokes. Jokes among related nations are quite common. Like other joking relationships, they can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. In the first case, the two parties tell jokes about each other; in the second case, only one of the two is expected to tell jokes about the other. The literature on joking relationships does not suggest hypotheses about which type will exist

in various social settings in industrialized societies. Davies' (1990) careful examination of ethnic jokes indicates that asymmetrical relationships are much less common than symmetrical relationships.

A well-known symmetrical relationship is that between the English and Americans, which Dundes (1998:155) characterizes as 'reciprocal stereotypes, integrally, mutually related, mutually reinforcing stereotypes held by each of the two groups about the other'. One example of a mutual stereotype is that the English perceive the Americans as culturally inferior, and the Americans perceive the English to be culturally superior.

In spite of the fact that the cultural similarities among the Scandinavian countries may be compared to those shared by Britain and North America, there is generally no such mutual, symmetrical joke-telling in Scandinavia. Rather, the relationship varies according to which of the three nations is involved. Connery (1966:19) argues that in all the joking about Scandinavian national characteristics, it is always the Swedes who come out the worst; but a closer look at the way Scandinavians joke among themselves reveals a more complex, asymmetrical picture.

### **Asymmetrical relations**

The following section reveals that both symmetrical and asymmetrical joking relationships exist among the Scandinavian countries. In order to confirm this contention, the character and number of jokes among the Scandinavians should be determined. However, it is very difficult to establish such empirical data for jokes. It is impossible, for instance, to determine the number of jokes that exist about other nations. Jokes typically exist only in verbal form, and the number of jokes defies any accurate measurement.

Available written data exist as collections of jokes as well as scholarly works on jokes. Based on a such types of data (Kvideland 1983; Davies 1990), searches on the Internet and the author's informal interviews with people from the Scandinavian countries, it can be argued with some certainty that there is a curious nature to the joking relationships among the Scandinavian countries.

As Table 2 shows, Danes tell jokes about Norwegians and Swedes, the Norwegians and Swedes tell jokes about each other, but neither Norwegians nor Swedes tell jokes about the Danes. The only examples of jokes in which

Table 2. *The numbers of jokes among Scandinavians.*

Joke-teller	Butt of the joke		
	Danes	Norwegians	Swedes
Danish	–	Many	Many
Norwegian	Very few	–	Many
Swedish	Very few	Many	–

Danes are the laughingstock are jokes that refer to several nations, such as the one that was quoted at the beginning of this article, or in some international jokes, i.e. identical jokes that can apply to many different groups. Table 1 shows that some joking relationships among the Scandinavian countries are asymmetrical, others symmetrical. It follows that in social settings when Scandinavians meet, Danes are expected to make jokes about the Norwegians and Swedes, and Norwegians and Swedes about each other, whereas few jokes are told about the Danes.

Ethnic jokes create a 'sudden vicarious superiority felt by those who devise, tell, or share a joke' (Davies 1990:7). Following this argument, Table 1 indicates that the Danes seem to have the greatest need for telling ethnic jokes and thus attributing particular unwanted traits to the other groups. When we tell jokes, we laugh at the other person or nation's folly, perhaps 'glad or relieved that it is not our own' (Davies 1990:7). This means that joke telling has a double edge: it ridicules the other group, but it also imparts value to social institutions and characteristics that the joke-teller uses to define his own culture.

### **Nature of the jokes**

The next step in the analysis is to consider the nature of the jokes. Again, there seem to be different types of jokes among the Scandinavian countries. Following Davies (1990, 1998), we can distinguish among at least three different types of jokes: (1) jokes where the object, or butt, of the joke is considered *stupid*; (2) jokes where the butt of the joke is considered *canny* or *shrewd*; and (3) jokes that point to *different values* between the joke-teller and the object of the joke. It is sometimes difficult to classify a specific joke unambiguously into one of these categories, so they should be considered only as analytical categories. The idea of the joke, nonetheless, is always to ridicule traits of the butt of the joke by exposing elements in the

national stereotype as perceived by the joke-teller.

*Stupidity-based jokes* are quite common among the Scandinavians. This was demonstrated most clearly in the so-called 'War of Jokes' that took place between Norway and Sweden in the mid-1970s (Kvideland 1983). The war was especially strongly fought in two popular newspapers. It started with a number of jokes about Norway in a Swedish newspaper. A Norwegian journalist reported this to his paper and suggested that Norwegians retaliate with their own jokes about the Swedes. Hundreds of jokes were reported, most of which were the standard jokes that we know from similar versions among other ethnic groups. Two examples suffice to give a general impression of the character of the jokes (Kvideland 1983):

Why does his dog always accompany a Swedish police officer? Because one brain thinks better than no brain.

When the people from the south travelled north to settle in Scandinavia, they came to a signpost with two arrows. Below one arrow it said, 'To Sweden'; below the other, 'To Norway'. Those who could read went to Norway.

Many of the jokes were told in two different versions, where the joke-teller and the butt of the jokes changed places. Such symmetrical jokes are common among neighbouring nations (Davies 1990). The object of the joke is usually from a neighbouring people with strong similarities to the joke-teller's people. Since the Scandinavians have fairly similar languages and a diffuse kind of common identity as Scandinavians, these nations can be expected to have many such jokes. The Norwegian-Swedish relationship is an example of a common phenomenon. The deviant case in this analysis is the joking relationship between the Danes and the two other nations. We will now turn to a more detailed description of these relationships.

Davies argues that stupidity-based jokes (where the butt of the joke is called stupid) are the most widespread of ethnic jokes (1990: 40ff). In general, irrespective of whether the joking relationship is symmetrical or asymmetrical, it is characteristic that the object is considered stupid, primitive or backward. He is often perceived as provincial to the storyteller; he is in the periphery, whereas the joke-teller perceives him/herself as being in the centre. The butt of the joke is pre-modern, strongly influenced by the culture of, say, peasants or

fishermen, in contrast to the joke-teller's urban, more modern orientation (Davies 1990:82-83). This is exactly the pattern of Danish jokes about Norwegians. Norway is considered a backward country, provincial, in the periphery not only from a Scandinavian perspective, but also in relation to Europe. Norway's modern position as an oil exporter seems to have no impact on the joke-telling. By the same token, Norway's independence from the European Union is interpreted as a sign of its provincialism. One example of Norway's so-called 'pre-modern position' is related to the alleged strong national pride in Norway, which is seen in contrast to other more modern nations' international orientation.

Various nations have produced books about elephants. The Germans published a book called *Elephants and Efficiency*; the French, *Elephants and Their Love Life*; the Danes, *100 Ways to Cook an Elephant*; the Norwegians, *Norway and We the Norwegians*.

Other Danish jokes about the Norwegians play with the language similarity between the two nations. One type of joke shows how the Norwegian language uses primitive, or old-fashioned, expressions for modern phenomena. For instance, in Norwegian, a skyscraper is said to be called '*hytta-på-hytta*' (cottage upon cottage), and the Norwegian name for James Bond is '*Fjell-Åke*' (Åke from the mountains). These examples show how Danish jokes perceive Norway as a provincial nation. The Norwegian people have not yet reached a mature state of modernization, and the Danish jokes reflect a feeling of superiority on the part of the Danes towards the Norwegians.

In contrast to the Danish-Norwegian relationship, the Norwegian-Swedish relationship is symmetrical – which, as we have stated, is the more common type of joking relationship. Initially in the War of Jokes, the Norwegians and the Swedes told stupidity-based jokes about each other; but gradually the war seemed to devolve to an out-and-out competition, in which the two countries used all the jokes they could think of to 'win' the war against each other. Again, it must be stressed that such joke-telling presupposes a close cultural and linguistic relationship between the two parties. At the same time, the jokes reveal a sense of competition and even minor hostility between the two nations – also something one would expect to find among relatively similar nations.

The *second* type of ethnic joke is where the

Table 3. *Character of the jokes among Scandinavians.*

Character of joke	Joke-teller	Butt of the joke
The butt is stupid or provincial	Danish Norwegian Swedish	Norwegian Swedish Norwegian
The butt is canny or shrewd	None between the nations	None
The butt has different values	Danish	Swedish

object of the joke is called *canny*, or shrewd. Canny jokes are equally as widespread as stupidity-based jokes, but they reflect a smaller list of ethnic groups (Davies 1990:102), and are typically about the Scots or the Jews. The object of canny jokes is usually a local minority, clearly connected to the nation in question. Although the Scandinavian countries are very similar, such jokes are rarely told among these nations. There are, of course, examples of such jokes that concern minorities in the individual countries. In Denmark, for instance, the inhabitants of the peninsula of Mols are the butts of many such jokes (*molbohistorier*). However, a survey of Scandinavian jokes suggests that the Scandinavian countries follow the same pattern as other countries – jokes where the laughingstock is considered shrewd, or canny, only exist within the individual countries; or the jokes concern populations considered stereotypically to be canny or shrewd.

The *third* type of joke relates to *different value systems*. In spite of the great similarities among the Scandinavian welfare states, there are several differences in the structure of these societies. As mentioned earlier, some differences relate to alcohol consumption. The Danes consider the Norwegians and Swedes to have deviant, primitive habits and attitudes towards alcohol consumption. When Norwegians and Swedes drink, goes the Danish argument, they drink to become drunk and to enjoy their drunkenness, not to enjoy the taste of the drink or the social occasion. An example:

Do you know this popular Swedish party game? Three Swedes take a small boat and row to a small island in a lake. They bring a lot of liquor. At the island they enter a small cottage and start drinking. After a period of heavy drinking the party game begins: one of the three leaves the cottage and the other two try to guess who he is. This game can also be played with only two Swedes, but then much more liquor is needed.

The last part of the joke is often told in an

adaptation to the Swedish language (*då behövs mer sprit*), which language play heightens the comic element of the joke. Due to the close similarity of the languages, simply uttering phrases intended to sound like the other nation's language is in itself comic. Other Danish jokes about Swedes are related to their too energetic, healthy lifestyle and to their relations to the state, which the Danes consider a 'Big Brother' state that aims to control all parts of Swedish life. This the Danes contrast to their own relaxed, anarchistic, even hedonistic lifestyle.

To summarize: a comparison of typical ethnic jokes shows that the character of the jokes differs among the Scandinavian countries. Only the relationship between the Norwegians and the Swedes is symmetrical, and the jokes they tell about each other are of the type in which the butt of the joke is called stupid. The Norwegians and Swedes tell very few jokes about the Danes. The Danes tell different types of jokes about the Norwegians and the Swedes. Although there is, of course, some overlap, there is a tendency for the jokes about Norwegians to be the type that point out a provincialism or stupidity, and the jokes about Swedes to concern differences in values. These results are shown in Table 3.

If we consider Tables 2 and 3 together, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The jokes Scandinavians tell about each other have a special character.
- There are few jokes about Danes.
- Norwegians and Swedes tell jokes about each other but not about Danes.
- Danes tell different kinds of jokes about Norwegians (stupidity-based jokes) and Swedes (different values jokes).

These jokes affirm the relations and stereotypes shared among these countries.

It goes without saying that such ideas about national identity are extremely difficult to

sustain by empirical data, and to the extent that data do exist, they are often ambiguous and contradictory. In the following sections, some explanations of the differences in joking relationships among the three nations will be elaborated.

### 3. Danish–Norwegian–Swedish relationships

As shown in Table 1, the fundamental prerequisite for a joking relationship exists among the Scandinavian countries: the countries feel closely related. Furthermore, the histories of the three countries are tightly interwoven, and many elements of their cultures and societal institutions have great similarity. No wonder, therefore, that one finds joking relationships among these countries. It is also plausible – because of their relative similarity – to expect that the jokes tend to focus on how the countries differ from one another.

Table 1 also shows the relative popularity of the three Scandinavian peoples *vis-à-vis* each other: Danes choose Norwegians above Swedes, Norwegians choose Swedes above Danes, and Swedes choose Norwegians above Danes. These data indicate that Norwegians and Swedes feel mutually closer than they do to the Danes, and this may at least partially explain the reciprocal (symmetrical) nature of the joke-telling between the two countries. Denmark seems to be a less significant country for the other two nations, which may explain why there are few jokes about the Danes. Denmark is not considered as relevant to the other two nations as they are to each other. This is supported by the geographical structure of the three countries. Norway and Sweden comprise the Scandinavian Peninsula and share a 2000-km-long boundary, while Denmark consists of a separate peninsula and several islands, unconnected to the other two countries.

The character of the jokes based on stupidity implies a superiority/inferiority relationship (Davies 1990). If this observation is correct, it indicates that there is an ambiguity about the superiority/inferiority relationship between Norwegians and Swedes and a feeling of superiority on the part of Danes towards the Norwegians. The character of the jokes on differing values indicates that the Danish–Swedish relationship is less related to inferiority/superiority than to differences in values and

an ongoing struggle for social respect and true recognition between the two countries.

A more important component in understanding the character of the joking relationships can be found in the ‘national habitus’ of the three countries. Elias (1996) uses the term ‘national habitus’ to describe fundamental components of a nation’s collective values. According to Dunning & Menell (1996), *habitus* was a very popular concept in German sociology in the period between the World Wars. This notion of habitus is unrelated to the currently fashionable Bourdieu concept. National habitus also differs from other concepts, such as national identity, national mentality or *Volkscharakter* (national character). The concept of *Volkscharakter* refers to the widespread idea at the turn of the century that there were essential biological differences between different people and, consequently, invariable social and cultural differences. In contrast, the concept of national habitus implies that basic national values have a stable, but changeable, character. Jokes among Scandinavians are only one expression of the narratives of national habitus that may be found in the three countries, and we should expect to find similar descriptions of the stereotypes of the three countries in other contexts.

Scandinavian national differences have been the topic of several novels and travel descriptions, but no social science comparative studies exist of the national identities of the three countries. The evidence, therefore, can only be rather impressionistic. It should also be emphasized that, as with other social constructions, the narratives and suggested explanations of Scandinavian national habitus are time-specific and subject to constant re-interpretation. Three examples of texts describing national habitus follow that support the characterizations as presented herein of the national habitus of the Scandinavian countries:

- (1) Recently, an anthology of literary works was published in which Danes and Swedes write about each other (Liljenberg 1996). The selection of publications covers several centuries, and it is striking that almost all Swedish texts are relatively positive towards the Danes, whereas almost all the Danish texts are relatively negative towards the Swedes. The literary texts confirm the national stereotypes as they have been quoted earlier. The Danes are relaxed, positive and kind people; the Swedes are boring, rigid and formal. Danes know how to live a pleasant life; Swedes suppress their desires. In short, the



literary texts confirm the existence of different values among the Swedes and the Danes.

- (2) Norwegian (e.g., Klausen 1984; Eriksen 1993), Swedish (e.g., Daun 1989; Gaunt & Löfgren 1985) and, to a lesser extent, Danish (e.g., Østergård 1992) historians and ethnographers have attempted to locate some of the basic elements in the national habitus (or national identity) of the various countries. These studies generally confirm most elements of the stereotypes: the narratives in the ethnographic publications are mirrored in the jokes.

Eriksen (1993:84–85) describes the traits typically ascribed to the Norwegians: egalitarian individualism, objectivity and sincerity, small town, simplicity, nature, puritanism. Daun's (1989) study claims that the Swedes are shy, lonely and independent, and try to avoid conflicts in their social relations. Emotionally, Swedes are sensible, reasonable, and melancholy.

Østergård (1992) claims that the Danes are anarchistic and liberalistic. Gundelach (1992) argues that the Danes can be seen as a tribe: relatively closed, self-satisfied and valuing consensus.

There are some instances where these national ethnographers characterize the other Scandinavians, as when the Norwegian Eriksen (1993:74) writes: 'When the State asks a Swede to do something, he will, it is said, do it. The Norwegians are rather subordinate, but not to the same degree as the Swedes. And what is most important is, as it is well known, to beat the Swedes'. The Swede Löfgren (1986) speaks half ironically about his 'desire for Danish civilization' and refers to the Swedish stereotype of Denmark as a country where life is more easy and bureaucracy less dominant, but which is, on the other hand, too bohemian, loose and inefficient.

These ethnographic studies reveal in part the same patterns expressed in the jokes. The jokes, of course, focus on the unflattering parts of the national characteristics and avoid the more positive ones; but the themes of the jokes will not surprise anyone familiar with the ethnographic studies. The Norwegians are provincial and the Swedes shy and formal, even by their own accounts.

- (3) The German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger visited Norway and Sweden in the mid-1980s, and many of his observations describe the overall picture quite accurately. Enzensberger sees Norway as a society that is both modern and traditional. The modern oil industry has created an international capitalistic structure of companies and banks, and a large percentage of the population works in this industry. At the same time, the traditional elements in Norwegian society are very strong, with emphasis on tradi-

tional folk culture, nature, etc. In Sweden, Enzensberger experienced how the population seemed to accept a strong authoritarian state. The state has an immunity in relation to the population. It has coalesced the moral values of the citizens and invades the most intimate elements of its citizens' everyday lives. It is surprising to Enzensberger that the citizens accept this situation. They even seem to feel secure with, and to welcome, this strong state control. As a seasoned observer of cultural differences, Enzensberger confirms the same types of characterizations that one finds in many of the jokes.

These three examples suggest similar descriptions of national habitus of the Scandinavian nations. It should be emphasized that there can be a tendency in such descriptions to look for similarities and overlook contradictory evidence. Linde-Laursen (1995), for instance, has shown that national stereotypes of Danes and Swedes have changed during this century. Their national habitus, therefore, reflect not fixed natural differences, but changing attitudes and conditions in the two nations. The explanations of the differences must in the same way be considered interpretations of different historical developments. Like individuals, nations constantly change and re-interpret their histories.

#### 4. Explanations

The national habitus is primarily shaped by the collective experiences of a people. It is crystallized in the collective memory and in the social institutions, and is, in turn, changed by collective events. An in-depth analysis of such components by far exceeds what can be covered herein, but a few possible explanations can be suggested.

According to Elias' analysis of German national habitus, the components of a habitus can be rooted in the state formation process, particularly in national defeats or victories that took place several hundred years ago, although the nation is transformed and modified by later developments. Elias (1996:19) also argues that 'the fortunes of the nation over the centuries become sedimented into the habitus of its individual members'.

A brief sketch of Scandinavian history illustrates some of the elements comprising the national habitus. For hundreds of years, the southern parts of Sweden and Norway were part of the Danish kingdom. In the late 17th century, the Swedish kingdom conquered the

portion of Denmark that is now the southern part of Sweden, bringing it into the Swedish kingdom. This seriously weakened the Danish state. In the beginning of the 19th century, following the Napoleon wars, Denmark lost Norway, which entered into a political union with Sweden. In 1905, Norway declared her freedom from Sweden.

As this extremely brief description shows, over time Denmark has lost several wars to Sweden. Sweden is often seen as the hereditary enemy of Denmark, even in modern sports events, especially soccer games. When Norway declared her sovereignty from Sweden, many Swedes were disappointed by the Danes, who (albeit passively) supported the Norwegians. For Denmark, Sweden is the bigger and stronger brother. For Norway, Sweden is a rival. If the Scandinavian wars have had an impact on the national habitus, the Danes should feel inferior to the Swedes, and there should be a natural sense of competition between the Norwegians and the Swedes. The ambiguity of the Norwegians in relation to the Swedes is illustrated by the fact that while the Swedes received Norway as part of the Vienna peace treaty, Swedish domination of Norway was never very strong; in the end, the Norwegians abolished the agreement, which the Swedes could do nothing to prevent.

Another type of explanation concerns internal components of the modernization and nation-building processes. In spite of the similarities among the countries, their nation-building processes have varied considerably. It has already been noted that Norway was a Danish province until 1814, when it entered into a union with Sweden. Compared to Denmark, Sweden has for centuries been a more centralized nation. Historians have often considered King Gustav I Vasa (1496–1560, King from 1520) as the person who created a centralized Sweden and the first in a long row of authoritarian, bureaucratic leaders. Gustav freed Sweden from membership in the Nordic Union and created an independent, centralized state. In contrast to most other nations, Sweden did not have a feudal system. There was no intermediary link between the state and the peasants. Sweden became industrialized relatively late in history, and its industrial structure consists of many large-scale firms. The Social Democrat Party became very strong and has dominated Swedish politics for most of this century.

In contrast, Denmark had a feudal system,

with many competing lords and enduring conflicts between the lords and the king. Small-scale farmers played an important role in Denmark's modernization process, which was characterized by co-operation between the state and the peasants. The workers became part of the modernization process only decades after the democratic constitution was in place. The peasants also formed co-operatives and modernized the Danish agricultural sector from the grassroots level. This illustrates the Danish 'liberal urge for action and anarchistic self-confidence' (Christiansen & Østergård 1992: 54).

The historic Norway–Sweden relationship seems to explain the hesitant and unstable nature of the joke-telling between Norwegians and Swedes. Their symmetrical joking relationship is similar to what is found among other neighbouring nations (Davies 1990). The Danish–Norwegian joking relationship also follows a well-known pattern. The several hundred years of Danish rule over Norway is an important part of why Norway is referred to as a subordinate country. Coupled with Norway's relatively remote geographic location, this may explain why the Danes tell stupidity-based jokes about Norway.

The asymmetrical Danish–Swedish joking relationship is more puzzling. Following the other examples, the expectation would be that Swedes would tell stupidity-based jokes about the Danes. However, there are very few examples of such jokes. Danish jokes about Sweden refer to a stereotype of the rigid, boring, unhappy Swedes. The Danes perceive themselves as pleasant, anarchistic and hedonistic. It is possible that the very nature of jokes makes it difficult for Swedes to tell jokes about the Danes. Jokes about what may be seen as a more pleasant life may be difficult to communicate. In contrast, the Danish jokes about Sweden often play with the contrast between the Swedes' hidden hedonistic desires and their austere, controlled reality.

## 5. Conclusions

Joking relationships are common among neighbouring and culturally similar countries. It is therefore to be expected that such relationships exist among the Scandinavian countries. What is unexpected is the peculiar character of the jokes: the Danes tell jokes about 'stupid' Norwegians and jokes about the 'wrong' values

of the Swedes. The Norwegians and the Swedes tell stupidity-based jokes about each other, but neither of these nations tells jokes about Denmark. The character of the jokes can at least be partly explained by the countries' respective national habitus as they have developed in the mutual conflicts among the countries.

Jokes are a way of describing stereotypes, and they are only one source of narratives featuring stereotypes. In many cases, there is overlap between literary and scholarly descriptions of the national stereotypes and other types of narratives. Joking relationships can therefore be used as an indicator of the cultural similarity among nations as well as a source of information about the national stereotypes. In contrast to other texts, however, in jokes it is pointless to look for the motives or purposes that characterize a single author (Davies 1990:3). Precisely because jokes are jokes, they indicate that the described stereotype should not be taken too seriously. One can tell jokes involving national stereotypes without believing in them, whereas serious stereotyping implies that there is some significance to the stereotypes. It is therefore quite possible to tell jokes without having any impact on the joke-teller's behaviour or on the reactions towards the butt of the joke. The joke plays with the essential characterization, which is part of the stereotype. Jokes, especially joking relationships, are primarily expressions of feelings of alliance and affiliation, and they achieve their result by teasingly playing with stereotypes.

The examples above also show that overlap exists among empirical studies, narratives and jokes about various countries. This means that the study of joking relationships even among very similar countries, as in Scandinavia, can serve to illustrate how national stereotypes are constructed and maintained.

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