

# Manifestation of hidden discrimination and everyday prejudice towards immigrants in Iceland

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to find out the nature and effect of everyday prejudice and discrimination in Iceland. The sample consisted of 89 participants, 72 of whom were of foreign origin while the remaining 17 were Icelandic. A recording form was constructed where 15 examples of disrespectful behavior were listed. Over a period of two weeks, the participants were asked to indicate each day whether they had experienced one of the examples that day, where it happened, and how it made them feel. The findings suggested a significant difference between the Icelandic and non-Icelandic samples in terms of perceived prejudice and discrimination. The feelings experienced by different participants in similar situations are similar, independent of origin.

**Keywords:** Immigrants ■ hidden prejudice ■ discrimination

## **Introduction**

The number of immigrants in Iceland has grown rapidly since 2006. In 1990 there were 4,812 non-Icelandic citizens residing in Iceland but in 2006 the number had gone up to 18,563. A rapid increase took place between 2006-2008, with 2008 having largest number of non-Icelandic citizens in Iceland, a total of 24,379. The reasons behind this increase of immigrants in Iceland can first and foremost be traced back to need for labour during those years, in part because of extensive construction projects. After an economic recession hit Iceland, the number of immigrants decreased again and by the end of 2012 there were 20,957 non-Icelandic citizens who had permanent residence in Iceland, or about 7% of the nation. By January 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 the largest group of immigrants residing in Iceland was from Poland, or 9,040 individuals. The next largest group was from Lithuania, or a number of 1,605 (Statistics Iceland, 2013). Immigrants from Germany, Denmark, Latvia, the United Kingdom, Philippines, and Thailand were between 500-1,000 from each country.

The increase of people with non-Icelandic backgrounds has brought with it a considerable discussion about prejudice, racism and discrimination in Icelandic society. Prejudice is a term that most people think they understand, but has a multifaceted meaning. Allport (1954) defines prejudice as follows: "Prejudice is an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group or an individual of that group" (Allport, 1954, p. 9). According to Allport prejudice is first and foremost an attitude that affects a person's behaviour but can be very well hidden so that only those who the behaviour is directed towards can detect it. According to van Dijk (1987) nationality-based and racist prejudices are a system for negative evaluations of characteristics of certain groups which have been defined as culturally different. Victims of prejudice are therefore groups that are *thought to be* different from members of the majority group. The perceived difference is thought of as negative compared to views, values, traditions and goals of the group in power, generally this group is dominated by the indigenous population. This negative evaluation is built on inadequate, generalized ideas about the minority group – in essence, stereotypes.

Definitions of racism are numerous and complicated, but according to Philomenia Essed racism and discrimination includes "all acts – verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal – with intended or unintended negative or unfavourable consequences for racially or ethnically dominated groups. It is important to see that intentionality is not a necessary component of racism" (Essed 1991, p.45).

Discrimination is essentially the process where prejudice influences behaviour or actions, either at an individual-, group- or government level. In the Icelandic language discrimination is mostly talked about in the context of laws and regulations but discrimination can also refer to the behaviour of an individual belonging to a majority group towards individuals of a minority group. Discrimination therefore happens when an individual or a group is treated less favourably because of their nationality or because of something else that they have been defined by as *different* than the majority group.

Hidden prejudice or "everyday prejudice and discrimination" towards people with non-Icelandic backgrounds have been far less discussed and researched by academics than racism in general. The term "everyday racism" can be traced back to Philomenia Essed (1984). Later Essed (1991, 2002) also uses the terms "everyday prejudice" and "everyday discrimination" in her writings. According to Essed (2002), everyday racism refers to systematic, repeated and known habits and behaviour, and therefore surfaces within normal circumstances in people's daily lives, not as a specific, unusual occurrence. Hence, everyday racism is always racism but racism is not always everyday racism (Essed, 1991).

Alvarez (2010) defines everyday racism as hidden, everyday forms of discrimination, examples include being ignored and isolated, made fun of and

embarrassed, or being in some way treated differently than people belonging to the majority group. According to Alvarez (2010) these are incidences that would seem innocent and harmless but when they build up they can greatly affect people's mental and physical well-being.

If prejudice and lack of respect for certain groups of society have become like any other routine which is seen as "normal" behaviour, it is not recognized as prejudiced, at least not by members of the majority group. This means that the majority group, or the group which holds power in society, does not perceive all of the prejudice's manifestations, does not acknowledge them as discrimination, does not define them as racism and therefore does not view them as a problem (Essed, 1991).

The current study's objective is to investigate everyday prejudice and everyday discrimination towards people with non-Icelandic backgrounds residing in Iceland, and to use a research method which has not been used before in Iceland for this purpose. Numerous studies looking at conditions of various immigrant groups in Iceland have been conducted, as well as Icelandic people's attitudes towards immigrants. However, researching immigrants' everyday experiences in their daily lives with interviews and similar methods would be difficult as discussed later in this article.

### **Research objective and questions**

The main objective of the research has three components. Firstly, assessments are made to see if people with non-Icelandic backgrounds personally experience prejudice and discrimination on a regular basis in their daily lives. Secondly, the locations of these types of experiences are determined, and thirdly the emotions that come with these types of experiences are identified. Assessments are made to determine if people with an Icelandic background experience the behaviour to the same extent as people with non-Icelandic backgrounds, and if there is a difference in experiences based on nationality. The main research questions were as follows:

Do people with non-Icelandic backgrounds experience hidden forms of prejudice regularly in their daily lives?

Which forms of everyday prejudice and discrimination do people with non-Icelandic backgrounds experience most often in their daily lives?

In which circumstances do most people experience this type of behaviour?

What emotion comes with experiencing hidden prejudice regularly in one's daily life?

Do Icelandic people generally have comparable experiences of hidden prejudice and discrimination as people with non-Icelandic backgrounds, in their daily lives in Iceland?

## Procedure

Essed (1991) particularly mentions one problem with research methods when looking at everyday prejudice, which is that respondents are less likely to remember what could be called “small” or “unimportant” incidents and even prefer not to discuss them so they can not be accused of exaggerating or being overly sensitive (Essed, 1991). Instead of asking participants directly about their experience with prejudice, the current study used methods addressing behaviour which, according to the participant, demonstrates a certain lack of respect and prejudice. The research method is based on having participants record answers to certain questions every day for two continuous weeks in the same month. The items asked about are based on previous studies on manifestations of everyday racism (Alvarez, 2010; Barnes, 2000; Essed, 2002). Participants were asked to record everyday if they experienced any of the 15 types of behavior referred to on the recording sheet. In addition, the participants were asked to mention where the incidents took place and which emotions they felt in the situations that they recorded. The recording sheets were translated to Polish, Lithuanian, Thai, and English. Table 1 shows the proportions of respondents who had experienced any of the incidents in question.

Participants were chosen with opportunity sample from work places in the greater Reykjavik area and from the Suðurnes area, where both immigrants and Icelandic people work, from language schools in Reykjavik, in addition to working translators being asked to distribute recording sheets to other people from their country, if interested. The recording sheets were anonymous and came with a confidential envelope, which could be put into a closed box at their workplace or language school, handed to a research worker, or sent by mail. Participants from outside the city sent their recording sheets by mail. With each recording sheet came a letter in the appropriate language where the research was explained. The letter did not specify that the research focused on prejudice.

**Table 1.** *The proportion of participants who had experienced negative behaviour during a two-week period*

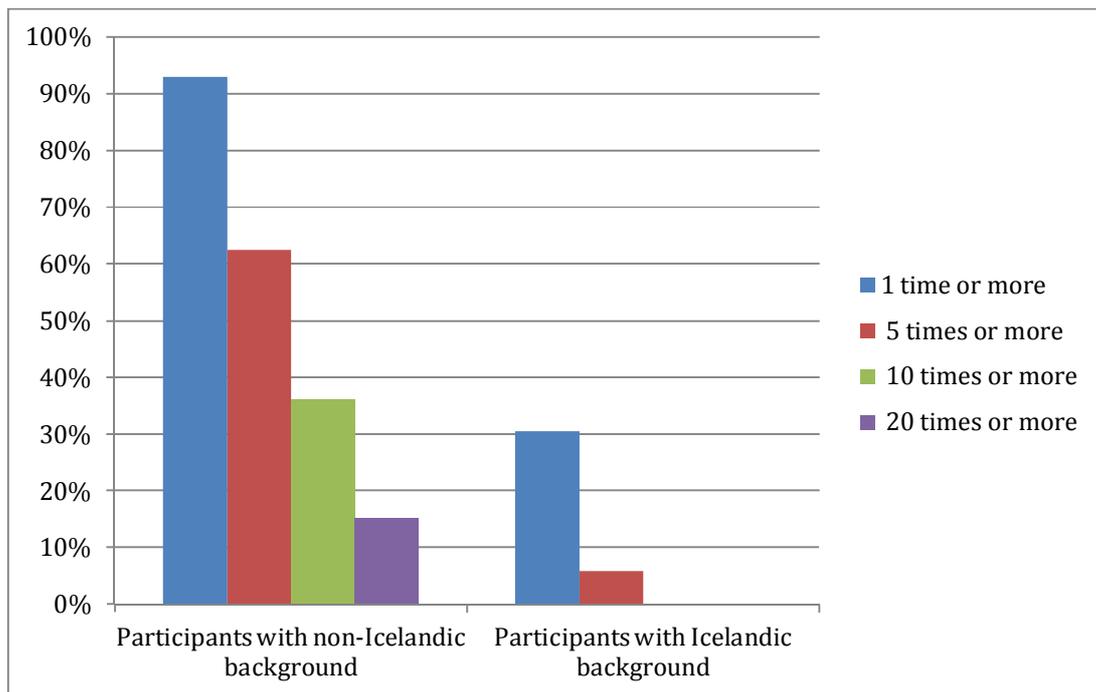
<b>Today I experienced that I felt that someone:</b>	One time or more	Five times or more	Ten times or more	One time or more	Five times or more	Ten times or more
Pretended not to understand me	46%	11%	5%	0%	0%	0%
Avoided communication or contact with me	46%	6%	0%	12%	0%	0%
Called me names	14%	6%	3%	0%	0%	0%
Laughed at me	29%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Ignored me, pretending they didn't see me	58%	9%	3%	23%	0%	0%

Talked down to me – was patronising	17%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Showed dislike with facial expression	43%	6%	3%	6%	0%	0%
Talked to me like I was a child	29%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Stared at me, looked me up and down	49%	7%	0%	6%	0%	0%
Spoke to me loudly and drew attention to me	40%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Spoke English to me, without knowing if I speak Icelandic	45%	11%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Showed me distrust or suspicion	45%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Showed impatience toward me	37%	8%	0%	6%	0%	0%
Called abusive words after me	13%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Talked ABOUT me, not WITH me	43%	11%	3%	0%	0%	0%

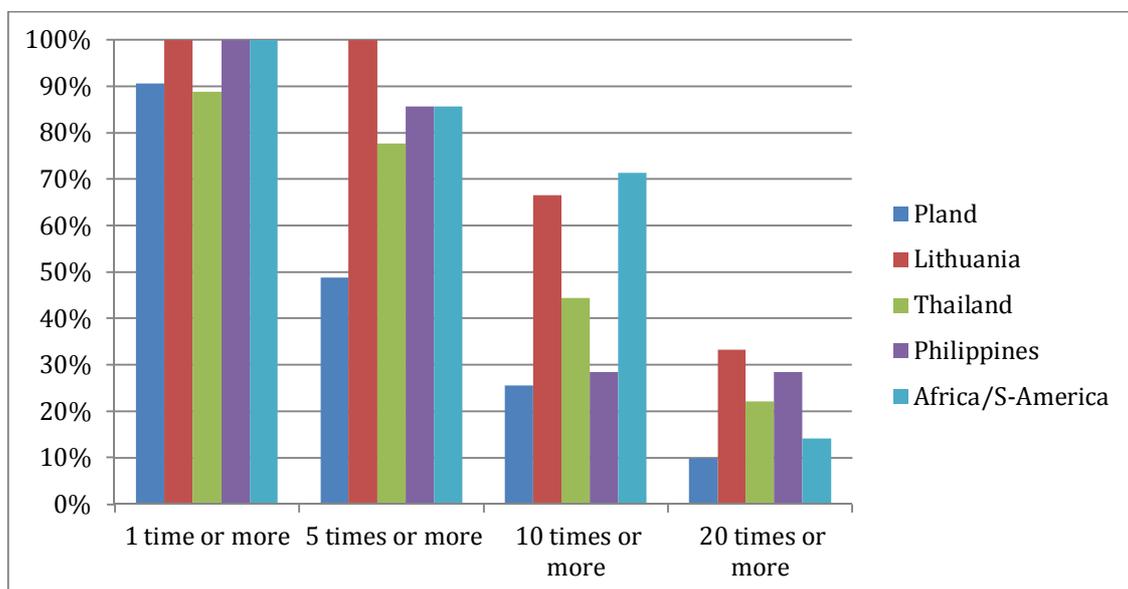
Out of 200 recording sheets that had been sent out, 89 individuals returned answer sheets, 72 non-Icelandic participants (51 women and 20 men) and 17 Icelandic participants (9 women and 8 men). The mean age was 34.1 years old. Out of the non-Icelandic participants 49% had resided in Iceland for more than 5 years, 40% had resided in Iceland for 2-5 years and 6% for less than one year. Polish participants made up the majority of the respondents, with 43 participants. Nine participants were from Thailand, seven from the Philippines, and six from Lithuania. During the analysis, a total of seven participants with African or South-American backgrounds were put together in one category. Lastly, 17 Icelandic participants returned their answering sheets.

## Results

When looking at an average from all groups, 82% of the participants had experienced one or more incidents referred to on the recording sheet during the two-week period. The percentage was 93% for people with non-Icelandic backgrounds and 35% for people with an Icelandic background. An ANOVA showed that a significant difference was found in frequency of experiences based on country of origin ( $F(5, 88)=7,378, p<0,001$ ). A Tukey's HSD showed that the difference was significant between Icelandic participants on one hand ( $M= 0,41, SD=0,50$ ) and participants from Poland ( $M=0,91, SD=0,29$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p<0,001$ ), Thailand ( $M=0,89, SD=0,33$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p<0,01$ ), Lithuania ( $M=1,00, SD=0,00$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p<0,01$ ), Africa and South America ( $M=1,00, SD=0,00$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p=0,001$ ) and the Philippines ( $M=1,00, SD=0,00$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p=0,001$ ) on the other hand.



**Figure 1.** *Proportion of participants who had experienced any kind of hidden discrimination during the two weeks period*



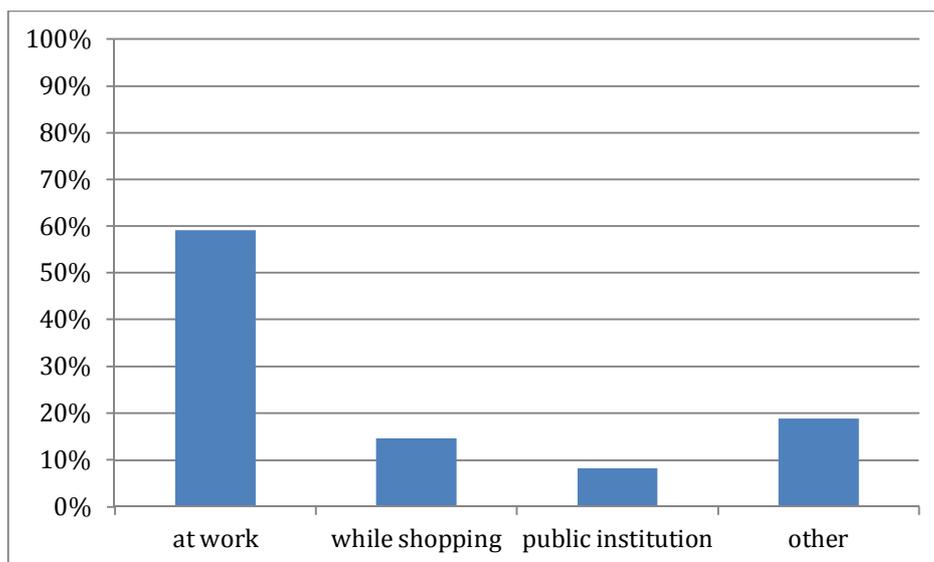
**Figure 2.** *Proportion of negative experiences between different national groups*

Figure 1 demonstrates that the proportion of participants with non-Icelandic backgrounds who had experienced any of the indicated behaviors five times or more during the two weeks was 63% but 6% for Icelandic participants. Furthermore, 36% of participants with non-Icelandic backgrounds had experienced an indicated behavior ten times or more,

with no Icelandic participants reporting this for themselves. Lastly, 15% of participants with non-Icelandic backgrounds experienced an indicated behavior more than twenty times during the time 14 day period.

As Figure 2 demonstrates there is little difference between nationality groups when looking at how many participants had experienced a negative regard one or more times during a two-week period. However, Polish individuals are less likely than other groups to have experienced a negative regard five times or more during the time period. Participants with African/South-American, Lithuanian or Thai background experienced the negative behavior the most often, when looking at responds that indicated ten times or more during the two-week period. Participants with Lithuanian and Philippine backgrounds were most likely to experience a negative behavior referred to on the sheet, twenty times or more during the 14 day time period. When only looking at participants with non-Icelandic backgrounds, an ANOVA showed that a significant difference could only be found between Polish participants ( $M= 6.93$ ,  $SD= 7.48$ ) and Philippine participants ( $M=30.14$ ,  $SD= 45.74$ ; Tukey's HSD,  $p=.01$ ), as the Philippine participants did on average record far more incidences than did the Polish participants.

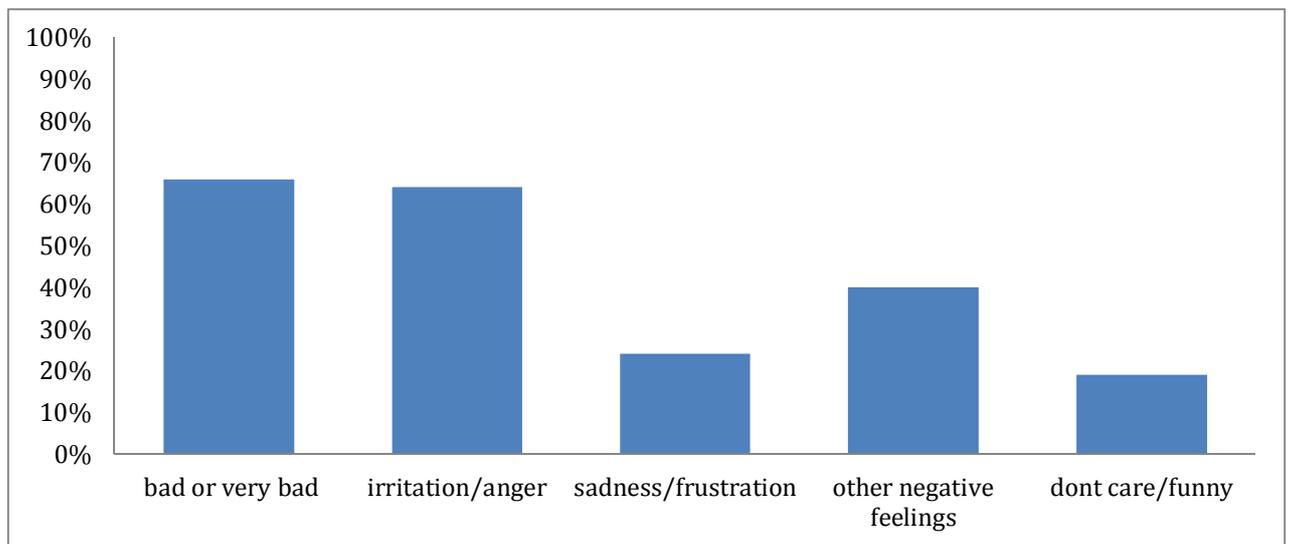
Most often participants experienced being ignored or made feel like they did not exist, while other hidden manifestations of prejudice like pretending to not understand the person, avoiding contact with them or stare and measure them up and down were also very common. Interestingly, behavior which includes direct discrimination or open prejudice are far less experienced by the participants than the hidden manifestations. For example, much fewer people had experienced being called names or having insults being yelled at them during the two weeks that they participated in the study.



**Figure 3.** *Where did hidden prejudice mostly take place?*

Figure 3 shows that most of the incidents took place in the workplaces of the participants. Participants did not always indicate where they had experienced the behaviour and these results show the division of percentages of those participants who did indicate where it had taken place. The category “other” includes places such as “downtown”, “on the street”, “in a bar”, “at a hair salon”, “at a doctor’s office”, “at the child’s school or leisure club”, and “at home”.

Participants wrote down a total of 215 comments regarding the feelings they experienced caused by the incidents, and 194 of those comments described a negative or a very negative feeling.



**Figure 4.** *Participants’ feelings in situations where they experienced everyday prejudice*

The four categories representing the most common answers can be seen in Figure 4. Some kind of a negative feeling was experienced by 81% of participants. The category “other negative feelings” includes words such as *offended, exhausted, humiliated, lonely, isolated, disappointed, stressed, anxious, shame, unfair, crying, insecure, embarrassment, and awkward.*

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that the majority of people with a foreign background regularly experience disrespect and discrimination which brings forth negative or very negative feelings. Only five out of the 72 non-Icelandic participants did not experience any behaviour towards them that would fall under hidden prejudice and discrimination during the two week time period. After observing that over 60% of non-Icelandic participants experienced such a behavior toward them five times or more during the 14 days, it is strongly indicated that this is everyday discrimination as defined by Essed

(2002). A large portion of the sample experience prejudice in their daily lives and this causes feelings of distress among the ethnic minorities that took part in the study. Most of the time the incidences occurred in the workplace.

It can be expected that most people can have negative experiences every now and then in their daily lives, for example due to gender, age, social and economic status, disability, physical or mental health. This study shows that national origin is one factor that has a significant effect on the frequency of those incidences and they are a persistent part of many non-Icelanders' daily lives. It is important to bear in mind that even though it could be argued that three of the questions are not applicable to the Icelandic participants since they ask about language ability, it still does not change the frequency of incidents for non-Icelandic participants.

The results indicate that the manifestation of everyday prejudice and discrimination that is obvious and visible to others is not nearly as common as the behaviour that is disguised and often invisible to people other than the ones who it is directed towards. The manifestation that most participants had experienced during the two weeks was people ignoring them or pretending they were not present. It is very difficult for anyone to "prove" that he or she was ignored or that someone pretended that he or she was not present, or that someone avoided communicating with him or her. In the same sense, it is almost impossible for someone to "prove" that someone else had *pretended* not to understand him or her, or had shown dissatisfaction in his or her facial expressions. On the other hand, a number of people can witness someone being called names or having insults yelled at them on the street. The results of this study show that this kind of a hidden behaviour does not cause less distress than in the case of a more obvious manifestation. It must be considered serious that 29% of non-Icelandic participants experienced being laughed at once or more during the two-week time period, and experienced "*shame*", "*sadness*", "*disappointment*", "*irritation*", "*misery*", "*being offended*", or felt like they were "*worse of a person.*"

It is possible that some of the hidden manifestations of prejudice have become such a "normal" part of communication with people of foreign origin that the people who cause the distress do not realize the consequences of their behaviour. This could, for example, include when people raise their voice when they speak to people of foreign origin. The results of this study show that 40% of participants experienced this behaviour once or more during the 14-day period, and the words that described people's feelings in those situations were: "*humiliation*", "*unhappy*", "*bad*", "*it irritates me*", "*I feel like an idiot*", "*embarrassed*", "*angry*", and "*I am not deaf*". It is completely possible that some people behaved like this in good faith, so that the person could understand them better, but did not think about the humiliation that comes along with a raised voice and the attention that gets drawn to the person, who really does not understand them any

better when they shout. This is an example of an issue that can easily be worked on during educational courses on these hidden manifestations of prejudice.

It is critical to recognize the importance of individuals who are a part of the majority taking responsibility for their behaviour instead of implying that the intent was not malicious and that the experience was probably just a misunderstanding. In those cases, the people who refuse to accept humiliating and prejudiced treatment are made out to be the problem, that is, they either misunderstood, exaggerated or are too sensitive. Many studies (Dutton and Linke, 1973; Dutton and Lennox, 1974; Weitz, 1972) have shown that the majority has a strong tendency to see themselves as broad-minded and free of prejudice. By only acknowledging the obvious forms of discrimination the hidden manifestations are maintained.

Van Dijk (2002) emphasizes in his writings that the dominant group's denial of prejudice and racism in the society is one of the main reasons that it is continually maintained and renewed in the society. A prejudiced or racist behaviour is generally not accepted as normal and so most people do not want to be considered racist or prejudiced, according to van Dijk, "Sentences such as 'I did not say/do that intentionally', 'I did not mean it in that way', 'You misunderstood me', etc. are typical answers in defense to accusations of legal or moral discrimination" (van Dijk, 2002, p. 308). Philomena Essed (1991) reached the same conclusion in her studies in the Netherlands where her studies demonstrated a great discrepancy between how Dutch people viewed their own society, which they thought was characterized by tolerance and did not consider racism having ever been a problem there, and the reality of what studies were finding. Icelandic studies have found the same results, specifically that Icelanders consider themselves as having a positive attitude toward immigrants (Friðrik H. Jónsson, 2003; Hanna Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2007).

Based on the answers in this study, most participants experience negative behaviours in the work place, where they tend to spend most of their time in their daily lives. This is an indication that workplaces are in need of an awareness awakening regarding various manifestations of prejudice and the feelings caused by it. It can be expected that most people know what kind of a feeling results from such behaviour towards them, but fewer people recognize how *frequently* people of foreign origin experience these feeling in daily life and how the feeling intensifies when similar negative experiences occur repeatedly. The role of supervisors and managers in workplaces is very important in this context, and studies have shown just how much effect their behaviour and attitudes can have on other employees (Essed, 1991). Supervisors are in a position of authority in the workplace, which means that dealing with their prejudiced views and behaviour is considerably more difficult, and their attitudes can also directly encourage other employees' prejudiced views. In the same way, prejudice and racism decreases in workplaces when supervisors take initiative in working against prejudice and discrimination. In this way a broad-minded and aware supervisor can promote respectful

and prejudice-free communication between employees (Essed, 1991). It would be interesting to further study whether these kind of incidences are more common in certain occupations as well as the effect a supervisor or a manager has on communication between Icelandic and non-Icelandic employees.

It is worth noting how consistent individuals' experiences are in certain situations. The Icelanders who indicate having experienced a specific incident describe similar feelings to non-Icelandic participants, although the incidents take place much less often with Icelanders. Therefore, it is an important finding of this study that incidents that could be seen as minor or insignificant for those who rarely experience them, have a large negative effect on those who experience them *frequently* and *repeatedly*. In those cases, an experience of humiliation and disregard in daily life can cause great distress and feel unbearable for the individuals who experience it (Garfinkel, 1967).

In most cases, the negative feelings were not described in detail, but rather people wrote down "bad" or "very bad", although in the cases where feelings were described in more detail it is interesting how often the words "irritated" and "angry" came up. It would be interesting to study whether there is a relationship between the length of people's stay in Iceland and experiences, that is, whether the negative feelings perhaps start as sadness and evolve into anger with time. The answers to the questions certainly indicate that some participants take certain treatment more personally than others, but it still causes the vast majority distress, anger or sadness, which is consistent with previous findings on everyday discrimination (Alvares, 2001; Garfinkel, 1967; Essed, 1991).

The external validity of this study is limited by various factors. The results are based on a convenience sample as opposed to a random sample, and the sample was small, especially the sub samples of specific language groups. The response rate was also rather low; only 44% of forms handed out were returned to the researcher. The form has not previously been used by other researchers, and therefore this study's results are not comparable to other studies' findings. Another possible limitation is that the form was translated into four different languages and there could be a difference in the meaning of certain concepts depending on which language is being used.

It should be noted that this study does not relate to all forms of everyday prejudice and discrimination, but specifically to certain personal behaviour and communication in public places such as workplaces, stores and official institutions where some communication between individuals takes place. Everyday prejudice and discrimination can also occur when there is no direct communication between individuals, for example between media professionals and the groups they discuss, or members of parliament who pass bills and regulations affecting groups that they do not belong to themselves. This study did not examine how and whether other "everyday" factors, such as news reports and media promote stereotypes and prejudice. Neither did it examine if and how official

institutions such as educational institutions, the police, or official offices discriminate between people based on national origin. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that factors such as socioeconomic status, education, and financial situation were not asked about, but these factors can influence how people are treated, for example in workplaces or in various official institutions.

A large proportion of non-Icelandic people in Iceland regularly experience some manifestations of hidden prejudice or these so-called everyday prejudice and discrimination. Almost all non-Icelandic participants in the study experienced some kind of disrespect and humiliation during the 14-day time period, almost two thirds experienced such treatment five times or more, and almost a sixth experienced it 20 times or more during the time period. Prejudiced treatment must therefore be considered a part of this group's daily life.

These results are consistent with findings of previous studies on the situations of immigrants in Iceland, which are mostly based on interviews with non-Icelandic individuals. Sigurlaug Hrund Svavarsdóttir's MA thesis (2000) on the circumstances of Asian women in Iceland found that Icelanders had little respect and tolerance for them and they regularly experienced harassment in their everyday life. Jóhanna Ingadóttir's BA thesis (1998) also found that adopted youth had all experienced racism in the way that they were teased or called names.

Despite this, previous studies indicate that Icelanders consider themselves to have a positive attitude toward immigrants (Friðrik H. Jónsson, 2003; Hanna Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2007). This is consistent with Essed's (2001) and van Dijk's (2001) theories suggesting that most people do not want to admit to prejudiced attitudes and behaviours. For these reasons, it can be assumed that people of foreign origin can provide better information about the behaviour of members of the dominant group, than the dominant group members can themselves.

Participants' descriptions of similar feelings in certain situations suggest that these are not cases of bullying or coincidental individual experiences, but rather a systematic, complicated and multifaceted process that is maintained with both the actions and omissions by the dominant group. In this way, the power relations between groups is maintained through socialization and with constant renewal through the media and other communication mediums, standardized images, opinions and presentation of a reality that justifies an unaltered state (Essed, 2002; van Dijk, 2002).

From the results of the current study, it can be concluded that people of a foreign origin regularly experience disrespect and that such treatment causes them considerable distress. It is important to take the feelings of participants seriously in the situations where they experience everyday prejudice, and that their feelings are not made irrelevant even

though the experiences can be seen as “minor” in the eyes of those who rarely or never experience them in their own daily life. This is the only way for change. The first step is to raise awareness among people about the consequences that their behaviour toward people of foreign origin has, suggest ways to react, and show people of foreign origin in Iceland that there is a willingness to change attitudes and behaviours towards them for the better.

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