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Cultural competence in institutional care for youths: experts with ambivalent positions

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, cultural competence is often singled out as both a strategy and solution for managing differences attributed to migrants, but few studies have critically investigated the idea of cultural competence. This article is an empirical contribution, based on an ethnographic study, and analyses talk and actions in the everyday practice in special residential homes for boys and young men. It examines *when*, *how* and in relation to *what* and *whom* cultural competence is made relevant, with special focus on how notions about cultural competence position the staff in the studied institutions; organisationally, in relation to different work tasks and in narratives about the care and treatment provided. The analysis shows that cultural competence is almost exclusively attributed to staff who have a migrant background, and that the position as cultural competent is ambiguous. On the one hand a position as expert, on the other hand surrounded by a suspicion not to be professional. Staff who are ascribed cultural competence are made into representatives of cultural difference and locked into culturalised and ethnified positions. Thus, cultural competence rather emerges as a tool to master and control the boys who are placed in the studied institutions than as a tool to affect a change process in support of multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS

Cultural competence;
ethnicity; ethnography;
residential home; social work

Introduction

In times past, when the majority of youths came from Swedish families, there was no need to recruit staff with foreign backgrounds. (Quotation from interview)

In Sweden, cultural competence has been singled out as both a strategy and a solution for managing cultural differences ascribed to migrants in different welfare institutional practices. However, there is hardly any critical discussion concerning what this competence involves, what the benefits are, or what it is expected to provide. This article is an empirical contribution focusing cultural competence and its practical application in institutional care for youths in a Swedish context.

In the 1970s, the Swedish Government introduced an ambitious and progressive multicultural policy with the purpose to include and integrate migrants in the welfare state and to ensure their social and civil rights (Swedish Government Official Report [SOU] 1974, 69). This policy was a clear offshoot of the Swedish (social democratic) welfare model, and at that time, one of Europe's most egalitarian

migration regimes (Schierup, Hansen, and Castles 2006; Borevi 2012). All welfare institutions were required to implement this multicultural policy. Nevertheless, this progressive multicultural policy has generated processes of culturalisation that essentialises culture, stereotypes migrants, and separates Swedes from migrants (Ålund and Schierup 1991). As a consequence are migrants needs and (social) problems reduced to a question of cultural, ethnic or religious background (e.g. Kamali 2002; Gruber 2007, 2011, 2013a; Jönsson 2013; Wikström 2013), resulting in viewing cultural competence as both a strategy and a solution for managing differences linked to migrants. This view is especially manifest in relation to different welfare institutions and their counselling with clients identified with migrant background (Kamali 2002; Lill 2007; Gruber 2007, 2011, 2013a; Jönsson 2013; Wikström 2013). In relation to social work, cultural competence has figured as a key concept and the importance of culturally competent social workers has been repeatedly emphasised in a number of studies and investigations during the last 30 years. Social workers have been described as being uncertain in their work with migrants and their 'dissimilar cultural patterns' (Bäck-Wiklund 1996; see also Soydan 1984; Ahmadi and Lönnback 2005). Furthermore, cultural competence has been highlighted as an important aspect in successfully managing this uncertainty as well as migrant clients (Hessle 1984; Soydan 1984). In turn, educational programmes in the field of social work have also been criticised for their failure to provide knowledge about migrants (Aune 1983).

'Culture' has thus been established as a specific and important field of knowledge in welfare work, especially in social work (SOU 1991, 60; Socialstyrelsen 2010). Previously, this knowledge was referred to as 'knowledge about immigrants' (in Swedish *invandrarkunskap*) (Sandberg 2010), which, aptly enough, illustrates the parties associated with specific needs and problems in the meeting between client and welfare institution. Today, there are also a number of other concepts in use (e.g. ethnically sensitive, cross-cultural or intercultural social work) (Kamali 2002; Ahmadi and Lönnback 2005; Williams and Soydan 2005; Pérez 2009; see also Socialstyrelsen 2010). All these concepts are premised on the idea that there exist cultural differences that need to be bridged, translated, interpreted or explained in order to achieve fruitful interactions between institution and citizen. However, previously foremost Swedish employees who work in welfare institutions were expected to acquire training in and experience of other cultures, but this expectation seems to have changed. Today, it is mainly those employees who are identified as having a migrant background who are naturally expected to possess and be able to provide the requested cultural competence (Kamali 2002; Knocke 2004; Gruber 2007, 2013b; Lill 2007; Sharareh and Lundgren 2012).

Even though the importance of cultural competence has been repeated and emphasised over a long period, few Swedish studies have critically examined the idea of culturally competent staff. The ambition with this article is to begin to fill that void. Using empirical material gathered for a research project on ethnicity and gender in special residential homes for young people, I analyse conversation and actions related to cultural competence.¹ In particular, I will pay attention to *when*, *how*, and in relation to *what* and *whom* the concept of cultural competence is made relevant with a specific focus on how this positions the staff in the studied institutions. In addition, I will examine how ideas about cultural competence influence the organisation of work tasks and narratives about the care and treatment. Below, I start with an overview of international research discussing cultural competence from a critical perspective. This review also provides a theoretical framework for my analysis. Next, I will describe the institutions where I have conducted the study and give an account of the study's methods and empirical material. Finally, I will analyse the results.

Cultural competence as a concept and practice in social work

With a few exceptions (Kamali 2002; Jönsson 2013; Gruber 2013a), hardly any studies have critically analysed the concept of cultural competence in a Swedish social work context. Empirical studies focusing on how cultural competence generates practices and strategies are especially lacking. Looking at the international arena, however, we find repeated criticism of the concept of cultural competence and the practices that have grown out of it. Above all, studies from the US and Canada call to attention

the concept's incoherent conceptualisation as well as its underlying theoretical tensions and the consequences it has for practice (e.g. Nybell and Gray 2004; Yan and Wong 2005; Williams 2006; Johnson and Munch 2009). Cultural competence models and programmes are often based on several different and contradictory paradigms (Williams 2006). For example, cultural competence models are often based on the assumption that all people are cultural beings. Nevertheless, when it comes to conducting culturally competent social work, the contradictory idea arises that social workers are somehow able to 'switch themselves off' as cultural beings (Yan and Wong 2005). Social workers thus appear to be neutral, impartial and culture free in their actions, while clients are instead seen as limited by and to 'their culture' and are portrayed as victims of 'their culture'. One result of this approach is the reproduction of power relations between the social worker and client; that is to say, the client is stereotyped and individual reflections, needs and problems tend to be overlooked (Johnson and Munch 2009).

Of particular interest to the analysis in this article is the discussion by the American researchers Nybell and Grey (2004). These authors point out that culture and differences often are applied and limited to interactions at the individual level and rarely include processes at other levels, such as institutional requirements and structures. Their point is that an understanding of cultural competence that is reduced to interactions between social workers and clients will unavoidably obscure the fact that these interactions also are structured through a host of ideas and values that are produced and embedded in policies, organisational arrangements and the physical environment. Nybell's and Grey's analysis thus emphasises the necessity for a power perspective and the need to ask questions about inclusion and exclusion in relation to the institutions examined in this article.

Similarly, Essed (1996), a researcher who focuses on racism, asserts that the growing demand for cultural competence is a result of an increasing ethnification of different work tasks. According to Essed, some work tasks are given an ethnic marker and positioned as different or specific, whereas others are characterised as normal and obvious within the institution in question. In this understanding, normal work tasks are those considered to be obvious for the institution and therefore performed by all employees, while the ethnic-marked tasks are viewed as having been added to the institution's work as a result of its dealing with clients with ethnic background another than the ethnic majority. Important in this reasoning is the fact that the institution bases its approach on the assumption that its clients belong to the ethnic majority. Essed emphasises that a dynamic like this produces an organisation in which it is viewed as both important and relevant to employ staff from ethnic minorities who are tasked with and also primarily expected to work with individuals and groups not included in the ethnic majority.

As I have already touched on, in Sweden cultural competence stands out first and foremost as a policy concept (Kamali 2002) rather than a theoretically elaborated concept. That is, despite the fact that the importance of cultural competence has been emphasised for several decades, a conceptualisation of the concept that is able to guide a multicultural practice built on equality and reciprocity remains elusive. As I will show in this article, the practice developed from the idea of cultural competence stops at the notion of 'other cultures'. It underlines competence and experience that facilitates a kind of movement and transfer across cultural boundaries that are understood to be nationality-specific. Based on this logic, cultural competence is primarily linked with differences defined in ethnic terms rather than in terms of class, gender, age or sexuality. Consequently, cultural competence has almost exclusively been ascribed relevance in social work with migrants and their children, but seldom in relation to the ethnic majority (Kamali 2002; Jönsson 2013; Gruber 2013a).

Special residential homes for young people

This article focuses on state-run residential homes that provide compulsory care for youths aged 13–21 years with serious psychosocial and/or drug abuse problems. The authority responsible for these institutions is the government agency National Board of Institutional Care (SiS).

Many of the institutions that currently serve as special residential homes for young people were already established in the early 1900s as institutions for detention, discipline, socialisation or care of

socially vulnerable children and youths and are in that sense carriers of a long institutional history (Vinterhed 1977; Levin 1998; Sallnäs 2000). Despite the extensive changes made to institutional care in the latter part of the twentieth century, these facilities remain characterised by a conspicuous continuity with regard to geographic location, organisation and work methods. That is, regardless of ambitious intentions to reform the care and treatment, old routines, inhumane and ineffective work methods have often survived in the institutional contexts that are in focus for this article (Levin 1998). With Erving Goffman can these institutions best be defined as 'total institutions' (Goffman 1990).

Youths are placed in these special residential homes by the Social Services office, in accordance with the Care of Young Persons Special Provision Act, based on a decision by a local administrative court. Some of these institutions also accept youths who have been remitted to secure youth care. Apart from locked doors and fences surrounding the institutions, the law permits a range of coercive powers to be exercised on the youths enrolled in special residential homes, such as separation, urine tests, body visitations and restrictions of outdoor occasions. In total, 600 places divided among 24 institutions throughout Sweden are available for emergency, assessment or treatment-based admissions.²

The organisation of special residential homes for young people is hierarchical with high demands on conformity; that is, the staffs work in accordance with detailed instructions that structure the care and treatment (Gruber 2013b). Put another way, the youths as well as the employees are subject to control and demands to adjust to the institution's organisation, structures and rules. These requirements produce specific institutional positions for both the youths and the employees, and demands that are difficult to challenge.

As previously mentioned, a special residential home is characterised by spatial limitations, such as locked doors and fences that greatly limit mobility and contact with the surrounding community. Conversely, few people outside these establishments have access to or insight into the social life and how it manifests itself within the institution. Special residential homes are surrounded by a conspicuous silence in the public debate that is only broken when crises, scandals or specific events occur. When this occurs, these institutions receive attention from politicians and various civil servants as well as the media and the general public before they once again slip into the margin of attention (Eronen, Laakso, and Pösö 2010; Gruber 2010).

Method, empirical material and analysis

This article is based on an ethnographic study and adopts a critical approach. Critical ethnography strives to effect change and goes further than conventional ethnographic descriptions of the social reality under study (Thomas 1993; Madison 2005). It can therefore also be said to have a political purpose that relates to studying and drawing attention to injustices, social control and power. More specifically, this means that I have attempted to capture the social life at special residential homes from an ethnic and gender perspective to shed light on how these relations create and sustain the prevailing conditions for both those who work there and for the youths enrolled for care and treatment. The overall aim for the project has been to examine how ethnicity and gender is constructed in institutional care for young people. Cultural competence turned out as a central theme in the study, and this article uses empirical data that include the staff's actions and talk concerning cultural competence.

The field study is based on participant observation (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; Wolcott 2008) and qualitative interviews (Burgess 1988; Sherman 2001) and was conducted between 2008 and 2010. This study observed staff at the department level at four residential homes (most residential homes have several departments with about seven to eight places each). From this vantage point, I gained insight into how the institution's structures and relationships are reflected in verbal communication and actions by following institutional staff in their daily work. Additionally, I also followed the institutions' educational activities and attended meetings central to the institution's operations, such as staff, treatment and management meetings. All the studied departments are dedicated to the care of boys and young men aged 13–21 years. The field study's initial observations have been complemented (Alvesson and Deetz 2000) with either group-based or individual interviews with treatment providers,

teachers, social workers, nurses, psychologists, and divisional and institutional heads. The empirical material comprises participant observations recorded over a period of 32 days, in periods of four to seven consecutive days, and 41 interviews with a total of 65 informants. The participant observations were documented in field notes and the interviews in audio recordings.

All participants in the study have provided their written consent for participating in the investigation; they have also been informed about the purpose of the study, in accordance with the research ethics rules that underpin social science research.³ To protect the informants' identities, all names used in this article (with the exception of my own) have been changed.

The scientific analysis in ethnographic studies attempts to identify and transform implicit knowledge from field studies in a way that makes the knowledge explicit so that the knowledge is comprehensible and contextualised, in order to be presented to the outside world (Hastrup and Hervik 1994). To translate my field experiences into such scientific knowledge, I use a hermeneutic analytical approach. This type of analysis rests on an interpretation characterised by an interaction between the analysis of sub-structures and entire structures (Ödman 2007). More concretely, I have done a close empirical thematisation of the material concerning cultural competence (Widerberg 2006). This approach revealed several empirical themes: cultural knowledge/lack of cultural knowledge and advantages with migrant background/problems linked to migrant background. These themes have been filtered through theoretical perspectives and concepts that frame the analysis and proved against the analytical overall picture. This process resulted in two theoretically elaborated themes: cultural competence as an expert position and cultural competence as a contested position. These themes inform the analysis that follows. With the support of quotations and ethnographic descriptions, I will illustrate how the staff position themselves in relation to cultural competence and how this competence is surrounded by ambivalence. I begin the analysis by discussing how the importance of cultural skills is articulated and what expectations are placed on staff identified with these skills, with a focus on how this classification produces specific positions: an employee who is a cultural expert and an employee who is culturally unskilled.

Personnel with cultural competence, an asset for the institution

The importance of increasing the staff's competence about other cultures was expressed at all levels of SiS, from its head office in Stockholm to the department level at the various institutions. Likewise, the desire to employ personnel with cultural competence was also repeatedly expressed. Some managers expressed satisfaction that many in the staff group had migrant background, but others complained that there were too few staff with such a background. The latter usually meant that too few treatment assistants had migrant background. Those who were identified with a migrant background were thus quite naturally expected to possess the coveted cultural skills. Typically, the need for cultural competence is primarily expressed in relation to the professionals who are most involved with the youths – the institutions' treatment providers. However, cultural knowledge or competence is rarely requested in relation to the institutions' managers and special functions, such as psychologists, trained social workers or teachers.

The arguments in favour of employing personnel with migrant background revolve around the idea that youths with other national backgrounds than Swedish think, reason and behave in different ways than youths with a Swedish background. Therefore, there is, as it is argued, a need for someone who can support the staff in their work with these youths. These lines of reasoning are based on assumptions that cultural difference related to the youths' ethnic and national backgrounds can be difficult for the institutions' (Swedish) personnel to manage. The quotation below, taken from an interview, typifies this way of thinking:

If you have a bunch of guys who all come from the same background, let's say the classic Swedish family with a Volvo, town house and white picket fence, they all have quite a similar upbringing, view of the world, culture, expectations and hopes. So, you can plan the structure and work, and the individual work based on that common foundation. However, if you, for example, have five different

nationalities with five different cultures, traditions and views on every little [...] well, it affects the structure of the work.

Boys with Swedish backgrounds are, as the quotation illustrates, presented as both similar to one another and to the staff and, therefore, working with them is assumed to be both easier to organise and structure. The point of departure for this reasoning is that the institution and its personnel are Swedish and that boys who are not identified with a Swedish background are different. This dissimilarity almost appears as a further complication in the work being done with the boys and it is these aspects that the staff and SiS want to manage with a culturally competent staff.

As a consequence of this conception, certain individuals are designated as representatives of ethnically defined differences, whereas a Swedish background and differences linked to class and age seem to be quite unproblematic and taken for granted.

Hence, the reasoning about cultural competence is not about ethnic backgrounds or differences in general, but about differences connected with specific ethnic backgrounds and the individuals identified with these. As a result of this view, recruiting personnel with migrant background can appear to be both important and expedient. But, what are these staff expected to do and contribute to in more specific terms? In an interview with three treatment providers (see next section), I provide an initial response to this question.

Managing conflicts with Muslim boys

Mats: Who do we have on the staff, is it Behrooz, who has a foreign background and who stands out? At times you also notice that they [staff who are ascribed migrant background] forge special bonds with the foreign boys. To Behrooz, I don't know [...] it might just be natural.

Kent: Also, he can raise issues with them in a whole different way.

Mats: Yes, for sure.

Sabine: In what way?

Kent: He might understand their homeland or religion in a different way [than we do]. He's a Muslim guy, so he can go in and talk religion with these boys. I can't do that. I haven't come that far in my [...].

Bett: Just take this thing with examines, for instance, which has been like 'I'm not taking my clothes off'.

Kent: Mmm.

Bett: 'I don't take my clothes off because I'm Muslim.' 'Is that so? But we have to do this nonetheless.' In cases like this, Behrooz has been able to go in [and argue]. 'Muslim! Of course you can do that. It's like this, you see'. Then he's been able to go in and they've listened to him in a whole different way. They have an easier time accepting his version than [...].

Kent: Than if I say it.

Bett: Then he might say: 'In the Koran it says such and such and that means this and that', which I have no clue about, actually.

In the above conversation, Behrooz is expected to intervene when conflicts arise with Muslim boys, while Swedish colleagues remove themselves from such conflicts. That is, Behrooz is seen as a representative of Muslims, and therefore it is seen as natural that he steps in and handles the conversation about having to strip naked during a visitation.

The boys' resistance to the institution's rules is quickly labelled as being religiously and culturally based, whereby a reasoning based on interpretations of the Koran seems self-evident. Thus, the primary discussion focuses on Islam and its traditions and not on the visitation itself or the resistance to it, upon which other possible interpretations of the boys' opposition are overlooked. Behrooz is positioned as an expert on Islam. He is ascribed (cultural) authority and expected to exercise this authority with the boys. In a similar way, personnel with migrant background are perceived as being able to overcome conflicts with the boys' parents. One staff expressed the matter this way:

At times, when you meet with opposition from a family in your work, staff with foreign backgrounds can contribute new thoughts and ideas.

Hence, the expectations placed on staff members who are identified with a migrant background relate not only to explaining cultural differences but also provide the (Swedish) institution and its practice with legitimacy in relation to youths and families with migrant background.

Mixed, but not too mixed

Although staff with migrant background were appreciated and sought after, there was also a concern that they would be too many working in the department. This issue is explained by one of the interviewed psychologists:

I'm reminded of what one of the department head said the other day, that there are now too many people [among the staff] who don't have a Swedish background. He thinks that too many migrants who are not fully integrated into Swedish society are starting to work here. Which means that, for the boys who come here, they only learn that [the norms and values associated with other cultures] and as he says; they will have to go out into the Swedish society to live and work later on. So there should be more staff with Swedish origins or those who have grown up here and are integrated into Swedish society, who can help the youths to be reintegrated in the Swedish society, with a sense of Swedish norms as concerns right and wrong.

What is perceived to be at stake here revolves around the institution and its opportunities to represent 'Swedish society' and how the boys will be able to be 'reintegrated' if too many staff members 'don't have a Swedish background'. This calculation logic (Dahlstedt 2005), as form the basis for the argument, asserts that there is a maximum limit in the number of employees who don't have Swedish backgrounds and that when this limit is exceeded, the situation becomes problematic. The institution is thus construed as an outpost for Swedish society, where the boys need to learn Swedish norms and values to subsequently gain entry to and become a part of Swedish society. The institution's task is clothed in ethnic terms and staff categorised as Swedish are the ones expected to carry it out – yet this expectation is not defined as a cultural competence. Accordingly, staff who is ascribed a migrant background is not expected to embrace, or convey the norms and values that the enrolled boys are expected to learn.

This line of thought is further developed in the next interview dialogue between me and a treatment provider:

Morgan: When he [referring to a staff member with migrant background] has come so far as to start working here, he has, for the most part, adapted himself a bit to our culture and view of women and all the rest of it. And when he, as [...] a foreign national or someone with foreign roots, so to speak [...].

Sabine: Mmm.

Morgan: [...] stands in front of a boy who has a completely different view of women than the Swedish view of women, if he expresses and defends the Swedish view of women [...].

Sabine: Mmm.

Morgan: Like, I have trouble being able to stand there and preach to him [a boy enrolled at the institution]. He has his views and his culture and I have my culture. But if, like, someone from his culture comes along who has started to accept or accepts it [the Swedish view] and backs me up, then he respects it.

The central point in this quotation is that some norms and values can be demarcated as belonging to 'our' culture and 'our' view of women, a view not shared by all cultures. Our culture and view of women is understood as being Swedish (see also de los Reyes, Molina, and Mulinari 2003; Gruber 2011). This view of gender is interconnected with what it means to be Swedish and something that Swedish staff are naturally considered to be part of, whereas staff with migrant background need to demonstrate that they have moved away from a patriarchal view of women. Simply put, staff with migrant backgrounds must confirm that they have adapted to and have acquired a Swedish, modern and egalitarian view of

gender relations. The length of their residence in Sweden emerges as an important factor in this context, in accordance with the idea that the longer the time spent in Sweden, the more likely an adaptation to 'our culture and view of women' has occurred. Gender equality is presented here as a national marker (Eduards 2007) and those who work at the institution are quite simply expected to 'behave as Swedes behave, even if they are Muslims', as one of the treatment providers expressed it. An idea like this also reveals a clear boundary between Muslims and Swedes, and negates the idea of Swedish Muslims.

As the empirical examples have suggested so far, the idea of cultural difference as well as cultural competence locks staff into culturalised and ethnified positions. Moreover, the position as a cultural expert also appears to be a complicated and ambiguous one: a position as expert with status and influence in relation to Swedish colleagues but simultaneously positioned in an auxiliary position. This auxiliary position is seen as a cultural competence that functions primarily as a resource for culturally unskilled colleagues 'by helping out', 'explaining', 'supporting' or 'translating' culture as it is formulated.

As Essed underscores, it is not the institution's organisation, activities or interactions that are made multicultural. That is, the treatment providers ascribed a migrant background are expected to carry out the institution's cultural capability and act as a kind of diversity agent. The multicultural ambitions expressed about employing staff with cultural competence thus seem to be limited to managing cultural challenges such as minimising conflicts arising in social interaction between the institution's staff and migrant youths.

To navigate cultural and linguistic competence

Using an ethnographic description, I will now develop the analysis of ambivalence and ambiguousness surrounding staff with a migrant background and focus on how their proximity to the institution's boys is questioned.

It is evening and the boys have gone to bed. I am sitting with the staff in the office listening to the 'evening reflection' as led by Basim. The conversation is about that it has been a 'good day', and that Said, one of the boys, enjoyed playing floorball with Fadi and some of the other treatment providers. Fadi mentions that Merdad (one of the boys) would also like to join in playing floorball. Elisabeth comments that Merdad will have to wait for a decision about that until after the staff conference is held on Tuesday. It is then that a decision will be made as to whether Merdad can be 'moved up a step' and thereby be granted permission to leave the division together with the staff, meaning that he can go to the institution's sports hall and join in activities there. She adds that it is not very easy to include him in a group, especially not together with Said. Fadi has a different view of the matter and says that he doesn't see any problem with having Merdad and Said together. 'Sure, it works fine when it's you or Basim. Then he behaves himself', Elisabeth counters and continues: 'but it's not as easy for the rest of us'. Pia nods and concurs, saying: 'they listen to you because they respect you, but for us Swedes [...]'. 'But that's not how it's supposed to be', Basim interjects. 'It shouldn't be us and the Swedes'. 'No', Elisabeth replies, 'but that's the way it is. They see us as Swedes', and concludes by adding: 'I'm not criticising you, that's just the way it is with the boys.'

The conversation focuses that Basim and Fadi, two treatment providers have a closer relationship with two of the enrolled boys, and that the boys are more pliable towards their instructions than to those given by other staff members. The relationship is described as respectful from the boys' side, which is interpreted as a result of the fact that Basim and Fadi, like the boys, have a Middle Eastern background. No other explanations for their relationship with the boys are considered. That is, they do not consider their common gender or shared interest in sports. A tension arises in the conversation. Basim defends himself against Pia's and Elisabeth's comments that it is 'easier' for him and Fadi to handle the boys, but the conversation ends up in a tense silence and is concluded.

Marko Valenta (2012), a sociologist, has studied the interaction between staff with migrant backgrounds and those with Norwegian backgrounds at an asylum reception in Norway, and argues that staff with migrant background operate in a field of tension. According to Valenta, this situation is bound up with assumptions that these staff members enjoy an insider position. Staff with migrant background

are thus expected to form a close relation to the asylum seekers, an expectation that is viewed as an asset to the institution. While at the same time, it seems like this closeness linked to ethnic, national or linguistic background generates doubts, resulting in a questioning of their professionalism.

The silence arising in the conversation illustrated above testifies a suspicion of the same kind as Valenta describes. It was expressed to me that staff with migrant background risk becoming too involved in boys with whom they share ethnic, national or linguistic background. This idea was also expressed in terms of that they 'buy free points' from the boys. Both these points of view contain criticism about a lack of professionalism, that is, this view implies that the migrant staff cannot maintain sufficient and necessary distance to the boys, and this criticism is made visible in the tense silence in the above conversation between the treatment providers. The insider position is seen as desirable, but it is also mistrusted. Staff who are identified with a Swedish background are not ascribed such an ethnified insider position when dealing with any of the youth. Their position is perceived as ethnically neutral and professionally distanced in relation to the boys, regardless of the boys' ethnic background. The next illustration gives an example of how staff with migrant background balance an insider position.

Balancing individual and institutional expectations

The following quotation is from an interview with a treatment provider, Nada. Nada makes use of different opportunities to speak Arabic with the Arabic-speaking boys who are enrolled at the institution.

I exploit that almost fully when someone comes [. . .] I don't know, it feels [. . .] but when you've started developing a relationship. It's not the first thing I say: 'I come from the same country as you.' It's not the first thing I say, but when it comes up, I might say something like: 'I understand what you mean [. . .]'. Plus the fact that I think it's fun. It's important to maintain your mother tongue, I believe. My parents have always spoken Arabic with me since I was small and I'm very grateful for that. So, now I speak two languages. That's why I speak our mother tongue with them. But I don't do it all the time. Sometimes I have to keep quiet because you can't speak another language the whole time in front of the others. I understand that. It's disrespectful. But, phrases like 'hurry up' [I will use], but perhaps not sit and have a conversation in a completely different language. But in order to maintain [. . .] the cultural aspect or, yes, the language.

Nada's intention is to find a way to open up a channel of communication with the boys. Nada gives several personal reasons for speaking Arabic with the boys, but later tones down the personal aspects. Instead, she is making herself an advocate for the institution's perspective on the matter: it is disrespectful to speak Arabic in the presence of colleagues and youth who do not understand the language. In the residential homes where the study was conducted, only Swedish was permitted to be spoken in the department; languages other than Swedish were only permitted to be spoken when the staff were alone with one of the boys (e.g. talking in their rooms or during walks). The justification for this rule was based partly on security arguments that the staff must be able to understand and monitor what the boys are talking about and partly on the argument that others feel excluded from conversations in languages other than Swedish.⁴

Returning to Nada, her reasoning reveals how she balances adherence with the institution so as not to challenge the institutional order and be criticised by her colleagues, and at the same time making use of a common language in her communication with the boys in order to establish a treatment relationship. As she explains, this requires continual adjustment on her part as to how much Arabic to speak without giving rise to doubts among her colleagues.

Nada's considerations about whether to have a conversation in Arabic or not reflect a balancing act in which she attempts to manage and assume a personal approach (i.e. that it is useful to be able to speak several languages) and an institutional approach (control of the youths' language use) in her communication with the enrolled boys. Interestingly, it seems to be the personal perspective that creates room for linguistic diversity, while the institutional perspective, with its focus on rules, control and distance, inhibits such diversity.

The dilemma that arises in both this and the previous example is about the inclination to hand over knowledge and experiences concerning a common language, culture or nationality to the individual treatment provider to handle. That is to say, there is no joint discussion about these matters or how they should or can be handled by the institution. These questions are not seen as an institutional concern; instead, it is left to Nada, Basim and Fadi to manage them in the best way possible.

Cultural competence to fill the needs of the institution: closing reflections

In this article, I have shown that the idea of cultural competence creates an ambivalent position in the everyday institutional practice, filled with different meanings and expectations, depending up on in the context. As we have seen, the culturally competent individual is positioned both as an asset and a potential problem. Cultural (and linguistic) competence is ascribed central importance in the work performed with the youths, yet the carrier of this competence has limited scope of action because of the institution's frameworks and regulations (i.e. compulsion, control, rigidity and hierarchy). Thus, the exercise of cultural competence is rather limited to interactions at the individual level, where it emerges as a tool to discipline and master the youths (e.g. used to teach them norms and values defined as Swedish). Paradoxically, it seems that the institutional level is disconnected from the cultural (and linguistic) diversity and competence that is available among the institution's staff. The institutions are organised from a majority perspective; they are constructed as Swedish institutions, institutions where the Swedish language is taken for granted and staff are identified as Swedish. An institutional practice such as this will inevitably reproduce ethnified and racialised work tasks and organisations as well as ethnic hierarchies.

Using Essed's, Nybell's, and Grey's discussions, we can conclude that these institutions strive to achieve a kind of smoothness in the organisation of their day-to-day work. The desired cultural competence is not primarily used as a tool to affect a change process in support of multiculturalism or to create (cultural) understanding of individual young people. Rather, cultural competence is connected to an ambition to handle difference. That is, staff who are ascribed cultural competence are seen as representatives of cultural and linguistic difference and are positioned as 'outsiders within' (Collins 1986). They are included in the organisation of work tasks, but in a marginalised position and in a state of the exceptional other. The crux is that cultural competence is asserted in relation to the youth with migrant background, whereas work tasks and expectations related to youths who are ascribed Swedish background are disconnected from culture and ethnicity. The question that unavoidably arises is to what extent staff with migrant background would be recruited to work at the special residential homes at all if there were no youths with migrant backgrounds enrolled.

The result presented in this article underlines a need for further research that could deepen the critical analysis of the meaning and use of cultural competence in a Nordic welfare context. How culturally competent assessments and interventions are made possible without culturalisation are not only essential questions for social work but also are questions for welfare institutions such as primary care and health care institutions as well as schools and other youth institutions.

Notes

1. This article is based on empirical material taken from the research project: En studie om etnicitet, kön, pojkar och unga män i institutionsbehandling [A study on ethnicity, gender, boys and young men in institutional treatment], financed by Sweden's National Board of Institutional Care (SiS).
2. Of the approximately 30,000 youths who were placed in care outside of the home during 2012, just over 1000 were admitted to state-run special residential homes for young people. See also <http://www.stat-inst.se/om-webbplatsen/other-languages/the-swedish-national-board-of-institutional-care/special-residential-homes-for-young-people/> for more information in English about special residential homes for young people.

3. The study has been assessed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at X University registration number 48-08.
4. A number of institution heads underlined the value of multilingual competence among the institution staff. However, paradoxically, these skills were practised in a very limited degree due to the institutions' restrictive language rule.

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