

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES AS A MEANS TO MANAGE INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

In the last century Swedish society has become increasingly globalized and multicultural. Today about 20 percent of the country's population of nine million people is of foreign decent. Recently questions of immigration, integration policies and multiculturalism have received much political attention. This fact, in the unmerciful light of a deconstruction of the welfare state coming to terms with these issues, constitutes an enormous challenge to the public sector as a whole. And for single social workers this requires somewhat new sorts of professional competencies – where intercultural competencies appear among the most important.

Drawing from the inherent paradoxes and cultural dimensions of social work, the article singles out and discusses several qualities of intercultural competencies that seem useful for social workers. These are referred to as content-competencies and process-competencies. It is concluded that intercultural competencies are preconditions for successful social work in the future.

Intercultural Competencies as a Means to Manage Intercultural Interactions in Social Work

*In Sweden, if you as an immigrant have
problems, you are seen as the problem!*
(unknown)

Introduction

Accentuated internationalization and global flows of people, ideas, technology, capital, knowledge, media images, and cultural impulses are inevitable characteristics of global society at the dawn of the new millennium (Giddens 1991; Appudurai 1996; Beck 1998). A decade of European Union membership and, more importantly, half a century of immigration has transformed Sweden into a multicultural society in the true meaning of the word. Out of its total population of nine million people, approximately one million were born abroad, whereas 1.7 million are of *foreign decent*. This means that these individuals' parents – one of them or both – were born abroad (Integrationsverket 2001).

In the last decade issues pertaining to policies of immigration, refugee reception, segregation, marginality and cultural integration have received much attention. One reason for this may be that these policies are intimately intertwined with the ideological corner stones of the welfare state – e.g. extensive state initiated programmes in the areas of labour, health, education, housing, and social work. There have also been intense political debates on the deconstruction of the welfare state and the realism of the European Union endeavour.

Despite its unquestionable significance, Swedish political discussions on cultural diversity remain, by and large, rhetorical, with insufficient anchorage in scientific analyses and outspoken political visions. Instead politicians and debaters repeat

their mantra: "Diversity enriches society!", "The spark of racism needs to be put out before it ignites the *Folkhem!*", "No one must be discriminated against because of their background!", "Schools must foster tolerant and respectful citizens!" or "Public employees need to enhance their intercultural competencies!". Presumably, few people in a democratic society would overtly oppose such ambitions, clinging to what fairly could be labelled as a humanistic worldview. Drawing from this view, the public sector has initiated numerous programmes and developed policies and strategies on how to meet the challenges of Sweden's transition into a multicultural society.

In the public sector abstract ideological objectives are not (unfortunately!) easily transferred into everyday life organizational practices. Increased workloads, cutbacks in public spending, shortage of skilled personnel, low wages, new competence requirements, and a lack of political and managerial support has rendered issues of cultural diversity a place outside the midstream of public debates. Alongside with such structural changes, social workers, psychologists, healthcare professionals, counsellors, teachers and employment officers are confronted with and forced to cope with new challenges that a multicultural context *de facto* brings about. In the coming two decades immigration of relatives and a changing demographic structure will bring about an increasingly multicultural society.

Against this background, the public sector as a whole – and the labour, education, health and social care sectors in particular – are faced with challenges unmatched in history. Besides an understanding of the structural conditions of society and knowledge about the laws and rules governing the public sector, Sweden of tomorrow requires broader and *different* competencies, both interpersonal and professional, from its social workers, psychologists, healthcare professionals, counsellors, teachers and employment officers etc – i.e. in all areas.

Aim and point of departure

For more than a decade I have been teaching courses where questions of cultural diversity and culture have been at the centre of attention. During this time public employees have made up an important and colourful group of participants. The majority of them find it both inspiring and challenging to interact with other people with varying background. At the same time they claim that there is an accumulated need within their professional realms for education concerning cultural diversity, cultural differences and *interculturality*. Of particular relevance

are the employees' *intercultural competencies*.¹ Discussing these competencies is the scope of this text. As I will show, they are connected to the individual's approach to people of a different cultural descent, but also to his or her own culture (Stier 2000/2003). Furthermore, intercultural competencies pertain to interpersonal skills necessary when interacting with people in professional contexts. In a wider sense it concerns a distinct way of relating to people in general.

Against this background and by drawing upon the social scientific discourse, informal conversations with public employees and personal lecture notes, *the aim of this article is to describe and discuss possible corner stones of what is referred to as intercultural competencies for social workers*. As I intend to show, these corner stones are made up by different, yet intimately intertwined competencies of different characters. Even if the primary focus will be social workers employed at public social work offices or institutions, the intercultural competencies introduced here ought to be useful for police officers, teachers, health care professionals and non-governmental organizations, specializing in social work or health care.

The text can fairly be accused of being argumentative. It is. It should be considered a contribution to continuous discussions around cultural diversity and intercultural interactions in social work. A *normative* point of departure is that clients, regardless of sex, citizenship, "race" or cultural, ethnic, religious or social background, are of equal worth and should, therefore, be treated equally by the social services. It is also assumed that cultural diversity embodies valuable resources and possibilities for society. A *sociological* point of departure is that health care, employment offices and social services, as they are manifested in everyday practice, are made up by different, unique human encounters characterized by interaction, communication and reciprocal influence. Hence, intercultural competencies must be seen in the light of the distinct professional and cultural contexts of social work.

Intercultural competencies are not to be seen as fully developed or universal, but remain flexible and must constantly be modified according to the context, character of the task, background of the client etc. A *pedagogical* point of departure, finally, is that encounters between the theoretical reasoning below and the social worker's reflected (and unreflected) experiences will allow professional development. To develop and refine one's individual intercultural competencies is a long and necessary process, yet a valuable aspect of the social worker-client relationship as well as of the personal and professional development of the social worker.

Paradoxes of Social Work

Commonly, the Swedish discourse on social work conceptualizes social problems as originating in a complex interplay of individuals and society. Social work encompasses a wide variety of domains such as elderly care, service and care of persons with physical disabilities as well as support and assistance to children and youth, adults and families with special needs.

For social workers, a common denominator is that their professional context houses incompatible expectations and apparent paradoxes. One outspoken rule is that clients should be offered individual solutions to their specific problems. Public actions should be flexible and harmonious with the client's needs and abilities and be meaningful to him or her. At the same time, social work must be planned and carried out within transparent collective organizational and judicial frameworks, that is, according to laws, ordinances, regulations and political objectives that are applicable to *all* clients (Holgersson 2000:86).

A sense of humanism, understanding and desire to ensure the client's physical and psychological well-being is not always up to par with the legal rights of the individual, efficiency and cost consciousness in daily social work. In relation to their clients, social workers need to find an adequate balance between closeness and distance, client self-determination and intervention, social support and individual responsibility, flexibility and firmness of principles (or even sanctions of various kinds). In short, social workers must cope with an, in essence, unsolvable conflict of simultaneously being a fellow human being and a public employee (Marklund, Nordenstam, Penton 1984). To accept and cope with such dichotomous and contradictory professional role expectations is a principal quality of the social worker role (Bernler, Johnsson, Skårner 1993).

Furthermore, like many other professions social work embodies an ever present discrepancy between theoretical manuals of appropriate professional behaviour in concrete situations, on the one hand, and between apriori-stipulated solutions and flexible modes of behaviour on the other. Besides coping with the inherent paradoxes of social work, social workers need to manage inter-client differences or disputes, derivable from cultural differences as well as from potential problems stemming from the worker's own cultural background, which in turn may cause misunderstandings or conflicts.

The Cultural Prism of Social Work

The social nexus of social work is communication, that is to say, a relationship between two parties (Bernler, Johnsson, Skårner 1993:29). The conversation may be the instrument *par excellence* for clients to express their needs, grievances and to depict their life situation. It seems, therefore, inevitable that differences in the client's and social worker's culture, personality, experiences, expectations, needs and ambitions, respectively, play significant roles in their mutual relationship and interaction.

What is culture, then? A common answer may be that culture refers to "a people's way of life" (Kluckhohn 1985; Williams 1995:11-13). Accordingly, culture comprises anything and everything constructed and influenced by man and leavens through every layer and domain of society. Human beings acquire "their" culture through the process of socialization and enculturation (Berger & Luckmann 1966), especially at a young age, but also throughout the life cycle. Just like people change, cultures do not remain static, but are in constant flux.

As a result of socialization and enculturation, culture will make up an internalized reference system (Stier 2004) or frame of understanding, to use Hesse's terminology (1987). Such a reference system is made up by numerous parts – e.g. verbal and written language, non-verbal language, symbols, conceptions, meanings, traditions, habits, customs, values, norms, rules, moral and ethics, religion, taboos, and time conception. Additionally, it contains collective views on democracy, equity, gender equality, sexuality, nature, man, family, health and illness, death, work, sex roles, and attitudes towards authorities and public employees (for example social workers). Altogether, culture describes and makes sense of the state of existence, and also shows us how things *ought to be* in life in general and in the public sector in particular.

By viewing culture as a cognitive reference system, its emotive dimensions may be disregarded. Culture and emotions are, however, closely interlinked. Culture provides individuals with an identity, a sense of coherence, roots, belonging, community and ontological security (Giddens 1991). As human beings we are ethnocentric and prone to defend our culture – sometimes no matter the foreseeable costs. Even if we are not particularly willing to admit to our self-righteousness many of us feel slightly superior, more civilized or simply "a bit better" than others. Accordingly, criticism of our culture or way of life is conceived of as a critique of *us as persons* and as a threat to our identity, sense of security and psychological well-being.

Intercultural interaction, cultural differences and conflicts, therefore, must be understood both in terms of cognitive and emotive factors, since human behaviour – collective and individual – is derivable from culturally defined cognitive “principles”, in conjunction with their emotive character.

Despite the inherent paradoxes of social work – and particularly an ever present discrepancy between theory and practical application – laws, ordinances, ethical guidelines and professional codes guiding the social worker-client relationship may appear rather clear. More dubious may “other” cultural codes and principles typically come across for the people involved. We all have experiences of how the things we consider natural, self-evident and logical may be perceived as the opposite by somebody else.

Culture and Communication

Taken together, all the elements of culture make up a prism through which the social worker communicates, interprets and experiences the world: “... communication is culture, culture is communication”, to quote Hall (1976). The curse of belonging to a culture is that we are “unable to observe the very eyes with which we are viewing the world”, a dilemma pointing to the fact that we to a large extent are trapped in our own culture and frame of mind.

The seminal importance of language for culture (and vice versa!) and human relationships is indisputable. Occasionally language is utilized, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or unintentionally, as a means to erect and maintain social barriers in housing, politics and on the labour market. In Sweden unspoken and vaguely defined demands for sufficient language competence are frequently spelled out – by politicians, employers or educators. Such demands are commonly made without any actual correspondence to the labour tasks performed. Simply put, many people of foreign descent are “locked into” certain sectors of the labour market, even though they possess sufficient language skills for other jobs.

There is no doubt that the linguistic (verbal and non-verbal) aspects of the client-social worker relationship are of utmost significance. Not all clients may possess the language competence necessary in order to fully grasp written messages, verbal utterances or non-verbal cues. And even though clients may possess optimal language competence (whatever that means!), “authoritative” language, communicative subtleties and nuances, both for people with the mother tongue

of the majority and for minorities may be dubious. Reversibly, it seems reasonable that social workers from time to time do not understand their clients' intentions, interpretations, linguistic peculiarities or definitions of the situation.

Apart from language differences, the view of health and illness, abuse, authorities, taboos, moral and ethics, and sex roles, may constitute an indefinite set of potential sources of misunderstandings and conflicts. (It should be noted that such communicative difficulties tend to be mutual!) Against this background, providing efficient social work in a respectful fashion in global and multicultural working environments is dependent on intercultural competencies.

Knowing that versus Knowing how

Intercultural competencies do not merely pertain to language skills or of how people from other cultures think and act, but also to understanding and relating to other people as well as to a notion of the impact one's culture has on one's conception of reality. In the context of social work intercultural competencies refer to the competencies of the individual social worker. For the sake of discussion intercultural competencies can be divided into *content-competencies* and *process-competencies*, respectively, (Stier 2003/2004).

Typical for content-competencies is their one-dimensional or static character. They refer to the *knowing that*-domains of a culture rather than *knowing how* and include knowledge about other cultures, but also about one's own culture. Content-competencies comprise general knowledge about language (written, verbal and non-verbal), interpersonal codes of conduct, (i.e. "do's and don'ts") and the aspects of culture discussed above. It also includes an awareness of how humans work and function as well as a notion of the structural conditions and socioeconomic conditions under which people live.

Characteristically content-competencies are grounded in reductions, meaning "accurate" or "inaccurate" stereotypical information about a culture, attributed positive or negative value. Content competencies can be acquired through formalized education and professional training. Whereas accumulated "silent" professional knowledge occasionally is covered in study and training programmes, cultural knowledge is often left aside – purposely or not – as long as serious cultural clashes and communication problems can be avoided.

Such knowledge tends to have an *apriori-character* – i.e. it is acquired *before* the social worker is confronted with the “real” world of clients. It may serve to prevent the worst clashes and serious professional mistakes from occurring. But it may also cement cultural clichés and confirm or reinforce the stereotypes of the social worker. Consequently, the social worker may unconsciously seek confirmation of his or her preconceptions. It seems likely that those social workers merely possessing content-competencies may not be sufficiently functional in other cultures than their own.

By contrast, *process-competencies* bear upon the *knowing how-aspect* of intercultural competencies. The term signals how intercultural competencies, by necessity, are both contextual and dynamic. Every social interaction is unique and must be seen in the light of the involved actors’ backgrounds and situational characteristics. Process-competencies can be broken down into *interactional*, *cognitive*, *emotive* competencies and *discourse awareness*.

Interactional competencies

Miscommunication in client-social worker interaction can originate in cross-cultural variations. In regard to non-verbal communication, such differences may, for example, pertain to proxemics, eye contact, prosody, touching, gestures or whether feelings are overtly expressed to strangers or not.

Generally speaking, interactional competencies refer to the ability to be sensitive to cultural peculiarities (and similarities) in communicative situations and to detect and accurately interpret cross-cultural variations. More specifically, interactional competencies involve verbal skills, turn-taking and to be able to accurately interpret non-verbal cues, subtle signals and emotional responses of others. In addition to this, it includes familiarity with cultural rules for self-disclosure, how conversations are initiated and concluded, “who talks to whom?”, degree of formality/informality in interpersonal relationships and social hierarchy (Stier 2004).

In human communication the significance of the interactional contexts always need to be considered. Interactional competencies, therefore, include situational sensitivity, that is, the social worker’s capacity to understand embedded cultural meanings of a given context, e.g., “how do clients perceive a situation like this?” or “what is appropriate to do?”. This ought to be especially important when a social worker from a low-context culture works with clients belonging to a high-context culture or vice versa.

Situational sensitivity also has to do with the social worker's degree of receptiveness, openness and attentiveness in interaction-situations. It is about how culture influences the fashion in which professional tasks are handled and, in turn, the output for the client, and also how he or she perceives the social worker. The goal for the social work should be, as far as possible, noticing, analysing and understanding cultural differences and peculiarities, without valuing them automatically and uncritically - i.e. to approach clients unconditionally.

Cognitive competencies

The term cognitive competencies is designated to the social worker's ability of *perspective-alteration, role-taking, self-reflection* and *problem-solving*. Perspective-alteration has to do with the social worker's capability to view things and situations from different angles, to problematize his own and the client's cultural behaviour (Gustafsson, without year). It is about putting him- or herself in the position of the other and to alter between the inside and outside-positions - i.e. to *understand* the client. In this weberian endeavour Hessle (1987) distinguishes between "external" and "internal" understanding. External understanding draws from the conceptions people make of information flows and communication. Insufficient or deficient external understanding becomes evident as differences in culture, language and modes of communication cause misunderstandings between clients and social workers. By contrast, internal understanding refers to the social worker's empathetic ability to identify with and understand the client's situation as would it be his or her own (thus it concerns the qualitative dimensions of human relationships and communication). Hessle argues that social workers may very well have an external understanding of the client's verbal utterances and access to biographical data, but insufficient information to fully grasp their situation "from within".

In this context, two things need to be pointed out. Firstly, even if the ambition of social workers is a deeper understanding, it is virtually impossible to *fully* understand the situation exactly as the client construes it. Secondly, it seems reasonable to say that there should be limits for his or her empathy, in order to prevent the professional distance to be dissolved (Lundgren 1980:41).

Social workers frequently find themselves dilemmas emanating from unclear role boundaries or role conflicts. Role-taking refers to the ability to alternate between different aspects of the professional role (for example between the role

of the mentor, encourager, pedagogue or informer). Successful role alterations are dependent on the social workers' notion of the organizational and structural frames of social work, their ability to self-reflection and self-distantiation.

The social worker's ability to critically analyse him- or herself in relation to the professional task and its sociocultural context "from the outside" pertains to self-reflection. It is about being aware of the cultural influence exerted on his or her frame of understanding and conceptions of reality. In communication situations it means viewing oneself in the eyes of others – e.g. to behold one's appearance, interactional style, non-verbal behaviour, accessibility and openness. By doing so, the social worker may better understand how clients (based on their cultural and personal frame of mind) think, feel and make sense of the world.

Problem-solving, finally, is about the strategies social workers use to cope with upcoming problems brought about by cultural differences. When confronted with a concrete situation the first step of problem-solving can be trying to understand the client in the light of his life-situation, cultural background and the interactional context. Also, engaging in self-reflection is valuable. The next step can be identifying solutions, acceptable and adequate for the client and consistent with the judicial frames of social work.

Emotive competencies

A goal for social workers should be to, as far as possible, avoid that their feelings influence the interpretations, professional assessments and actions, and yet allow for an empathic treatment of the clients and not coming across as cold or too distant. The social worker's ability to understand those feelings that intercultural encounters trigger (e.g. xenophobia, uneasiness, anxiety, fear, anger, uncertainty, disgust or condemnation) can be termed emotive competencies. This includes an awareness of the origins, expressions and behavioural implications of emotions and, more importantly, their repercussions for professional performances.

Furthermore, emotive competencies aim at preventing such emotional responses from *automatically* influencing professional performance (whereas completely avoiding these responses seems impossible!). "Automatic" emotional responses can partly be avoided by developing corresponding automatic cognitive responses. Through an increased awareness of their feelings, continuous critical self-reflection, social workers can train themselves so that automatic emotional responses immediately are succeeded by automatic cognitive responses. In due time, cognitive responses may even precede the emotional reaction – that is, "to think before you do anything" or, summarized in the old saying, "to count to ten".

Another aspect of emotive competencies is *paradox-management*. For social workers it means coping with the inherent paradoxes of social work (see above) as well as with feelings triggered by role alterations and role conflicts. Presumably, the challenge, on the one hand, is to be a fellow human being, and a public representative, on the other. As a public representative the task is to simultaneously transgress the client's personal boundaries and intervene within the realms of existing laws and ethical principles. Social workers must compensate for personal weaknesses and, at the same time, manage clients' potential failures.

Coping with frustration is an everyday issue for most social workers. The experienced ones view frustration mainly as an emotion, and not as an objective statement about reality. Accordingly, *frustration management* is the ability to cope with frustration, so that it does not affect the client, nor him- or herself too much. By becoming aware of the causes and manifestations of frustration a professional distance becomes possible.

The social worker needs to manage feelings of uneasiness, anxiety, uncertainty, or other "negative" feelings evoked by their daily work with people from other cultures. Such emotional responses are believed to innate among all humans, regardless of culture or ethnicity (Gudykunst & Kim 1997). Yet, when confronted with clients in trouble or in crisis, it is essential social workers conceal such feelings as much as possible. Hence, *anxiety management* has to do with self-knowledge – an awareness of one's own reaction patterns and coping strategies with regard to such feelings is invaluable in intercultural interaction.

Against this background, in order to prevent work from completely engulfing themselves and jeopardize their physical and psychological well-being, social workers must maintain a distance to clients. Otherwise they run the risk of burn out syndrome and stress-induced emotional fatigue (Maslach 1985).

Discourse Awareness

Social work is surrounded by collective clichés, exerting influence on the profession as such and on social work practices. Awareness of these clichés, and of their repercussions for client-interaction, is yet another significant aspect of the social worker's intercultural competencies. This *discourse awareness* pertains to the social worker's knowledge of and approach to the embedded and, for the most part, invisible, discourse on cultural diversity, interculturality and cultural differences. To illustrate this, let us look at the discussion on cultural diversity and immigration in Sweden.

Much of the political discussions and media coverage on “migration-related” problems seem to draw from two sources. The first source is the *problem imperative*, a taken-for-granted assumption that the primary outcome of migration, cross-cultural interaction and cultural diversity is a number of problems (e.g. unemployment, ethnic friction, identity crisis). Connected to the problem-imperative is the second source; an uncritical *pathologization* of the *entire* and significant portion of the population that immigrants constitute. The underlying ethnocentric worldview is that these people would be better off if they were Swedish.

In addition to this, welfare institutions tend to have a collectivized approach to immigrants (Integrationsverket 2001: 125). It is common to view immigrants as a homogenous “group” when social care and public programmes for immigrants, “immigrant questions” and “immigrant problems” are initiated and debated, thus both overestimating the internal cultural homogeneity and disregarding its enormous variation (this is referred to as the attribution error). In fact, the connection to another country is the only common denominator for many of these people. Some were born abroad, others in Sweden, some have one non-Swedish parent, other two, some are refugees, others labour immigrants, some have come recently and others have been here for decades. In addition to this, this “group” exhibits immense cultural, physical and geographical variation.

Moreover, social problems are often not analysed or treated as *social* problems but as *cultural* problems. Thus cultural background as a “blackbox explanation” of, for instance, drug abuse, social misery, unemployment, female oppression, welfare dependence, criminality, poor health and marginality is rarely questioned. For social workers it may seem self-evident that social action and individual behaviour result from an intricate interplay of personality traits, social factors and cultural background. Yet, it is essential for social workers to frequently remind themselves to scrutinize their personal attitudes, prejudice and stereotypes.

The problem of normality concerns the fact that social work is firmly grounded in taken-for-granted dichotomies such as “help-provider/help-seeker” and “normal/deviant” or “Swedes/immigrants”. These dichotomies, in combination with the human propensity to overrate differences between “us and them” and to overestimate the similarities within respective group are the basis for symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”. Since social workers typically are in-group members, their understanding of the out-group may be limited or impaired by prejudicial and stereotypical information, which, in turn, may have negative implications for the client-social worker relationship.

The challenge for social workers is to see the diversity in society as a whole, and particularly the diversity within this “group” of people. It is a question of seeking the unique in the general, and the general in the unique, and to utilize each individual’s own potential. And although the basis for social work is aiding the needy, to uncritically pity people from other countries is anchored in a highly stereotypical and ethnocentric world view. In encounters with clients it is, therefore, particularly important to have a non-patronising interactional style.

Concluding remarks

A starting point for any human-oriented work (may it be physical, spiritual or social) is that people, regardless of culture, ethnicity or social background exhibit similar basic needs (sometimes referred to as *universal needs*). For example, we all need food, shelter, love, appreciation. We also seek respect, an identity and a sense of community with other people. Yet the discourse on social work in culturally diverse environments emanates from taken-for-granted assumptions of human *differences*. Characteristically unconscious comparisons between “us” and “them” do not always stop at calling attention to differences. Rather, observed differences are devalued and transformed into deficiencies, weaknesses or unattractive qualities among those individuals or groups defined as “different” (Berry et al 1992:8). For this reason, social workers must scrutinize and be open about the *consequences* of such divisions.

At the same time, the individual’s culture serves as a prism against which universal needs are deflected and given a meaning. It is in interplay with others that such needs and, more than anything else, the way to cope with them, are given a collective, culture-specific character. Besides universal similarities and culture-specific peculiarities individuals also have unique needs, ideals, ambitions and reaction patterns. A major challenge for the social worker is to *see* and *grasp* which needs and reaction patterns are universal, and which are culture-specific or unique for the client. Another is about avoiding wrongful or inadequate conclusions where cultural peculiarities are used to explain things which in fact are expressions of something all-human or, by contrast, something highly individual.

In human-oriented professions there are no patent-solutions or user-friendly manuals to consult when assisting clients in coping with or solving their problems. Besides profession-specific knowledge and skills social workers need

an elaborate understanding of human functioning and of the structural conditions of society. Social work in multicultural contexts raises a need for intercultural competencies, a demand likely to be accentuated in the future.

The notion of intercultural competencies originates in a holistic view – i.e. that explanations of human behaviour and problems must be sought in the interface of individual, group, society and *culture*. Such a view also involves an accommodating and respectful attitude towards the client's integrity and towards his or her cultural background, ambitions and life choices. Social work must, as far as possible, make use of the possibilities inherent in society, cultural diversity and in every individual's personal potential.

For future social workers, an understanding of the unique character of multicultural professional arenas seems paramount. At the same time, stereotypical oversimplifications as well as an uncritical and exaggerated pathologization of immigrants and non-Swedes must be avoided. If social workers develop their discourse awareness they can support those of their clients who struggle to be relieved from the burden of negative labels that society has assigned to them or free those caught in a state of alienation or marginality.

Finally, social workers often claim their work to be profitable (though not necessarily in economic terms!), and yet very difficult and draining. To be an "interculturally competent" social worker seems even more difficult. Based on the experiences of myself and others, my objective has been, therefore, to shed some light upon the characteristics of social work in multicultural contexts. But a more profound theoretical and empirical understanding of these issues requires more elaborate investigations in the field – a future project I look forward to with excitement and energy.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion around the concept of “competence”, see Rychen & Hersh Salganik (2001).

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