Critical Social Work

School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

<http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/orientalistSWotherizationSweden>

Critical Social Work, 2013 Vol. 14, No. 1

Orientalist Social Work: Cultural Otherization of Muslim Immigrants in Sweden

Critical Social Work 14(1)

Barzoo Eliassi¹

¹Lund University

Author Note

Barzoo Eliassi holds a PhD in social work. He is a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University. His areas of interest are multiculturalism, social policy, immigration, nationalism, postcolonial studies and diaspora studies. His recent publication include: *Contesting Kurdish identities in Sweden: Quest for belonging among Middle Eastern Youth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Abstract

This aim of this article is to critically examine how the concept of culture is used in Sweden to explain the “failure” or the difficulties that Muslim immigrant families are experiencing with regards to their integration into the dominant society. Whereas, the Swedish society is often represented as ‘modern’, ‘progressive’, and ‘democratic’, immigrants with Muslim backgrounds are predominately described as ‘traditional’, ‘authoritarian’ and ‘pre-modern’. There is a widely held idea within Swedish social work research that immigrant families and the white mainstream Swedish society are situated within two different value systems with different world-views regarding family and gender relations. Due to this entrenched binary opposition, Orientalism becomes constitutive to social work research and practices.

Keywords: culture, Orientalism, otherization, immigration, integration, anti-racist social work, Sweden

Questions concerning whether Muslim immigrants are able or willing to integrate into the mainstream society constitute the core of heated debates in many European states. The cultural differences that Muslim immigrants supposedly bring with themselves to Europe are viewed as a major obstacle to their integration. The supposed unassimilability of Muslims immigrants is also raised as important arguments to reduce or prevent immigration from countries with a predominant Muslim population (Fekete, 2006; Kundnani, 2007; Razack, 2008). When Muslims are portrayed as a problematic category, they are often discussed in relation to their families and a totalizing view of Muslim women, youth and children as cultural prisoners (see Eliassi, 2010; Razack, 2008). Whereas, youth in general are often described both as a threat to society due to their allegedly subversive cultural values but also as an asset for the future of the nation and its continuity (Griffin, 2004), young Muslim men in many European states are mainly represented as an anomaly and a disturbing element in the national and public spheres (see for instance Carlbom, 2009). In regard to young women, they are predominantly portrayed as culturally and religiously imprisoned and veiled. It is implied that they need to be liberated, un-veiled, and empowered due to their family's traditional and oppressive social relations (Eliassi, 2010). This assigned victim position is intimately linked with Orientalist fantasies (Razack, 2008; Volpp, 2005; Yegenoglu, 1998) about Oriental women as passive and culturally submissive. Orientalism, as Said (2003) has shown, is mainly consisted of a discourse about the Middle East/Orient as a monolithic entity without internal disparities and heterogeneity. While West/Occident is associated in Orientalist representation with progress, democracy, cultural dynamics, and gender equality, Muslims are framed as a 'problem' community since their cultural values are believed to be in support of patriarchal violence like forced marriages and 'honor-killings'. Furthermore, Muslims are put in a negative light for assumedly forming 'parallel societies' within Western Europe (Morey & Yaqin, 2010; Ramm, 2010). What characterizes Orientalist representation is its tendency to stereotypically misrepresent, overgeneralize, and misrecognize Muslims and their cultures and societies in essentialist modes (Radhakrishnan, 2012).

Orientalist discourses are not limited to European or North American representations of Muslims in the Middle East, but are deeply embedded in the culturalism and anti-Muslim racism that targets Muslim immigrants when they are framed and represented in European societies. In this regard, culturalism is one of the most dominating theoretical approaches to the conceptualization of immigrant and Muslim families that involves an understanding of culture of an ethnic or national group as given, homogenous, monolithic, and geographically bounded that is transmitted across generations (Scuzzarello, 2008; Stolcke, 1995). With regard to immigrant youth, a culturalist approach focuses on cultural confusion and the notion of being 'trapped' between two cultures, the parents' culture and the mainstream culture, as well as the hierarchical power relations within families (Ahmadi, 1998; Anwar, 1998; Aronowitz, 2002; Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Khondaker, 2007; Schlytter, 2004; Schlytter & Linell, 2009; Sjöblom, 2002; Watson, 1977; Wikan, 2002; Wong, 1997). The culturalist approach often measures the level of 'deviancy' of immigrant families by looking at how much of their life-style and family constellations differ from normative Western middle class families. In this culturalist view, an 'identity crisis' emerges because the young people and their parents are situated within a continuum of traditionalism/collectivism and modernity/individualism, where the dominant society stands for modern values while the minoritized groups represent the pre-modern values incompatible with the modern world (Ahmadi, 1998; Schlytter, 2004; Schlytter & Linell, 2009;

Wikan, 2002, 2003). Such essentialist understanding of culture as unchangeable and fixed provides the basis for many 'corrective projects' in the field of social work. Muslims families are often portrayed as problematic categories, which should be governed and controlled through social policy, legal and social service interventions and policing. In this light, the culturalist approach has been accepted as the most appealing conceptualization of immigrant families, women, youth, and children within social work practices in Sweden. The following section is an illustration of this problem which shows how culturalism is used within social work research in drawing clear fault-lines between 'us' and 'them' but also how gender relations among immigrants have come to be used to create the 'other' and culturally stigmatize Muslim families in Sweden.

'Honor-Violence' as the Boundary Marker Between 'Us' and 'Them'

In January 2002, a young woman of Kurdish background, Fadime Sahindal, was killed by her father. The murder was widely described as an 'honor-killing'. Since 2002 the notions of 'honor-killing' and 'honor-related' violence and 'honor-culture' have dominated the Swedish and many other West European public debates. This 'honor-related' oppression is believed to be collective, traditional, and cultural and it is said to be found mainly in the Middle East (Friedman & Ekholm Friedman, 2006; Kurkiala, 2003; Schlytter & Linell, 2009; Wikan, 2003). It has been intensively debated in different public arenas and these debates have resulted in social policies through significant governmental grants in order to combat what now is known in Sweden as vulnerable girls in strongly patriarchal families (Carbin, 2010). Social work researchers have been central actors in consolidating this understanding of 'honor-related' oppression but also influential in formulating guidelines for social policy interventions (Schlytter, 2004; Schlytter & Linell, 2009). For example, Schlytter (2004) argues that young immigrant women with Middle Eastern backgrounds are in need of Swedish social work intervention since they are allegedly exposed to forced and arranged marriages. Further, Schlytter asserts that Swedish legal system and social workers need more cultural knowledge about 'honor-culture' in order to meet these demands in an adequate way. Arranged marriages, according to Schlytter, represent a traditional way of marriage that is totally different from the Swedish marriage system, which is based on freedom and equality. Finally, Schlytter questions whether arranged marriages should be accepted in Sweden or not; an issue that should be of concern for the state, the judicial system, and social work practice.

Schlytter and Linell (2009, p. 158) make a clear distinction between girls who are subjected to 'honor culture' and those who are subjected to parents that abuse substance and are categorized by the authors as incapable/passive, authoritarian, and suffering from mental illness. Schlytter and Linell studied girls who were between 13-18 years were about to be taken into care. The 'honor-group' which consisted of immigrant girls, according to Schlytter and Linell (2009), experienced conditions such as leisure time restrictions, restrictions at school, punishment for transgressions of rules, threats of punishment to force compliance with rules, restrictions at home, and forced marriage plans/genital mutilation/chastity norms. While non-immigrant girls in Schlytter and Linell's study were regarded as facing *social* problems due to the life situation of their parents (authoritarian upbringing, incapable/passive parents, substance abusing parents, mental ill health of parents), the 'honor-group' is believed to face a *cultural* problem that occurs when traditionalism clashes with modernity (Schlytter & Linell, 2009).

These young immigrant girls were described as experiencing ‘clashes’ between two different systems, a modern Swedish family policy and a traditional ‘honor-culture’, where modernity stands for individualism and freedom while traditionalism/pre-modernity is the site of collectivism and individual constraints (Schlytter & Linell, 2009). Consequently this assumed clash “obstructs the chances for women and their children to integrate into the new society” (Schlytter & Linell, 2009, p. 153-154). Further, the fathers of the ‘honor-group’ were described in Schlytter and Linell’s study as tyrants who abuse the daughters and sometimes even the mothers. Reflecting an Orientalist imagination about culturally imprisoned Third-World women (Volpp, 2005), Schlytter and Linell draw the conclusion that “the girls’ entire life space is controlled and fenced in” (Schlytter & Linell, 2009, p. 159). In the Western colonial imagination, Muslim women are often regarded as imperiled objects exposed to ‘dangerous’ Muslim men, who are in need of rescue missions by Western men and women. The Western subject, according to Yegenoglu (1998), is an “unavoidably masculine position” (p. 11) and Western women can gain access to a sovereign subject position only through inscribing themselves within the Orientalist fantasy about possessing the Oriental woman (Razack, 2008).

Schlytter and Linell (2009) situate themselves, through their research, into minoritized families within the culturalist paradigm that is imbued with Orientalist visions about a rescuing Swedish social policy vis-à-vis Muslim women. If inappropriate child-rearing and gender inequality among minoritized families are viewed as rooted in their cultural background, then social policy is encouraged to target and combat their culture. Consequently, in order to solve these problems, their cultures need to be contained, governed, fought, and excluded. An assimilationist social policy thus becomes a disciplinary means to ‘normalize’ what are believed to be deviant and pathologized Muslims fathers, brothers, and families with immigrant backgrounds. Following Foucault (1975), normalization is constitutive of the dividing practices of disciplines, such as, social work, which divide the world and its people into different categories according to a principle of the normal and the pathological. Moreover, these dividing practices not only classify people into different categories but also situate them within a hierarchy of development and degree of deviancy (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999). Schlytter and Linell’s (2009) classifications of different kinds of young women were based on the kind of families they were living in and the degree of oppression they were experiencing. Families with an ‘honor-culture’ were ranked as the most oppressive and these families, specifically the women in them, were regarded as being most urgently in need of social policy and social work interventions (Schlytter & Linell, 2009).

Normalization, as Foucault has insisted, is one of the central instruments of the exercise of power because it imposes homogenization on groups, and fixes differences, gaps and levels between groups (Rabinow, 1984) in order to enable interventions to adjust them to a standard that is believed to reflect the ‘good society’. Likewise, partitioning is the role of social work and social workers (Chambon, et al., 1999). Families with immigrant backgrounds are at risk of being categorized by social workers as needing to undergo a normalization process. Consequently, and paradoxically, many social work institutions help to stigmatize families with immigrant backgrounds and reinforce their exclusion (Ålund, 2002; Eliassi, 2006; Pringle, 2010; Wikström, 2007).

Within Swedish social work practices there are widespread ideas about immigrant men's masculinity as 'deviant', 'undesirable', and 'failures' in Sweden; they are also ranked low in relation to the white Swedish middle-class masculinity (Eriksson, 2006; Pringle, 2010). It is in relation to such discourses, that educating minoritized families and particularly women about gender equality, integration, and parenting have become an important line of actions enabled through different state-sponsored projects (see Larsen, 2009; Scuzzarello, 2008; Thomsson, 2003; Wright Nielsen, 2009) within the political framework of a 'civilizing mission' among 'backward' and 'traditional' communities. In the same vein, Mulinari (2007) points out that the more families with immigrant backgrounds are constructed as 'different/deviant', the more that children with immigrant background are subjected to colonial fantasies of a civilizing mission within social institutions in Sweden. Furthermore, this culturalist approach involving 'oppressive' Middle-Eastern/Muslim masculinities and 'oppressed Oriental' women underpins the Orientalist discourse which frames Muslims as oppressive and backward and not fitting in the modern world. In addition, it disseminates the idea of Sweden and the West as genuine sites of 'women-friendly' political geographies in deep contrast to other political geographies, such as, the Middle East (Eliassi, 2013; Towns, 2002). Sweden is thus portrayed as a modern society threatened by 'primitive' and 'traditional' masculinities untouched by the 'progressive' values of modernity (Carlbom, 2009; Schlytter & Linell, 2009). Likewise, minoritized families are demonized and pathologized and when such notions became dominant in the society, social policy and social workers were encouraged to take punitive measures against these families. Consequently, the association between immigrant/Muslim families and honor-related violence or culture has gradually become naturalized and taken for granted in public debates, media representations and policy documents. Critical voices that challenge and contest this culturalist framework are often repudiated, quelled, and charged for being 'apologist', 'complicitious' and 'denier' of cultural motivations behind violence against immigrant women (see, for example, Kurkiala, 2003; Wikan, 2003) and thus producing a hegemonic consensus on what honor-related violence entails and how it can be understood and addressed (Eliassi, 2013).

In recent years, strong critiques have been directed toward the ways that Swedish gender relations have been praised as modern/equal/women-friendly and used to construct the boundaries of Swedishness/Swedish nation in relation to the world but also the immigrant population in Sweden (Ålund & Alinia, 2011; Carbin, 2010; Mulinari, 2007; Scuzzarello, 2008; Towns, 2002; Wikström, 2007). Such ideological constructions of Swedish gender relations as ethnic markers have become a discursive strategy to exclude women and men with immigrant backgrounds from belonging to Sweden. These ideological constructions devalue differences as deviancy and reinforce the prevailing dominance of white Swedes over people with immigrant backgrounds. Using gender relations as a way to draw boundaries between Westerners and people from the Third World has been an important tool in the justification of Western dominance through colonialism and imperialism in the name of modernity, progress, development, enlightenment and rationality (Mohanty, 2003). Therefore, there is a powerful conjunction between the imperial subject and the subject of humanism and a close relationship between modern Western feminism and modern individual women and imperialism. The Swedish discourses about gender equality are also colored by the paradigm of 'us' and 'them'. Swedes are presented as 'equal' and migrants as 'oppressive/oppressed' within the same imperial and colonial logic that is embedded in the discourse of 'integration'. This intends to justify the existing hierarchical ethnic power structure in society. Moreover, a one-sided focus on

minoritized groups and their gender relations as problematic disavows the gender inequalities within the dominant society and produces a notion of gender inequality as mainly an ‘ethnic’ or ‘foreign’ issue. The recurring depiction of Third World women as victims has been fiercely criticized by postcolonial feminists (Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 2003; Razack, 2008; Spivak, 1999; Volpp, 2005; Yegenoglu, 1998) who argue that the victimization of Third World women affirms the idea that Western women are emancipated, superior, and in possession of a sovereign subject position. In a contemporary Swedish and wider European context, when violence against women is discussed, gender is often placed in opposition to ethnicity, culture, race, etc. (Ålund & Alinia, 2011). According to Razack (2008) when gender is used to explain the violence or the murder that men belonging to the dominant group commit, the crime or oppressive practices against women are viewed to be products of individualized deviancy and criminality. Consequently, Muslims or Middle-Easterners are viewed “to be stuck in pre-modernity while Westerners have progressed as fully rational subjects with the capacity to choose moral actions, even if the choice is a bad one” (Razack, 2008, p. 128). If gender inequality is reduced to culture, then there is risk of condensing the complexity of the problem and the mechanisms behind the subordinating positions that many Muslim women experience in Western countries. Since it limits the discourse (that becomes the basis for political action) and reduces gender inequality to overarching identities (culture or Islam) and excludes the flow of other signifiers like ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and minoritized position that can give a more nuanced picture of the situation.

Culture as a the Ethnic Property of the Other

The way culturalist researchers use the concept of culture in relation to the dominant society and minoritized groups is related to unequal power relations and citizenship status. In this regard, Rosaldo (1993) asserts that while minoritized groups are marked, named and culturalized, dominant groups are assumed to be postcultural and rendered invisible through the interplay of culture, power, and citizenship. In her review about how culture is used within the discourse of social work, Park (2005) indicates that culture is mainly used as a signifier of difference but also as a synonym for race and ethnicity limited to immigrants, refugees, ‘people of color’, etc. Further, Park notes that culture in relation to minoritized groups indicates both deficiency and necessity. As a result of this understanding of cultural identity, Ålund (1991) points out that it “makes culture both the problem and the means to its solution” (p. 69). It is also due to the alleged deficiency and necessity of minoritized groups that the discourse of cultural competence has emerged in order to make the cultural Other intelligible for the dominant society. However, cultural competence, according to Ben-Ari and Strier (2010), is based on an essentialist understanding of cultural knowledge and is regarded “as a tool to ‘competently’ assert control over cultural minorities” (p. 2163) for institutional purposes. It is in this context we can understand why cultural differences and ‘cultural clashes’ refer so often to immigrants while the cultures of the dominant subjects are dissolved into invisibility. And it is also the reason why it becomes so handy for social workers in Sweden to use culture to explain why immigrants use violence against women and children (Carbin, 2010; Eliassi, 2006; Eriksson, 2006; Mulinari, 2007; Pringle, 2010; Scuzzarello, 2008), why they resort to forced and arranged marriages, why they choose to live in segregated areas with people of ‘their own’, why they refuse to integrate into the Swedish society, etc. (Eliassi, 2006).

Although there is no clear relationship between ethnicity and men's violence against women and children, studies about social work in Sweden show that Swedish social workers claim that men with immigrant/Arabic/Muslim background are believed to have a cultural proclivity to be more violent against women and children (Eliassi, 2006; Eriksson, 2006; Kamali, 1997; Pringle, 2010; Wikström, 2007). This discourse leads to the pathologization of Muslim immigrants as violent while turning white Swedish men into an invisible category that does not run the risk of being scrutinized by social workers on suspicion of committing crimes or acts of violence against women and children. Subsequently, violence becomes associated with immigrant masculinities that are rendered visible and become targets of interrogation. This is why it becomes important to understand racism and social welfare arrangements within the context of unequal power relations between dominant and minoritized groups (Eriksson, 2006; Pringle, 2010), where the mass media have a powerful role in structuring an Orientalist discourse about Muslim men as violent, patriarchal, and oppressive, while representing Swedish men as possessing a desirable and inspirational form of masculinity (Pringle, 2010). In addition, the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) in Sweden suggests that social workers working within family law pay attention to the differences between the putatively 'equal' Swedes and 'unequal' immigrants who come from patriarchal extended family systems (Eriksson, 2006; Socialstyrelsen, 2003). Although culture can be an important consideration, an over-reliance on cultural explanations can distract social workers and policy makers from important structural factors such as unemployment, poverty, marginalization, exclusion (Williams & Soydan, 2005), and racism (Barn, 2007) in the context of unequal power relations. In the light of the culturalist approaches, the subordination of immigrants occurs in many interconnected contexts of unequal power relations (social work practice and research and official state documents) that reinforce the dominance of white Swedes and stigmatize immigrants as a 'disturbing' element in the wider society who need to be governed and surveilled by the state and social welfare agencies.

Hence, there is a negative nexus between culture and power, cultural visibility and invisibility, and 'cultural clashes' and 'cultural assimilability'. 'Cultural clash' is a handy metaphor used in the context of immigration and social work to underline the question of cultural incompatibility of different immigrant groups with the dominant society. The concept of 'cultural clash' has a central role in asserting the myth of Swedish and European identity as superior in relation to non-European identities that are perceived as being trapped in a pre-modern time with pre-modern values. The discourse of 'cultural clashes' permeates social work practice (Barn, 2007; Eliassi, 2006; Kamali, 1997; Pringle, 2010; Williams & Soydan, 2005). Gender inequality, inappropriate child rearing, patriarchal masculinity, forced and arranged marriages, and 'cultural clashes' are regarded as integration problems that affect young people with immigrant/Muslim backgrounds, which trigger identity crises and alienation. Many researchers have showed that ideological constructions of Muslim, Asian, or Middle Eastern families as a problem for Swedish society or for European societies play a significant role in legitimizing state racism and repressive immigration policies (Brah, 1987; Fekete, 2006; Ghorashi, 2010; Gullestad, 2006; Kundnani, 2007; Mulinari, 2007; Razack, 2008). Accordingly, these racist constructions and definitions of families with immigrant backgrounds "have powerful effects when translated into social policy or when they become the 'professional common sense' of teachers, social workers, health visitors and others working within agencies of social welfare" (Brah, 1987, p. 48-49). The actual lived experiences of these families do not bear

much resemblance to the values and perspectives of the professionals within agencies of social welfare that are structured by stereotypical notions (Brah, 1987).

Social Work and Integration in an Ethnically Divided Society

Advocating for structural change and helping to mobilize anti-racist directions and challenging domination are constitutive to anti-oppressive social work and anti-racist social work (Dominelli, 1997, 2002; Fook, 2002, 2003; Penketh, 2000; Quinn, 2009). Understanding and identifying the social structures, processes, and practices that result in oppression is an important step toward enabling social justice and advocating for the opportunities and rights of marginalized and oppressed groups (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002). Social work that is permeated by case work, cultural competency, ethnic sensitivity, and color-blindness not only risks neglecting structural conditions that influence the life conditions of individuals but also the outcome of the relationship between social workers and disadvantaged groups and individuals (Park, 2005). The structural approach takes into account the material conditions of individual belonging to a specific group and how these can influence his/her life chances. In order to enable social justice and equality, it is the duty of social work institutions to understand under what historical, cultural, social, and economic contexts discrimination and racism are legitimized, what groups discursively become objects of discriminatory practices, and how resistance can be framed against discriminatory structures (Dominelli, 1997; Eliassi, 2006).

Identity formation and the position of 'others' in society is one of the major challenges to social work practice at a time of increasing racism and discrimination in Europe reinforced by culturalist explanations as guidelines for social policies that deal with immigrants. If the goal of social work is to foster equality and challenge the subordinate positions of immigrants and marginalized groups, then it is essential to understand the processes of oppression and domination that deprive certain groups from having equal access to power resources. Several studies indicate there is a lack of anti-oppressive and anti-racist research, methods, and practices in Sweden (Eliassi, 2010; Eriksson, 2006; Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005; Pringle, 2010). Social work practices that engage with minoritized groups often reproduces the subordinated position of these groups and foster racist practices, enabled by white social workers trained to view the social problems of minoritized clients mainly as a consequence of their cultural background and leave the structural inequalities and experiences intact (Dominelli, 1997; Park, 2005). Therefore, social workers need to be aware of colonial and Orientalist legacies and reconsider their understanding of social work as the source of positive and productive interventions for those who are subjected to it. Dominelli (1997) suggests that this racist legacy can be traced to the ways young people with immigrant backgrounds are conceptualized as 'trapped between cultures', depicting Asian women as passive, submissive, and oppressed, black women as sexually promiscuous, and assigning patriarchy to Asian and black men. As a result, Asian and black families' cultures and communities are pathologized and punitive social work actions are justified as legitimate (Dominelli, 1997). Challenging such processes of normalization that reinforce the prevailing structural inequalities is regarded as a priority for social work research and practices (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005).

Furthermore, colonial legacies, along with the reproduction of knowledge within social work, make postcolonial theory central to understanding contemporary European societies and their

encounters with people with immigrant backgrounds (Eliassi, 2006; Fejo-King & Briskman, 2009; Healy, 2005; Quinn, 2009; Wikström, 2007). Postcolonial theory is particularly useful for highlighting structural inequalities which still prevail between people who are described as 'whites/Europeans' and people who are defined as 'non-whites'. Mulinari, Keskinen, Irni and Tuori (2009) underline that Sweden and other Nordic countries not only see themselves as part of the Western world but also as inheritors of the values of the enlightenment. This creates a complicity with colonialism which involves "processes in which (post)colonial imaginaries, practices and products are made to be part of what is understood as the 'national' and 'traditional' culture of the Nordic countries" (Mulinari et al., 2009, p. 1-2). Besides, the civilizing mission that has been an important part of European colonial dominance, is not only practiced outside of Europe but also implemented within its own welfare agencies, where the target groups are immigrants who are assumed to be culturally deviant and need instruction to become 'normalized', 'integrated', or 'assimilated' (Larsen, 2009; Mulinari et al., 2009; Scuzzarello, 2008). For example, Wright Nielsen (2009) shows how the concept of empowerment is used in practice within the framework of an integration project organized for women with refugee or immigrant backgrounds in a Swedish municipality. According to Wright Nielsen, the cultural background of these women is thoroughly problematized within the framework of the project and the main aim of the project is to interfere in the subjectivities of the women through empowerment work that is equated with saving the women from their culture that is represented as deviating from a Swedish norm. Swedish integration projects entail discursive construction of Muslim immigrants as a group who are in need of help and care. At the same time, within these projects, the culture of Muslim immigrants is regarded as a threat to the Swedish gender equality and national identity (Scuzzarello, 2008).

Hence, integration is understood following the culturalist paradigm as an evolutionary process which minoritized groups should undergo in order to enter the realm of modernity and claim an equal subject position. While integration is often associated with inclusion and viewed as a political goal to dissolve the prevailing hierarchy in the society, the culturalist approach preserves the ethnic/racial/cultural hierarchy through discourses about a unified national culture in deep contrast to the immigrant population. Consequently, the problem of integration is reduced to a matter of cultural deviation (Eliassi, 2013; Razack, 2008).

Undoing Pathologization of Families with Immigrant Backgrounds

Young women and men with immigrant background are well aware of the culturalist discourse and negative representation of families with immigrant backgrounds. In order to gain access and support from social services, they might be propelled to frame a discourse that converges with the stereotypical and homogenizing notions that social work institutions hold in Sweden about immigrant and Muslim families (Eliassi, 2010; Wikström, 2007). There is also a risk that all rebellions against parental authority by young men and women with Muslim backgrounds are understood within the discourse of so called 'honor-related' oppression that has become the framework for Swedish social services to analyze situations and formulate interventions concerning placements of young women and men with Muslim backgrounds (Eliassi, 2010). Muslim parents might fear that they do not have the same right as white Swedish families to set limits and outline rules for their children due to their awareness of being structurally subordinated as well as culturally stigmatized and besieged (Eliassi, 2006; Kamali,

1997). However, this is not to say that social workers should blindly neglect oppressive forms of parenting in the name of cultural relativism (Barn, 2007; Dominelli, 1997). All families with Muslim backgrounds cannot be gauged by the same yardstick and the diverse variety of family forms among Muslims cannot be reduced to negative stereotypes in encountering, assessing, planning and determining interventions (Eliassi, 2010).

Turning the middle class Swedish family into a universal form of family constellation is another means, following Dominelli (1997), to impose cultural imperialism on families who do not adhere to this norm. In addition, white stereotypes of minoritized families are often based on racist notions of white cultural supremacy that permeate the societal social relations in contemporary European societies (Dominelli, 1997). According to Eliassi (2010), it is unheard of for social authorities and social workers to use Muslim families as a 'family home' for placing youth with Swedish backgrounds. This prejudiced pattern of placement indicates that Muslim families are understood to be inappropriate places for nurturing and raising young people. Hence, class, ethnicity, and religion become important considerations when social workers assess their interventions and plan sanctions against families who do not adhere to the routines and the rule systems of social services (Eliassi, 2010). Punitive practices have become a hallmark of social work, especially in the context of resource constraints, efforts, and practices of a service-oriented social work have become limited; a relationship imbued with suspicion marks the interaction between social worker and client. Demonizing and pathologizing Muslim families in Sweden as dysfunctional and deviant from a normative Swedish Middle class family obstructs a process of dialogical relationships, contestation of perspectives and mutual narrativization of prevailing social problems and possible solutions (Eliassi, 2010).

If changes are to occur, then the basis of the racist epistemology within the discipline of social work needs to decolonize through critical inquiries that highlight and formulate new routes of action and strategies to deal with racism. An adequate strategy needs to look at those discriminatory practices that are reproduced on a daily basis by dominant subjects and dominant institutions and thereby undo those naturalized privileges that have discriminatory effects on minoritized individuals and groups. Further, social workers should also reconsider their social location as service providers within dominant social institutions that take white Swedishness as the normative point of departure for their service provision. In this regard, Fook (2005) points out that social workers should assess the lenses through which they analyze the social problems of those groups with which they work. Interrogating the basis of these dominant lenses is crucial to critical social work practice. In the same vein, writing from a critical social work perspective, Quinn (2009) argues that it is because of institutional racism that policies, practices, and institutions of the dominant society function for the advantage of one or some groups. Besides, it is within such institutional frameworks that the world-views, beliefs, and values of the dominant group are established as the normative point of comparison to which *other* values and meanings are constructed as inferior, pathological, and deviant (Quinn, 2009).

Concluding Thoughts

Social work in Sweden is permeated by a culturalist discourse about young people and families with immigrant backgrounds. This discourse classifies and frames their cultural background as inferior and assigns them deviant qualities. The culturalist approach is

preoccupied mainly with culture of the ‘origin’ and excludes the broader political, cultural, economic, and social contexts within which these youth are situated in the dominant society. Focusing principally on ‘culture’ as explaining the despair they experience not only maintains exclusionary practices in the dominant society but also limits their life opportunities and reinforces the structural inequalities that these youth experience within the labor market, school system, housings, mass media, legal system, etc. Identity formation is consequently a dynamic social process that is sensitive to prevailing structural constraints, inequalities, and opportunities. Therefore, social work research should pay attention to those structural inequalities that generate difficulties for Muslim families and youth to attain full and equal citizenship in the society where they are living. Social work can contribute to the formulation and mobilization of anti-oppressive forces in society in order to alter oppressive structural inequalities.

Today, one of the central tasks of social work in Sweden is to challenge dualistic categories like ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ that are assigned different power and values and reproduced by certain mass media, politicians, and researchers. Similarly, Pringle (2010) suggests that there is a great need to change the discourses about ethnicity within Swedish welfare agencies and among welfare researchers and policy makers. The notion that the Swedish welfare system is a *just* entity and does not practice racism should be challenged; otherwise, social workers will continue to reproduce the prevailing unequal social relations (Pringle, 2010). Social workers should also take into consideration the ideological basis of constructions of certain immigrant groups in terms of cultural deviancy and inappropriateness and link these constructions to the ways they experience structural inequalities. There are strong indications that culturalist explanations provided by certain feminists, journalists, activists, and politicians about family violence, enforced marriage, genital mutilation, and ‘honor-killings’ among Muslim immigrants have “offered the radical right a new arsenal of issues and rhetoric with which to fight immigration and defend a unitary national culture” (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007, p. 214).

Following Humphries (2004), social work is central in defining the boundaries of the welfare state and in challenging different sources of inequality. Many people with immigrant background are clients of social welfare services that have shifted their concern from welfare to a position of authoritarianism, a culture of blaming the victim, and emphasis generally on control, restriction, surveillance, exclusion, and enforcement (Humphries, 2004). Critical social work provides important theoretical perspectives and directions and asserts the importance of commitment to work towards social justice and equality for oppressed groups as well as the importance of working alongside these groups. Critical social work should involve itself in analyzing the power relations and dominant assumptions and beliefs that oppress and marginalize certain groups (Allan, 2009). In the light of rising ethnic discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in Europe, critical social work has a crucial role in fighting structural inequalities and otherization processes that permeate the wider society. This is a perspective that is remarkably absent within Swedish social work education and practice that are imbued with Orientalist fantasies about Muslim immigrants as culturally disrupting elements within the Swedish welfare state.

References

- Ahmadi, N. (Ed.) (1998). *Ungdom, kulturmöten, identitet [Youth, cultural encounters, identity]*. Stockholm, SE: Liber.
- Akkerman, T., & Hagelund, A. (2007). "Women and children first!" Anti-immigration parties and gender in Norway and the Netherlands. *Pattern of Prejudice*, 41(2), 197-214.
- Ålund, A. (1991). Immigrant culture as an obstacle to 'partnership'. In A. Ålund & C.-U. Schierup (Eds.), *Paradoxes of multiculturalism* (pp. 69-88). Aldershot, ENG: Ashgate.
- Ålund, A. (2002). Sociala problem i kulturell förklädnad [Social problems in cultural disguises]. In A. Meeuwisse & H. Swärd (Eds.), *Perspektiv på sociala problem [Perspective on social problems]* (pp. 293-313). Stockholm, SE: Natur och Kultur.
- Ålund, A., & Alinia, M. (2011). I skuggan av kulturella stereotypier: Perspektiv på forskning om genus, jämställdhet och etniska relationer i Sverige [In the shadow of cultural stereotypes: perspective on research, gender, equality and ethnic relations in Sweden]. *Sociologisk Forskning*, 2(48), 43-64.
- Allan, J. (2009). Theorising new development in critical social work. In J. Allan, L. Briskman, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Critical social work. Theoreis and practices for a socially just world* (2nd ed., pp. 30-44). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Anwar, M. (1998). *Between cultures: Continuity and change in the lives of young Asians*. London, ENG: Routledge.
- Aronowitz, A. (2002). Assimilation, acculturation, and juvenile delinquency among second generation Turkish youths in Berlin. In J. D. Freilich (Ed.), *Migration, culture conflict and crime* (pp. 233-361). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press.
- Barn, R. (2007). 'Race', ethnicity and child welfare: A fine balancing act. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(8), 1425-1434.
- Ben-Ari, A., & Strier, R. (2010). Rethinking cultural competence: what can we learn from Levinas? *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(7), 2155-2167.
- Brah, A. (1987). Women of South Asian origin in Britain: Issues and concerns. *South Asia Research*, 7(1), 39-54.
- Carbin, M. (2010). *Mellan tystnad och tal. Flickor och hedersvåld i offentlig politik [Between silence and speaking: Girls and honour violence in Swedish public polic]* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Stockholm, SE: Stockholm University.
- Carlbom, A. (2009). *Rosengårds bränder handlar om manlighet [The fires of Rosengård is about manliness]*. Retrieved from <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/opinion/aktuella-fragar/rosengards-brander-handlar-om-manlighet/>
- Cashmore, E., & Troyna, B. (1982). *Black youth in crisis*. London, ENG: Allen and Unwin.
- Chambon, A. S., Irving, A., & Epstein, L. (Eds.). (1999). *Reading Foucault for social work*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Dominelli, L. (1997). *Anti-racist social work*. London, ENG: Palgrave.
- Dominelli, L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice*. London, ENG: Palgrave.
- Eliassi, B. (2006). Diskriminerande föreställningar inom socialtjänsten [Discriminatory beliefs within the social service]. In M. Kamali (Ed.), *Den segregering integrationen. Om social sammanhållning och dess hinder [The segregating integration. On social cohesion and its obstacles]* (pp. 251-294). Stockholm, SE: Fritzes.

- Eliassi, B. (2010). *A stranger in my homeland. The politics of belonging among young people with Kurdish backgrounds in Sweden* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Sundsvall, SE: Mid Sweden University.
- Eliassi, B. (2013). *Contesting Kurdish identities in Sweden: Quest for belonging among Middle Eastern youth*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eriksson, M. (2006). Avvikande eller osynlig - rasifierade praktiker i familjerättssekreterares hantering av fäders våld [Deviant or invisible – racialized practices within the family law secretary's dealing with male violence]. In P. de los Reyes (Ed.), *Om välfärdens gränser och det villkorade medborgarskapet [On the limits of the welfare state and its conditioned citizenship]* (pp. 183-216). Stockholm, SE: Fritzes.
- Fahlgren, S., & Sawyer, L. (2005). Maktrelationer och normaliseringsprocesser i välfärdstaten [Power relations and processes of normalization within the welfare state]. *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift*, 2-3(5), 95-106.
- Fejo-King, C., & Briskman, L. (2009). Reversing colonial practices with indigenous peoples. In J. Allan, L. Briskman, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Critical social work. Theories and practices for a socially just world* (pp. 105-116). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Fekete, L. (2006). Enlightened fundamentalism? Immigration, feminism and the right. *Race & Class*, 48(2), 1-22.
- Fook, J. (2002). *Social work. Critical theory and practice*. London, ENG: Sage Publications.
- Fook, J. (2003). Critical social work: The current issues. *Qualitative Social Work*, 2(2), 123-130.
- Fook, J. (2005). Challenges and directions for critical social work. In S. Hick, J. Fook, & R. Pozzuto (Eds.), *Social work: A critical turn* (pp. 231-237). Toronto, ON: Thompson Education.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Friedman, J., & Ekholm Friedman, K. (2006). Sverige från nationalstat till ett pluralt samhälle [Sweden from a nation-state to a plural society]. In U. Hedetoft, B. Petersson, & L. Sturfelt (Eds.), *Bortom Stereotyperna? Invandrare och integration i Danmark och Sverige [Beyond stereotypes? Immigrants and integration in Denmark and Sweden]* (pp. 61-87). Göteborg, SE: Makadam Förlag.
- Ghorashi, H. (2010). From absolute invisibility to extreme visibility: Emanicipation trajectory of migrant women in the Netherlands. *Feminist Review*, 94, 75-92.
- Griffin, C. (2004). Representations of the young. In J. Roche, S. Tucker, R. Thomson, & R. Flynn (Eds.), *Youth in Society. Contemporary theory, policy and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 10-18). London, ENG: Sage Publications in association with the Open University.
- Gullestad, M. (2006). *Plausible prejudice*. Bergen, NO: Universitetsforlaget.
- Healy, K. (2005). *Social work theories in context. Creating frameworks for practice*. London, ENG: Sage.
- Humphries, B. (2004). An unacceptable role for social work: Implementing immigration policy. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(1), 93-107.
- Kamali, M. (1997). *Distorted integration. Clientization of immigrants in Sweden*. Uppsala, SE: Uppsala Multiethnic Papers.
- Khondaker, M. I. (2007). Juvenile deviant behaviour in an immigrant Bangladeshi community: Exploring the nature and contributing factors. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 2(1), 27-43.

- Kundnani, A. (2007). Integrationism: The politics of anti-Muslim racism. *Race & Class*, 48(24), 24-44.
- Kurkiala, M. (2003). Interpreting honour killings. The story of Fadime Sahindal (1975-2002) in the Swedish press. *Anthropology Today*, 19(1), 6-7.
- Larsen, N. B. (2009). Institutional nationalism and orientalized others in parental education. In S. Keskinen, S. Tuori, S. Irni, & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Complying with colonialism: gender, race and ethnicity in the Nordic region* (pp. 225-240). Farnham, ENG: Ashgate.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders. Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Morey, P., & Yaqin, A. (2010). Muslims in the Frame. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 12(2), 145-156.
- Mulinari, D. (2007). "Kalla mig fan vad du vill, men inte invandrarföräldrar!" En skola för alla, eller? [Call me whatever you want, but not an immigrant parent!] A school for all, or?] In M. Dahlstedt, F. Hertzberg, S. Urban & A. Ålund (Eds.), *Utbildning, Arbete, Medborgarskap* [Education, work, citizenship] (pp. 189-212). Umeå, SE: Boréa.
- Mulinari, D., Keskinen, S., Irni, S., & Tuori, S. (2009). Introduction: Postcolonialism and the Nordic models of welfare and gender. In S. Keskinen, S. Tuori, S. Irni, & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Complying with colonialism: Gender, race and ethnicity in the Nordic region* (pp. 1-16). Farnham, ENG: Ashgate.
- Park, Y. (2005). Culture as deficit: A critical discourse analysis of the concept of culture in contemporary social work discourse. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 32(3), 11-33.
- Penketh, L. (2000). *Tackling institutional racism. Anti-racist policies and social work education and training*. Bristol, ENG: The Policy Press.
- Pringle, K. (2010). Swedish welfare responses to ethnicity: The case of children and their families. *European Journal of Social Work*, 13(1), 1-16.
- Quinn, M. (2009). Towards anti-racist and culturally affirming practices. In J. Allan, L. Briskman, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Critical social work. Theories and practices for socially just world* (2nd ed., pp. 91-104). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Rabinow, P. (Ed.). (1984). *The Foucault reader*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Radhakrishnan, R. (2012). *A Said dictionary*. New Delhi, ND: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ramm, C. (2010). The Muslim makers. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 12(2), 183-197.
- Razack, S. H. (2008). *Casting out: The eviction of Muslims from Western law & politics*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Rosaldo, R. (1993). *Culture & truth. The remaking of social analysis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. London, ENG: Penguin Books.
- Schlytter, A. (2004). *Rätten att själv få välja [The right to choose for oneself]*. Lund, SE: Studentlitteratur.
- Schlytter, A., & Linell, H. (2009). Girls with honour-related problems in a comparative perspective. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 18, 152-161.
- Scuzzarello, S. (2008). National security versus moral responsibility: An analysis of integration programs in Malmö, Sweden. *Social Politics*, 15(1), 5-31.

- Sjöblom, Y. (2002) *På väg ut. När ungdomar rymmer och kastas ut hemifrån – utifrån socialtjänstens perspektiv [When youth run away and are thrown out – from a social service perspective]* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Edsbruk, SE: Stockholms universitet.
- Socialstyrelsen (2003). *Vårdnad, boende och umgänge - Stöd för rättstillämpning och handläggning inom socialtjänstens familjerätt (Custody, housing and visitation – support for application of the law and processing within the family law of social services)*. Stockholm, SE: Socialstyrelsen.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stolcke, V. (1995). Talking culture: New boundaries, new rhetoric of exclusion in Europe. *Current Anthropology*, 36(1), 1-24.
- Thomsson, H. (2003). Feministiskt integrationsarbete - eller vem ska definiera vems behov? [Feminist integration work – or who will define whose need?] In P. de los Reyes, I. Molina, & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Maktens (o)lika förklädnader. Kön, klass & etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige [the same/different disguises of power. Gender, class & ethnicity in the postcolonial Sweden]* (pp. 69-92). Stockholm, SE: Atlas.
- Towns, A. (2002). Paradoxes of (in)equality: Something is rotten in the gender equal state of Sweden. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37(2), 157-179.
- Volpp, L. (2005). Feminism versus multiculturalism. In N. J. Sokoloff & C. Pratt (Eds.), *Domestic Violence at the Margins. readings on race, class, gender and culture* (pp. 39-49). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Watson, J. (1977). *Between two cultures: Migrants and minorities in Britain*. Oxford, ENG: Basil Blackwell.
- Wikan, U. (2002). *Generous betrayal: Politics of culture in the New Europe*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wikan, U. (2003). *En fråga om heder [A question of honor]*. Stockholm, SE: Ordfront Förlag.
- Wikström, H. (2007). *(O)möjliga positioner. familjer från Iran & postkoloniala reflektioner [(im)possible positions. Families from Iran & postcolonial reflections]* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Göteborg, SE: Göteborgs universitet.
- Williams, C., & Soydan, H. (2005). When and how does ethnicity matter? A cross-national study of social work responses to ethnicity in child protection cases. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(6), 901-920.
- Wong, S. K. (1997). Delinquency of Chinese-Canadian youth: A test of opportunity, contro, and intergeneration conflict theories. *Youth & Society*, 29(1), 112-133.
- Wright Nielsen, T. (2009). *Viljen til at frigøre: En undersøgelse af empowerment i praksis [The will to liberate: A study about empowerment in practice]* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Lund, SE: Lunds Universitet, Socialhögskolan.
- Yegenoglu, M. (1998). *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.