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## Article

# Social Workers' Reflections on Forced Migration and Cultural Diversity—Towards Anti-Oppressive Expertise in Child and Family Social Work

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**Abstract:** Social work in Finland, like in many other countries, has faced various challenges after the large scale of forced migration in 2015. Although working with migrants is not a new area in social work, the exceptionally large amount of asylum seekers in the Finnish society caused a need for improved social work expertise. Our article deals with Finnish social work practitioners' reflections on multicultural, multilingual and transnational issues with a client group, which is in a vulnerable situation after forced or other forms of migration. The practitioners participating in our study have either attended a specializing education of child, youth and family social work or taken part in peer group discussions in order to develop multicultural expertise. All attendants worked in child and family social work during the study periods in the years 2018–2020. Applying a qualitative methodology by using thematic analysis, we analyze the social workers' texts and discussions in order to find out the challenges and possibilities as well as needs and tools towards anti-oppressive practice in social work. The identified challenges are connected to differentiated local services, social workers' uncertainty of their expertise in working with forced migrants, nationally defined welfare services and communication skills in client encounters. Some ways ahead were recognized in structural social work and further education to improve knowledge and skills. Social workers emphasize the need for self-reflection on their prejudices and in developing anti-oppressive practices, which contain human rights aspects and client-oriented practices. Specializing education and reflective group discussion gave a platform to social workers for reflective professional discussions and writings, which seem to have broadened their expertise in multicultural social work.

**Keywords:** forced migration crisis 2015–2017; anti-oppressive social work; social work expertise in working with refugees; reflective learning; Finland; qualitative analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Finland was affected by a large scale of migration in 2015, in the same way as many other European countries. This year was exceptional in terms of the increase in the number of asylum seekers in Finland. Around 32,000 asylum applications were submitted to the Finnish Immigration Service in 2019 compared to couple of thousands before ([Finnish Immigration Service 2019](#)). In 2015, the debates for and against asylum seekers were extensive; for example, accusations were targeted at asylum seekers, claiming that they posed a security risk. There was also a moral panic, with fears that Finland could not afford such a big number of people who are 'only' looking for better life. Asylum seekers were called 'social benefits shoppers' by the populist politicians (e.g., [Kansalainen 2019](#)).

Since the Second World War, Finland has been a country of emigration. However, this situation has changed during the last three decades, with the number of forced and voluntary migrants increasing. Historically, Finland has been considered a strong refugee resettlement country by the UNHCR (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees)

among the other Nordic countries. The country's annual refugee quota is 850–1050 persons, for example, for those coming directly from refugee camps. The residence permits are granted to new migrants based on family ties in Finland, international protection needs, students, quota refugees, return migrants and work-related reasons ([Finnish Immigration Service 2019](#)). By the end of 2019, the number of foreign citizens was nearly 5 percent and the number of persons with foreign background constituted nearly 8 percent of the population (5.5 million) living in Finland ([Statistics Finland 2020](#)).

As a consequence of hardening societal climate against refugees and asylum seekers, Finnish politicians made amendments to the Aliens Act ([Migri 2020](#)), which has implications for the European legislation concerning asylum seekers, such as the EU-Turkey statement ([European Council of the European Union 2016](#)). For example, the possibility to get a residence permit on humanitarian grounds was ended and also, the possibility to bring family members together was made much harder than before (see [Fingerroos et al. 2016](#); [Pellander 2016](#)). For example, family members of a person who has been granted international protection are now required to have secure means of support in Finland from other sources than benefits paid by the society. This does not affect refugees, who can ask for family reunification within three months after their first residence permit in Finland, as long as their family (spouse or children) already existed before the refugee came to Finland ([Migri 2016](#)). As a result of amendments of the Aliens Act ([Aliens Act 301/2004](#)), many asylum seekers do not get asylum, or their residence permit is granted for a short period of time. Also, the family-reunification is not possible for many migrants. Consequently, basic and social rights (access to social and health care) are violated, because asylum seekers' access to social and health services is limited only to immediate need of social and health care ([Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings 746/2011](#)).

The changes in political climate and amendments of the Aliens Act ([Aliens Act 301/2004](#)) have an impact on social work as a human rights profession. The social service system as a whole is mainly built to service the majority of the population, which means that minority rights are often not properly met in service provision. As a background to our study, it is important to note that professional social work has historically been organized along with other welfare services in a nation-state. In the Nordic countries, social work is an essential part of national social service systems ensuring social support, especially for the most vulnerable individuals, groups and communities ([Askeland and Strauss 2014](#)).

Nordic social work research has pointed out that Nordic mainstream societies and the welfare systems have had difficulties in embracing ethnic diversity. Social work in Nordic countries is often described as color-blind and universal, and therefore unable to recognize and acknowledge ethnic and racial differences and particularly racism. Social work is also criticized for culturalized interpretations (e.g., [Bø 2015](#); [Eliassi 2017](#); [Gruber 2020](#); [Jönsson 2013](#); [Kriz and Skivenes 2010](#); [Pringle 2010](#)). The supposed color-blindness has been seen as one reason why anti-racist ([Dominelli 1997](#); [Lavalette and Penketh 2014](#)), anti-oppressive ([Dominelli 2010](#); [Sakamoto and Pitner 2005](#); [Strier and Binyamin 2014](#)) or anti-discriminatory ([Thompson 2012](#)) social work theories or practice-based approaches have not been grounded in the Nordic social work profession and education ([Eliassi 2017](#)).

Nowadays however, social work is part of a globalized society. Social workers are confronting social problems and social needs, which are multicultural and transnational by nature. Consequently, it is not possible to understand or solve social problems only in national or local contexts ([Wallimann 2014](#)). Social workers have to expand their knowledge and expertise to meet the needs of diverse client groups, such as migrants and new ethnic minority groups, who have immigrated to Finland for diverse reasons, lived in different social and political circumstances in other parts of the world and possibly experienced serious losses and traumatic events during their lives. These minority groups also experience social exclusion in many different ways in Finland (e.g., [EU-MIDIS II 2017](#)).

As a consequence of the globalized and multicultural development in social work, there is a need for social workers to look at their service users' situations from new and

sometimes unorthodox angles, for example by understanding the transnational nature of the social relations (Käkelä 2019; Nadan 2017; Righard 2018). In addition to social problems and social needs, the aspects of human rights and social rights as well as global responsibility have become more essential to look after. In social work practice, relevant knowledge about peoples' everyday lives and the shortcomings of the service system accumulate, which gives the profession a unique position to analyze and influence social work institutions (Eliassi 2017; Kaartinen et al. 2018). Our study examines social workers' experiences and understanding of these challenges and possibilities in developing social work in Finland.

As a reference point to our article, a Norwegian study (Bø 2015) identified five main issues, which social workers found to be the biggest challenges in multicultural social work. These were as follows: communication problems caused by the lack of common language as well as different codes of behavior in interactions with professional services, cultural differences in parent-child relations, health problems without adequate medical or psychological help available and structural barriers which made it difficult to adapt the social service system to the needs of the minority clients. Bø (2015) points out that the social workers' answers indicate a lack of certain kinds of knowledge, which is needed in social work practice. These lacking points are awareness of the embedded 'Western' ideology in social work and knowledge of the national immigration rules and policies. Social workers also stated that their agency lacked a common ideology or even discussion for the work they did with ethnic minority clients.

The main concepts we use in our article are multicultural social work and anti-oppressive social work. The concept of multicultural social work is referring to a general idea of social work in a culturally diverse operational environment, where the clients come from different cultural, lingual and religious backgrounds (Sue et al. 2014; see also Payne 2014). On the other hand, the majority of social workers in Finland are ethnically Finnish. The anti-oppressive social work concept in our article is a theoretical idea (Dominelli 2010; Strier and Binyamin 2014; see also Payne 2014), which we use in analyzing and interpreting the research material. According to Strier and Binyamin (2014), the theoretical framework of anti-oppressive social work includes developing non-hierarchical work relations between clients and social workers, promoting social rights, adopting structural and contextual views of clients' social problems and developing client representation. Furthermore, it means responding to social, class, gender and ethnic diversity, acknowledging unequal power relations with clients, creating a non-bureaucratic organizational culture, developing alliances with clients and critical consciousness among clients and workers, as well as promoting reflexivity between workers and clients (see also Dominelli 2010; Eliassi 2017; Sakamoto and Pitner 2005). An important part of developing anti-oppressive expertise is social workers' willingness and ability to judge their own attitudes and basis of knowledge. They have to be conscious of how they meet clients and on what grounds they assess and make decisions in client cases (Dominelli 2010). This requires self-reflection on one's own ethnicity and on possible bias connected to ethnicities and nationalities. It is also essential to be aware of power relations, both in social work and in the larger society (Eliassi 2017). The assumption in our study is that anti-oppressive social work practises are essential in multicultural operational environments.

Critical reflection and reflective learning (e.g., Karvinen-Niinikoski 2007; Schön 1987) are also central analytical concepts in the study. We are examining social workers' reflections on action by analyzing how they write and talk about their experiences in practical work situations retrospectively as part of their learning processes. Social workers are at front lines of social policy implementation, and for that reason, it is crucial to examine social work practitioners' views of working in a multicultural environment. By analyzing social workers' perceptions and reflections on their work and on possibilities for development, we are demonstrating that social work profession in Finland is in a process of change towards more culturally sensitive and anti-oppressive practices. Our article identifies challenges and ways ahead in the development of social work practice

and theory with relevance for the globalized society, as well as for multicultural and transnational social work. It argues that the anti-oppressive perspective can contribute to this development, and it can be reached by reflective learning and practices.

Our research question is to specify what kind of expertise is needed in social work in order to develop anti-oppressive practices, and how social workers in child welfare services reflect and recognize the needs for learning and change to develop their expertise. In a wider perspective, we aim to explore and discuss how social work as a profession can answer to and manage cultural and lingual diversity and transnational issues in client work with individuals, families and communities. We are asking what the main challenges and needs as well as possible tools and ways ahead are for the change towards more anti-oppressive practice. We answer to these questions by analyzing social workers' reflections on their professional experiences in working with migrant clients.

## 2. Research Data and Methodology

We focus on social work profession in general rather than on very specific issues in child welfare and child protection social work practices, although the research data are composed of discussions involving child, youth and family social work. Focusing on general professional topics, instead of specific client cases in child protection, is also an ethical choice in our research. We want to ensure that very sensitive and client-specific issues are left out of this article. Thus, child and family social work is more like a context for the study.

The study is based on two sets of data. The first set of research data consists of social workers' texts on child welfare and child protection issues. The text material is part of the social workers' specializing education program in child, youth and family social work, in which the participants wrote texts, such as essay answers and reflective discussions, as their learning tasks. Altogether, 40 social workers from two education groups (in the years 2018 and 2019) participated in the Special issues in multicultural child, youth and family social work course carried out by the University of Turku as part of the national specializing education. The web-based study module contained written material, for example academic studies, as well as recorded lectures as teaching material and as a reflection base for the tasks (The themes of the learning tasks in the course were as follows: orienting to multicultural issues in social work, multicultural interaction in client work, forced migration, ethnic relations and racism, working with violence issues, human trafficking and child protection in a multicultural context. All these issues are not discussed in this article.). The participating social workers were asked to write essays and shorter reflective texts about their experiences in working with forced and other migrants. The participants were first asked to write about how they understand multicultural social work in general and in their work. More specific topics in the course concerned their perceptions on racism and anti-racist social work, domestic violence and other child protection issues as well as social work practises in these situations. The participants were also asked to comment each other's texts. Thus, the course was based on the participants' self and peer reflection on the above-mentioned issues. A total of 32 of the 40 participants gave their permission to use their texts for research purposes. The first set of data contains 240 pages of texts.

The second set of research data consists of eight peer group discussions during the Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020 with three social workers in child protection services for newly arrived forced migrants (refugees and asylum seekers). The structured study group was initiated by the participants themselves, and the aim of the discussions was to reflect and build knowledge-based expertise of the team. Therefore, a researcher took part in group discussions and brought material for improving the multicultural expertise of the team. The themes discussed were social work with newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, reflections of one's own attitudes, communication skills with clients and co-workers, discrimination, racism and human rights. These discussions were carried out

by Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius. The second set of data contains 135 pages of transcribed discussions.

The article focuses on social work practice in different local environments, where cultural and lingual diversity take different forms. The strength of the first data is that these social workers represent diverse working environments and tasks. Some social workers work in big cities, where the environment during their whole career has been socially, culturally and linguistically diverse. Other social workers work in small municipalities, and they have no or only limited experience in working in a culturally diverse context, for example with migrants or ethnic minorities. They meet refugees and other migrants among other clients, which are mostly of Finnish origin. The major criteria for being accepted in the Specializing education program was the master's degree in social work and the licentiate social worker's status, as well as several years' experience in the field of social work practice. Therefore, all the participants of the first data set are experienced and formally qualified social workers.

The strength of the second data is clearly the long term (one year) reflective learning process, where the team could build expertise together. The researcher offered research results, concepts, and theories, which were used as basis for the team members' reflections on cases from the field and challenges with the co-workers and other services. It was also possible to build expertise for challenging the populist and hostile societal climate. Social workers reflected their own attitudes, knowledge and skills. On one hand it is a weakness, that this team works only with refugees and asylum seekers, who came recently to Finland, but on the other hand, it is a strength, because the situation after 2015 became visible and was reflected upon by the team members.

These two research materials complement each other; together, they comprise discussions and texts from 35 social workers, who are of different ages and have different working experiences and careers. During the data collecting periods, they all worked in child, youth and family welfare or child protection services and were interested in developing their expertise either through specializing education (first set of data) or external supervising (second set of data). They do not represent Finnish social workers in general while being in positions such as adult students or as members of a supervision group. Yet, this position gives them a special possibility to reflect their knowledge and working experience to theoretical discussions and current research. All 35 participants (All participants were female and they were of different ages. They worked in different parts of Finland.) gave their informed written consent to use their texts and discussions in research and for the anonymized data to be used in scientific publications. Social workers' texts and the transcribed discussions were anonymized, and the data was then thematically analyzed by using inductive codes. Further, the codes were categorized into a set of themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

We apply constructionist research paradigm, which in our study means that the data has been generated in interactive written and oral discussions encouraged by theoretical learning material. As for us researchers, we have had an active role in identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within the data. Also, we are not reporting the reality of the participants as such, but how the realities are understood and reported by the social workers in the research data (Burr 1995).

The phases of the thematic analysis were reading and re-reading the transcribed data, generating the codes manually, then searching, reviewing, defining and naming the themes and finally writing the analysis. We included patterns, named as themes, which we identified in both sets of data. For the article, we chose particularly vivid extracts, which capture the essence of the points we are demonstrating (Braun and Clarke 2006). The two sets of data, the themes and the analysis were compared and evaluated by both authors, in order to get an integrated and shared interpretation of the analysis and results. Therefore, both data and researcher triangulation were applied in the study.

The thematic analysis highlights the various challenges, including some current working practices, as well as ways ahead to improve social work and family services

towards anti-oppressive service structures and social work practice. In the article we outline the current faults in the service system and social work's possibilities and competence in working with refugees and asylum seekers. Moreover, we aim at showing ways by which it is possible to develop social work towards more reflective and critical practices, which was also the aim of the study module and the peer discussions which the participants attended. Consequently, our study strives for advocating anti-oppressive social services and practices (Denzin and Giardina 2012; Krumer-Nevo 2012).

We analyze social workers' texts and discussions in the framework of professional expertise and reflective learning (e.g., Karvinen-Niinikoski 2007). One point of comparison for this kind of framework is Ilkka Uusitalo's research (2019), in which social workers' professional learning was examined in the context of challenging client situations in child welfare social work. The results showed that social workers' learning was linked with interaction, reflective and social expertise, as well as expertise on operational methods. In challenging client situations, the professional expertise in child welfare was also constructed situationally based on context. The formal expertise changed more towards the direction of reflective and negotiating expertise in particular situations. The same phenomena are seen in our research data in different ways, and this is visible in our analysis.

We explore the ways that social workers critically reflect their own working practices and knowledge and point out needs for more anti-oppressive practices. The social workers in our data reflect these issues via experiences in client work and cooperation with other professionals and services. By interpreting the data in the light of previous research and theoretical discussions on anti-oppressive social work and other nearby concepts, we aim at showing how social work practice and theory can be developed by using critical reflection (Sakamoto and Pitner 2005; Schön 1987). Since our study is qualitative and the number of participants is rather small, the results cannot be generalized to cover all social workers in Finland.

Our ethical and methodological premise is to respect the social workers' voices and their professional knowledge and experience. The participants have either attended the study module of the specializing studies or the reflective peer group discussions in order to learn more about multicultural social work and develop their working practices, and we as researchers appreciate this ambition. Another ethical principle is that we have avoided reporting client-specific issues in the texts and discussions, since most of the clients in question are in vulnerable situations in their lives, being forced or other migrants and at the same time being clients in child protection services. We have also excluded municipality-bound issues in order to avoid the participants being identifiable. Thus, we are focusing on general professional issues. By promoting anti-oppressive practice, our study is congruent with the social work values of respect for human dignity and worth, as well as with a commitment to social justice. It is also important to acknowledge that we as authors are social work researchers, teachers and qualified social workers, which has an influence on how we look at and understand the issues in the research data. Although the data-driven method of analysis is our standpoint, our interpretations are inevitably also connected to our professional background as well as our theoretical and practise knowledge (e.g., Sobočan et al. 2019).

### 3. Findings and Discussion

We identified four thematic patterns in our data, which gather the challenges in social work with migrants. The themes are 'differentiated local services', 'uncertainty of the existing expertise', 'challenging nationally defined practices' and 'communication—building a joint process'. The fifth theme contains 'some ways ahead', which gives ideas on, how social work should be developed towards anti-oppressive practice. As is typical in thematic analysis, the issues discussed under the themes are partly overlapping (Braun and Clarke 2006), for example some ways ahead are reported when discussing and writing about challenges.

### 3.1. Differentiated Local Services

The results of our study show that social workers' experienced knowledge and expertise vary a lot depending on their working environments. Social workers' clients in big cities represent diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and multicultural social work is the nature of the professionals' everyday work. Social workers in rural areas have more limited experience in working with migrants, as well as social and cultural diversity. However, some of them faced a new situation in 2015, when new reception centers for asylum seekers were established in different parts of Finland. They had to get involved with issues concerning forced migration and deal with conflicts caused by prejudiced attitudes and racism in their local environments. The social workers in child welfare have been involved in solving the conflict situations, but the school authorities have also taken assumed major responsibility in the case.

*In my work, we are now facing a situation that in one local school some racist encounters, bullying and confrontation have gone so far that there is a fear that bigger conflicts between the refugees and original population will take place. The conflict has escalated, because couple of youth have responded to the racist assaults by violent manners. It has been fine to notice, however, that the school has taken a big and significant role in solving the conflict by many-sided angles. (sw20) (In the extracts, 'sw' in small letters indicates to the social workers in the data set 1 (oral discussions) and 'SW' in capital letters to the social workers in the data set 2 (written texts).)*

After 2015, it became more evident than before that communal social work in local environments is necessary in order to tackle the racist episodes. This requires that social workers and other local professionals recognize various forms of racism and are prepared for anti-racist work.

The availability of psychosocial support and services vary in different rural areas, which hinders the treatment of traumas and other mental problems. Not getting help at an early stage of the problem situations inevitably leads to clients needing 'heavier' services and more specialized support like child protection, and possibly out-of-home care.

*Unfortunately, the situation of the most traumatized families and children, is still dependent on where they live and what kind of services are available there. The know-how is concentrated in big cities and near to the reception centers. (sw31)*

*We still have quite a small number of migrant families in the child protection services (in our municipality), but the amount is clearly rising because the needs of the families have not been met in the basic services, and their situations have become complicated and ended up in child protection services. (sw34)*

The social worker in the excerpt above states that the basic services in a smaller municipality do not meet the needs of migrant families (also [Tuomisto et al. 2016](#)). The previous research shows, however, that also in big cities migrant children end up to child protection and out-of-home care more often than the children with the Finnish origin ([Kääriälä et al. 2020](#)). In big cities there is more multisectoral and specialized expertise, but also very heavy work load and a shortage of resources.

### 3.2. Uncertainty of the Existing Expertise

Social workers in our data have noticed that their existing expertise, for example communication skills, ethical understanding and methodical knowledge, are often declining in situations where they are working with refugees' family issues. Social workers describe that the basic expertise as social workers or other service providers may 'drop', as they call it, especially when they start to work with asylum seekers, but also with other migrants. This is the situation which more and more service providers faced after 2015, according to our data.

*I keep thinking, that us professionals also in a way are too afraid, that we might not know how to work with this group of clients, and in that case, is there a risk that the ones who*



*most badly need help, because of their bruising experiences, can also completely miss the support, because professionals are afraid to tackle the matter? (sw47)*

Some social workers also stated that instead of applying their existing expertise, their attitudes were not always properly reflected, and obtained elements from hostile public debate and especially populist opinions on asylum seekers. On the other hand, some social workers reflected that when they began to work with migrants, they first assumed that there is nothing special compared to working with native Finns, but little by little they understood kinds of expertise are required in order to really find sustainable or best possible solutions for the relevant situations. The social worker below has a long career, and the need for special expertise has become more obvious for her over time. She is looking back to her previous duties and reflecting upon earlier experiences compared to the situation nowadays.

*I have previous experience in working in reception centers and nowadays in child protection services, and I can tell that social work with refugee children and youth really requires special expertise and that this expertise still is very limited in the Finnish society. (sw18)*

Another social worker goes further in her reflection by saying that the starting point was to understand *the sameness*, namely *working the similar way to with Finns* and understanding *the cultural differences* at the same time. This kind of framework has elements of a culture-conscious orientation, which is based on cultural pluralism where both individual and cultural aspects as well as the right to equal services are taken into account (Anis 2006). The next reflection shows how the tension between sameness and difference is visible in social work encounters.

*SW2: This issue (what is the part of the culture), I reflect a lot, and I think I have also prejudice against the issues, which are part of the culture. But my thoughts have changes when I think about my clients' situations, I don't consider the issues were these families come from, but I meet a client as an individual, a child as a child and a parent as a parent and we speak about the issues which we have to consider. The background of the family does not lead my work practice, but it is important to know and understand the background in order to find a common ground to meet the person. I mean that not the culture in front of you, but it is somehow clear in my mind that there are cultural differences.*

*SW1: There are differences, but the differences should not be based on presumptions.*

In this extract, the starting point to work with the family is an understanding of the people as individuals in special situations connected to their statuses as children or parents. In order to find a common understanding of this particular situation, different interpretations (maybe cultural) are needed. Without these discussions of the interpretations from both the social worker's and the client's sides, the culturalization may replace the common understanding of the situation. This means, for example, not normalizing harmful behavior as being part of the culture, but instead, understanding it as a consequence of an unbearable situation as an asylum seeker. One concrete suggestion for a way ahead was to think about which experiences are possible to share, for example, as a parent or as somebody's child. It is also vital to remember what kinds of social and other challenges migrants and especially asylum seekers encounter in Finland and how that affects people's lives (e.g., Käkelä 2019). This is the reality where families themselves appeal, when they talk back to stigmatizing categorizations by the civil servants (Turtiainen and Hiitola 2015, 2019).

In the next reflective discussion, the basic principles of social work are reinforced.

*SW1: ( . . . ) all the families come from different backgrounds, and have different experiences, we can't act as if these families come from this country ( . . . ) every time we have to find the way to communicate with each family.*

*Researcher: and if we think about identities, they are individual, for example religion, ethnicity, which affects their meanings for people.*

( ... )

SW2 (K): *We don't need to be afraid of our prejudices and presumptions. We build our thought through those (ideas), but we have to be more and more aware of those ( ... ) that is one of the cornerstones of emancipatory work.*

The deconstruction of categorizations as an ethical demand of the emancipatory social work is reflected in the extract. This reflection reminds us that the basic ethical principles have to be taken seriously so that we do not base our knowledge on societal common understandings or populist speech, which often follows excessive generalizations or stigmatizations. This kind of awareness may be a starting point to avoid imagined cultural barriers or culturalization of the clients' behavior (see [Eliassi 2017](#)). It is repeated in our data that after 2015, this kind of populist speech became common and social workers did not know how to work with asylum seekers. Social workers started to remind their colleagues to be aware of the basic cornerstones of awareness of deconstructing their categorization. This fact often got lost, especially in social work with asylum seekers.

Besides, social workers reflected that if there is uncertainty about what to do, it is possible to imagine this person as a Finn, and think about how you would initiate communication with her/him. This suggestion does not mean that differences should be forgotten by being color-blind, but remembering the basic principles of asking questions and listening instead of making interpretations without knowing the real situation ([Tuori 2012](#)). Sara [Ahmed \(2000\)](#) turns around the often-repeated idea that we are not afraid of what we know but instead, we are afraid of what we imagine we know. These images could be based on the news or negative societal debate concerning refugees.

### 3.3. Challenging Nationally Defined Practises

In our data, it is discussed a lot that services do not recognize the needs of a transnational population. In particular, the big problem is that asylum seekers and migrants without residence permits only have access to so called 'necessary services', which means that entry to specialized social and health care services is limited. This means that social and health problems often reach a critical point before help is available. These critical situations usually fall to social work.

*Service providers, who work with children and families may have insufficient ways to identify and deal with migrants' particular issues, and that is why the responsibility in these cases is often reassigned to social work. (sw29)*

*Although many asylum seekers are traumatized, it is very difficult to get them specialized health and social services, since these services are only possible for asylum seekers to obtain when there is an urgent need. When these families finally enter the child protection services, we often have to consider involuntary interventions at that stage. (sw19)*

Child protection social work, as the last means, takes responsibility for the children's distress when asylum seekers' or undocumented migrants' rights to get help from the national welfare services are minimal or non-existent. However, child protection is often the last measure, even though there is lack of multicultural and transnational expertise in social work.

Social workers reflections show that they are not safe from discriminatory or racial attitudes. Social workers reflected on the imagined and repeated ideas of equal Finnish society and non-equal migrants, which may have consequences for their work with migrants.

SW2: *When we speak about 'the othering', yesterday there again was discussion about the family violence, then some colleagues commented that we have these immigrants and they have family violence, it's so common in their families. Luckily there was my old colleague, who stated that it was not so long time ago when beating children was a norm and commonly accepted, and it is still a problem in the Finnish society. This older colleague told us, who were children in the 1960s and 1970s, how our reality was then. We cannot look down on migrant families from above and say that they beat up their*

*children ( . . . ) and it is still taboo to discuss about family violence in Finnish society. At the European level, Finland is the second worst society in terms of family violence after Albania, if I remember correctly. But still, even in social work it is difficult to talk about it. ( . . . ) Do we (social workers) live in an illusion that we have equality in Finland by reproducing these ideas in our rhetoric?*

In the previous reflection, social worker quotes the discussion with her colleague who reminded her that historically family violence was a norm in Finland, and it is still a serious existing social problem. She makes a link between recent history and the present by deepening the understanding, and mentioning that family violence is a taboo in the Finnish society, even though its existence is high by European standards. The core idea of reflection is that social workers in Finland must understand their own historical norms, address the current reality and not reproduce the illusion of superior equality, which may lead to serious consequences by making divisions like ‘us’ being equal Finnis and ‘them’ being unequal others (e.g., [Keskinen 2017](#)).

Some social workers realize that the special circumstances and experiences of refugee families should be better recognized in order to get an adequate and holistic understanding of the family’s situation, for example when working with domestic violence issues.

*I was reflecting a lot on the phenomenon of forced migration, and realized that the fact of clients being forced or other migrants has always been secondary in my work as a social worker, and probably even a too neglected area of the client family’s situation. The primary problems, like placing children in out-of-home care or the domestic violence in the family, have taken my attention away from the forced migration background of the family. (sw16)*

This statement refers to the idea that problems in families can be better encountered and more appropriate support offered when the social worker takes into consideration family histories. In that way, it is also possible to build a better client family–social worker relationship, and thus support the family’s welfare by offering appropriate services.

Therefore, social workers reflect on how they began to be conscious of the Nordic understanding of universal color-blind services, where the differences between people and cultures are not recognized and considered. It is visible in our data that social workers are not automatically safe from either othering practices or color-blind practices without carefully reflecting their attitudes and being aware of the trap of Finnish (also Nordic) state-centered social work, where they earlier could count on general social policies and their implementation accordingly ([Turtiainen and Kokkonen 2020](#)).

*Fifteen years ago, it was a starting point that alteration work is not possible if we have to work via interpreters. If there were no services available in the client’s own language, that service was basically not offered. Still today, we are often thinking of the same issue. Is it possible to obtain good results in communication-based family social work via an interpreter or in bad Finnish? The family members might not trust the interpreter and without the interpreter, it is impossible to discuss sensitive family issues, and so it is not possible to talk about the essential topics. (sw8)*

Although interpreter services in Finland are reasonably good, there are both biased and practical challenges in offering family services to migrants, who do not speak national languages. Therefore, families are left without help, instead of trying new ways of working and allocating more time for challenging client cases. Clients may also be deprived from helping services if their problems or their supposed ‘culture’ are interpreted being too difficult to work with ([Anis 2006](#)). As the social worker above concludes, the challenges have not changed during the last 15 years, and the services still lack appropriate methods for working with sensitive family issues in a multilingual context.

The social worker below calls for more reflective discussions concerning the unequal power relations between the professionals and the migrant clients. The ethnic minorities’ particular situations are very easily neglected, when the social workers are talking about their clients’ vulnerabilities in general.

*In my work community, we have had many discussions on the power relations between the clients and the social workers in child protection in general, and especially the stigma that children in institutional care easily get in the society. However, we have not discussed about our own attitudes and prejudices on migrants, not to mention the need for anti-racist social work. I believe that the reason for this lies in the color-blindness of Finnish and Nordic social work, which believes in the equal treatment of each client and social fairness in the society. That is the reason for not paying attention to ethnic power relations, although we should. (sw33)*

Another social worker writes about how she became more aware about racism in the Finnish society through the education material. She reflects on her previous ways of assessing children's situations without taking racism into account, and states that in the forthcoming client cases, she has more expertise in recognizing the meaning of racist experiences in the welfare of children and youth.

*I have to admit that I too seldom remember to even ask about the client's experiences on racism when I am assessing his or her situation. Now I think that in child protection work, it is important to develop practices for broaching racism, so that these experiences would not be passed over. (sw38)*

All reflections above resonate the historical context of nationally defined social work in Finland. However, there is a need to look beyond the comfort zone of national context (Briskman et al. 2009, pp. 7–9). This means to understand the links between local and global processes and consider the possible unethical national practices, which have unjust consequences for people in vulnerable life situations. Therefore, one main area of knowledge is the hardening societal climate in Finland, which asylum seekers and refugees face after their arrival to Finland. One consequence of hardening societal climate is the amendments in the Aliens Act (Aliens Act 301/2004) during the past few years, which affect getting residency and family reunification for asylum seekers.

#### 3.4. Communication—Building a Joint Process

The evolution of joint understanding in the reciprocal interaction calls professional communication skills and theoretical understanding about the phenomena behind the lives of forced migrants into play. Reciprocal interaction and joint understanding of the matter in concern is also an important element of a non-hierarchical work practice. The joint understanding is built and merged with the information given in the interaction with the client, as is shown in the following reflection:

*Researcher: I remember that once you mentioned an important issue that you must jump out from your comfort zone of knowing (as a social work professional).*

*SW2: Yes, I think it arises from the interpersonal relationship that we have to ask and to be surprised because we don't know how their life is and we can't just offer a service because we might somehow know about the phenomena, which is behind our clients' life. ( . . . ) but we must have courage to ask and I remember, you said that it is somehow a fascinating part (of the work that you don't know)*

*SW3: Yes, I have learned that there is not just a thing that you can't ask about (related to issue in concern), even though they are sometimes really extremely hard issues. I think that if I one day work mainly with Finns, there will not be any issues that I am afraid to ask about, because I have learned (working with migrant families) that there are not such taboos which you can't ask. ( . . . )*

*SW1: ( . . . ) it is not possible to do the advocacy work if we don't know the context (of clients), for example, what it means to be an asylum seeker. My understanding has developed little by little during my work practise.*

Social workers are reflecting the interpersonal communication as an interplay between knowing and not knowing. One basic thing is to understand that there are not any taboos in the communication with clients that cannot be asked. However, it is also mentioned in

the extract that social workers must know the phenomena which are behind the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. For example, by knowing the complex situations of asylum seekers, social workers can understand the diverse situations of their clients. As mentioned before and reflected many times in our data, the knowledge of clients' backgrounds, for example refugee processes, is vital in social work. Social workers have to know, how traumatic events—like torture—may affect the wellbeing of the people, how the separation of family members hinders settlement and integration in the new situation and how precarious residence permits or long processes of waiting for residence permits affect people's lives. Social workers reflected that their research-based knowledge and facts concerning for example, refugeehood, is essential background knowledge, which is needed to pose the appropriate questions (see also Käkelä 2019).

*I believe that we can discuss all topics with clients. The client can decide what to tell and what not to tell. I have reflected a lot on the possibility of genuine interest and putting oneself in another's place. I notice that by years I pay more attention to that and become more skilled. I also got good feedback from some clients. When I was a young professional, I used to go more behind the professional role. (sw4)*

Building empathy as a genuine interest and putting oneself in another's place is a vital professional skill, enabling a good interaction process with forced migrants. *Going behind the professional role* was also reflected as *going behind the Law*, which also hinders the communication with clients, while strengthening the social workers' position as agents of the state. So, the Law hinders, and interaction in the front helps for trying to understand each other and consider the root courses of the issue.

Social workers reflect quite a lot about their experiences in encountering forced migrants that have recently arrived to Finland. They pay a lot of attention to their behavior and reactions in client meetings, where they feel uncertainty. They might also be worried about not being able to meet the client in a culturally and contextually respectable way (Bø 2015).

*I also think that our way of communicating reflects more our confusion than the lack of respect. Sometimes it is just so difficult to understand those experiences and that world, where the refugees come from, that the first emotion directing the encounter is just confusion. (sw6)*

As mentioned before, there are situations in multicultural work when social workers become uncertain of their basic professional skills. Here, the uncertainty is reflected in connection to good interpersonal communication. Social workers' focus changes from considering the matter in question and people with whom you work with to their own confusion of how they should behave 'right'. So, this reflects social workers' genuine emotions when she may not have worked with the diverse population.

Another uncertainty is connected to the challenges of communicating via an interpreter (see also Bø 2015).

*When you don't understand how the interpreter says the things to the client, you as a professional become worried that the issue gets distorted and your own expertise bruised or faded. Social work is very much based on the expertise of interaction, and the interaction changes when it is not direct. This is connected to the feeling of not controlling your work. (sw9)*

*SW2: The interpreter is your co-worker, and you must find a joint understanding first with her/him.*

These two different reflections show that working with an interpreter has an impact on communication with clients from diverse linguistic backgrounds. First, there is uncertainty that the meaning of social worker's words may change or be understood differently. In the second reflection, the social worker states that interpreters are co-workers, which means that communication is a triangle between the client, social worker and interpreter. Working with interpreters is also a skill in the multicultural social work. At best, working with interpreters addresses the agency of all parties and therefore, it is essential to discuss and negotiate on

how the understanding is built, and at the end to repeat how you and your client understood the communication to have proceeded (Rautavuoma and Turtiainen 2018).

Structuring social work in the organization level affects communication with migrants a lot. It is challenging to build a confidential relationship without allocating enough time in encounters with clients, as is reflected here:

*Sensitive and listening encounters are central in multicultural social work. It is challenging that our social service system is very fragmented and overloaded. In one place we make the assessment of the client's situation through a few meetings and then the client moves to another place to meet another professional. This is the same for all clients, but I think that especially in multicultural work, it takes longer to build a confidential relationship with clients and thus, the service structure is more essential. (sw24)*

Allocating time is necessary for building a joint understanding of the situation, for example a relevant service. Otherwise, the outcome is *just to give a band aid for the problem*, as is seen in our data.

*SW1: I know that if we have time to build a joint process, the root causes will be found, and we can support that family (showing that the situation is not getting worse) and the child does not need to be taken into custody. If we don't need to work a service in front of us, we just offer a service but have no time to listen to each other.*

Here *service in front* means that social work should not be like a shop to deliver services but should carefully try to find the root causes and after that find the best solution for the situation together. Some social workers might also adjust to the instructions, given by the local authorities or managers, not to get involved in these legal processes when their workload is already very heavy. It is evident that the welfare service structure as a whole is not appropriate for the needs and rights of forced migrants and other migrants in vulnerable situations.

Working with transnational families clearly requires more time and skills for building a joint process with clients than working with native Finns. Transnationality itself is building a challenge, and calls for skills to address it. As an example, the family member, who lives in Finland can be seriously mentally ill, caused by a trauma, and the crucial element of the psychosocial support would be working with the family and close relatives. When the family members and relatives are abroad, many of them also in vulnerable situations, perhaps waiting for an opportunity to come to Finland, meaning the basis for supporting the family member in Finland is very challenging, calling for new knowledge and working methods in social work. Multidisciplinary co-operation would give some answers, but other professionals in social and health services often have even less experience and abilities to work in these situations.

### 3.5. Some Ways Ahead

As the social workers point out weaknesses in the service system and in their own working practices, as well as reflect their prejudices, they bring up ideas about how social work should be improved in order to better meet the needs of migrant families and children, and therefore become more anti-oppressive. The interplay between theory and practice knowledge is evident in these ideas. Many social workers call for a stronger emphasis on structural social work and structural changes in the welfare system. One social worker writes:

*Via structural social work, we should shake off the interpretations of the Finnish national identity, and make new experiences possible, in which other national identities also get a share. (sw34)*

By participating in specializing education and group discussions, the social workers had the possibility to reflect upon their working experiences and thoughts with the help of theoretical concepts. Our data calls for antiracist and postcolonial theories on whiteness and national identities, which are not largely applied in social work education and practices

in Finland. (see [Briskman 2014](#); [Jeyasingham 2012](#); [Ranta–Tyrkkö 2011](#); [Staub–Bernasconi 2014](#); [Wallimann 2014](#)).

Research and educational material on social work with black and other minority ethnic groups typically focuses on social work practice and does not pay attention to the ways ethnic and racial differences are produced within social service policies, legislation and guidelines ([Bø 2015](#); [Christie 2010](#)). Some social workers in our data point out the role of social work as a societal agent by speaking and writing publicly, and therefore influencing the welfare policies as well as the public opinion, so that ethnic and racial differences and power relations would be recognized.

Regarding client meetings, social workers point out the essential principle of encountering their clients as individuals and at the same time reflecting and being conscious of one's own prejudice and ways of interaction. When the social worker's knowledge develops towards more anti-oppressive expertise, the formal, knowledge-based expertise seems to change towards the direction of reflective and negotiating expertise ([Uusitalo 2019](#)).

*I think that there are many ways of carrying out anti-racist social work in child protection. The most important is encountering the child, young person or the parent as individuals, not as representatives of their culture or "race". Dialogic interaction, where the social worker meets the client without prejudice and enables the client's view and experience, is essential. In order to do that, the social worker has to be able to reflect his or her own actions. It is vital to observe one's own prejudices and attitudes. (sw33)*

The common principal of culturally competent practice in multicultural social work is to acknowledge the cultural and social differences between the clients and the professional and between different client families. At the same time, one has to recognize the sameness and work equally with all clients. Families have some universal challenges in their lives in raising children and youth, and culturalizing or racializing these challenges by defining them to affect migrant families in particular would be misleading and stigmatizing. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the particular challenges of migrant and especially forced migrant families, who have several welfare risks connected to their family histories and possibilities to integrate into the new society. ([Bø 2015](#); [Käkelä 2019](#))

Another important principle, which is pointed out in our data, is to make social work visible and explicit to the migrant clients, who do not necessarily understand the course of the welfare service system and social work as part of it. Misunderstandings can harm the working alliance and therefore the outcomes of social work very badly (see [Bø 2015](#)). Making social work practices transparent is a way to promote the rights of the client, but also to lower the power differences between the social worker and the client.

*The words 'social work' and 'social worker' do not necessarily tell anything to an immigrant client. The expectations for the interaction can be different and the client may think that he or she is treated differently because of the immigrant background. It is very important to verbalize what social work is about and how it works, as well as what the social workers duties and fields of expertise are. (sw3)*

This social worker's impression is that there is a clear need for more education on special issues concerning forced and other migration as well as multicultural and anti-oppressive social work practices, although the knowledge and understanding about diversity in the society and the ethics concerning human rights are the basics of professional social work. Social workers are also clearly aware that knowledge of the particularities of migrants' life situations and cultural meanings is not enough in building expertise in anti-oppressive social work, but a more holistic way is needed. Social workers need to look at themselves as well as representatives of the Finnish welfare state and culture. This shapes their ideologies concerning family life and possible solutions to the problems they are working with.

*In my opinion, we need a lot more education and knowledge about the special issues in forced and other migration. As a human rights profession, we in social work have*

*reflected a lot more on ethics, moral, human dignity and human rights than many other professions. This gives a good starting point for multicultural work. (sw27)*

Human rights as a vital basis for work with ethnic and lingual minorities is discussed a lot in our data. At the same time, it is a starting point for multicultural work, as reflected in the previous extract, and an important approach and practice to overcome the nationally defined services (Staub–Bernasconi 2014), which may leave migrants, especially asylum seekers and undocumented population, without help.

*SW2: In our team, we discuss a lot about rights. Our families (asylum seekers and refugees) have rights to certain services, which we must consider. But also, inside the families, between the family members, each family member has different rights. Human rights give us this comprehensive approach. We don't consider just rights, but the Declaration of Human rights itself is one basis of our work ( . . . ) We must turn around our thinking as social workers that we don't only assess needs of our clients, but we have to consider what kind of right they have and how we can support people that their rights will be realized. ( . . . ) Besides, we have Declaration of Child rights in our work. ( . . . )*

*SW1: Like children (seeking asylum) have a right to go to school and it is not their duty to take care of their parents and siblings. ( . . . ) and also, women have a right to tell their opinions and divorce and so on. ( . . . )*

*SW2: Often it is told to us (from other services), that if that child would be a Finn, we will do this or that, but because s/he is an asylum seeker, first we must find an office, which will pay for our service.*

Human rights give an extensive frame to social work with asylum seekers and refugees, but also with other minorities. A possibility to access services because of the precarious status, lingual rights, just assessment of asylum procedure and equality in general with native born population, is discussed a lot in our data. A human rights approach as a general frame enables us to overcome nationally framed services and policies. It also minimizes the power relationship between the social worker and the client, since the social worker does not only assess the needs of the client, but instead, the goal is to find ways for the client to be empowered by advocating her/himself (e.g., McPherson 2015). However, advocating minorities on behalf of them or with them is necessary if the rights to services or fair asylum processes are violated.

Therefore, social workers also reflect that they must constantly update their knowledge regarding the situation for asylum seekers in Finland. This does not only mean the frequently changing Acts and policies, but also how these Acts and policies are interpreted. For example, they have to give information about the asylum processes and write statements for the clients' appeals to Administrative Courts, if their rights to residence permit or family reunification are violated. A human rights-based approach gives a comprehensive lens to understand the clients' complex conditions as doubly (or more) vulnerable situations (traumas, precarious status, a lack of agency). The differentiated welfare system and forms of control that asylum seekers are subject to are forms of wider, state-based structural oppression, that are a major concern in current social work practice (Käkelä 2019).

#### 4. Conclusions

Our data focuses on similar experiences to those identified in the Norwegian study (Bø 2015) which was referred earlier in the introduction. Communication problems and cultural differences as well as a lack of appropriate social and health services were noticed, but our results also emphasize that social workers worry about the marginalization of vulnerable migrant groups and members of minorities, as well as racism. They also report uncertainty and inadequate skills in working with these challenging problems. The same themes were found and repeated in both data sets for our study.

Social workers reflect a lot about the importance of communication skills in multilingual and multicultural environment. Not only the interaction skills, but also knowledge are needed regarding forced migration and especially the challenges of forced migrants in



order to ask relevant questions, to understand the situations and help comprehensively. For example, knowledge is needed about refugee and asylum processes, national and European asylum laws and systems, human rights as well as the comprehension of how precarious statuses and traumas affect the (family)life of people.

Furthermore, social workers in our data reflect on and discuss about the possibilities and limitations they have in overloaded practice to meet the challenges, and develop more client-oriented ways of practice. They call for cultural sensitivity and skills for cross-cultural communication as well as social work skills and methods relevant to diverse clients, so that social work as a profession would both apply the ethics and have the tools for anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice. They also emphasize the importance of structural social work in order to develop the welfare system towards more culturally aware and sensitive services, as well as to stand up for the human rights in general.

All in all, social workers in our data are discussing and reflecting on how they understand multicultural social work theoretically and practically, and what kind of special knowledge is needed in social work with forced and other migrants. They are also writing and talking about their own ethnicities and experiences as Finnish white professionals in multi-ethnic work environments. Specializing education and reflective group discussion gave a good platform to social workers for these reflective professional discussions and writings, which seem to have broadened their expertise in multicultural social work.

The results of our study concern the social workers in our two sets of data, and cannot be widely generalized. The participants of our study represent experienced social workers, who have decided to improve their expertise in child, youth and family social work by further education or research-based supervision, and therefore were willing to critically analyze their working practises and social services in general. Nevertheless, the results complement and add to previous research conducted in different countries, which is referred throughout the article. The research on child welfare and child protection social work is reasonably extensive in Finland, but research on migrant, especially forced migrant, families and children as clients in child protection services is almost completely absent (Pösö 2015). Our article focuses on the general challenges and ways ahead from the social workers' point of view, but more research, focusing on the core issues of child protection and child welfare social work, is needed in order to further develop the multicultural and transnational expertise in social work with children, youth and families.

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