

IFSW Reykjavik, Island May 2017. Marginalization in a changing society

Title: Cultural competence in social work. A constructive position or a contribution to othering and marginalization?

Abstract

Beginning in the 1990s, a number of nations including Norway established various courses and programs of further education focused on helping professionals become better equipped to meet and to work with ethnic minorities. Many of these programs were launched and initiated by the state as part of major initiatives aimed at facilitating the integration of minorities into society. For many years, we have been involved in planning and executing programs of various types aimed at increasing the knowledge and skills of professionals working with ethnic minorities, especially in courses focused on child protection work among ethnic minorities.

In Norway, much attention has been focused on the need for welfare professionals to understand the cultures of ethnic minorities. Demands for increasing cultural understanding and cultural competence among professionals working with minority clients have been central in many programs. One key question left unanswered, however, about these and related programs involves determining what is actually meant by cultural competence.

Making use of experiential knowledge acquired during many years of teaching about child welfare work with ethnic minorities, we critically explore here culture-related notions expressed both as key goals in many programs and as concepts eagerly sought for by social workers in the field. In examining the concepts of cultural competence, cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity, central to many of today's programs for social work education, we wish to focus especially on how these notions impact in various ways on the practices of professionals with minority parents and their children. In so doing, we wish especially to examine whether these well-intended culture-related concepts work at cross-purposes to contribute to essentialist, stereotyped and other harmful understandings minimalizing and obscuring racism and related processes marginalizing ethnic minorities in Norwegian society.