Teaching ethnicity in social work education: teachers’ experiences in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
The shifting demographics that come with migration and globalization have changed the settings for social work education in Sweden. To promote sustainability in a diverse society, strategies for inclusion and equality are essential in the development of core competencies in social work. One essential question is how social work education has responded to the demographic changes. The study aims to contribute with knowledge about how ethnicity is conceptualized in Sweden and to describe the impact the subject has on teaching forms and strategies. More specifically, the study investigates university teachers’ expressions of their teaching practices about the concept and addresses the faculty members’ narratives about the teaching situations. The study concludes that the lack of a coherent academic context for teaching ethnicity leads to the development of individual approaches by the teachers and a personalization of the issue of ethnicity in social work education. This creates a limitation on how structural elements come into play in relation to ethnicity, and in turn, leads to a shortage of a critical analysis of the construction of social problems where ethnicity plays a fundamental role. These circumstances precede theoretical perspectives on social problems related to ethnicity, migration, transnational relations, globalization, and racism.

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Introduction
The shifting demographics that come with migration and the globalization of societies are challenging the settings for social work in Sweden. Essential questions to raise are how social work education has responded to these transformations and how diversity content is embraced and handled within the teaching. However, one social work curriculum study is arguing that the majority of social work programs worldwide do not incorporate migration- and diversity-related content in their curricula and that migration appears not to have been as institutionalized in social work education as some other topics have (Danso, 2016). Diversity-related content is a multifaceted conceptualization, which aims to produce awareness, knowledge, and skills on ethnic and cultural diversity issues for social work students. Depending on the theoretical and normative starting points, ethnicity, migration, and other interrelated notions such as culture, diversity, religion, and race are incorporated.

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in the curricular content (Bartoli, 2013). In social work practice in Sweden, there is a political uneasiness about how migration and ethnic diversity is handled on both structural levels and in practical terms. This anxiety has developed and accumulated mostly due to the refugee immigration to Sweden in the fall of 2015, but also because of alarming reports on increasing gaps between native and foreign-born persons regarding health, income, and educational inequalities (Albin, Hjelm Ekberg & Elmståhl, 2006; Gregg, Jonsson, Macmillan, & Mood, 2017).

These developments must raise questions of how inclusive social perspectives and diversity content are operationalized in the social work education in Sweden. Ethnicity is a key social variable here, specifically, because of the increasing cases of ethnic discrimination in society, the housing segregation that predominantly runs along ethnic lines, and the political discussions about how ethnic diversity in various ways creates divisions in Swedish society (Schömer, 2016). Ethnicity is, thus, a politically controversial issue, which often is argued to be one of the main societal problems requiring social change (Sainsbury, 2012). Research also show that in social work education, the understanding of ethnicity is often permeated with multiple and sometimes contradictory content (Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015). This suggests that the understanding of ethnicity can vary among different bodies of students and that a shared formation of knowledge of the concept is under constant negotiating in social work education (Dominelli, Soydan, & Lorenz, 2001). In this study, we will analyze data from interviews with teachers of social work education in Sweden. Our focus has been on how they approach ethnicity and diversity content in their teaching strategies and curricular content.

Research on ethnicity in social work has been internationally established for more than 40 years. It is from multicultural contexts such as the USA and the UK that the field of knowledge has developed, and at many universities, diversity content is an integral part of the national learning objectives of social work training (Saudelli, Mogadime, & Taber, 2012). Although the experience of the UK and USA differs in many ways from Sweden, the proportion of foreign-born population is similar (OECD, 2018). Sweden also recognizes five national minorities—Sámi, Swedish Finns, Tornealeders, Roma, and Jews. Because of their historic presence on Swedish territory, each of these communities is considered to be apart of Sweden’s cultural heritage. Yet, according to the Higher Education Ordinance in Sweden (1993), diversity content is not included in the national learning objectives of the social work degree. Instead, it is up to each individual department to design and regulate its own curricula and educational practice. However, including diversity content is important because of the diverse experiences of migration affecting Sweden overtime, which includes massive emigration to the USA in the nineteenth century, labor migration to Sweden in the 1950s–1970s, asylum migration in the 1980s to the present, and extensive internal migration in Sweden among the national minority groups. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the Swedish social work education does not take the issue of ethnicity more seriously.

**Aim and questions**

The central aim of the study is to investigate how ethnicity is comprehended as an educational subject. The study intends to contribute knowledge about how ethnicity is
conceptualized in social work education in Sweden and to describe the impact the subject has on teaching forms and strategies. More specifically, the study investigates the university teachers’ expressions of their teaching practices. The study raises the following questions: How do teachers understand ethnicity in social work education? How do they transform their understanding of ethnicity into teaching? How is ethnicity contextualized and problematized in various forms of teaching? Empirically, the study focuses on how the teachers describe classroom situations and teaching strategies of diversity content, such as how they involve students in the teaching situation. This includes how cases are constructed and discussed in class.

In this context, we understand teaching strategies as the teachers’ expressions of how they practice diversity content at all levels in the education. This includes the context and the space they award it, and the theoretical perspectives that are selected. The teaching strategies are furthermore linked to frictions between strict theoretical perspectives and perceptions of professional social work practice. Teaching content is understood as the teachers’ descriptions of the curricular content presented to the students. Teaching forms are the ways the teachers plan and conduct the teaching, how they use forms that best fit the strategies and content. This includes, for instance, traditional teaching such as lectures on theoretical concepts but also more exploratory forms such as transitions to field studies where students are asked to problematize and reflect on their own class and ethnic backgrounds.

**Method**

**Interviewing university teachers**

The empirical material is based on interviews with 16 faculty members, 10 women and six men, who are teaching and grading social work students on courses related to diversity content at undergraduate and graduate levels at social work programs at four universities in Sweden. The interviews were based on what Kvale and Torhell (1997) call the ‘qualitative research interview.’ Technically, the qualitative research interview is semi-structured and is neither an open conversation nor an interview strictly structured from a questionnaire. Since the study is intended to investigate the interviewees’ adjustments and preferences, rather than verify hypotheses, the research was carried out inductively (Merriam, 2014; Yin, 2003). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by a coding procedure, whereby meaningful units were created out of the answers and grouped into categories which subsequently were formulated into themes (Fangen & Sellerberg, 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015; Winther Jørgensen, Phillips, & Torhell, 2000).

The participation has been limited to interviewees that have experience of teaching diversity content. A criterion for participation was that the teachers had substantial experience in teaching and course development at social work educations in Sweden. The information about the study was initially communicated via the academic leaders at each department, after which the participants voluntarily signed up. The interviewees were teaching on different levels of the programs, and the interviews took place at each participant’s university. The conversations did not aim to criticize or second-guess how the university teachers handled the conceptualization of diversity content in their teaching. The ambition was rather to highlight the professional competencies that go
into the teaching. Except for two interviewees, the number of teaching years at social work programs was more than 10 years. The interview form was not confrontational. The participation was voluntary, and the teachers have been informed that they could annul their partaking at any time during the study. The informants were given a guarantee of an anonymous identity and all participants have signed an approval form. The four universities are denoted by the numerals 1–4.

**Ethnicity in Swedish social work education**

The Swedish debate about the need for theoretically and practically skilled social workers to serve in a globalized society differs in some respects from similar discussions in other countries. In England and the USA, the argumentation is based on social terms where ethnicity has a great impact. Key concepts in this context are anti-racism, cultural sensitivity, and anti-oppressive theory and practices (Dominelli, 1997; Dominelli et al., 2001; Graham & Schiele, 2010; Williams & Parrott, 2014). The social work practice in Sweden is strongly regulated by the Swedish Social Services Act. This regulation has produced a tradition in Sweden whereby the whole educational curriculum has been designed to incorporate aspects of social equality and social justice more generally. In such a context, the diversity aspects—especially ethnicity—have been pushed aside by other, so-called ‘inclusive’ social perspectives. Furthermore, liberal ideals of non-discrimination are the most common framing of ethnicity and race in educational contexts in Sweden (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016).

**The necessity for problematizing ethnicity in social work education**

Already in 1975, US scholars argued that race and ethnicity ought to appear across all areas of the social work curriculum (Mirelowitz & Grossman, 1975). The importance of knowledge about ethnicity in social work and its inclusion in the curricula has thus been under discussion for more than 40 years. Similar developments have occurred in both the UK and in Canada (Jackson, 1981; Pinderhughes, 1979; Sebaran & McNiven, 1979). The Scandinavian countries’ relation to the concept of ethnicity in social work education has been highlighted much later. Only recently has there been a critical discussion about the absence of race and ethnicity in the social work educations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Flem, Alseth, Jönsson, Strauss, Antczak, 2017).

Research based on the situation in the USA shows that although social work basically always worked against inequality and discrimination, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that researchers began to question the Eurocentric perspective in social work education and training. Overall, this research shows how different outlooks on ethnicity in social work emerged. The trend is not uniform, but the development moves from essentialist standpoints toward social constructivist understandings, and from a one-sided focus on ‘them’ to consider the relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in terms of oppression (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009). However, there are indications that there has been a shift in Western social work education from theory and methodology focusing on ethnic sensitivity, anti-racial, or non-oppressive social work, to a broader framework of anti-discrimination in which all types of inequalities are considered as equally important (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). This involves a shift to a discourse that incorporates
race and ethnicity into all kinds of discriminating structures, for instance Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights, ageism and gender inequalities.

In-line with these developments, researchers have voiced reservations as to whether and how international perspectives on ethnicity, race, and diversity become integral parts of social work education and practices of the classroom (Dominelli, 2010; Graham & Schiele, 2010). In a newly published research article from an American context, the authors claim that these aspects do not appear in social work education as frequently as they should. They argue that students’ learning about cultural and ethnic relations is dependent on the training context, the literature, but also on the course syllabi, and that the curriculum in social work definitely needs to be strengthened in the field (Small, Pavlova Nikolova, & Sharma, 2017). This is feasible since there has been well-developed textbooks written especially for social work that provide a relevant educational context of how social work needs to relate to race and ethnicity (Singelis, 1998). The methods for teaching sensitive topics such as ethnic difference and racial oppression are significant for the students’ learning outcomes (Loya & Cuevas, 2010). Furthermore, research indicates that an ethnically diverse student group can contribute to the learning experience in the classroom (Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2014).

**Results**

**Ethnicity as a subject in Swedish social work education**

The interviewees expressed how important precise course objectives and learning outcomes are for the planning of their teaching. The teachers found existing learning outcomes and course objectives supportive of their preparations and teaching processes and considered that the most common way ethnicity was articulated in the curricula was when the concept is accompanied with other social categories such as class, gender, age, or disability. It was basically together with these concepts that a conceptualization of ethnicity occurred. This was something they interpreted negatively and described it as a ‘mantra’ for including all the variables that constitute grounds for discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. They said that this ‘mantra’ usually is phrased with the term ‘intersectionality.’

The interviewees made historical comments about how the development of teaching diversity content at their departments have been sustained over the years and what a struggle it had been to develop time and space for the subject in the programs. The teachers described a conflict where two approaches stood against each other. One of them is a generalizing approach to social work as intervention work and that the students should be trained to become culturally competent and the other is to teach the students social theories concerning discrimination, racism and racialization. These conflicts, however, have been toned down in recent years. One teacher articulated:

However, we have expanded the critical social work instead. This means it [diversity content] comes in another way (Laura. University 2, personal communication, 5 June 2015).
What is evident is that in the past there was a clear conflict between different perspectives on how diversity content should be handled in education. In recent years, the departments have increasingly shifted to deal with diversity content as part of what is called critical social work, which provides a back door through which primarily the concepts of race and ethnicity can be taught.

**Teaching content, strategies, and the understanding of ethnicity**

The findings show a wide range of understandings of ethnicity and a considerable diversity to its prominence in the teaching. The interviewees declared that their perception of ethnicity is ‘structural,’ and that the concept is important for their appreciation of globalization and global cultural exposure, as well as for their understanding of internationalization, migration, and transnational relations. They, therefore, argued that these aspects should permeate all courses in the education. One teacher from a university where ethnicity is not at all explicit in the curriculum said that they nevertheless include ethnicity and related concepts in their teaching:

> Ethnicity, racism and racialization, I think, it’s important for the students to understand these concepts. In this way, we can use concepts to understand problems and challenges. We work a lot with them (Svea. University 4, personal communication, 3 December 2015).

The interviewees claimed that the concept of racialization also was part of the teaching content, even though the concept was not specifically articulated in the curricula at any of their universities. However, the interviewees did not perceive the teaching on diversity content as a priority in their departments’ respective curricular development.

> Migration and ethnicity are not subjects that are central in the education, as I perceive it. With the assignment that I have, it is more like ephemeral efforts (Ruth. University 4, personal communication, 9 December 2015).

Furthermore, the teachers referred to ethnicity as a politically controversial issue both at their departments and in society as a whole. They described how these tensions are articulated by faculty members, as well as by practitioners and the students. The teachers found these political controversies hard to handle. They also expressed that they are seen as the most suitable for teaching on the subject at their departments, and likewise the only ones doing research in the area. This has turned them into advocates of the subject. They said that there is repeatedly a discussion at the departments about the subject’s space and place in the education. In these situations, they interpreted it as if their colleagues supported their efforts for reasons of political correctness, yet in the end, they felt that other subjects were prioritized and the importance of ethnicity as a teaching field was largely put aside.

However, the interviewees stated that the students constantly called for supplementary teaching on the subject, and in the shortage of teaching material, some teachers referred to their own migration process to illustrate ethnicity and its impact for practical social work. One teacher said:

> Then there is another thing. […] Then I use my own experiences. My story, from my own life (Hilda. University 2, personal communication, 4 June 2015).
Even though the ambition of the teaching is to make the students develop a theoretical and structural understanding of migration and ethnic relations, a major part of the teaching seems to be concentrated on personal, experience-based perspectives. For example, another interviewee expressed relief when academic literature supported her own perceived migration experiences:

I have worked in my own migration process as the theories show and what the books say. I give my own examples. It was a great relief for me when this was written about. That there are explanations that not only depend on myself (Agnes. University 1, personal communication, 1 November 2015).

The teachers’ perception is that the teaching content about ethnicity has developed from trying to develop ‘a culturally competent social worker,’ to instead teach ‘critically thinking social workers, who understand the complexities of migration.’ With teaching strategies that predominantly focus on personal experiences of migration and ethnicity, it is highly uncertain if that is the case. Instead, the teachers make decisions informed by private and subjective understandings, rather than structural and theoretical knowledge. We believe this is caused by three interrelated phenomena: the incredible levels of passion that the teachers express in their effort to give the students a better understanding of ethnicity, the lack of a developed curriculum which focuses on diversity content, and supportive management.

**Teaching ethnicity and educational forms**

So, how do the teachers work professionally with this heterogeneous subject? In the interviews, a variety of teaching forms and assignments are described. In addition to traditional teaching, such as lectures on theoretical concepts, a number of other educational forms are used. One of the most frequent teaching form is to improvise. When the students are asking how ethnicity has an impact on specific social contexts, the teachers try to make the concept understandable by applying it to real-life cases. The cases are built around contemporary social problems where ethnicity materializes as an important factor. These didactic approaches are dependent on the students’ own initiative, and here the teachers see a huge potential for the subject to improve to meet both the students’ concerns about ethnicity, race, and social problems, as well as making the teaching of diversity content relevant for social sustainability more generally.

Since there are no specific textbooks or standardized teaching materials on ethnicity in social work, the interviewees described their teaching as very creative when it comes to teaching forms. For instance, they frequently used media coverage and fiction that includes descriptions of migration and ethnic relations.

I usually start each autumn semester by making an agenda of what has happened in the summer. I think that’s very, very good to pick up in the classroom. So, I usually start briefly by showing some statistics. In teaching, I use very topical material alongside what is supposed to be read. The students are often extremely interested. They have a thousand questions and I handle them as part of the teaching (Agnes. University 1, personal communication, 1 November 2015).

The teachers said that the encouragement of critical reflection on social problems inspire the students’ own initiative to discuss the meaning of ethnicity. Furthermore,
the teachers met the students’ requests by frequently introducing authentic cases. One teacher said:

I do it all the time in vignettes, with different traps that you can fall into and this is the case with ethnicity and racism. That is so present all the time. (Laura. University 2, personal communication, 5 June 2015).

The teachers are trying to include the importance of ethnicity by changing names, ages or social class indicators in the presented cases and vignettes. The purpose is to make the students aware of whether they analyze problems differently depending on these simple changes or not. Through the cases, they thus involve the students’ own understanding of ethnicity. Again however, we see the personal level breaking through. Rather than developing the students’ critical and theoretical abilities, the students are instead assessed in their ability to critically reflect on ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ as part of their own subjective experiences. Another teacher said:

I actually had a lecture on this theme that was very successful. It was in the first semester. It was a mixed group and I noticed quite rapidly that it was second- or third-generation immigrants who were participating. They had thoughts about these things that they wanted to analyse through their own experiences. I spent three hours and it was a single long discussion which I moderated. They seemed to be very happy afterwards (Kasper. University 2, personal communication, 5 June 2015).

Even though the teachers stress how important it is for a social worker to understand migration and ethnicity theoretically at global and structural levels, a major part of the teaching focuses on ethnicity and social work from an individual and an experience-based perspective. This means that the understanding of diversity content is determined by individual, personal situations and that the students’ professional awareness is built largely around their own attitudes and values—and not on theoretically and methodologically informed knowledge.

Complications and obstacles for teaching

All the teachers pointed out that there were substantial gaps in the education when it comes to how ethnicity is articulated and how it is conceptualized. They also argued that the students lack basic knowledge about the subject in the first place. One teacher said:

But their [the students’] basic knowledge is very bad. I must meet them wherever they are. When I bring up the Children’s Convention, where you learn a little more about ethnicity, there are often discrimination laws, and we [the teachers] are open to deliberating things that are topical in the societal debate. Right now, it’s unaccompanied refugee children. It’s mixed. Sometimes you can go into the classroom as a consultant in a course if there is room for legal issues. But it requires organizational conditions and they are difficult to achieve (Paul. University 1, personal communication, 10 June 2015).

In the interviews, a degree of frustration was often manifest. It was recurrently correlated with the teachers’ inability to reach the ‘right level’ of understanding, a lack of time, or the fact that the students’ starting point was not always compatible with the teacher’s ambition and the predicted learning outcomes.

The teachers mentioned several important parts that they found neglected in the education. In their opinion, more weight should be put on the structural level and how
the notion of ethnicity matters for discrimination and racialization. The understanding of the construction of us and them and othering was mentioned as crucial, as well as knowledge about power and oppression. Some of the teachers said that they used textbooks about anti-oppressive social work. But since these choices were up to the individual teachers and not determined through strategic curricular design by the course administration at the universities, the teachers believed that there was a great lack of knowledge about anti-oppressive social work among the students. When it is up to the individual teachers to include the issue in the teaching, there is a further problem for producing progression through the learning outcomes. They also claimed that the conceptualization of ethnicity requires more space and more development. The teachers likewise communicated the need for specific, supplementary courses on the subject to achieve progression throughout the social work program. The main argument for expanding the teaching on the subject was that social workers find themselves in a diverse society, which requires an ability to problematize ethnicity in the complexity of the social work practice to understand the citizens’ living conditions.

Discussion

The necessity to guarantee knowledge of ethnicity in Swedish social work education

Globalization and changes in contemporary migration patterns are producing a new set of implications for social work in Sweden. Therefore, we raise questions about how educators in Swedish social work training are responding to these challenges. The interviewees claim that individual encounters and experiences of migration form the basis in the teaching of ethnicity, rather than theoretical knowledge and structural understandings. The teaching, therefore, foregrounds the individual level, focusing on the professional encounter with individuals from migrant backgrounds to the disadvantage of a critical analysis of the construction of social problems related to the conceptualizations of ethnicity and migration.

In contemporary society, social workers are acting in a diversified context. This, according to the interviewed teachers, requires the students to problematize the complexity of the social work practice to understand the citizens’ living conditions. By not basing the teaching of diversity content on theoretical knowledge, the social dimensions of ethnicity are at risk of being ignored or analyzed as an aspect of more general social problems. But also, more specifically, when ethnicity is not theorized, it risks being approached as a personal problem and relegated to a more general ‘otherness’ (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011), rather than being perceived as a ‘social structure,’ to speak with C. Wright Mills (2000). Vertovec (2007), Vertovec (2017)) takes this even further with the term ‘super-diversity,’ a concept designed to point out that the new migration patterns not only entailed variable combinations of these traits, but that their combinations produced new hierarchical social positions, statuses or stratifications. These, in turn, entail: new patterns of inequality and prejudice including emergent forms of racism, new patterns of segregation, new experiences of space and “contact,” new forms of cosmopolitanism and creolization (Vertovec, 2017, p. 2).
The meaning of super-diversity highlights the political dimensions of globalization and actualizes its implications for the social work education. However, even without ‘super-diversity,’ social work would still be a matter of politics operating within the field of social policy (Hämberg & Sedelius, 2016). The Swedish welfare state evolved in a national context, where globalization and migration already produced unequal conditions for social citizenship (Schall, 2016). ‘Super-diversity’ might have accentuated the political controversies over ethnicity in the Swedish society, but racism, discrimination, and social exclusion have always been part of the problematics of social policy.

The appearance of racist parties in Europe and in Sweden has marshaled a shift among traditional and established parties, many of whom have adopted the rhetoric and policies of the populist right (Hellström, 2015; Wodak, Mral, & KhosraviNik, 2013). That is why Sweden’s earlier, more generous migration and integration policy today, is much more restrictive. The concrete consequences of this shift are new, stringent demands on newly arrived immigrants to establish themselves on the labor market, limited residence permits, more restrictive asylum policies, and the development of return policies to countries of origin, even for unaccompanied children and young people, as well as reduced opportunities for family reunification. Students in social work need analytical tools to understand these implications for social work. They should be able to critically analyze the strategies for an anti-racist and an anti-discriminatory social work practice. It is, therefore, remarkable that the Swedish government has not formulated national degree goals for this field of knowledge in education in social work.

**Conclusion**

One essential conclusion to draw from the material is that the teachers find it hard to balance the teaching on ethnicity between an individually practice-based and an academic theoretical standpoint. The students are expecting to be taught professional abilities and skills for performing social work with refugee reception, honor-related problems, a variation of religious viewpoints and anti-oppressive social work related to racism and ethnic discrimination. The teachers are claiming that the teaching needs to go beyond the students’ applied requests for skills and abilities for encounters with individuals and groups and instead analyze the complexity of social problems related to ethnicity. The education must, therefore, facilitate knowledge and capacities to develop perspectives that include anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and human rights in the frame of social work practice, without being oblivious to the theoretical and methodological demands of the social sciences in general (Ornellas, Engelbrecht, & Spolander, 2018).

We have raised questions whether social work education and educators in Sweden are responding to contemporary challenges in social work. We can conclude that they do, but given the teachers’ statements, there are reasons to suspect that the students do not develop theoretical and methodological skills necessary to deal with the complexities of ‘super-diversity.’ For these reasons, the subject of ethnicity has to be a part of the Swedish social work national degree objectives, supplemented by local learning outcomes in the social work education at each university. Strategies for inclusion and equality are essential to promote sustainability in a diverse society and the development
of core competencies in social work. Only then, will social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline have the opportunity to respond to the changes caused by the age of migration and globalization in Sweden.

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