Negotiating Migrant Community Needs through Social Work Research: A Finnish Example

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ABSTRACT

The implications of increased immigration have been at the top of the political agenda in many European countries for the past decade. The boundaries of inclusion in national welfare states are a fraught political issue provoking heated debate on the limits entitlements. Human services workers are thus often thrust into the forefront of national integration efforts by having to act as gatekeepers to social and health interventions to increasingly diverse populations in homogenously constructed welfare states. This article explores integration in the Finnish human services through an analysis of the secondary data obtained from two migrant community research projects produced by migrants themselves, a project facilitated by the author. Utilizing a narrative approach to knowledge development, the migrant researchers outlined their communities' concerns and experiences in the Finnish welfare state. By focusing on how voice and identity was narrated by the migrant researchers, this article explores the relevance of using community research methods to reveal the complexity of migrant community needs. It argues that locally based, community research has the potential to provide a more inclusionary, community-based methodological approach to migrant issues in European social work.

KEY WORDS: community research, Finnish welfare state, insider perspectives in research, migrants, narrative methods

INTRODUCTION

Mobility is a pre-eminent trait of contemporary globalization (Cresswell, 2006). Demands for flexible workforces and competition among post-industrial societies for low wage workers have created tremendous pull factors in the European Union, while

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environmental degradation, poverty, civil strife and the search for better economic opportunities have presented significant push factors from the south and new accession countries (e.g. Krieger and Maitre, 2006; Lillie and Greer, 2007). The movement of people is nonetheless regulated and constituted by policies and practices that embody the structural inequalities of global power relations (Balibar, 2004; Sassen, 1999). The acceleration of current trends has many political implications for national identities, welfare state models, labor and social policies as well as national security. People with multiple citizenships, mobile populations as well as second generation migrant and bicultural communities raise new challenges to culturally normative and privileged definitions of insiders and outsiders in national societies as well as traditional constellations of group relations.

Contemporary demographic shifts in the European Union have great significance to enfolding local power relations and the allocation of resources, particularly in a time of great economic instability. Eurostat has estimated that less than 10 percent of people living in the European Union are of foreign origin, though local percentages vary widely (Eurostat, 2007: 76).¹ Spain, Germany and the UK received more than half of the 3.5m immigrants to the EU in 2006 (Eurostat, 2008: 2). Immigration is therefore experienced differently in local European contexts that, in turn, represent distinct cultural-historical ways of organizing health and welfare services.

Integration programs for migrants have been instituted by many European countries in the attempt to define the social parameters of social cohesion, national belonging and entitlement (e.g. Green, 2007).² However, such integration measures are sometimes so enmeshed with the structures of systems that support privileged groups that they do not adequately take into account the specific barriers that some migrants face (such as discrimination, racism and low social power) to become incorporated into society (Miles and Thränhardt, 1995). Many second and third generation migrants have come of age in European nations that nonetheless retain discriminatory barriers in employment and education towards those perceived as not belonging, thus limiting their opportunities to participate as equals in society (Balibar, 2004). In this connection, human services professionals are often the frontline workers in implementing integration procedures that are defined by political decisions.³ Consequently, it is important to explore how knowledge about migrant identities is developed and disseminated among human services professionals because it has an impact on how appropriate social and health care policies and interventions are designed.

THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE

This article examines how migrant identities were narrated in two small-scale qualitative research projects funded by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and coordinated by the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Tampere, Finland, in 2003 and 2005. These studies were conducted by members of migrant communities resident in Finland. The author facilitated the training of the researchers and the editing of the manuscripts as well as wrote the introduction and summary of the projects.

The mission of both projects was to develop qualitative data on how people from diverse migrant communities living in Finland experienced human services in specific health care settings and health promotion efforts. They also sought to elucidate the expectations of these communities towards the Finnish welfare system. The primary methodological innovation of the projects was to position migrants themselves at the center of the process as both insiders and researchers. Each migrant researcher decided on the topic, scope, content and conclusions of their individual studies.

These projects embodied a different approach to evaluating welfare in Finland because research on services by users has tended to be rather rare due to the tradition of professional-oriented research and the relative novelty of participatory approaches to service use (see for example Heikkilä and Julkunen, 2003). Moreover, there has been virtually no research by migrants on their own community experience as users of Finnish human service systems (Clarke, 2004: 60–66; see also Domander, 1993, 1999). This article argues that though the migrant community studies in question were preliminary in nature, their significance lay in the exploration of previously uncharted social work research territory in Finland. The complexity of migrant identities narrated by the community researchers underscored the diversity of voices that often remain unheard in Finnish policy and practice discussions due to the fact that most research is performed on, rather than conducted in collaboration with, migrant communities. Further development of a more participatory and inclusive approach to social work research on migrants would be important.

This article identifies the benefits and limitations of migrant community-based research in Finland through an examination of secondary data derived from the projects. First, it briefly introduces the notion of narrative used in this analysis. It then outlines how migrant identities are conceived within the context of Finnish immigration and integration policies. It then explores how the migrant researchers narrated their identities and roles as both knowledge producers and community members in the projects. It argues that these types of projects have great potential to illuminate the ambiguity and multiplicity of positions held by diverse migrant community members as parents/children, workers/unemployed, men/women and foreigners/Finns in the caring encounter, but also contain some risks.

NARRATIVE, POWER AND KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

At the heart of democratic deliberations on the measures needed to enhance the common good are societal conversations that often reproduce social relations of inclusion and exclusion (Benhabib, 2002: 134). Opportunities to participate in such discussions can be limited by the status of the speaker, ways that the viewpoint is expressed, access to the table as stakeholders, and the role of power and privilege. Gaining entrance to speak can be seen as merely the first hurdle. The complexities of ‘coming to voice’ include the risks inherent in breaking silence: potentially revealing secret collective knowledge that has sustained communities through struggle, increased surveillance through greater visibility, disputes over authenticity, and finding one’s voice appropriated for the purpose of containing challenges to the status quo

(Collins, 1998: 47–56; Islam, 2000). Commitment and complicity are thus dialogically enmeshed in how diverse low social power groups narrate themselves and negotiate within systems of privilege.

Culture can be defined as material, cognitive and spiritual ways of doing things in specific environments. Intrinsically, culture includes ways of making meaning of such actions as well as interactions with outsiders that build a common group identity. Cultural differences are therefore real and reflect complex fluid intersections of ethnic, racial, generational, gender and sexual orientation diversities. As Seyla Benhabib has noted, culture presents itself narratively:

... we identify *what* we do by an *account* of what we do ... this is so even when, and especially when, there is disagreement between the doer and the observer. The...reason why culture presents itself through contested accounts is that not only are human actions and interactions constituted through narratives that together form a 'web of narratives', but they are also constituted through the actors' evaluative stances towards their doings. (Benhabib, 2002: 6–7)

Narratives and storytelling can be an important means of raising awareness, communicating and developing situated knowledge about issues and experiences that may be important to one cultural group but invisible to outsiders. Groups with high social power may exclude narratives that challenge the status quo from debates governed by the dominant cultural, rhetorical or authority role rules in knowledge production (Young, 2000: 71). Experience-based narratives have thus been seen by many low social power groups as an essential counterweight to official discourses because they can give voice to the realities faced by marginalized communities living amidst structural inequalities (see, for example, Gutierrez-Jones, 2001).

The project reports under examination asserted that the hidden narratives of migrants in Finland constitute important situated knowledge for human services professionals and policy makers. While some have cautioned against accepting all experience-based stories as reflecting direct, unmediated truth (Stone-Mediatore, 2003), such debates over 'true' representations of authentic experience can be seen as emerging from the positivistic tradition of ascertaining validity in constructing scientific fact. A postmodernist perspective recognizes the significance of situated truths. As Catherine Kohler Riessman has summarized:

The validity of a project should be assessed from within the situated perspective and traditions that frame it ... I approach the issue of trustworthiness, for example from a particular position on narrative research, which emphasizes its fluid boundaries and origins, theoretical premises, epistemologies, uses, and limitations. (Riessman, 2008: 185)

Narrated situated knowledge is thus important for developing social and health policies and practices that address how certain populations *experience* human services. It fosters the possibility for developing a common conversation to include diverse voices and alternative ideas by listening to marginalized voices. These conversations can counter the prejudices and stereotypes that emerge from simply not knowing, encountering or understanding others' perspectives.

SITUATING THE FINNISH CONTEXT OF IMMIGRATION

Due to its geo-political location and history, Finland was not a major crossroads of migration in the 20th century. Until the 1980s, there was a far higher amount of emigration than immigration in Finland.⁴ The Finnish Institute of Migration calculated in 2004 that 790,000 Finns have emigrated since 1945 with 296,000 expatriates currently living abroad (Korkiasaari, 2005). Approximately, 132,000 people of foreign origin were resident in Finland in 2005 (Statistics Finland, 2007). The majority of these foreigners were not asylum seekers or refugees; 47 percent of migrants were spouses or partners of Finns (Heikkilä, 2007). The rate of asylum applications has hovered steadily around 2000 per year between 1990 and 2006 (Ministry of Labour, 2007).⁵ Though temporary labor migration is increasing, Finland has small numbers of foreign workers unlike other European nations. Less than 1 percent of the Finnish workforce can be categorized as low-wage foreign workers (Bartram, 2007: 767). Indeed, immigrants to Finland tend to have a higher educational level than immigrants to Sweden or Denmark, for example, which can be attributed to proportionately large number of Estonians and Russians (Johansson, 2008).

Despite the fact that there had been some cross-border migration from Russia since Finnish independence in 1917, it abruptly stopped during the Second World War. Between the War and 1970, there was far greater emigration than immigration (Salo, 2004: 7). The first refugees came to Finland in 1973 when a small group of Chileans fleeing Pinochet arrived. Between 1973 and 1999, Finland has accepted 17,600 refugees (Salo, 2004: 7). The first immigration law (the Alien's Act) in Finland came into force in 1983.⁶ This restrictive law reflected a culturally homogenous view of the process because it largely required biological or family ties to immigrate to Finland (Sagne et al., 2007). The revised 1990 Alien's Act slightly opened the doors, resulting in a great increase in immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The growth in immigration occurred at the same time as a deep economic recession in Finland raising strong feelings of xenophobia and racism (Jaakkola, 1995).

Finland joined the European Union in 1995. The EU is still developing an immigration agenda and cannot intrude on the sovereign right of nations to determine their own immigration policies.⁷ The main impact of EU membership on Finnish migration policies has been on asylum policies. The Finnish system for dealing with immigration issues is different from many other European countries because there are multiple actors involved (local police, the Immigration Authority, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, etc.) in developing policy rather than a single agency.

Migrants as a whole nonetheless remain a very small proportion of the Finnish population (approximately 2.5%) and are largely resident in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Migrants in Finland are enormously diverse and represent over 150 language groups and nationalities. Russian is the largest single language group (28.5%) among migrants, with English coming in a distant second (6.8%) (Institute of Migration, 2003). Migrants tend to have significantly higher unemployment rates than Finns despite being a far younger population group generally, though the rates vary greatly by nationality. The high unemployment rate among highly educated migrants has been generally attributed to the

negative attitudes of Finnish employers towards foreign qualifications (Paananen, 2005). The rights of migrants have been extended in recent years to allow greater participation in political parties and associations, but migrants generally have a rather low profile in public life (Sagne et al., 2007: 107). Hence the Finnish case represents a migration context distinct from many other European nations, such as Germany, France or the UK, in its extreme diversity, small-scale and relative newness.

FINNISH INTEGRATION POLICY: NARRATING OTHERS INTO US

Integration is the official government policy towards immigrants. Finnish integration policy is based on the Act on Integration (1999). The purpose of this law is to '... promote equal opportunities of immigrants belonging to Finnish society' (Ministry of Labour, 2004: 2). The Ministry of Labour is the primary agency responsible for integration activities as well as the dissemination of information (Heikkilä and Peltonen, 2002: 7). The practice of integration is conceived as an exchange between administrative measures provided by the Finnish government and newcomers. In other words, the government provides opportunities for language courses and employment training, which are then subsidized by special benefits. The government's expectations of migrants are explained thus:

Immigrants have an obligation to play an active role in trying to obtain employment and training. For this, an integration plan is drawn up for them. When an individual is following the agreed plan, his/her livelihood is guaranteed by means of an integration allowance. (Ministry of Labour, 2004: 2)

The key concept here is the notion of being 'active', which is implicitly defined as participation in the labor market. Interestingly, the integration plan is 'drawn up for them,' which implies a degree of passivity or lack of capacity for migrants to make their own choices.⁸ Integration is thus implicitly framed as becoming a worker in the Nordic welfare state, according to the needs of the state rather than one's personal wishes.

Finnish work researcher Annika Forsander has argued that there have been two waves of policies aimed at the increasing number of migrants since the 1980s. The first aimed at integrating migrants into the workforce, while the second characterized migrants by their strangeness (different ethnicity and culture) within the Finnish welfare state. The second wave of policies not only 'clientified' migrants but also recognized the need to address issues beyond the economic:

During the first wave of immigration, the economic benefit that immigrants represented was enough of an argument on behalf of immigration, and it was not seen as necessary to pay attention to the ability of the majority population to tolerate or respect the cultures of the newcomers. (Forsander, 2004: 4)

During the second wave of integration policies many projects and events were developed to promote tolerance. This shift in discussion from employment as a marker of belonging to tolerance for difference nonetheless represents a depoliticization of integration. As political scientist Wendy Brown has pointed out:

It is this positioning, power, and authority that make possible ...tolerance ...

– a position of indulgence towards what one permits or licenses, a posture that softens or cloaks the power, authority, and normativity in the act of tolerance

...Magnanimity is always a luxury of power; in the case of tolerance, it also disguises power. (Brown, 2006: 26)

Projects that promote tolerance and placement in the workforce, commonly in low-paid, temporary jobs, do not represent equality. Equality requires not only a framework of laws (which exist in Finland) to combat discrimination, but tough enforcement efforts to ensure compliance (which is lacking in Finland) (Valtonen, 2001: 423). Finnish integration policies therefore do not necessarily aim to narrate 'them' into 'us' by transforming Finland from a society of tolerance to a community of respect, inclusion and commonality. Rather, integration policies seek to secure the preconditions of privilege by containing migrants as marginalized outsiders that may fulfill society's labor needs but have little power to affect the definition of the shared community.

THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECTS: NEW POINTS OF DEPARTURE FOR ARTICULATING NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES THROUGH PROBLEMATIZING IDENTITIES

This section analyses the process and secondary data of the two projects.

The Research Process

The first Finnish project started by issuing a call for interested migrants to contact the university research facilitator (the author). Information was disseminated by email, website and word-of mouth. Potential participants were asked to write a brief description of their proposed focus of research. These proposals were sent to the steering committee, which made recommendations on the viability of the ideas. Few proposals were received due to the limitations of the publicity about the project,⁹ reservations that potential participants had about the time and skill needed to prepare the report, as well as financial constraints on travel budgets to attract participants living far from Tampere or to provide for travel grants to interview people beyond the southern Finland region. These financial roadblocks provided serious challenges, both ethically and practically, to the completion of the projects.

In the first project, there were eight applicants: five were eventually chosen by the majority vote of the steering committee,¹⁰ which was convened electronically. Five researchers started the initial project, though two eventually dropped out due to family and work pressures as well as the lack of time, resulting in the fact that the first report featured only three studies. The research did indeed demand a great deal from participants in terms of writing and academic skills, in addition to mental and emotional resources to cope with processing all of the difficult discussions and information given in trust by fellow community members. Hence the pool of potential researchers was limited by these factors that served to exclude many candidates. As one researcher wrote:

It is true that not only does the researcher feel pressure from their community to portray them in a way that will not cause problems for them but also from the mainstream society, in terms of how credible the research is scientifically. (Dayib, 2005:70)

Each project group met four times during the year of research, though researchers had the option to consult with the coordinator or advisors as often as they felt necessary. In these four all-day group sessions, researchers circulated their plans, draft papers and data to fellow participants. Each paper or plan was discussed for one to two hours, with all participants offering comments. On occasion, university researchers were asked to give brief lectures on certain aspects of methodology that the participants were interested to know more about. However, the majority of meeting time focused on peer counselling and debate. In this sense, researchers' ownership of the project, its methodologies, aims and ways of reporting was underscored. Experts were used to advise and assist at rough points, rather than placed at the center of the project.

The second project proved to be more successful in supporting researchers to finalize their research reports. This may be due to the fact that two of the researchers had experience from the first project and the other three had some experience of writing academically. The initial hurdle of conceptualizing and formulating a project was therefore not as steep as in the first project.

Orienting Towards Theory

One of the main topics of discussion in group sessions was how to construct and represent 'truth' in the reports. Some researchers felt that migrants' stories should be compared with the stories of human services professionals in order to assess the validity of migrants' narratives. They worried that if 'objective truth' was not measured, Finnish society would feel that the reports were biased and a backlash against migrant communities would occur. However, as discussions progressed the notion of 'situated truth' emerged in conversation with visiting experts and researchers found it best expressed the multiplicity of experiences diverse communities have had with the Finnish human services.

A primary point of departure in the theoretical orientation of the projects was the problematization of the predominantly normative and cultureless views of patients implicit in much of Finnish welfare research. Raising the salience of cultural complexity as an important factor in developing research was not intended to reify the notion of culture as a self-contained entity. On the contrary, the purpose of using cultural difference as a primary theoretical point of departure was the empowerment of under-represented communities to address issues of equality and unequal welfare state practices by defining themselves and taking ownership of migrant issues.

The theoretical orientation of the project came from a cultural competence perspective that constructs caregiving as an inherently cultural encounter was the basic underlying concept in these studies (Lum, 2005; O'Hagan, 2001: 233-5). Patients, caregivers, organizations and institutions were all considered as complex cultural elements with varying degrees of power in the caring encounter (Thompson and Campling, 1998:

14–27). Moreover, the caring encounter was viewed as a relational process that embodied societal and institutional patterns of power through intercultural ways of communicating and acting.

The Project Reports

The reports in the migrant community research reports can be broadly divided into two main subject categories for the purpose of this analysis:

Experiences in service systems:

- Maternal/child health
- Prostitution counseling center
- Primary health
- Mental health

Cultural information and experiences:

- Aspirations of the second generation
- Reactions to sexual health information
- Finnish drinking culture

The focus in the first round of studies was on migrants' perceptions of sites where they received services (2003). In this report, the three studies focused on primary health services, maternal health care centers and the nongovernmental prostitution counseling center. The informants were all newcomers to Finland. Two of the studies were done by insiders in the community, while the third, dealing with the sensitive topic of sex work, was conducted by a frequent visitor to Finland from Estonia. The second round of studies (2005) placed greater emphasis on the challenges facing the second generation through an examination of their aspirations for education and the impact of sexual health information. Reports in this collection also examined the impact of mental health services, primary health care services and Finnish drinking culture.

As the projects were not well funded, researchers did not receive a sufficient salary to work on their research full time. Moreover, resources for extended education were limited. As a result, the theoretical framework of the project suffered from the lack of training, meeting time and discussion. These limitations perhaps reflect the value Finnish academia and policy institutions place on recognizing the existing capacities of migrants and empowering them as researchers and experts.

An ethical danger inherent in the nature of this type of project is the inability to produce the highest possible quality research product through budget restrictions and therefore risk criticism that would reflect on the capacity of migrant communities to represent a serious critique of the welfare system. Many of the researchers felt vulnerable in this regard, but nonetheless felt that it was important to 'come to voice', in Patricia Hill Collins' terms, to break the silencing engendered by the dominant discourse on migrant issues by non-migrants in Finnish academia. As a result, all migrant researchers chose to publish their reports under their own names.

NARRATIVES OF VOICE AND IDENTITY IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECTS

Each migrant community researcher had the freedom to decide how to position themselves in relation to the subject of study and informants through their written text. How each researcher constructed their scientific voice is a revealing way of viewing how he or she considers their communities' position in regard to mainstream Finnish society.

Four distinct roles can be seen in the studies:¹¹

- The fellow community member (Dayib, Adjekughele [1], Haghsereht [1 & 2], Kuchey)
- The observer (Strömpl)
- The foreigner (Powers-Erkkilä)
- The scientist (Adjekughele [2])

These roles may reflect how the individuals, and perhaps even the communities they belong to, consider their relation to mainstream Finnish society and the voices they want to use to address decision makers.

The fellow community member can be characterized as a voice strategy in which the researcher speaks with informants to produce situated knowledge about issues of concern that are often overlooked by caregivers and mainstream researchers. The majority of reports embodied this type of voice. Haghsereht, for example, begins his first report by telling his own story as an Iranian refugee who eventually became a Finnish citizen. He states his interest in the research:

As a researcher and fellow Iranian, I was also interested in learning about what the informants thought and felt about their experiences. I wanted to know if and how they acted upon these feelings. (Haghsereht, 2003: 74)

Similarly, Lona Kuchey wrote of her reasons to study mental health treatment among the Afghan community:

I have lived in Finland for almost three years and interact closely with the members of my community. This is because Afghans have a collectivistic culture in which it is easy to contact one another and become aware of the problems that members of the community face. I chose the area of mental health because many people seemed to be having problems in obtaining appropriate mental health services. This topic continually emerged during discussions about life in Finland and about the services provided to our community. Because I am Afghan myself and associated with the *Kotopolku* integration project run by the Finnish Red Cross, I am often approached by Afghans who have social problems or social needs. (Kuchey, 2005: 78)

Here we can see that both Haghsereht and Kuchey clearly identify with compatriots resident in Finland. Moreover, they appear to conceive of their research in terms of a dialogue with fellow community members (e.g. 'I wanted to know...') in addition to raising issues to mainstream Finnish society that cannot be resolved by community members alone ('I chose the area of mental health because many people seemed to be having problems in obtaining appropriate mental health services.'). Thus, viewing the research as a means of making demands for social change.

In Haghseresht's case, his voice in his second reports goes even further in not only speaking with his community, but also viewing the study as expressing concerns about the future of youth in his community:

As an Iranian, as well as a Finn, I have an interest to see the second generation live prosperously and in harmony with Finnish society. (Haghseresht, 2005: 145)

The voice of the fellow community member thus takes the responsibility of the researcher to the community seriously:

It is true that not only does the researcher feel pressure from their community to portray them in a way that will not cause problems for them but also from the mainstream society, in terms of how credible the research is scientifically... I have felt this to be an empowering act. It was an ethical decision that made me want to actually give a voice to these communities as an 'insider' and lessen the growing anxiety that more research was being published on them in which they had no say. (Dayib, 2005: 69)

In this sense, the voice of the researcher embodies a political act of challenging dominant representations with the counter narratives of migrant communities. At the same time, the researcher feels the weight of responsibility that may arise from the consequences of reporting an insider perspective on her community. As Patricia Hill Collins has noted, the repercussions of detailed reporting can include increased social control and surveillance.

Judit Strömpl, an Estonian academic, represents a different voice strategy with regard to her subjects, Estonian and Russian sex workers, whom she interviewed and observed at a counseling center for prostitutes. As a multicultural Estonian who also spoke Russian, she shared some elements of national identity and history with her subjects. At the same time, her scientific approach embodied recognition of the multiplicity and contradictory nature of knowledge construction. Strömpl's voice strategy is developed through the research process in which she encounters and comes to understand more about her informants' lives and choices. I thus characterize her role as an observer:

When I attended the University of Tampere to complete my doctoral dissertation, I frequently traveled between Estonia and Finland. As a woman from post-Soviet Estonia who crossed the Finnish border on a regular basis, I was subjected to the suspicions of the border guards and their questioning about the reason and destination of my travel, the duration of my stay, the place and names of the people I stayed with, and my financial situation. The border guards considered me to be a potential danger to Finnish society. However well I can understand the reasons for such an attitude, the feeling of being subjected to such treatment was always very unpleasant. My usual reaction to such treatment was anger; it was hard to understand why an ordinary woman had to constantly undergo such humiliations. When I talked to Russian-speaking Ingrians I knew in Tampere, I found similar attitudes. In their eyes, Finns believed that all Russians are either criminals or prostitutes. (Strömpl, 2003: 123)

Strömpl thus experiences being seen through the eyes of Finnish society as a suspicious woman and foreigner. Yet, she approaches her research site as an outsider to the world of sex workers. Through her interaction as an observer, Strömpl finds points of common ground

with the female clients by narrating the long-term personal consequences of the transition from the Soviet Union. Tracey Powers-Erkkilä creates a bifurcation in the first sentence of her article by positioning herself as a 'foreigner' who observes Finnish culture. She compares the drinking culture of Finland with North America from a professional social work perspective. She narrates her attempts to problematize her target group in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity:

I've chosen for this paper an immigrant population defined as western European or US-based. It wasn't my intention to restrict the study to an all 'white' population...but in the end those who responded turned out to be white. I decided to incorporate that component into my study with the idea that there is a difference immigrating to Finland as a white westerner than as a person of color. To be white in Finland enables the individual not to have to instantly disclose their ethnic or cultural differences, possibly alleviating some of the strain of integrating . . . Viewed as a more privileged or welcome group here in Finland, these groups of 'white' people are often mistakenly labeled or written off by Finnish society as having no adjustment needs or difficulties. My experience here is that there are few social service structures or services for these groups to access easily and little is known about how these immigrant groups are coping in Finland. (Powers-Erkkilä, 2005: 193-4)

Powers-Erkkilä's attempts to transcend borders between diverse immigrant groups to discuss questions regarding substance use were problematic.¹² As a researcher, she remains within her own group of more privileged white foreigners who do not face everyday racism or class-based discrimination because no other groups respond. Hence attempts to 'speak with' diverse communities as a fellow immigrant were thwarted for various reasons, not least the potentially stigmatizing and marginalizing nature of substance abuse. Perhaps due to the restricted pool of informants that was available and their relative privilege, the main areas of focus in the study included socializing and spousal relationships rather than social inequality issues.

In Josephine Adjekughele's second study on sexual health information (2005), she assumes a more detached scientific voice and does not position herself in relation to her subject or informants. We do not know what kind of an expert she is from the text or what community she sees herself as belonging to. This second study is in contrast to her first study on maternity and child health services for African women where she took on elements of the fellow community member, saying that '... being an African woman myself was one reason that it was possible for me to have the confidence to approach the women' (Adjekughele, 2003: 38). It is difficult to speculate about the reasons for the difference in the voices of the two reports, but it may be that because the first report drew informants solely from the African continent while the second report included informants from bicultural, ethnic and Finnish communities might have affected how the researcher positioned her voice in regard to the subjects. At the same time, it is important to underline the fact that the ethnic or social identity of the researcher should not act as an 'essentializing' device that precludes the construction of an objective scientific voice. Adjekughele's second report, thus, can be read as embodying a more positivist epistemological perspective than the other studies.

Difference is positioned in various ways in the reports. National identity remains a primary means of social identity. This might reflect the newness of migrant communities in Finland, which remain tightly bound to countries of origin. A primary term used to describe and theorize difference is 'culture'. In many reports, culture appears frequently as a factor that explicates reasons for difference (e.g. Powers-Erkkilä 117 times, Haghseresht [2] 72 times, Kuchey 42 times, Dayib 36 times). There was a clear disparity between the first project, which used the term 'culture' far less frequently (Adjekughele [1] 18, Haghseresht [1] 12, Strömpl 3) than the second. Concepts of race, and the oppression racism, were less used notions as they only appeared twice in the first project (Adjekughele) and were not as common an explanatory device as culture in the second (Powers-Erkkilä 1, Dayib 33, Haghseresht [2] 13, all others 0). Culture remained a fairly ambiguous concept in the reports and the relation of cultural identity to social power is approached, but not fully discussed.

A vocabulary of explicating the significance of difference in encounters with welfare services and everyday life was positioned to some extent by the voice strategies used by the researchers. The predominant use of the ambiguous term 'culture' as an explanatory device may mirror notions of Finnish integration, which posits culture as a personal issue and militates against collective action to demand social justice. Nonetheless, these exploratory reports present a glimpse of a far more complex array of migrant identities than statistical representations portray and holds promise for future research.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These two collections of migrant community studies opened up a wealth of situated knowledge from 'non-experts' that problematized the cultural normativity characteristic of much Finnish welfare research. Much of western social science research is based on certain ideas about the social world, which include cultural ideas about the relation of the self to the community that are operationalized through the practice of policies. Hence 'non-experts' – or those who speak from the margins – are often erased from national policy discussions because they are not recognized as having the appropriate knowledge to inform decision-makers. At the same time, the concepts and formulations used by 'non-expert' researchers reflect the manifold pressures of finding ways to address issues of concern to marginalized communities while remaining mindful of the possibility that revealing information about their communities can bring increased surveillance and hence greater social control by the authorities (Collins, 1998: 20–1). Democratizing knowledge production is a key element of developing culturally appropriate interventions that are based on the strengths of diverse communities and better serve the needs of a multicultural society and social justice. Such a knowledge production process, however, also has important implications for democratizing how decisions are made and implemented.

A strong element of the community research discussed in this article is the rich narrativity of the studies, which broadened and complicated notions of social group membership vis-a-vis ethnicity and cultural identity as well as ways of understanding the self in a new society. Indeed, a disconnect can often be seen between official definitions of ethni-

city and community understandings of identity and interaction. As a small nation, which lacks large migrant communities that can make political demands or muster significant resistance to policies that define identities (and concomitantly measures to enhance integration into Finnish society), many policy makers can operate in a relative vacuum of ethical responsibility because there are few migrant stakeholders to challenge or provide oversight. These reports thus represent an attempt to introduce a critique of the dominant discourses on migrants in Finland, but their discussions may also inform debates in other small and relatively homogenous countries that are facing the local impact of greater international migration.

The fact that these particular migrant researchers were considered 'nonexperts' in the Finnish academic discourse on migrant issues need not imply that these researchers lacked education, rather they were not included as stakeholders in the construction of such discussions and thus considered marginal or silenced voices. These migrant researchers were strongly motivated to participate in this study by a sense of exclusion from the rarefied discourse on migrants in Finland. It is therefore difficult to know how representative these researchers were of their own communities since little information exists about the complexities of community identities and being in a new society from an insider's perspective. Their studies should perhaps be seen as a starting point for a more open debate on what it means to live as a newcomer in society unaccustomed to migration.

Most of the trailblazing scientific works and textbooks that are defining multiculturalism and the politics of difference in the West are being written by mainstream researchers with funding. There is a danger that the subjects of research (namely, people from vulnerable culturally diverse communities) become marginalized in the knowledge production process because of their low social power as stakeholders in the welfare state. Having low social power, however, does not necessarily indicate that migrants have low educational levels because this is often poorly measured (Pekkala, 2005). This article argues that debate on the preconditions necessary to create diverse narratives on knowledge production could be an important step forward towards developing more transformative and inclusive social work research in Finland and elsewhere, which could better address the needs and complexity of self-definitions of diverse migrant communities. This underlines the fundamental mission of social work research as bottom-up work with communities, rather than top-down expertise.

Notes

- 1 The main statistical organization in the European Union.
- 2 For the purposes of this article, all people of foreign origin living in Finland on a more or less permanent basis, regardless of the reason for coming, will be termed 'migrants'. This term is discussed in further detail later.
- 3 Among the many examples of human services professional-migrant client interactions are the requirement to attend language courses in some European nations (particularly Nordic countries) or face the loss of social benefits. Various restrictions on the use of culturally specific dress in schools and employment can also involve social work interventions, see the debate over the use of the hijab in French schools.

- 4 According to Statistics Finland, in 2003 the immigration rate was 3.4 percent with the emigration rate 2.3 percent. These statistics demonstrate that there is not a tremendous imbalance between the two types of migration flows.
- 5 In 1990, there were 2743 asylum applications, while in 2006 there were 2324 (Ministry of Labour, 2007; Statistics Finland, 2005).
- 6 Previously, immigration was regulated by decree.
- 7 The European Council meeting in Tampere, Finland (1999) established the principle of a common EU immigration policy, though such a policy has not been implemented.
- 8 Though a later headline in the Ministry brochure claims that the immigrants draws up the integration plan, the language describing the process remains vaguely contradictory, thus raising the question of how autonomous the immigrant is in making decisions. For example, the immigrant is said to make the plan with a municipal official and should include the 'best measures that help the immigrant integrate' (Ministry of Labour, 2004: 4). No information is given about what happens in the case that there is a dispute over the content of the 'best measures'. It can be assumed, however, that as officials have the right to decide whether the immigrant is fulfilling the integration plan, and thus is entitled to receive full benefits, the power rests in the hands of the authorities.
- 9 Until very recently, there were not many multilingual media targeted specifically at culturally diverse communities and few other means to reach out broadly to migrant communities.
- 10 The steering committee consisted of nine experts: three Finnish medical doctors specialized in infectious disease and epidemiology, two Finnish social work professors, two British social work professors, an Irish medical doctor specialized in care for people with HIV both in Africa and Europe, and a European coordinator of community activists for migrant rights in the field of HIV. Later, a Swedish-American professor of social work specialized in race and gender issues joined the second project steering committee.
- 11 The community research collections with titles of all studies can be found in the references section.
- 12 Powers-Erkkilä describes the difficulties of finding informants. In one case, she went to English language AA meetings to contact potential informants, only to find that the meeting was dominated by Finns seeking to practice their English (PowersErkkilä, 2005: 196-7).

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