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Conceptions of Immigrant Integration and Racism Among Social Workers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on 22 qualitative interviews with social workers in Sweden, this article analyzes how social workers conceive immigrant integration and racism and tackle racism within their institutions and the wider Swedish society. The majority of the white social workers framed integration in relation to cultural differences and denied or minimized the role of racism in structuring their services and the ethnic relations in Sweden. In contrast, social workers with immigrant backgrounds were less compromising in discussing racism and assumed it as a problem both for themselves as institutional actors and as immigrants in everyday life and institutional settings. Social institutions in Sweden have been important actors in endorsing equality and accommodating differences. However, it is of paramount importance for social justice-minded social workers to identify and unsettle those structures and discourses that enable racist and discriminatory policies and practices against those groups who are not viewed as “core” members of the Swedish society. The absence of anti-racist social work within Swedish social work is primarily related to the idea of color-blind welfare universalism that is assumed to transcend the particularity of the needs, experiences, and perspectives of different groups in Sweden. While integration is envisioned and framed as a political project of inclusion of non-white immigrants, it tends to become a political device through which hierarchies of belonging are constructed. Following such conception of integration, cultural/religious differences and equality are framed as conflicting where cultural conformity underpinned by assimilationist discourses becomes a requirement for political, social, and economic equality.

KEYWORDS

Anti-racism; culturalization; immigrant integration; racism; Swedish social work

Across Europe, immigration and ethnic diversity are framed as political and cultural challenges that supposedly undermine social cohesion, democracy, social trust, and economic distribution. Multiculturalism and accommodation of cultural and religious differences are continuously opposed and challenged by political forces that stress national homogeneity, loyalty, citizenship test, and national core values (Goodman, 2010; Holtug, 2010). Anti-immigrant political parties have gained political power in many European countries and are blaming non-white immigrants and particularly those with Muslim backgrounds for having created
“parallel communities” and constituting a threat to social cohesion and western liberal values (Lithman, 2010).

Sweden, which informs the political context of this article, was, for decades, regarded as being immune to anti-immigrant sentiments and was celebrated for its progressive multicultural and integration policies (Schierup & Ålund, 2011). Borevi (2014) argues that whereas many European states are redefining or dismantling their immigrant policies, Sweden’s welfare state integration continues to be path dependent and guided by ideals of equality and universalism. While discussing multicultural policies and redistribution in a broad Western context, Kymlicka (2010) praises Sweden for being “one of the strongest and most consistent proponents of a multicultural approach” (p. 264) in Europe. In contrast, Pred (2000) contends that this stereotypical image of Sweden as an international champion of social justice, solidarity, and equality tends to bypass the fact that racism is flourishing in Sweden in both its subtle and its apparent forms. Since the 2000s, anti-racist discourses and talk of structural and institutional discrimination are widely mocked in Swedish debates when immigrant integration and ethnic inequalities are debated.

Since social work constitutes an important sector of the Swedish welfare system, social workers are often given a leading position to implement integration and immigrant policies. Despite the burgeoning literature concerning ethnic inequality in the Swedish society, social work in Sweden is still permeated by notions of color-blindness and universalism that asserts equality, neutrality, and fairness (Eliassi, 2014). The Swedish integration policies are also based on the idea of universal welfare solutions and equality, regardless of communal belonging (Borevi, 2014). This supposed color-blindness can explain why theoretical or practice-based approaches such as anti-racist social work (Dominelli, 1997; Lavalette & Penketh, 2014), anti-oppressive social work (Sakamato & Pitner, 2005), anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2012), or critical race theory (Abrams & Moio, 2009) have not been able to gain ground in the Swedish social work profession and education, which are based predominantly on individualistic casework. Despite claims of color-blindness, Swedish social workers not only see the ethnic and religious differences of their clients but also are involved in the construction of cultural hierarchies. Following an evolutionary understanding of “developed” and “backward” cultures, clients with immigrant and Muslim backgrounds are defined as lagging behind culturally. Such notion of immigrant or Muslim cultures is often used to underpin social policy and social work interventions (Eliassi, 2013; Jönsson, 2013).

While outlining the theoretical framework of racism, Fredrickson (2002) argues that difference and power are two central components of racism. When differences are understood as being incompatible or permanent, it “provides a motive or rational for using our power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our
own group” (p. 9). Racist discourses often aim to have the “effects of establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations between those defined” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 70) as ethnically or racially different. Pon (2009) maintains that contemporary discourse concerning racism does not invoke the language of racial and biological differences but is engaged with ideas about social cohesion, cultural preservation, and nationalism. Accordingly, the language of this “new racism” has shifted its focus from the biological to the cultural (Pon, 2009). This is in line with Fredrickson’s (2002) idea that culture can “be reified and essentialized to the point where it has the same deterministic effect as skin color” (p. 169). Racism does not necessarily entail intention of eliminating the Other but involves cultural, political, and economic domination, subordination and exploitation (Fredrickson, 2002). Balibar (1991a) asserts that nationalism and racism can go hand in hand in defining the boundary of the nation and creating cultural Otherness. Contemporary racist discourses are now concerned with defending national cultures, home, identities and welfare resources from the immigrants (Amin, 2013). Whereas Balibar (1991b, p. 21) talks about “racism without races” as informing racial injustice, Bonilla-Silva (2014) proposes that contemporary ethnic/racial inequalities are constituted through “racism without racists.” Accordingly, the language of racism is continuously in motion. As Goldberg (1990) suggests, “there is no single unified phenomenon of racism, only a range of racisms” (p. 345). This approach and sensitivity to racism is important because formulating resistance to racist discourses needs to take into consideration the adaptive flexibility and intensity of racism.

Given that discourse has a central role in producing and reproducing social inequalities and racism, but also enabling anti-racist strategies (see Riggins, 1997; Wodak, 2008), the aim of the article is to analyze the discourses of social workers in Sweden about integration and racism within the social services and the wider Swedish society. Likewise, the article explores how social workers in Sweden deal with racism within and outside of their immediate institutional settings. The ways social workers conceive and frame racism impinge on the ways they counteract, mitigate, relativize, or even deny its prevalence in Swedish society. First, I provide an overview of literature that has engaged with social work and immigration in Sweden. Second, I discuss the methodology and the data that I have collected. Third, I discuss the main findings regarding how social workers conceive integration and racism in social services and the Swedish society. Finally, I revisit the findings and arguments of this study and their implications for social work and social justice in the multiethnic Sweden.

**Literature overview**

By and large, immigrants in Sweden are often problematized in political and media debates in relation to lack of integration into the labor market,
housing, and education. Issues of urban riots, Islamic extremism, and radicalization among Muslim immigrants have received considerable attention in mass media as posing a threat to social cohesion and democracy in Sweden. Political and media debates regarding immigration are generally concerned with the assumed failure and inability of immigrants to integrate into the Swedish society (Dahlstedt & Neergaard, 2015; Eliassi, 2013).

Thompson (2012) underlines that social work has traditionally neglected the experiences of ethnic minorities and has not accorded sufficient attention to their experiences of ethnic discrimination. This is particularly true for Swedish social work and Nordic social work in general. The Swedish welfare state is based on the idea that it should be ethnically or racially color-blind and universal in its application (Borevi, 2014). Lack of interest in or engagement with ethnic relations in Swedish social work is also related to Swedish self-image and the romanticized idea that ethnic stereotypes and discrimination in Sweden are regarded as an exception rather than a rule. Previous scholarship on social work involving immigrant families in Sweden has showed that social work with immigrants in Sweden is characterized by ethnocentrism when Swedish social workers assess immigrant families (Soydan, 1995). It is argued that clients with immigrant backgrounds tend to be economically and culturally clientified by social services (Kamali, 1997). Pringle (2010) notes that when immigrants are involved in gender violence or child abuse, social workers use ethnicity as the main explanatory factor. Several studies of social work with immigrants in Nordic contexts show that social workers tend to adopt an assimilationist approach and instruct immigrant families to culturally assimilate into the mainstream societies. The purported culture of the Muslim immigrant is thus portrayed as a threat to the Swedish national identity and its gender equality (see Anis, 2005; Eliassi, 2014; Jönsson, 2013; Pringle, 2010; Scuzzarello, 2008). Swedish social work research is also deploying a discourse of cultural clash and cultural differences as the reason behind failed integration of immigrant families and their children (e.g., Schlytter & Linell, 2009). Thus, immigration poses challenges to the welfare states regarding their integration policies and modes of incorporating immigrants into their new countries of settlement. It calls into question ideas of who belongs and is entitled to make claims to rights and benefits. In this context, Williams and Graham (2014) point out that the effects of immigration can not be reduced to individualized problems because they “strike at the heart of wider issues of nationhood, belonging and identity for all” (p. 13; emphasis in original). The ways refugees or immigrants are dealt with in a particular society “expose the prevailing rationale for the existence of boundaries of belonging, social responsibility and the conditions of citizenship” (Lorenz, 1998, p. 251). In a related statement, Lister (1998) explains that social workers can be important actors in supporting the citizenship status and rights of immigrants and can challenge the exclusionary forces of
citizenship that immigrants face (Lister, 1998). Social workers are at front lines of social policy implementation, so it is important to examine and assess their views of immigrants and cultural diversity in order to identify how the representatives of the social work profession determine inclusion and exclusion in a multiethnic society (see Ahmed, 2012; Park & Bhuyan, 2012).

**Methodology**

This inquiry engages with questions of inequality and social justice in the context of social work, immigration, and racism. According to Humphries (2008), social work research has an important role in pursuing social justice:

> What is legitimate in social work research is a concern for those in the real world who continue to be disadvantaged and oppressed, and who are on the receiving ends of problems for which there is resolution given the political will. The invisibility and enforced silence of such groups are what make it imperative for social work researchers to attempt to pursue an ethical practice in examining the conditions and policies that lead to this marginalization (Humphries, 2008, p. 193, emphasis in original).

Accordingly, social workers are encouraged to take sides actively and embrace values that can lead to social justice through opposing social injustices and undoing oppression (Pease, 2010). Ferguson (2014) goes even further in his critique and argues that social workers can not respond to racism and xenophobia by hiding themselves and their profession behind “a mask of ‘professionalism’ that seeks to deny the political nature of our profession or pretend that somehow we are above the struggle” (p. 4). While it is central to listen to the voices of marginalized groups in order to understand and challenge the processes of unequal power relations, it is by the same token important to examine the discourses of institutionally empowered social workers for the purpose of highlighting their discursive construction of marginalized groups and how social inequalities are located within institutional and structural arrangements (Pease, 2010). Through deploying a qualitative method based on interviews, I interrogate how social workers frame their discourses about immigrant integration and racism within social services and the wider society in Sweden and how inequality is discursively constructed and justified and as well as resisted by the research participants in this study. The study does not focus on the direct experiences or voices of immigrant clients and their encounters with the social services and social workers in Sweden but on the accounts of social workers about immigrants, integration, and racism. The aim of this study is to show how social workers conceive immigrants in the context of the Swedish nation-state as potential members or citizens.
Data collection, researcher positionality, and analysis

The empirical material of this article is based on 22 semi-structured interviews with social workers in Sweden. Each interview took approximately 1.5 to 2.0 hours. While 18 of interviewees had white Swedish backgrounds, 4 of the research participants had non-white immigrant backgrounds. In order to secure their confidentiality, I have disguised their identities and the locations of their fieldwork and have provided each social worker with a pseudonym. Concerning the research sites, the research participants work in territorially stigmatized and marginalized urban areas marked by poverty and ethnic exclusion. Clients with immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented as recipients of welfare support and benefits in the social service settings where the social workers have been interviewed. The selection of these social workers was informed by their relatively long experiences of social work with immigrant clients. I have used a purposeful sampling in order to attain access to information-rich social workers with knowledge and experiences of the topics of this inquiry (see Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling can provide important information through selecting particular settings, persons, and events (see Maxwell, 2013). So as to gain access to the social workers, I contacted the heads of departments and explained to them the purpose of the study, which was to increase knowledge about social work with immigrants in the Swedish society and facilitate their social inclusion. The heads of departments functioned as gatekeepers and provided me with the names and telephone numbers of social workers who were perceived as having long experiences of social work with immigrant clients.

The interpersonal situation of the interview and the interaction is an important site of knowledge construction. The intersection of differing and relevant social categories during interview interaction affects the limits and possibilities of knowledge production. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) underline that the researcher impinges on the voices of the interviewees and the way interviewees frame their accounts and subject positions. Or, as they put it, “Who after all, is the interviewer in the eyes of the respondent?” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 22). Interviewees might adjust what they say and how they discuss things, peoples, and situations following their assumptions about the cultural identity of the interviewer (Phoenix, 2013). Since racism is viewed as politically and morally unacceptable, social workers will attempt to avoid being viewed as racists or to frame racist discourses if they do not know whether “the interviewer is a sympathetic ally or potentially threatening adversary” (Phoenix, 2013, p. 80). I was approached differently by the social workers because I have an immigrant background in the Middle East. My name and appearance already indicate Otherness in the Swedish context. For the Swedish social workers, I represented an example of “an integrated immigrant” but not yet Swedish because Swedishness is often viewed as a
quality that people are born with and that is transmitted across generations. This issue became more evident when we discussed racism in the Swedish society, where majority of the Swedish social workers considered talk about racism within social services as inappropriate or irrelevant. In contrast, the social workers with immigrant backgrounds felt that they could disclose experiences of ethnic discrimination in the Swedish society without fearing that they would be negatively judged or risk social isolation by the local authorities dominated by white Swedish social workers. The four social workers with immigrant backgrounds talked about ethnic and religious discrimination not only in general terms but also as it related to their personal experiences of these issues. Therefore, their accounts are important in the sense that, as social workers, they are, on the one hand, institutionally empowered and, on the other hand, vulnerable and run the risk of being targets of exclusionary practices in the wider society.

In order to obtain descriptions of how integration and racism are understood, interpreted, and given meanings by social workers, I have used qualitative research interviewing as a narrative device through which knowledge can be constructed (Kvale, 2007, p. 7). According to Alvesson (2011), researchers not only produce contingent truths about human conditions and experiences, they also produce representations of different things and people. Norman (2001, p. 25) points out that a reflexive interview can be understood as an interpretive practice and a way of representing the world and providing it with a situated meaningfulness. What characterizes interview talk is its embeddedness in local and larger discursive system in which people express and describe their worldviews and identities (Talja, 1999). In this inquiry, I was interested in the descriptive accounts and interpretive repertoires of the social workers and how they evaluate topics like integration and racism that can lead to production of specific kinds of truths. Moreover, it is important to analyze what these discursive constructions accomplish in institutional and structural settings (see Eliassi, 2014; Kvale, 2007; Talja, 1999). Regarding the data analysis, I have adopted a thematic analysis through seeking themes, patterns, and categories and making judgments about what parts of the data are significant and meaningful for the prevailing study (Braun & Clark 2006; Patton, 2002). This means that selected extracts from the data set related to immigration integration and racism will appear in the final analysis. In this regard, I have played an active role in identifying patterns and themes of interest related to the topic of inquiry and in relation to the research questions. Through a thematic analysis, the researcher needs to examine “the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). A thematic analysis, thus, takes into consideration how individual accounts are enabled by sociocultural contexts and structural conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Findings

In Sweden, the term *integration* is often used to describe a desirable condition in which immigrants are included without displaying too many cultural and religious differences. Integration as a social policy approach reflects a functionalist understanding of the society or the nation-state as an organic entity, where non-European/white immigrants are recurrently represented as a force that destabilizes social cohesion. Hence, integration is viewed as a political necessity but also an indication of a societal problem that immigration supposedly contributes to. The political importance of integration guided the establishment of an Integration Ministry in 1996. However, the Swedish government abolished the Integration Ministry after the Swedish general elections in 2014. The abolishment of the Integration Ministry was motivated by the argument that the right to employment and welfare is a matter of concern to everyone. Yet the abolishment of the Ministry of Integration has not entailed an end to talks and debates about immigration and integration. On the contrary, immigration and concerns about the integration of immigrants continue to be heated and contentious political issues in Sweden. In this study, although most of the social workers framed integration as the “problem” of the culturally Other, there were also voices among social workers that challenged this assumption and targeted social structures that excluded immigrants from equal participation in the Swedish society. There was a discursive consensus among the white social workers that racism was not a major issue or was a non-issue for their practices and in the wider society. In contrast, social workers with immigrant backgrounds were less compromising in discussing racism and assumed it to be a major problem for themselves, both as institutional actors and as immigrants/Muslims in their everyday lives.

*Integration as a matter of culture and hierarchies of belonging*

So how do social workers talk about integration? In order to understand how integration is conceived by social workers, it is important to pay attention to the ways they frame integration and identify the actors and structures that enable or complicate the processes of social inclusion. While discussing clients with immigrant and Swedish backgrounds within social services, Daniela, one of the white social workers, framed immigrant integration as a question of immigrants’ adaptation to the Swedish society:

The place where I worked at before moving to this area (a marginalized and stigmatized urban area), the basic needs were fulfilled. They could speak Swedish and could follow Swedish news and read Swedish newspapers. They followed the development of the Swedish society. Even if they had major social problems, they could speak Swedish. The difference is that they (Swedes) had a stronger connection to the Swedish society than the immigrants here. Even if the Swedish clients
were mentally ill or drug addicted, they were nevertheless much better adapted to
the Swedish society than the immigrants here.

Daniela, above, tends to reduce the question of integration to knowledge of
Swedish language, which means that lack of Swedish language ability is repre-
sented as a bigger social problem than mental illness or drug addiction. This
dichotomization creates immediate categories of “desirable” and “undesirable”
clients, where clients with immigrant backgrounds within social services are
viewed as non-sovereign subjects and lack qualities that can allow them to be
included as equal members of the society. However, this framing of integration
does not include all potential immigrants in Sweden coming from the United
States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Western European countries,
where they can pass as members without being disqualified as integrated or
constituting a threat to social solidarity and cohesion, although they can lack
knowledge of Swedish language. These groups often bypass the process of
Otherization and are occasionally celebrated for their desirable presence
among “us.” In other words, there are conspicuous “ethno-national hierarchies
of foreignness and citizenship” (Dumbrava, 2015, p. 12) in Western Europe
where non-white immigrants are viewed as “distant” and “incompatible” with
white European ways of life. The figure that assumedly needs to be integrated
(Anthias, 2013) includes, first and foremost, non-white Muslim immigrants in
the Swedish society. In this context, Daniela provides an example of the cen-
trality of cultural distance as a threshold to integration:

I can feel that the further away you come from, the more difficult it becomes for
you to acclimatize in Sweden. I believe that if you are a Finn, a Pole or an
Icelander, it becomes much easier for you to acclimatize. I mean, if I have to
move to Poland or Iran, it will become like day and night. It would be much easier
for me to live in Poland. It is exactly in the same way for the immigrants when they
move to Sweden. I would be able to easily recognize the Polish society, the Polish
culture, and the Polish way of life. The Polish way of life is very much like my
Swedish way of life. We are built up in the same way. The families for us have the
same meanings. I will arrive to something (Polish culture) where I am familiar
with and do not need to make an effort. That is why I think that the further away
you come from, the larger become the differences become between societies.

The metaphor “day and night,” in the case of Poland and Iran, is used to
strengthen and intensify the discourses of cultural distances, differences, and
incompatibilities between Muslim/Middle Eastern and Christian/European/
Western countries and peoples. Although Australia, the United States or
Canada are geographically more distant than, for instance, the Middle East,
members of these states are more often welcomed and included. When Daniela
uses the words “the further away,” “the more,” “the larger,” she intends to describe
and explain causality between cultural distance/nearness and successful/failed
integration that she as a member of the dominant group can determine and
discern. The discourse concerning cultural distance explicitly privileges certain
immigrant groups as being more desirable and problematizes certain groups as being “difficult” and not “compatible” with “our” ways of life. This shows that cultural racism (Balibar, 1991b; Pon, 2009) has gained legitimacy among a section of institutional actors such as social workers, who are expected to endorse equality and diversity within their institutions. Likewise, integration is not used or endorsed in Daniela’s accounts above to dissolve ethnic and cultural hierarchies (see Razack, 2008). On the contrary, the culturalization of integration assumes hierarchical differences based on desirable and undesirable differences (Anthias, 2013), where Muslim immigrants are viewed as culturally alien. Williams and Graham (2014) underline that the predominant focus of social work with immigrants views culture and language as the main barriers to integration. Such assumptions within social work not only pathologize immigrants as deficient subjects but also neglect their skills, strengths, resilience, and agency (p. 18).

While discussing housing segregation and the labor market, Anders strongly criticized state-sponsored integration and argued that people want to live with “their own kind” and resist mixture. Furthermore, he pointed out that Sweden, in comparison to war-torn Middle Eastern countries, is a “small paradise”:

For me integration is not what the state sets out. According to the Swedish state, different groups should be mixed with public funds. They have a program, heavy programs, housing programs that intend to regulate where people should live, putting two Swedes and one immigrant in the same area or vice versa. The state is benevolent. But for me, the practical integration is as follows: We are human beings and we have needs. We come from different circumstances and backgrounds. You look automatically after the people who share your language and ethnicity. That is why it becomes like that in Malmö and Stockholm…. The obstacle to integration is the labor market. The jobs are ending, even for the native Swedes. You wait for better times. Maybe it turns. For immigrants, it is better to have something than nothing.

Similar to Daniela’s discourse about cultural distance and nearness, Anders assumes that it is “natural” for different groups to live in segregation, and this is not an issue that can or should be altered by state policies and politics. Cultural essentialism not only fixes identities but it also naturalizes material inequalities. However, through referring to “immigrant-dense” housing areas in the cities of Stockholm and Malmö, Anders represents the arrival of immigrants as the primary source of “segregation” because immigrants assumedly want to live with “their own kind.” Residence areas that are inhabited predominantly by white Swedes are not generally viewed as indicative of segregation and reluctance to share spaces with non-white immigrants. While immigrants are supposed to be motivated by culture to settle down in certain urban areas, the motives of white Swedes are described mainly as issues of class and prosperity. Moreover, Anders reveals the ethnic hierarchy in Sweden when the native white Swedes are assumed to have precedence in the labor market, hence dismantling
the myth of the meritocratic and color-blind Swedish society. This discourse creates a strong nexus between belonging and entitlement. Sweden supposedly belongs to white Swedes, so they can assert themselves as the ones who should govern the nation (Hage, 2000, p. 17) and have the right to speak in its name and determine the conditions of belonging and the distribution of rights and resources. As recognized masters of Sweden, they view themselves as being more entitled and deserving than non-white immigrants (see Skey, 2014, p. 327), regardless of their contributions to the society.

In general, white social workers talked about integration in relation to spatial segregation. Although segregation was framed as a social problem, it was focused mainly on “other cultures” that had “chosen” to live with “their own kind.” Integration was also conceived by a white social worker as a matter of cultural co-existence between Swedes and immigrants and the ability to share the same social space without giving up cultural identity and traditions. This framing of integration is informed by the idea that people can share the same social or political space and maintain ethnic boundaries. Thus, integration was imagined more as a device to maintain ethnic boundaries rather than to enable multicultural identities and tranethnic solidarities.

**Challenging integration as the question of the “culturally other”**

In the previous section, I discussed how integration was framed within a culturalist framework that highlights the role of culture in enabling or complicating immigrant integration within the Swedish society. In contrast to this culturalist approach that neglects structural and everyday life inequalities, Johanna raised critical questions regarding how Swedishness is imagined and defined and also how it informs the idea of integration:

When I think about integration, I think about coercion, to force people to live like we do in Sweden. Why should we force them to live like us? Integration should focus on opportunities and access to jobs, education and housing and, of course, obligations. You can not force people to live and think like Swedes. All Swedes do not live and think like each other. I have been contemplating and thinking about what it means to live like a Swede. In a multicultural society, everybody should have right to their opinions within the boundary of law. Immigrants should be allowed to participate and think for themselves. We Swedes can not think for everybody. Sweden is not a multicultural society. Sure, there are people from different countries, but they are not allowed to participate and decide. They are inhabitants of this country and, therefore, they should be included.

Unlike the majority of the white social workers in this inquiry, Johanna described integration as a surrogate for assimilation, where immigrants are expected to adjust culturally to a Swedish way of life. For Johanna, participation, political deliberation, and inclusion become impossible when immigrants are viewed by the dominant Swedish society as lacking agency and are
considered as objects of policies and political actions. Non-white immigrants are often viewed as “late-comers” with no historical roots in Sweden, so they are denied the right to shape the Swedish society as equal partners.

Evin, who talked passionately about her experiences as a woman with an immigrant background in Sweden, referred to the dilemma of immigrants in the context of integration discourses:

Swedes think that it is only immigrants who need to be integrated into the society. I usually say that Swedes also need to integrate because the society changes all the time, and they need to update themselves. In Sweden, integration has become the responsibility of the immigrants who are expected to make efforts to integrate. For some years ago, social workers were so caring and assumed that people who come to Sweden do not know so much and are backward. Therefore, we Swedes should take care of them and show them how to wash dishes and how to bring up their children. If a child is treated badly in a family, the social workers believe that they need to remove all children from the family. Now it has changed. The social workers have become tougher and tell the clients that “you should take care of yourself,” “you are not in Sweden to live on social aids.” There is not something in between. It is either about being too caring or too tough.

The Swedish integration discourse is situated within the framework of benevolent paternalism and authoritarianism. Although these discourses have different conceptions of how integration should be achieved, immigrants are viewed as objects of care who need guidance by the majority society in order to become sovereign subjects or as a group that needs to demonstrate that they are not a burden to the Swedish society. As Evin underlines, immigration poses a continuous challenge to the idea of a fixed Swedish identity and highlights the importance of updating the national narratives about Swedish identity through including people who have immigrated to Sweden as equal partners in the constitution of the society. Immigrants are viewed as late-comers, so they are often urged or reminded to be thankful and to adjust to the dominant society.

According to Young (1990, p. 165), it is not just requiring immigrants to assimilate because that “always implies coming to the game after it is already begun, after the rules and standards have been set, and having to prove oneself accordingly.” It is thus important to identify how the boundaries of the nation or the dominant group are constructed in order to enable drawings of groups’ boundaries that are flexible and responsive to the dynamics of the population and the political balance in multiethnic societies. Such a political strategy can decompose those hierarchies that are established on the basis of essentialist notions of identity, differences, and the ways in which the dominant group has come about (see Nederveen Pieterse, 2007, p. 109).

Heval, a social worker with an immigrant background, argued that integration can not be defined as a cultural problem and needs to be tackled structurally:

The situation of the immigrants in Sweden is a political question. It concerns the labor unions, the employers, and the labor market. It can not only be the problem
of the immigrants that they are facing difficulties in the Swedish society. These difficulties should concern everyone in Sweden.

For Heval, integration was primarily a political issue that concerned equal distribution of resources and public recognition of the structural thresholds that immigrants face in Sweden. Although the idea of integration as a mutual relationship between immigrants and Swedes appears as a democratic approach to an inclusive society, this alleged mutuality does not accord enough attention to the fact that ethnic Swedes have access to and power in discourses regarding the inclusion and exclusion of immigrants. The framework of contemporary integration discourses are based on unequally arranged relations of domination and subordination (see Wieviorka, 2014), where the dominant white Swedish group holds the reins of societal power and resources. This idea leads to the issues of racism and ethnic discrimination that justify unequal power relations.

(Un)imagining racism in Sweden

Sweden is often portrayed as “the most egalitarian, humanitarian, and democratic country in the world” (Eger, 2010, p. 204, emphasis in original). Likewise, it is viewed as the country with progressive ideals of multiculturalism, universalism, and tolerance in the eyes of both Swedes and the world (Pred, 2000). With such a national self-image and international recognition of Swedish “exceptionalism,” it is highly difficult to frame ethnic and racial inequalities in terms of racism. Hübinette and Lundström (2014) have identified three principal stages of Swedish nation building and whiteness. These phases include the idea of “white purity” (1905–1968), “white solidarity” (1968–2001), and “white melancholy” (from 2001 and onward). As we will see, it is mainly the idea of white solidarity and white melancholy that are found in the accounts of the white social workers when racism is denied or naturalized. The white social workers deployed four main discourses, sometimes in tandem with each other, to downplay or deny the prevalence of racism within social services and the Swedish society. These discourses include temporal deflection, spatial deflection, deflection from the mainstream or the dominant society, and absence discourses (see Nelson, 2013, p. 89). These discourses functioned as shared weapons and rhetorical techniques to resist anti-racist analysis and interventions (Fozdar, 2008, p. 529; Nelson, 2013). In response to the question about whether they have discussed racism within social services, the white social workers provided brief and categorical responses indicating that racism was not an issue for social services. Their responses exemplify absence discourses:

Racism is not discussed in our unit, and we have never had racism in our unit (Johanna).

We have never discussed racism within our organization. No, I do not like when I hear people talking about racism. People get scared, and it creates problems. It is
only politicians that talk about racism. Ordinary Swedes do not talk about racism (Karin).

For the interviewed white social workers, racism as an ideology that underpins ethnic hierarchies was viewed as antithetical to the ideals of social work because white social workers allegedly do not differentiate between Swedish and immigrant clients. Moreover, racism was pejoratively referred to as an elite issue and supposedly did not concern the wider Swedish population. Accordingly, talk about racism was not only conceived as scary but also as problem generating. Badwall (2014) argues that “naming racism is both incompatible with and threatening to a professional identity that is invested in constructing an image of goodness and shaped by practices to help others and address social injustices” (p. 2). In this light, Ahmed (2012) asserts that speaking about racism is often heard as a noise or a problem and leads to anxiety among members of the dominant white group. This “never” that was deployed by the white social workers is a discursive strategy to “protect whiteness from being hurt or damaged” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 147). In the same context, Heron (2004) points out that there is a tendency within social work to view the concept of anti-racism as being threatening and provocative and to replace it with less threatening concepts, such as anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive social work. Consequently, this modification of terminology does not benefit those who experience racism, and it risks cloaking racism. For social workers, avoiding the concepts of racism and anti-racism can also obstruct their capacity to understand logically the importance of unequal ethnic and racial relations in guiding racist practices.

According to Martina, misunderstandings between different cultures should not be labeled as racism:

I think that using the word racism is wrong because it is so loaded, and there are so many negative associations around that word. There is a risk that people misinterpret other cultures. Racism is a word that I rarely use.

The usage of the concept of racism was discarded not only because of its association with histories of horror and atrocities in colonial and postcolonial contexts, but also it was equally viewed as a question of misinterpretation of different cultural expressions. In other words, it is the very talk about racism that is conceived of as a problem, not the oppressive outcomes of racist discourses and acts. Instead of viewing racism as an injury to those who experience it (Ahmed, 2012), racism was considered as an inflammatory discourse that risks damaging the positive image of Swedish national identity. Below, Anders provides an account that is characterized by temporal and spatial deflection in conceiving the presence and absence of racism in Sweden:
I think that the word *racism* is a very loaded word. I mean that Sweden has a particular history. I am not talking about Sweden’s history during 1930s, when Swedes supported anti-Semitism and the Nazis. What I am talking about is the history of the Swedish politician Olof Palme, who allied himself with everyone and took a stance on many issues, like supporting Yasir Arafat, which was a controversial act in itself, since Arafat was associated with terrorism. When I think about racism, I think about the old South Africa. If we compare Sweden with other countries, racism becomes a very strong and loaded word for Sweden.

While discussing racism, Anders bypasses the centrality of racism and racial purity in Swedish nation-building in regard to oppression of racialized groups like the Jews, the Roma, and the Sámi or groups classified as “mentally deficient.” In Swedish history writing, contemporary Sweden is portrayed as embodying universalism and humanism that can include people and organizations that are otherwise perceived by the outer world as outcasts or terrorists. This illustrates how internationalism and white solidarity (see Hübinette & Lundström, 2014) become central to Swedish self-image when racism is denied and minimized. Unlike the rest of the world, Sweden becomes an inclusive home that can harbor the world. In the accounts of the white social workers, racism was spatially deflected as belonging to certain places, often symbolized by the Nazi Germany and South Africa. Both temporal (other times) and spatial deflection (other places) were used to minimize the significance of racism in the Swedish context and to give Sweden a form of ahistorical immunity to racism. These discursive strategies not only reinforce the status quo but also prevent anti-racist efforts to alter the unequal ethnic relations in Sweden. For anti-racist strategies to succeed, it is important to take the past into consideration because “a focus on the past is essential to produce the sort of future desired” (Fozdar, 2008, p. 542).

Similar to the majority of the white social workers in this inquiry, Martina was not happy about how racism was debated in Sweden and deflected it from the mainstream Swedish society:

I think that the word *racism* is a huge concept. When people talk about racism in Sweden in public forums, it is all about the racism of Swedes against immigrants. But there is racism between immigrants too. We need to break down the concept of racism into a more useful concept. Racism is very common here in this urban area if we mean, by racism, prejudice against a group of people. I think that the concept of racism has lost its true meaning. The concept was important during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. But it is not racism when immigrant parents complain that police officers treat their children in a racist way.

A common tendency among the white social workers was to assign racism to the apartheid regime in South Africa, which made it difficult to conceive racism in forms other than the ways it was enacted in South Africa. Using South Africa as the immediate universal template to make sense of racism makes it difficult for the white social workers to accord attention to the adaptive flexibility and
historicity of racism. This becomes evident when Martina denounces the presence of racism among the police in territorially stigmatized and marginalized urban areas. When Martina attempts to make the concept of racism into a more usable concept, she refers to racism mainly as the problem of minoritized groups in urban areas and deflects the presence of racism among the dominant white group. This framing is highly problematic and depoliticizes the political distance and inequalities that are the hallmark of the relationship between the dominant white society and the immigrant population.

In contrast to the rest of the world, Sweden was viewed by some of the white social workers as a better place for immigrants because racism was considered a non-issue. In this regard, Carl maintains that immigrants are gaining more recognition and enjoying more power in Sweden:

If we compare Sweden to other countries, Sweden has come a very long way. I am thinking about newscasters and ministers who have other backgrounds than Swedish. They are taking higher positions. Sweden has come along further than other countries.

In Carl’s account, immigrants are assumed to be better off in Sweden than in the rest of the world. This ranking locates Sweden positively “in a global hieracry of racist/non-racist countries” (Fozdar, 2008, p. 537). Such comparisons are often articulated in order to discard the urgent need of the Swedish society to improve its unequal ethnic relations. By articulating this comparison, it is suggested that immigrants should be happy about their life situations and grateful to the generous Swedish society and should avoid complaining about racism in Sweden. Talk about racism is perceived as betrayal of the generosity of the benevolent Swedish people.

So far, I have discussed how the idea of Swedish exceptionalism and white solidarity were used to mitigate the prevalence of racism in Sweden and in social work settings. In contrast to the discourse of white solidarity and the “good” Sweden, Daniela provided a perspective that captures the idea of white melancholy (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014) when racism is viewed as a natural reaction to the demographic changes in Swedish society, where Swedes are assumed to be becoming a minority in their homeland:

You are always afraid of the unknowable, and Sweden has been a homogeneous country for many, many years, and this change that has occurred in Sweden is going very, very, very fast. The employers appoint people whom they are used to. So, if I would apply for a job in Iran, and there is an Iranian woman who has the same qualifications, the Iranian woman will get the job.... I think that we human beings function in this way, that we employ those people that we recognize, a person who is from here. I do not think that there are any differences between countries in this regard.

The account of Daniela captures the idea of Swedes as a besieged nation that mourns its lost homogeneity, which is being undermined by the
presence of non-white immigrants. This discourse converges with what the racist political party, Sweden Democrats, is deploying in its official discourse against the immigration from the Middle East and immigrants with Muslim backgrounds. It is often argued that many white Swedes who vote for Sweden Democrats do not “recognize their Sweden” due to an allegedly uncontrolled immigration and multiculturalism. Voting for Sweden Democrats is mainly about reclaiming Sweden as white and Christian, as though the Muslims or brown bodies have, through official multicultural policies, or *Swedish-hostile* policies, as it is called by Sweden Democrats, taken over the nation and become its governor. Reclaiming Sweden as a property inherited by white Swedes is about undermining multicultural policies and “imposing a specific *national order* in which they have the dominant position. It is through such a process that they manage to become the enactors/representatives/inhabitants of the national will” (Hage, 2000, p. 65, emphasis in original). Going back to Daniela’s discourse, racism among white Swedes is naturalized as a universal response to multiculturalism, heterogeneity, and differences. This experience is evoked to exonerate racist discourses targeting predominantly the Muslim migrants in Sweden. Instead of targeting racist discourses, many journalists and political debaters in Sweden are calling upon politicians to accommodate to the experiences of alienated white Swedes, which is making Sweden more Swedish, Christian, and white (see Eliassi, 2013; Hage, 2000).

**Recognizing and dealing with racism**

The earlier section engaged with the ways in which racism is framed, downplayed, denied, or legitimized by the majority of the white social workers in the Swedish context; this section discusses how racism is expressed and experienced in the social work setting and the wider Swedish society. I start with the ways some of the white social workers recognize and deal with racism before delving into the discourses and experiences of racism among social workers with immigrant backgrounds. Malin highlights what she experiences as a shift in the way members of the dominant Swedish society talk about immigrants:

Racism is becoming more blatant in Sweden. People are now saying things publicly that they did not say before. I have met many immigrants who have told me that they have been treated in a discriminatory way. But I hope that it is not because of their backgrounds.

There is a paradox in Malin’s framing and recognition of racism in the Swedish society. On the one hand, she has witnessed a discursive shift where racism is more publicly accepted; on the other hand, she minimizes the role of racism despite reported lived experiences by immigrants she has met. This framing supports political and institutional passivity in dealing with racism. In this study, Berit was
the only white social worker to admit that racism exists within social services and how talking back against racism is silenced by her colleagues:

Racism exists within social services. Many social workers think in terms of “us” and “them.” Because of this, immigrant clients can not get the support they need. Racism affects the relationship and the encounter between social workers and clients. You hear racism when social workers express their ideas about immigrant clients. You often hear it during the coffee breaks. If you tell them to stop, they get irritated because they want you to keep your nose out of their business.

Racism affects not only the relationships between white social workers and immigrant clients but also the support those clients receive. It is noteworthy that talking back against racism is viewed as “irritating” or not a business that is of concern to others, while in reality, it targets, subjugates, and discriminates against people who are not viewed as “one of us.” Berit’s account clearly indicates that there are no institutional strategies guided by anti-racism to deal with racism, even when it is occurring in front of the gazes of the members of the dominant group. In a related comment, Carl told a story about a woman with Thai background who had charged Carl with racist treatment:

She had sent a letter to our unit and accused us of having treated her in a racist way. It was not nice words. She meant that she had been treated unfairly. I told my unit chief that me and my colleague had been as neutral as you can be when dealing with her case. Nothing came out of this. It was not that we sat down and discussed this case in detail with our unit chief. Our unit chief did not doubt that we had treated her in a good way.

This example illustrates that the social workers, even when they are charged with racism, do not view themselves or their institutions as having the potential to act in an oppressive or discriminatory way. As Thompson (2012, p. 89–90) underlines, “a social work which is unaware of its potential for discrimination and oppression is a dangerous social work.” Clients with immigrant backgrounds are often exposed to institutional discrimination when the institution fails to respond to the needs of the clients in an adequate way due to prejudices against and stereotypes of clients with immigrant backgrounds (Lavalette & Penketh, 2014). Furthermore, there is a need for social work in Sweden to “re-evaluate its assumptions about race, culture and ethnicity to become more alert to the presence and impact of racism” (Thompson, 2012, p. 87). When racism is reduced to and framed as an accusation, it becomes easily displaced and reproduced (Ahmed, 2012).

Although Sweden is viewed as a color-blind society, the example below shows how whiteness matters and how it is equated with goodness and innocence while the brown bodies become markers of threat in the context of everyday life, social work, and international relations:
I have talked to an adopted boy from South America who is receiving treatment for aggression about the reason why people get so scared of him. I think that people seem like they are more dangerous when they are dark in contrast to a tender light person. The dark color makes you look grimmer than a person who has blond hair with blue eyes. You become afraid of something you do not know. I believe that people think about what has happened in the United States following 9/11. That is something that scares people. (Maria)

It is in such contexts that social workers need to evaluate their assumptions about ideologies and discourses that stigmatize brown bodies as being dangerous to national and international orders. Because categorization is central to social work practices, it is likely that such perception of brown bodies as being dangerous and grim can inform social work practices and interventions. Social work needs to undo ideas and beliefs in which brown bodies become a metaphor for evilness due to historical and ideological constructions underpinned by Western colonial discourses.

Now we move on to the accounts of the social workers with immigrant backgrounds, whose narratives and experiences of racism are more conspicuous and alarming. Elham, who wears a veil and identifies herself as a Muslim, highlighted the presence of racism within social work settings and the wider society:

The racism in Sweden is very covert. They do not show it openly because they know that racism is considered to be ugly. Racism is everywhere in Sweden, and you feel it particularly in the labor market. The treatment of the Muslim has become much harsher after 9/11. There is a marked hatred against the Muslims. You do not see it directly in the work of the social workers, but it indirectly affects their work. I have to explain to them all the time why I am a Muslim and do this and do not do that. They never need to explain themselves.

Muslim migrants are among the most stigmatized immigrant groups in Western societies. They are often viewed as the fifth-columnists who supposedly seek to undermine the nation from within. Anti-Muslim racism has a long history in the West, but it has become more blatant since 9/11. Moreover, anti-Muslim racism is often exonerated as being not against Muslims but against Islam as a totalitarian religion that is supposedly incompatible with Western lifestyles and liberal values. Elham pointed out that she, as a Muslim woman, was often asked by her white colleagues to explain why she fasts, why she wears a veil, and why she was not sitting with them while they were eating their food and drinking their coffees during Ramadan. According to Elham, the white social workers did not bother themselves to explain the reasons behind their own choices in life because the focus was on her Muslim identity. Ethnic white Swedes often view themselves as organic citizens born with qualities that provide them with a certain level of acceptability and, therefore, escape being named, marked, and interrogated.
In talking about the presence and expression of racism, Jamal resorted to his own life experiences to explain why racism can not be reduced to a “pocket” of pathologized individuals or groups like skinheads:

Those skinheads that are out there that scream and run. They are not the ones who are dangerous but those who are sitting with power and decide. Their racism is much more dangerous because they have power. In Sweden, people try to pretend that they are neutral to all peoples. But there is no neutrality. I was invited by a colleague to attend a birthday party and that colleague is a very nice person. She is Swedish. I went to the party and it was a typical Swedish birthday party with cakes and the Swedish flag. Accidentally, I sat beside her husband. We introduced ourselves to each other. He was a dentist and did not say so much. But every time he wanted to say something, he wanted to represent himself as a progressive person. But after he had drunk some glasses of wine, he asked me, “Imagine if you have a daughter!” I said that I have a daughter. Then he went on. Imagine if she meets a Swedish man, what would you say? I said that I have a daughter and she has a Swedish boyfriend. What do you want me to say? But he continued to pose the same question on and on again. I told him that what I am telling you is not about imagining something but about a fact. I think he was a bloody racist who presented himself as an open and progressive person but revealed his racist face.

This account by Jamal dismantles the liberal myth that racism is mainly about “lack of knowledge” or “ignorance.” It is often argued that if only intolerant individuals would learn more about their prejudices, they would not adhere to racism and would become more tolerant (see Hage, 2000). As Jamal shows, while there are individuals who believe or pretend to hold progressive attitudes toward different ethnic groups, they can, nevertheless, reproduce unequal ethnic relations. Jamal’s account converges well with dominant Western discourses about Muslim men as dangerous and Muslim women as imperiled and in need of rescue missions by the dominant white society. Along similar lines, Karwan told a story about how he was interviewed by a white Swedish employer within social services:

Do you know what she asked me during the interview? She asked, “What do you think about women?” When she saw me, she surely thought I am a Muslim man and I oppress and look down at women. After some minutes, I told her that I am not interested in this job and I left the interview room. People usually say that racism and prejudice are not the same thing. I do not agree. Prejudice is a central part of racism. Before, they told non-white people, you have a different color and, therefore, you are not intelligent but are inferior to white people. Today, they tell you that you have a different culture, and your culture is backward because you oppress and kill women and do not like human progress. That woman who interviewed me might not have any problem with me as a person, but when she saw me, she saw a Middle Eastern and a Muslim man that oppresses women. Racism within social work is bigger than people expect.

Karwan demonstrated an impressive knowledge about how racism is appropriated and shifts its face during different historical and political contexts. He
also shows how different discursive strategies are used to exclude non-white groups. Karwan’s experience fits poorly within the Swedish discourse on multiculturalism and diversity as a welcoming political and institutional arrangement of inclusion. This institutional encounter between Karwan and the white employer reveals how Muslim immigrants are viewed as “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004, p. 8) whose bodies and values do not fit within the normative white institutional makeup of Swedish society. Moreover, this encounter reveals “the intimacy of bodily and social space” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 3) and how non-white immigrants are denied a home within white institutions and made into strangers. The connection of white bodies with institutional space is central to this stranger-making. When non-white immigrants are included, they are indirectly expected to respect the uneven relationship between the hosts and the guests. Despite the presence of non-white social workers in Swedish social services, they do not lack “an undisputed right to occupy that space” (Puwar, 2004, p. 1). This troubled presence of non-white social workers can explain why Jamal refrains from talking about racism within social services and the Swedish society with his white Swedish colleagues:

It is not me who should discuss racism. If I talk about racism, the Swedes would say, “Here we have an immigrant who is sitting, talking and complaining about racism.”

When non-white immigrants talk about white racism, they challenge the dominant structural positions of the hosts that white Swedes occupy. By talking about racism, non-white immigrants are viewed as failing to show gratitude to the (white) institution that has provided them with hospitality. As Derrida (2000) has underlined, the word hospitality is problematic because it “carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest” (p. 3). This conditional hospitality (Derrida, 2000) is dictated by “those who are already in place or at home” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43), and demand loyalty to and identification with the host institution or society.

Various studies in Canada, the Netherlands, and Britain show that racialized and immigrant social/welfare workers run the risk of experiencing ethnic discrimination within social services (Badwall, 2014; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Hendriks, van Doorn & van Ewijk, 2015; Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015). Social workers with immigrant backgrounds in Sweden share similar experiences. They do not experience racism only as social workers or as individual immigrants, but they also have witnessed how clients with immigrant backgrounds have been discriminated and harassed. While discussing racism within social services, Evin told a story about how she has witnessed this racism:

Once I went with two Somali clients to the bank in order to help them with opening bank accounts. An old lady spat at their faces and told them: bloody apes!
Go back to your homeland! People went by the Somalis and saying, “Oh, where is this smell coming from? It smells Salami.” They say that Africans smell.

Despite blatant racist attacks on immigrant clients, there are no clear strategies in Swedish social work to counteract racism. Evin argued that racism was becoming a rule in Sweden, and this was evident among her white Swedish friends and colleagues who talked about immigrants in negative terms. For instance, Evin referred to her colleagues and the discursive framework they use to discuss immigrants. Namely, there are “too many immigrants in Sweden” and “Immigrants receive so much social aid” and “Why cannot we get as much money and save as they do,” and “Immigrants get all this money without having done so much or given anything to this country.” In other words, immigrants were framed as an undeserving category of people, who just exploit the system without paying back. Oddly enough, this is exactly what the racist party, Sweden Democrats, says about non-white immigrants and immigration, that what “we” (white Swedes), as the entitled space managers of Sweden, should spend “our” money on white Swedes who are “truly” in need of help, like poor pensioners, who have built up this (white) nation. Evin was surprised to discover that “there was so much racism within the social services.” Moreover, Evin underlined that when the white social workers wanted to assert themselves as not holding racist views, they used argumentative strategies such as, “During secondary school, I had a friend from Africa and he was so nice.” Nonetheless, during various social events, the racist attitude of her Swedish colleague became clearer after consuming some alcohol:

They throw out everything they have on their minds. They become more open about it. I have not discussed racism with them, but I usually challenge their ideas about immigrants. The thing is that you cannot attack a person for her racist ideas when you are in a room where 20 other social workers back up that racist colleague. There is a consent among the Swedish social workers about how to silence anti-racist voices, and if you challenge it, they think that you are exaggerating. They can say, “Oh, that is not how we wanted to say it, and you have misunderstood us. They can even say that you lack enough vocabulary and do not understand Swedish codes. I have seen racism at the social work services, at the Migration Board, at the Job Center. The social workers can say, “Oh, these Muslims, do not they have a better thing to do in their lives than having many children?” It is not strange that we react or even over-react when you hear racist comments about immigrants on a daily basis. You have to be very careful when you talk about racism because you can easily be isolated as an immigrant social worker. Now with the rise of a racist party in Swedish politics, it seems to be valid to be racist and make racist comments about immigrants. Of course they do not call it racist but “critical” of immigrants. Suddenly racism has become a democratic right in Sweden (my emphasis).

There is a clear shift in the Swedish debate regarding how racism is named and debated. Blatant racist discourses are not consistently viewed as racist or
xenophobic but as as immigration-critical or right-wing populism. To be recognized as being critical of immigrants or Muslims, despite expressing and deploying racist discourses, is appropriated within a democratic framework of freedom of speech. One of the privileges that white Swedes enjoy is the continued right to define what is racism and what is not. Determining the meanings of racism has important political effects in terms of recognition or non-recognition of abuse of social power. When immigrants protest and challenge racist practices, they are infantilized and accused of being “oversensitive” and “paranoid” (see Essed, 1991). As Evin indicates in her account, when she talks about racism as a problem, she becomes the one who is problematized for lacking “proper” knowledge of Swedish language and society. While immigrants are blamed for seeing racism in everything, white perspectives are assumed to be permeated by neutrality and objectivity beyond the straitjacket of subjective feelings. Essed (1991, pp. 273–274) argues that “it is in the interest of the dominant group to mitigate racism because acknowledgment questions racial privileges and calls for responsibility to act.” Thus, denial of racism is a strategy of inaction and political indifference. Obviously, social workers with immigrant backgrounds run the risk of being stigmatized and isolated by a white consensus. Although racism is a divisive ideology, the very talk about the division that racism creates is assumed to be divisive for the organization or the society (Ahmed, 2012). Accordingly, the dominant group determines and stipulates the regulatory framework for punishing and prohibiting talks about racism (see Nelson, 2013).

**Discussion**

This study emerged as the result of the lack of anti-racist perspectives within Swedish social work. Given the leading role of social workers in implementing integration policies and their regular encounters with clients with immigrant backgrounds, this study investigated the conceptions of social workers about immigrant integration and racism within social services and the wider Swedish society. The majority of the white social workers identified cultural identity of the immigrants as the main factor that complicated their integration into the Swedish society. A common narrative that emerged was the idea that non-white immigrants lack properties or qualities that the “core” group (white Swedes) embodies as an organic member of the state. It can entail a lack of the “right” language, culture, appearance, religion, history, and so on. Wieviorka (2014) points out that before applying the concept of integration to immigrants, integration was used by sociologists mainly in relation to “fragile, immature, not yet entirely integrated or capable of being integrated, or too easily tempted by forms of conduct which would exclude them or marginalize them from the social system” (p. 637). In addition, when segregation was elaborated upon, it was argued that immigrants choose to live
with their own kind due to their cultural identity. Culturalization of immigrants tends to obstruct identification of structural inequalities that are embedded in the Swedish society, which deny immigrants equal participation and access to social and material resources in Sweden. Culturalization or color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 303) justifies and naturalizes ethnic inequalities and undermines the need for state and government policies to improve the life situations of stigmatized and marginalized groups in the Swedish society.

In effect, white immigrants were viewed as culturally near and compatible with the Swedish society, which can explain why integration is framed by white social workers as a problem that concerns primarily non-white immigrants. Instead of dissolving ethnic hierarchies, the discourse of integration among the white social workers reinforced social division between the “core” white group and non-white immigrants, thus creating and maintaining hierarchies of belonging. This understanding of integration functions as “an invitation to judge those who have already immigrated, as well as those who are about to immigrate” (Hage, 2000, p. 242). Conversely, there were also counter-narratives that problematized how integration is conceived in Swedish society. For instance, one of the white social workers argued that integration is guided by ideas that reinforce the cultural domination of the white Swedes. According to her, for immigrants to become equal partners in the integration process, the relationality of integration needs to be underlined; the unequal power relations between white Swedes and immigrants must be acknowledged and addressed. As long as the dominant group controls the regulatory framework of integration, in which they decide who is the figure that needs to be integrated and how integration is achieved or fails, the prospect of equality becomes gloomy. Likewise, social workers with immigrant backgrounds highlighted the structural hurdles that immigrants encounter in the context of housing, the labor market, and welfare services. They also argued that current Swedish integration policies have shifted their focus from paternalist care, dependency, rights, and cultural relativism to independency, duties, punishment, and cultural pathologization. Migration poses challenges to the idea of a fixed national identity, so the social workers with immigrant background stressed the centrality and the need of (re) defining Swedish identity in order to become more flexible and inclusive.

Racism as an ideology poses a danger to political projects of inclusion in multiethnic societies. As a social practice, racism justifies an unequal distribution of social and power resources, issues that the Swedish welfare state has historically endeavored to address. Yet social work in Sweden has not engaged seriously with counteracting the racism and ethnic discrimination that obstruct immigrants from equal participation in Swedish society and prevent them from having equal rights within a variety of societal arenas. In general, the notion and experiences of racism were conceived differently by
social workers with Swedish versus immigrant backgrounds, and this, in turn, affects the ways racism is dealt with within their organizations and also in the wider society.

This inquiry has shown that the absence of anti-racist discourses and strategies are the hallmark of Swedish social work. The majority of the white social workers asserted that there is no need to talk about racism because racism does not exist within their organization. It was argued that clients—regardless of the communities they belonged to—were treated equally and fairly. Talking about racism was viewed as generating problems that did not exist. Likewise, it was considered as improper to talk about racism within social services and in the Swedish society because Sweden was assumed to be an international champion of solidarity and supportive of oppressed nations. Racism in Sweden was viewed as absent or minimal among white Swedes and, when visible, it was mainly to be found among non-white immigrants in urban areas. Complaining about racism in Sweden was perceived as misconceiving the “true” meaning of racism that existed in Nazi Germany and the old South Africa. Racism was deemed to belong to other historical times and other places outside of Sweden. Following international migration from the Third World, white Swedish melancholy and fear of multiculturalism were regarded as natural because Sweden has lost its homogeneity due to an accelerated diversification of the population. Consequently, when racism is framed as nonexistent, there is no need for anti-racist social work or strategies. Even when non-white immigrants talk about the lived experiences of racism in their everyday lives, their accounts are not viewed by the crucial, dominant white audience as trustworthy but are interpreted mainly as “exaggerating” the scale and the scope of racism. The dominant white point of view regarding proscription and prescription of racism is framed in terms of objectivity, neutrality, factuality, and freedom from prejudice (Nelson, 2013).

Although the majority of the white social workers did not view racism as a problem, one of the white social workers argued that those who expressed racist views aggressively silenced those who challenged racist discourses for meddling in their business. This situation became particularly evident when social workers with immigrant backgrounds talked about the fear of talking about racism with their white colleagues because they could run the risk of being isolated, punished, and suppressed for “whining” about racism. As immigrants and guests (despite often being formally citizens of the state), they are expected to be thankful to the host white institutions and its white space managers. This study indicates that racism is expressed mainly in tandem with nationalist discourses (Balibar, 1991a) about cultural hierarchies (Pon, 2009) and welfare chauvinism, in which the white members of the nation often do have preference in terms of power and social resources in Sweden.
The non-white immigrants are expected to stand behind in that national queue and know their places in the hierarchies of belonging and entitlements.

Despite national and international celebration of Sweden as an exceptional stronghold of an inclusive welfare state and multiculturalism, Swedish social work does not demonstrate an exceptionally progressive approach to tackling inequalities generated by racist discourses and structural inequalities that non-white immigrants encounter in their everyday lives and in institutional contexts. Racism can no longer be reduced to individual pathologies or a property of extremist right-wing groups, “because racism is by definition the expression or activation of group power (Essed, 1991, p. 37). However, as Essed (1991) asserts, this is not to say that all whites are perpetrators of racist acts or that all non-white immigrants are victims. There are empowered non-white immigrants who are involved in formulating and enacting racist discourses, and there are also whites who are challenging racism and becoming targets of violence and intimidation by racist forces. Nevertheless, members of the dominant group are the “structural beneficiaries of racism” (Essed, 1991, p. 43). The absence of anti-racist social work, anti-discriminatory social work, and anti-oppressive social work within Swedish social work are related primarily to the idea of color-blind welfare universalism that supposedly transcends the particularity of the needs, experiences, and perspectives of different groups in Sweden. There is a dire need for social work in Sweden to reframe its conception of racism and immigrant integration. As long as the dominant white social work profession does not see the privileges of being white in a multi-ethnic Sweden as a problem, white social workers continue to reproduce and reinforce the system of privilege (see Lavette & Penketh, 2014; Mullaly, 2010) that oppresses non-white immigrants in a country where the specter of racism is shaping and gradually poisoning the political deliberation and the discourse of social work. Since the social work profession in Sweden adheres to principles of social justice, it is imperative to challenge those social forces that aim to reinforce the idea that cultural/religious differences and equality are mutually incompatible and making sameness or monoculturalism to a requirement for political, social, and economic equality.

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