

Integration, race, and “doing good” – some critical reflections

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Researching integration

- MiCREATE project description: through a “comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes” to “stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children”, by “adopting a child-centered approach to [...] integration” and “revisiting integration policies”.
- “incorporation as equals into society or an organization of individuals of different groups (such as races)” (Merriam-Webster, 2020).
- “the process by which people who are relatively new to a country (i.e. whose roots do not reach deeper than two or three generations) become part of society” (Rudiger & Spencer, 2003).
- However, integration has become an emic or folk concept and can not (at least not in a Danish context) be understood as straightforward or ‘innocent’ as such basic conceptualizations may imply

Writing against integration

“Ideally, there should be a vast difference between emic categories used in popular discourse and etic concepts used in academic analysis. However, the concept of integration often seems to be used more or less uncritically on both levels. This conflation means not only that academic analysis risks losing its critical potential, but also that the analysis itself tends to become an active element in the stigmatisation of vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities.” (Rytter, 2019, p. 678)

Danish emic concept of integration:

- ‘welfare reciprocity’, ‘host and guests’ and ‘the Danes as an indigenous people’
- → immigrants should ‘blend in’ and become invisible in statistics
- → ‘closing the gap’ (for school performance and wellbeing: MiCREATE aim)
- → asymmetrical relationship between majorities and minorities; casting integration as both desirable and impossible.

Race and racialization

Racialization in education and welfare work is an emerging field of research in Denmark:

“welfare dynamics in the case of Danish welfare work are deeply racialized as configured around the refugee, who is treated as a burden with potentials that can be rescued by compassion, stimulated by potentializing, and managed by colour-blindness. All of these are practices that seem to work effectively by denial of their relations to the post-colonial ordering of global economy, ideology, and cultural production.” (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2020, p. 13)

Drawing on ‘stock stories’ of welfare professionals’ work with refugees, Padovan-Özdemir & Øland suggest a “postcolonial welfare analytics” to study the relation between welfare workers and refugees, and conclude:

“Each stock story [of compassion, potentializing, and colour-blindness] does the job of silencing race and racism while transmitting the art of doing good in the name of the social as the guiding ethos of providing welfare to refugees within and beyond the Danish welfare state.” (p. 13)

What to do?

“Therefore, the article suggests that we start to write against integration. Insights from feminism, post-colonial theory and the representation debate of the 1980s and 1990s seem very promising for ethnographers doing fieldwork ‘at home’, providing them (us) with ways to position themselves outside or in opposition to the dominant emic discourses. Critical awareness of the contrast between the emic and the etic, between ‘categories of practice’ and ‘categories of analysis’, is crucial at a time when the legal and humanitarian rights of migrants, refugees and religious minorities are subject to discussion, contestation and political sanctions in many parts of the world, including Europe and North America.” (Rytter, 2019, p. 692)

When studying welfare and education practice: can we, concurrently, promote a distinction between practice categories and analytical categories – while still maintaining a meaningful understanding of ‘good practices’?

Possible critical reflections?

“A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept rest” (Foucault, 1988, p. 154)

- How can we research integration without contributing to stigmatizing?
- How can we become more aware of the most obvious pitfalls of racialization when doing research on “doing good” and promoting “good practices”?
- How can we avoid problematic understandings of child informants? (for example as having a deficit or that some are more ‘useful’ for the project than others)
- How should we reflect on our own stories of experiences with informants and on observed “good practices”?



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