

The Role of Social Work in Supporting Queer Asylum Seekers and Refugees – Queering and Decolonizing Social Work Practice

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Introduction

I am a second-year doctoral student in the University of Helsinki, Finland, in the department of social work. In this presentation, I will present you some preliminary findings of my doctoral research. My focus is not so much in the asylum process or asylum law but more in the social services offered for queer people with refugee background from queer and decolonial point of view. The approach in my PhD research is holistic and I have several kinds of research material, including interviews with social workers and with queer asylum seekers. My theoretical background lies in queer and decolonial theory and in anti-oppressive social work theories.

In this workshop presentation, I am focusing on my interview data with social workers. I have conducted semi-structural interviews with 12 Finnish social workers working in reception centers or public immigration social services in years 2019 and 2020. I am asking: What kind of picture do social workers construct on their work with queer service-users? What kind of identities do they propose for themselves and for the service-users? I have used discourse and narrative analysis and tried to figure out, what kind of mindsets the narratives carry.

Theoretical standpoint

In this presentation, a central theoretical standpoint is the concept of homonationalism originally by Jasbin Puar (2007). Homonationalism is a concept bringing together decolonial and queer criticism. Puar has first used the concept in the US political context to analyze the discourses on War on Terror,

where the nation's gay-friendliness became a sign of its modernity and a dividing line between modern Western states and the allegedly conservative non-Western countries.

The concept is bound to the idea of a nation state, and that's why it is, in my opinion, a significant concept in social work. Social work is known for its solidarity to the service-users, but at the same time the profession has its roots in state-building and colonial projects (Dominelli 2002). As Walter Lorenz (1994) has pointed out, social work's origins coincide with the formation of modern Western nation states, and are directly related to the internal stability that these states needed. Social work is even today dependent on the national ideas about who is accepted in and who is left out; it is contributing to the building of the nation and the brand of Finland.

Regardless of its colonial and nationalist history, social work's controversial relationship to the nation state and the colonial legacies inside the profession are not reflected on enough, at least not in Finland. This leads to a situation where social workers are unconsciously reproducing oppressive structures without being able or motivated to actively deconstruct them. I argue that the social work discourse that I am going to present you next is one example on this.

The development narrative of a queer asylum seeker

In the interviews, while describing their work, social workers construct a normative story of a queer asylum seeker that I call development narrative. The story is repeated in social worker's interviews and carries an idealized and stereotypical picture of queer asylum seekers, social workers, and nations. It can be considered as a discourse, as a way to understand the issue and speak about it. In this development narrative, a queer person arrives in Finland as a suppressed asylum seeker, gets liberated with the help of a social worker, and, finally, is integrated into the gay-friendly Finland. While I know that many social workers are doing very important work with supporting their service-users, I argue that a one-sided repeated narrative reinforces stereotypes and reduces service-user's own agency and autonomy. First I will present the narrative and after that my criticism towards it.

Beginning

The normative story begins when the queer asylum seeker arrives in Finland and meets the social worker for the first time. At this point, the service-user is described as vulnerable, fragile, and lonely. They are closeted with their queer identity, because before meeting social worker they didn't have anybody to talk to about their queerness. They don't know how to verbalize their experience because they are not familiar with the Western LGBTQI+ concepts and have never met another queer person.

That's why their identity is portrayed as incomplete and the whole personality a bit child-like, "not quite adult yet". The understanding of the starting point of the story is described in the following citation by a social worker working in a reception center:

Part of them are quite fragile, because they may have grown up in a very suffocating environment, and it feels like other parts of their identity have not developed either. They are somehow, at the worst it feels like the person hasn't grown up as a stable adult at all, because the childhood and youth have been so damaging. [- -] because there are so many things that they are maybe not used to think or process. In their childhood or youth they haven't had that kind of concepts, tools to process those things.

Middle

After the beginning, the development narrative evolves while the relationship between the social worker and the service-user gets deeper. The queer person is in the process of growing adult and growing whole – their previous, unfinished self is becoming complete. During this stage of the story, the queer service-user is portrayed as someone who is processing their identity, learning new concepts, and struggling with becoming their true self. According to social workers, the fact that the service-users now, for the first time, have tools to verbalize their identity, leads to a situation where they are emphasizing their queerness. They want to talk about it a lot with their social workers and "fuss" about it with their fellow queer asylum seekers. The flipside of this development stage is the growing vulnerability to the threat caused by heterosexual asylum-seekers at the reception center and racialized communities in Finland that are regarded as presumably homophobic and dangerous.

The social worker has a significant role in this stage of the story. They are the one encouraging the service-user to speak about their queerness, teaching appropriate concepts, and sharing information about the gay-friendly culture in Finland. They try to protect their queer service-users against the homophobic religious and national communities and other asylum-seekers. All in all, their role in this phase is to work as a civilizer, empowerer, and protector.

The national context of this development stage is twofold. On the one hand, the gay-friendly Finnish state is understood as enabling the development and offering a safe environment to come out. On the other hand, the racialized minority communities are presented as an oppressive bubble in the gay-friendly Finland – inside it but still impermeably separated from it and threatening it. The next citation is a good example of the mindset that there are totally different worlds inside and outside the reception center. The citation also clarifies the social worker's role as protector – as someone who tells the queer asylum seeker what to do:

And then the fact that you still need to watch out for the fellow countrymen here. And yeah, I have told many that even if this is kind of a safe space camp, still, you know that many people here come from a very conservative society, right. And it's good to take into account that this is still a slightly different environment than the one when you step outside of the camp. This has been something that's good to talk about.

Ending

According to the social work development narrative, what is the happy ending, then? Some goals that are presented for the queer service-users are that they would become themselves, have strong identity, feel no more shame, speak about their sexual identity openly and bravely, and be able to verbalize their experiences. They would at best find tolerable Finnish friends, participate in Pride march, and get married. According to social workers, all this would require that they take distance from their religious and national communities or totally abandon them.

At the same time, social workers are also idealizing a situation where the person *no more* needs to speak about their identity. It seems that in an ideal situation the person is open about their queerness *without* speaking about it or “fussing” about it. Underlining one’s queerness is understood as incompleteness, as a sign of a process that is not yet finished. I find this contradictory and reinforcing heteronormativity. It also encompasses a false idea that the identity building can be complete at some point. In the next citation a social worker working in reception center describes the shift from queer asylum seekers’ harmful and even disabling “fussing” about their identity to a situation where they have more energy left for other important things:

You don't need to fuss about the identity all the time but just, like, next we deal with these Finnish lessons, you go to study, you go to work, these kinds of things. But while I'm speaking I'm also thinking that it can be so that when people arrive here, they are in a stage where they have space and possibility to think about the identity and that's why they may tend to fuss about it for some time. And now we have clients who have been here since the day we started and they are still here, so their situation has already turned out [towards] normal, or something like that, I don't know if you understand what I mean... [- -] Like the fussing is now behind, and I am here and I want to act.

Criticism of the narrative

I argue that the development narrative of a queer person with refugee background follows a typical colonial understanding of an underdeveloped, child-like Muslim, brown or black queer person who is

lacking agency and who needs a white Finnish social worker to save and civilize them. In consequence of the same pattern, the countries of origin (usually referring to Middle Eastern or African countries), as well as the (straight) people who have moved from these countries to Finland, are presented as incontestably backward, barbarian, and intolerant. The racialized communities in Finland are presented as the greatest threat for a queer asylum seeker, even bigger than the threat of deportation that the social workers hardly mention.

As Edward Said has noted in his famous book *Orientalism* already in 1978, constructing this kind of homogenous picture of the East helps the Western countries to build a picture of the West as an opposite to that; as advanced, civilized, and tolerant. I argue that constructing this kind of ideal development narrative the social workers are, at the same time, polishing the brand of the Finnish nation state. They manage to do this by only highlighting oppressive characteristics of the countries and communities outside of the Finnish white unity, and simultaneously only highlighting good characteristics of Finland. Social workers promote the Finnish equal right to marry, but don't mention that it was legalized only 3 years ago and that the parliamentary vote about the issue was extremely tight. Social workers promote Finnish freedom and Pride marches, but don't mention that the Finnish legislation on transgender rights lags behind the Nordic level and violates human rights for example by requiring sterilization. Only comparing Finland to the "Other", non-Western countries gives impression that Finland has already reached full equality. This can be seen as a form of welfare state nationalism, where the claimed gender equality (or gay-friendliness) of the Nordic countries is used in order to separate them from the Others: from allegedly patriarchal countries and racialized minorities (Keskinen et al. 2009).

The development narrative presents the racialized communities and straight asylum seekers in Finland as a homophobic bubble that is constructed as essentially Other in relation to the rest of Finland. The assumed homophobia in the "communities" does not endanger the picture of Finland as unquestionably gay-friendly, because the racialized communities are not regarded to be part of Finland. This mindset excludes people with migration background and Muslim people outside the tolerant (white) Finnish unity, and is inherently colonial, racist, and homonational. (see Keskinen et al. 2009; el-Tayeb 2011.) The fact that the racial exclusion is well recognizable in the social workers' speech still in 2020s addresses how historically deeply rooted it is in the Finnish nation building.

Practical influence

As a conclusion, the colonial mindset is still living in social workers' discourses. When talking about queer and gay issues, it gets a form of homonationalism and welfare state nationalism that are bound

together. What is required is that social workers critically reflect their relationship to the Finnish nation state and recognize their (inherent?) role as state allies and promoters of national coherence.

On a practical social service level, the existence of the ideal development narrative prevents social workers from seeing and hearing things that matter for their service-users if they don't fit to the narrative. This reduces service-users' own agency and autonomy over things that they find important in relation to social work. In my interviews with queer asylum seekers they told me many things that do not fit to the narrative. They told me how they miss their home country and their family, even if all the family members wouldn't have accepted their queerness. They told me about the queer underground culture and LGBTQI+ organizations in their home countries that they were part of. They told me about racist comments and looks that they have faced in Finland and how it makes them feel like they don't belong here. They told me about problems with the Finnish reception center management; about the lack of privacy, autonomy, and physical accessibility in the centers, and about homophobic and heteronormative staff members. They told me about social workers who didn't manage to support and protect them; who didn't intervene in the bullying and death threats in reception centers, didn't listen to their own service-needs, didn't give them appointments, and weren't able or willing to affect the asylum process and the risk of deportation. These all were things that the social workers hardly ever mentioned in their interviews, or if they did, they were very careful and gentle with their critique towards the system.

In the interviews, the queer asylum seekers stressed how important it is that the social worker would really listen to them, try to understand them, and hear their own service-needs. They wished that the social worker would be soft and caring towards them, feel equal like a friend, and do something concrete to help. In consistency with the service-user interviews, I suggest cultural humility as one way to respond to queer asylum seekers' service needs and resist colonial and normative discourses. It is an approach introduced by Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García (1998) that emphasizes deep and genuine listening of the service-user, staying open to diversity and different service paths, and lifelong learning of the professional. Cultural humility includes reflecting critically one's own positionings, acknowledging the structural oppression in the society, and taking action against it. Cultural humility is an anti-oppressive approach. It would provide important tools for social workers to take a critical stand against their colonial and nationalist roots and strengthen their solidarity towards their service-users, not the nation state.

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