The Welfare State’s ‘Stepchildren’

An intersectional perspective on ethnic relations and discrimination in Sweden

Mehrdad Darvishpour

School of Health, Care and Social welfare, Mälardalen University, Sweden

In an international perspective, Sweden is a wealthy country with a strong and comprehensive welfare regime, a fast-growing economy, and a progressive democratic system based on citizens’ rights (Mattsson, 2010). This remains true despite changes in Sweden’s economic situation and some deterioration of its welfare system during the last decade. The Swedish welfare model is seen by many other countries as an example to be emulated. An established opinion in Sweden about the welfare system's focus and goal is that it should reduce social and economic inequalities and provide equal conditions for everyone. Its distinguishing features are egalitarian strivings and strong social civil rights (de los Reyes, 2006).

Studies of the welfare system indicate that the Swedish welfare regime has managed to reduce the class divide in various ways, but has been
less successful at dealing with inequalities based on gender and ethnicity (Mattsson, 2010). An investigation of the development of social welfare during the 1990s found increased differences between population groups, with single mothers, foreign-born immigrants, and young people being among the most vulnerable groups (SOU 2001:79). The study shows that ethnic minorities’ weak position in the labour market can be a major cause of their worse welfare and health. The study also shows that in addition to globalization and international developments, ideological standpoints can influence social policies and their significance for combating inequality.

The situation for the welfare state’s ‘stepchildren’ (inhabitants of foreign origin) is on average significantly worse than for persons born in the country. One even speaks of an ‘ethnically divided welfare’ (see SOU 2005:56). In Sweden, however, foreign-born persons comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of origin, socio-economic background, education, and age. Non-European immigrants in particular have on average lower employment rates, poorer health, lower incomes, and worse living conditions than those born in Europe (Regeringskansliet, 2011).

Recently, the marginalization of persons of foreign origin and their inferior status compared to Swedish-born persons have been attracting increasing attention. Statistical data and research (see Regeringskansliet, 2011; Socialstyrelsen, 2009; Socialstyrelsen, 2010; Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008; Kamali, 2005; SOU 2006:59, SOU 2005:56, SOU 2005:41, SOU 2001:79) show that foreign-born immigrant generally have poorer health, lower income, and lower rates of employment than Swedish-born persons of the same sex, age, and

9 In the old days was often the stepchild a family member from earlier marriages that would not get equal care and attention that parents joint biological children. The metaphor used to illustrate how people of foreign descent can as the country’s inhabitants in many cases not experience having equal value as ethnic Swedes.
socio-economic background. They are also less active in political life. The situation also goes against the goal of the current integration policy adopted by the parliament 1997, which provides for equal rights and obligations for all regardless of ethnic or cultural background (Regeringskansliet, 2011).

How can we study and explain this? What guidelines can improve welfare policy and the process of integration into Swedish society with regard to ethnicity, and how this can be studied? The purpose of this chapter is to study ethnic relations from a power perspective and illustrate how an anti-discrimination perspective can provide a better starting point than culturally determined perspectives for both understanding and explaining the segregation of people of foreign descent. An anti-discrimination perspective can also be applied in social welfare interventions.

A statistical picture of the situation for foreign-born persons in Sweden

Today, almost one fifth of Sweden’s population is of foreign origin. About 14 percent were born abroad, while about 5 percent were born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents (Regeringskansliet, 2011). Compared to many other European countries, Sweden has a high proportion of foreign-born persons in relation to the total population. Statistical data from 2008 (Murray, & Ådahl, 2011) show that Germany (12.1 percent), Sweden (12 percent), France (10 percent), and Britain (8.3 percent) have among the highest proportions of foreign-born residents in Europe. Spain (5.3 percent) and Italy (3.9 percent) have among the lowest percentages of foreign-born residents in Europe.

Sweden has gone from being a land of emigration to a land of immigration. Since the post-war period, immigration has provided a very significant admission to the Swedish population. Because of this immigration also the group of Swedish born children to one or two foreign born parents has increased. In 1970 the group of children
with one foreign born parent constituted three percent and the group with two foreign born parents made up one percent of the Swedish population. The corresponding figures for 2008 were seven and four percent, respectively (Demografisk rapport, 2010).

Today, the greater part of foreign-born persons in Sweden comes from non-European countries (Regeringskansliet, 2011). Statistics show that the number of people who moved to Sweden for humanitarian reasons was proportionally higher in 2006 than in many other European countries such as England, Italy, Germany, and France (Murray, & Ådahl, 2011).

**Employment Levels**

Although there are large variations within the foreign-born groups, on average they have a lower employment rate than native-born persons. The native-born employment rate has been ca. 80 percent or higher throughout the 2000s, while the corresponding figures for foreign-born immigrants are on average less than 65 percent for the same period. The average employment rate for persons born outside of Europe was even lower, and in 2009 it was about 59 percent.

Employment rates are lower for women than for men and the gap between men and women is greater among the foreign born than the native born. In 2009, the employment rates for native-born men and women were about 76 and 73 percent respectively, while the corresponding figures for foreign-born men and women were about 67 and 58 percent (Regeringskansliet, 2011, p. 70). In 1975, foreign-born and native-born persons had similar rates of employment, but the employment gap increased markedly during the economic crisis of the 1990s, and was still large in 2009 (Regeringskansliet, 2011, pp. 55–60; Corman, 2008).

An international comparison of a number of Western countries including Spain, Britain, Sweden, Italy, France, Canada, and Germany
found that in 2008 Sweden had the largest employment gap between foreign- and native-born persons (Murray, & Ådahl, 2011). Statistical data also show that of 19 OECD countries, Sweden exhibits the highest disparity in employment rates between native- and foreign-born persons 12.1% in 2009.

There is, however, a large difference between men’s and women’s employment levels. Among the 21 OECD countries (Belgium, France, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Finland, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Greece, UK, Netherlands, Denmark, USA, Canada, Luxembourg, Portugal, Norway) Sweden is in ninth place when it comes to the proportion of employed foreign-born women, but eighteenth place for the men (Regeringskansliet, 2011, pp. 68–71).

**Unemployment**

In Sweden, unemployment is higher among immigrants than native-born persons. When it comes to gender aspects of unemployment, foreign-born men have the highest proportion of unemployment while native-born men have the lowest percentage (Regeringskansliet, 2011, p. 75). When it comes to age, unemployment has been greatest in the age category of 15–24 years. Combining age, gender, and ethnicity, statistical data for 2009 show that youth unemployment was highest among foreign-born young men (37.6 percent) and lowest among young women born in Sweden (22.8 percent) (Regeringskansliet, 2011, p. 75).

Even at the international level, unemployment is high among foreign-born immigrants in Sweden. While Spain has the highest rate of unemployment among foreign-born persons, Sweden ranks fifth out of the 21 OECD countries, as mentioned above (Regeringskansliet, 2011, p. 71).
Income
There are large differences in disposable income depending on place of birth and length of residence in Sweden. Nevertheless, foreign-born persons who have lived in Sweden for more than 20 years still have lower incomes than persons born in Sweden (Regeringskansliet, 2011). Foreign-born women have lower incomes than foreign-born men no matter how long they have lived in Sweden. Income levels are lower among those born outside Europe than those born in Europe (Regeringskansliet, 2011). A study (Arai et al., 2006) has also found that unreasonable income disparities exist between foreign- and native-born persons. This investigation shows that changing one’s foreign-sounding surname to a Swedish-sounding one results in higher income after the name change. The average increase in annual income associated with a name change ranges from 100,000–155,000 kr. This applies to people born in Africa, Asia, or the Slavic countries (de los Reyes, 2008).

Education
Statistical data show that 38 percent of native born 25–64 years of age had post-secondary education, while the corresponding figures for foreign-born were about 36 percent. Among the native-born 21 percent had lower secondary education, compared to 13 percent of the foreign-born. A larger part of women than men are highly educated both among native and foreign born persons. By international standards, Sweden has a high proportion of college graduates among its foreign citizens, 31 percent (Regeringskansliet, 2011).

A demographic study (Demografisk rapport, 2010:2) shows that children, who were born in Sweden with one or two parents born abroad, have slightly lower grades in compulsory school and have to a slightly lesser extent qualified for upper secondary education compared with students with parents born in Sweden. The differences
can be explained by the parent’s educational level. When it comes to schools, the proportion of girls and boys born in Sweden attending upper-secondary schools are 92 and 90 percent respectively, while the corresponding figures for students from Africa and Asia are just over 56 and 59 percent. Students with two foreign born parents are less likely than other students to be eligible, and foreign born boys have the lowest rate of eligibility. The largest differences in eligibility for upper-secondary education are between students with high- and low-educated parents (Regeringskansliet, 2011).

In higher education, women generally get better grades than men. Foreign-born students receive lower grades than native students, and students with highly educated parents get better grades than students with low-educated parents (le Grand, Szulkin, & Tåhlin 2005, p. 336). A determining factor for why children of foreign-born parents have worse educational prospects than children of native-born parents is the parents’ poorer socio-economic background. At the same time, both Swedish and international studies (see SOU 2005:56; Platt, 2005) show that foreign-born parents place higher demands and expectations on their children than Swedish-born parents. One reason could be that ethnic minorities emphasize education as a way to counterbalance ethnic discrimination and achieve success (Platt, 2005).

Health

In 2008–2009, the proportion of people with ‘good health’ among native-born men and women aged 16 and older was about 84 percent. The corresponding figures for foreign-born persons were about 73 percent. Only 69 percent of foreign-born women report being of good health, while the corresponding figure for native-born men was 85 percent (Regeringskansliet, 2011, pp. 98–102). During 2000–2005, the proportion of native-born persons reporting poor or very poor health was around 4 percent. The corresponding figure for those born outside
Europe was about 17 percent. When controlling for socio-economic factors (socio-economic group, type of housing, and possession of a cash buffer), the proportion who reported poor or very poor health among persons born outside Europe was found to be 10 percent, which is two-and-a-half times higher than among native-born persons (Regeringskansliet, 2011, pp.98–102).

A dissertation (Akhavan, 2006) that highlights a gender perspective on the health of foreign-born persons finds that immigrant women are less healthy than their male counterparts. The dissertation rejects the explanation of immigrant women's poor health as being due to 'cultural differences', connecting it instead to class, gender, and ethnicity. It shows that there is a strong association between illness among immigrant women and their class position. Even foreign-born women who have lived in Sweden for over twenty years are less healthy than those born in the country (Akhavan, 2006).

Residential Segregation

Residential segregation is a growing problem that has attracted increasing attention lately. The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2010) reports that during the period 1990-2002 there has been a marked increase in ethnic segregation in Sweden. Urban (2008) notes that during the period, the poverty rate has increased significantly in very resource-weak areas where people often have their origins in Southern Europe, Asia, Africa, or Latin America. This means that the populations in these areas have come to be poor ‘visible’ immigrant groups.

The proportion of foreign-born individuals who have been in Sweden for 20 years or more and who live in their own house is 40 percent, corresponding to 56 percent for native-born persons (Regeringskansliet, 2011). Statistical data show that residential segregation in Sweden’s cities has increased even more during the 2000s. In districts such as Rinkeby
in Stockholm, Fittja in Botkyrka, Herrgården in Malmö, and Bergsjön in Gothenburg, more than 90 percent of the population now have some form of foreign background, and are mainly of non-European and non-Caucasian origin. In an international context, Sweden stands out today as a country with far-reaching ethnic-cultural residential segregation (Urban, 2008; Nordström, Skans, & Åslund, 2010).

In summary, one can say that the statistical data and reports of various government commissions give a consistent picture, namely that, as a group, foreign-born persons generally face worse conditions in terms of health, work permits unemployment, income, education and housing, as well as other key living conditions. This can be seen as a sign that the Swedish welfare state to a growing extent is characterized by segregation, exclusion, and marginalization, and therefore cannot live up to its goals. Today researchers are speaking of ethnically divided welfare (SOU 2005:56; de los Reyes, 2006).

Can segregation be explained in terms of foreign-born persons’ cultural backgrounds and circumstances being different from those of native-born persons? Or might the answer be found in the social structure of Swedish society? Does society, through discrimination, create and maintain an ethnic divide between the majority population and ethnic minorities? In other words, the question revolves around how ethnic boundaries are created and maintained.

**Defining ethnicity and ethnic relations**

Ethnic relations are not only about the relationship between ethnic ‘Swedes’ and those who have immigrated, but also includes the relationships between the majority society and indigenous groups, such as the Sami, and minorities, such as the Roma. Nevertheless, immigration is the basis for the most extensive ethnic relations in Sweden and many European countries today (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008). The Swedish term for ‘immigrant’ (invandrare) is problematic and is often called into
question. It literally designates a temporary status people acquire during the move from one country to another, but the word is often used in everyday language to describe all people of non-Swedish origin. As it is used in Sweden, the notion of immigrants contains a built-in social exclusion. To be an immigrant means in a sense to be non-Swedish and in a deeper sense not to be considered a person of full worth (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008). By immigrating and being transformed into an ethnic minority, people lose status. The question concerns what ethnicity is, and what is the basis for ethnic boundaries.

**Ethnicity: Characteristic or construction**

The concept of ethnicity is far from problem-free. It is in fact difficult to determine the extent to which ethnic differences are based on objective criteria for group membership or are a result of social constructions. According to ‘primordialism’, ethnicity is a characteristic and distinguishing feature that is independent of circumstances and has existed throughout human history. It is emphasized that even modern ethnic groups trace a continuous identity far back in time and reproduce themselves through endogamy. This means that even today ethnic boundaries may be differentiated through various physiological features and genetic backgrounds that stem from a distinguishing biological characteristic, according to primordialism (Westin, 2008; Cornell, & Hartmann, 1998). Today, the biological view of ethnicity has given way to a culturally determined perspective that places more emphasis on cultural characteristics in defining ethnic boundaries (Cornell, & Hartmann, 1998; Westin, 2008; Anthias, & Yuval-Davis, 1993). But the question remains whether ethnicity can be interpreted in terms of a homogeneous group in which everyone shares the same norms. It can also be asked whether notions of culture, belonging, and identification are immutable.

In contrast to this perspective, constructionists employing a ‘circum-
substantial view consider ethnicity to be just one of many dimensions used by individuals or collectives to identify themselves or be identified by others (Cornell, & Hartmann, 1998; Westin, 2008; Anthias, & Yuval-Davis, 1993). One could say that ethnicity is based on a feeling of belonging that derives from conceptions of cultural characteristics. This feeling can grow weaker or stronger depending on time, place, and interaction with other groups. For this reason, many researchers stress that ethnicity is a context-bound phenomenon. For example, in situations where people of different backgrounds and origins are integrated within the community, ethnic identities may be toned down; while experiences of discrimination and exclusion may reduce individuals’ participation, in which case ethnic identification and ethnic mobilization are strengthened (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008).

In recent years a growing number of researchers have problematized the use of the concept of ethnicity as a special category because it can be redundant and runs the risk of essentializing ethnic relations (see Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008; de los Reyes, & Kamali, 2005; Anthias, & Yuval-Davis, 1993). One reason for the growing problematization of the concept of ethnicity is the risk of focusing on cultural characteristics instead of focusing on power distribution, inequality and social stratification when describing ethnic relations. A focus on ethnicity, which is connected to ideas of a community sharing culture, identity, and origin, obscures the significance of power relations when explaining hierarchical relationships among individuals and groups (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008).

The problem with a cultural definition of ethnicity is that it ignores many collective and personal factors – such as people’s socio-economic background, childhood circumstances, age, gender, position in the new country, length of stay, social network, and interaction with the surroundings – that also may affect cultural conceptions and their degree of integration in the new country. Too much emphasis on cultural
differences also runs the risk that ethnic minorities’ cultural characteristics will be perceived as insurmountable obstacles to integration and to accessing the welfare system. In this perspective, it is ‘they’ who are the problem and ‘they’ who should be helped by the ethnic majority to adapt and be integrated into the prevailing norms and values of society.

Thinking in terms of specificity and difference in the analysis of ethnic relations is based on treating characteristics and differences as individual or collective properties, on their being taken for granted, fixed, stabilized, and considered immutable, and on an individual’s position being linked primarily to his/her collective characteristics such as ethnicity or gender. Some researchers (see de los Reyes, & Martinsson, 2005) question the existence of essential differences and causes of people’s identities and social positions, and believe that individuals’ identities and positions are determined by historically specific social interactions and material conditions that are controlled, legitimized, and made possible by discursive constructions. In this respect, the discourse of diversity is also problematic, not only because of its essentializing tendencies but also because it lacks a power perspective (see de los Reyes, & Martinsson, 2005).

**An intersectional perspective on ethnic relations as power relations**

That the concept of ethnicity can be a social construction does not exclude the fact that one should study ethnic relations primarily as a power relation in which some groups have a superior and others a subordinated position. Actually, one might ask whether an intersectional perspective that combines class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc. would not be a better starting point for analysing power relations surrounding ethnic relations and possibilities for integration than the approaches that emphasize cultural characteristics. Such an intersectional perspective would study the points of intersection between different power relations such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. from a power perspective (de los
Reyes, 2005). This means that one must identify and analyse the different forms of power relations that interact and construct the living conditions for ethnic minorities. This does not mean that the above dimensions will always all be of equal significance when analysing the individual’s willingness and ability to be integrated into society. It is about selecting the appropriate categories and justifying them in relation to the context, rather than explaining everything only in terms of an ethnic perspective. With an intersectional perspective that analyses various power structures such as class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, disability, etc., one can also study the complexity of discrimination (de Los Reyes, 2005).

Key concepts in analysing ethnic relations from the perspective of power will be discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Within the framework of this perspective, the majority society’s attitudes can also be a part of the problem, contributing to the exclusion and segregation of ethnic minorities and hindering their participation and integration in society. From a power perspective, ethnic relations – like class, age and gender relations – are generally part of a social stratification based not only on a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also on a hierarchical power relationship in which ethnic minorities usually are inferior and ethnic majorities superior (Anthias, & Yuval-Davis, 1993).

In the wider context, ethnic relations are based on power and status, rather than a question of identity determined by the particular characteristics of various ethnic groups. The social exclusion and discrimination in Sweden that many people of non-Swedish ethnic background experience can lead some of them ending up outside of society and as marginalized. Categorization of people as ‘immigrants’ can contribute to having a negative image of themselves or the new country and thereby reinforce this feeling of marginalization. Therefore, ethnic groups’ power and status, participation and representation are some of the important elements that should be addressed to shed light on ethnic relations and on the idea of the ‘multicultural society’ and what
it means (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008). Sweden has previously been a country with relative homogeneous group of citizens and with limited number of immigrants. This can be one of the causes that explain why a one-sided cultural adaptation was the basis of Sweden's integration policy. Because of the great immigration during several decades Sweden has today transformed into an immigrant country with a heterogeneous communities where the conditions of integration now is recognition of the ethnic multiplicity and the need for respect for diversity and ethnic pluralistic society. Therefore the integration policy have to change from culture adaption into how we can increase an individual's participation and combat discrimination and exclusion.

I believe that a power perspective can increase our understanding of how exclusion mechanisms and discrimination maintain ethnicity and ethnic boundaries as a category of stratification. As previously mentioned, ethnic identifications are not static phenomena. Instead, this should primarily be seen as evolving phenomena that may be affected by the individual's and the ethnic group's status and degree of power, both at the national and global level, as well as by other factors such as education, class background, gender, age, length of stay in the country, the majority society’s integration policy, and degree of participation in society. Below I present a variety of perspectives that can explain in more detail the vulnerable situation of foreign-born persons.

**Different perspectives on the vulnerability and segregation of foreign-born persons**

This section describes three factors that explain why ethnic minorities in Sweden have worse socio-economic conditions than Swedes: 1) A culturally conditioned perspective that stresses cultural differences and a lack of cultural competence; 2) A class-based perspective in which generally the ethnic minority have poorer health, a lower position in the labour market, and worse housing conditions; 3) The intersectional
theory of ethnic discrimination that emphasizes the role of exclusion mechanisms in explaining the marginalized status of foreign-born persons in Sweden.

Cultural characteristics and their impact on the vulnerability of foreign-born persons

Some researchers seek to explain the marginalization, isolation, and segregation of foreign-born people, as well as many of the social problems within their ‘cultural characteristics’ in terms of Swedish norms and culture (see Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 2005; Sjögren, 2003). They argue that migrating from a non-individualistic society to an individualistic society like Sweden creates problems and negatively affects the health, welfare, and integration of foreign-born born persons (Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 2005). Some researchers (Wikström, 2009) even emphasize the phenomenon of voluntary segregation that is rooted in the need to seek out people with similar cultural backgrounds. This means that people with the same ethnic ancestry and similar languages and their ethnic identity.

From this perspective, this stress that cultural differences as well as their lack of language skills and understanding of Swedish norms, laws, and rules may hinder opportunities for integration and reduce access to the labour market and welfare system. One problem with treating ‘cultural characteristics’ and a lack of ‘cultural competence’ as the main explanations of the marginalization and exclusion of foreign-born persons is that it ignores the fact that social institutions and norms are not neutral when it comes to ethnic factors (Mattsson, 2010).

It can hardly be questioned that cultural characteristics do have some bearing on ‘voluntary segregation’ and the experience of immigration. The findings reported on residential segregation may indicate that the problem is a class issue rather than an ethnic one. Nordström and Åslund (2010) furthermore refer to research that has focused on the
effects of ethnic enclaves, that is, proximity to fellow countrymen. It is
this form of segregation that is expected to have positive effects. In this
way, ‘voluntary segregation’, may primarily be a class-related problem
rather than a culturally conditioned phenomenon. These studies show
that the networks created between compatriots facilitate their entry into
the labour market (Nordström, & Åslund, 2010).

Seeking out one’s fellow countryman may be a result of an exclusion
mechanism by which many foreign born people find it difficult to
become part of the community, and feel themselves held at a distance by
the majority population; hence they associate with people with similar
status and conditions as themselves (Ramberg, & Pripp, 2002).

Socio-economic background and its impact for vulnerability of foreign-
born persons

In this perspective, one views the ethnic divide as more a question of a
class divide than of cultural characteristics (see Socialstyrelsen, 2010).
Immigrants’ lower degree of integration, and their vulnerability and
reduced welfare in Sweden are considered to actually be a class issue.
That is to say, the vulnerability of foreign-born persons as well as their
marginalization and difficulties integrating can be explained by their
having lower socio-economic status and fewer qualifications, and having
lived a shorter period of time in the country (Regeringskansliet, 2011).
It is believed that segregation and isolation are primarily a result of the
class divisions that, especially during an economic downturn, grow wider.
It is furthermore claimed that the immigrant communities generally
have a worse situation in society because the majority of foreign-born
persons have a lower class position than other residents. In other words,
the problem is that class divisions acquired ‘colour’ in the sense that the
majority of the underclass belong to ethnic minorities. There is certainly
much to this. It is clear that immigrants’ socio-economic background
and current position in society affect their experience of immigration.
and degree of integration (Darvishpour, 2004).

A new report from the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2010) on housing segregation shows that the individual socio-economic factors are more significant for vulnerability than the residential area as such. The report compared young people who grew up in an affluent area with young people, who grew up in a resource-poor area, or an area with a large concentration of native Swedes, with neighbourhoods dominated by various immigrant groups to ascertain the difference in living standards. The report focused on mental illness, crime, employment, education, and difficulties earning a living. The results showed that in itself the housing area had a minimal impact on mental illness. Criminality was more prevalent among those who grew up in a resource-poor immigrant-dense area, but when controlling for socio-economic factors, the difference was found to be very small. Youth unemployment did not appear to be affected by residential area either (Socialstyrelsen, 2010).

Studies (see Nordström, & Åslund, 2010) show that low-skilled refugees and immigrants improve their chances of getting a job, if they live near fellow countrymen. Living near compatriots may also have a positive effect on low-skilled workers’ wages. How well individuals do in the labour market, for example, depends mainly on their qualifications and experience rather than the ethnic composition of the neighbours (Nordström, & Åslund, 2010; Socialstyrelsen, 2010). When it comes to the prevalence of welfare benefits, there were many more people in the resource-poor immigrant areas who had been recipients of such income support (Socialstyrelsen, 2010).

**Discrimination and its impact and on the vulnerability of foreign-born persons**

Today an increasing number of researchers consider social exclusion to be one of the main causes and consequences of hierarchical ethnic
relations in Sweden and other European countries (see Schierup, 2008; de los Reyes, & Kamali, 2005)

More recent research in Sweden has found that the marginalization of foreign-born persons or children of foreign-born parents may be a result of the discrimination that is often directed against persons who are considered to deviate from ‘Swedishness’ (de los Reyes, 2008). Having a foreign surname, skin colour, clothing, and accent causes many people, whether they have migrated or not, to be exposed to daily harassment and discrimination. Government commissions have found that entering the labour market and working life is much more difficult for immigrants than for Swedish-born people with the same abilities (de los Reyes, 2008: SOU 2006:59, SOU 2005:56). The Swedish labour market is far from being open to all, and ethnic discrimination may be a reason for the higher unemployment among foreign-born persons (Arai et al., 1999). A study (Carlsson, & Rooth, 2007) shows that the likelihood of job seekers with Arabic-sounding names being called to a job interview is 50 percent lower than for applicants with Swedish-sounding names. Other studies show that precarious terms of employment, temporary employment, and unregulated working conditions are over-represented among foreign-born workers (de los Reyes, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, studies of the labour market conducted during the last decade show that the ethnic divide and inequality between native-born and foreign born persons remains, even when controlling for socio-economic factors such as education, experience, and human capital (see de los Reyes, 2008; Groglopo, & Ahlberg, 2006; Kamali, 2006; Neergaard, 2006; SOU 2006:59; SOU 2005:56). With regard to discrimination in the welfare system, several government commissions have found what can be described as the border of the welfare regime. In the borderland, ethnic minorities are treated differently. This is a fundamental paradox of the Swedish welfare model (de los Reyes, 2006; SOU 2001:79). Sweden’s welfare regime is based on aspirations to
achieve higher living standards and equality, while the report’s results (SOU 2001:79) indicate clear tendencies toward segregation and exclusion, as well as the existence of structural discrimination and an ethnicization of poverty (de los Reyes, 2006). This is despite the fact that the general welfare system’s aim has been to reduce social and economic inequalities and provide equal opportunities for all. The report suggests that in reality the welfare system is selective, conditional, and even helps to cement the structural inequalities in society (de los Reyes, 2006; SOU 2001:79). Because the design of the social security system is based on a scenario with full employment, increased unemployment and insecure working conditions have contributed to transferring labour discrimination to the welfare sector (de los Reyes, 2006; SOU 2001:79). The report reveals processes inside and outside the welfare system, that by categorizing, stigmatizing, and demonizing certain people or groups creates a system where social and economic rights are reserved for some and are conditional for others. The results of these investigations show that discrimination in the welfare sector manifests itself at structural, institutional, and individual levels and is perpetuated by the discourses of ‘cultural specificity’ and discriminatory practices in various contexts within the welfare sector (de los Reyes, 2006; SOU 2001:79).

An interesting aspect of this question that has been attracting growing attention recently is whether this discrimination is composed of individual actions and occurrences that should be interpreted as deviant behaviour, or whether discrimination is built into social structures. ‘Structural discrimination’ means that certain rules, norms, attitudes, and behaviours found in organizations and other social structures systematically discriminate against certain groups of people.

Integration process and the three perspectives

When it comes to the integration process, it is shaped by interaction between one’s own actions and how one is treated by the majority
culture. This process is different for different individuals depending on age at immigration, gender, educational level, social class, how much time has passed since immigration, previous living conditions in the home country and present ones in the new country, cultural background, and individual factors. Moreover, culture is not an unchanging phenomenon but a continuous interplay between different individuals and groups. Contact with the new world, new experiences and knowledge, new norms and values, and so on all influence attitudes and ways of thinking. Generational conflicts between younger and older immigrants can sometimes be greater than the cultural differences between a young immigrant and young native Swedish (see Westin, 2003; Ålund, 1997). Studies show that even among the so-called ‘second generation immigrant’ is segregation and marginalizing extensive. This desires the fact that they have mastered the Swedish language and have a cultural adaptability to Swedish norms and rules that are significantly larger than their parents (Darvishpour, 2008; Westin, 2003; Ålund, 1997).

The problem is that the theory, that emphasizes cultural differences and their importance for integration, interprets integration primarily as a result of cultural adaptation rather than of an increased degree of participation. In this cultural perspective, it is ‘they’ who are the problem and ‘they’ who should be helped by the ethnic majority to adapt and be integrated into the prevailing norms and values of society. This theory offers a minority-oriented integration in which immigrants’ cultural adaptation is a measure of integration. Integration or social cohesion can also be interpreted primarily as a class issue rather than an ethnic issue. Nevertheless, several studies confirm that ethnic disparities persist even when comparing groups with equivalent training, work experience, age, or gender (Regeringskansliet, 2011; de los Reyes, 2008; SOU 2006:59; SOU 2005:56; Kamali, 2005). The statistical data presented in an earlier section in this chapter also show that socio-economic conditions are of great importance for degree of participation and integration. But when
controlling the socio-economic variable, the same statistics also show that immigrant groups are worse off according to many measures, such as ill health, working conditions, rate of employment, etc. Moreover, one can ask whether ethnic discrimination further increases class divisions between the majority community and ethnic minorities. Discrimination was formerly seen as a deviant phenomenon, an increasing number of investigations today treat (de los Reyes, & Kamali, 2005; de los Reyes, 2008; SOU 2006:59; SOU 2005:56). The point of this perspective is that it shifts the focus away from the ethnic minorities, who have been seen as being responsible for their exclusion, and looks instead at the mainstream community, which holds a position of power and thus creates the framework for ethnic minorities’ actions. Another interesting aspect that has attracted attention is that discrimination should be described from the standpoint of those who have experienced it, and not in terms of the act itself or from the perspective of the actor. The difference is that when starting with those who practise discrimination, the discussion gets stuck in the motive for the discrimination and/or whether or not it was intentional; whereas starting from the individual’s experiences of discrimination focuses instead on the consequences of discrimination (de los Reyes, 2008). Applying the perspective of structural discrimination to ethnic relations implies that integration issues, the welfare system, and even social work should be based on an anti-discrimination perspective in order to challenge social structures (Mattsson, 2010; Thompson, 2006).

In fact, it is not only ethnic discrimination that prevents integration into society, but also all forms of discrimination and exclusionary mechanisms that enhance social inequalities based on class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc. The individual’s position and the degree of integration in society therefore should be studied from an intersectional perspective that analyzes the various power structures that interact or collide with each other and determine the individual’s
position and the degree of integration.

The question is whether today’s integration policy serves to reduce ethnic inequality and discrimination, or actually contributes to maintaining inequality.

Integration policy in Sweden: From assimilation to multiculturalism

From the end of World War II until the early 1970s, labour immigration to Sweden and many other countries increased, as a result of economic growth. At first the mainstream community believed that most foreign-born inhabitants of the country were labour migrants. They were regarded as ‘guest workers’ who were in Sweden ‘temporarily’ and would leave the country, when the labour shortage ended. People even used the expressions ‘foreigner’ or ‘stranger’, emphasizing that ‘they’ do not belong to ‘us’ (Allwood, & Franzen, 2000). The concept has been replaced by the word ‘immigrant’, which carried a double message. On the one hand, it meant that society modestly began to recognize that the group comprised a part of the country’s population of residents and citizens. On the other hand, society wanted to accentuate that they are ‘non-Swedish’ and in many respects differ from the ethnic Swedish population (Allwood, & Franzen, 2000). For this reason various policies were developed to ‘integrate’ immigrants into the country economically, socially, and culturally. In this way, the adaptation of ‘immigrants’ was the dominant discourse of integration policy for a long time (Johansson, 2008). Society has scarcely problematized the concept of integration, or wondered ‘who’ should integrate ‘whom’ into ‘what’? A policy of assimilation was officially pursued in Sweden until the mid-1970s. It failed because many foreign-born persons lacked the ‘will’ or ‘requisite ability’ to assimilate in their new country (Södergran, 2000).

An assimilation policy implies that immigrant groups and ethnic minorities are expected to abandon their own ethnic identities in order to assimilate to the majority population’s culture and norms. The possibility
for immigrant groups to retain their homeland’s culture, language, values, and sometimes religion is hence reduced by public measures.

Several researchers (Mattsson, 2010; de los Reyes, & Kamali, 2005; Castles, & Miller, 2009; Cornell, 2007) believe that a culturally conditioned perspective on ethnicity and hence assimilation policy is rooted in a colonial way of thinking and can be connected with the new racist discourse (so-called cultural racism). Other researchers, however, (Friedman, & Friedman, 2006) believe that the failure of assimilation policies should be linked to the economic recession that followed the oil crisis of 1973–1974. The authors argue that during periods of hegemonic expansion and economic growth there is tendency for people to identify with modernism and progress, and to distance themselves from traditions and culturally specific identities. But with hegemonic decline, the attractive power of modernity is weakened because the future seems uncertain and unstable. People then search for their original identities and cultural characteristics (Friedman, & Friedman, 2006). Friedman and Friedman also believe that a weakening of the nation state and its ideology together with a lack of integration paves the way for multi-ethnic ideas that, according to the authors, increase the risk of ethnic identification and disintegration. Paradoxically, Friedman and Friedman (2006) acknowledge that it is rather the French model, which upholds national integrity and assimilation policies that has led to increased conflicts between the government and immigrant groups. Nevertheless, the authors seek an explanation in the country’s economic deterioration and social exclusion (Friedman, & Friedman, 2006, p. 73).

A modest multicultural integration policy

In Sweden, the failure of assimilation policies led to the setting up of an immigration commission. The final report of the commission became the basis for the government bill Concerning Guidelines for Immigrants and Minorities Policy (1975:26). The immigration commission formulated
the following goals for Swedish policy on immigrants and minorities: equality, free choice, and collaboration. The goal of equality states that ‘immigrants shall have the same opportunities, rights, and obligations as the rest of the population’ (Government Bill, 1975:26). The goal of free choice requires society to assist ‘members of linguistic minorities’ and give them the opportunity to ‘choose the degree to which they want to maintain and develop their original cultural and linguistic identity’ (Johansson, 2008). The third goal, collaboration, is intended to promote cooperation between immigrant and minority groups and the majority population. This collaboration should be based on ‘mutual tolerance and solidarity between immigrants and the indigenous population’ (Government Bill, 1975:26). The parliamentary decision signalled a distancing from the previous concept of assimilation, by which immigrants were expected to leave behind their own language and culture in order to become as ‘Swedish’ as possible (Södergran, 2000). These goals were interpreted as an expression of a multicultural approach and as enabling immigrants to become equals of the indigenous population without necessarily abandoning their cultural distinctiveness. The intention was to increase tolerance and respect for ‘the other’ in a multicultural Sweden (Johansson, 2008).

While the policy of assimilation views cultural diversity as the main barrier to integration, the new policy is based on the idea that cultural characteristics should be respected and not be seen as an obstacle to integration. This policy involves a positive attitude towards cultural diversity and seeks greater tolerance of differences. There is however research (SOU 2005:56) suggesting that because of this policy, the debate about Swedish immigration policy remains focused on cultural issues rather than on social factors such as foreign-born persons’ degree of participation, health and welfare, education, and employment and housing situation. This is despite the fact that research indicates that social issues are crucial for integration (Darvishpour, & Westin, 2008;
Emphasizing cultural aspects can often lead to a focus on immigrants as a problem and can hardly call the majority society’s attitudes in question. At best, immigration policies are perceived almost as a kind of development aid. This means that Sweden would be providing aid to ‘The Others’ (SOU 2005: 56; SOU 2005: 41).

As mentioned earlier, the increased immigration has led to Sweden being transformed into one of the largest immigrant nations in Europe today. This situation requires a different form of integration policies that counteract segregation and marginalisation, which is a widespread problem among foreign-born. While during the 1980s and 1990s, the gap between foreign- and native-born persons was widened in many respects, at least in terms of rate of employment. Immigration policies were increasingly questioned in the late 1990s, and a new policy was drafted to replace it. In the bill Sweden, the Future, and Diversity - From Immigrant Policy to Integration Policy (1997/98: 16), the government proposed a new goal and orientation of integration policy, namely:

The goals of integration policy should be equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all regardless of ethnic or cultural background; a community based on society’s diversity; and social development that is characterized by mutual respect and tolerance and that everyone, regardless of background, would be involved in and jointly responsible for. Society’s ethnic and cultural diversity should be taken as the overall starting point for policy formulation and implementation in all areas and levels of society (SOU 2005: 56, p. 112).

This new policy has meant that immigration is now interpreted as a natural feature of society and highlights that Sweden is a society of ethnic and cultural diversity. Public authorities have also abandoned the idea of viewing immigrants as a homogeneous group. Thus, the focus has shifted from group membership to individual needs. The characteristic
feature of the new integration policy, in contrast to an immigrant policy, is that special measures directed towards ‘immigrants’ would no longer exist; instead immigrants would only be subject to general measures. The idea was to avoid aiming interventions at those, who had migrated based on their ‘ethnicity’ and ‘cultural background’. By focusing on people’s cultural background, society itself contributes to creating structures that further segregation, such as an ‘us and them mentality’. It was argued that immigrant policies had caused ‘being an immigrant’ to be associated with ‘being different’ (SOU 2005:56). Many studies, however, have shown that the new integration policy has not led to any major changes (see Johansson, 2008; de los Reyes, & Kamali, 2005; SOU 2005:56). Hence there is a serious risk that being an immigrant will continue to be associated with being different and excluded.

Multiculturalism, transnational cultures, and an anti-discrimination perspective

For a long time there was an established belief that the integration issue mainly concerned how ‘immigrants’ should be integrated into Swedish society. It was believed that society was composed of two groups with different characteristics, namely ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’. The former were perceived as an integrated group that represents social norms, while the latter were unintegrated and different. For this reason, integration issues only concerned how mainstream society could help immigrant groups to become the same as ‘Swedes’, that is, to adopt similar standards and values. In this way, the integration question was reduced to a special policy for ‘the others’, while in fact it is about a redistribution of social resources for the sake of cohesion (Kamali, 2006). The question is whether one also must begin to speak of integrating Swedes into a multiethnic society, instead of just integrating immigrants into Swedish society. The problem is that this approach ignores that today’s Sweden, with its multiethnic population, requires a different attitude, a different
approach and a policy based on mutual integration and respect for diversity, where even the majority of ethnic groups should adapt to the new Sweden, a multiethnic nation.

The image of cultural diversity as determining ethnic boundaries has now been questioned from several quarters. In the early 1990s, researchers began to pay attention to the fact that foreign born people were able to maintain contacts with their countries of origin and families in a way that meant that theories of cultural characteristics became increasingly problematic in order to explain immigrants’ integration processes. The term ‘trans nationalism’ was used to describe how people develop and maintain relationships and activities in several national environments (Brunnberg, Borg, & Fridström, 2011). Researchers have found that cultural identities are flexible construction and those variations of identities are depending on changes in social circumstances. In this way cultural identities are not only a result of acculturation (Brunnberg, Borg, & Fridström, 2011).

For example, some researchers (Feiler, 2010) are speaking of transnational culture that also can be a transnational family culture with parents and children living in different countries like unaccompanied children living in Sweden or children left behind when parents are coming on their own (see Brunnberg, Borg, & Fridström, 2011). Transnationalism has to some extent replaced the nation and majority society with thinking about globalisation even within the nuclear family. Parents that for different reasons have been separated from their children they can practice ‘skypeparenting’ (Fridström, Aytar, & Brunnberg, 2011 p. 14). During the 1990s, researchers began noticing new and changing patterns among immigrants and immigrant communities. New studies showed that many people who had immigrated continued to maintain continuous and close contact with several home countries and with compatriots in other countries (Feiler, 2010). Among other things, it was noticed that migrants travel increasingly often to their country of origin,
as well as visit fellow countrymen in other countries and participate in various networks spanning multiple nations. An increase in economic transactions, such as remittances and gifts to relatives back home, and an expanding ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’ with international dimensions were also part of this development. Explaining this trend, the term transnationalism is increasingly used (Feiler, 2010). This development is a result, among other things, of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and increasing mobility, as well as the shrinking role of the nation-state, the breakthrough of the Internet and emergence of a network society, and overall ethnic diversity.

Applying this new transnational perspective to today’s Sweden involves a shift in focus from nationalistic and majority-dominated ideas, which define immigrants and minorities in terms of their failures and the ‘threat’ they pose to the domestic settled majority, to a transnational approach that recognizes the different diaspora groups’ own motivations and scope of action. The transnational cultures are challenging both the Swedish national cultural heritage and contemporary cultural segregation (Feiler, 2010). Thus, there is a tension between the nation-state ideology that pervades the Swedish welfare state and the trend towards transnational, transcultural, cross-cultural, and ethnic diversity, as well as an ethnically plural society. This trend is a distinctive characteristic of modern Sweden. To avoid ethnocentrism, intolerance towards differences, and a one-sided assimilation policy, there is a growing emphasis on the value of multiculturalism, cross-cultural encounters, or transnational culture in combating racism (without race) in Sweden.

Studies of ethnic relations cannot solely be reduced to an analysis of cultural differences or cultural blending between different ethnic groups. Emphasizing multiculturalism in order to replace the nation-state ideology will not necessarily solve the problem of segregation and isolation. ‘Segregated integration’ may in fact be a result of multicultural and transnational society, as it does not place enough importance on
participation as the key measure of integration (Kamali, 2006). Research (Feiler, 2010) has shown that when residential segregation and income disparities increase in society, it is mainly children and adolescents, as well as young adults that are affected. And in fact it is among people under 18 years of age that the ethnic-cultural residential segregation most clearly can be seen. Today, nearly half of all children and adolescents with non-western backgrounds are concentrated in ten Swedish municipalities (Feiler, 2010). It is furthermore within the framework of this housing segregation, which is also reflected in the labour market, that the new transnational Sweden has taken shape.

As previously mentioned, the focus on cultural characteristics may be problematic to explain segregated integration. Even a change in attitude and policy that seeks to increased tolerance of multicultures can not solve the problem of the segregated integration. The multicultural model is unfortunately still culturally determined and tends to depict ethnic groups as homogenous. While in fact there are a variety of collective and individual factors, such as people’s socio-economic background and childhood circumstances, age, gender, position in the new country, length of stay, social networking, and interaction with the surroundings, that also may affect cultural conceptions and generate a wide variety of cultural diversity within one and the same ethnic group (de los Reyes, & Martinsson, 2005). That Sweden abandoned its assimilation policy and adopted a multi-cultural model does not seem to have had much of an effect, neither having put an end to segregation nor to the marginalization of ethnic minorities. In this multicultural context, even Swedish democracy operates in the field of tension between a heterogeneous population and ongoing ideals of a culturally homogeneous population. Hence the multicultural society remains empty words as long as people’s opportunities in life largely depend on their ethnicity. As Hellgren (2008) points out, the question is whether Sweden can be described in terms of a mono-culturalist multicultural
society rather than a multiculturalist multicultural society.

A state based on the ‘ethnic’ concept of the nation excludes other minorities who belong to different ethnic groups. In it, all citizens share the same ethnicity. A state based on a ‘civic’ concept of the nation includes all inhabitants – including those belonging to ethnic minorities – in its integration project. In this state, people’s integration into a civic community is not dependent on their ethnicity (Hellgren, 2008).

We need to think about how the relationship between state or nation, on the one hand, and migration and integration policies, on the other, has so far been framed in the Swedish context, and both in the past and present has created ideas of ‘us and them’ and exclusion. As mentioned earlier, an intersectional perspective that focuses on power relations and inequality in studying ethnic relations can shift the focus and provide better opportunities to increase equality and participation among vulnerable groups of foreign origin in Sweden. To achieve the objective of ‘equal rights and equal opportunities’ we should change the focus from the minorities’ characteristics to the majority society’s resource allocation policy. In this way the starting point and main focus should be anti-discrimination policy, something to which the most recent commissions investigating power relations have begun to pay attention (see de los Reyes, 2006; SOU 2006:59, SOU 2005:56, SOU 2005: 41). Experiences in social work (see Mattsson, 2010; Thompson, 2006) also suggest that an anti-discrimination perspective, due to its norm-critical approach, provides a better basis for working with vulnerable groups in society. Therefore, an intersectional perspective that focuses on studying the different exclusion mechanisms become central to antidiskrimination policy.

Afterword

Statistics about the situation for residents of foreign origin in Sweden, in terms of housing conditions, work, health, education, etc., paint a
picture of a large ethnic gap in Sweden. People of foreign descent have worse socio-economic conditions than native-born persons. I mean that the Swedish welfare state in many ways has succeeded in reducing inequalities between people but when it comes to the ethnic dimension, however the problem in a great extent remains.

In this chapter, I have discussed the problems of culturally-defined explanations. These assume that the greater the cultural difference between foreign-born persons on the one hand, and native-born persons with Swedish norms and rules on the other, the more the former will lack cultural competence and a desire to integrate.

The text also argues that a solely class-based perspective, which assumes that integration, depends on immigrant groups’ socio-economic background and circumstances can just partly explain why they are more segregated and have less status. Statistical data also suggest that individuals with the same socio-economic background exhibit differences when it comes to their situation in the labour market, their health, etc.

This means that a one-dimensional class perspective can hardly explain the increased segregation and exclusion of foreign born citizens. I have also argued that the focus on cultural characteristics hardly can explain the segregation of foreign born citizens in Sweden. It does not mean that cultural characteristics not have any impact on motivation and the desire for integration. My emphasis is however on that attitudes and motives of groups that have a weak position in society can hardly be decisive for the integration. It is the integration policy and the current power structure that should be studied to know which the opportunities for integration will increase.

By means of an intersectional point of view I have attempted to put forward the theory of structural discrimination as describing a central mechanism of exclusion of ethnic minorities. It is a key factor for explaining social exclusion among immigrants in Sweden.

The point of the theory of structural discrimination is that it does
not interpret discrimination as deviant behaviour or as a random or merely statistical phenomenon, but emphasizes the structural barriers that oppose ethnic equality. I argue that just as the gender regime is based on a dichotomization of male/female and a hierarchical structure, the ethnic regime is also based on a dichotomization between ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities. In this regime, ethnic majorities are the norm and have a superior position, while ethnic minorities are the ‘other’ and have a subordinate position. It is therefore important to take into account exclusionary mechanisms such as ‘ethnosociality’, prejudice, stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, otherization, ethnicization, and an ‘us and them’ mentality. These concepts are important for understanding the ethnic divide in the country.

Although ethnic discrimination and structural barriers are very significant for segregation and isolation, one could ask how some people of foreign origin have managed to defy the structural barriers and improve their position in society. If the individual’s motives, intentions, and qualities have any impact on integration, is there not a danger that theories which only emphasize structural discrimination will underestimate the extent to which interaction between the individual and the environment may lead to a greater variety of living conditions among different groups of people in differing circumstances? For example, one cannot deny that the highly educated groups are more likely to integrate into society than low-skilled immigrants, and it can hardly be questioned that the degree of integration ultimately depends on the interplay between the majority society’s actions and the minority’s conditions. In this case, the question is: Which of these two factors is crucial to integration? In fact, from an ethnicity perspective, it is the majority community that occupies the position of power and can reallocate resources. As mentioned earlier, the point of emphasizing exclusion mechanisms and discrimination is to shift the focus from individual actions to structural conditions that put certain people at a disadvantage because of their particular characteristics. An
active anti-discrimination policy may therefore be of great importance in encouraging foreign-born people to improve their motivation, skills, and desire to integrate, and thus reduce ethnic inequalities.


on immigration.] Stockholm: Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet.


