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Understanding racism in Finland

**A qualitative study on social workers'
interpretations of racism**

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Abstract

The thesis examines Finnish social workers' understandings of racism. The research task is to view how professionals understand racism as a phenomenon, how they perceive social work's role in relation to racialization and racism and how they understand the complex relationship between race and gender in the Nordic context. The data consists of two focus group interviews and three in-depth interviews conducted with child welfare professionals. Qualitative content analysis is used as an analysis method.

Anti-racist social work and intersectionality are presented as a theoretical framework in the thesis. Anti-racist social work is part of the tradition of anti-oppressive theory, where societal power structures are raised to the centre of attention. Race is understood as a socially constructed power hierarchy enabling privileged and oppressed positions. The concept of intersectionality refers to the similar nature of all power structures, where all forms of oppression are understood as mutually constructed.

The findings suggest that racism is infrequently recognized in social work practices. The dominant approach in Finland emphasizes cultural competence, while the importance of anti-racism remains scarce. The gender equality discourse is especially strong in relation to immigration. Immigrant women are often portrayed as victims of their culture, and gendered violence is explained through culture. The thesis suggests that racism is rarely accounted as a cause when viewing problems in racialized families. Combining anti-racism and intersectionality while reinforcing critical reflection on social workers' stance and privileges is proposed as a method for improving social work practice.

Keywords: institutional racism, racialization, anti-racist social work, intersectionality, culture, culturalization, privilege.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why study racism?

Recently, Finland has received undesired media publicity for being the most racist country in Western Europe. The headlines were based on an EU-study (EU-Midis II 2018), in which Finland topped the list regarding the perceived racial discrimination and harassment against people with sub-Saharan African origins. At the same time, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East has increased the number of asylum seekers, and the rise of the Islamic state has affected many countries and turned the ideology in a more violent and patriarchal direction. Islamophobia has been increasing all over Europe and it is often reasoned with problems in women's rights in Islam. This development coincides with the rise of the far-right movements and narrowing attitudes towards immigration. (Dominelli 2017, 4–5.) Thus, racism remains as one societally significant theme directly affecting social work practice.

The increased number of immigrants and the changing attitudes towards immigration are also visible in the field of child welfare in Finland, where I have worked during the past few years. Our clientele consists increasingly of immigrants and other racialized groups. My interest in the topic of racism arises from my observations and discussions I have had with both the service users and colleagues. Many of the service users I have worked with have expressed experiences of racist treatment in social services and child welfare. I have observed cultural prejudices within social workers, which has encouraged me to reflect on our practices. My pre-understanding is that we often fail to see the processes of racialization in the encounters with the service users, hence we fail to recognize the importance of actively working to deconstruct racist structures and stereotypes.

The understanding of the significance of racism in the Nordic societies vary greatly. Racism is not simply about skin colour or ethnic background anymore, although these factors have not totally lost their significance either. The current racism can be understood more in relation to culture and religion, and it has been named as new racism (Puuronen 2011), cultural racism (Dominelli 2017) or xenophobia (Fekete 2001). These changes and the new forms of racism seem to have led to a situation, where racism can be more difficult to recognize, because racism covers more than the ideology of hierarchy of races.

The premises of my thesis are rooted in the tradition of critical social work, which seeks to challenge inequality, marginalization and oppressive practices by increasing structural understanding

of inequality (Mattsson 2014, 8). The tradition of critical social work aims to deconstruct power relations related to race, gender and class. It can be understood as active political action dedicated to social, economic and cultural change towards increasing societal equality. In the context of social work, the goal is to demolish oppressive power structures. (MacKinnon 2009.) These oppressive power structures are often difficult to notice and hence reproduced in daily encounters in the institutional level.

This thesis leans towards an anti-racist approach. Anti-racism can be defined as including resistance towards all different forms of racism, as well as critical reflection towards one's own thinking and practice. A researcher aiming towards an anti-racist approach must be careful not to rebuild racist categories and needs to remain sensitive about one's own position. (Rastas 2005, 56–57.) As a white Finnish social work student, I have a privileged position in my own society in many aspects. I acknowledge that I have a very different view of racism compared to someone who has experienced racism themselves. Nonetheless, I find challenging racism and other societal power structures as one of our core tasks as social workers. As Lena Dominelli (2017) argues, white practitioners have a role in diminishing racism both on a wider societal level and also in social work practices.

With this thesis, I aim to contribute to the research of racism in Finland by focusing on the field of child welfare social work. I aim to create new knowledge of social worker's understandings of racism and its' connection to gender equality but also to stimulate critical discussion on the subject matter in the institutions included in this research. One of the objectives is to challenge the participating institutions and individuals in order to critically reflect on their understandings and practices. I am hoping, with this research, to take part in strengthening the approach of critical social work and anti-racist practice in Finland, to further improve the position and the services for the minority service users.

1.2 Research problem and research questions

The research problem stems from my personal experiences as a child welfare social worker, where I have observed the lack of discussion and reflection related to the issues of racialization and racism. My pre-understanding has been, that within Finnish social workers, racism is often bypassed as a problem for a few individuals. My pre-understandings are partly based on previous practice research I conducted in 2016 and 2017. Back then, I interviewed child welfare social workers in one office in Southern Finland. The main findings in my practice research were that racism is

mainly understood in terms of *old racism*, and that individual explanations of racism were dominant rather than structural ones. (Nurmi 2017.) As I find the topic of racism both relevant and current, I wanted to study it further in my master's thesis. In this thesis, I have been able to expand my data collection to several workplaces and also included social workers from a foster care unit.

The research task is to study how Finnish child welfare social workers perceive racism and what meanings they give to racism in their work with service users. I do not intend to describe what kind of racism the service users are experiencing, and I have not limited the study to cover specific racialized groups or specific types of racism. I am interested especially in social workers' understandings, because they affect directly the practices of social work. I am also interested in the complicated relationship between racism and gender equality in the Nordic context. Gender seems an impossible factor to bypass when studying racism because the current discussions on cultural differences are entangled with the questions of gender equality (eg. Keskinen 2012; Anis 2012; Vuori 2009). The research questions are:

1) How do social workers understand racism, racialization and social work's role in relation to these processes?

2) How do social workers understand the relationship between race and gender?

The aim of this thesis is to study and create new knowledge of the processes of racialization and racism, as well as their connection to gender issues. Besides creating new knowledge, it also aims to generate discussion of these issues in the field of social work to improve social workers' abilities to work against practices of racism.

2 Theoretical framework and concepts

In this chapter, I briefly introduce the theoretical framework and main concepts used in this thesis. I start by discussing the concepts of race and ethnicity and try to reason why race remains an important analytical concept when studying racism. Secondly, I present a snapshot of different understandings of racism both historically and currently. Thirdly, I suggest intersectionality as a useful tool to view different power relations simultaneously and I discuss the complex relationship of race and gender in the Nordic context. Lastly, I introduce anti-racist social work as a theoretical approach for analysing and questioning the current practices in social work.

2.1 Race or ethnicity

The concept of race is not often used in the Nordic context, where we tend to talk about ethnicity instead. Thus, there is a need to clarify the different meanings of these concepts. Race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably in literature, even though there are differences in the definitions. I will briefly present some of the definitions and discuss the differences and similarities between these concepts.

Originally, racism refers to the concept of race, and to an idea that people belong to different racial groups which differ from each other in their capacities and cognitive skills. However, scientifically race does not exist, because there is more genetic variation within the groups than between the groups. All human beings belong to the same race – homo sapiens. (Puuronen 2011, 48–50.) Many academics have avoided using the concept of race because it is biologically incorrect and because it has been thought to belong to racist speech. Nonetheless, race does exist as a social construction affecting people's everyday lives. A Finnish scholar Vesa Puuronen (2011, 48–50) finds race as the main concept to understanding racial hierarchies and the processes of racialization. For the same reason, I will use the concept of race whenever it is essential to the subject matter.

Ethnicity is also a fluid concept used for various analytical and ideological purposes. Roger Brubaker (2002) questions the very notion of understanding ethnicity as a distinction between ethnic groups. He argues that instead of groups, we should consider ethnicities as categories. The difference between groups and categories refers to an idea that groups can easily be understood in essentialist terms which leads to seeing ethnic groups as coherent and natural. Instead, Brubaker suggests we should consider ethnicities as practical categories, narratives or discourses. The emphasis on categories, instead, allows us to consider ethnicities as processes, that are used for certain purposes. (Brubaker 2002, 167–172.) His notion connects ethnicity to the same discussion with race, where race is understood as a social category instead of a clear-cut group of individuals.

Richard Jenkins (2008) defines the basic social anthropological model of ethnicity as cultural differentiation, that is both internal in self-identification and external in the categorization of others. He argues that ethnicity is about shared meanings, but also produced and reproduced in interaction. (Jenkins 2008, 14.) Thomas Eriksen (1992, 3) suggests ethnicity to be used in a meaning of “the systematic and enduring social reproduction of basic classificatory differences between categories of people who perceive each other as being culturally discrete”. Further, he reminds that ethnicity is connected to both identity and politics. Ethnicity is used as a criterion for social stratification, which means ranking individuals based on their ethnicity. Thus, ethnicity is context based and

linked to the class structure and historical context of a given society. (Ibid 19.) In this sense, ethnic differences seem to be used similarly to racial differences. Congruently, Thomas Eriksen notices that in everyday language, ethnicity is used as a synonym for race relations. However, in social anthropology, ethnicity refers to the experienced group identity and to the experienced distance to other groups. (Eriksen 2002, 4.)

Yasmin Gunaratnam (2011) argues that even though race is usually understood in relation to biology, whereas the differences and kinship in ethnicity are founded in culture and religion, there are dense interrelations between these categories, and she admits using these concepts interchangeably. In reality, the meanings given to ethnicity are marked through race and biological characters. (Gunaratnam 2011, 4–6.) Ethnicity seems to be a concept perceived as a polite way to express difference to the majority ethnic group (Eriksen 2002, 4). Richard Jenkins (2008, 15) reminds us that ethnicity easily becomes a phenomenon that is only connected to *the other* and not ourselves. Even though we all have an *ethnicity*, people who get defined as *ethnic* are the racialized groups. In everyday language, whiteness or Finnishness is not defined as ethnicity, but ethnicity is something that differs from the norm. When we talk about ethnic restaurants or ethnic music, we do not refer to any ethnicity, but to something that becomes defined as exotic or different.

In the Nordic countries racial categorizations are often avoided and the official policies are based on colour-blind universalism. (Keskinen 2018). One possible explanation for refusing to use the concept of race is connected to its connotations to biological categories. Ethnicity is perhaps understood more as a social category, thus easier to use. However, similar issues are discussed in international literature despite the differences between the concepts of race and ethnicity. Like many scholars studying racism, I understand race as a necessary concept for being able to study racism as a power relation creating oppressed and privileged positions. However, I will use both race and ethnicity in the literature review, based on the used concepts in the original sources. Additionally, I use the concept of racialization to refer to different ethnic, cultural and religious differences that are used to divide people into categories, and which further on affect their societal positions. Even though the Nordic countries are often presented as equal societies, I find racism a pervasive and persistent phenomenon and an important issue to study in social work.

2.2 Racialization and racisms

There is a wide range of definitions for racism, and I present those that I find the most essential for my research. The most fundamental differences can be understood as twofold. The first aspect of

difference is linked to the idea of understanding racism as being solely connected to racial differences or further on to cultural or religious differences. The second aspect is connected to the differences in viewing racism as an individual or structural issue. An important issue to be understood is that these definitions are mostly not competing but rather complementary. Different racisms can exist simultaneously, and the chosen approaches guide the interpretations we make.

A Finnish scholar Vesa Puuronen (2011) makes a differentiation between *old racism*, which refers to an ideology based on biological racial hierarchy, and *new racism* based on ideas of cultural differences. Old racism is built on an idea of distinguishable human races, which differ from each other in capacities and cognitive skills. According to him, old biological racism has lost its significance and cultural racism is the new dominant form of racism, even though it is rarely recognized as racism. (Puuronen 2011, 56–57.) Similarly, Etienne Balibar (1988) argues that the ‘sociological’ signifier has replaced the ‘biological’ one while racism has altered from its’ origins. However, he also notes that cultural racism is not totally new, and that ‘racism without race’ has always existed, and presents anti-semitism as a prototype of old cultural racism. (Balibar 1988, 21–23.)

Despite the previous existence of culture as a premise for racism, it still seems reasonable to argue that culture has superseded biological race as a signifier for racism. In cultural racism, the hierarchies are not based on genetics but on culture. Non-western cultures are seen as backward, conservative and being in conflict with Western values. (Puuronen 2011, 56–58.) In cultural racism, cultures are interpreted through an evolutionary model, whereas Western culture is seen as advanced compared to non-Western cultures (Keskinen 2012, 300). Cultures are understood as uniform, stable and inter-generational instead of being seen as context related, interactive and ever-changing. (Eliassi 2015, 560).

Liz Fekete refers to the new form of racism as xeno-racism. Similar to cultural racism, xeno-racism is not restricted to racial differences, but it is defined by fear towards foreign cultures and it is targeted towards people who are seen as alien or as a threat. According to Fekete, xeno-racism concerns white and poor immigrant populations as well as those who are non-white. (Fekete 2001, 23–24.) Thus, she calls it non-colour-coded institutionalized racism (Fekete 2009, 2). This notion is connected to the intersectional approach, where different forms of oppression, such as race and class, are seen as interconnected.

The historicity of a given society affects the complicated way that racism appears, and which groups of people are subjected to racism. Race is also closely connected to gender, class and other societal hierarchies and is thus sometimes difficult to view on its own without simultaneously

looking at the intersectional approach to other hierarchies. An example of the intersectionality of race and class is the labour market. In many countries, the labour market is divided in accordance with ethnic and racial hierarchies so that even highly educated immigrants end up working in low-paid sectors and less valued professions, such as cleaners, assistant nurses or bus drivers. (Keskinen & Vuori 2012, 16). Class cannot be distinguished from race or ethnic background but instead race can be understood as a class position. In addition to racism, racialized groups face the same challenges and social problems as other 'lower' classes in society. (Erevelles & Minear 2010, 131–132.) Thus, we can argue that racism and classism often work hand in hand and co-constitute each other (Puuronen 2011, 26).

In this thesis, I sometimes refer to the privileged racial group as white people, even though some groups subjected to racialization and racism might be 'white'. Estonians, Russians and Sámi are examples of groups, which could be interpreted as 'white' but which experience racial discrimination in Finland (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind 2011; Puuronen 2011). Instead of referring to whiteness as a biological trait, I follow the understanding of whiteness as a social construction that privileges the individuals that are interpreted as belonging to the group of white people. According to Dominelli, racism has never simply been a matter of 'white' versus 'black', but a more complex phenomenon where racial relations are fluid and depend on the context. For example, one can be privileged by one's racial position in one context but oppressed in another. Also, racism is not only oppression implemented by the dominant group. In the same way that women can maintain sexist ideology and practices, non-white people can internalise white norms and reproduce racist ideology by favouring whiteness themselves (Dominelli 2017, 17).

Lena Dominelli (2017) divides racism into personal, cultural and institutional racism. Personal racism is practised by individuals and it appears in prejudices and attitudes. According to Dominelli, personal racism is the most recognized form of racism. However, focusing on the individual level allows people to think of racism as merely a problem relating to a few individuals. Dominelli uses the concepts of cultural and institutional racism to refer to more structural forms of racism. Cultural racism refers to values and norms that normalize white culture and *others* other cultures. White culture here refers to the dominant culture, to which other cultures are being compared to. Dominelli argues, as well as other scholars (Puuronen 2011; Keskinen 2012), that cultural racism is the currently dominant form of racism in our societies. Furthermore, all these different forms of racism reinforce and co-constitute each other in complex interactive processes. (Dominelli 2017, 18–23.)

Institutional racism covers the law, policies and professional routines that exclude certain groups of people, thus enabling racist practices at the institutional level. (Dominelli 2017, 18–23.) Institutional racism is embedded in the institutional practices, so it can be covert or unconscious. Robert Hill reminds us that institutional racism has to be defined through the outcome rather than intention, because often the people creating or implementing racist policies are unaware of it. (Hill 2004, 19.) The implicitness of institutional racism makes it difficult to detect and requires deep critical reflection from the practitioners.

Systemic racism is a concept that includes more familiar concepts of institutional and structural racism. “Systemic racism cannot be pinpointed to a person, who could be perceived as racist, but it is present as an unquestioned assumption within different structures” (Sardelic 2017, 141). Structural racism covers the societal structures, like the law, institutions and organizations that often unintentionally discriminate against the racialized individuals and groups. It normalizes the negative and often indirect treatment of minority groups. (Kamali 2009, 6.) Structural racism can also be understood as incorporating both institutional racism and wider aspects of racism embedded in other social structures (Thomann & Suyemoto 2018, 745). Masoud Kamali (2009, 6) notes that the theoretical difference between structural and institutional racism is not clear, thus these concepts are often used interchangeably. However, whether we use the concept of systemic, structural or institutional racism, the significance is that each of them provides an understanding that differs from the view of seeing racism as an issue located in the minds and acts of an individual.

Racialization is one of the key concepts in studying racism. Racialization refers to a process, where people are divided into categories based on different characters, and the differences between these groups are interpreted as societally significant. Practical racialization works in creating artificial groups for example in statistics, while ideological racialization includes practices where certain social problems are understood to be an integral part of certain racialized groups. (Puuronen 2011, 20–21.) Racialization works as a tool to create distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between the privileged group and the oppressed groups in society. While the ‘other’ group is racialized, the dominant group is de-racialized and seen as ‘normal’. (Dominelli 2017, 25.) Thus, we can see that the processes of racialization are based on dualism of categories and some racialized identities are favoured over other identities.

Racialization is connected to categorization, which is an essential part of understanding the world and other people. We use categorization to organize ‘messy’ things by naming them and sorting them into different categories. Based on these categories, we assume that we know how other

people, for example immigrants, are. (Juhila 2004, 21–24.) The categorization behind racialization is built on ethnicity, and explanations are drawn from ethnicity and culture rather than other societal positions. Racialization does not only concern ethnic background, but religion and culture are also aspects influencing categorization. Racialization works by creating artificial categories based on chosen characters. (Keskinen 2012, 202.) The processes of racialization can target cultural or religious groups and link them with different social problems, which then become part of the public image of the group (Puuronen 2011, 21–22). Many scholars have identified anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia as currently one of the most significant forms of racism (Fekete 2009; Puuronen 2011), even though Muslims are culturally and ethnically a very heterogeneous group. Through the processes of racialization, religion is constructed as the most significant character, and the image of Muslims becomes shaped through this simplified generalization.

One way to view racism is to understand it as a grammar, through which the social signification is made. Matts Trondman (2006) has studied the grammar around the concept of the immigrant in Sweden. He argues that the category of the immigrant is produced in connection with social problems, so that it becomes reduced to represent social problems. The concept of a grammar does not refer to linguistics, but to a shared meaning within a specific socio-historical context. He argues that this grammar both produces social problems and also prevents true social integration. Instead of race, he talks about the immigrant, and argues that in the Swedish context, it is the significant category. (Trondman 2006, 431, 444–446.) Keith Pringle (2010, 22–23) reminds us that even though the term ‘invandrare’, immigrant, is widely used in the Swedish context even of people who are born in Sweden – the so-called second-generation immigrants – it is considered unacceptable for example in the UK. In the same manner, the term immigrant is used in a seemingly neutral manner in Finland, but it can be argued to include negative connotations. This is an interesting notion in relation to the abovementioned colour-blindness and the avoidance of racial categories in the Nordic context. Instead, it seems that the category of the immigrant can be racialized, but in more subtle ways.

We can notice racialization at work with both old racism and new cultural racism. The difference is whether the categories are created based on the idea of racial differences, or cultural differences. Later on in the analysis chapter, I will present Finnish social workers’ understandings of racism in relation to these different forms of racism. I am willing to find out if structural forms of racism are recognized in addition to personal racism, and how the social workers interviewed are reflecting their own role in relation to racism.

2.3 The intersectionality of race and gender in the Nordic countries

First, I will introduce intersectionality, which is a key concept for understanding the relationship between race and gender. Then, I will present some ideas how gender and race are connected in the Nordic context according to the existing literature. Later, in the discussion chapter, I will discuss my findings concerning race and gender in relation to the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality became chosen as one of the key concepts in this research because besides racism, I am interested in the interaction of racism and the Nordic gender equality discourse.

While intersectionality is mainly chosen because of the interest in gender issues, it is a useful concept to viewing any different power structures and social positions simultaneously. Intersectionality is based on an idea that all power structures, like racism, sexism, ableism or classism, are interconnected and mutually co-construct each other. To be marginalized in different dimensions causes a new kind of marginality that cannot only be viewed as a sum of these positions. (Anthias 2012, 125–126, 133.) Kimberle Crenshaw is usually named as the one who coined the concept of intersectionality, even though she was not the first one to be interested in the intertwined forms of oppression. In her study about black women and violence, Crenshaw uses the concept of intersectionality to describe how racism and sexism operate hand in hand and how black women fall outside of both feminist discourse and anti-racist discourse. She claims that the feminist movement has left black women behind focusing rather on issues of privileged white women, and that the anti-racist movement has focused on black men, again neglecting black women. Crenshaw claims that black women are marginalized in both groups – within *women* because they are black, and within *black* because they are women. (Crenshaw 1991, 1242–1244.)

Intersectionality has been recognized as the single most important theory or concept from gender studies (McCall 2005, 1771). Despite its success, intersectionality is far from being a clear concept. It can be understood as an analytical tool to study gender, race, class, sexuality and ability as complex and co-constructive systems of power. (Mattsson 2014, 9). Leslie McCall has criticized binary categories in intersectional studies. She claims that all categories have more than just one dimension: race, gender, sexuality or class are all complex systems (McCall 2005, 1781). An individual can be in privileged and oppressed positions simultaneously in a different axis of power, for example, privileged by one's gender but oppressed because of their racialized identity. Power relations are relative but not stable. Race, gender or class might be insignificant in one context but significant in another. (Anthias 2012, 131.)

The relationship between race and gender in the Nordic countries can be understood as a very complex one. One of the characteristics of the Nordic welfare state model is being described as a passion for equality (Borchorst 2013, 92). The Nordic countries have been portrayed as embracing gender equality in a way that it has become a representative value of our societies (Keskinen & Vuori 2012, 21–24.) Many scholars have suggested (eg. Keskinen 2012; Anis 2012; Vuori 2009) that gender equality is important especially in relation to immigration because immigrants are generally not perceived as gender equal. Instead, gender equality is understood as something one must learn when integrating into Nordic societies. When immigration is discussed, gender equality as a core value in Nordic societies is often presented as something that is already achieved, compared to immigrants, who are not considered as gender equal.

Some scholars have suggested that even though immigrants are a diverse group, the contemporary public image of immigrants is constructed through Islam and the stereotypical immigrant is a Muslim (eg. Vuori 2012; Honkasalo 2012). The public image of Muslims is often simplified and connected to problems with gender equality and domestic violence. In the Nordic gender equality discourse, (Muslim) immigrants are implied to have gender equality problems, while the Nordic countries are positioned in achieved gender equality. (Vuori 2009, 378, 391–392). Keith Pringle (2010, 28) claims that the Swedish welfare professionals' discussions about patriarchal oppression are often connected to minority ethnic groups, especially to those of Muslim background.

Thus, gender cannot be separated from meanings given to ethnic or cultural differences. We tend to see immigrant women oppressed by their culture and men, while the image of the Nordic woman is based on gender equality (Keskinen & Vuori 2012, 9). The paradox is that Muslim women are, at the same time, portrayed as victims, but also as a threat to the Western values (Bilge 2010, 10). Immigrants, especially those from Muslim countries, are being problematized by their culture, which is understood as being opposed to gender equality and liberal values. The discourse of integration can be understood as gendered, because the idea of integration is based on saving immigrant women from their own cultures. (Eliassi 2015, 557.)

2.4 Anti-racist social work and anti-oppressive theory

Anti-racist social work can be located as part of the tradition of anti-oppressive and critical social work theories. Critical social work refers to an approach that takes power relations as a core issue and aims to both examine and transform them. Anti-oppressive theory is one part of critical social work, alongside radical, Marxist, feminist or structural social work theories. (Healy 2014, 183.)

Different authors prefer to use different concepts, and similar approaches are sometimes referred to as anti-oppressive practice (eg. Burke & Parker 2007) or anti-discriminatory practice (eg. Huggan 2010). Christine Cocker and Trish Hafford-Letchfield (2014) note that anti-oppressive practice and anti-discriminatory practice tend to be used interchangeably, even though there are differences to be named. They analyse some of the differences to be related to the diversity of identities and oppressions that it takes into account. According to their analysis, anti-discriminatory practice is more concerned with the level of legislation in tackling the discrimination, but it might fail to emphasise more than just one dimension of oppression at once and prioritise some forms of oppression over others. (Ibid, 4–6.)

Burke and Parker suggest that Foucauldian analysis of power is necessary in understanding anti-oppressive practice. The main idea in Foucault's understanding of power is, that power structures are complex and people are not simply divided into those who have power and those who do not. Power is not something that people *have*, but something that is exercised in relationships between them. Even the most 'powerless' express resistance and thus exercise power, which is used as a driving force in anti-oppressive practice. (Burke & Parker 2007, 151.)

Anti-racist practice can be understood as part of anti-oppressive or anti-discriminatory practices but focusing especially on racism. However, an anti-racist social work approach does not mean that other forms of oppression and power relations, such as sexism or classism, can be ignored. The starting point for anti-racist social work is eradicating racist social relations both from the profession of social work but also from the wider society (Dominelli 2017, 10–11). Anti-racist social work, as presented by Lena Dominelli (2017; 2002; 1997), is used as a theoretical framework in this thesis. Instead of anti-oppressive or anti-discriminative approach, I use anti-racist social work because this thesis focuses especially on racism. Although Dominelli's work is focused on the British context, I believe her theoretical understandings are useful in the Nordic context as well. I believe there is a need for more critical reflection of our practices rather than assuming the Nordic societies being equal and free of racism.

Ethnic discrimination is prohibited by the Finnish law (Non-discrimination act 2014, 5 § and 8 §) thus all the authorities are supposed to operate in a non-discriminatory way. While non-racism is part of social work's premises and is being embraced by the majority, I use the concept of anti-racism to refer to a more active position against racist practices, where racism is understood as a significant and relevant issue in social work. Lena Dominelli (2017) describes the difference between non-racism and anti-racism slightly differently – she locates anti-racism in between racist

and non-racist practices, in which case anti-racism bridges our current situation in racist social relations with our goal of non-racist societies. According to Dominelli, when a truly non-racist society would be achieved, race would no longer be relevant and anti-racism would become unnecessary. (Ibid., 10.) However, while a truly non-racist society seems like a distant and unrealistic dream, there is clearly need for active anti-racist reflection and practice.

Dominelli argues that practising anti-racist social work requires both acknowledging racism but also understanding that white people have a different relationship to racism than racialized people. Thus, their roles in fighting racism must be different. White people, as well as other privileged groups, benefit from racialized relations even if they do not use overtly racist practices themselves. Fighting racism and other unequal power relations requires recognizing one's own privileged positions. (Dominelli 1997, 15.) White privileges refer to extensive social privileges and power relations, which often remain invisible to the privileged. (Jeyasingham 2012, 672). Even though Dominelli recognizes the importance of acknowledging one's privileges, the focus on eliminating racism as an external force has received criticism for leaving the racial position of the practitioner to remain unnoticed. Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011, 13) argue that the problem in identifying oneself as anti-racist is that it "allows individuals to exclude themselves and the practices they engage in from examining how they participate in the cultural, material, and symbolic advantages generated by their privileged position". The continuous self-reflection as the main means of action has also been challenged. Christie Alastair also (2010, 212) questions, if this self-reflexivity merely helps white practitioners in being aware of their own position but does not produce any actual anti-racist action. While her critique may be partly relevant, I see no need to abandon self-reflection but rather to more critically evaluate what we are using it for.

In response to this critique, anti-racist social work requires seeing social work as political action in addition to recognizing and acknowledging power hierarchies. According to Dominelli, being a professional in social work is often understood as being apolitical. This seeming objectivity or neutrality is based on false ideas of equal premises and manifests itself in 'colour-blindness'. Colour-blindness means that a social worker fails to notice the importance of the service users' racialized background, but instead aims to treat everyone in the same manner. (Dominelli 1997, 33–34.) A Finnish scholar Suvi Keskinen refers to the same issue as the paradox of universal treatment. According to her, social workers trying to escape culturalizing and racializing premises might end up using universal discourse and forgetting significant differences, such as racialized background and its effects on service users' situations. The universal discourse is based on generalizing the

experiences of the dominant group as the norm while neglecting minority experiences. (Keskinen 2012, 309–313.)

Social work has been criticized for viewing service users in relation to norms, which are formed through privileged positions (eg. Mattsson 2014). In relation to racialized groups, white western culture is viewed as the norm, while other groups are positioned outside of that norm in the position of the other. The practices of othering have been deconstructed in whiteness studies, which is still an uncommon approach in social work research. Whiteness studies is based on a notion, that the discussion of race assumes whiteness as a norm, which is generalized into a universal experience. Whiteness is faded in a way that white people are viewed as individuals, while people belonging to racialized groups are always viewed through their racial identity. Whiteness studies aim to study white culture as a racial position and at the same time to displace its dominant position. (Jeyasingham 2012, 670.) Some scholars have suggested (eg. Eliassi 2015; Keskinen 2012) that social workers assess social problems within racialized groups to be part of the culture, while within the dominant racial group the social problems are seen more as individual problems.

Dominelli claims that social workers often see no need for anti-racist practice if they do not work with non-white service users. She reminds us that racialization is a bidirectional process, and the normalizing de-racialization of white people needs to be acknowledged too. (Dominelli 2017, 26.) According to Dominelli (2017, 52), the dominant approach in social work in Europe focuses on education around cultural differences, which she sees as an unlikely approach to achieving racial equality. Malcolm Payne similarly claims that the international discussion of multicultural social work can be roughly divided into two main discourses. The first one highlights cultural sensitivity, and the second one anti-discriminative approach. (Payne 2005, 269–270). I will discuss the difference between anti-racist and cultural sensitivity (or cultural competence) approaches in the analysis section.

Anti-racist social work seems necessary if we are to tackle racist practices in social work and to develop more egalitarian practices. However, despite individual anti-racist practitioners, institutional policies and routines might still contribute to racist practices (Dominelli 2017, 9). Thus, an anti-racist practice has to be understood as a process where practitioners have to both continuously question their own positions and understandings, and to also aim to rebuild the structures and practices.

In this chapter, I have introduced the most important concepts and discussed the theoretical framework. I have presented differences and similarities in the concepts of race and ethnicity, and noted

that ethnicity is the dominant concept in the Nordic context. I have presented different racisms and argued that these different forms exist simultaneously and co-construct each other. Intersectionality has been suggested as an important concept to understand the complex dynamics of race and gender. Finally, I have introduced anti-racist social work, which I have used as my approach in this thesis.

3 Literature review

In the first chapter of this literature review, I will introduce more general research on social work's relationship with themes of racism. In the second sub-chapter I will move to studies related to child welfare social work. Many studies related to racism concern social work with immigrants but not specifically social work with children and families. However, all child welfare social workers work also with immigrants or other racialized groups. Therefore, I find it relevant to discuss social work's role on a more general level. I have included both the most significant international literature as well as literature from the Nordic and Finnish context.

3.1 Racialization, racism and social work

Social work is a profession closely connected to its surrounding society and values. Karen Healy (2014) reminds us that social work as a profession varies greatly within geographical and historical contexts. The institutional contexts that affect the practice are continually changing due to the different societal changes and thus we need to view social work always as a contextual practice. Obviously, social work is not only affected by social, economic and political changes, but it should also be actively involved in making these changes. (Healy 2014, 1–2.)

Being embedded in the historical and geographical contexts, social work has also been linked to different questionable practices, such as eugenics and colonialism that are now widely understood as unethical (Dominelli 2017, 73). Later, the connection of social work with colonial practices and the oppression of different indigenous groups have been widely studied. Post-colonial studies and whiteness studies have increasingly entered social work research and scholars are calling for more reflexive practice in relation to whiteness of social work and its colonial past (Walter, Taylor & Habibis 2011). The influences of colonialism are still not completely bypassed and social work research and practices have still been criticized for the knowledge base being very Western-centric. (Gray & Hetherington 2013.) The reason for mentioning colonialism is that the roots of racism can be seen as embedded in the history of colonialism. Even though colonialism is often seen as a

distant issue from a Nordic perspective, Diana Mulinari *et al* (2009) claim that in reality the Nordic countries have taken part in colonial practices and have benefitted from colonial relations. Thus, different post-colonial and anti-racist approaches can be seen as being of importance in the Nordic context too.

Has social work currently changed to a more anti-oppressive practice? Nicole Corley and Stephen Young (2018) have conducted a comprehensive content analysis on the topic. They analysed articles of minority groups and the suggested interventions in three significant social work journals – *Child Welfare, Social Service Review, and Social Work* – between the years 2005 and 2015. The study aims to follow-up with a similar comprehensive analysis conducted by Anthony McMahon and Paula Allen-Meares (1992) between the years 1980 and 1989. At that time they argued that “social work with minorities seems to be a marginal interest for the social work profession” and that “most of the literature is naive and superficial and fails to address their social context” (ibid. 533). Corley and Young’s recent findings suggest that researchers still fail to address the issues of institutional and structural racism. Instead, the emphasis is on individual level interventions and training practitioners in approaches of cultural sensitivity or cultural competence. They criticize these approaches for focusing on helping the ‘cultural other’ to adapt in the oppressive environment instead of aiming to change the environment. (Corley & Young 2018.) In this literature review, I have chosen to present studies that both acknowledge racism and take a critical stance towards presenting different racialized groups in relation to social problems.

The construction of normality is one of the key elements in social work. Social work can be understood as an institution that creates normality and stabilizes norms. (Sawyer 2012, 156–158.) Siv Falghren and Lena Sawyer (2011) have studied the normalization of gender, race and class in Swedish social work textbooks. They notice that social workers’ gender, ethnicity or class are not mentioned but there is a supposition of whiteness and middle-class background. However, service users are named in relation to gender, ethnicity and even class. Thus, they claim that certain cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity, heteronormativity, whiteness and middle-class values are normalized in the context of social work. (Falghren & Sawyer 2011, 542–546.) Other studies concerning racism and social work teaching have found out that teachers lack historical knowledge of racism and view race mostly as individual identity (Varghese 2016), social work education in US is blinded by false neutrality or colour-blindness, and that the widely used cultural competence model is ineffective (Abrams & Moio 2009). However, even a short training focusing on issues of race and racism within child welfare social workers in the US increased the participants

understanding of their own privileges and decreased the colour-blindness in relation to racial issues (Johnsson, Antle & Barbee 2009).

In Finland, racism towards immigrants has been widely studied (eg. Rastas 2004; Rastas 2005; Puuronen 2011) but the discussion within social work research has been scarce and has focused more on multicultural, multiethnic and cross-cultural approaches (Anis 2006, 110.) Social workers' attitudes towards immigrants have been studied in relation to other authorities, when social workers have been found to possess more positive attitudes towards immigrants (Pitkänen 2006). Tuula Carroll's study of social worker's public writings about immigration issues diverges from these findings because she found mostly non-existing or negative attitudes towards immigration. Carroll interprets the non-existent public discussion by social workers to be part of the social works silent culture, which she describes to be strong in Finland. (Carroll 2012, 39–40.) She interprets the prevalence of social workers' negative attitudes towards immigration to be connected to ideas of immigrant service users as difficult clients and to the current shift towards immigration criticism. The discourse in immigration criticism is based on the division between 'us' and 'them' and to a speech that creates confrontation between helping their own group of people and helping others. Carroll calls for more active participation of social workers into public discussion, and sees strengthening anti-racism as an important way of practising structural social work. (Carroll 2012, 39–40.)

The silent culture mentioned by Carroll has recently received more attention. Laura Tiitinen (2018) claims in her doctoral thesis, that the silence culture is strong in Finland and the silencing of social workers by their employers is a real phenomenon that prevents social workers from reporting unethical practices. Tiitinen suggests that Finnish social workers have adopted a very careful approach towards reporting problems, even though, according to the law, they have a responsibility to do so if they notice deficiencies or problems. According to her, the employers often forbid directly or indirectly social workers from bringing up structural problems, which she calls a hidden exercise of power. Similar to Carroll, she calls social workers to actively take part in public discussions about societal issues and grievances in the service system. (Tiitinen 2018.) Tiitinen does not focus on racism or any other specific societal problem in her thesis, but I understand her research to be important in understanding the difficulties in intervening in racist practises too.

Suvi Keskinen (2012) has studied Finnish social workers attitudes towards domestic violence within different racialized groups. According to Keskinen, social workers use mainly universal discourse highlighting the similar nature of experiences of violence despite differing backgrounds.

In this case, violence becomes explained through individual explanations instead of cultural ones. Keskinen claims that while this discourse works as a wanted counter discourse to culturalized and racialized explanations, it also restricts considering the 'significant differences'. This is what Keskinen refers to with the concept of the paradox of universal treatment. The universal discourse refers to a process, where the experiences of the majority are being generalized and seen as a norm. It might obscure the differences premises, such as experiences of racism, while it might work against its objective and end up ignoring minority experiences. Keskinen proposes that we need to include acknowledging the significant differences into the Nordic value of universalism. Equal rights do not mean that everyone benefits from the same services. (Keskinen 2012, 309–313.)

Maria Garbin (2014) has studied the use of victim stories in honour-related violence, and how these stories are used in policy initiatives in Sweden. She found a strong narrative around saving immigrant girls from their patriarchal and violent cultures. Immigrant girls not experiencing oppression are interpreted as exceptions. Garbin claims there is a paradox whereby giving the victims a voice might actually lead to producing new silences, as only the voices of victims are highlighted. For Garbin, the dilemma is that talking about honour-related violence might fuel racist understandings but at the same time, the particularities of these crimes are missed if they are viewed only as gendered violence. (Garbin 2014, 108–113.) Here, she seems to refer to the same phenomenon which Suvi Keskinen has named as the paradox of universal treatment.

According to the literature (Keskinen 2012; Garbin 2014; Corley & Young 2018), structural forms of racism are often left unidentified and cultural explanations are dominant when viewing the social problems amongst different racialized groups. The research on racism and social work differs greatly between different countries, thus it is essential to understand both social work research and practice as contextual. Social work research on racism in Finland is still scarce and the silent culture prevents social workers from voicing structural problems. There is a need for both academic research on racism in social work and also for more active participation of social workers in the public discussion. Social workers work with the most vulnerable groups of society and they should be able to practice structural social work by bringing up the most current and significant issues.

3.2 Racialized children and social work

Whereas social work in general can be understood as a profession that seeks to create normality, this tendency is especially evident in child welfare social work. The core function in child welfare social work is to assess the situations of children at risk by defining *good enough* parenting and

good enough care. Many scholars have suggested that these ideas of parenting and family life are connected to ideas of normality and that social work's role is closely connected to assessing normality (eg. Sawyer 2012; Mattsson 2015; Eliassi 2015). The ideas of children's rights and societal position vary greatly between different countries. In the Nordic countries children's participation has received more attention lately and children are viewed increasingly as actors independent from their families. Thus, we tend to distinguish the interest of the child from the interest of the family, which differs from the view in more family-centered societies. (Anis 2008, 15.)

Children can be understood as being in a vulnerable position because of their age. In addition, belonging to a racialized group and being subjected to racism might further affect their position. Julija Sardelic (2017) has studied the position of Romani children in Europe and describes it as triple exclusion. She claims that their intersectional position makes them discriminated not only for their ethnicity and socio-economic status but also for their age. Sardelic argues that both systemic racism and everyday racism are reproducing their exclusion. (Sardelic 2014, 140.) Mary Christianakis (2015) has analysed European newspapers and human rights organizations communication. She claims that the discourses of Roma children are constructed in an oppressive manner. She also argues that these discourses are simultaneously both vilifying and victimizing Roma childhood and produce a belief that "the Roma can never produce healthy childhoods – only poverty, alienation, and marginalization" (ibid. 60). According to Christianakis, these discourses discourage the Roma community from developing their own interventions that would prevent child abuse while strengthening the family ties and cultural bonds.

Christie Alastair (2010) argues that in Ireland, black and minority ethnic families are continually racialized in child welfare policies and practices by linking them with specific social problems. She claims that white identities remain as a norm against which the standards of childcare and family life are assessed. On the contrary, not much interest is placed on the effects of racism in the lives of these families. Alastair interprets that the formal guidelines imply that there are cultures and social norms that might be at odds with the wellbeing of children. She claims that in these guidelines, "cultural and ethnic differences are represented as potential social problems, thus implying that social problems may be effects of culture rather than structural inequalities, discrimination and/or racism" (ibid., 205). Further on, she asks if actually the biggest difference between majority and minority ethnic groups is that the racialized minority groups are likely to experience racism (ibid., 213).

Similar findings have also been presented in Nordic studies. Finnish scholar Merja Anis has studied the specific questions related to child welfare social work with immigrant children in Finland. Although racism is not her main interest, she recognizes racism as one of the main questions and finds that understandings of racism vary greatly between social workers. She notices that anti-racist practice is not a common approach in Finland, thus social workers that criticize their organization might end up in a minority position themselves having to justify their approach to their colleagues and the organization. According to her findings, racism is not often named by social workers as a big problem in the lives of immigrant service users. Instead, social workers often name cultural differences or past traumatic experiences as bigger challenges. (Anis 2008, 85, 91–92.) Anis claims that the concept of culture is significant for both social workers and service users. Firstly, culture is used to define the ‘normal’ family life and ways of raising children, secondly, it is used to explain the difficulties in the interaction between the service users and the social workers and lastly, as a tool to create dialogue with service users. (Anis 2005, 7–8, 12–16.)

Due to different historical and cultural issues, race and racism are more commonly discussed issues in English-speaking countries like UK, US and Canada whereas concepts of ethnicity, discrimination and intolerance are more common in the Nordic countries. Merja Anis' (2008, 21) interpretation of this is that the avoidance of the word racism has to do with the belief, that the Nordic societies are considered as equal, and scholars are cautious about connecting racism with the Nordic welfare states. Also, the Nordic countries, especially Finland, have been more homogeneous societies with less immigration for longer.

Katrin Kriz and Marit Skivenes (2010) have compared social workers' perspectives on black and minority ethnic parents in Norway and England. Their interpretation of this is that Norwegian social workers adopt a racism-blind stance, whereas English social workers are more aware of racism as an issue affecting their client families. Their findings support the view that anti-discriminatory practices are stronger in UK and less used in the Nordic countries (Kriz & Skivenes 2010, 2634.) Keith Pringle (2010) has analysed the differences between the child welfare systems of Sweden and UK in addressing issues of racism by using Esping-Andersen's well-known comparative welfare models as a starting point. He claims that the issues of racism and gendered violence are often neglected in the Swedish welfare system and suggests that the reason might be linked to the welfare system itself. While the Swedish or the Nordic system is well known for tackling poverty rather efficiently, the deeply rooted idea of an equal model might have obscured the problems with gendered violence and racism. (Pringle 2010, 28–30.)

According to Pringle (2010, 27), physical violence towards children has often, in public discussions, been linked to ethnic minorities, especially Muslim immigrants. However, in a Swedish report on violence towards children it is noted that there was no connection with the ethnicity of the parents. Instead, poverty, social class and substance abuse play a role in physical abuse. (Janson *et al.* 2007, cited in Pringle 2010, 27.) Gender is also strongly involved when the issue of domestic violence is discussed. In Pringle's interviews the professionals often referred to oppressive patriarchal relationships in relation to women and children in ethnic minorities (Pringle 2010, 28).

Other scholars have made similar findings. For example, Barzoo Eliassi (2015) suggests that Muslim families are assumed to have problems with violence and patriarchal oppression, thus they are understood as worse families for children. The human rights issues such as forced marriages and the oppression of women are interpreted as being an integral part of the cultural identity. According to Eliassi, domestic violence in Muslim families becomes interpreted through culture and religion, whereas violence in majority ethnic families is understood as a sum of individual and psychological problems. Islamic and Western cultures are presented as binary opposites, where the Western culture represents progress and equality and the Islamic culture is assumed as being backward and conservative. The femininity and masculinity in Muslim families are thus marked as opposite to the local, white and middle-class gender. Furthermore, these are positioned to a hierarchical order of good and bad gender identity. (Ibid. 564–566.)

Lena Sawyer (2012) has studied the construction of normality in a Swedish family assessment home by interviewing the social workers in the institution. Family assessment home is a child welfare institution where parents temporarily relocate with their children to get their parenting skills and support needs assessed. Sawyer claims that the assessment is based on ideas of normality, which are closely connected to race, gender and class. According to her findings, the personnel in the family assessment home used 'we-you' categorization to define the service user families different from the personnel, thus constructing boundaries between them. The personnel viewed themselves as part of the norm, while the service users were compared to that norm and positioned outside of it. The desired normativity consists of reproduction of the heterosexual nuclear family, being in the labour market, taking part in the consumerist society and not having too much contact with the social services. (Sawyer 2012, 156–159.) Remarkable in Sawyer's findings is, that the normativity is constructed in so close relation to gender roles, heterosexuality, whiteness and middle-class values.

In convergence with the previous mentioned findings, a Finnish scholar Johanna Hiitola claims that child welfare decision making is based on the norms of 'decency', which are, in addition to other factors, connected to ethnicity or race and gender, class and ability. She has studied administrative court's documents related to decisions regarding taking children into custody and she states that parents' gender, sexuality, class, ability and race or ethnicity are pivotal factors in deciding about taking into custody. According to Hiitola, parents are expected to have a certain relationship with the Finnish culture and the deviation from this norm is interpreted as inability in other areas of life. The families that differ from the norm are the ones that end up in child welfare services and whose actions are guided towards the idea of 'normal' family life. Hiitola asserts, that the decisions regarding taking into custody are not guided by only concrete events and evidence of child neglect, but also the decency of the parents as a whole. (Hiitola 2015, 259–261.)

In Finland, statistics of child welfare service users do not include information relating to ethnic background. Social workers seem to think that children of many racialized groups are over-represented in child welfare services but there is no evidence to support this idea. However, based on international literature, children of immigrant families and ethnic minorities seem to be targeted more often with child welfare measures compared to the majority (Anis 2008, 14; Dominelli 2018, 79). Robert Hill (2004) provides three explanations for the over-representation of black children in the child welfare services in US. He argues that the first two explanations – the first being the concentration of several risk factors and the other being the higher proportion of black families in poverty – are more often used than the one he emphasises, the importance of institutional racism. There seems to be a need for additional research concerning potential reasons for this difference in the Nordic context. Children from different racialized groups might be in need of protection more often because of socio-economic reasons or there might be factors of institutional racism affecting the situation.

Due to the differences in the academic culture and social work approaches, the issues of racialization and racism seem under-represented in the Finnish social work literature, especially related to child welfare and social work with families. Therefore, there is a need for research for both the service users' and social workers' perspectives to racism.

4 Methodology

Yasmin Gunaratnam (2011) argues that it is important to understand research on race and racism as a discursive practice, so that it is possible to interrogate also the understandings of the researcher and the used research practices. She refutes the idea of a pre-existing and stable reality that could be objectively studied from above. Instead, it is crucial to situate our knowledge within the social context in which it is constructed. (Gunaratnam 2011.) In the same manner, I do not claim to have acquired totally value-free and objective knowledge of the subject matter, which I find impossible in qualitative research. I have striven to approach the topic with an open mind but certainly my pre-understandings have guided me in all the phases through data collection and analysis. Thus, I find it important to state the pre-understandings and to be reflexive with the chosen methods. Many scholars (eg. Souto 2011) argue that when studying racism, it is important that the researcher takes an anti-racist position and does not view the phenomenon as seemingly neutral. For the same reason, I take an anti-racist approach to this study and I put on critical anti-racist glasses when analysing the data.

In this chapter I first present the data and the data collection context and discuss the potential and deficiencies of the data. Then I introduce the chosen analysis method and explain the process of choosing a suitable method. Lastly, I discuss the ethical aspects of the research.

4.1 Data

In Finland, all the research must be approved by the committees in the municipalities, which often takes time. I applied for research permits in two large cities in southern Finland at the beginning of January 2019 and later, in April, from one smaller municipality. I received the first research permit in January and the second one in February and started contacting the child welfare offices in those municipalities immediately. I contacted all the leading social workers and asked them to forward my interview request to social workers in their teams. However, finding informants proved to be more challenging than I had expected. From the first municipality I contacted, I was finally only able to conduct one focus group interview. I was totally dependent on the leading social workers as gatekeepers, since I did not have access to the contact details of the social workers themselves. In the second municipality I had better opportunities, since I have been working there myself. I had the chance to contact the social workers directly, which resulted in two focus group interviews and two individual in-depth interviews. From the third municipality I contacted, I received a research permit and an encouraging response from leading social workers but eventually no social workers

answered my messages or phone calls. Besides being very busy, it is possible that social workers might have hesitated in taking part in a study that concerns sensitive topics. According to both my data and previous research, race and racism seem to be issues that are not widely discussed in Finnish social work.

The data consists of two focus group interviews and three in-depth interviews collected in two large cities in southern Finland during March, April and May 2019. I interviewed child welfare social workers from both open care units and substitute care units. In open care, social workers assess the situations of children living in their own homes and decide about the necessary services, or finally, the need for substitute care. In substitute care units, social workers work with children who are taken into care and placed with either foster families or foster care institutions. Two focus group interviews and one in-depth interview were conducted with social workers from open care units and the two in-depth interviews with substitute care social workers. There were four participants in both focus groups. The length of the interviews varied between 55 minutes and one hour and 18 minutes. The total length of the interviews combined was five hours and 38 minutes. After transcribing the interviews, I had 73 pages of data in textual form.

All my informants were female, which is a likely coincidence in a field where most of the professionals are women. However, I do not find the unbalanced gender distribution as problematic because social workers' own gendered experience was not of interest in this study. I did not ask my interviewees about their ethnic identity but all of them were native Finnish speakers and I would describe them as belonging to the majority ethnic group. The informants were of different age and had different length of experience in social work. I used to work in one of the studied municipalities, so I knew some of the informants beforehand. The familiarity may have helped me to create a trust with the interviewees but at the same time there is a risk that the results may be biased. The social workers who knew me were probably aware of my personal stance and my emphasis on anti-racism. However, I introduced my approach to all my respondents because I wanted to be open about my own preunderstandings. Furthermore, the office where I used to work myself was limited out of the research to eliminate participants that would be too familiar to me.

From an early stage I decided I wanted to use focus group interviews as a data collection method. Focus group interview is a method of interviewing several participants simultaneously. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 96.) It is fundamentally different from in-depth interview because the participants are not only responding to the researcher but to each other as well. Thus, this process can produce rich conversations. However, these are not naturally occurring conversations but always arranged

for the purpose of the given research. Participants agree, disagree and explain their views to each other, and might also reconsider their beliefs when reflecting with the group. This ongoing negotiation makes focus group interviews especially fruitful when studying topics that concern values and attitudes or work with critical theoretical perspectives regarding power relationships (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 166–168.) On the other hand, participants might want to give socially desired responses, which has to be taken into account when analysing the content. There may also be discrepancies in understanding the phenomenon and the usage of words, thus the participants may be referring to different acts with similar words, or vice versa.

From the completed two focus group interviews, I would argue that the method worked well with my controversial topic. The discussion in the focus groups blossomed in a way that was very different compared to individual interviews. The participants disagreed, questioned one another and elaborated each other's ideas further. In many cases they also asked each other questions so that my role as an interviewer momentarily shifted to one of a facilitator. Some of the participants expressed feeling more satisfied with the participation in a focus group interview compared to their previous experiences with individual interviews.

However, due to the difficulties in being able to schedule more focus group interviews during the short period of data collection, I started to consider the possibility of supplementing my data with individual in-depth interviews. For practical reasons, busy social workers are more easily scheduled for an interview separately. With the social workers from the substitute care unit we seemed unable to find a time slot that would have accommodated everyone. For this reason, I decided to interview them separately. I used the same interview guide (appendix 9.2) for both focus group and in-depth interviews, except that I modified some of the questions for the interviewees from the substitute care unit because of their different job description. The interview guide (appendix 2) was formulated based on my pre-understandings and interests. The questions were directed towards definitions of racism, understandings of the societal significance of racism, racism in the social work practice and to the role of social work in the processes of racialization and racism. Each interview proceeded differently as each focus group and individual were focused on different themes, which I encouraged by asking follow-up questions.

Afterwards I realized that, besides the practical reasons, individual in-depth interviews would provide me with different insights to the topic. In in-depth interviews I would have more time with one participant and they would have more space to express their views. Interviewing participants separately would also remove the group dynamics that might cause pressure to give certain

answers. Surely, the significance of social pressure cannot be totally removed, since my presence as an interviewer would still affect the way participants would talk about the subject matter. All the three in-depth interviews were implemented with social workers who have long experience of child welfare social work. Conducting additional in-depth interviews gave me an opportunity to dig deeper into the complexity of the theme and to focus in more detail on the experiences of individual social workers.

Since the participants were selected based on their own will to participate, I have to acknowledge that I probably found participants that are more interested in the topic of racism and who view racism as a relevant question, compared to the interviewing of random social workers. I do not see this only as a shortcoming though, because probably the ones who find the topic important, also have relevant ideas to present. Also, the number of social workers interviewed is rather small, since the emphasis has been on in-depth interviews rather than the number of interviews. Thus, my results cannot be generalized to present the understandings and opinions of all child protection social workers in southern Finland. Instead, the findings have to be understood in connection to the specific time and social context. My findings can provide a kaleidoscope of possible current beliefs and tensions around the studied topics.

4.2 Analysis methods

This study is based on qualitative research, which refers to non-numerical description of data. The data used is textual data formed from the recorded interviews that have been transcribed into textual form. Qualitative methods can be used to study phenomena that are located in the realm of social relations. Thus, the findings have to be understood as contextual and connected to the time and locations of the research. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 13–16.) Qualitative research can be understood as describing the reality from the premises that it is complex and striving to describe it in a comprehensive manner. (Hirsjärvi ym. 1997, 161).

I chose qualitative content analysis as a method to analyse the data. Qualitative content analysis is based on finding patterns and themes from the data to describe and explain the studied phenomena (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 234). Content analysis has traditionally been a quantitative method for studying written texts systematically by counting the occurrence of the terms of interest in the texts. However, nowadays, content analysis is used more often in qualitative research. It can also be described as a hybrid method, because it contains a possibility for both quantitative and

qualitative analysis. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 232.) My approach to content analysis is purely qualitative, and I do not intend to present any numerical analysis of the data.

Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (2011) define qualitative approaches to content analysis as mainly inductive, which means that instead of trying to fit the findings in a previously chosen theory, the aim is to approach the data with an open mind and to see what themes arise from the data. They describe the qualitative process as spiral model, where the researcher begins to study the topic based on their epistemological position and pre-understandings. The codes are not pre-conceived but rather generated from the data. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 236.) However, talking about themes that 'arise' from the data can be understood as factitious because the aims of the study and the researchers' own pre-understandings and previous theory always guide the analysis of the data. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 156.) However, my approach can be also defined as inductive, despite the fact that there is a theoretical framework through which I view and analyse the data.

I acknowledge that my analysis is guided by my position as a white practitioner. This means that I have no personal experiences of racism but instead, I view the processes as a concerned professional. My pre-understanding is that racism and racialization are themes that have so far received little attention in social work research and practice in Finland. The anti-racist approach means that I view current understandings of racism critically and that, besides creating new knowledge, one of the objectives is to deconstruct racist practices in social work and encourage practitioners to reflect their own privilege and attitudes. The analysis and findings must be understood as subjective interpretations of the subject matter. Someone else would have provoked different discussions even with the same questions, not to mention finding different interpretations of the data.

When beginning the analysis, I first read carefully through the data several times and made notes about the data. I reduced the data by trimming off sections that were irrelevant to the main topic. I did not use any software but instead I used coloured pencils on paper as a tool to classify the data. I searched for repeated themes, and also similarities and differences in expressions. After coding different themes, I reorganized the data according to these themes. The themes come both from the data itself but also, inevitably, from my pre-understandings and the manner in which I have formed the questions. The previous literature has certainly affected the themes I have selected from my data. (Ryan & Bernard 2003, 88–91.) Considering the extent of the studied phenomenon and the differences in the views of the interviewees, forming a condensed description was not a simple task.

4.3 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process I strived to pay attention to research ethics and to perform ethically sustainable research. I informed my interviewees about the research, so that they understood in what they were participating. They had a chance to read the research proposal before deciding to participate. I told the participants that participating in the study was completely voluntary and that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point. The participants signed a consent form (appendix 9.1) before the interviews took place. I transcribed the recorded interviews without identity information and, after transcribing, the recordings were deleted. While writing the report, I have aimed to refer to the informants in a way in which they are not recognizable.

In addition to basic research ethical questions, such as informed consent and anonymity, I find the biggest ethical issue to be if the research is offering anything that can improve the current situation. Ethics is not only about the right procedures and risk-management but also about considering the overall goal of the research to be in line with social works ethical guidelines, which include promoting social justice and challenging institutional oppression. I cannot claim to have created a wide impact on the field, but I believe I have involved several practitioners in self-reflexive practices, which may have improved their capability to recognize problematic norms in their own thinking or their own institutions. Hopefully, this study will enable the participants to become more familiar with self-reflection and to evoke further discussion in the field. For the participants to be able to make use of the knowledge produced in this research, I have promised to share the final thesis with them. In the next chapter I present the analysis and the main findings in a thematic order.

5 Analysis and findings

After analysing the data, I have formed four main categories, which I present here. The first subchapter includes different understandings and descriptions of racism. The second handles social work's role and the notions of racism in social work and child welfare. The third subchapter considers cultural explanations regarding difficulties in the working relationship between social workers and service users. Lastly, I analyse the data related to the complicated relationship between race and gender.

The quotes used in the following analysis are from both focus group interviews and in-depth interviews, which I specify in each quote. When it is essential to include the question in the quotes, the roles are specified with SW (social worker) or IN (interviewer).

5.1 Understandings of racisms

Racism was discussed in the interview situations both as an issue service users encounter in their daily lives and as a more structural phenomenon affecting wider society. Huge differences occurred within the informants in recognizing racism. A direct racist speech was more easily recognized as racism compared to structural inequality, and discrimination based on colour was understood as racism more often compared to discrimination based on culture or religion. When asking to define racism, the descriptions condensed around discrimination in both individual and societal level.

In all its simplicity, some part of the population, a group of people is inferior compared to the other, based on colour, nationality, culture, background. And it is formed from ignorance and prejudice, practically from fear. (In-dept interview 1)

The meaning of ignorance and the lack of knowledge was often mentioned as the cause of racism. Most of the interviewees seem to think that the more contact we have with other cultures and the more multicultural our society is, will inevitably lead to a decrease of racism. They also brought up children as an example of the positive development.

But there is a difference! Our generation talks maybe more about immigrants. But my children, they are under and above 10 years, they don't talk about immigrants. They also never make a difference if their friend is dark or white or African, but they only have friends who have names. And they never, if I ask, start describing someone by their looks, but the world is different already. If I ask if they come from a certain country, they say they don't know. This has changed and the children have moved forward. (Focus group 1)

On the other hand, families and upbringing are also understood as the cause of racist attitudes. The emphasis on the family and upbringing might be explained by the background of my interviewees. Child welfare professionals work with issues of parenting and home, thus the importance of these factors can be highlighted. In the following quote, the social worker both mentions the lack of contacts with other groups and also connects the growing inequality to the hardening attitudes towards immigration.

It is formed in people's own childhood circumstances and upbringing, that they haven't had contact with immigrants. And a big issue is the growing inequality in neighbourhoods. And schools.[...] It is connected to the growing inequality in the societal level. (In-depth interview 1)

At the same time when expectations are placed on future generations, social workers also recognize the growing criticism towards immigration, which they explain with political changes and the

importance of media. In the discussions, both the hardening societal values and also the so-called polarization were brought up as concerning issues. Polarization refers to an idea that society is losing its cohesion and that it is dividing into two opposite groups. To the question where racism is located, I got a variety of answers.

SW 1: In media, legislation, against whom we are in war with. It can be anywhere, everywhere.

SW 2: First thing to come to my mind was that it is located inside the individuals mind, but then again it can also be located in the interaction with others.

SW 3: And in structures.

(Focus group 1)

Even though the dominant understanding of racism seems to locate it in individuals, these informants also locate it in interaction, media and societal structures. In the following quote, the social worker describes the structural racism in the labour market.

And the labour market is dividing, so that it goes by colour. For example, in kindergartens, there are no more Finnish people working as kindergarten assistants. It has been discussed that there are many Somalis and Russian immigrants who are happy to work with children. And all the cleaners are black nowadays. So that the labour market is turning to the American system that they are working underpaid in the kitchen and cleaning the hallways at schools. (In-depth interview 1)

In my data it is very visible, that, in the Finnish context, race is not an often-used concept and it is considered as part of the racist speech. Instead, most of the interviewees are more comfortable discussing culture and ethnicity. Partly, the interviewees are also careful in naming racism.

I would say that if you are a prejudiced person and you have adopted some stereotypes, or if you are critical towards some aspects of for example Islam, it doesn't mean you are a racist. If you don't accept everything or you criticize veiling is not racism. But if you treat people differently or marginalize them in your speech or demonstrate that they are unequal or remove their humanity, then it is racism. Nowadays it is often stated that all criticism is racism, but I don't think that is true. (In-depth interview 3)

She states that she finds it important to be able to express criticism about cultural practices without being named a racist. It seems clear that racism is understood as a negative issue and people do not want to identify as racists. Thus, racism becomes defined as something more severe than stereotypes and prejudices. Whereas social workers easily identify racism within other groups, they seem

to be more hesitant to name prejudices within social workers as racism. Often racism becomes associated with lower social classes and lack of knowledge.

If you would have more experience, or this person who discriminates, if they would want to know more about other cultures and other peoples, they wouldn't necessarily act based on this racist ideology. It can be explained by lack of self-esteem, own problems, maybe one's own marginalization, own difficulties that one can blame someone else for. (In-depth interview 3)

When asking the interviewees which groups they think are facing the worst racism in Finland, the answers partly followed my assumptions. My interviewees highlighted groups like Somalis, black Africans and asylum seekers from the Middle East. What I found surprising was, that all of them mentioned the Romani as a specific group.

I think it is accepted racism in Finland. For example, I feel that the majority of Finnish people find it easier in company with other white people to say racist things about the Romani compared to Congolese for example. That would more easily lead to that you are a racist, you cannot say things like that. But the discrimination of Romanis is little bit like accepted. (Focus group 1)

Besides recognizing the prevalence of racism towards Romanis in the Finnish society, many also claimed that Romanis face discrimination in child protection services, which I will discuss more in detail in the later chapter related to child welfare and racism. In relation to Romanis, the idea of reverse racism was also brought up.

SW 1: But when you say it is like accepted racism towards the Romani, we have to remember that they are similarly racist towards us. That is works the other way too, even though it is not necessarily so clear and of course they are the underdogs in the process.

SW 2: It doesn't necessarily restrict us in the same way.

(Focus group 1)

In this quote the first social worker names the prejudices Romanis have towards the majority population as racism and hence presents the idea of reverse racism. At the same time, she recognizes the power differences and understands that Romanis have a different position and power in the situation. The second social worker continues to question the similarity of the outcomes of these prejudices. She follows the understanding that besides prejudices and discrimination the definition of racism requires a power imbalance in the relationship. Thus, she does not want to name any prejudices against another ethnic group as racism. Surprisingly, many bring up other forms of

discrimination when asked to define racism. When asking to define racism, they also mention discrimination related to gender, age, religion or disability.

It can be connected to anything that differentiates you from someone else, sets you to unequal position. Gender, or age or any other factor [...] (In-depth interview 2)

The interpretation of this is twofold. It can be interpreted optimistically with the growing emphasis on the intersectional approach, where all forms of oppression are seen as interconnected. Thus, the connection social workers make between different forms of oppression can be understood as being critical enough to identify how racism intersects with other forms of discrimination. On the other hand, it can be understood as a failure to recognize the particularity of racism and thus undermining its significance. Focusing on all forms of discrimination as similar may blur the specific features of racial discrimination. One possible explanation may also be language; in Finnish language ageism is expressed as 'age racism', which might explain this connection to the definition of racism. While social workers are partly careful in naming racism, simultaneously the concept recalls connections to different forms of discrimination. This can be interpreted as a desire to emphasize all forms of discrimination as equally bad while not highlighting any form of oppression over others.

5.2 Racism and child welfare social work

There is a significant variation in recognizing racism in social work practice, although it is widely recognized in the surrounding society. The most significant factor defining understandings of social workers' roles in child welfare seems to be the one of professionalism. Some interviewees recognized racist speech or prejudices in child welfare social work, while the others highlighted the meaning of professionalism and claimed that professionalism and the strict law guiding child welfare social work guarantee the absence of racism.

But if I think about my own work, it is annoying that you are always asked that how many immigrant clients you have. That you have your client list, the client children, and you have exactly the same laws and responsibilities as an authority, you do the work absolutely in a same manner. (In-depth interview 2)

For the most part, the interviewees did not experience a generally racist atmosphere in their workplaces but recognized some cultural prejudices. When talking about violence within racialized service user groups, one interviewee described prejudices her co-workers have but, at the same time, reasoned that these prejudices do not affect the work or the services.

SW: When we work with clients we do not have different premises. Of course, what kind of language is used in the office and in the coffee room when the service users are not present. People do bring up their prejudices, attitudes and thoughts. That these families do get help, but at the same time this social worker might have strong attitudes. Like why there is another Syrian mother that has been battered.

IN: What are these attitudes connected to?

SW: They are strongly connected to Islam, the religion, which is an issue with many social workers. Or women's position or the use of hijab. Of course, these attitudes are not visible in the interaction with the service users, but they continue to exist.

(In-depth interview 3)

She acknowledges the prevalence of prejudices within social workers but is convinced that the professionalism guarantees that these attitudes do not affect the work with service users. Another social worker embraces a more critical stance and claims that these attitudes inevitably affect the work.

It does affect and it becomes visible for the client as coldness. The client senses with all their cells what the social worker thinks about them. [...] I believe the social workers try to hide it but people are so skilled in interpreting it from the eyes, the gestures, how you write about them, what kind of services they get. I don't believe a social worker can hide it. (In-depth interview 2)

All the social workers interviewed think that some racialized groups are over-represented in child welfare services and foster care. The explanations are mostly drawn from the traumatic backgrounds of refugees, problems in the integration system and difficulties in operating between two cultures. While racism is not specifically named as an explanation, the interviewees notice cumulative disadvantages as an explaining factor to the over-representation. This can be understood as recognizing structural racism. In the following quote a social worker from a foster care unit names Romanis as an example of an oppressed group and describes the position of Romani children and families in child protection.

SW: Romanis. That is very clear. It is also visible in our child protection. In the first place, no one wants to foster Romani children. [...] It also shows that even if there was a need for placement and foster care, they are not placed in foster care early enough. That this cultural sensitivity is turned into acceptance. That they are left on their own for a very long time.

IN: What do you think the reasons are? Why do we not intervene?

SW: There are fears and ignorance, we think that they are lost cases because of their backgrounds. That why would we invest tax money, because they will run away and not rehabilitate.

(In-depth interview 1)

This social worker recognizes clear inequalities in the services for Romani children. She also reflects on the differences between educated white parents and uneducated parents from racialized groups and claims there might be a difference in the quality of services depending on how demanding the service users are.

I think that if there are educated white parents, do we take more time to consider what is the best foster care place for them. Some of the Finnish parents make a lot of complaints so with them we take time to consider the options, while when the ones who don't know the language or do not have lawyers, we just make any decision. So are the quality of the services and the treatment equal one might ask. (In-depth interview 1)

While there is clearly a variation in recognizing racism in social work practices, there is neither unity in the understandings of the role of social workers. The question if social workers should have a uniform value base and stance towards racism divides the interviewees. Some embrace an anti-racist stance towards social work practice.

I think rather roughly that you cannot work in this field if you cannot follow certain ethical guidelines. It has to be like that you get same quality of services no matter what is your racial background or country of origin. (Focus group 1)

At the same time, many emphasize a more careful stance, that social workers do not need to have a uniform world view but rather that plurality is a strength. This view reflects the idea that we cannot judge social workers by their personal opinions but solely by the quality of work. This view emphasizes the significance of professionalism that is supposed to guide the work and guarantee universal treatment for all the service users. The universalist approach gets also criticism for not noticing the underlying inequalities. One social worker emphasizes the importance of understanding that the equality of opportunities does not exist and criticizes social work for not always understanding it.

It is important to have the understanding that people drift, people get marginalized, people cannot always affect things with their own choices but the inequality begins in the womb. And this is something all social workers don't understand unfortunately. (In-depth interview 1)

The effects of the whiteness and middle-class background of social work is widely recognized, although the interpretations vary. For most parts, the social workers' backgrounds are

acknowledged as a cultural barrier but as much reflected in the light of power and privilege. In the following quote, a social worker discusses the factitious role of flawlessness that social workers need to follow as authorities.

I think it affects a lot. And it is kind of a taboo that is not discussed. It is also a taboo to talk about social worker's own backgrounds and childhood experiences. It's like when we are authorities, we need to be flawless, so we don't talk about that our own backgrounds can be a positive aspect and kind of a bridge between our and the service users' life worlds. We are a product of our past so it affects a lot. (In-depth interview 1)

The role of social work in tackling the issues of racism divides opinions. Some argue that we should pay more attention to racism and bring it up as an essential theme in social work. One social worker brings up the issue of a silent culture in social work preventing effective anti-racist approach.

We still have this silent culture dominating. We are the ones who would have the most knowledge of how racism is visible, experienced and implemented, but I don't know if we have been intimidated enough but we are very silent. (In-depth interview 1)

However, some of the social workers view the role of social work differently and they do not see racism as an issue that they could intervene in social work practice. One social worker ponders the role of social work and sees the role of schools more valid in changing attitudes.

Maybe in some situations one could bring up that I notice you are using this kind of language. But I haven't been in this kind of situations and I have to say I haven't thought about how to react. I think that maybe this kind of education in tolerance and acceptance of difference belongs to schools. I don't see that it could be an objective in family work to shape someone's worldview and prejudices. I think it is more of a theme for schools. (In-depth interview 3)

Most of the social workers say they do not ask about experiences of racism from their service users, because they do not want to assume that they have experienced racism. They seem to think that asking a service user of an ethnic minority background about their experiences of racism would be interpreted as impolite. What is interesting here is that social workers deem asking about racist experiences as unequal treatment, if they only ask certain people. One suggestion was to ask about experiences of inequality so that it would cover experiences of racism also.

One interesting finding was the prevalence of the idea that the service users are `playing the race card` when negotiating in the child welfare context. This notion came up in most of the interviews

and most of the social workers expressed experiences of service users claiming racism in situations where social workers did not find it.

SW: Maybe it is mainly in situations where we have started to talk about placing the child in foster care and then they experience that the decision is connected to a racist social worker.

IN: How do you answer or how do you feel about it?

SW: I guess we have said that we are not racists. Or that this decision is not based on racism.

(Focus group 2)

The interpretations of ‘playing the race card’ include both understandings that it is a genuine understanding service users may have based on their previous experiences of racism and that it is a narrative and a strategy service users consciously use. However, the expression ‘playing’ itself can already be understood as referring to a conscious strategy. Social workers also interpret this rhetoric sometimes working as a defence mechanism that service users can use to bypass the criticism regarding their parenting. Anyway, the dominant understanding seems to be that no matter if the service user uses a conscious strategy or if it is an error in their interpretation, the decisions themselves are well-grounded and not connected to racist prejudices. This interpretation can be again understood in connection to the professionalism and universalism guiding child welfare social work. Thus, the possible causes behind such strategy remain unreflected.

If they tell here that they have experienced racism, then you have to stop to where this comes from, that we are not racists here. Often, I tell people that I don’t care what colour you are, you could as well be purple. That I don’t care about someone’s colour, let’s move forward. (In-depth interview 1)

In the previous quote, the social worker wants to identify with anti-racism by referring to the service users racialized background as irrelevant. While she clearly wants to signal that she is not a racist, a potential service user may interpret “let’s move forward” as a way of ignoring and silencing previous experiences of racism. A problem here is that while focusing on the objective of equality one might fail to notice the existing inequalities.

Most of the time the interviewees do not recognize racism as an implicit factor in their work and racism becomes interpreted as non-existing. However, some of the informants also reflect on the meaning of personal prejudices.

In my previous workplace I had a situation, where an African male client threatened me with violence and that he would come to beat me and kill me. And after that I had this irrational fear for like an

half a year if I saw another black male that what will happen. And I think that if a Finnish male had threatened me, I wouldn't have been scared of other white males on the streets. (Focus group 2)

She reflects on the case and understands that, despite the understandable fear she was experiencing, there were prejudices at play besides her personal experience. Through processes of racialization, this aggressive service user became interpreted in connection to other black males. I find her reflection very important in relation to professional growth and the development in social work practices. She acknowledges the importance of self-reflection in order to ponder where these prejudices arise. Another social worker also acknowledges prejudices and sees it partly inevitable.

One has to have an ability to reflect one's own actions and see these features in oneself. The ones one wouldn't like to have. If we strictly forbid that social workers cannot think like that, does it end up in a situation where they have these thoughts anyway, but because it is not acceptable, they cannot reflect and work with their understandings. (Focus group 1)

There is a variety of approaches towards the issues of racialization and racism within social workers. Some social workers have adopted a stance whereby child welfare social workers are mainly understood as professionals whose main task is to implement the child protection legislation and guarantee equal treatment and equal services for different service users. This approach is inseparably connected to the ideas of professionalism and universalism. The counter approach takes a more anti-racist stance and sees social work in a wider sense as a potential actor in tackling racism and other forms of inequality. Social workers' personal values, backgrounds, education and political ideas seem to affect the role they emphasize. The ones supporting the idea of professionalism seem to think more positively about the current standards in social work regarding racism, whereas the ones embracing the more anti-racist stance seem to recognize more room for improvement of practices.

5.3 Cultural explanations

One of the main themes found from the data was the understanding of cultural differences and lack of knowledge about other cultures as an explanation of difficulties in the relationships between social workers and service users. The lack of knowledge about specific cultures is understood as leading to a situation where all immigrant families are viewed through the same lens. The prevalence of the local norms and values is widely recognized, although the opinion about accepting other norms varies.

While in Finland there is a strong idea that adults, parents are in responsibility and if the children have been by themselves, if an older sibling has taken more responsibility and done well, even though still a minor, it can lead to unnecessary moralizing. If their idea of family is very different, is it so bad to support that if they feel that the children can handle some things on their own already? (In-depth interview 2)

The social worker in the previous quote recognizes the local norms related to family life and responsibility and questions the superiority of the Finnish norms. She argues that, following our own norms too strictly, can lead to unnecessary conflicts in the working relationship. While some informants recognize restrictive local norms, some see child welfare social work as already flexible and well adapted to a multicultural client base.

I think we are pretty flexible. We see so many different families in this child welfare work. At least for me it is all the same if the food is eaten with a fork or chopstick, as long as it is offered on a regular basis. (Focus group 1)

While different habits are accepted in some areas of life, violence in families is seen as an issue where social work has the same norms for all families, no matter the cultural background. This is reasoned by the non-negotiable role of legislation. However, one social worker finds more tolerance towards corporal punishment in families from different cultural backgrounds.

There is maybe some sort of positive discrimination as well. For example, corporal punishment that is not acceptable, but it is maybe more tolerated if it is part of the culture. Compared to a Finnish background. (Focus group 1)

Besides explaining the difficulties in the working relationships with cultural differences, social workers also note that the service users use the same rhetoric themselves.

Sometimes the client has said that because here in Finland the social worker does not understand their culture, that is why the child was taken away or that they are not allowed to live according to their own culture. (Focus group 1)

The dominant view, in relation to cultural differences, is that social workers require more knowledge of other cultures to be able to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. In all the interviews the lack of knowledge was raised as a current problem.

In our workplace you can see that some social workers are more aware of different cultures and the issues connected to them. Then, it is clear that the understanding of these issue and the problems in

that family grows. It is easier to start working with people from the cultures you have already had contact with. Even if everyone is an individual, you get some kind of certainty to the working relationship, compared to people you don't know anything about. (Focus group 2)

This dominant approach, that could be named as a cultural competence approach, concentrates around the idea of understanding other cultures and thus being able to work more effectively. It can be seen as partly problematic because cultures are mainly viewed as static and non-contextual. The question is how much one can interpret someone's situation based on the previous situations with other service user families from similar cultural backgrounds. There is also a competing approach that emphasizes other cultures as something we cannot just come to understand.

I feel that in the end I cannot really understand their culture. That even though I know things about it, I cannot really understand it. That in some level I need to know, but I don't know if I need to deeply understand, because I haven't lived that. (Focus group 1)

Here the social worker ponders the meaning of learning about other cultures and claims that it might not be possible. Also, notable here is, that *their* culture becomes defined as something that is not *our* culture. In relation to other cultures, our own culture becomes interpreted as coherent, uniform and intelligible. On one hand, this approach serves as a counter argument for the cultural competence approach, while on the other hand it may strengthen the imaginary distance between *us* and *them* and increase othering. Another social worker suggests that, instead of learning other cultures, we should embrace the service users as experts in their own cultures.

Well if we think about how many cultures there are, thousands in the world, and you never know who ends up as a client here. But maybe then we can think that the client is the expert in their own culture. That you can like ask that how about you... (Focus group 1)

Besides presenting a noble idea of valuing the knowledge of people themselves, the very notion of culture as a defining factor is not questioned. Both the cultural competence approach and the approach of seeing clients as experts of their own cultures highlights the meaning of culture over other factors. On the contrary, Finnish families only become defined by culture in comparison to racialized families. It can be argued that culture intersects with race and ethnicity in a way that only the cultural other is described through culture, while the problems in the dominant ethnic group are viewed through individualised explanations.

Many difficulties in racialized service user families are explained with the collision of two cultures. The conflicts concern especially gender equality and the respect for parents and become visible

especially in relation to teenage girls from immigrant families. The difficulties are understood as arising from the different rights, responsibilities and expectations these teenagers have within their families and in the outside society. In the next chapter I will discuss gender and culture related issues in more detail.

5.4 Culturalized violence and the position of women

Violence is a theme that is repeatedly brought up when discussing child welfare social work with families from different cultural backgrounds. The topic of violence covers both violence towards children and violence towards women, because both are interpreted through understandings of patriarchal culture. Firstly, violence towards children becomes interpreted through the differences in legislation between Finland and other countries regarding corporal discipline. Some social workers think that there is no difference in how they react to violence in relation to the families' backgrounds. However, some argue that they are more understanding with immigrant families and are willing to offer more time to adapt to our standards and to offer more support measures before placing the child in substitute care because of violence. Secondly, and especially with teenage daughters, violence becomes interpreted as honour related.

I think that we live in a rather individualistic culture where the individual is the unit. In many cultures, especially in the Middle East, the meaning of family is pronounced through which the honour-related violence becomes understood. I think it is an issue that needs to be noticed and acknowledged in the work. And we do. We don't have to think about honour-related issues with Finnish families, if a teenager can return home and if she would be killed. (Focus group 2)

The questions of race or ethnic background are inevitably intersecting with religion because the same mechanisms of othering are connected to both racialization and the supposition of a religious background. In the following quote one interviewee describes why social workers might have negative attitudes towards the use of hijab.

Maybe there is the strong assumption that when we think that in our society, women have a strong self-determination about their own body and clothing nowadays, that they don't have to listen to anyone or please anyone but do as they please themselves. And we don't have any religion there in the background. (In-depth interview 3)

She explains the negative attitudes towards Islam to be arising from the concern of the position of women. The assumption here is that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab and they are not in control of their own bodies and clothing. While social workers may have experiences with Muslim

women who are oppressed and controlled, is this view rather generalizing and fails to recognize different experiences. This quote illustrates the conflict between race and gender in the context of Nordic gender equality. Through processes of racialization, the image of the Muslim woman is constructed through oppressive position and it is seen in conflict with the Nordic values of gender equality. The same interviewee brings up Koran when talking about gendered violence in immigrant families and ponders the acceptance of violence in other cultures and religions.

And one big group are these immigrant background families who have an issue with domestic violence. So the women look for protection and help. Is the woman's position, is it allowed to hit women according to some cultures or religions? I don't know, I haven't read the Koran ever. You hear stories that the Koran allows you to hit women, but I don't know about that. And the position of women is discussed a lot that it isn't as strong and equal as in our culture, that is that causing the violence. That is one cultural factor. (In-depth interview 3)

What is said between the lines is the supposition that violence is not part of *our* culture. Muslims are being generalized to sectarian interpretations and connected to religious extremism. Thus, violence becomes interpreted through culture and religion rather than other explanatory factors. Besides physical violence, silencing is also described as a form of violence in immigrant families.

It does feel violent, in a situation that if the children have come here when they were very young, or even born here, and then they live their lives with their friends and this Finnish reality and their futures are most likely in Finland within Finnish norms and values. It feels very violent then that if a girl cannot say something. Not for this mother or other women, it is their reality and it doesn't have to be even a bad issue if it is like that, but it is this gap here. That on the other hand you are silenced but on the other you live there. (In-depth interview 2)

Social workers express a struggle to find the women's perspectives in immigrant families because they have experiences that often men are the ones who are in contact with authorities and who speak for the whole family in child welfare meetings.

SW: If you think that our premises in the Western scheme is that the mother is in the centre, we work primarily with mothers. That we are always like oh how about the father? How does he take part, should we call him too? So in some way in immigrant families the father might be the only one you can call, even if the mother speaks the language, she is not the one in control of family issues. And the man is very strong and father. So when we have one format with Western people, we have another one with immigrants.

IN: It is interesting you mention we work more with mothers, it is different from the common Western idea of an equal family relations where both parents have an equal position.

SW: Well if you think about a relationship, I think we have very equal ideals. But when it comes to parenthood I dare to claim that we are very mother-centered.

(Focus group 2)

The interviewee brings up an interesting notion of differences in family relations and questions the notion of gender equal parenting in the Finnish context. Usually, family life in Finland is viewed through gender equal ideas. However, this interviewee brings up the lack of inclusion for fathers in child welfare social work. Interestingly, fathers' roles are presented as more important in immigrant families and the mother-centeredness becomes questioned.

In the analysis I have presented my findings under four main themes. However, these themes are not separate but rather overlapping. The different understandings of racism are connected to the role of social workers and to the manner culture is described. Particularly, culture is inseparably connected to ideas of gender and gender equality. In the next chapter I will discuss my main findings in relation to previous literature and the main theoretical concepts presented earlier.

6 Discussion

My research task was to study how Finnish child welfare social workers perceive racism and what meanings they give to racism in their work with service users. Another emphasis was in exploring the complicated relationship between racism and gender equality in the Nordic context. In the discussion, my aim is – in the context of my data – to answer the following research questions:

1) How do social workers understand racism, racialization and social work's role in relation to these processes?

2) How do social workers understand the relationship between race and gender?

Racialization and racism are complex phenomena, and there is great variance in the understandings and interpretations of these issues amongst professionals. The findings appear to resemble other scholars' notions that personal racism is more widely recognized compared to institutional racism (eg. Dominelli 2012). Many of the social workers interviewed were inclined to allocate racism to the minds of individuals. In addition, they portrayed ignorance and societal inequality as plausible explanations for racism. The problem with this individualising understanding of racism is that it

allows us to exclude ourselves from the reflection. We cannot start critically examining our own ideas and practices, if we merely see racism as a problem of a few individuals.

Furthermore, old racism based on racial hierarchies seemed to be more easily identified when compared to cultural forms of racism (Puuronen 2011). Compared to cultural prejudices, prejudices based on an individual's racialized background appear to have a tendency to be more easily condemned. This is not to allege that other forms of racism would remain totally unnoticed. Cultural, institutional and structural forms of racism are also being recognized, but there seems to be more variation amongst the informants. Possessing a narrow view on racism can be problematic in social work because it can prevent us from understanding the far-reaching consequences of structural inequality.

One of the dominant ideas amongst the interviewees was that racism is caused by ignorance and a lack of knowledge about other cultures. Many of the interviewees expressed views that the next generation will naturally be less racist because they are growing up in a more multicultural society. For this reason, the interviewees argued that it is essential for children to be mixed with immigrant children in schools to become more familiar with different people and cultures. I find the idea of such contextual change to naturally eliminate racism as rather optimistic. One could argue that, actually, the recent growth in the numbers of asylum seekers has provoked negative changes in politics and in the formation of public opinion. Many scholars have noticed the rise of far-right movements and islamophobia across Europe (Dominelli 2017, 4–5). The social workers interviewed recognized these changes and discussed the hardening of public attitudes towards immigration. Simultaneously, they argued for a change to be expected. This could be interpreted as a desire for a more tolerant society in the future.

As mentioned earlier, racism was more widely recognized in the society but far less identified within social work. I asked my interviewees, if they experienced that social workers' backgrounds affected the work with service users from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some of the social workers seemed to reflect on their own backgrounds' effects for the first time. Many of the interviewees expressed views that they do not find the social workers' or service users' ethnic background or societal class affecting the work. Child welfare social work is based on legislation and thus professionalism is believed to guarantee equal treatment for everyone. However, some interviewees reflected more on their own backgrounds and recognized the power relations related not only to their position as a professional, but also to the significance of their whiteness and middle-class background. Nonetheless, the differences in personal backgrounds between the social

workers and the service users were mostly interpreted through cultural differences which can lead to communication problems. The power dynamics related to privileged and oppressed positions were less examined. Lena Dominelli (1997, 15) reminds us that when belonging to a group of white people or other privileged groups, we benefit from the racial hierarchy even when we do not notice or want it. She claims that it is essential to acknowledge and recognize our own privileges in order to be able to detect the oppression racialized groups are facing.

The discourse of professionalism was dominant in my data. Professionalism was understood in terms of neutrality, objectivity and equality, as Lena Dominelli has also noted. Mainly, my interviewees experienced the ability to assess the situations in their client families objectively despite their backgrounds, which appears partly problematic. Professionalism may promote equal treatment but also obscure understandings of unequal premises. The strong emphasis on neutrality may lead to colour-blindness, possibly preventing social workers from noticing the significant differences, such as racialized background. (Dominelli 1997, 33–34.) For me, some amount of colour-blindness was clearly visible in the data. There seems to be a paradox in having non-racism as an objective and highlighting professionalism to an extent, which leads the professionals to bypass service users' racialized backgrounds and to claim everyone is treated the same. While most of the social workers clearly strive to be and to present themselves as non-racist, they may fail to notice the effects of racism in the process. As Suvi Keskinen (2012, 309–313) has noted, social workers might want to avoid racializing premises and use universal discourse instead. This is not to say that significant differences are not recognized. Based on my data, I would argue that differences are recognized in relation to service users' situations while, simultaneously, social work with these service users is described in terms of neutral professionalism and universalist values.

Social workers working in child welfare can easily name attributes to 'normal' family and 'normal' family life. Both unquestioning the norms and critically examining the norms exist side by side. Violence and gender equality seem to be issues where normality is strictly constructed through Finnish values and at the same time other cultures are presented in conflict with these local values. Concurrently, social workers are willing to be flexible and to accept ways of parenting and upbringing that are not considered part of the dominant culture. Which norms to follow remains a question to which there are hardly any clear-cut answers to be found, instead it presses for a necessity to continuous reflection.

Barzoo Eliassi (2015) claims that the privileged groups tend to understand their own culture as a norm, while other groups and cultures are being positioned outside of this norm. Social work

operates through categories which place normative families outside of social work while the *othered* groups are located to subjects of social work. According to Eliassi (2015, 556–558), the dilemma in social work is to recognize the categories of otherness as the subjects of social work interventions but, at the same time, striving to fight these othering mechanisms. Compared to Eliassi's findings, I have identified some rhetorics of othering but also critical examination of our own cultural norms. There seems to be a tension between accepting different norms and claiming to work in the same manner with all the service users despite of their backgrounds. While service users' situations become interpreted through diversity, the ideal social work is viewed as universalist. I believe the Finnish child welfare social workers have the will to develop the skills to approach norms critically. However, the pressure with workload and the lack of resources may cause the lack of time to accomplish critical reflection. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to the the discussion of possibly othering norms and encourage commitment to developing the practice.

My findings support the notion presented by Lena Dominelli (2017, 52), that the dominant approach in social work is focused on cultural differences. Similarly, Malcolm Payne (2005, 269–270) separates the two main discourses – the cultural sensitivity discourse and the anti-discriminative discourse. Anti-racist practice, which belongs to anti-discriminatory discourse, is not common in Finland, which was also visible in my interviews. Even when racism was recognized, it was rarely named as a big problem in the lives of the service users. The dominant approach can be named as cultural competence, while references to anti-racist approach are scarce. However, anti-racist approach is not non-existent while some of the interviewees clearly strive to place more emphasis on racism as a structural issue and see the need for reflection on the current practices.

As mentioned before, the cultural approach seems to be more familiar to social workers compared to the themes of racialization and racism. Cultural differences were presented as a challenge both within immigrant families and in the working relationships between the service users and social workers. Social workers recognized many immigrant children struggling between the requirements of two different cultures. Merja Anis has made similar findings in the context of Finnish child welfare work and she presents three main manners in perceiving culture. Firstly, the social workers use culture to explain the normal and the accepted family life. The norms related to parenting and upbringing are reasoned through Finnish and Western culture. (Anis 2005, 7–8.) This was especially evident in my data in relation to violence towards children, where Finnish culture was presented as the norm and violence was understood as belonging to other upbringing traditions.

Secondly, according to Anis, culture is understood as a difficulty that explains the conflicts and differences in opinions between the service user and the social worker. Using culture as an explanation offers an easy way to bypass the conflict and to avoid viewing the situation from an individual perspective. (Anis 2005, 12–14.) Also, in my interviews, the difficulties in the working relationship were often explained in terms of cultural differences. Cultures were partly presented as foreign languages that obstruct communication between professionals and service users. Social workers also described how the service users use cultural differences to explain the conflicts and their experiences of social workers not understanding their culture.

Thirdly, Anis describes culture as a methodological tool which a social worker can use to express interest in the service user and their cultural background. Showing interest is used as a tool to create a positive relationship between the social worker and the service user. (Anis 2005, 14–16.) The specific interest for working with families from different cultural backgrounds can be understood as part of this third approach. On the other hand, the mystifying approach to other cultures, which were interpreted as something an outsider cannot understand, can be read in terms of reluctance to use culture as a tool to connect with the service users. All these three ways of constructing culture that Anis presented, were visible in my data, although the first two were more commonly used.

The lack of knowledge of other cultures was often named as the biggest challenge in working with families from different cultural backgrounds. In the analysis, I named this understanding as the cultural competence approach. Similarly, Gai Harrison and Rachel Turner (2011) name cultural competence as a prominent discourse in social work and other caring professions. They define cultural competence being about “providing culturally responsive services to a multicultural clientele” (ibid. 334), while they, at the same time, recognize the vagueness of the concept. According to Harrison and Turner, the lack of cultural competence is usually connected to cultural insensitivity and racism. My interviewees seem to argue accordingly, and they bring up aspects of cultural competence in connection with discussions of racism.

The cultural competence approach has received significant criticism too, because culture is mainly equated with non-Western cultures. Thus, racialized groups become defined through culturalized understandings (Harrison & Turner 2011, 335). The risk is that culture becomes something that only defines the *Other* and narrows our understandings of minority groups. This can be named as an essentialist view, where cultures are assumed to possess some kind of stable nature. The way different cultures were described in my data follow this notion. The pursuit of learning other cultures can be interpreted as seeing cultures as homogeneous, uniform and non-contextual. Not

understanding the fluidity of cultural identities may lead to a situation, where we encounter people as stereotypical representations of their assumed culture. The common understanding in my data seems to be, that culture is something people inherit and bring with them from the countries of their origin. There seems to be a lack of seeing cultures as fluid, contextual and ever-changing. This is problematic in social work practice because it may simplify people into narrow cultural categories and prevent understanding individual differences.

Laura Abrams and Gené Moio (2009, 247, 250) explain the main critique towards the cultural competence model being the lack of addressing institutionalized racism by reinforcing a colour-blind paradigm and suggest using Critical race theory to make structural inequalities visible. I find this critique very valid in relation to my data. Social workers seem to embrace the idea of working against racism by arguing that they make no differentiation between the service users based on their racial background. However, these colour-blind approaches may actually lead to ignoring the structural inequalities. Fortunately, some of the interviewees recognized institutional racism in child welfare practices but unfortunately for many parts, racism was bypassed as something that only exists outside of the institution of social work. Thus, critical examination of the ideas and practices within social work is clearly needed.

Different understandings of racism and culture are inseparably connected to gender. The discussions of the meaning of gender in the work with families from different racialized groups was connected to the issues of power and violence. The culturalized women were often presented as silenced and oppressed victims. Especially in relation to violence, the image of the *Other* woman takes the form of an Muslim woman. Religion is not always mentioned but the references to veiling imply the connection to Islam. Similarly, some scholars have noted (Vuori 2012, 253) that the caricature of an immigrant is based on an image of a Muslim woman, who is seen in an oppressed position in her culture and religion. Furthermore, immigrant women are described through Islam even when their religious background is not known (Honkasalo 2012, 271).

According to Keith Pringle's (2010, 27–28) findings from the Swedish context, the interviewed professionals connected gendered violence and oppression of women to ethnic minorities, especially to those of a Muslim background. I also noticed that violence and oppression in Muslim families became interpreted first and foremost through culture and religion, unlike the violence in Finnish families. Violence in Finnish families is not mentioned, even though social workers certainly are aware of the alarmingly high numbers of gendered violence in the Finnish society (FRA 2014, 28).

When discussing immigration, social workers define the Finnish culture as gender equal and non-tolerant towards violence, despite the fact that domestic violence is very much present in Finnish families too. Instead, Finnish culture becomes understood as the opposite of the immigrant cultures and the underlying assumption is that violence is not accepted. Barzoo Eliassi (2015, 564–566) claims that the explanatory factors behind domestic violence are interpreted differently depending on the family's background: in majority ethnic families violence is understood as a sum of individual and psychological problems, whereas in Muslim families violence is seen as part of the culture. The same issue shows clearly from my data, where violence within different racialized groups is mostly interpreted through culture and religion. This is problematic because understanding violence as an integral part of a given culture reduces the possibilities of altering the situation. What kind of change can social work offer, if other cultures are seen as doomed with gender inequality and violence?

Maria Garbin suggests that understanding immigrant women as victims of their patriarchal cultures is part of constructing *us* and *them*. She claims that the construction of a gender equal Nordic woman requires a binary opposition of the *Other* woman, who is constructed through victimhood, helplessness and powerlessness. (Garbin 2014, 108.) In a same manner, the discussion of veiling in my data created a distance between immigrant women and women in our societies by suggesting that Finnish women possess self-determination that immigrant women are lacking. For some of the interviewees, hijab represents that lack of self-determination and implies that *the Other* cannot decide about their own bodies and clothing. The use of hijab evokes manifold emotions because Muslim women are, at the same time, portrayed as victims but also as a threat to the local values (Bilge 2010, 10).

This is very problematic in social work because this simplifying image of immigrant women eliminates their agency. If the objective is empowerment and increased equality, victimization does not have much to offer. Instead, I think that Finnish social work would benefit from a more intersectional approach. We need to understand that racism and sexism can reinforce one another to create even more oppressed positions. The prevalence of the emphasis on gender equality in my data is pleasing but unfortunately gender equality is usually discussed in contrast to the cultural others, which are viewed as not gender equal. Suvi Keskinen and Ulla Vuori suggest that gender equality and women's position are essential when defining the Finnish or Western value base (Keskinen & Vuori 2012, 22). Also in my data, gender and gender equality seem to get a more central position in relation to racialized groups. Cultural generalizations are more avoided in other contexts but

violence and the position of women is understood as issues where cultural prejudices become justified.

Certainly, violence exists within cultural minorities and this violence may have specific traits, which have to be acknowledged. According to my findings, the complexity of women's position within racialized groups can be understood as a dilemma. Suvi Keskinen (2012) uses the concept of the universal discourse in her study, where Finnish social workers mostly constructed experiences of domestic violence similarly despite the background. According to her, it works as a positive counter discourse to culturalized explanations but at the same time it can lead to neglecting the 'significant differences'. Unlike in Keskinen's study, my interviewees mostly explained the violence through culturalized explanations but emphasized universalism in social work support measures. Despite the slight differences in interpretations, Keskinen's notions of the paradox of universal treatment can still be valid. Without recognizing the significant differences, the experiences of racism can remain unnoticed and lead to ignoring minority experiences. While embracing the ideals of universalism, it is essential to remember that equality does not mean that everyone would benefit from the same support measures. (Keskinen 2012, 309–313.) Merja Anis (2008, 88), accordingly, calls for paying attention to both equality and differences simultaneously in social work practice, so that ignoring the differences would not lead to actual inequality.

The problems in the lives of culturalized women are mostly constructed through the idea of oppressive cultures and racism receives far less attention. However, there are some notions recognizing, for example, the structural racism in the labour market, which prevents educated immigrant women from finding jobs equivalent to their education and directs these women to low-paid careers such as care work. Moving towards an anti-racist approach, social work would require professionals to learn more about racism to be able to acknowledge racist structures and to work against them. There does not have to be a choice of whether to focus on racism or the oppression of women, but these issues can exist as objectives simultaneously.

My findings predominantly follow the previous findings on racism in the field of social work. Cultural competence appears as a dominant approach and culture is used in manifold manner to explain difficulties both in racialized families and between the social workers and service users. Anti-racist or anti-oppressive approaches only appear occasionally, and even though racism is understood as an important societal issue, it is infrequently recognized in social work practices. Gender, gender equality and violence are issues, where culture receives an unquestioned position in the interpretations of social workers.

7 Conclusion

As other scholars have noted (Anis 2006; Kriz & Skivenes 2010), race is not a common concept in the Nordic countries. This is evident in my data too, as the social workers seemed to avoid talking about race and would use ethnicity and culture instead. Still, race must be understood as an essential concept in understanding racism. Without acknowledging the historicity of race and racism, the still existing importance of race as a power structure remains invisible.

Culture appears to be the main explanatory factor used in describing differences between the majority and the minority groups. Culture becomes emphasized as an explanatory factor especially in relation to gender equality. Regarding social work with different racialized groups, cultural competence is named as an expertise needed. The problem with the strong emphasis on understanding other cultures is that service users easily become reduced to archetypes of their assumed culture (Harrison & Turner 2011). Thus, cultural competence approach might risk the ability to notice individual differences and to recognize true diversity.

Social workers mainly recognize racism outside of their own institution. Professionalism and universalism are presented as guiding values expected to guarantee equal treatment and to prevent racist practices. However, with this emphasis on neutrality and placing social work above the problems of racism, we risk failing to recognize the norms and prejudices that guide our interpretations. Racism is understood as a negative issue, which social workers do not want to identify with. Seeing racism as unaccepted is a good premise but implementing truly anti-racist social work would require more. I understand racism as an issue so deeply rooted in our society that it is impossible to escape. We have grown up in an environment, where racism is normalized and consequently becomes invisible. To be able to effectively deconstruct racism at all levels requires us to be able to first scrutinize our thoughts and actions.

Tina Mattson (2014, 15) and Lena Dominelli (1997, 46) argue for critical reflection and claim that without the analysis of our own premises, social workers risk reconstructing racist structures and othering practices. Thus, I find it essential for child welfare social workers to critically examine both their own privileges and the premises of the norms operating in the practice. Besides reflection, there is a need for direct anti-racist policies within institutions. As Christie Alastair (2010, 212) mentions, self-reflection cannot merely be used to ease practitioners' awakening awareness of their privileges, but it has to be directed towards actual improvement.

At times of increasing immigration and the growing multiculturalism in the Finnish society it seems evident that there is a need for more social work research on racism and racialization. My findings have provided an insight to some understandings of racism and showed that cultural differences are perceived as a core problem in the relationships between professionals and service users. As other scholars have suggested (Anis 2008), racism has not been in the centre of attention while culture and cultural explanations take the stage. I have focused on social work professionals' understandings that I have found crucial in improving the practices. However, the interest in service user perspectives has been increasing in social work research, and it would be a much-needed approach in studies related to racism too. Combining critical anti-racist approach with service user perspectives and involvement might provide completely new insights to the subject matter.

8 Resources

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9 Appendix

9.1 Consent form

I give my consent to be interviewed as part of Maura Nurmi's master thesis research. The interview is recorded and used as data in the research. When the analysis is completed, the recording and the interview transcript are deleted. Participation in the study is voluntary, and I can at any point of the research withdraw from the study without having to state the reason. Deciding not to take part in the study or to withdraw from the study do not affect my position in the workplace.

By signing the form, I confirm my participation in the study and accept that the recorded interview can be used as data in the research.

Place and date _____

Name _____

Signature _____

Email address _____

(If I wish, that the thesis is sent to me after it has been finished.)

9.2 Interview guide

1) First, I would like to talk about the concept of racism. How would you define racism?

Can you give me examples of acts and speech you would consider racist?

2) How would you describe racism in Finland?

Which racialized groups you find most discriminated in Finland?

3) When working with racialized groups:

Do service users bring up experienced racism? (In social services or otherwise in the society)

Do you ask about their experiences of racism?

4) How do you work with families from different cultural backgrounds?

Do you remember a specific encounter? How did you react?

5) Do you find gender and gender roles to be a different issue when working with families from different cultural backgrounds? How is it different?

6) What kind of difficulties there is in working with people from different cultural backgrounds?

7) In your social work education, were racism and racialization discussed? How?

What kind of skills and knowledge about racism and racialization you gained?

Do you think your education has provided enough tools to understand and deal with issues of racism?

What skills and knowledge you would like to gain?

8) Is racism a relevant topic in social work practice? Why?

What kind of stand should social workers have in relation to racism?