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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to write against normative discourses and interpretations of ‘integration’ by nominating social workers and social work as the main subject of ‘integration’ and find ways to overcome exclusionary and discriminating social work practices. To do that, we use material collected when observing public service interpreters giving lectures to social workers about their experiences from encounters in social work settings. In a critical analysis, we found two ‘integration’ problems, that is, certain problems that social workers have in making themselves accessible and where they risk reinforcing exclusion and discrimination. One problem is ‘the failure of handling perceptions that social services take children’. The other is ‘the failures of (re)producing bureaucratically driven social assistance’. These problems might lead to exclusionary practices towards migrant families, often with disastrous outcomes. The analysis shows that these problems appear due to social workers’ lack of institutional self-awareness, language competencies, and emphatic ability. To overcome these shortcomings, the interpreters emphasized the impact of encounters that social workers were already involved in during their everyday work. The interpreters recognize that social services are unknown to most families who are newly arrived in Sweden and point out the importance of making more efforts to be clear, rephrasing questions, explaining, avoiding abbreviations, and becoming proactive in dialogue outside of the offices, i.e. recognizing that social work is language work.

Introduction
A primary commitment for social work(ers) is to tackle processes of exclusion and provide for social inclusion and justice (Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles 2018; Pierson 2010). Yet, research shows how social work might, in practice, reinforce processes of exclusion and discrimination (Dominelli 2018; Eliassi 2015; Humphries 2004). This latter is emphasized in this article as we situate social workers in a multilingual context of global migration, with commitment in people with migration experiences and with whom they do not share a language. Hence, social workers are considered crucial actors in integration policies and work (Fioretos, Gustafsson, and Norström 2020; Schierenbeck and Spehar 2021).

In the contemporary debate about policies aimed at migrants in Sweden and other European countries, integration is often defined as either a status, e.g. that societies or parts of societies are integrated or segregated, or as a goal, e.g. that there are normative ideas about the meaning of being integrated, often based on white middle-class lifestyle and the importance of being employable...
Furthermore, it is the migrant who is the primary integration subject, who is offered or, rather, obliged to participate in activities aimed at integration, such as Swedish language training (SFI), civic orientation courses, and resettlement programmes.

From a critical perspective on integration, this kind of relationship between the majority and the minority has, in research, been called the minority-oriented model (Hosseini-Kaladjahi 2002; Pripp 2005). The minority-oriented model implies that the majority population and societal institutions do not recognize its impact on segregation, discrimination, and social injustices. Exclusionary practices are not included in the definition of integration. Instead, segregation in housing areas and ethnically segmented labour markets are one-sidedly explained as individual migrants’ lack of resources and competencies (Ibid; Rytter 2019). A critical approach to the minority-oriented model supports a definition of integration as an often asymmetric but still reciprocal process that takes place and continuously goes on, no matter the political goals. In sum, there is a problematic gap between how ‘integration’ is defined and used in an emic sense, that is, in practice, in policymaking and expectations on the society, and how it is defined and used in an etic sense, as an analytical and theoretical concept (Olwig and Pærregaard 2007; Rytter 2019).

Mikkel Rytter (2019) suggests that critically driven researchers should inquire this gap and write against the use of integration as it is used in policies by investigating who is the target for integration policies and who has the power to decide who is integrated and who is not. Inspired by his challenge, we consider this article a counter text as we dispute dominant and normative perspectives on integration as something the migrants are involved in but not the majority society, by making representatives for the majority society targets for integration.

**Aim and research questions**

The aim of the article is to take on this critical approach to how integration is understood in policy and society, turning the minority model upside down and nominating social work and social workers as the main subject of ‘integration’, who lack resources, skills, and competencies, rather than their non-Swedish-speaking clients, and identify as well as find ways to overcome exclusionary and discriminating social work practices. We use empirical material collected in a project called *Cultural dialogue via interpreter* (2020 – 2022). The project included an intervention, a model for interpreters giving lectures about their experiences from everyday encounters between social workers and migrants in welfare settings. For this article, three main questions are formulated:

1. Which areas and situations in social services come forward as prominent and problematic for integration, i.e. integration problems, according to the interpreters’ experiences expressed in the lectures?
2. How can these integration problems, transformed into narratives and discussed during lectures, become a source for change in social services encounters with migrants?
3. What are the implications of writing against ‘integration’ and making social work and social workers targets for integration?

In the following sections, we present previous research. Thereafter are methods and theories more thoroughly explained, followed by a section on results and analysis where we present and discuss two ‘integration’ problems. One problem occurs in social childcare and protection, and the other in social and economic support. In the last section, we discuss how these problems can be used as tools for integration work among social workers.
**Previous research**

The ‘integration’ problems in social work found in our empirical material are also identified in previous research studies and among practitioners (cf. Gustafsson 2020; Kriz and Skivenes 2010; Schierenbeck and Spehar 2021). This is especially true for the area of social childcare and protection. For example, several studies reveal that families with migration experiences or ethnic minorities are not reached by social services support, such as financial, social, health, and psychological assistance, to the same extent as others even though there may be more needs for support for these families (Deng and Marlowe 2013; Nunes et al. 2021; Rania, Pinna, and Coppola 2022). Such difficulties can be linked to families’ weak economy as it sometimes takes a long time for migrants to enter the labour market. In many cases, families end up in temporary housing solutions with overcrowding. Furthermore, many families do not reach social services at all, which may be due to fear of authorities or not knowing what support is available. In these studies, the researchers highlight that these difficulties in accessing welfare are related to the families’ shortcomings such as a lack of knowledge of languages or how society works (Deng and Marlowe 2013; Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2010; Nunes et al. 2021; Rania, Pinna, and Coppola 2022). Suggested implications of this research, in line with the above-described minority model, often include strengthening parents’ knowledge about social services and designing parenting programmes that target parents to change and improve their knowledge and capacities (Bråten, Gustafsson, and Sönnerudbråten 2020; Lucas 2011). A problem with such efforts is that they build on prejudices about migrant families as marked by patriarchal structures, honour-related problems, physical child discipline rather than real-life situations and needs (Bråten, Gustafsson, and Sönnerudbråten 2020; Gustafsson 2020). Linnéa Åberg (2020) shows in a similar way how mandatory courses in civic orientation are built on stereotypical ideas about migrants and what they might need to know as newly arrived in Sweden. However, the reason for not being reached by social service support should also be linked to what is lacking in social services (Fylkesnes, Iversen, and Nygren 2017; Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2010; Ramsay 2016). Marte Knag Fylkesnes and others (Fylkesnes, Iversen, and Nygren 2017) are questioning the deficient positioning of the parents and declare that there also exist discriminatory practices within social services, in that they do not make themselves accessible for the families. Similarly, David Westlake and Westlake and Jones (2018) turn towards the social workers’ lack of competencies, in handling multilingual settings when interacting with families and children. They point out that a lack of competencies in how to talk through an interpreter could be one source of discriminatory practices. They found that social workers tended to skip all kinds of chitchat that they normally used in conversations with families with whom they share language, to establish trust and they tended to go straight into the problem without any contextualization or effort to clarify mistakes (ibid.).

In a study about the use of child language brokering, that is, children who interpret for their parents, Kristina Gustafsson, Eva Norström, and Petra Höglund (2019) have identified discriminatory practices within the area of social assistance. In a quantitative survey among social case workers in social assistance, they found that all respondents (N = 117) had used children as interpreters. They discuss how this leads to discrimination of the service users when they rely on a minor with no training in interpreting. Also, in social assistance, Hussénius (2019, 2021) has shown how exclusion and discrimination practices affect different client groups based on variables such as gender and ethnicity. Based on hundreds of interviews with both welfare professionals and clients with migration experiences about their experiences of their encounters in various welfare institutions Isabell Schierenbeck and Spehar (2021) found empirical evidence of feelings of powerlessness among both groups. Cultural differences are one aspect that the authors explore, but they do not include language as a parameter in their analysis. Authors in social linguistics, like Ingrid Piller (2017) have pointed out how most states and their welfare institutions are marked by a monolingual mindset that disqualifies other language competencies among their clients. Gai Harrison (2006, 2007) underlines the need for social workers to recognize how language use and
Hierarchies go back on the legacy of colonial history and the establishment of civil and military administrations. To demand the use of the colonizers’ languages on behalf of existing languages has been one of the most powerful tools for oppression in colonial history (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Consequently, language has been, and still is, a ‘war zone’ in many countries. Jonathan Hall and Sonia Valdiziviedo (2020) add important perspectives on this battle. By framing social work as language work, they pinpoint the need for language competencies among social workers. This does not mean learning different languages but:

—/a combination of cultural awareness and social diversity as they relate to working in a multilingual environment where language holds immense power. Regardless of the use of interpreters, a social worker’s ability to navigate and mediate language differences skilfully can make a significant difference in building an effective working alliance with a client of a different culture, background and demographics. (2020, p. 18)

Hence language competence implies a more positive perspective on multilingual settings than the more limiting, negative but often-used concept of language barriers.

**Methods, material, and theories**

The empirical basis for this paper is material collected during the implementation of an intervention and research study called *Cultural dialogue via an interpreter* (2020–2022). The project was conducted in collaboration between researchers in social work at Linnaeus University (the authors of this paper) and two public-owned interpreting agencies operating in two regions in Sweden.1 One central part of the intervention was that 12 qualified public service interpreters were trained in rhetoric, didactics, pedagogics, and critical culture theories to lecture about their experiences of interpreted multilingual encounters (Gustafsson, Norström, and Åberg 2022). The motive for this was that interpreters have unique insights when witnessing daily practices where welfare professionals assess, guide, instruct, inform, or give treatments to migrants and that they become aware of obstacles and excluding mechanisms that obstruct encounters. Their unique position is underlined by the fact that they are the only one who masters both languages in the interpreted encounter. Furthermore, compared with other welfare areas where interpreters work, the social services stood out as particularly complex. This was even described as a driving force to participate in the project, to finally be able to talk about encounters in social services.

Another central part of the intervention was that during the project, the interpreters conducted 216 lectures in dialogue with various groups of welfare professionals (n = 64 lectures with 1302 individual participants) and migrants attending Swedish language classes, SFI (n = 152 lectures with a total of 874 unique participants). Besides the intervention our role was to do research and to follow and document the intervention by using ethnographic methods, observations (n = 71) and reflective interviews with the interpreters (n = 10) and participants attending the lectures (welfare professionals and migrants at SFI, total n = 41).

Initially, we used storytelling methods to support the goal of verbally formulating narratives about interpreters, often tacit knowledge (Labonte and Feather 1996). They were asked to narrate specific situations that included more general problems and to write them down. Hence, the core element in the lectures was these detailed narratives described by the interpreter to the participants who were invited to visit the narrated situation. In most cases, the narrative is familiar to the participants since it often occurs in their daily work encounters with clients with migration experiences. By listening to a familiar situation presented by interpreters, the welfare professionals as well as migrants are confronted with an outside perspective on themselves and their practices. They are invited to reflect on the situation from different perspectives.

Furthermore, the intervention is based on moral philosophical theories and concepts. In our case, we wanted to explore if this kind of imaginary visiting narrated situations could lay the ground for developing a capacity for responsible judgement, which according to Hanna Arendt (1958), implies enlarged thought:
The concept of enlarged thought is supposed to explain how a person moves from a narrowly subjective self-regarding perspective on action to a more objective and socially inclusive view. (Young 1997, 358)

Enlarged thought has been further developed in Karl Jaspers’ perception of empathy (Gatta 2014). Empathy is a dual commitment to distancing oneself from and drawing on one’s experience. To Jaspers, empathy is not passive about the other’s situation and requires action and commitment. To activate empathy, the idea of visiting situations plays a crucial role. Based on this Jaspers has developed Arendt’s ideas and suggests that visiting open-ended and real-life situations is fruitful not only for developing enlarged thought but also for enforcing empathy (ibid., Gillies 2016). We have added thoughts from Iris Marion Young (1997), who more explicitly puts the idea of enlarged thought and empathy in a context of reciprocity in encounters marked by power asymmetries. Besides empathy and responsible judgements, she looks for the development of moral respect. She writes: ‘Moral respect between people entails reciprocity between them in the sense that each acknowledges and takes into account the other (Young 1997, 343)’. She adds that power asymmetries can never be (fully) overcome, and therefore, the social worker needs to recognize them as a fundamental condition for each encounter, while the clients are not responsible for handling these asymmetries at all.

As observers of the lectures, conducted online and in real life, we documented how the participants, both welfare professionals and migrants, received and discussed these narratives with the interpreters. The observations were documented in thick descriptions (Davies 2008). The material thus produced gave us and the interpreters opportunities to reflect and discuss the complexities of interpreted multilingual encounters, experiences of misunderstandings and shortcomings, and innovative and productive solutions to problems that might appear. In a qualitative analysis and thematic coding of the collected material, we have found two recurring narratives about situations in different versions that stand out as particularly complex and, therefore, as relevant to visit (Rapley 2010). We have assembled these situations under the label ‘integration’ problems. These problems emerged during the project and are found in different parts of the collected material.

Result and analysis

Problem one – “the failure of handling perceptions that social services take children”

The first ‘integration’ problem was ‘the failure of handling perceptions that social services take children’. According to the interpreters, the word ‘social services’ was, as a word, loaded with bad connotations among many migrant families. Other frightening words were ‘report of concern about a child’. In their lectures, the interpreters talked about how stories flourished among migrants about how the social services take children, that children are abducted to a secret place, and that they are taken without an investigation or a reason that the parents could understand.

It is essential to highlight that this fear reflects reality as migrant families are overrepresented in the statistics of children taken into care (Grim and Persdotter 2021). Based on a thematic coding of the material, three subthemes that together support and reinforce the main problem, fear, emerged. Firstly, there is a profound belief that children are taken without a proper assessment. Secondly, a problem lies in the (mis)information about children as rights holders. Thirdly, families were continuously exposed to other types of sources, in international social media and languages other than Swedish, that spread (dis)information about how Swedish social services take children from families.

Taken without a proper assessment

During a lecture with migrants at SFI, two interpreters opened the dialogue by saying, “we have received some questions about social services and why they take children ”. Referring to the above-described knowledge of how this perspective was widespread among migrants, he continues: ‘There
are many migrant parents who think that it is the only thing the social services do, take children. A participant responded immediately and expressed how this anxiety affects her everyday life:

Maybe if the child has a bruise or mark of some sort, in kindergarten, in the school, it can be a call to social services. But she may have a mark from chocolate perhaps. My child has eczema. I’m afraid of what they’ll do if they find out she’s got bruises or other marks. I think about this a lot, every day, very stressed, stressed.

Another participant continued with an example she has heard about, confirming the narrative.

One I know. Or one I heard of. The girl is 12 years old. Her friend asked her if she wanted to sleep over at her place. But the girl's parents do not want her to sleep over at a place they do not know, and after that, the social services came, and they wanted to take the girl. They wanted to take that girl.

Some participants at SFI state that they are targets of discrimination and racism. Their feeling of being targets of social services is underpinned by experiences of prejudice; that is, the social services, as the rest of the society, have stereotypical views on migrant parents, as bad parenthood based on patriarchal structures, physical child discipline etc. Later, during another lecture with social workers, the interpreter reflects on the anxiety these migrants at SFI had shared and the effect of such stories. How much stress and fear it implies based on the belief that it only takes one bruise, one phone call or one missed appointment to take away a child. He concludes:

They think that social service is like a devil. That the social services' focus is on taking migrant children. That is what they do, period. I have interpreted for people who have run to an appointment, for example, to the dentist, and parents who have been fifteen minutes early, saying, 'Pooh, I arrived on time'. And I say, but there is no problem, you are fifteen minutes early. And so, they say, 'Everyone says they will take the children if you do not arrive on time'. I have been with parents with tiny babies who cry, living on the second floor, and when neighbours on the third floor complained, they did everything to move because they thought they would be reported to social services, who would come and take the children.

The interpreter can pass on these experiences in their lectures to social workers and open possibilities to react and discuss these problems with them. According to the interpreters, it is especially important to find ways to communicate the long investigation, preventive work and supportive processes that precedes imperative decisions of taking children from their families to build trust.

(Mis)information about children as rights holders

A second subtheme can be found in public authorities informing migrant parents and children about children’s rights and childrearing. Several of the 12 interpreters have interpreted at civic orientation classes where information is given about children’s rights in Sweden. Based on this, they saw a potential problem that might be parents and their children that lose track of parents’ rights and duties. Too much information can become misinformation. This was confirmed by migrants in the lectures, and a common claim was that it sometimes appeared as if only children have rights in Sweden. They witnessed how the priority of the child’s rights over other family members was proved each time a social worker or schoolteacher addressed the child rather than the parent.

The interpreters discussed how a particular problem due to such information was that children threatened or even reported their parents for neglect to the social services if they were not allowed to decide on some issues. For example, one interpreter talked about an assignment he recently had over the telephone.

A 14-year-old girl had called social services and was upset. (…). The youth said her mother had strict rules that limited her life. The social worker had asked what kind of rules. And she answers that she must come home at a particular time. The social worker asks at what time? The girl answers at eight o’clock in the evening. The social worker says that it is a very reasonable time limit that her mother has given her.

When an interpreter talks about such a situation, one participant at SFI asks, ‘what shall I do if my daughter is lying to social services’? At first, the Swedish language teacher as well as the interpreter tries to make something funny out of it, asking with a smile: ‘Are you sure your daughter is lying’?
The man stays serious and replies that he has big troubles because his daughter wants to have a particular sweater, but he can’t afford it this month. The daughter threatens him, claiming she will call social services if he doesn’t get her that sweater. And he finishes his description by saying he thinks he can buy her that sweater next month.

In another lecture on the same topic, a man asks for clear descriptions from social services about the exact times when children should be at home at a particular age and at what ages they can look after their siblings, and how much they should be allowed to use their smartphones. He explains how he has received information repeatedly about how children should be brought up in Sweden, but the descriptions are abstract. His question reflects an opinion about how social services, an omnipotent authority with information about how things should and shouldn’t be, keep information to themselves. And he expects that this might lead to fatal situations for families who do not know the ‘rules’.

Other sources of (dis)information
A third subtheme is how people gain and spread information through various sources like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram about social services as a welfare institution that cold-bloodedly takes children without any proper reason. After a lecture conducted for social services, one of the Somali interpreters seemed disappointed in the social workers, who did not understand the extent of the problem of how disinformation was continuously spread among migrants in Sweden. He knew that many migrants have other sources of knowledge that they trust much more than the information provided by the authorities. He picks up his mobile phone and shows a series on YouTube where a Somali mother uploads videos every week about how her children have been taken. The interpreter explains that many people watch these films.

Based on this, one of the interpreters passes on information to social workers about the impact of these media as a primary source of knowledge about how social services work in Sweden. He takes himself as an example. He was on holiday in Lebanon, and his cousin shared a link to a page on Facebook that showed a film about how a child was taken into custody in a chaotic situation. The cousin asked: What is happening in Sweden? Why do social services constantly take children from their parents? The interpreter ends his narrative by underlining: ‘The rumours are there. That in Sweden you take children’. Again, to counteract and recognize the impact of such information seems to be an important task for social services, according to the interpreters.

The fear and frustration that are identified here in relation to social childcare and protection is a widespread and significant problem that was manifested in public early in 2022. Then migrant parents in Sweden arranged demonstrations against social services in two major city centres. These manifestations were forcibly reinforced by parallel attacks in social media where international militant religious organizations threatened Swedish social services and even individual social workers. The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency acted seriously on these threats, as well as the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) and various immigrant associations and congregations (Forsberg and Fält 2022; Rundberg 2022).

Problem two – “the failures of (re)producing bureaucratically driven social assistance”

The second problem is labelled ‘the failures of (re)producing bureaucratically driven social assistance’. In comparison to the interpreters’ narratives about ‘the failure of handling perceptions that social services take children’ which were straightforward and to the point, this topic is filled with long, sad, and complicated stories about people who lost both homes and families due to economic problems that all started in misunderstandings around the bureaucracy of social assistance. The following excerpt is an example of one of these complicated situations that the interpreters narrated in lectures to introduce this problem.
These situations can be difficult, even if you have an interpreter. In this case, it was a family that needed to apply for money for maintenance support. The social worker gave much information about what you can and cannot do when you receive income support. She asked many questions: Do you have etablingsbidrag (introduction benefit), do you not have alfakassa (unemployment insurance fund), do you receive child allowance or other allowances from the social insurance office? She asked about assets: Do you own a boat, a car, or other property? (...) Then the social worker says: If you get money retroactively, you are obliged to repay what you now receive. The family did neither ask what this meant nor to have it explained more clearly, but I wonder if they understood everything or anything at all. But at that moment, I was not allowed to get involved due to my ethical guidelines as an interpreter. When you are newly arrived, it can take time before you get money from different authorities. After this, the family received maintenance support. Later I was booked at the same place. The family had received child allowance retroactively, SEK 20,000. But the family had used it to pay smugglers, so they did not have anything left. Then the social worker explains that you do not get more money because then you get a surplus. The father in the family felt bad and was so frustrated. After that, the family had to borrow money, and two months later, the social service provider saw that they had received a swish (direct money transfer) as the father had borrowed money from his brother. The social worker must follow the law, meaning the family was not entitled to benefits because money had been deposited into their account. Thus, they were rejected again. The father felt very bad; this was clear.2

The excerpt illustrates another three subthemes. The first subtheme includes the sometimes overwhelmingly complex relation between different economic support involving several authorities. The second is social workers’ institutional talk and standardized forms. The third subtheme is that the individual is expected to speak up if they do not understand and actively participate in their own assessment. Participation is a word of honour in the Social Service Act (2001, 453, chapter 1 section 7), but it is not always self-evident what it is all about among clients.

Complex relations between different authorities

During a lecture for social workers, one interpreter tried to draw their attention to the complexities of migrants’ contacts with many different authorities. He began by saying:

You are familiar with your workplace; you know the social codes, routines, and rules. You also know the overall system. Because the migrants are newcomers, there is a lot of chaos. Every migrant is asked to contact many authorities, and it is exceedingly difficult to understand who does what. And in the end, the client is left with, ‘What should I do?’.

In another lecture, the problem is underpinned by an illustrative PowerPoint where the interpreter has scattered words like activity support, development allowance, introduction benefit allowance, additional introduction allowance, social assistance, social insurance, unemployment insurance, sick leave compensation, parental leave compensation, activation support, etc. He explains that all these are examples of different ways of receiving economic support, and they are often summarized by migrants under one label, namely ‘my salary’.

On other occasions, the PowerPoint is filled with names of authorities responsible for allowing economic support, that is, the social services, the Swedish Public Employment Agency, The National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Tax Agency, etc. As shown in the lectures in Swedish language classes, migrants often asked the interpreters about the differences between these authorities. The interpreters clarified and explained how they are related to each other, and which is responsible for what. A problem related to this confusion expressed sometimes explicitly, sometimes between the lines, was a widespread suspicion among social workers as well as migrants that receivers of economic support were cheating the system. This is discussed in lectures for migrants, and the interpreters provide guidance to ensure the participants do not risk making mistakes. While in lectures for social workers, they try to explain why newly arrived migrants might make mistakes unwillingly rather than cheating on purpose. It is simply too complicated, and often, a specific date or detail in the given information that the client has missed starts all troubles, as in the story above. This explanation of the suspicion of cheating is one reason the authorities work formally, leading to the next subtheme.
Institutional talk and standardized forms

The confusion among migrants about economic support and unclarity around the responsible authorities became even more problematic due to the often difficult technical terminology used in these settings. As the story above about the newly arrived family’s meeting with social assistance illustrates, it is not only technical terminology that is problematic but also the rationalities that lie behind different forms of economic support.

The takeaway message from the story was, among other things, that social workers need to understand how problematic it is to use standardized forms without any explanations. These are difficult on any occasion, also with Swedish-speaking clients, but in the case of newly arrived migrants, many questions do not match their situation and might cause stress, as in the case of the story above. It can also undermine social service confidence since the questions might seem ridiculous. In preparation for a lecture, an interpreter shared a situation different from most other meetings he had interpreted. He describes how the social worker started asking the same standardized questions as she always did. But when she came to the question about the boat, she said, ‘Do you know what? These questions are not at all made for you and your situation. We put them away, and you and I talk freely about your financial situation’. According to the interpreter, this led to a much more fruitful investigation.

Expectations on participation

The third subtheme is the idea that the individual clients are expected to speak up if they do not understand, be active, and participate in assessing their situation. At one lecture, the interpreter told of an incident at a department for social assistance where a single mother with four children was applying for support. The family had been in Sweden only a short time and had been informed about the authorities they needed to meet with, social services, the Swedish Public Employment Service, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, schools, the municipality, the health- and medical care services, etc. The interpreter could see that the mother did not understand the information or the questions about unemployment insurance, saved cash, shares, and funds. Panic was in her eyes and after the meeting she asked the interpreter to explain.

One of the social workers who listened to the story said that her experience was that many migrants say that they understand even when they do not understand at all. The interpreter explains that many migrants seldom ask authorities any questions. They will not admit that they do not understand, even if asked, because they feel insecure and uncomfortable. The interpreter advises the social workers that, instead of asking, ‘Do you understand?’ ask, ‘Can you recount what I just said?’. That would open for more active participation. Similarly, the interpreters suggest migrants not be shy. One interpreter repeatedly explained: ‘Ask all the questions you want. In Sweden, no questions are considered stupid, and authorities are obliged by law to answer’.

Discussion and implications

A conclusion is that both ‘integration’ problems entail that welfare resources are not reaching individuals who need them, that there seems to be a gap between individuals and social services with no actual platform for an engaged encounter, and these shortcomings are for the social services to take responsibility for. Based on that we will return to the issue of turning the minority model for integration upside down and replacing the client as the integration subject with the social worker.

In Sweden, as well as in other European countries, the political rhetoric about integration has become more and more pessimistic, and the status is described as a failure, with increased economic, social, and cultural gaps between migrants and the majority population, leading to segregation, criminality, poverty, and violence. Therefore, demands for stricter regulations, penalties and a more vital police force have become politicians’ top responses to the contemporary (perceived) lack of integration. In addition, political rhetoric is filled with worries about migration as a threat to social welfare and a risk of burdening society. This status description guides further development of
integration policies and their goals, focusing on employment and adjustment of migrants in adopting national values and behaviours (Phillimore, Rachel, and Khan 2018). Hence, in Sweden, many years of development towards multicultural policies and the recognition of multilingualism and pluralism in laws and regulations are now subordinate to new demands for assimilation and an increasingly forceful and exclusive kind of nationalism that intersect all political parties from right to left (cf. Gustafsson and Johansson 2018; Phillimore, Rachel, and Khan 2018). Here the area of social childcare and protection has become a target for political directives pointing out the need for fostering migrant parents in Swedish values. As described in previous research, this often leads to interventions based on prejudice and stereotypical views on migrant families (Åberg, 2020; Bråten et al., 2020 Gustafsson 2020). Inspired by Rytter’s (2019) challenge introduced in the introduction, we consider this article a counter text as we turn the dominant perspective on integration as something the migrants are involved in but not the majority society by making representatives for the majority society targets for integration. We have labelled the by interpreters narrated situations, taking place in social services, as integration problems. The problems are that non-Swedish-speaking clients risk exclusion from welfare and become subjects of discrimination (Gustafsson 2021). It is also important to discuss what may be the underlying causes of these problems. From a broader perspective, it is important to point out the underlying reason for the integration in social work such as the organization, new public management, lack of resources, and heavy workload. This is relevant for a more comprehensive understanding of why social work practices might be exclusionary and discriminating (Dominelli 2018). However, based on the narratives presented here, we have found a lack of skills and competencies among social workers that can be useful for further development of education and training to become (good) ‘integration’ subjects in a continuous and ongoing reciprocal process of integration and to overcome the problems. Firstly the fear of social services taking children; the problem could be framed as a lack of institutional self-awareness of being seen as only a controlling institution that wants to split the children from their parents. In the lectures, the interpreters point out the need to recognize how social services are often new to parents from other countries. Furthermore, the problem is reinforced by the eagerness in society and amongst social workers to give adequate information, primarily focusing on children’s rights. These initiatives are often guided by prejudiced perceptions about migrant families rather than real-life situations and needs and thus become discriminatory (Grim and Persdotter 2021; Gustafsson 2020; Åberg, 2020). The takeaway message is that social workers need training in institutional self-awareness to engage with parents and communicate about their work both inside and outside of their offices. Secondly, we have identified how failing support due to manual and forms might appear due to a lack of language competencies, defined by Hall and Valdiviedeo (2020) as ‘a combination of cultural awareness and social diversity as they relate to working in a multilingual environment where language holds immense power’. Instead of thinking in terms of the migrant’s lack of competencies in the majority language or defining language as a barrier, the social workers are encouraged on the one hand by the interpreters’ narratives to, be more literate about their own institutional language and practise a clear and plain social work language such as to be clear, rephrase questions, explain, and avoid abbreviation, and use more small talk in working on building relation. Moreover, the interpreters on the other hand point at the need to listen more carefully and include the client in the conversation by asking them to give their view on or summarize what they have understood during the meeting. Besides these more concrete and hands-on skills and competences of recognizing and communicating one’s bureaucratic and institutional framework and the broader understanding of language competences, the need for recognizing power asymmetries and the social worker’s superior position to the clients became apparent through the interpreters’ narratives. It is exactly these power asymmetries that give ground for exclusion and discrimination. This is also the reason why the opposite cannot happen, namely that the client would discriminate and exclude the social worker. With this, we would like to end by discussing a possible lack of empathy or misguided empathy implying that ‘misguided empathy’ arises from failures to handle perceptions of others and failing to think and speak outside of scripted or formulated institutional frames. As previously explained,
when we developed the intervention, that is, interpreters’ lectures, we started with theories about enlarged thought, responsible judgement, empathy, and moral reciprocity. Empathy has been defined by Jasper (see Gatta 2014) as a capacity that has a dual commitment to distancing oneself from and drawing on one’s own experience. To Jaspers, empathy is not passive about the other’s situation and requires action and commitment. To activate empathy, the idea of visiting situations plays a crucial role (ibid; Gillies 2016). An implication of the intervention, where interpreters offer their perspective on, for social workers, familiar situations, is that it opens the possibility to take a step back and critically investigate these situations with distance. This is true also for the migrants in SFI. The fact that the narratives are based on someone else’s perspective initiates reflection. Guiding questions to discuss could be. What is the problem according to you? Have you been in similar situations? Depending on how you define the problem, what can you do to make it turn out differently in the future? Finally, to overcome these integration problems and shortcomings, the interpreters emphasized the impact of encounters that social workers were already involved in during their everyday work. To take this step, away ‘from a narrowly subjective self-regarding perspective on action to a more objective and socially inclusive view’ (Young 1997, 335) might be a way to overcome a misguided empathy and find ways to go beyond a superficial idea about whom to integrate and about giving information and instead engage in the clients with reciprocity (Banks 2013). This would be a way for social workers to recognize their part in integration processes and to act against ‘integration’ in its political and structural (emic) sense. Based on this, they can avoid and combat exclusionary and discriminatory practices and structures that they are operating within and therefore part of instead of reproducing them. As Rytter (2019) declares, this is important at a time when the legal and humanitarian rights of migrants and refugees are subjected to contestation and political sanctions in many parts of the world.

Notes

1. The Asylum, Migration, and Integration Foundation (AMIF) financed the project. The study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Agency, Dnr 2020–0471.

2. Words in italics are presented in Swedish followed by a translation. These words refer to technical language used in social assistance and are kept since they illustrate that they are difficult to translate and are often either explained or reproduced in Swedish by the interpreter.

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