



## **Racialised modern welfare work - Or how cultural difference works in Danish welfare**

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# Racialised modern welfare work

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# Welfare work with immigrants and refugees in a social democratic welfare state (Routledge, 2019)

Based on sociological interviews with 48 welfare workers, a variety of professional identities  
→ to **conceptualise** welfare work in relation to society, state and governance

## Main results:

### (A) Welfare work seeks to re-integrate Denmark through:

- (1) Passing on **the idea of rights** meant to strengthen 'the weak' and prepare for societal participation (e.g., via mothers' groups and the bicycle)
- (2) Urging for **cultural modernisation**
- (3) Believing in **policies** that assume human beings are technically governable and economics oriented
- (4) Promoting the **local community as a moral source** for reforming

## Mothers' groups & The bicycle

“The idea was to prepare them to ... well, perhaps not them, but then their children, to become part of the Danish mother's groups because then they would have appropriated a cultural sense of what it entails to be in a group. And we are very proud of that. Today, we actually have mixed groups”  
(Annika, a health visitor)

“One woman rides one of those bikes you can buy in a supermarket. With a BIG helmet on. She rode to the Women's House, she rode around and across the local area, she has an allotment garden out there, and all of a sudden, she uses the bike all the time. I think that is fascinating. She bought her own bike and practiced at night because she thought it was embarrassing. And now she uses her bike when she works as a home carer. She knew the bike was what was needed to get a job. A lot of the other women also ought to be biking”  
(Alice, head of a Woman's house)

## Main results:

### (B) Welfare work as a structural whole operates a global hierarchy of human and cultural difference - race

- (1) By ascribing **ethnic or national affiliation** according to a standard of a Danish welfare state right-based culture
- (2) By ascribing **broader cultural competence** according to a standard of a **Western civilised culture →**
- (3) **Cultural difference** functions as **a social problem and a lack to be remedied; welfare work surfing crises in a remedial circularity (cf. Tess Lea)**

"I think it is a mixed bag, because there are as many illiterate from areas ... you know, places like Kurdistan and such places where they have not been stimulated; where they have not been trained how to read. I know about this when I exercise with the women. They are not able to keep their balance. They did not train their right and left parts of their brains to co-operate from their childhood years." (Caroline, nurse)

If they attend this ward, there has to be a cultural aspect to the situation. If you grew up here and lived all your life here and speak Danish fluently, then you will go: 'hey, why do you come here?' But still, they may struggle to be between these two different cultures. So, there has to be a cultural aspect. If they don't have something cultural with them, then ... but we all do ... (Mona, nurse)

"Well, they sense that I have a comprehensive cultural competence. Just based on a short address, I can tell which nationality we are dealing with because there are issues that frequently belong to particular countries' experiences ..[..].. The Iranian group just comes to mind ..[..].. They can be rather dramatic and almost histrionic. But not necessarily histrionic diagnostically; it may just be a way of doing things Iranian style ..[..].. Because when we are in the area of psychiatry we have to separate, what is pain and what is a way of expressing oneself that we just have difficulty understanding." (Marie, social worker)

“Even though the Somali women de facto are hard to integrate, then when you get to know them, they appear to have a wonderful sense of humor which I absolutely adore and which is magnificent when you witness it. Even though they are poorly integrated and don't know what is going on, they are very cheerful and happy many of them. They think life is beautiful and are happy with what they have.” (Helle, midwife)

# Racialised modern welfare work

**The modern colonial state lives on in welfare work:**

- (1) Race and racialisation is there**, not only as biology and ideology, but as **cultural competence** linked to **hierarchical** power and government (cf. also Alana Lentin 2016)
- (2) Racialised modernity** is in play on the basis of deconstructing European modernity and reconstructing its relations to its constitutive others in the processes of Europe's colonial relations (cf. Barnor Hesse 2007)
- (3) Colonial complicity** is in play: we are all complicit in colonial racist relations. Colonialism affects all countries' social and cultural relations, including knowledge relations (cf. Ulla Vuorela 2009)
- (4) Humanitarian imperialism** within welfare work – addressing what seems to be understood as dislocated people within modern welfare states (cf. also Hesse & Sayyid 2006).