This is the published version of a paper published in *Nordic Social Work Research*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Gustafsson, K. (2020)
Selective parenting programs for parents with foreign backgrounds: Cultural imperialism or democratic practices in social work
https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2019.1573750

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-80091
Selective parenting programs for parents with foreign backgrounds: cultural imperialism or democratic practices in social work?

Kristina Gustafsson

To cite this article: Kristina Gustafsson (2019): Selective parenting programs for parents with foreign backgrounds: cultural imperialism or democratic practices in social work?, Nordic Social Work Research, DOI: 10.1080/2156857X.2019.1573750

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2019.1573750

Published online: 30 Jan 2019.
Selective parenting programs for parents with foreign backgrounds: cultural imperialism or democratic practices in social work?

Kristina Gustafsson

Department of social work, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In focus of this article are two selective parenting programs, both developed locally by Social Services and by a Women’s Shelter organisation in Sweden. Parents with a foreign background is the target group. Their needs are formulated in terms of ‘change values based on patriarchal beliefs in honour’. In the article the programs are described in relation to universal evidence-based parenting programs and a also a three-part dilemma of 1; offering preventative but also normative interventions to 2; selected target groups and 3; based on the idea that migrant parents have special needs due to cultural differences. The aim is to investigate in what ways the practices of conducting parenting programs for this target group could be framed as cultural imperialistic practices or democratic practices in social work. Cultural imperialism leads to oppression while democratic practices are emancipatory. A conclusion is that both practices are apparent and concurrent. Yet the dualism dismantles the risk of reproducing oppression of the selected target group. Another conclusion is that instead of defining parents with foreign backgrounds as culturally different the target group could be defined as a group with migration experience e.g. experience of leaving the home country and family and finding ways of resettlement in a receiving country. Selective parent programs are relevant but an alternative definition would promote democratic practice, where authorities and social workers meet the demands of the participating parents on their own terms, and with the goal, not to change ‘unwished cultural differences’ but to support empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Parenting program; foreign backgrounds; migrants; cultural imperialism; democratic practices

Introduction

I think it is like a great journey. You know, I had a lack of knowledge. I could not find solutions. I just needed a bit of advice and then I could continue on my own. But from the beginning I felt sealed off. It was not easy to be a parent in Sweden. Children can do whatever they want and as a parent you can be punished [by authorities]. There were days when I thought I would be better off without my children.

The woman quoted above is a mother of two children. She has a migrant background and is now living in Sweden. She was interviewed about a parenting program for parents with foreign backgrounds that she had participated in a few months earlier. In Sweden, parenting programs have a history going back to the late nineteenth century. In accordance with legislation and welfare policies, parenting programs for all parents of new-born children have been offered by maternity care services since 1979 (Wissö 2012). In addition, most municipalities offer programs for parents of children of different ages as a part of preventive family care interventions by the social services. Many schools and adult psychiatric treatment programmes also offer parents further support.
clinics also offer such services. Most of these programs are universal, evidence-based and offered on a group basis (Olofsson 2015). The purpose is to support parents in their parenting role and to prevent the maltreatment of children (Meija, Calam, and Sanders 2015a, 2015b) or to promote change in the behaviour and health of children (Furlong and McGilloway 2015; Olofsson 2015). In all these programs, the parents are the target and resource for change rather than the children. Theories about attachment, social behaviour and social learning have been essential in the development of parenting programs. Certification and special training is required for those who organise and implement the programs, and these leaders must closely follow a manual. Several of these programs have been developed internationally but are translated and implemented in Swedish municipalities, for example, International Child Development Program in Norway and Active Parenting, The Incredible Years and Comet in Canada and the United States. Most research on evidence-based universal programs either have focussed on expected benefits or on implementation (Olofsson, Skoog, and Tillfors 2016).

This article focuses on two parenting programs in Sweden. Both programs aim at meeting special needs among parents with a foreign background. They differ from the above described universal and evidence-based programs since they are selective and developed locally by social workers at the Social Services in one municipality and by a Women’s Shelters organisation. They do not follow a manual, but have produced a study guide with themes and topics that should be discussed in group meetings with parents of the target group.

These two locally developed programs can be described as an answer to a critical debate about universal programs in recent research. Critique has been raised against the universality of the programs and the fact that the programs are ‘blind’ to special needs among, for example, low-income or migrant families with different cultural backgrounds (Furlong and McGilloway 2015). Therefore universal programs need cultural adjustment (Bråten and Sönsterudbråten 2017; Coard et al. 2004; Parra-Cardona et al. 2012, 2015; Meija, Calam, and Sanders 2015a, 2015b; Morawska and Sultan 2016). Another critique is that evidence-based universal parenting programs represent an intrusion of the state into the private sphere, implementing middle-class values about family and childhood (Lucas 2011; Symonds 2017).

The two Swedish programs in this article embraces the need for cultural adjustment. In the same time they have to handle the dilemma of implementing normative values e.g. ‘Swedish’ values, which is also a motive of the programs. For the actors involved in organising the parenting programs studied here, this means that the organisers have a mandate to decide who is in need of special support and what needs these individuals have. In short, parenting programs in general can be described as a disciplinary intervention but in the same time, the practices are supposed to be emancipatory (Lucas 2011; Rivest and Moreau 2015; Symonds 2017).

As discussed in the work of Anderson (2013), the need for such interventions is especially debated in liberal democracies in the context of migration, since migrants are often defined as culturally different from natives. The migrant is therefore expected to integrate, accept and act in line with a community of shared values, as a part of the resettlement (Larsen 2011). Divisions and differences between migrants and citizens have been extensively explored within migration studies over the past 50 years. Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002) conclude that the binary relation between migrants and citizens influences not only the social sciences but also politics and public officers’ work with migrants within the context of the liberal nation states in North America and Europe. Hence, processes of ‘othering’ of migrants are constantly present as the nation state, through politics, welfare systems and public officials, intervenes in migrants’ lives (Chambon 2013).

This article’s analysis start in this three-part dilemma of social workers who 1; offer preventative but also ‘normative’ interventions 2; to exclusively selected target groups 3; based on the idea that migrant parents have special needs due to cultural differences. The aim is to investigate in what ways the practices of conducting parenting programs for this target group could be framed as cultural imperialistic practices and/or democratic practices in social work (Young 1990, 2000).
Previous research about parenting programs

Most of parenting programs that today are spread worldwide were first selective and tried out on a specific risk group. Over time, they were developed into universal, evidence-based programs (Olofsson, Skoog, and Tillfors 2016). Although this has been the most common path of development, several researchers and practitioners have argued that cultural adaptation has been crucial in order to make the programs relevant for different target groups. These studies have had a pragmatic and rather uncritical approach. The aim has been to meet special needs among specific groups that otherwise would be overlooked and excluded (Coard et al. 2004; Meija, Calam, and Sanders 2015a, 2015b; Parra-Cardona et al. 2012, 2015).

The point of departure in these studies is that evidence-based universal programs are based on English-speaking middle class parents from urban areas. It is therefore important to find out if these programs are relevant in other kinds of settings, for example in low-income areas or among ethnic minorities (Furlong and McGilloway 2015). Studies have been conducted among Afro-Americans (Coard et al. 2004); among families in disadvantaged settings in Ireland and Panama (Furlong and McGilloway 2015; Meija, Calam, and Sanders 2015a, 2015b); among Latinos in Detroit, U.S. (Parra-Cardona et al. 2012), among parents in war zones (Morawska and Sultan 2016) and among families in asylum reception centres and parents who are concerned that young family members may have become radicalized in Norway (Bråten and Sönsterudbråten 2017). These studies show that in order to make the programs relevant for selected target groups, cultural adaptation is necessary. For example, themes relating to racial socialization; living with intense economic difficulties and an insecure legal status; living between two worlds (country of origin and new home country); gender relations, abuse and violence in the family could be included.

Other studies have focussed on the implementation of parenting programs in different settings and have found that difficulties appeared especially among low-income families in disadvantaged settings. Identified obstacles included parents’ fear of authorities and public services and of revealing their private problems in social situations. Offering food, childcare and transportation to the meetings made it easier for parents to attend (Furlong and McGilloway 2015; Morawska and Sultan 2016; Olofsson, Skoog, and Tillfors 2016; Parra-Cardona et al. 2015).

As stated in the introduction, the two programs that are analysed in this article differ from the evidence-based universal or culturally adopted programs included in the research above. The programs are developed locally with the aim of being relevant for a selected target group, parents with a foreign background, from the beginning and have no ambition to reach other target groups in the future. Still, the questions raised above about the problem of implementing normative values and the need for cultural adaption are highly relevant for this article.

Theory and concepts: cultural imperialistic practices and democratic practises

As outlined in the introduction, the aim of this study is to investigate in what ways the two parenting programs for target group of parents with a foreign background could be framed as cultural imperialistic practices or democratic practices in social work (Young 1990, 2000). Young departs from the statement that a fundamental value of a deliberative democracy is respect to all people’s equal worth. Young argues that although these values are just and states that all persons, no matter gender, age, ethnicity, ability, etc. should have the same rights, in practice they might function discriminatory and oppressive if differences and inequality in society are not recognized. Instead of presuming an ideal situation of equality between abstract persons Young emphasizes the importance of a society to identify itself as multicultural, multilingual etc. and in the same time marked by hegemonic ideologies and norms that creates unequal power relations between different individuals and groups in a society. Selective parenting programs can thus be a way of acknowledging and being responsive to differences in a pluralist society. However, the risk is that the differences are handled as something that need to be overcome so that the participants become
more like the majority population, i.e. adapted to what is perceived as universal norms and values (Lucas 2011).Selective parenting programs thus become what Young refers to oppressive rather than emancipatory. She identifies five phases of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young 1990, 48–63). While exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness occur by virtue of social divisions of labour and are matters of concrete power in relation to others (who benefits from whom, and who is dispensable), cultural imperialism is another kind of oppression. As Young writes (58),

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how dominant meanings in society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experiences and culture, and its establishment as the norm.

According to Young, cultural imperialism is a discursive rather than a tangible form of power. It is exercised in all kinds of everyday situations and sometimes turned into a practice. In this article I analyse whether the selective parenting program for parents with foreign backgrounds can be interpreted in terms of cultural imperialistic practices in social work. In addition I also investigate the emancipatory aspects of social interventions (Rivest and Moreau 2015), namely the possibility of framing the selective parenting programs in terms of democratic practices, or even what Waltzer calls ‘insurgency’

Insurgency is the demand that bureaucratic services make possible, instead of replacing, local decision making. Or rather it is the acting out of a new dialectic, which denies conventional definitions of good behaviour and seeks to make the ‘helpfulness’ of the welfare bureaucracy into the starting point of new politics of resistance and self-determination (Young 1990, 81).

Democratic practice is further discussed in Inclusion and Democracy (2000) where Young proceeds from a conception of deliberative democracy based on ideals of inclusion, political equality, reasonableness and publicity (Young 2000, 23–25). Democratic practices in social work would then be practices that reproduce and create possibilities for these ideals in relation to clients and within institutional and professional settings (Strier and Binyamin 2014). Using the above theoretical framework to analyse the practice of the parenting programs opens up for a discussion about how to handle the dilemmas outlined in the introduction of 1; offer preventative but also ‘normative’ interventions 2; to exclusively selected target groups 3; based on the idea that migrant parents have special needs due to cultural differences. It also adds critical perspectives to the research on cultural adaption and normative values.

**Materials and methods**

This article draws upon empirical material collected as part of an evaluation of two parenting programs for foreign-born parents in Sweden in 2014–2015. In the evaluation, ‘contribution analysis’ was used, focusing on the results of the parenting programs and the relation between aim and outcome, e.g. changes in parenting in the target group (Gustafsson and Rosén 2015; Mayne 2012). The report focused on strong areas in the programs as well as development areas. The three-part dilemma that is analysed in this article became apparent in the evaluation and the need for further theoretical analysis was recognised.

One of the parenting programs was developed by the Social Services in a municipality in central Sweden and the other by a national organisation of Swedish Women’s Shelters. Both programs were organised and implemented over a period of eight years (2006–2014). The Women’s Shelter’s program included three group-based meetings. They had about 2000 participants in three cities during this period. The Social Services worked in one municipality and had a program that included seven group-based meetings. They had about 200 participants in the same period. For both programs, the participating parents were recruited in outer housing areas
through advertisements in local public areas and through contacts with immigrant organisations. Participation was voluntary.

Both programs were designed as study circles, a method often used in Scandinavian adult education. Study circles is a method that actively involve the participants and encourage them to share personal experiences. The method was presented in the study guides along with themes and practical exercises based on comparisons between family organisation, the raising of children, fundamental values, norms and laws in the participants’ country of origin and in Sweden. The parents were to discuss their own situation and parenthood, experiences of similarities and differences in the past and in present time.

The study circles were managed by a person who spoke the same languages as the participants. They were persons with migrant backgrounds and different working conditions although most of them worked as interpreters or mother tongue teachers. In the program by the Social Services these persons took part in the initial development of the programs while the persons involved in the Women’s Shelter were recruited in the implementation phase. For the purpose of the program those who were recruited were especially trained, in over-weekend courses, in the methods used in the programs and in laws, norms and values in Swedish society. In the program organised by the Social Services, a social worker was also a leader and the person who spoke the language(s) of the participants was called a ‘resource person’.

The collected material includes project application forms that describe the aim and purpose of each program, project reports and the study guide used in the study circles. It also includes recorded and transcribed conversations from two workshops, one for each program, with persons involved in organising the programs, project financiers and leaders of the study circles. Nine persons took part in the workshop for Social Services and eight in the Women’s Shelter workshop and the aims and outcome of the programs was discussed. Organisers were also interviewed in one group interview and one individual interview for Social Services and two individual interviews for Women’s Shelter. The interviewees narrated about their personal experiences of developing the programs, the process and reflections on the outcome.

In total, four interviews were conducted with ten parents (not couples) that had participated in the programs. In the interviews, they narrated about why the participated and what they had learned. Two men, with the same national background and mother tongue who took part in the program at the Women’s Shelters were interviewed in Swedish without an interpreter. For the other program by the Social Services, the interviewed parents were arranged in two groups based on national background and mother tongue. One interview was conducted with one man and four women of the same national background with the support of an interpreter and one with three women of another national background, also with interpreting. Finally one individual interview was conducted in Swedish with a woman with yet another national background.

The material includes perspectives of many different stakeholders and provides the analysis with material about expectations on and experiences of the parenting programs. The written material includes initial and formal motives of the programs. In the oral accounts from workshops and interviews comes narratives about experiences and practices forward from both organisers and participating parents’ perspectives. The different sources, the written material and the narrated material from workshops and interviews, are put in relation to and in contrast to each other in ethnographic narratives. The analysis is theory-driven and two concepts cultural imperialistic and democratic practices are guiding the analysis of three themes: 1. In the first narrative is the motives for the program analysed based on the interviews and experiences of the organisers, project plans and reports. 2. In the second narrative is the negotiation of motives analysed e.g. how those involved in the program, especially the ‘resource persons’, negotiate motives through sharing experience-based motivations. 3. The third narrative is based on the interviews with participating parents and here are both motives for and experiences of participating analysed.
**Findings**

**The motives of the organisers**

In 2006, the social services in a municipality outside of a major Swedish city initiated a project aimed at developing a parenting program for parents with a foreign background. It was mainly two skilled social workers who, after years of family support work in a multicultural environment, thought that it would be valuable if they could do preventive work instead of dealing with difficult and violent situations after they had already arisen. One of the social workers was at the time working at an open public preschool and she thought this would be a convenient place to start a preventive parenting program for parents with foreign backgrounds. She and her colleagues were supported by their manager and applied for money from the county council. The county council had at the time a directive from the government to support preventive interventions against honour-related violence and oppression (Regeringsbeslut IJ2007/2460/JÄM).

The project received financial support and the program started and was further developed in the following years. In 2014, a study guide was produced. Since the project was financed by the county council, the aim and target group in the application and final report was defined in line with the national directive:

The purpose of the parenting program is to change values and perspectives on humans based on patriarchal beliefs in honour and collectivist perspectives on family among the parents. We will give the parents knowledge about Swedish society, perspectives on children’s rights, equality between men and women, and the impact of a good upbringing. We will give the parents tools so that they can guide their children without oppression or violating the rights of the children, which are supported in law (dnr 801-10849-2011, 1, *my translation*).

At around the same time, the Women’s Shelter started its parenting program. The project leader had long experience working at shelters for women who were victims of honour-related oppression and violence. Her project collaborator was especially concerned with the situation of the children. She noticed that children were often considered as an appendix to the violated women in the shelter. The Women’s Shelters project then defined their target group and aim on a similar basis to the Social Services’ project:

The power and control in several patriarchal immigrant families concerns women and children. The daughters in these families are oppressed and under strong supervision. The sons are often responsible for the supervision and for making sure that the patriarchal order is intact (project description, 30 April 2008, 1, *my translation*).

In this document, the project organisers continue by describing the loss of power among immigrant men as they resettle in Sweden and how they struggle to remain heads of their families in a society where they do not feel welcome and do not understand fundamental values and norms.

The formal motivations behind both parenting programs reflected long experience of problems and conflicts among parents with foreign backgrounds, often involving violent outcomes. Moreover, in order to finance preventive work, the organisers had to apply for funding, and they then translated their experiences into the vocabulary of the calls for project proposals. It is possible that they used words such as honour-related violence and patriarchal structures also before writing the applications. Still, in the act of making these words part of their purpose they reproduced the idea of cultural differences and the binary opposition between the migrant and the citizen (Anderson 2013; Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). Obviously, there is a normative point of departure in both mission statements in which the social workers exercise the power to define the needs and character of the target group, a situation that corresponds to Young’s definition of cultural imperialism.
**Negotiating the motives**

In contrast to the mission statements formulated in the grant applications, in the interviews and workshops, the organisers hardly mentioned their formal motives. Again, they spoke on behalf of their long experience of working with families with migrant backgrounds. The person representing the county council (which financed the Social Services program) introduced herself as follows:

I arrived in Sweden as a refugee; I have been a parent. Hence, there are several motives behind my interest in these issues.

Further along in the discussion about the programs she explained the feeling of being treated as ignorant and said that everybody around in society tried to educate and correct her. In the long run this led to increasing self-doubt.

...I believe there is a need for this type of study circle for parents in order to enhance their self-confidence and belief in their own capacity as a parent.

To enhance participants’ self-confidence in their capacity as a parent was therefore her main personal motivation for the programs. Behind this motive lies her own experience of being oppressed through cultural imperialistic practices. At the same time, she represents these practices in her work at the county council by following government directives.

The persons who functioned as resource persons in the parenting program all had their own experiences of migration and raising children in a new country. Three resource persons originating in three different countries and speaking different languages worked in the program at the Social Services. One of them described how and why she recruited parents to the program by recounting a conversation between two fathers she overheard on the bus. One of them said:

I hope I can leave Sweden soon. Everything is so weird here. Today my child’s teachers wanted me to attend school. I had to take time off from work. When I arrived they showed me stuff my child had done. He had painted a butterfly and written two letters. Oh, how talented he is, they said. Yeah, I thought, this is what he is supposed to do in school. I don’t have to come and admire this.

In this passage, the resource person describes different perspectives on children colliding in an everyday situation. In the resource person’s eyes, the father was blinded by his own values and culture and explained the others’ (the teachers’) actions in a stereotypical and simplified way. In telling this story the resource person argued that the father might develop a more reflective understanding of such situations if he participated the parenting program. Her motive, then, was to foster a self-reflective consciousness that would give the parents tools to understand their own roles and reactions in society and at the same time understand the position of the other (the teachers). In comparison with the statement in the project description that the purpose was to ‘give parents knowledge about the Swedish society,’ this seems like a more open-ended motive that might open up for insurgency rather than oppression.

Another resource person explained that her reason for working with the program was her many years of experience as a community interpreter. In this role, she met parents in various public service contexts. During the first weeks after they have received a residence permit in Sweden all migrants are offered at least 60 hours of information about society. Professionals from the social services, the school system, the social insurance agency, the tax agency and the police give lectures about laws, rights and duties in Swedish society. The resource person believed that it was important information, but that the migrants were not always receptive. Many of them had no interest in listening to information about maternity leave, the police force or the pension system. But once they had their own children, they needed knowledge about how to stand up for their children and their rights. She illustrated this point with an imagined (but in her experience realistic) scenario with parents in a police interrogation. Their son was prosecuted for dealing and using drugs.
He is only thirteen! This means that last year he was twelve and you [the parents] say that he never came home before 10 p.m. on weekdays and after 1 a.m. on weekends, often escorted by the police. Where have you been [the resource person asks the imagined parents in a loud voice]? We did not dare [the imagined parents answer]. Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you call the school or tell the welfare officer or get in contact with social services? No, no [they answer] we were afraid that they would take our child away.

She concluded that if the parents knew more about the role of Swedish authorities and their own rights, a lot of trouble would be prevented. She had experienced how a fundamental problem among many parents was mistrust of authorities. Thus, like the other organisers, her personal motives also diverged from those presented in the project description. She hoped to impart to foreign-born parents a better understanding of the rights of children and the strength to stand up for them in communication with authorities. The problem from her point of view was not only the parents’ possible oppression of the children, in the project application described as a consequence of a lack of knowledge about children’s rights and gender equality. Instead she worried about oppression of the parents with foreign backgrounds as a consequence of lack of knowledge about how the relationship between citizens and the state in a liberal democracy is supposed to function in terms of rights and duties.

According to the interviews and workshops, in practice the phrasing of the formal motives about changing patriarchal values and honour-related problems in the grant proposals differed significantly from the personal motivations of the project organisers. The organisers’ motives could instead be formulated as follows: To enhance self-confidence in one’s own capacity as a parent, to support self-reflection in order to understand society and one’s role there instead of ending up in unproductive stereotypes about cultural differences, and to reveal the rights and duties of the citizen and the state authorities in order to give the parents the power to stand up for their children instead of being afraid (as exemplified by the mother in the quotation at the beginning of the article).

Parents’ experiences of the parenting programs

As in the interviews and workshops with the organisers, the interviews with parents included stories of experiences of differences, often labelled as ‘culture’. Several parents in the group interviews agreed that the main reason why they wanted to participate in the parenting programs was curiosity or a need to know more about Swedish culture and society. The overall impression among participants from both programs was that the study circles were a safe environment where they were actively involved in discussions about family, parenting and children in their own language rather than told what to do.

One parent in a group interview explained that she was convinced that it was forbidden to raise children as Muslims in Sweden. That caused her great problems because she was a Muslim and owed it to her child to be raised as a good Muslim. At the same time she owed her child an upbringing that could be respected and valued in society. In joining the parenting program, she hoped for more knowledge about religion in Sweden so that she could raise her child properly.

She and another woman described the first meeting in the parenting program. They were curious and they had come because they knew the resource person. At the same time, they added, they were terrified of the social services and were afraid that their children would be taken away because of their religion. They recalled how they collectively had decided in advance to obtain information, but not to give any. They refused to drink coffee and eat sandwiches. They answered no questions. In the end, the solution proposed by the resource person was that they could ask questions and talk about their friends and relatives instead of about themselves. In that way, the discussions could be more neutral. In the end, after seven meetings, the mother had learned things about Swedish society that she had not anticipated. She knew more about how to raise her child in line with her religion and culture and that she must have self-confidence and not be afraid of the surrounding society or authorities.
Another parent recalled a scenario that had troubled her and also alluded to the feeling of being afraid and oppressed by the Swedish authorities:

For example, I did not know what to do when the headmaster or the teacher phoned. They used to say, ‘Come and pick up your child or we will send him home.’ I didn’t know what to answer. The social workers and the others in the study circle said, ‘No, you must tell them to stop! They can’t send your son home.’ So, I called the headmaster and said, ‘Do not send my son back home. I will come to you and sit with him.’ The headmaster was surprised; he did not expect this from me. I was very happy and proud of my actions.

The mother concluded that she was proud of her ability, not only on behalf of her son, but also because the headmaster was surprised.

The interviewed parents perceived that parenthood in Sweden differed from what they grew up with. The young mother cited in the introduction described how she arrived in Sweden with her six-month-old baby. Her husband had already settled in Sweden many years before, but turned out to be careless. According to her, he had no stable income or employment and no interest in his wife or child. The mother explained that it was a devastating change to leave her hometown and family. There, all adults had been involved in the upbringing and care of the baby. In Sweden, she sat isolated in her apartment, looking out of the kitchen window wondering where all the people were. The street below was almost always empty. She had neither family nor neighbours with whom she could discuss her feelings or get advice about the baby.

My son cried constantly. He was used to all attention from my family. You know someone is always involved in holding him, cooking dinner, talking, normal everyday life and routines. [...] And here, upbringing is difficult in a new country. Maybe it’s easier if you come without children, then you can concentrate and learn on your own. But if you arrive with a child, you and the child have to grow up at the same time.

Meanwhile, she had a second son, and explained in the interview that she was overwhelmed by the feeling of doing something wrong in her parenting. She felt lost in everyday situations and had constant conflicts with her children. When she got angry, her son would threaten her, telling her that the social services would come and take him away. When she grew up, adults punished children by hitting them. If a parent said something children had to obey. In Sweden, she understood that it was different and even against the law to slap a child. But what to do instead?

For example, at the shop, my youngest would demand something. If I said no, he would lie down flat on the floor and cry. You get embarrassed, and feel shame. What would people think? That I have beaten him? I would give in and buy what he asked for. I knew no other way.

To the mother, the shop situation represented conflicts in several directions. In line with the story told above about the communication with the headmaster, she expressed feelings of being questioned and assumed to be an ignorant and incapable single migrant mother by people around her. She saw herself through the eyes of the other and reproduced the prevailing binary opposition between the migrant and the citizen (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). In that way she also confirmed perceptions of oppression from cultural imperialism in society (Young 1990).

In discussions with the other parents at the parenting program, she realized that the situation in the shop was not unique, but something that almost all parents regardless of their background have been through. She felt relieved and more self-confident and concluded that, above all, the parenting program gave her the opportunity to exchange experiences, listen to others, and get and give advice in a group where she felt safe. This was exactly what she had been missing before, since she came alone without her family and support network. Her shop story also includes another significant focus of the parenting programs, namely the relation between the child and the parent. One parent explained:

To treat children as individuals and actors with rights, that does not exist in the culture where I come from. We don’t even have a word for it. Children means, it is like my own handbag, an item that I can possess, regulate and fill with whatever. The child has to do exactly as I say, otherwise the child is doing wrong.
Similar ambivalences towards the position of the child were expressed in other interviews. It seemed to be a common position that children sometime threatened their parents by saying that they could be taken away by the authorities. To these parents, it was a relief to understand that, although the position and the rights of the child differed from what many of them were used to, it did not mean that the parents had no rights or authority over their children.

We have learned to play a little bit of theatre [role play] in the study circle. Imagine your teenager watching television. Normally I would go and turn the television off, shout at him not to sit in front of the TV all day [claps her hands loudly]. He would object and I would shout, ‘Get out! Don’t talk!’ And we would have a conflict. Instead we tried another approach. I would ask the teenager, ‘When does your program finish?’ He would answer, ‘In ten minutes.’ ‘OK, you will have to turn off the TV then and do your homework.’ Then he knows and is prepared. He might object in the end, but then you can refer back to your conversation and the deal that he had ten minutes more.

The example gives an instructive glimpse of how the parenting program worked with the authority of the parent. The parents presented a dilemma from their everyday life. They discussed it and then they turned it into a role-play where the parent took the position of the child. The role-play explored ways of communicating with the child without violating the respect and rights of the child. At the same time, the authority of the parent was recovered.

As the above examples indicate, like the organisers, the parents participating in the programs also discussed and gave examples of other motives and outcomes of their participation than the formal motives in the project applications and plans.

Discussion: negotiating cultural imperialism and democratic practices

Both programs proceeded from the organisers’ long-term experience of working with families with migrant backgrounds, dealing with conflicts and violence, especially between family members, men oppressing women, or adults oppressing children. In the organisers’ project descriptions, they used a set of keywords related to foreign collective cultures, patriarchal structures and honour-related violence in order to identify the needs of the families and to attract funding.

Against this background, I suggest that the official motives can be understood in terms of cultural imperialism as described by Young (1990, 59). The representatives of the Social Services or the Women’s Shelter, both influential authorities, have the power both to define the target group and what they believe to be its needs. The target group was selected negatively based on perceptions of cultural differences that needed to be changed. A linear relation of ‘us’ giving ‘them’ knowledge and insights was described in both project descriptions. The linear relation was reproduced by the interviewed parents who described how they had learned from the organisers about what was right and wrong. Besides being linear, the relation was also hierarchical, that is, based on the assumption of the superiority of ‘Swedish norms.’

However, there is an important discrepancy between the formal motives stated in the project descriptions and the personal motivations described in the interviews and workshops. In practice, the organisers seemed to focus on other things than cultural differences in terms of patriarchal structures and honour-related violence. They underlined the importance of enhancing the participants’ self-confidence in their role as parents, supporting self-reflection over one’s role in Swedish society instead of ending up in non-productive stereotypes about cultural differences, and revealing the rights and duties of both residents and state authorities in order to give the parents power to stand up for their children. These motives were also expressed in the interviews with the parents. The participating parents all expressed how they had felt that something was wrong about their parenting. Participating in the program was a way to confront this feeling and find ways to create a more sustainable parenthood and to look to the future. Although the ideal of the self-reflective person is a highly valued norm in a liberal democracy and can therefore also be considered as a cultural imperialistic practice,
the participants rather perceived the programs as democratic practices. Both aspects of the practices of the programs are operating at the same time but it might be that cultural imperialism stays at a discursive level rather than turned into an oppressive practice.

As described in the section on previous research, there is an ongoing critique towards universal, evidence-based programs for intruding into the private sphere and sanctioning middle-class values. Despite this, researchers defend these kinds of programs since there is evidence that they benefit parents and children (Symonds 2017). Other researchers argue that the evidence-based programs need to be cultural adapted to different groups and settings in order to benefit different target groups (Parra-Cardona et al. 2012, 2015). This brings us back to the dilemma of adaption to selected groups and the risk of stigmatizing these groups (Lucas 2011).

It is necessary to keep in mind these kinds of considerations in the context of the two analysed parenting programs in this study. They were originally formulated and developed in order to meet specific needs among a target group vaguely formulated as parents with a foreign background. These needs were defined by the organisers in a stereotypical and simplifying way that did not fully correspond with such a vaguely defined group. The formulations were based on expectations and ideas about cultural differences in an uncritical way. During the implementation and in the encounters with the parents, other experiences and needs were brought into play as described by both organisers and resource persons and by parents.

Based on these needs, for example to enhance self-confidence in the capacity as a parent it might be useful to reconceptualise the target group. It could be described as people with migration experiences rather than by the set of keywords used in the project descriptions, e.g. honour-related violence, patriarchal structures, and so on. The concept of migration experience refers to an understanding of each person’s unique situation and experiences, but also refers to some common features. Migration experiences are, for example, the experience of leaving the home country and family behind, finding ways of resettlement in a receiving country, often with limited means and in an environment hostile towards immigrants (Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2012). In addition, these persons are parents with a responsibility for raising children.

Conclusions and implication

Based on written and interview data collected from two parenting programs for parents with foreign backgrounds this article have taken as its point of departure a three-part dilemma of social workers who 1; offer preventative but also ‘normative’ interventions 2; to exclusively selected target groups 3; based on the idea that migrant parents have special needs due to cultural differences. The aim was to investigate in what ways the practices of conducting parenting programs for the target group could be framed as cultural imperialistic practices and/or democratic practices in social work (Young 1990, 2000).

A conclusion is that the recognition of migration experiences and responsibility for children in a new country might be a way to motivate selective programs without using and reproducing oppressive norms and stereotypes. It would promote a more democratic practice, where authorities can meet the demands of the participating parents on their own terms (rather than formulating their needs in advance) and with the goal not to change ‘unwanted cultural differences’ but to support empowerment and self-confidence (Young 1990).

A main implication of my analysis is that these experiences and the development of a democratic practice ought to be emphasised, expressed and included in the parenting programs mission statements and study guides. The intention of the programs studied here is to implement the programs on a wider scale, in other municipalities, but to keep the selective idea. It would be problematic if only the cultural imperialistic practice, that is currently specified, is transferred.

I will also raise two critical considerations about the methods and theory used in the article and the analysis. Firstly, can practice be analysed through narrated and written material? Although based on texts and transcriptions from interviews, the combination of the project plans, the
negotiated motives of the organisers and the experiences of the parents says something about practice in the programs and how it was reformulated and perceived by their participants. Secondly, one risk of a theory-informed analysis is that the researcher may lose sight of variations, ambivalences, and discrepancies in the analysed material. I am prepared to take that risk though, since theories do not give proof of something but rather present alternatives and new perspectives. I argue that the pair of concepts cultural imperialism and democratic practice have supported a critical analysis of the two parenting programs. The concepts could be further used in order to critically discuss previous research in the field and here I especially think of the studies about the cultural adaption of evidence-based parenting programs (Coard et al. 2004; Parra-Cardona et al. 2012, 2015; Meija, Calam, and Sanders 2015a, 2015b; Morawska and Sultan 2016; Bråten and Sönsterudbråten 2017). As described in the section about parenting programs, these studies do not deal with the risk of othering or stigmatization. In most cases, they point out quite harmless adaptations such as language or ‘living with two countries.’ But, again, none of this is harmless; there is always a risk of reproducing ideas of difference based on culture. Such differences are interpreted as hierarchical and therefore supports oppressive and cultural imperialistic practices.

Finally it is crucial to understand that cultural imperialism and democratic practices are concurrent features. As showed in the findings and the discussion, the parenting programs can be framed as both cultural imperialistic and democratic practices in social work at the same time. The purpose of using this dualism is to dismantle the ethical dilemmas of cultural imperialistic practices, to make them visible to the organisers and participants and make them aware of the risk of reproducing domination and oppression. It also highlights the problem of how oppression is reproduced in a wider context. As discussed above, the negotiated motives for having selective parenting programs for parents with a foreign background among the organisers corresponded to the experiences formulated by the parents. Proceeding from these motives, the aim of the programs would be to establish self-confidence and to reclaim the power of the parent, investigate the position and rights of the child, overcome fear of authorities, and reflect upon differences and similarities in order to better understand the role of parenthood in Swedish society.

Notes

1. Racial socialization refers to how Afro-Americans and Latinos in the United States handle the experience of racism and discrimination in society in the upbringing of their children (Coard et al. 2004).
3. The Women’s Shelter is a national non-profit NGO. The parenting program was developed by the headquarter organisation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Linnaeus University Center Concurrences in colonial and postcolonial studies.

References


