Why It Is Bad to Be Kind. Educating Refugees to Life in the Welfare State: A Case Study from Norway

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Abstract

In Norway, as elsewhere in Europe, the aim of policy-making is to ensure the integration of immigrants into mainstream society. This paper focuses on one of the most concrete and practical measures Norwegian authorities have ever taken in this field, namely the recent establishment of a compulsory two-year introduction programme for newly arrived refugees. This is an activation-style programme involving both a financial and an educational component, where out-payments depend on participation in a full-time training programme aimed at enabling participants to become self-sufficient members of Norwegian society. In the first part of the paper the establishment of this policy is located within a broader context of integration crisis, before it moves on to look more specifically at the background for the programme and the problems it is set up to address. The latter part of the paper addresses the implementation of the introduction programmes in one medium-sized Norwegian city. The local discourse here is one of before and after, where the failings of previous policies have been overcome and new and productive practices have been established. Connections can be made between public and political discourses on integration crisis and the local discourses of implementation through the notion of kindness and the idea that kindness has hampered the integration efforts of the state. Herein lies a story not only about views on immigrants and diversity, but also about how immigration has challenged the Norwegian welfare state model.

Keywords

Refugees; Welfare state; Integration; Norway

Introduction

Everyone is talking about integration and how important it is that immigrants are integrated in the societies they have moved to. Most agree that integration is good. But what does integration actually mean? Or more precisely, what kind of policies and practices does it entail? What must governments actually do in order to promote integration?

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A number of studies have addressed the debates and philosophies underpinning the integration policies of European countries (Favell 1998; Hvenegård-Lassen 2002; Silvermann 1992). In my own work on Norway (Hagelund 2003) I have seen how the meaning of integration and the purposes of integration policy have changed imperceptibly over time, from being a project concerned with how to avoid enforced assimilation, to one more concerned with how to produce actively participating citizens out of immigrants. However, such analyses often fail to address the institutionalization and implementation of integration policy. Integration is no doubt a slippery notion, incorporating an appealing, but diffuse, functionalist image of the harmonious coexistence of social inclusion and cultural diversity within nation-state boundaries. Nevertheless, it is also more than a catchy word in political debates. In a well-developed welfare state, such as the Norwegian one, institutions are set up to produce integration; integration is something people are employed to do. From the Home Office and the Directorate of Immigration to hundreds of local municipalities, integration is a practical task entailing a whole range of institutions, practices and occupations. It is towards this apparatus that I have directed my focus in this paper.

One of the most concrete measures Norwegian authorities have ever taken to produce integration is the recent establishment of a compulsory two-year introduction programme for newly arrived refugees, effected nationally from 2004. In the first part of this paper I will locate the establishment of this policy within a broader context of integration crisis, before I move on to look more specifically at the background for the programme and the problems it is set up to address. The introduction programme is an activation-style programme involving both a financial and an educational component, where out-payments depend on participation in a full-time training programme aimed at enabling participants to become self-sufficient members of Norwegian society. In the latter part I present the introduction programme as it is being implemented in one medium-sized Norwegian city. The local discourse here is one of before and after, where the failings of previous policies have been overcome and new and productive practices have been established. One of the themes of progress concerns the past tendency to be kind, which is now about to be overcome. Why is it so bad to be kind? And what does this tell us about changes in integration policies as well as about social perceptions of immigration, immigrants and the welfare state?

Integration Crisis

There is a grave sense of crisis with respect to integration in Norwegian politics and in the public debate. Why is this so?

Immigration to Norway started later than in many other Western European countries, but has otherwise developed along lines that are quite comparable to those of better-known countries of immigration. The first significant number of labour migrants from poorer countries arrived in the late 1960s. Following the introduction of immigration restrictions in other European countries, Norway established an “immigration stop” in 1975 that effectively put an end to third-world labour immigration. As elsewhere, immigrants
continued to arrive as specialists (mostly westerners), via family reunification schemes, and later as refugees and asylum-seekers. Today, the immigrant population, comprising first-generation immigrants and their children, constitutes 7.6 per cent of the population (as of 1 January 2004; Statistics Norway: http://www.ssb.no). About a third of these have a refugee background.

Why crisis? Research on immigrants’ living conditions repeatedly comes up with the same depressing pattern. Non-Western immigrants fare worse on most indicators—unemployment figures are higher and living standards lower (Djuve and Hagen 1995; Blom 1998). Considering that the Nordic welfare state model relies on high employment in order to secure universal access to relatively generous services, the low employment rates are particularly disconcerting. Only 48 per cent of the refugees settled after 1986 are employed, compared to 70 per cent of the total population (Olsen 2004: 73), which again means that income levels are lower and dependence on social security higher (Kirkeberg and Kleven 2004). The discrepancies between immigrants and natives get narrower with longer times of residence, but do not disappear. And as Grete Brochmann has pointed out, good welfare states do not have the time to wait for equality to occur after two, three or four generations (2004: 352). To wait is simply not a legitimate response to current problems in ambitious welfare states. They have social problems on their hands now and need to find remedies.

Immigration and integration have been big and heated issues in the public debate since the mid-1980s, stirring strong feelings and often provoking highly polarized positions. Furthermore, no issue has contributed to the cross-political sense of integration crisis in the way that gender issues have done in Norway, since the turn of the century (Hagelund 2002, 2005). Television documentaries about issues such as enforced marriages (Bredal 2004) and female genital mutilation have provoked massive outrage, as did the “honour killing” of Swedish-Kurdish Fadime Sahindal, killed by her father and brothers because she had had a Swedish boyfriend. Such stories have spurred not only big headlines but also parliamentary debates and a sense that a “rethink” on integration was necessary.

Young women are both the heroes and victims in these stories, that all revolve around dichotomies of tradition vs. modernity, force vs. freedom, family vs. individual, and foreign ways—particularly Islamic—vs. core Norwegian values. It was impossible not to be affected by the stories, both because they were upsetting and because a public climate developed wherein everyone was required to take a stance. Gradually the horror stories of abuse and violence were also incorporated into a more general narrative about integration failure, pivoting on a parental generation which gives priority to maintaining transnational relations with their own ethnic community, rather than focusing their efforts on gaining the knowledge necessary to succeed in Norwegian society. At the heart of this kind of discourse is a problem representation which is focused on a mixture of ignorance and unfit values within immigrant communities. And, as always, when lack of knowledge and understanding appear as the problem, education and work on people’s attitudes easily come up as the solutions.

However, Islam, traditional values and ignorance are not the only villains in the tales that have emerged to explain the integration crisis. Equally to
blame has been the state: the state that has failed to intervene when women’s rights have been violated, the state that has failed in making demands on immigrants, the state that has failed in making integration happen. Norwegian politicians of all political persuasions have admitted shortcomings with respect to integration, and a willingness to take more drastic steps than have been taken previously.

One of the common explanations that keeps coming up for how and why things had failed is the untranslatable word *snillisme*. It is constructed by combining the adjective “kind” with the suffix “-ism”—*kind-ism*. The claim, or diagnosis, was that Norwegian politicians, policy-makers and academics had been *kindist*; that this was why integration had failed and grave injustices had been allowed to continue. *Kindism* is devising new benefit schemes, rather than telling people what they have to do for themselves. The concept has been used by right-wing liberals, and by social democratic reformers of the welfare state. The argument is a nostalgic one. It speaks of a past where the ideal was to “do your duty and demand your right” and a present where the focus on rights has outgrown the doing of duties. Integration policy provides the “anti-kindists” with a potent example: instead of stressing what immigrants have to do—like learning Norwegian—Norwegian authorities and opinion leaders have been more concerned with securing their rights to this or that benefit.

A scholarly version of the same argument has been formulated by the social anthropologist Unni Wikan. In the poignantly titled *Generous Betrayal* she writes about the “well-meaning Scandinavian, whose cherished identity is that of world champion of all that is kind and good” (2002: 25). Through the state’s efforts to be good, in the sense of respecting immigrants’ culture, Wikan argues that it has ignored the situation within immigrant families where daughters have been married off by force, and where mothers, who have not been allowed to learn Norwegian and participate in society, are incapable of helping their children to succeed in Norway. According to her analysis of welfare colonialism, the Norwegian welfare state works to undermine the idea that Wikan has found so vital in the Muslim communities where she has done fieldwork: God helps the one who helps himself. That is not true in Norway, says Wikan, where he who does not help himself receives social benefits. The result is a situation where minorities systematically obtain less education, do not learn the language and are more often unemployed than the majority population—in other words, an “ethnic underclass”.

The kindism argument incorporates the diverse concerns of integration—culture, gender, welfare, social equality, language skills and employment—into one explanatory narrative. However, the location of responsibility is ambiguous in many of these accounts. At one level it is placed within migrant communities as a partly cultural problem. But at another level, the responsibility for the integration crisis is located in the welfare state itself, more specifically, in its generosity and good intentions.

**The Introduction Programme**

Everyone blames the state; yet, it is the very same state that is called upon to sort out the mess. In this context of crisis, one of the most concrete and
ambitious things the authorities have done is to introduce a compulsory introduction programme for refugees, successful asylum-applicants and their families.\textsuperscript{1} In what we shall here be referring to as \textit{Midtown} (along with a dozen other municipalities), such programmes have been running as pilot projects since 2000. In 2004 they became national law.

The introduction programme is to provide newcomers both with the qualifications they need to integrate successfully and with a source of income. Basically, the new law gives refugees the right, and in practice also a duty, to participate in a two-year full-time education and training programme. It has a financial and an educational component—and arguably also a third, less acknowledged, mental component.

Participants receive a monthly introduction benefit. The amount is fixed, not means-tested, meaning that work on the side is both possible and encouraged, without affecting payments. Benefits are, however, subject to attendance in the full-time introduction programme, and each class missed without legitimate reason results in reduced benefits.

Each participant has a contact person—a primary contact—who, in collaboration with the participant, develops an individual career plan consisting of an aim—normally a type of job—and various classes and training schemes deemed relevant to achieve this. This element of individual tailoring is emphasized by policy-makers and practitioners alike, but in practice, all municipalities will have a more or less limited set of classes and courses to offer, which will suit some better than others. The programme will always consist of a huge dose of language classes, and in many cases also of so-called language apprenticeships, where students spend two days a week in a specific workplace in order to pick up work-related vocabulary and get to know the Norwegian labour market. In Midtown, they also have computer courses, a women’s group, a traffic course, sewing courses, job-seeking courses, courses directed specifically towards work in the health sector or in catering, as well as schemes for introducing participants to the city and civil society activities.

The programme also has a mental component in the sense that it aims to foster a certain kind of attitude to work and welfare. The economic incentive structure is designed to encourage participation, and illustrates clearly that immigrants have both rights and obligations. Also, in the actual teaching there is a marked emphasis on creating the motivation to work and to become financially independent.

Carol Bacchi has suggested that when we look at policies, we should ask, “What’s the problem?” What are the problems that make integration policies necessary? Within every policy proposal there is an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the “problem”, which we may call its problem representation (Bacchi 1999: 1). By asking this kind of question we can also critically address the broader understandings of society and social problems that underpin policy—the explanations and simplifications that make political action possible. So what is the problem the introduction programme is set up to remedy?

A closer reading of the reports and analyses that preceded the law reveals a problem representation founded in the idea of welfare dependency. Social assistance dependency is relatively high for refugees, even after many years of residence. This is partly caused by lower employment figures, but also by
the fact that few alternative income support schemes are available to new foreign residents. They have simply not lived or worked long enough to earn the rights that would qualify them for rights-based income support, such as unemployment benefits or incapacity pensions. Instead, they rely—often for many years—on means-tested social assistance, which in theory is meant to be only short-term. However, the problem is not merely poor skills and subsequent employment problems, but the detrimental effects of being on welfare. Social assistance, particularly over time, is seen as a form of support that creates *passive* recipients. This is aptly formulated in this quote from the “introduction bill”:

> The socialization of newcomers does to a too large extent consist of arguing on the basis of needs with respect to social assistance. Over time, this may result in permanent dependency on public assistance and a subsequent passive way of life for the individual. This will work to stigmatize the group in society and prevent an active participation in social life from their side.

The Government is of the opinion that the natural starting point is that it is primarily the newly arrived immigrants themselves who are responsible for participating actively in society. The society must arrange conditions in an appropriate manner so that this may actually be possible. (Ot prp nr 28 2002–3: 7)

The introduction programme is precisely an attempt to provide such enabling conditions and, not least, to construct incentives that may make this kind of active participation come true.

**Midtown: Before and After**

*Midtown* is a medium-sized city with a well above average size immigrant population. In recent years, awareness of multicultural issues has grown in the municipality, and a number of projects have been established in order to create a positive vision of and for a *Multicultural Midtown*. One such establishment is the Introduction Centre for Foreigners, where the new introduction programme is located.

The Introduction Centre is a recent institutional creation in the city, the result of a merger between the Norwegian Language Training Centre and the former refugee section of the Social Assistance Centre. Now, this new institution is in charge of the whole reception and introduction process. Once the municipality has agreed to receive a new refugee, the centre will apply to the housing office to find accommodation for the newcomer and furnish the flat. The assigned *primary contact* will help the newcomer settle in and soon take him or her to the introduction centre to be enrolled in the introduction programme. The programme largely consists of courses offered by teachers at the Introduction Centre and supervised work placements. After two years the participant should be ready for work or further education. In practice, quite a few are instead transferred to other types of income support or training schemes, while others continue to take classes at the centre.
The establishment of the Introduction Centre and of Midtown’s pilot version of the introduction programme have been two sides of the same process. Some very resourceful and dedicated individuals have been involved in engineering the merger, and this is no doubt a crucial factor in its success. There is a great sense of enthusiasm at the centre. People feel they have brought about some good changes and that things are moving in the right direction. What has happened in Midtown is also, it seems to me, generally regarded as a success story in the Norwegian world of integration work—members of staff are often invited to speak at conferences, and they have been quite successful in attracting state funding for their projects. Most probably, the intentions of the introduction programme have been followed up more thoroughly here than in most other municipalities. In this sense, it may be more of a showpiece version of the introduction programme than a representative one, which makes it ideal for studying the philosophies and ideals of the programme, if not its general workings.

In 2003 and 2004, I spent time at the introduction centre, taking part in meetings and classes, interviewing, observing and chatting informally with dozens of staff and management. From the stories they told me, I got the impression of a young and confident institution, which had already developed an identity based in a narrative of “before and after”, where the before chapter had a definite touch of “bad, old days”.

One reason given for the restructuring of Midtown’s integration work was pedagogical. They had wanted a new approach to language training that was focused more directly on the purposes of the training, namely to enable participants not only to speak the language, but also to find work and be financially self-sufficient. This implied taking a more practice-orientated approach, translated into out-of-school language apprenticeships, but also to a more practical orientation in classroom teaching with more focus on life in Norway and how to find employment, and less on grammar.

Another reason given for the merger was to remove integration work away from the sphere of social work. Primary contacts are not social workers, but make up a new type of occupational category. When recruiting new staff, management actively tries to avoid too many social workers, instead recruiting people from more diverse backgrounds. People with business experience, for example, are considered highly desirable, which is in line with the focus on employment. The merger also increased the status of the refugee workers. What used to be an understaffed subsection at the Social Assistance Centre is now part of an attractive and independent institution solely dedicated to work with refugees and immigrants.

The problem with the Social Assistance Centre was that refugees had to go there in the first place. For most newly settled refugees, it had been their only option for subsistence. The problem, according to the stories my informants told me and each other, was the sort of socialization into Norwegian life they had been offered (and here they echoed the official discourse I referred to earlier). There had been few resources to supervise and inform people on how to organize themselves. Instead, all manpower was busy paying out benefits and sorting out people’s bills. One ex-social worker told me:
“It worked like this then that everyone is given a certain sum of money each month for what the social assistance centre calls subsistence, meant for all kinds of expenses. But with for example rent and electricity they simply give the bill to the social office, which then pays it automatically. I had a real aha-experience with a specific family who had been with us for three years and after three years he got a disability pension and she got a small job, so they no longer qualified for social benefits because their income was too high. Then came their shock when they realized that they had to pay rent. They hadn’t noticed previously that there was something called rent that they had to pay. It was really bad. So this is much better now. It was very much like this, you took away their courage and motivation by saying that here is a system that looks after you and they learn it really quickly, that there is not much point, we just hand in the electricity bill so whether we switch the lights off or not or no matter how much heat we put on, it doesn’t matter.”

The before-and-after narratives also include an analysis of changed attitudes among staff. The past was associated with the idea that refugees would not be able to sort out things themselves, that staff had to do it for them. In the new era, refugees were seen as capable of solving their own issues—with a little assistance. The refugees are no longer clients in the social system, but participants in the introduction programme.

One pair of concepts that staff often use to explain this change of mind is helper versus supervisor. A helper is doing things for the other and thus incapacitating him. The supervisor is teaching the other how to do things himself. A primary contact with long experience from refugee work talks about her past as a helper—with a hint of embarrassment:

Primary contact: “It has perhaps been easy to consider the refugees as if they have started here, as if their lives began on the Norwegian border and now we need to help, and perhaps not thought so much about what resources they have taken with them from before that they can use here. They are grown-up capable people like everyone else who can manage as long as they get a little supervision, then they are OK. We don’t need to run around with a screwdriver and light bulb and drive them everywhere.”

Anniken: “Is that what happened before? Did you put in light bulbs for people?”

Primary contact: “Yes, I did carry a hammer and a screwdriver in my bag, I must admit I did. And a floor cloth.”

This dichotomy—helper vs. supervisor—is not one the primary contacts have come up with themselves. They have read about it in training manuals developed by the Directorate of Immigration, and it has been the focus of internal seminars at the Introduction Centre. Every week all the primary contacts meet to put forward and discuss cases that are troubling, and many of these cases revolve precisely around this balancing act, of knowing when it is acceptable to do something for the participants and when they should be left to their own devices. One of the noteworthy aspects of these meetings was how the introduction workers’ desires to intervene were constantly
scrutinized and problematized by themselves and others. When someone, feeling sorry for an exhausted mother, had spent time finding her a reasonable baby buggy, was that right or should the participant have done her shopping alone? It is not that helping in itself is always wrong, but when kindness motivates the action there is reason to be wary.

Controlling Kindness

The helper/supervisor dichotomy is a key discursive resource when trying to work out solutions to these dilemmas. The aim is to guide without eliminating responsibility. Introduction workers speak about the lure of helping; the temptation is always to be the helper—it is easier to help people than to supervise them. Being a helper is the default position. To become a supervisor, training, work on attitudes, and discipline are necessary. It is convenient to take on the role of the helper because it is easy to feel compassionate when encountering other human beings who have suffered and feel helpless and lost. To be a good primary contact one needs to curb this natural inclination to be a helper. In a sense, the introduction workers are busy fighting their own kindist instincts. A range of strategies, discursive as well as more practical, are employed to achieve the right balance.

One strategy is to explicitly emphasize the element of participants’ choice and responsibility by saying “this is your choice”, or “this is your responsibility”. Let us look at one example: primary contact John has organized a meeting with Ahmed and Ahmed’s teacher to discuss his progress. Ahmed’s family has just arrived in Norway after many years of separation. Tomorrow the primary contact will meet him at the house to drive him, his wife and their eldest daughter to the girl’s new school. The parents can spend the day with her there and help her to settle into her new school life. Ahmed asks: “What about our younger children?” “Well, you need to get someone to look after them”, says John. Then he bites his tongue. “I mean, I should rather ask, what do you intend to do to sort out childcare?” Ahmed replies that he will call his brother and ask him to babysit. John nods approvingly: “I know that you can sort these things out yourself. You don’t need me to explain to you how to do it.” However, while encouraging Ahmed to find his own solutions, there are also things that John is more than happy to tell Ahmed how to do. When Ahmed expresses reluctance about doing a language apprenticeship, for example, John is very persuasive when telling him that he is ready for this challenge and that he should follow the steps set up in his individual career plan. While individual choice is encouraged, the alternatives need to be commensurate with the framework of the introduction programme.

Another method of controlling the inclination to help is to speak about the introduction programme as work and to use work as the basis for comparison in difficult cases. When discussing such cases the winning argument will often be the one that can claim similarity to how things are in the workplace. This is not surprising, given that the introduction programme can in many ways be described as an attempt to simulate working life. It aims to generate the kind of mental state that is associated with waged work as opposed to welfare.
dependency. Participants receive a flat-rate "wage"; there is no means-testing; rules for holiday and sick leave resemble those of working life, and work placements are a treasured part of the teaching methodology.

Another parallel to working life goes through the attendance register, also a favourite topic at staff meetings. The introduction programme is like a job, so participants are obliged to attend classes just like one is obliged to show up at work every day. The teachers are instructed to register attendance at the beginning of each lesson, and illegitimate absences should result in deduction of benefits. The teachers, however, are sometimes reluctant collaborators in this effort. Rigid attendance registering takes time, but also fits badly with teachers' ideals about adult students who should take responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, the elaborate rules regarding legitimate and illegitimate reasons for absence do not cover all the stories teachers face in the classroom. There are so many things going on in their lives, says one teacher: children are sick, wives must be taken to the dentist because they are scared of taking buses alone, there are meetings with the immigration police, calls at the Social Security Office and appointments with the primary contacts. It is tempting to connive at their absences—tempting to be kind.

The attendance register works to discipline the participants, they must be present in order not to suffer financial sanctions, or even lose their place in the programme. But in a sense, these rules also work to discipline the teachers. They are obliged to be strict, to perform their control duties.

Teacher 1: "There were fewer demands previously. We really feel it as teachers, that a much stronger control is imposed with respect to attendance registry, the absences should be documented and that they have consequences. For some, not all of course, it means that they lose their places. What do we think about it?"

Anniken: "Yes."

Teacher 1: "In a way it can be a double-edged sword. In a way I think it is right, it is important and it should have consequences and that is something every one must understand sooner or later. It is something we in a way are responsible for communicating also. But at the same time I see that it is not always easy for me as a teacher to keep to it that strictly for the participants I know. It is . . ."

Teacher 2: "It is something about us seeing the human being."

Teacher 1: "Yes, we see the human being."

Teacher 2: "We know a little about the background and we know why it happens. So then we are a little kind anyway, aren't we . . . I was much kinder before. In tutorials and meetings and such things, if they didn't come I made new appointments again and again and again, but I am much better now at saying no, you have lost that chance."

Teacher 1: "And I think that is good."
Teacher 2: “Yes, but I do feel a little bad.”

Teacher 1: “Yes, I must admit I do too. It’s something about our [students]3]. Have they understood it? What have they understood? We do not have interpreters available normally, and we’ve had lessons now about how to apply for leave and the rules for attendance and what are they actually left with in their heads? We do not actually know. But at the same time, it can be a way of learning in practice which can be quite brutal.”

Teacher 2: “But this is where they are supposed to learn it. For it is like this out there in society, so if they do not learn it here, they won’t learn it.” (Emphasis added)

This quote well illustrates the double quality of kindness. It is something the introduction workers try to contain. They should not be too kind—and progress in introduction work has partly been achieved by moving away from kindness. On the other hand, the act of not being kind leaves them with a disconcerting feeling of having been “bad”. This can partly be interpreted as a paternalist reaction, grounded in uncertainties about whether the refugees really understand what is best for them. But it is also an expression of compassion, based on a closeness to the actual lives and experiences of programme participants, and a sense of discrepancy between these and the formalized bureaucratic system and ideals embodied by the introduction programme. So while kindness may be bad, not being kind is not an entirely desirable option either.

While work skills and employment are crucial parts of the introduction programme, I think it is equally apt to describe it as an introduction to Norwegian welfare bureaucracies. One day, a primary contact and I took a refugee to a meeting at the social assistance centre, and afterwards the primary contact decided to take him on a little sightseeing tour in the car. It was a sightseeing tour of the welfare state. We showed him the social security office (where he should go to apply for child benefits), then to the tax office (where he should go to get his tax forms), and to the job centre (where he should go to try and find work). When the primary contacts and teachers talk about what they see as the aim of their work, they do not only talk about work and further education, in the way the official discourse does; they talk about “finding one’s way around society”, about “understanding how things work”. For the refugees this means being able to fill in forms, to deal with the social security office, to attend parents’ meetings at school, apply for a place in the kindergarten for their toddlers and book appointments with the health centre.

For the refugee workers, however, the bureaucratic character of their own institution is also a way of avoiding kindism. Sticking to the rules means less space for individual considerations and fewer temptations to feel sorry for people and to help more than one should. When refugees try to negotiate for more support, a better flat, a bigger fridge or more leave, the introduction workers are quite happy to be able to say, “sorry, this is the rule, there is nothing I can do”. It also relieves the refugee workers of the responsibility for controlling their personal sympathies, as expressed by this primary contact:
“It is better then to be able to show some empathy in the situation one is in, but then to say that this is life and this is how the system is. Yes, it is actually limited, the extent to which the system will adapt to you later in life too.”

This also points to a factor which makes kindness problematic in any kind of bureaucracy: If emotions and personal sympathies are given too much space, unequal treatment and unfairness may result. More importantly, perhaps, the strict insistence on following the rules is presented as an imperative “reality check”. There is a tough world out there, which the participants on the introduction programme will sooner or later have to face. In other words, the introduction programme should not be a cushioned protection against the demands of the “real world”, but a simulation of it.

Why Is Being Kind So Bad? Concluding Remarks

It is noteworthy that while immigration and integration are highly contentious issues in public and political debate, the introduction programme has been introduced with hardly any debate and to universal applause. Lydia Morris (2002) reminds us that welfare rights can also be means of control. For example, many rights operate through premises of conditionality—you have the right to A (introduction benefits), but only if you fulfil condition B (participation). Within this double quality lies a considerable potential for appealing to opposite forces of claims-making. For those who are welcoming to refugees, the introduction programme represents a vigorous pull to improve refugees’ lives and future chances of success in Norway. For the more sceptical crowd, it means that the authorities “finally” are doing something to “make demands” on immigrants; there is an element of force which is welcomed. Furthermore, with its strong emphasis on learning the Norwegian language and the skills deemed necessary to succeed “here”, it is a far cry from multicultural celebrations of diversity or complex attempts at forging increased levels of tolerance towards foreign practices. At the same time, it is hard to argue against the value of such skills. For all parties, it is a chance of saying that they are doing something to tackle the problems of integration. The programme promises long-term reductions in social welfare expenditure, and it represents some of the hottest trends in improving the welfare state’s efficiency (individual plans, activation). For those more concerned with refugees’ welfare than state finances, the right to introduction benefits is considered preferable to means-tested social assistance. The counter-arguments that one might imagine being pertinent—such as the paternalism inherent in a programme that instructs people on what is good for them—have, so far as I have been able to register, hardly been uttered.

We have seen how the street-level introduction bureaucrats of Midtown feel that they are part of a project that is moving refugee and integration work forward. The introduction programme and the methodologies it entails are in their view an improvement on how things were done in the past, although they sometimes feel that the programme is structured on an unrealistic conception of the individual refugee’s capacity. In general, though,
they accept that too much kindness, as epitomized in the role of the “helper”, is counterproductive and a threat to efficient introduction work. Kindness has become an embarrassment.

The changes in Norwegian integration policy and the attacks on kindism in the public debate can all be understood in light of what the British anthropologist Ralph Grillo has called a “backlash against diversity” (2005). This is a complex, multivocal phenomenon played out in many different ideological versions and forms on different levels. At its heart lies disenchantment with multiculturalism, concerns about social cohesion and, not least, about Islam. The question being asked with increasing strength is whether diversity threatens the unity of European societies. These concerns are raised also in Norway in multiple forms and guises by actors ranging from feminists on the left to the populist anti-immigration right, and government policies are responding to them in various ways. The introduction programme certainly appeals to those who desire more clearly defined responsibilities for newcomers, and it does respond to some of the issues presented in the kind of anti-kindist discourse that has quite successfully been propagated in the Norwegian public.

It could be argued that the programme deals more explicitly with welfare state concerns about inactivity and exclusion than with cultural diversity. This is true, but at the same time, the non-inclusion of immigrants in the labour market appears as a particularly troubling scenario because it generates patterns of exclusion along ethnic, cultural or religious lines, which again are seen to threaten social cohesion in a way that, say, the large number of people on incapacity benefits do not. Thus, welfare exclusion and cultural diversity can be understood as mutually reinforcing issues rather than distinct ones.

How do we understand the street-level bureaucrats’ struggle to contain their own drives for kindness within this context? They are in the middle of it, to a large extent managing the results of it, but at the same time peculiarly untainted by it. According to the anti-kindist narrative of integration failure the welfare bureaucracies must take a large part of the blame for the crisis. The risk of being accused of racism has made welfare officials shy away from “making demands on immigrants”, it is argued; they have been more concerned with being good people than with doing good work (see, for example, the anthology edited by Brox et al. 2003). None of my informants spoke of the risk of being labelled as racist. Their discourse was rather about encounters with genuine distress and complicated lives, where the default reaction was one of helping and being kind—reasonable enough but unproductive in the long run. Their story of change was not one of reassessing diversity, but rather of reassessing past practices. They too blame the state, as produced by their own work, but also call on it and their own renewed and professionalized efforts to save the situation.

The backlash diagnosis is not sufficient to capture the endeavour to rationalize, institutionalize and professionalize integration that the introduction programme represents, but they are related. The programme and the way it is implemented at the Introduction Centre provide the people who work there with a comprehensive professional discourse for integration work, which they seem to appreciate. There is a problem analysis of welfare dependency,
aid-induced incompetence and misconceived helping, substantiated by tales of colleagues’ experiences from the old Social Assistance Centre. There is a methodology based on individual plans, a language of goals, subgoals and means, and a syllabus aimed at enabling refugees to cope in a complex welfare state. The primary contacts obtain a professional role and identity as supervisors. The teachers feel part of something larger than language courses. There is an economic incentive system designed to encourage participation and self-sufficiency, which also comes with the ideological baggage and offerings of new public management. There is a legal framework in the introduction law, and a national network of support with conferences and inter-municipality meetings. This process of professionalization has equipped the introduction workers with a shared language and a shared understanding which makes it easier for them to talk about and make sense of the work they are doing. And as is so often the case, meaning is produced through contrasts, and ideas become much clearer when explained in opposition to something else. At the Introduction Centre, this opposite is the bad old days of kind helping.

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Notes

1. Family members’ right to participation has since been restricted, so that those who are reunited with asylum-claimants granted residence on humanitarian grounds are no longer included in the programme.

2. One evaluation report found that of the 176 former participants who were interviewed 16.5 per cent had found work and 5.7 per cent had entered the ordinary education system (Lund 2003). This evaluation was done at an early stage and many participants had a relatively short career in the introduction programme, which may partly explain the low figures.

3. These teachers teach classes aimed at some of the weaker students.

References


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