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# Lost in culture: Language discordance and culturalization in social work with migrants

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## ABSTRACT

Social work carried out without a shared language, can be referred to as language discordant social work. In this article we discuss links between language discordance and culturalization in social work, based on data from participant observation of meetings between social workers and service users who lack a shared language. We discuss how social workers tend to attribute the preferences and actions of service users to collective group identities categorized as 'culture'. This can be termed culturalization, a process by which situations, problems, or differences are explained based on generalized cultural interpretations. We show how culturalization occurred when social workers attributed utterances or actions of service users to 'cultural differences', rather than to language discordance, problems of communication, or problems related to interpreting. We argue that there is an intrinsic interrelatedness between communicative difficulties and culturalization, in the sense that communication problems can be misdiagnosed as an issue of 'cultural difference'. This inhibits social workers' abilities to effectively identify issues and reduces their ability to see their clients' problems, resources and capacities accurately.

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## Introduction

With global migration and mobility, language barriers in encounters between service providers and service users are becoming a more common occurrence. In encounters between service providers and clients, adequate communication is needed to ensure equitable assistance and services, and to uphold due process and legal safeguards (cf. The Interpreting Act, 2022, section 6). Social workers are among those professionals working most closely with particularly vulnerable populations, including migrants and other linguistic minorities. This is not new; social work has since the emergence of the profession been a practice and profession close to the most marginalized and underprivileged groups (Richmond 1922, 117; James 2016, 37). This requires a particular sensitivity, as social work is not defined by certain decisions and resolute action but is, rather, marked by 'an openness to dialogue, self-reflection, self-doubt, and humility' (de Montigny 1995, p. xv).

Communication is essential in the practice of social work, and communication skills are fundamental to all social workers (Healy 2018, 236; Kadushin 1972; Koprowska 2010, 1). Specifically, communication enables social workers and clients to get a sense of what is at stake, and to reach accurate analyses of various situations and problems. For social work meetings to be constructive, it is necessary that professional practitioners see, hear, and understand, and that clients in turn experience recognition through being seen, heard, and understood.

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When social work is carried out without a shared language, it can be termed ‘language discordant’. Language discordance occurs when a client and a professional service provider lack proficiency in the same language(s) (Rossi, Grenier, and Vaillancourt 2019, 2; Sears et al. 2013, 535). Language discordance and language competence are not necessarily either/or determinations, as people may be more or less proficient in various languages. Furthermore, someone may be proficient enough in a language to carry out some tasks but not others, such as buy a train ticket but not apply for welfare benefits. Thus, language discordance is particular to the situation or activity that is to be carried out. In this article, we use the concept of ‘language discordance’ for situations where a client and social worker lack sufficient proficiency in a shared language *for the task at hand*. This entails that some encounters referred to as ‘language discordant’ are between social workers and clients who have no shared language, while others are between social workers and clients who have some limited proficiency of a shared language, though not sufficient for the task at hand. Getting a clear picture of the situation of each individual client is always essential in social work. When social workers lack a shared language with those they work with, communication is more challenging to accomplish, and the risk of misunderstandings and misjudgements increases (Koprowska 2010, 132). Poor and insufficient communication can, in turn, lead to lack of a clear understanding of individual circumstances and to inadequate service provision (Eliassi 2015; Williams and Graham 2014, 8).

Though much is known about the importance of communication in social work, there has been little previous research into the communicative consequences of language discordance in social work meetings. Much research on social work with migrants from the Nordic context has tended to foreground ‘culture’ and ‘cultural differences’ as explanations (Volckmar-eeg 2021; Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021, 2). Clearly, cultural differences can impact how things transpire when people attempt to communicate, but there are also other factors that are of importance. The question we explore, is whether social workers tend to use cultural explanations for difficulties that are not necessarily linked to cultural difference. This can be termed culturalization, understood as when social problems are explained based on generalized cultural interpretations.

In this article, attention is given to one particular aspect of social work with linguistic minorities, namely the links between language discordance and culturalization in how social workers understand particular persons, situations and problems that they encounter in their work. Our interest in this interrelatedness emerged from the analysis of empirical data of language discordant encounters, where culturalization played out in different ways in a study of social work in the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Agency (NAV). Our goal is to discuss the interrelatedness between communicative difficulties and culturalization. Drawing on ethnographic data, we explore how communication problems can be misdiagnosed as an issue of ‘cultural differences’, such as cultural values and traditions, on the part of the minority language speaker. In the following, we will first present some theoretical approaches to language, communication and culturalization, before going on to present the research methods and empirical material. We will then analyse and discuss three empirical cases. Finally, the links between language discordance and culturalization, and the consequences of this for social work practice, are explored further.

## **Language, communication and culturalization in social work practice**

Acquiring proficiency in a new language is a monumental task which requires substantial commitment as well as physical, intellectual, and emotional effort, as language plays an important role in mediating, shaping and building relationships (Canagarajah 2017, 2). Listening in a language in which one has limited proficiency is tiring and requires a great deal of concentration. Stress levels have been found to increase much more rapidly when information is presented to someone in a language in which they are not proficient, compared to when information is presented in a language they understand well (Skutnabb-Kangas 1986, 82–84). The more difficult the situation is, and the more important the information is, the more

quickly stress levels rise and the worse our chances of understanding will be. This, in turn, influences the ability to take active part in the conversation or meeting. People have to think more about how to express themselves, and this means that there is less capacity to think about content. Particularly in situations that require interaction and dialogue, this often leads to people remaining silent, giving short responses, not asking follow-up questions and hesitating to express lack of understanding. As Skutnabb-Kangas points out, people may also react with aggression, shyness, or poor self-esteem in such settings. With constant pressure to think about the form of the language, there is less capacity available to process contents, which may cause stress, loss of confidence, disengagement, disaffection, and alienation (Baker 2001, 213). These issues may clearly impact relations between social workers and clients, both in terms of how successful they are at reaching a shared understanding of what is at stake, and how they perceive each other. This, in turn, impacts which assistance is offered, and also the chances clients have of being provided with benefits and services they are entitled to.

Like other markers of identity, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, language is a complex factor in people's lives (Harrison 2007, 74). Who we are is closely associated with the languages we express ourselves in, and how we are perceived is connected to our proficiency in the language we are using in any given situation. Language is not simply a means of communication, but also a symbol of personal and social identity (Harrison 2007, 86), and language proficiency is closely linked with power, domination, and subordination. As such, minority language speakers can be disadvantaged and dominated in communicative encounters in languages they lack proficiency of, and may be perceived differently compared to meetings where they understand and can speak the language of the meeting. The links between language proficiency, communicative success and power relations are thus essential to understanding social work with linguistic minorities.

Social work with immigrants is often described as different from and more demanding than social work with people from the ethnic majority. Difficulties related to language and communication are often interlinked with issues of cultural differences and the need for cultural sensitivity (see for example Berg et al. 2017; Bunkholdt and Kvaran 2021; Bø 2015; Qureshi 2009). Social work research from the Nordic countries has found that social workers often attribute social problems affecting minorities to cultural differences, rather than difficulties related to uneven power relations or the subordinate position of minorities in the Nordic societies (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021; Eliassi 2013, 2015; Jönsson 2013; Križ and Skivenes 2010).

Focusing on culture and cultural categorizations in social work with ethnic minorities often leads to culturalization; a process where given situations, problems or differences are interpreted and explained based on generalized cultural interpretations, rather than structural and institutional mechanisms related to individual and social positions (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021). Culturalization also leads to individuality being lost sight of, and brings stereotyping and stigmatizing perceptions of people. Searching for 'objective cultural knowledge', can be understood as attempts by social workers to reduce and control the complexities of social problems, and as strategies for coping with demanding situations at work. Culturalization can feed into the idea that it is possible to acquire factual knowledge about people and apply this in work with people as directly operational knowledge. This can be labelled the *cultural competence discourse* (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021), where cultural explanations seem natural and are taken for given. Such discourses aim to make the 'cultural other' more comprehensible (Eliassi 2013). The discourse emphasizes how knowledge of cultural values, norms and traditions of ethnic minorities provides an ideal basis for understanding and working with migrants. The cultural competence discourse often leads to essentialized and one-dimensional understandings of people and cultures. In this way, the discourse tends to diminish the impact of factors such as power, racism and other structural forces that affect and shape people's identities and lives (Garran and Werkmeister Rozas 2013; Nadan 2017; Pease 2010). Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker (2021) have argued the need to shift from a culturalized position of the 'other' towards a position where intersecting categories and

uneven power relations are acknowledged and combatted. In this article, we explore specifically how language discordance and culturalization can prevent social workers from understanding how social problems arise and manifest in people's lives. When social problems are linked to cultural values and practices, social workers may not see other contributing issues and the complexities in the lives and struggles of their clients.

## Research methods and empirical material

The article is based on empirical data from observations of conversations and interviews between social workers and services users in the Norwegian Welfare and Labor Administration (NAV). The observations were carried out as part of a research-project 'Comprehensive follow-up of low income families' (*Helhetlig oppfølging i lavinntektsfamilier*, HOLF), focusing on social work with low-income families in NAV. The project was initiated and funded by NAV, and studied the process and effects of this intervention through a cluster randomized study and a qualitative process evaluation (Malmberg-Heimonen et al. 2019). A total of 29 NAV offices took part in the project in the years 2016–2019 with two social workers employed as *family coordinators* at each office. 78% of the parents taking part were born outside Norway. The project was approved by Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) and have followed the ethical research guidelines in relation to confidentiality, informed consensus, anonymity and voluntary participation. All names used in the presentation of data are pseudonyms.

This article is based on a sub-project which included observations of 26 meetings, as well as interviews of eight of the minority language speaking clients from the meetings, and 35 of the social workers in the project. Of the meetings, 24 were language discordant, and 15 of these were interpreter mediated (see Buzungu 2021, 48–49). The interviews lasted 20–75 minutes each, focusing on issues of communication, language choice, language discordant communication with and without interpreters, the qualifications of interpreters, and perspectives on interpreter-mediated communication. The interviews with social workers were in Norwegian, whereas the interviews with minority language speakers were interpreter-mediated. Due to the sensitive nature of the meetings, the meetings were not recorded (see Buzungu 2021, 49). During the meetings, observations were noted on paper, and these notes were immediately transcribed after each observation. Similarly, the interview notes were recorded on paper and typed up immediately after each interview.

In the analysis of data, an inductive approach was taken. The first analytic step was a thorough review of all observations and interviews. Based on this, the data from each meeting was coded thematically (Braun and Clarke 2012) focusing on communicative attributes. Four themes emerged as central aspects of the communication in these encounters: communicative complexity, participation, communicative interaction, and challenges reaching clarity when clarification was needed (see Buzungu 2021, 2023). The next step was to analyse each of these themes focusing on how language discordance was expressed within each aspect. During this step, certain issues emerged as more evident across the material in its entirety. One of these was the issue of cultural differences, and the phenomenon of culturalization in particular emerged as significant. In this article, we explore three distinct cases from the material that show different manifestations of how language discordance and culturalization emerged as interrelated.

## Language discordant encounters

In exploring the intersection between language discordance, unsuccessful communication and culturalization in social work, we look at three encounters between social workers and minority language speakers. The first case is from observations of a meeting carried out in Norwegian, between a social worker and a man who has quite limited proficiency in the language. The second case is based on observations of an interpreter-mediated meeting between a man and two social

workers. The final case is not of a singular meeting, but an observation of social work as a process over time, based on talks with two social workers who reflect on their work with one family.

### **“They are collective, not individualistic”**

Arman had lived in Norway for a few years and was a single parent of Abel, his son. He spoke several languages but, having moved to Norway as an adult with substantial health problems, he had relatively limited proficiency of Norwegian. He was meeting with a social worker to follow up on a number of issues pertaining to his housing, income, health and social situation. One of the topics for this meeting<sup>1</sup> was activities for the upcoming summer holidays:

Social worker: How are things going with Abel in the boys’ group?

Arman: Very good.

Social worker: He chose to keep going there, rather than starting taekwondo?

Arman: Yes.

Social worker: I have also heard from Torbjørn [the social worker organizing the group] that he is a very good boy.

Arman: Yes.

Arman kept his answers short and did not elaborate on any topic. The social worker continued to probe, but Arman’s responses remained minimal:

Social worker: Is he going to be in the boys’ group this summer?

Arman: Don’t know.

Social worker: Because I think the summer camp with the group would be really nice, they go into the woods, sleep in a cabin, go fishing and swimming and I think it would be a very good experience for him.

Arman: Maybe he can be home.

In saying ‘maybe he can be home’, Arman indicates disagreement with the social worker’s suggestion about the summer camp. Rather than probing further into this, the social worker goes on to persuade Arman that the summer camp is a good idea:

Social worker: It is really good for children to get out in fresh air for a bit, see something different and have some summer memories, and stories to share with their friends when they come back to school.

Arman: But he is very good boy, helping me in the home and with bags.

Social worker: Yes, I know, he is a very good boy. But even if he does not complain, he still needs to have some positive experiences like other children.

Arman: He is helping me every day, when he is in summer I am only.

Social worker: Maybe you can think about it, because in Norway it is important for children to gradually have more freedom and make memories with their friends.

As the social worker elaborates on the good aspects of the summer camp, Arman expresses reluctance and hesitation about the idea. Since his responses were relatively short, it is not easy to grasp why he was not enthusiastic. Although the social worker begins with an open-ended question, she continues with a leading question about taekwondo and ultimately ends with a suggestive prompt. The use of leading questions and suggestive prompts can obstruct reaching clarity and lead to service users feeling interrogated (Healy 2018, 54). In this case, this gradual narrowing of the scope of questions has a silencing effect on Arman, similar to what has been found in other research

of language discordant meetings where conversations have tended to be shallow and probing for information has been largely unsuccessful (see i.e. Westlake and Jones 2018, 1400).

As the social worker finished the last sentence, her phone rang, and she excused herself for a moment to take the call outside. While the social worker was out, Arman said to the researcher: ‘if he is going in that program, who will helping for me? I cannot carry bag, and the one is no elevator and is very high, he helping me. And for bed sometimes helping me, for go up from bed. One week is long time’. In other words, Arman did not know how he would get by if his son was not at home for that long. He had mobility difficulties due to his health problems and needed help grocery shopping and getting out of bed some days. The social worker then came back into the room:

Researcher: Maybe you want to tell her what you were saying?

Social worker: Yes?

Arman: Yes, that problem is as for carry bags, because it is high the apartment.

Social worker: Yes, I know, that you would like to move to an apartment on a lower floor or with an elevator, yes, we’ve brought that up with the housing office.

Arman: Yes, because Abel helping me with the one bags, and that one not easy for me when he not home.

Social worker: Absolutely, I have that here [as a goal].

The social worker went on to other issues. After the meeting, the researcher and the social worker talked, and the topic of the boys’ group and the summer program came up:

Researcher: It’s great that you have something like that here in the municipality.

Social worker: Yes, it’s just a pity that so many of those it would be good for do not get to take advantage of the opportunity. Like here, in their culture it’s not common for the youth to go off by themselves, and so he will miss out on that opportunity.

Researcher: How so?

Social worker: Because like with culture and religion, they keep a much closer eye on their youth than what we do. They are not used to sending them away for camp for a week with other youth like we are. It’s with culture, a different view of families, they are collective, not individualistic, and they don’t have this focus on independence.

Researcher: But he needs help from the boy as well, to do things he said?

Social worker: Yes, but I think the main reason is the cultural issues.

The language discordance in this case seemed to limit the social worker’s ability to understand what Arman was trying to say, creating challenges for her in getting a clear understanding of his predicament. When Arman attempted to express his concerns regarding the social worker’s suggestion to send his son to summer camp, his reasoning was not immediately available to the social worker due to the language discordance they were experiencing. The social worker, however, attributed his resistance to Arman being conservative, based on her reasoning that ‘they are collective, not individualistic’.

The notion of people from the global South as collectivistic, in contrast to people from the global North as individualistic, is an idealized representation of ways of living and social organization. The collective is often linked to traditional societies, whereas the individualistic is linked to modern and complex forms of social organization. While individual freedom and independence are seen as central values to individualism, obedience, respect and loyalty are seen as central values to collectivism. Moreover, harmful practices such as corporal punishment or honour codes are often linked to notions of collectivism. This dichotomy is commonly found in social work textbooks, being easy to understand and apply on other people when social workers attempt to understand them (Dahl 2013; Hundeide 2003; Skytte 2019). When the social worker in this case

was attempting to understand why Arman hesitated to send Abel to the summer camp, this was the frame of reference for her analysis.

In this sense, she tended towards culturalizing in her efforts to understand and make sense of what was being said. This led to essentializing and stereotyping interpretations of Arman. An equally likely (or perhaps more likely) explanation was the client's poor health and his need for practical help from his son. Arman himself was trying to communicate a reason for his hesitation which was different from that of being a conservative immigrant man intent on restricting his son's independence. Yet that is how he was perceived. It is likely that Arman would have been more successful at getting across the reason for his hesitation if their language discordance had been either eliminated by communicating in a shared language, or effectively resolved with interpreter-mediation of sufficient quality.

### **“Circular in communication”**

Ghirmay came to Norway as a refugee with his wife Eden. In their first two years in Norway, they had two children, and Eden had been staying home with the babies while Ghirmay had been looking for work. For the meeting, the social workers had made arrangements for an interpreter. In NAV, there is usually no check of the interpreters' qualifications (Buzungu 2022), and this meeting was no exception.

The meeting covered various issues pertaining to the life of the family, one of these being financial hardship. What Ghirmay and the interpreter say in the other language is not accessible to us, as the text below is an English translation of utterances spoken in Norwegian by the social worker and the interpreter.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: It is not true, he is not quite correct actually, but I must interpret it as he has stated it. So he has said, it is 20,234 in total they can have. And then plus they get the 3,000 maybe per day more, and then they must pay rent and electricity, and then they have only fourteen ...

Ghirmay (in Norwegian): Fourteen thousand seven hundred

Interpreter: ... for food and drink, right, they must pay from there. This means that internet fees and those things we must pay from internet fees, car, you know. Not so much four person then.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: Not just food, also the other things, bills and car costs and ...

Social worker: Yes.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: Like, he saying it NAV pay electricity bill and the other bills he pays himself.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: What he talking about is he don't have enough money for bills.

The interpreted renditions in Norwegian are difficult to understand and marked by the interpreter's own linguistic struggles in Norwegian. Throughout, there are missing pieces omitted by the interpreter, and the totality leaves a confusing impression on the social workers and Ghirmay alike. Moreover, the interpreter is not adhering to basic conventions of interpreter mediated talk,



such as using the pronoun ‘I’ when rendering utterances in the other language (see Buzungu 2023, 86–88).

After the meeting, the researcher interviewed Ghirmay. For this interview, there was a certified interpreter with university-level training in interpreting. The interview started with some general questions about the previous meeting:

Researcher: How do you feel about the meeting?

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: In general, I see that they [the social workers] are trying to help us. However, I feel that there are challenges to my current financial situation which I would appreciate guidance on how to manage in a good way.

Researcher: How so?

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: What I am wondering, is in what areas I could reduce costs. I see that a substantial part of our budget is tied up in fixed costs, and that when there are unexpected occurrences, there isn’t much room for that. Given the costs of having a car, which are higher here than what I am accustomed to from home, I am wondering if it would be financially wiser to not have a car.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: However, I feel I was not able to get a clear answer to that, perhaps I did not get it across clearly.

In this sequence, Ghirmay suggests a problem from the meeting, where he did not get clear advice about what to do with his car. He is then quick to offer the possibility that he himself is to blame, saying that perhaps he did not get it across clearly and, thus, attributing the lack of clarity in the conversation to his own shortcomings. In Ghirmay’s meeting with the social worker, the interpreter did not render any question about the car. The only mention of a car during the meeting was when the interpreter rendered ‘Not just food, also the other things, bills and car costs and ...’

The question of quality in interpreting was brought up in the interview with Ghirmay. He immediately expressed that he found interpreting to be useful. However, after some probing, Ghirmay reflected on both the complexity of the interpreting task and the variations he had experienced between different interpreters:

Researcher: What would be your assessment of the interpreters?

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: In general, they are skilful.

Researcher: In what way are they skilful in your opinion?

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: They convey information in a good way.

Researcher: Do they interpret everything?

Interpreter: [...]

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: Well, in general, I doubt that it is 100%, they are not Norwegian, and it is different languages. I don’t think it’s possible to interpret everything?

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: Like in general, there are some, it varies, some are skilled at explaining well and elaborately, and render details, whereas some are brief. For example, if you say ‘he ate and left’, some interpreters only say ‘he left’ – not everything.

Ghirmay: [...]

Interpreter: Like the interpreter earlier today, I understood what she said [in Norwegian] and I would have been able to say the same if I can put it like that. The difference between that interpreter and this interpreter now is like night and day.

In the research interview, the man came across as easy to talk to and easy to understand, as well as knowledgeable, nuanced, and resourceful. After the interview, the social workers asked the researcher how the interview had gone. The researcher responded that it was good and that Ghirmay was an interesting person to talk to. In the conversation between the researcher and the social workers, it became clear that they had perceived him completely differently. In the meeting between Ghirmay and the social workers, questions and answers did not fit, and there were incomprehensible sentences and fragmented utterances throughout the meeting. The social workers’ impression of him, from this and previous meetings, was that it was difficult to follow his train of thought and reasoning, and they saw him as having complex problems and limited potential for integration. The social workers attributed the communicative difficulties in the interaction as issues with Ghirmay’s communication style in the sense of him being ‘circular in communication’.

The notions of circular and linear communication stem from theory on ‘intercultural communication’. People from the global North are described having linear communication styles, with ideas clearly represented and trains of thought going straight to the point. People from the global South, on the contrary, are described as being circular in communication, being indirect with requests, responses and trains of thought, evasive and avoidant when direct questions are posed. The dichotomy between these two communication styles is commonly presented in textbooks on intercultural communication (Dahl 2013; Dypedahl and Bøhn 2017). Its appeal in social work practice, is in part that it provides a simple explanation for complex communication difficulties. When the social workers in this case were experiencing unsuccessful communication, this was the frame of reference within where they found an explanation for what they were experiencing.

In this sense, they resorted to culturalizing Ghirmay when describing him as ‘circular in communication’, rather than seeing the shared failures in the interpreter-mediated meeting. With the unskilled interpreter, Ghirmay was perceived as incoherent, unclear, and unable to answer questions. With the skilled interpreter afterwards, Ghirmay came across completely differently, as reflective, nuanced and resourceful. This shows how the interpreter’s performance not only affects how the interpreter is perceived, but also how minority language speakers are perceived, as Stephanie Feyne (2015) has also found in her research. The social workers did not perceive that inadequate interpreting was the reason why so much was incomprehensible, as they attributed the difficulties to cultural differences in communication style. With two different interpreters, Ghirmay left radically different impressions of himself, his situation, and his capabilities.

### **“Controlling immigrant man”**

Nadia and her husband Naem came to Norway several years ago with six children. Their three oldest children were grown up and had moved out, but the three youngest were still at home. Nadia stayed at home caring for the children, one of whom was severely disabled, while Naem had been attempting to learn Norwegian and unsuccessfully trying to find employment. In meetings with the family, there was telephone interpreting. The two social workers following up the family reflected on their work with them in a conversation with the researcher after a home visit.

The social workers said that when they initially came into contact with the family, they found Nadia to be lonely and isolated in the home. She seemed sad, alone, and worn down by responsibilities, childcare, and financial hardship. Nadia had a phone, but the phone did not have a SIM card and she

did not have a bank card or access to money. She did not go to the shop by herself, Naeem or one of the children always went with her. The social workers were concerned with the situation; as one of them said, ‘we were like . . . we thought he [Naeem] was so controlling’. They described their initial impression of Naeem as a ‘typical controlling immigrant man’ and related this to ‘how people are’ in the family’s country of origin. They immediately made arrangements for Nadia to have a SIM card so she could make phone calls, and they arranged for her to have her own bank card.

The categories ‘immigrant woman’ and ‘immigrant man’ are prevalent in public discourse and scholarly literature. The ‘immigrant woman’ tends to be presented as someone who needs to be helped and liberated. She is placed into a victim-category, and is portrayed as helpless, dependent, passive, complacent and oppressed (Rugkåsa 2012; Larsen 2009; Ylvisaker 2004). The immigrant man, on the contrary, is presented as an oppressor, as authoritarian, controlling and patriarchal (Jacobsen 2011; Tuori 2009; Ewing 2008). This discourse may have been part of the social workers’ frame of reference when they encountered the family.

Due to their concerns, the social workers had frequent meetings with the parents, both separately and together. They also talked with their adult children and the children living at home. Through many lengthy talks with family members, a different understanding of the situation began to emerge. As soon as Nadia had a SIM card, she made international phone calls and ran up a large phone bill, which put a substantial financial strain on the family. When Nadia got a bank card with access to some limited funds, she went out and purchased items that the family did not need. After these things happened, Nadia was confused and in despair about what she had done.

The social workers’ explained how they over time changed their understanding of the situation, from the initial culturalized one, to issues of cognitive and mental health. Initially, they had seen Naeem as a controlling husband. Later, they thought it was rather an issue of Nadia experiencing cognitive difficulties and perhaps signs of early-onset dementia. In their work with this family, they only had telephone interpreting, and their interpreters were without any interpreter training. The social workers said that the language discordance and problems with the quality of interpreting had made this difficult. One may wonder what would have happened if the social workers had not had the time and approach that they took. The social workers would perhaps have stayed with what they described as their ‘initial stereotypical controlling-immigrant-man-idea’. If so, this could have led them to continue to put in place entirely inappropriate measures for the family.

This case shows the complex and contextual nature of social work communication. The interconnectedness between practical, hands-on issues, such as telephone and banking access, and deeper issues such as mental health, cognitive capacity, gender roles, dominance, and subordination, is at the core of social work practice. It is through communication that social workers approach and untangle the complex realities of the families they work with. Unresolved language discordance, such as lack of quality and continuity in interpreting, can cause social workers to resort to culturalizing people and reduce them to cultural stereotypes of themselves.

### **How failed communication leads to culturalization**

This article addresses what is at risk when social workers and clients are not able to communicate and understand each other due to unresolved language discordance. In the three cases presented, social workers resorted to culturalizing clients when attempting to make sense of the clients and their situations. All three situations were marked by problems of unresolved language discordance. However, the problems of language discordance, language proficiency, or the quality of interpreting seemed less visible to the social workers than those of ‘cultural difference’.

In the first meeting, in Norwegian without interpreting, Arman was left with little opportunity to express himself and explain his points of view. For this reason, it was difficult for the social worker to grasp and understand his perspectives, and she was left to infer from generalized assumptions. In the second meeting, communication was hampered by the interpreter’s lack of competence. Inadequate interpreting led to chaotic, disorganized communication that left social workers with

confusion and unanswered questions. This, in turn, lead to Ghirmay not being heard and understood, but also to him being perceived as ‘circular in communication’ and the culturally conditioned cause of the communication difficulties. Finally, Naem and Nadia’s family dynamic was misdiagnosed based on stereotypical representations as lack of gender equality rather than a question of health. This third case shows how unresolved language discordance leads to culturalization in ways that not only impact how social workers think and make sense, but also which specific measures they may take in their efforts to help people. All these three cases show how social work communication is particularly vulnerable to unresolved language discordance.

The essentializing and culturalizing in our empirical material shows an intrinsic interrelatedness between communicative difficulties and culturalization, in the sense that communication problems are misdiagnosed as issues of cultural attributes of the minority language speakers. Maria Gussgard Volckmar-eeg (2021, 109) in her ethnographic study of the operationalization of ‘cultural sensitivity’ among social workers in NAV, found clear links between difficulties understanding what the problem is, and the use of culture as an explanation. In meeting with unresolved language discordance, as in the empirical data in this study, it is evident that it will be more difficult for social workers to understand what the problem is. This in turn inhibits social workers’ abilities to effectively identify other issues such as health or mental challenges and reduces their ability to see the complexity in the clients’ situation. Minority language speakers are thus disproportionately affected by culturalization in encounters with service providers as long as language discordance is not effectively resolved. In order to overcome these detrimental issues, social workers and minority language speakers need to be given access to available interpreting services of a sufficient quality.

Language discordant social work transpires in the communicative space between social workers and clients who lack a shared language. Unresolved language discordance leads to difficulties achieving mutual understanding. This in turn increases the risk of resorting to stereotyping, essentializing and culturalizing minority language speakers. As Ingrid Piller has pointed out, ‘understanding and addressing linguistic disadvantage must be a central facet of the social justice agenda of our time’ (Piller 2016, 6). Understanding linguistic domination as something that can mark multilingual communication beyond the intentions of individuals, is essential. Social workers need to explore how language discordance transpires in various contexts (Roche 2019, 27). The tendency to resort to culture as an explanation for the complexities inherent in majority-minority relations may blind social workers to other aspects of such interactions, such as race and racism (Gilroy 2004, 6), power asymmetries (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021), or language and communication. This silencing and muting of linguistic minorities place them at risk of experiencing racism, humiliation, and disempowerment.

## Note

1. When Norwegian language is used in meetings and conversations, the utterances have been translated into English.

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