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Prepared for the future? Social work students, ontological insecurity and the turning point in Swedish refugee policies

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Abstract: The year 2015 marked a rupture in the post-war development of refugee reception and integration policies in Sweden. This rupture involved both a radical change in refugee policy and practice, and a rupture in the long-held collective self-image of Sweden as a country with generous reception and integration policies (Scarpa & Schierup 2018). This article responds to the question of how social work students in Sweden understand and conceptualise these changing conditions. It draws on the concept of ontological insecurity and on two qualitative studies conducted in 2015 involving individual- and group interviews with social work students at different Swedish universities. The article discusses how the students' responses reflect this moment of rupture. On a personal level, they express confusion and uncertainty as they experience the consequences of changing narratives in the public and private spheres. The analysis shows that although the students are engaged with the current political and social refugee situation, the social work education does not provide them with tools to unpack the situation. This reveals the limitations of a conceptual apparatus learned in social work education that is not up to date in responding to contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Sweden; ontological insecurity; turning point; refugee crisis; social work education

1 Introduction

A *turning point* refers to a particular moment when arrangements turn decisively in a different direction; a moment that suddenly changes the conditions for present and future practices (Abbot, 2001). Such a turning point took place in Sweden in 2015 when the government changed its policies for refugee reception, and by doing this followed dominant European restrictive trends. By analysing how Swedish social work students understand and respond to the 2015 turning point, this article shows how changes in refugee policy impact not only refugees and their situation but also society as a whole in receiving countries. Policy changes regarding marginalized and vulnerable groups do not only concern the situation of target groups. They have consequences for professional work with the vulnerable and as we argue here, it also affects well established groups. The turning point in 2015 is an event in Sweden that clearly manifests the necessity to revise societal responses to contemporary crises, and the lack of preparedness in professional social work to respond to such challenges. In order to have a quality social work it is necessary to investigate and discuss how the education prepare future social workers for being part of processes such as the 2015 turning point, and for

confronting radical social changes in their upcoming work when an increasing number of people are left outside institutionalised social protection systems (Sassen 2014). By studying students from the social work education, we investigate how the social work education deals with these changes and how it prepares students for their future work.

The aim of this article is to discuss how social work students understand refugee migration at a political and societal turning point, and how the social work education can be understood in light of the students' understandings and responses. To do so, we mainly draw on the concept of *ontological security*, a feeling of safety in the society one lives, as described by the sociologist Giddens (1991). The following questions are posed: (i) How do students understand refugee immigration and its impact on Swedish society? (ii) How do students respond to immigration and its impacts? (iii) What ideas, categories and concepts related to social work figure in the students' accounts, and how can the social work education be understood in relation to these?

2 Background

The Swedish response in 2015 was initially open-hearted. A slogan, *Refugees Welcome!* gave the arriving refugees a welcoming message at the borders and various actors were involved in the reception of refugees, including public welfare officers, police and health staff, NGO activists, university students and religious groups. Until this time the responsibility for the resettlement of new arriving refugees was a public issue and in the dominant public discourse refugees were still portraited as people in need of protection. However, the public discourse of shared responsibility and solidarity was in a short time replaced by a new discourse that viewed the arrival of refugees as a security threat (Boccagni & Righard 2020, Brock 2020). On 24 November 2015, the Swedish government announced upcoming restrictions, including the introduction of border controls, limitations to the right to international protection, temporary residence permits, and limitations to family reunification (Regeringskansliet, 2015; see also Parusel, 2016). Restrictions that first were introduced as temporary measures became permanent and gradually followed by further restrictions (Hagelund 2020, Sandström 2023.).

The importance and meaning of this specific moment have been described as a turning point not only for Swedish policies but also collective Swedish self-understanding (Dahlgren, 2016, p. 383). It consists of a radical change in refugee policies and practices, and a rupture of a long-held collective self-image of Sweden as a country that since the Second World War has had generous responses to people in need of international protection. The 2015 turning point must be understood in relation to the global economic, political, and cultural restructuring during the past decades that changed social conditions for what it means to be a member of society (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019). The year 2015 is when the consequences of war and other conflicts outside of Europe became obvious to the whole world with the increasing arrival of refugees, the 'messengers of globalisation' (Bauman, 2015) whose situation reflect injustices, inequalities, and violence. The arrival of refugees in 2015 made Europeans feel the local impact of global processes (ibid.) and highlights the shortcomings of the institutionalized responses to these migrations.

Societal and political developments after 2015 confirms the conceptualization of the moment in 2015 as a "turning point". The restrictive policies that were launched are still in effective use, increasingly sustained by narratives that frame refugee immigration and non-European migration as an issue of national security, a threat to national cultures and welfare of the nation (Asztalos Morell, & Darvishpour 2018). These changes have radically reduced refugee

immigration and transform the conditions for doing social work with refugees (Boccagni & Righard 2020, Elsrud & Lalander 2022).

In the following, we present theoretical framework and methodology. Results are then presented in three sections. We first outline the students' understandings of refugee immigration. Secondly, we discuss how they respond to it. In the third section, we discuss conceptualizations and how the social work education can be understood in light of the students' understandings and responses.

3 Theoretical framework

Ontological insecurity emerges when individuals experience loss of control and when taken-for-granted certainties concerning belonging, social protection, and the capacity of existing institutions are undermined. The concept is developed to discuss societal conditions –or rather, turning points– which we do not yet have relevant theoretical tools to unpack.

Ontological security as a concept was brought forth by the psychiatrist Laing (1960) to understand individual fears among his patients. Giddens (1991) conceptualized it out of a sociological perspective to offer understanding about anxieties and fears in contemporary societies (Croft 2012). Inspired by Gidden's work (1991), the political scientist Catarina Kinnvall (2004) uses *ontological (in)security* as a conceptual tool to analyse how people experience and cope with the consequences of global transformation processes. Globalisation processes raise multiple insecurities that create a state of permanent insecurity (Kinnvall & Lindén, 2010; Cash & Kinnvall, 2017, Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020), as people experience loss of control when taken-for-granted realities of belonging, social protection, and the capacity of existing institutions are questioned. Feelings of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty characterise 'the political psychological experience of living in a rapidly changing world' (Kinnvall & Nesbitt Larking 2011: 4). Kinnvall (2004) develops a relational approach that link macro and micro levels of analysis using both sociological and psychological theory in order to explore how global transformations reshape subjectivities. A sociological perspective identifies these forces, while a psychological perspective provides tools to understand the subjective dimensions they create.

Global restructuring affect people and their societal life, yet people also actively respond to these changes. As objects, people are affected by economic, political, and cultural transformations, and as subjects they are active part in these transformations. Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking (2011) conceptualize the practices of people trying to reconstruct senses of being and belonging according to changing life conditions as *identity strategies*. They present three main identity strategies: *retreatment*, *essentialism*, and *engagement* or *cosmopolitanism*.

Retreatment and essentialism are practices of separation and exclusion, where people construct themselves and their groups as different from other groups (ibid.). Both retreatment and essentialism are nourished by uncertainty and fear, yet their appearances differ. *Retreatment* is a defensive and passive strategy, "adopted by those who want to stay under the definitional radar, who do not want to be noticed" (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011:100). In contrast, *essentialism* is a confrontational and active response invoking feelings of superiority in relation to those perceived as others (ibid. 2011:132). This offensive strategy is based on narratives of an imaginary past that "close down, separate and confront" (ibid, p. 160). According to Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking, the strategy of *engagement* or *cosmopolitanism* represents an alternative to retreatment and essentialism. Based on self-reflection, it aims to

develop dialogues in search of new institutional responses to handle the uncertainties of on-going transformations (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011:161).

Kinnvall and Lindén (2010: 596) use these concepts to analyse how global transformations impact the formation of ethnic and national identities in a globalized world. Botterill et al. (2019) have used a similar rationale to study young Scottish ethnic and religious minorities strategies to preserve ontological security when being racialized and gendered. They experience insecurity in the context of racialization, religion and nationalism using multiple strategies to secure the self and their ontological security. They show that everyday threats and risks in society are responded to with pre-emptive and pro-active strategies to balance their ontological security in their everyday life. Specifically, young people exercise pro-active resistance and pre-emptive strategies such as avoiding of specific spaces and social withdraw. In the Swedish context Schütze (2022) has studied the perceived ontological security among bureaucrats in relation to their work and migration. The study shows that bureaucrats use different identity strategies, in the form of a) distancing oneself, b) showing resentment towards migrants and c) by wanting to engage in mutual dialogues, in order to overcomes uncertainties in their work with migrants. In this study nationalism is also used as a tool by the respondents to counter-balance uncertainties.

In processes of identity construction individuals and groups reinforce or reinvent established categorical divisions. They conclude “Categories of us and them, home and away, east and west are constantly being used to defend invisible boundaries and thus create psychological distances between people, nations, and continents” (Kinnvall & Lindén 2010:596). The categories deepen and reinforce imagined differences that create social distance, separate individuals and groups, and thus fragmenting society.

A vast body of literature discusses the relation between national identity and feeling ontologically secure (e.g. Croft 2012; Kazharski 2019; Bilgic et al. 2019; Schütze 2022). For example, Bilgic et al. (2019: 11) show in their article on trust and ontological security in Norway that the "building of distrust” is contributed to an imagined homogeneous Norwegian identity that is challenged by immigrant groups that are perceived as different. The same type of processes and categorizations can be seen in our empirical data on social work students. In this article, we use the concepts of ontological insecurity and identity strategies to analyse the experiences and strategies of social work students, and to discuss categories that their strategies create.

4 Methodology

This is a qualitative study that draws on interviews with social work students from four Swedish universities. The overall content of interviews was international migration in relation to the social work education. The interviews were conducted late 2015-2016, during a time when the Swedish public debate on the ‘refugee crisis’ was heated due to the 2015 events. Many interviewed social work students were, as paid professionals or volunteers, engaged in the reception of refugees that had come. Some of them identified themselves as activists concerned with the situation of undocumented migrants. Thus, the students who volunteered to participate in interviews were committed to the issue of migration. This is interesting and notable in relation to the study results and therefore highlighted in coming sections.

Three researchers conducted the interviews. 25 students were interviewed individually and 17 in groups with 4-5 people in each group. Except for one group of five students, all interviewees attended last semester of the social work education and thus had completed their

internship. The individual interviews were focused on how the content of social work education relates to international migration. The interview questions intend to capture how international migration is conceptualized in the curriculum, how this content is treated in teaching, course literature and examinations. The interviews focused on specific issues directly related to the then ongoing refugee migration, the students' general perception of refugee migration and how they perceived contemporary refugee migration and its impact on the Swedish society, on their local communities, and in their personal lives and the implications of refugee migration for the content of the social work education and the kind of knowledge needed to prepare students for work with refugees.

All students who participated received written and oral information about the research project before consenting to participate. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were conducted in Swedish and presented excerpts in this article are translated into English by the authors.

Two researchers read the interview material independently to filter out emerging themes. Two dominant themes were identified. The first one is students' complaints about the limited contents treating international migration in the curriculums of social work education. The second theme concerns students' own emotions regarding authority decisions, and feelings that arouse in relation to the changes in Swedish refugee policies. What was striking in the interviews was how the emotional dimension dominated the students' responses as soon as they started talking about how they themselves perceived and were affected by changing policies, even though they are well-established in Sweden and not target of these policies. When the students commented the limited contents of the curriculums, they assume a factual and neutral position, but as soon that they started to relate their own lives to ongoing changes their conversation became alive and filled with emotions. These emotions became the starting point for our analysis as they vividly capture the subjective experience of the turning point in their lives.

5 Results

The students' accounts are here seen as empirical data capturing the subjective experience of the turning point in individual' lives. Their reflections express personal feelings of confusion and sadness in the face of these, for them, unexpected changes. These different dimensions and levels are analysed from the conceptual lens of ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity captures how also those who are part of the well-established population are affected by the turning-point in governmental policies. Using this lens, we identify students' strategies to handle the situation. The final part of this section discusses how the students turn to available categories, and how learned knowledge in social work hinders students to find ways forward.

5.1 Understandings: Changing landscapes and loss of trust

The students understand refugee migration as a consequence of international conflicts, and war as the main cause for these forced migrations. They related the origin of refugees to the international conflicts going on in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, in addition to other violence not necessarily directly associated with war.

> People are fleeing from war, and after what has happened, they want to get to a place where it is possible … they need protection. I mean, many of them are today from Syria, and also from Afghanistan, Eritrea … I think that there are also those who are fleeing

> persecution dealing with their sexuality, and they might also come from other more stable countries.

The students were informed about the violent situations the arriving refugees faced in their countries of origin as well as other countries. They identified the abandonment of refugees by international institutions when they also mentioned the dangers refugees are exposed to in their trajectory to Europe, both outside and inside the European Union borders.

> It is dangerous, even in countries in South Europe; the treatment of migrants in these countries is terrible, they build walls and fences, they have also built refugee camps surrounded by walls.

> Many of them are moving within regions where anything can happen … they are robbed, raped, or become victims of sexual harassment.

When acknowledging the difficult situation for migrants and locating the problematic situation in other countries, the students took for granted and thus implicitly reproduced earlier narratives about Sweden as one of the best European countries in granting protection to refugees (Parusel, 2016, Scarpa & Schierup 2018). At the same time, they also expressed that this image is changing, and they were concerned about the changing political landscape in Sweden that promotes a restrictive refugee policy. They said that lack of protection commonly associated with other countries' responses, is now part of the responses of Swedish authorities. They discussed how these restrictive policies produce illegality, meaning that people who seek protection will be forced to go underground and live in Sweden as undocumented migrants exposed to different kinds of exploitation and in permanent risk of being expelled.

> They risked their life to get here, it's so hard. It has become so difficult to come … some try walking along the railway … I think about those who have taken their own life, because of insecurity, don't get asylum … because they feel no hope of anything … this is a risk, that this hopelessness will increase.

Based on knowledge from their working experiences and/or activism, they identified situations where institutionalised protection systems do not protect undocumented migrants and are not responsive to their needs.

> What is clear is the situation of uncertainty … if you have no documents and are living in Sweden, the police can take you and you can be taken to a detention centre. Your family doesn't have any idea what is happening; they don't know where you are.

The students questioned the collective image of Swedish as a bastion of international solidarity, and they said that Sweden is implementing restrictive policies and creating obstacles with the aim of stopping the arrival of refugees. The students were worried about the situation for migrants in Sweden, but when they discussed the impact of government policies, they also expressed their own distrust of governmental institutions, and the way these policy changes also affected the students themselves became visible. Their opinions were expressions of confusion and dismay. Events that disrupt the sense that existing governmental institutions can protect those who are in need of protection generate existential anxiety (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020: 246).

> They said that we closed the border because we have no resources to help all who are arriving. In this way, they try to give legitimacy to government decisions. However, it is not human to act in this way ... what I am most worried about… I have no words … it is not easy to verbalise it. One has an idea about what you have to do, what should be done … and this idea doesn't match with what is happening … it is heavy, how to solve it …

The excerpt above shows how these students felt worried and confused, they were critical towards the actions of the Swedish authorities. They seemed to relate to questions of principles, of what is and what should be done. The students also talked about a time of greater solidarity before the Swedish government changed their policies. At that time, they still felt trust in Swedish public institutions and in their capacity and willingness to solve problems also for people falling outside the institutional protection systems. Their words expressed how the new policies gave a different message. Their perceptions about Swedish refugee policies were contradictory, and these contradictions reflected the 'novelty' of this moment. These contradictions were reflected in the language that was used; sometimes they described Swedish policies in terms of solidarity and at other times described them as restrictive and excluding. The students' accounts might be seen as a transition to policies that might not have a clear legitimacy in the larger population and thus represent a new discourse in the making (Dahlgren, 2016).

The students did not expect public welfare institutions to assume responsibility for the welfare of the new arriving refugees. In the quote below, they make a distinction between good practices, which they connote with NGOs and volunteers, and bad practices, which they connote with Swedish Prime Minister Löfven and governmental welfare organisations. Their words express a transition of trust from governmental organisations to NGOs.

> … there were volunteers, who looked for ways to give support and provide hospitality, they solved immediate problems, then came Löfven[3] and ordered the closure of the borders, a decision made a long away from where things were happening.

> The NGOs assumed a great responsibility … it is so disappointing to see that the organisations that used to give support don't do it.

The students argued that the closing of the Swedish territorial borders and the new asylum legislation had contributed to changing the contents of the public debate; they mean that these measures opened up a space where negative perceptions about migration, refugees, and those perceived as strangers could more easily be expressed. The students maintained that a search for solidarity dominated public discourses before the government changed its policies, meaning that discourses changed.

> I wonder, one becomes surprised, how did we get here? It happened so fast; one is struck dumb. My God, what are they [the Swedish politicians] really saying? I feel they present an image that I don't recognise … and the measures they proposed … it is difficult to appreciate how it is affecting me, how it has influenced me.

They meant that the governmental measures opened up for acceptance of racism in the public debate and in daily conversations, and they identified a shift to more aggressive racist assumptions in media contexts that normalised racism.

> I think that it earlier was easier to recognise 'the racist'; you saw skinheads and knew they were racists.

> Today the racists are conscious on what can be said and when they say: 'Ok, I'm not a racist, BUT …'

The students were engaged with the problematic situation these migrants face, and they expressed a commitment to easing the suffering of refugees. In these responses, we identify feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. They seem to involve the loss of a sense of collective solidarity that they, until that moment, had perceived as a socially shared value. These feelings can be related to more general feeling of uncertainty and loss of trust, related to global transformations (cf. Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). In the students' responses, these feelings are present. However, they maintained a distance to the tragedy of refugees, the distance of those who described the problem of others.

5.2 Responses: ruptures, social distance and mistrust

In the discussions, the students described how everyday racism made them isolate themselves from people who they perceive as racist or indifferent to the situation of migrants. Their responses may be interpreted as retreatment strategies. Retreatment is a defensive and passive strategy involving acts of withdrawal, isolation, and non-involvement, as engagement and confrontation are avoided (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). This strategy is present in the acts students narrated, as they described how they stayed close to people who thought the same as themselves, while at the same time they isolated and distanced themselves from those who expressed racist opinions.

> I realise that I no longer listen, I do not read the newspapers, it's that I get angry ... I only get together with people who think like me; I read only read the Facebook comments of people who think like me. When I hear something else, I get scared. I think I live in a bubble that is nice for me ... There we are.

> It's true, I only see the news page on TV, and there are concrete descriptions, without debate ... I'm also like that; I eliminate what I do not want to read, and my friends, the people around me, think like me. I know there are many who think differently, but I do not associate with them, and if those others are my relatives, I simply avoid them.

The students described how they reduced their activities in virtual spaces, reduced their personal relationships, avoided participating in the debate, and in many cases kept silent. Online they 'blocked' friends whom they identified as racist. They reduced the 'we' to being a group of friends and people who think and act like themselves. According to their descriptions racism has been normalised, it is present in their daily lives. The students talked about where they meet these expressions of racism and how they cope with situations they perceive as problematic. Retreatment is an identity strategy that contributes to destructive processes of social fragmentation and the erosion of social ties.

Further, the students expressed pain when members of their families or earlier friends assumed what can be described as essentialist identity strategies (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). These were expressed in racist opinions.

> …with my parents I cannot talk about politics. It is odd living like this! My father is calmer, with him I can talk ... my mother does not understand, and you cannot talk to her. My brothers and their friends, their partners are terribly racist and it's so difficult to handle this because they say it openly...

> Even when I talk to my father he can say: 'That happens in Malmö[4] because they have taken in so many immigrants there' ... Then I think that is what most people think, that we receive information from different sources ... and that makes us have different world views.
>
> Yes, I think that racism exists on many levels ... I do not experience it [racism], but my partner does because he comes from [a non-European country]. People take for granted many things about him, things that confirm their prejudices. For example, my aunt is sure that my boyfriend is homophobic ... they presuppose a lot of things...

In the interviews, the students expressed concerns about former friends and family members who they thought had taken a different stand than themselves in the new political landscape. They described them as racists or as holding prejudices. Thus, we can see how strategies of essentialism and retreatment separate people and how racism creates divisions between those who were once friends and between family members. The turning point in Swedish policies is also reflected in personal relationships, both outside and inside family life. The retreatment strategy that the students deployed is based on open and active avoidance in relation to those who openly express their objection to refugees using racist arguments.

Retreatment involves acts of withdrawal, isolation, and non-involvement, and it can also involve ways of blending in or to suppressing one's own opinions and needs (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011, p. 278). The students avoid people with racist opinions, and, when they on occasions have to deal with relatives, family, or friends who express racist thoughts, they describe how they remain silent and how they avoid engaging in the conversations. This is a way of not engaging, of trying to blend in, but also of suppressing opinions, identity, and needs.

When the students talked about people with different and/or racist opinions, they are clearly and openly avoiding people who are racists. However, avoidance and separation seem to define their relationships also with migrants, although in a more vague and unarticulated way. The students positioned themselves as activists, volunteers, or professionals who wanted to work for more human refugee policies. However, their accounts also described relationships based on distance to those who are perceived as non-Swedes, and they recognised that in their personal lives, beyond work or volunteering, their relationships with refugees were non-existent. This adds a further dimension to their separating strategies.

> I think, my friends are white, why do not I mix my friends with people of colour? I think I should change this to live according to my principles...

This student identifies herself as an activist. She explains that in her personal life, she does not form relationships with people of colour. Her friends are white, just like herself. As shown in the previous section, the students explained how they tended to keep to themselves, creating a distance towards racists and others who are perceived as different. However, as mentioned above, it is also possible to discern in their accounts a distance towards migrants. The migrants they talked about seem to be groups of people perceived as 'others', people with whom the students do not mix.

What is different though, is that when the students talked about migrants, they lamented the distance they formed in relation to them. In the excerpt above, the student expresses a wish for change, to overcome this distance that seems to be not wanted and not that articulated. We call this *inadvertent distance*, and it illustrates general processes of social distancing where

the separation between non-white migrants and white natives is even part of the strategies used by those who actively try to distance themselves from racism.

5.3 Conceptualization: Inadvertent distance as a strategy

The phenomenon of inadvertent distance can be further explored by looking at the students' critical accounts and opinions about their social work education, and the proposals made by the students about the social work curriculum in relation to migration issues. We argue that the students' proposals highlight the limits of conventional ideas, categories and concepts used in social work and show how they close down the analytical potential of social work. In the case of refugees, the conventional approach is nourished by general and internalised assumptions about human mobility as a social problem and perceptions on refugees as the carriers of 'the problem' (Montesino & Olsson Al Fakir, 2018). This figure in the students' critique of the social work education. They were critical to the lack of migration issues as well as the lack of updated knowledge about economic, social, and political change in social work education:

> When it comes to migration, I feel like we have not had that much [education] when it comes to that issue...
>
> We have not had that much, one lecture … considering that it [migration] is such a big issue today … shouldn't it be that the University should be … should make students want to work with it?

They were critical to social work education because migration forms only a small part of the curriculum.

> I think we need knowledge that is contemporary: 'This is happening; Sweden has closed its borders, and these paragraphs are new in Swedish legislation'.
>
> Our education programme does not follow the events of our time, it is like being left behind.
>
> We have never talked about asylum seekers who are held in internment centres, for example ... suddenly I think about that.

The students identified a superficial treatment of these issues:

> … it has been included by mentioning multiculti ... there is a caution in the education ... in fact, we have ethnicity in all courses ... but it has been very superficial ... it has not had any depth ... It has just been mentioned that ethnicity is an issue but not why it is an issue...

They also take distance from it, and see it as an issue that concern "others", and one which they themselves cannot contribute.

> Those who have experiences (of ethnicity) it would probably have meaning ... on my part, I have nothing to offer, I have not experienced my ethnicity as a problem …

They identified the lack of response, or what may be seen as a retreatment strategy, in the attitude of teachers when the students intend to discuss migration in the classroom.

> … the thing is that many teachers do not want to touch upon it, in the debate climate today ... it could easily turn into a conflictual debate in the class ... It has been about to happen on several occasions, but then the teacher has said no ... we must go on…

The students expect the teachers to be able to handle the situation. Instead, according to them, teachers tend to avoid issues related to racism in the classroom.

The students criticise the social work education curriculum for not including migration issues. They mention teachers' non-response or inadequate responses to situations when students intend to discuss racism in the classroom. In relation to this, the students also proposed changes in the educational programme. They want it to in a higher extent involve a service user perspective. However, we mean that by using the service user category when talking about migrants, the students inadvertently reproduce an institutionalised distance to migrants and refugees.

> There is room to do something, for example, the participation of service users; we should have a greater presence of service users in the courses...
>
> If they invited service users, they could give us their perspective, because if you do not have that perspective, it is not good for either you or the user. Incorporate it … to have seminars with refugees or ex-refugees. We have these seminars about other service users … but nothing with refugees.
>
> However, we have space for user participation … I mean, we have too little content that presents the user perspectives; we try to guess who the service users are, but we should listen to the service users themselves.

The students tried to overcome the social distance by incorporating a service user perspective in the social work education. These tools, provided by social work education and based on administrative categories (service users), reproduce the very distance they criticize. Their reflections uncover a problematic development in the function of the service user category in social work education. The service-user perspective was introduced as a bottom-up perspective, with the aim to overcome institutionalised power relations. However, in the students' proposals, the migrant is created a client or service user, hence conceptualized as a social problem. The service-user category represents an understanding of those seeking support who are categorised as 'claimants', while social workers are the 'providers' of services.

Refugees are described as victims of war and racism, but also as people who come from elsewhere and who will be clients of welfare services. They are interpreted as "them", that is, not as part of a "we". These assumptions highlight how old perceptions 'survive' in more newly institutionalised categories, even categories intended to overcome top-down perspectives. Kinnvall and Lindén (2010) show how categories (based on nations or people) are used to defend invisible boundaries and how these boundaries contribute to create psychological distances between people. The 'user category' and the discourse of 'user involvement' in social work education illustrate these processes.

6 Discussion

In this study we have interviewed social work students about international migration in relation to social work education, and their perceptions on the Swedish turning point on refugee policies. The result show how students are concerned about refugees and their

situation. The students mean that the loss of common values (collective solidarity), increase polarization. They are sad and frustrated, and they mean Sweden no longer differs from other countries when it comes to restrictive refugee policies. Further the turning point in Swedish policies affect their personal lives, both inside and outside family life. The students describe how they isolate themselves when they witness increasing racism and social polarization to avoid contact with people with negative opinions towards migrants. Paradoxically, when they refer to refugees the students are themselves involved in these distancing processes. They talk about refugees as "the other", social work clients, different from themselves as social work providers. We argue that their strategies are nourished by conventional social work approaches where refugees and human mobilities are framed as social problems and that their accounts highlight the limits of established ideas, categories and concepts used in social work.

Nine years have gone by since the turning point in Swedish refugee policies. Swedish restrictive refugee policies are today part of the institutional policies that shape restrictive and excluding welfare practices. By introducing the concept of ontological insecurity in a social work context, we identify commonalities in the apparently complex and sometimes contradictory understandings and actions of people in a dramatically changing world. The global nature of contemporary challenges (Covid- 19 pandemic, climate change, financial, economic, and political crisis, catastrophes, international conflicts, and violence, the withdrawal of welfare systems, increasing inequalities, etc.) reinforce and increase individual and collective feelings of fear and uncertainty (Bauman 2006, Ferge 1997, Jindal, & Kumar 2024). Ontological insecurity emerges when individuals experience a sense of losing control and when taken-for-granted certainties concerning belonging, social protection, and the capacity of existing institutions come into question. The concept captures how these processes impact personal lives, how individuals perceive the precarity of their own positions, of "their being in the world" and how they act in order to cope with these feelings.

The concept of ontological insecurity is useful because it provides a theoretical tool to overcome conventional ideas and institutionalised boundaries which build on taken for granted and imagined differences between people and groups.

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[3] The Swedish Prime Minister.

[4] A Swedish city on the border with Denmark.

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