

“I can see something you can` t see”: perception and misperception of migrant clients in Austria

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Background: Society's attitude towards people with migration backgrounds often implies that they are inadequately educated. This perspective emphasises a deficits discourse rather than an approach which focuses on strengths. This research project aimed to shed some light on the latter strengths-based approach. The inter-disciplinary issues of gender and culture are often insufficiently addressed within society and contribute to societal marginalisation and stigmatisation of immigrants. Social workers need to continuously reflect on their own biographically-formed attitudes and blind spots towards gender and culture.

Only by going through a process of having knowledge of these issues, being willing and able to act on them and having permission to do so helps to make “the Invisible Visible” (cf. Exenberger et al. 2007). Social workers' conceptualisations and attributions of gender and culture within their implementation of a pilot scheme for young migrant adults were explored. The scheme aimed to re-integrate young adults sustainably into the labour market and focused on their self-development over this process. The social workers' views were compared to the client`s self-perceptions.

Methods: 36 semi-structured interviews were carried out with young migrant adults, aged 17 to 22 and 13 semi-structured interviews with social workers. Thematic analysis was undertaken, and two focus groups were held with professionals in order to present initial findings and gain their feedback.

Results, conclusion and implications: The findings highlight the gap between the self-perception of the young immigrants and how they are seen by professionals - visible through the professionals' prejudiced attitudes in their treatment of the young immigrants and how they spoke about them. The necessity of a reflexive education and practice as well as a professional framework within social work is highlighted.

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