The aim of this study is to shed new light on the ways in which the distinctions between immigrants and Finns have been drawn in the late 1990’s. The topic is approached from the point of view of diversity, difference and inequality, which are interpreted as inter-connected concepts. To support and illustrate the analysis, group interviews with Finnish young people as well as municipal policy documents have been used. The main empirical material consists of 13 group interviews with young people, aged 17 to 19, all from Helsinki. In addition, the municipal integration programmes for the Helsinki region have been consulted as a secondary material.

This study explores the tensions between group belonging and differentiation, particularly with regard to the attitudes of young Finns towards immigrants. Secondly, it investigates the contents and structure of their conceptualisations of immigrants, tolerance and racism. The study also dwells on the implications of these conceptualisations for the social and material conditions of immigrants in Finland. Thirdly, it undertakes to follow up on how the immigrant-related questions are interpreted in municipal policy documents. Using the concepts of tolerance and solidarity, it asks what societal membership-conditions immigrants are faced with. Furthermore, what are the main challenges that a multicultural society creates for the welfare-state?

The study consists of five separate articles and an introduction. The methodological and theoretical orientation of the work is to do justice to the dynamic, social and evaluative nature of the conceptualisations studied. The theoretical framework is based on youth studies, cultural studies, and classical sociological concepts such as group and solidarity. The study provides an evaluation of late modern convictions concerning increasing individual freedom and the fragmentation of traditional social bonds. The ethos of individualism proves on closer examination to be rather selective - and that in ways that the issue of immigrants is well suited to illustrate.

The title of the study, Hierarchies of Difference, provides an interpretative framework for the study. Difference can be regarded as a source of a group’s strength where the diversity is seen as enriching, or it can be construed negatively as the symbol of group’s weakness. In addition, difference can be interpreted variously as a sign of power or of powerlessness in the individual. It all depends on whose differences are being discussed, and as compared to what. In the concept of ‘immigrant’ the ideas of cultural inequality and of a lower social standing often seem to become entangled, making this concept inherently hierarchical. Nevertheless, such hierarchies can be contested. This study therefor takes a critical stance towards simplifications that classify immigrants as different from (other) Finns in a uniform and enduring manner. Differences and similarities, like individual and communal problems, cannot be approached as mutually exclusive propositions.

Finally, the hierarchies of difference are also approached by putting racism and toleration in dialogue. Racist and tolerant conceptualisations can, as this study reveals, follow similar logic and impose similar distinctions: between “us” and “them”, between similar and different, between included and excluded.

Avainsanat-Nyckelord-Keywords
immigrants - conceptions - youth - Finland
tolerance - racism - Finns

Säilytyspaikka-Förvaringsställe-Where deposited
Muita tietoja-Övriga uppgifter-Additional information